

Home to Stay

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The school bus was an ominous yellow-and-black hearse to Brian's eyes as it came in sight. He boarded it, almost expecting it to feel sinister, somehow, instead of like all the other buses he had been on in his life. After all, this was *different*. He was going to a mainstream high school. Brian's mind wound back to when he had arrived home for the worst Christmas of his life, just last year.

It had started out so normally. Come back, unpack, kill his brother, the usual routine. Every time he came home to stay, he always felt uncomfortable, but that night the feeling had worsened at dinnertime. The family meal was more silent than any other he could recall, and certainly far more dull than the animated conversation at the institute. What little talk there was never directed at him except for exciting comments like "pass the salt." He began to count the time until he could go back to school. He was figuring just how many seconds there were left of his vacation when dinner finished and he had to wash the dishes.

His father asked him a few questions about his life at the school as they washed. Brian was wearing a hearing aid and could figure out what his father was asking him most of the time.

"How *(something)* school?"

"Fine. Our basketball team looks really good this year. The coach says I'm one of the best players... My class is planning to go white-water rafting for our class trip this year."

"*(something)* like *(something)* dorm?"

"It's okay. *More exciting staying in a dorm than here*, he wanted to say.

"*(something)* stay *(something)*?"

"Huh?"

"Do you want to stay here?" his father asked slowly.

"Huuuh?"

"Do you—" his father began again.

"I got that. What do you mean, stay here?" Brian tried to choke down his fear. This wasn't part of the normal "how's school?" routine.

“Go to school here. (*something.. Interpreter?*) if you want. We think it would be best for you.”

“I like my school fine.” He dried the last dish with a violent jerk of the towel and abruptly left the rose-covered kitchen.

The old anger resurged with that memory and he threw his backpack on the seat just as somebody got ready to sit next to him. The last thing he wanted was company, or even the possibility of some. He refused to embarrass himself by letting his anger spill out for everybody to see, and for that he needed time to calm himself.

One time he had allowed his family to see his anger– at last year’s Christmas party and that had been a major embarrassment. The bad mood didn’t begin until he noticed how perfect his mother was and the attention to detail his mother always paid to her appearance from his clothes to the make-up down to the cultivated nails, that he had always hated; too long, too like claws, or the thorns of the roses she so loved. Such hands were for looks, not for actual work or even touching. He had imagined those hands attempting to fingerspell or sign and slashing themselves again and again until blood ran down her arms. No, she would never sign.

She still won’t sign, even though I begged them to learn a thousand times, Brian thought.

Those nails and the ruckus of too-loud relatives definitely had made him feel ill-tempered. He started pondering the question of why his parents wanted to put him in a mainstream school.

Good question. They certainly never showed much interest in me before. My mother– she cares only about how things look, not their truth, he thought. Images of his living room surfaces in Brian’s mind; white sofa that nobody was allowed to sit on, well-dusted books stacked on polished bookshelves, and everything, everything, color-schemed down to the lint.

Perfect house, perfect family, he thought- a family that shouldn’t have a handicapped son, which he knew was what he was in his parents’ eyes. So they had denied it, sending him to an oral school before they finally admitted he wasn’t going to be hearing. He couldn’t even lip-read “Merry Christmas” reliably.

Uncle Tim had came up to him and said “Barry(something)” at the party and it had taken

Brian a few seconds to figure it out: Merry Christmas, but not before he had said “Barry who?”

After this display of miscommunication, Brian wanted to leave to go someplace where he could really talk to people, not play Twenty Questions, but he was stuck with Uncle Tim. Brian didn’t bother to pretend to pay attention. Hearing people almost ever looked at each other while they were talking. Some hearing people were smart enough to know he had to look at the face in order to understand anything; some, like Uncle Tim, well, weren’t. Those people rarely said anything that interested him, anyway. He looked about for a possible escape, spotted his grandfather near the drinks, and fended off his uncle by pleading thirst.

He gladly leapt in conversation with his grandfather using both voice and paper. After he had told his grandfather about school, his driving lessons, basketball, all the “news” he could think of, his grandfather said “this must be a good year for you.”

“Yes...” suddenly Brian found himself wanting to tell him about his parents wanting him to change schools, to make at least one person understand.

“My parents want me to stay home, go to normal school and act hearing. They want to give up all my friends. They want to start over in a new place. Why? So they don’t feel ashamed for sending me away? What’s wrong with my school?”

“Your parents haven’t told me about that. They may be worried about the level of education you are getting there,” his grandfather wrote.

Brian looked at that for a while, and said “you mean my parents think it’s a stinky school?”

“I wouldn’t use that word, but your English is not as good as it should be; I noticed that in the letters you sent me.”

“You’re kidding. I get A’s in English and it bores me.”

“Then perhaps you need a better English class.”

Brian had already worked Grandfather’s point in his head. Better English-mainstream school. Better English=better, period. Well, that was what he deserved from talking to a retired teacher.

