

His father sits him down several hours before his 8th birthday party, a Batman-themed party he's begged his parents for several weeks. His father has a strange look on his face, slightly pensive but not overly ominous, and it makes him uneasy. He fidgets on the leather couch, the material sticking to his clammy tiny legs.

"Listen, Johnny, we have to go someplace," Mr. Callejon says. His father is usually a small wiry ball of energy, but not today.

His initial fear seems to be coming true. "But what about my party?" He looks at his father with wide eyes, tears hinting at streaming down his cheeks.

"Don't worry, son—we'll be back in plenty of time for that. It's really important that we go to this place, so let's go now so we can come back to get ready, Batman." Mr. Callejon gives Johnny a toothy smile. His father's small frame seems to have relaxed and is back to its usual eased nature. Johnny feels much better, and he runs upstairs to change.

Mr. Callejon waits at the bottom of the stairs. As he plays Tetris on his phone, he notices the time slowly pass. "Hurry up, Johnny! You don't want to miss your party," he screams upstairs without looking up from the game. He lets out a grunt as the board fills up and he loses.

After another minute passes, Johnny finally runs down the stairs. He's fully regaled in a homemade Batman outfit, courtesy of his mother, that mirrors the 1960s TV series rather than any of the movie incarnations. Although it isn't an exact facsimile, the costume is more than passable, and Johnny slips seamlessly into his imagination's latest creation: Johnny Callejon, the eight-year old who is really Bruce Wayne, who's secret identity is Batman, protector of Gotham.

Mr. Callejon gives a half-smile at Johnny's presentation, standing at the bottom of the steps doing the Superman pose—biceps flexed, fists at his waist, jaw jutting slightly to the left.

At this point, these fancies and whims are old hat to Mr. and Mrs. Callejon, as Johnny apes a new fictional character almost every week, but his newfound obsession with Batman is different.

“Let’s go, Clark Kent,” Mr. Callejon teases, knowing it will get a reaction from Johnny.

“Dad, I’m Bruce Wayne...Clark Kent is Superman. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“One more time. So can Bruce Wayne fly too?”

“Dad, you don’t know anything!” Johnny cries as he follows his dad out the door.

Mr. Callejon and Johnny get in the dull-yellow Honda Accord, and they drive out of the dead-end street they live on. Mr. Callejon is half-listening to Johnny explain, with little variation, for what-seems-like the hundredth time all about Batman.

Mr. Callejon utters, “Uh huh,” “Yeah,” and “Oh really?” alternating in order to continue the guise of paying attention, but he’s focusing more on what directions the GPS gives him.

“And, Dad, there’s this one villain called Two-Face. He’s really scary.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah! Because a part of him is this normal guy who used to be a materny, and the other half makes him do all these bad things.”

“Uh huh...a what? What did you say, Johnny?”

“A materny?”

Mr. Callejon thinks about this for a bit, causing him to almost miss the turn that he needs to make. “Do you mean attorney?” He laughs a little at his son’s mistake, and he looks in the rearview mirror to indicate to Johnny that it’s a playful laugh, not malicious.

“Yeah! Attorney. What is an attorney, Dad?”

Mr. Callejon thinks about how to answer this. After several seconds of contemplating, he says, “An attorney is someone who argues for a living.”

“Like you and mom do?”

“We don’t argue *that* much,” Mr. Callejon replies between laughing.

“I guess not. My friend Jermaine, his parents fight all the time.”

“That’s sad to hear, but grown-ups will do that sometimes. People don’t always see everything the same way.”

“So then how come some people get paid to do it and others do it for free?”

Mr. Callejon smiles at this as he looks down the road for any sort of sign to recognize the place. “Mommy and I only do it when it’s important.” He sees the sign for the building, both very inauspicious, which he doesn’t remember because he swore it was so much scarier when he went there thirty years ago. “Some people think it would be fun to argue all day and try to prove that you’re always right,” Mr. Callejon says as he pulls into the parking lot. He’s looking at the sign, which is three black curved arrows that form a circle and the words Life Plan written in green in the middle.

Johnny, with furrowed brow, looks straight ahead. “That doesn’t sound fun to me.”

“What does sound fun to you?” Mr. Callejon has stopped the car, and he’s staring at the building. After recollecting what it was like for him to go into the building and what happened there, he looks up in the rearview mirror and back at Johnny, who’s looking out the window.

“My birthday party. Mom says she made cupcakes. Do you promise this won’t take long?”

Johnny looks over at his dad. Mr. Callejon nods back to quell Johnny’s fears.

“But what else sounds fun, Johnny? Do you think what Daddy does for a living sounds fun?”

“Add numbers all day? No way! I hate math.”

He laughs at Johnny, who starts to pout at the mere mention of math. He pauses for a few seconds, contemplating the best course of action. “Listen, Johnny, we’re about to go inside this building. What’s about to happen is very important. There will be some people in there that are going to ask you a bunch of questions. I will tell them a little about you, but once they start talking to you, I can’t help you. Do you understand?”

“Sort of. You mean I have to talk to strangers.”

“Yes, but they aren’t strangers. They are going to ask you some questions that you may think are silly or weird, but...listen to me, Johnny...I need you to think long and hard before you say *anything*. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“What did I just say?”

“Think long and hard,” Johnny says and nods, his Batman mask sliding slightly down his face.

“This isn’t a game, Johnny. This isn’t pretend. You need to focus on what’s really happening now, OK? This is a really important day for you.”

Johnny listens and nods vehemently. Mr. Callejon recognizes Johnny’s expression. He knows Johnny’s still in character, pretending he’s Commissioner Gordon asking Johnny to save Gotham.

“Mr. Callejon, please tell us about your son, Jonathan.”

“Yes, Architects. Johnny is a very smart kid. He loves to read. Already he’s reading on a 5th-grade level...”

“Why is he dressed like this?”

“Because I’m Batman!”

Mr. Callejon laughs nervously. “He’s got a very active imagination. My wife and I encourage it—it makes him so happy to pretend that he’s these characters. He’ll create these stories about each one. He likes to be a new person every week.”

“But why Batman?” The Architects’ voices seem to echo and boom throughout the room to Mr. Callejon. He looks over at Johnny, who’s standing in the center of the room underneath the skylight, with rays of sun illuminating Johnny as Johnny kicks and punches imaginary villains.

“Well, Architects, he loves Batman because...”

“No. Not you. Him.”

Mr. Callejon looks up at the three Architects that sit on the bench raised several feet above them. Mr. Callejon’s body deflates, knowing now that he can’t help Johnny anymore. He takes a seat on the bench in the dimly-lit area away from the Architects.

“Why do you love Batman, Jonathan?”

Johnny looks up, without an ounce of fear, and stares straight at the Architects. “Because he fights crime and he does it by using things that he invented.”

“Does that interest you?”

Johnny looks over at Mr. Callejon, who is trying to suppress nervousness. Johnny looks back up at the Architects and waits.

“What?”

“Fighting crime. Does that interest you?”

“Not really, I guess.” Johnny shifts his body weight and looks to the ground for comfort.

“Well, why not? Batman fights crime.”

“Yeah, but he gets hurt doing that. Bane breaks his back! I don’t want to get hurt.

Mommy and Daddy would be too upset if I do. When I was being a Ninja Turtle, I fell off my skateboard and hurt my arm. Mommy and Daddy cried a lot that day.”

Mr. Callejon turns away.

“So you like that he invented things?”

“Yeah! I love building things! Daddy and I built my tree house together. We had so much fun, didn’t we, Daddy?”

Mr. Callejon nods. “We sure did, pal.”

“So is that what you want to be when you grow up...a builder?”

“Yes!”

Mr. Callejon’s eyes widen. He looks up at the Architects. He’s panicked. “No, please, that’s not what he means! He wants to be an inventor. That’s what he wanted to say. Please, he’s just a boy. He doesn’t know...” Mr. Callejon feels sweat on his forehead. It’s suddenly become very hot in the room, so he unbuttons his collar.

The Architects finish conferring. The three look down at Johnny. “Jonathan Callejon, you will grow up to be a construction worker. You can pick up your life plan from the receptionist on your way out. Good day!”