“Who cares about English, I’m gonna be a math major anyway,” he said, and turned away. He was steamed. If his parents were worried about his education, why not tell him?! Despite Grandfather’s logic, he was still convinced that his parents just didn’t want to explain

about him being away at school. Many people thought anybody that would send children away from home and “the nice and cozy family” would have to be heartless.

My mother, of course, would never want to seem a cruel parent, Brian thought mockingly. Grandfather hadn’t tried to talk to him anymore. He looked disappointed before some relatives caught him up in conversation, but Brian was too angry to care then.

He was just trying to figure out why for me, Brian thought, now feeling ashamed of how he had treated him.

When they got ready to leave, Brian had asked his parents why they wanted to put him in a mainstream. “*(something)* later. It’s too late for that now.” His mother replied, expecting that to be the final word.

“NO! It can’t be too late for me to stay at my school!” Brian had shrieked, discovering by the startled look of the other relatives that his voice was out of control.

“Later”, his mother said, looking very angry— because she was embarrassed, of course.

“My school is good. I love it— I understand everybody. I don’t care if it’s Harvard High. I will stay here.” Brian said, after he had taken a deep breath to control his voice.

“Brian, you can’t read.” This from his father.

Brian was stunned by the silliness of this. Of course he could read, hadn’t he been doing that since he was ten? It was his school that taught him to read. The oral school before that had just taught him to copy hearing. *A school for parrots*. Still, he wasn’t going to say “I can too read” like a two-year-old.

“I can too read.”

“Not good enough for *(something-- college)* and you’re smart *(something)* and need it.” His father clarified.

“Let me prove it. Can I borrow a book?” Brian asked Uncle Tim.

By now half the room was very interested in this drama. Uncle Tim had a long involved discussion with everybody. Too many people were talking at the same time for Brian to follow the conversation at all. His throat began to go dry from nervousness. The seconds dragged.

The diver slowly climbed a ladder stretching to the sky, he imagined, heart pounding.

Why did I say that? Brian thought as he had thought before many times. He was jarred temporarily out of his thought by a girl who was looking at him strangely over the bus seat. But the memory was too strong for him to notice little things like a stranger staring at him.

They had finally presented a book to him with intense anticipation.

The diver bent to dive from the high platform.

He had taken the book with a gulp. Macbeth, the cover said. A name, he supposed. He had opened it at random and looked at a whole sea of words that didn't make much sense. "Is this an old book?" he complained as he looked at it.

The diver jumped forward into the dive.

"Okay, um it says there that he uh, a bloody hand, and uh, he can't wash it because it will turn in card." Brian said, mumbling a few words on his hands.

The diver tripped leaving off the platform.

"That's in-card-ine. It means red." His grandfather said. Brian was turning in-card-ine so he skipped to another part.

He twisted in the air, recovering.

"Okay, here is somebody asking uhm, who's there in the devil's other name? And there's something about uh, an e-q-u-i-v-o-c-a-t-o-r who can't uh, equi-vocate to heaven. This is some weird book." He flipped some more looking for a better part.

Too late the diver saw there was no water below him.

A few relatives twittered to each other whether this proved he could read enough for college or not. Brian felt tricked. He had never seen a book with words like these.

In fact there was no pool at all, just a tiny bucket getting bigger every second...

Brian wanted to get away from everybody, especially his father who looked like he had proved his point.

"Do math majors have to know about in-card-ine seas and heaven and the devil?" he had asked his grandfather.

"Good question." His grandfather had said, his eyes twinkling. "But it doesn't hurt to know."

It doesn't hurt to know, the words echoed in Brian's head like a dirge as the bus rolled to its final stop all too soon, leaving him to face the ugly brick monster that was to devour him with a thousand other hapless students. He noticed the school property, muddy from a recent storm, and imagined the Waterfield High School building slobbering in anticipation of the long-awaited feeding after the starvation of the summer and drooling on the ground, turning it muddy. *Or incardine*, he thought, feeling sick to his stomach as he entered the orifice.

At least he had been allowed to finish out the year at the institute. He recalled the last day there. Most of his friends had sympathized with his plight, telling him horror stories.

"I had to teach my interpreter to sign!"

"The baseball coach wouldn't even let Bill try out for the team because the coach didn't want to handle somebody who couldn't hear!"

"You'll be talking to yourself in days!"

"Nobody, NOBODY talks to you."

"The only people that hang around you are the ones nobody else will talk to!"

"Yeah, dorks, nerds, and creeps!"

"It's tough to get an interpreter for ANYthing!"

"It's hell!"

Hell, no interpreter, no friends, school is hell, his friends' words slurred in his mind into a single chant, drowning out his grandfather's *It doesn't hurt to know*. As he looked around the inside of the huge school with swarming students jostling each other like blind, mindless insects, he suddenly knew it could hurt very much to know.