Johnny sits there while his father repeatedly punches the steering wheel. He hears words that he’s not supposed to say, ones he hears often when Mommy and Daddy fight. He’s upset.

He doesn't know why, but he's made Dad angry. *I don't even want to have my birthday party now.*

He looks over at his father, who, while driving home, is leafing through the Life Plan for him. His father grows more agitated every time his father reads something else from the packet.

“He doesn't get to go to college? Are you fucking kidding me?” Mr. Callejon is screaming, unabashedly releasing his stream-of-consciousness about the situation. “Well, at least I won't have to pay for college. Ha!

“Those motherfuckers, they sit there...how the fuck are you supposed to know? You're just a boy!”

His father keeps doing these half-gestures—one minute Mr. Callejon looks ready to punch something, then aborts it—and he's more confused than ever. He's watching the trees race by him and wishes he could stop them. He wants everything to stand still. He's got tears in his eyes now. He watches his dad curse with a guttural yell, and he doesn't know why, he doesn't know what he said wrong.

He takes off his Batman mask and he hands it to his father. Mr. Callejon, mid-expletive, stops and looks at what he's giving. “Why are you handing me this, Johnny?”

“I don't want to be Batman no more. I don't need to build things.”

His dad pulls the car over. He looks around but doesn't know where they are, and his dad is just sitting there, now all quiet, until he sees the tears flow from his father's eyes. “You can be Batman if you want. Batman's real brave.”

“Come sit in the front for a bit, Johnny,” Mr. Callejon says and pats the seat. Johnny unbuckles and climbs into the front, next to his dad.

“I’m sorry, Johnny. I tried to warn you. I told you all I could. I wish I could have told you more, but I can’t...”

He feels his body get pulled into his dad’s, and they hug. “I don’t know why the Architects make it like this, but they do. You can’t fully know what’s in store for you until after you decide. It’s so fuc...

“But you like building, though, right? Like, you really like it?”

He nods, a smile slowly forming. His father stares at him, trying to tell from his face if it’s the truth.

“OK. OK. That’s OK then. If you really like it, that’s fine, son. Yeah, fine. It’ll all be fine. And look, you get to marry a hair stylist—they’re usually really hot. Good for you, Johnny.

“Look, maybe I overreacted. It’s just that I wanted so much more...forget it. Let’s just focus on some of the good things here.”

Mr. Callejon leafs quickly through the Life Plan. Every now and then, Mr. Callejon reads out loud something that might interest Johnny, though Johnny still doesn’t have a clue what any of it means. “You’ll get to have a cabin in the mountains...that you built! Impressive stuff, Johnny. You’ll help rebuild city hall. That’s no slouch project, son. We can deal with this. This can work.”

He is staring at the Batman mask that his father is waving around in one hand. The mask is crumpled into a ball. *I guess I’ll have to be Bruce Wayne at the party.*

He stares down an almost-empty glass of vodka, flavorless. He swirls the remnants around a bit, watching it shift in the glass but always being forced to return back to form. He grabs the glass and drains the rest of it, some of it spilling onto his bottom lip. He puts the glass

back down on the bar caked with years of liquor stains. He wipes away the liquor on his lips with the back of his hand.

Someone has put “Piano Man” on the jukebox, a song that he and the other regulars hate to hear blaring throughout the bar, but the ones who pass through love to throw it on. He looks up at the bartender, a paunchy middle-aged man, who, with shrugged shoulders, continues to clean the glasses, though they never get clean, not really.

He hears some yelling behind him. Before fully turning around, he looks to his left and notices that only one of the six barstools is occupied. He looks over his left shoulder and sees several kids, *can't be older than 22*, huddling near the jukebox. They all have drinks in their hands, but the floor gets more of the drinks than they do.

He turns back around and stares straight ahead, not at anything, just ahead.

“Want another one, John?”

He doesn't answer.

“For your birthday.”

He looks over at the bartender and gives a slight affirmative nod. He looks down at the bar and wonders. *How many people have sat here before me and thought the same things I do? Some liked their scotch, others their beer, all one thing in common.*

“Hey, hey, hey...I just want to congratulate Jacob on finishing up his MBA!”

Am a man without ambition except to be champion of the world.

“We'll miss him, but I know he's excited to leave tomorrow to go on his tour of Europe for two months. What can we say, the guy chose a good Life Plan, and now he's reaping the benefits of it!”

All of the kids start to laugh. He continues to stare straight ahead, somehow even more focused than before. *We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination.*

“Hey, everyone want another round? My treat!”

So long as we are loved by others, I should say that we are indispensable; and no man is useless while he has a friend.

“Hey, can we get another round of drinks, please?”

“Just a minute.” A glass is placed in front of him. “Happy 30th, John.”

So it goes. “Thanks.”

He walks in the door and sees his kids fixated on the TV. They don’t acknowledge his presence, so he walks by them into the kitchen. He sees his wife, all blonde and buxom and little else. *How little of permanent happiness could belong to a couple who were only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue.* He chuckles a bit at that, and watches her cook.

“And who are you? Because *my* husband doesn’t laugh.” Her voice sounds shrill to him.

“Well, it is my birthday,” he answers, a step back from being curt. His eyes are drawn to random parts of the kitchen—the two wooden beams that run parallel on the ceiling, the cabinets, the hanging pot rack—that he’s built over the years.

“Did someone buy you a sense of humor at the bar?”

“You can say that. Jermaine gave me free shots.”

His wife gives him a quick roll of her eyes, then goes back to chopping carrots. “Remind me to thank him for that next time I see him.”

She tries to move some wayward hairs from out of her face without using her arms, and he smiles devilishly at the sight of her jerking her neck. *It is the eye of the beholder that moves.*

“Just remember, tonight after dinner, we have to start working on Sam or Samantha,” she says, as she dumps chopped carrots into a big pot. “Pot Roast, by the way.”

He nods indifferently about dinner. He walks to the cabinets and grabs a bottle of generic vodka. He adds ice then pours himself a glass.

“Really, before dinner?” she asks, and he can detect the disapprobation in her voice easily.

“It’s my birthday.”

“Has it been your birthday for the past month too?” She walks over to the refrigerator and grabs a head of lettuce to start making a salad.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he says, tilting his back as he swigs vodka and stares up at the ceiling.

“You’re the one who’s always acting like you’re smarter than everyone. You figure it out.”

He knows what it means, but just doesn’t care. A smirk sneaks across his face at this.

“Can’t you just let me enjoy my birthday? I don’t ask for much. Can’t I just have this one day?”

“Why should I bother being nice to you? You don’t care about any of us.”

“Like this is what you wanted...” he gesticulates and spills some of the vodka onto the floor.

She smiles sarcastically at him, then grabs a dish towel and throws it at him. “Not when you spend every minute looking for reasons to be unhappy. But, things could be a lot worse.”

He rolls his eyes and washes it down with a long sip of vodka. “Suffering is relative.”
The vodka warms his cheeks.

She puts her right fist on her hip and shifts her weight to that leg. Her red turtleneck sweater hugs her svelte body and her black pants offer little room to move freely in. “Yeah, you suffer—I cook for you on your birthday. I do my best to look nice for dinner. I tell you we’re going to fuck later. You’re really suffering, pal.”

“Oh, like you’re not?”

She shakes her head very slightly and then turns her back to him. She throws in the carrots to the mixed salad, and without looking up, she says, “We’ve got two great kids, a nice house, and good jobs. If I weren’t married to Mr. Fucking Gloomy, no, I wouldn’t be.”

His eyes become beady as he stares at her. “I didn’t fucking ask for this.”

She chortles. “Yes you did. We all did.” She looks up from making the salad and gives a toothy grin. “Some of us know our place in the world better than others.” She walks over to the refrigerator to grab a bottle of salad dressing, and he drains vodka as she strides by him. She lets out a slight snicker. “I’m so sorry that the dream *you* had wasn’t enough for you.”

After work, he gets a call from his dad.

“Listen, Johnny, sorry we couldn’t make it to your house for dinner last night to celebrate your birthday. We got back late from seeing that specialist for Mom.”

“Is she OK?”

“Why don’t we meet so we can talk in person? Let’s grab some dinner.”

“Sure,” he says, walking off the construction site. “McCloone’s?”

“You got it. I’ll see you in 15 minutes.”

There was something strange in his voice—sadness. He only remembers his dad truly being upset on that day...He quickly tries to think of something else. *What will I get at McCloone's?* Though this line of thought doesn't last, it serves its purpose.

As he's walking to his car, his boss stops him. "Callejon, where the fuck do you think you're going?"

He's nonplussed, so he replies, "It's 5PM. My shift's over. Is there something wrong with that?"

"Didn't you get the memo that all construction workers have to stay until 5:30? We're a month behind schedule."

"I've been here 12 years, Mr. Berkeley. Can't the new guys handle it?"

"That's not the fucking point! You're a construction worker. You could've worked for me for 500 years. The memo clearly says *all* construction workers. Is that so fucking hard to understand?" Mr. Berkeley's gangly stature belies the severity of his tone.

"No, sir, but I promised my father I'd meet..." Mr. Berkeley's bug-eyes widen at this, and he knows that there's no point to finish the request. "Nothing, sir. It's fine. 5:30."

As Mr. Berkeley's gawky body recedes into the construction site, he pulls out his cell phone while staring straight at his car. "Hey, Dad, sorry, I have to work a bit late. Can we say 5:45?"

After he hangs up, he's tempted to quit. *Why not? I'm sure I can find some other fucking bullshit job like this.* But then he another thought occurs to him, a thought that makes him smile genuinely for the first time in a while. He turns back around and walks back almost sprightly onto the site.

He walks into McCloone's to find his dad sitting at the bar. The restaurant's faux log cabin décor usually escapes his scrutiny, but today he surveys the restaurants for subtle ways to improve it—bamboo floors and walls, mosaic tiles around the fireplace (as well as an actual fire), granite tile bar. *Nothing major, but a makeover would do this place some good.*

“What are you smiling at?”

He looks at his dad, and still can't suppress it fully. “Nothing.”

“Come on, tell me,” Mr. Callejon replies. “It's been a while since I've seen you look happy.” He feels his father's hand on his back, rubbing it in a cajoling way. It brings a slight comfort to him to know that this act from his dad can bring up those same feelings even as an adult.

“Tell me about Mom first,” he says as he signals to the bartender to get him the same drink his father is having. “You got me all worried.”

Mr. Callejon takes a quick sip, then begins, “Well last week your mother found a lump close to her right armpit. We've been worried all week about it—we didn't want to tell you because we didn't want to ruin your birthday. Like I said, we saw a specialist yesterday, Dr. Hallman. Your mother's fine. It's benign.”

He finally releases his breath and his heart starts to return to its normal pace. He grabs the glass the bartender has just placed in front of him. “To good news!”

Him and his father cheers, then both take a small sip from their drinks. “How about you? How's Heather? Still looking as great as ever?”

He grabs his drink and takes another sip. “We're trying for our third. But you know that.”
Once you bring life into the world, you must protect it...

Mr. Callejon smiles sheepishly. “Of course I do! Congratulations...knock on wood—ha ha! But I bet you’re having fun trying, eh?”

He nods insincerely. He stares down at his drink trying to avoid his father’s gaze. He feels it burning him, and he becomes flushed.

“What’s wrong? You were just so happy one minute ago...”

We must protect it by changing the world. “Oh yeah, actually I just had a great idea as I was finishing up work today.”

“How is work, by the way? Is Mr. Berkeley still being a shithead?”

“Yeah, and that’s just it, that’s what I realized—he’s such a *huge* reason why I hate my job. He treats with me no respect. Just today, he made me stay an extra half hour for no reason! He could have just had all the younger guys stay later.”

“Well, he’s the boss,” Mr. Callejon says in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I know, and that’s the thing, and that’s what I was thinking on my way over here and a few minutes ago...what if I started my own company? I’ve been doing this for 12 years, I know what it takes to do a successful job. I could be really good at it. Oh, and you could be my company’s accountant! How great would that be, us working together?”

Mr. Callejon, very concerned, looks around the restaurant. He starts to scan the room too, as a knee-jerk reaction, but he isn’t sure what he’s looking for. The bartender is the only one that’s close to them. In a hushed voice, he says, “Did you tell anyone this plan yet?”

John’s slightly confused at his dad’s behavior. “No. Literally, I just thought of this. I thought you would be excited about this.”

Mr. Callejon takes a long sip of vodka. Once the bartender walks to the other side of the bar, Mr. Callejon whispers, “Forget you ever thought of this, OK? Just forget it now.”

“Why?” he asks, incredulous at his father’s behavior. He’s never seen his father look this nervous.

“Look...you know your life plan. So do I.”

He scratches his face. “Yeah, so?” He rests his elbow on the bar and leans his head against his right hand.

“You said construction worker. Not manager or owner.”

He lets a sarcastic laugh escape, and it briefly draws the attention of the bartender. He feels his dad grab his left forearm as a gesture to quiet down. “Wait, you’re serious.”

“I am.”

He turns toward the bartender, who has turned away, and then faces his dad again. “So what are you telling me? That I’m stuck in this dead-end fucking job for the rest of my life? That there’s nothing I can do about it?”

“You said builder...” Mr. Callejon adds as a tear rolls down. John feels as if the chair underneath him is about to give out. His stomach wrestles itself. “Look, people were tired of their dreams not coming true. They were sick of wasting thousands of dollars on college educations and training only to have to work in completely different fields.

“And then they thought of this, the Architects designing life plans for everyone to follow. I don’t have to tell you—‘By age 18, begin working,’ ’21 get married,’ ’24 have a child...People stopped having their dreams unfulfilled. Everyone got what they wanted.”

John’s got both hands on the bar, and it’s barely holding him up. His dad’s words are reverberating in his mind. *You said builder.* “But what if my dream has changed?” he asks, his right hand trembling so much that as he grabs his glass he can’t even lift his drink. “I grew up! I discovered I want something else, something more. What’s wrong with that?”

Mr. Callejon shakes his head forlornly. “The Architects thought about this—society can’t have people wasting however many years on a plan then switch to another. Do you realize how much each of these plans cost in order to create? Think about all the schooling that goes into each person’s plan! Just the schooling alone...

“Hell, before a child turns 18, it costs \$300,000 to raise it! So add \$200,000 on top of that for *college*, *four* years for someone to study something and not get a job in it—you can understand why there were a lot of very angry people.”

Angry people are not always wise. He tries to bury his head in the bar. His forehead feels oddly cooled off by the granite. The stench of ammonia stings his nostrils, and it makes him lift his head back up.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Couldn’t you have warned me? How was I supposed to know what I did in there was going to affect the rest of my life?”

He’s fighting back the tears, but it’s futile, and he starts to cry as his father adds, “None of us knew. I wish it were different, son, I do, but we don’t know.”

“Look, I’ll pay them anything. There’s got to be something I can do...” The last few words seem to be a whisper as he says them.

He sees his father shaking his head the whole time. “Look, Johnny, it’s not just you—what about the teachers that trained you on the plan you were on? What about their wasted hours? Even if you could pay \$500,000 for the rest of your life and some of that went to compensate the people that wasted time guiding you to a career you abandon, not to mention the other people who wanted that career whose spot you took, society *can’t* have people not contributing. Everyone has to do their part, and we have no room for people taking time to discover themselves.

“Son, just be thankful you said *something*. Do you know what happens to the people who didn’t have any career in mind when they went to their meeting?”

Immediately he thinks of Jermaine, but him and Jermaine never talk about that. *That would be against the unspoken rule between bartender and patron—how you got here is irrelevant. “You’re here, so what can I get ya?”*

“How?” he asks, though his mind continues to race for a way out of this.

“Did you ever think about what moron would ever say they want to be a janitor or a garbage man?” His father whistles quietly, more pantomime than even emitting sound, and he thinks about how when he’s there, Jermaine never *really* does much of anything behind the bar. A sad, sardonic smile slithers across his face. *That’s some catch, that Catch-22.*

“So, that’s it?” he says, the smile not entirely faded.

“Afraid so.”

He nods acknowledging the dead end. He drains his drink, then reaches for his wallet, pulls out some money, and throws it down on the bar.

“But it’s your birthday. Let me treat.”

“Don’t worry about it, Dad,” he says, and he puts his arm around his father. “You’ve treated me long enough.”

He walks out of the bar, knowing full well what he’s going to do.

He’s on the roof of the newly-renovated city hall. He’s looking down at the pavement and he sees the way out of the dead end. As the breeze hits his face, he can’t help but feel refreshed. He closes his eyes and does his best to drown out the wail of the cop cars’ sirens. He opens them

and is calmed by the red and green flashing in the dark of night. He wants to feel the sidewalk's warm embrace. *Kiss me, and you will see how important I am.*

He feels his one foot let go of its grip from the marble. It's dangling in the air, so free. He smirks. He's ready to feel the same way. *Good luck exploring the infinite abyss.*

"Johnny..."

Reflexively, he puts his foot back down on the ledge. He looks down into the now-gathered crowd—about a dozen cops, several onlookers. He can't make out who's speaking though.

"Johnny, it's your dad," Mr. Callejon says through a megaphone. He looks down in the crowd to try and spot his father. After several seconds, he can see someone by three cop cars holding a megaphone. He realizes for the first time just how small his father is.

"Johnny, what are you doing?"

He screams. There's no response. He screams again. Nothing. Then he feels a vibration. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and answers it.

"What are you doing, son?"

With a gleeful tone, he replies, "You said it yourself—there's nothing I can do. Except this."

"Don't you think we've all thought of this? Is it really worth throwing your life away for?"

The words feel like they're going to rip through his throat to get out. "What life? I'm miserable, Dad. I wake up every morning and I can't think of one single reason to get out of bed. I could be so much more. If I had just said a scientist, or a manager..."

“We all could have. Every single person on this planet looks at what they *could* have been. Do you honestly think that *any* of us are happy? Hell, don’t you think there were times when I was your age that I thought about doing the same thing you’re thinking of doing right now?”

“So what am I supposed to do? Just pretend that I’m not miserable? Should I act like everything’s fine?”

“We all having coping mechanisms. If that’s what it takes for you, then yeah. We all need a reason to get up every morning, and you—you were, you are...”

“If anyone should be up there on that ledge, it should be me, because if you feel this is the only way out, then I failed you. It’s that simple.”

He looks down at his father. He can’t make out any expression, but he knows him and his father are staring at each other that very moment. His cheeks grow warm as the tears trickle down. He doesn’t wipe the tears away.

“All I’ve ever wanted was what you had—wake up every morning, be happy, and know that you support your family doing that. When I walk in my door, no one even acts like I matter.”

“Son, I’m sorry, but you’re lying to yourself. I’ve seen the way Heather looks at you, well used to anyway. I’ve watched your kids laugh until they cry when you play with them. If you would just open your damn eyes for once in your life and stop *dreaming* about what you don’t have and look at what you do, you’d see that.

“Look, life’s not fair, OK? I don’t know why some people know what to say when they’re interviewed and others don’t. That’s just the way it is. But if you keep focusing on how things could have been different if only this, if only that...”

“Your wife loves you. Your kids love you. Mom loves you. I love you. So what, you’re never going to be something else? That’s what drinking’s for.” He hears his father snort.

“So that’s all the secret, huh? Just find something that doesn’t make you want to kill yourself?”

His father gives out a hearty laugh again. “Pretty much.”

He hangs up the phone. He puts his leg out again. So free.

His wife wakes him up by straddling him. *I guess all parts don’t know that I’m still tired.* As he starts to become more and more alert, his hands start to roam his wife’s body, something he hasn’t taken pleasure in for years. She sighs with pleasure, and he stiffens more with each one.

He guides her to her back and climbs on top of her. He thrusts. Over and over. Over and over. *How come this is the only monotonous act that no one ever complains about?* Over and over.

When he’s done, he slinks beside her. She looks over at him and smiles, satiated. He grins back. When she gets up to go brush her teeth, his eyes follow her and try to memorize every part. She closes the door, and he looks up at the ceiling. The smile fades pretty quickly. He reaches over to his night stand. He grabs a book, and the smile returns. He opens the book and begins to read.