

Perhaps Tomorrow

by [Daniel Buck](#) (March 2019)



Monuments in the Sky, Hugh Cabot III

Friday, April 20th

I didn't actually believe there were words in the sky when I first saw the hashtag. The same picture tagged over and over, a few wispy trails of clouds that spelled out a message:

I am real

– God

No period. No reference to a specific religion. Just a simple, but history-altering declarative statement followed by a hyphen and a name. For a moment as long as my eyelash, I hoped for unity. Then I scrolled. The Southern Baptist Convention and their seminaries had unified, but only against Wheaton College.

It was a Friday. My wife worked second shift and would not be home until midnight. I didn't bother to text her. Instead, I did what I normally do on Friday nights when my wife works. I went to the bar.

I drove up to the small red brick building, a chain restaurant. A guy walked out with a black eye. Inside, half the patrons sang and drank and pounded on tables. The other half sat solemn, a party at a funeral.

My normal drinking buddy, a kook full of conspiracy theories, was at the bar. Most of what he said was outlandishly offensive, but I almost admired the man for the strength with which he held his convictions.

"What'll it be, Stan?" the bartender asked.

"The same always: a pilsner and fries," I said. "I'm surprised you're open tonight with the news."

“I’m sure our good Lord would want his people to capitalize on such a miracle, don’t you?”

Jerry, the kook of a circus show, had already spilled on himself. I still don’t know what he does for a living, but I know he supports euthanasia.

“It’s a vintage, Stan.” He had found me. He was sloshing his glass of wine at me. “You know how I know it’s a vintage, Stan?”

“Because you read the bottle, Jerry.”

“No. The dregs, Stan. The dregs. Give that fucker a swirl.”

He meant the legs. The legs of the wine are the little streaks that drip down after its swirled. I humored him.

“You see all that shit drippin’ down. There’s a lot of them. That’s how you know it’s a vintage.”

His grey beard was stained red around the mouth. The barkeep held up a bottle of cooking wine, out of Jerry’s sight, and snickered.

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“But enough about wine, Stan. There are more important things to talk about tonight aren’t there and you just had to come in and hear what I had to say about all this shit and it’s the same thing I’ve always said. You know what I’ve always said, Stan?”

“Mostly bullshit?” I joked.

“Fuck it. Fuck all this God stuff. Ya know why, Stan?” Despite the vulgarities, he was serious. This was the closest to sober I had ever seen him. “All my life I’ve been living, drinking, and enjoying myself. I’ve never done nobody any wrong. A few clouds say he’s real and now some prick at the end of the bar insists I believe.”

“Well, he gave you a life,” I said.

“And I gave my son his life. That doesn’t mean he needs to give two shits about what I say. He never asked for it. If an absent father comes along and tries to tell his kid’s girl to fuck off, why should that kid listen to his Dad?”

I had no response.

“No,” he continued. “My kid should go date his girl for all I care and ignore all that I’ve said to him. If my kid is smart, he’d listen to me, but he has no obligation to.”

He was silent. He noticed his mistake.

“I disagree,” I stuttered.

“Well then, Stan, give me a reason,” he snapped. “Because I don’t have one.” We weren’t talking about the clouds anymore.

“It would take too much time right now,” I said. “A good argument, one of this caliber, needs to be made well. Sitting in a loud room just won’t do.”

“Sounds like you don’t have a response either.” He put his glass down. “Why should he care if I have this drink? If he creates clouds, what does it matter if I’m close to my kid? Nah. We make ourselves.”

He finished his second glass in silence and left for the bathroom.

I walked home that night, my blood brown with beer. I had forgotten about the clouds in the bar. They were hard to see

now, backlit by the moon. During the day, the words were bright white on blue. Now they were a shadow in the sky, an absence scratched into a black abyss. I watched a man take a picture with his phone and then another. He couldn't get it in focus.

I turned into the park. I reflected on a conversation with my parents from my childhood, how they named me Stanley Jonathan Maker. It had been an assignment for school to find out.

"Mom?" I was 8 years old.

"What's up?" She lowered the volume on the nightly news. She hadn't bothered to change out of her work clothes.

"What name did you give me and Why?" I read off the assignment sheet.

"Well you know your own name," she started. "As for why, well, your father and I just read lots of different names in a baby-naming book and Stanley was one that sounded good. Jonathan is from the Bible. We thought it would be good to give you a name from the Bible. We made your first name Stanley and your middle Jonathan."

Other kids in my class the following day had riveting stories behind their names. I was given Jonathan, because it seemed like a good idea and Stanley, because it sounded nice. God says 'I am real' in brilliant vapor in the sky and I can write

in pencil 'I am Stanley Jonathan Maker.'

Monday, April 23rd

The school had a policy about the clouds in the sky: do not discuss with students. Almost everyone followed the rule. Even in the teacher's lounge, conversation avoided the phenomenon. Instead, everyone talked about my classroom as a proxy.

The official statement says:

Two students began an argument over the clouds. Racial slurs were used. Student A punched the other. The teacher pulled them apart. Student B walked out of the room. The teacher and another student held the other back. When the student in the classroom sat down, the teacher called security and the school's SRO escorted both students to the office. Both students will be suspended for 1.5 days.

That's not exactly what happened. Tensions between the students had been building for months. Smoke doesn't stain walls yellow after only one week of a habit. In early November, the first student had left his laptop lying out where I store them. The other kid grabbed it, thinking it unclaimed, and brought it to his desk. They both began fighting over who had the right to use the computer. Interestingly, because of the circumstance, they both had a genuine claim to the machine.

After that instance, both considered the other a prejudiced lowlife. Throughout the year, the verbal altercations between them began to stain the halls. That the two fought in my class is entirely irrelevant to a miracle floating around the world; it began over a misunderstanding, nothing. It wasn't just them either.

I had treated them like two rabid dogs, betting on their fight, so I could spend a class with them suspended. The clouds had nothing to do with this. Two boys, a teacher, and a school administration did. I talked with my wife about it.

"Hector and Bilal got in a fight today," I said. I was eating Kraft mac and cheese at our plastic folding table. She had a salad with beets and goat cheese.

"What happened?"

"I'm really not sure. They swore at each other a couple times, got in each other's faces, and then Hector swung first."

"Oh my gosh."

"I feel kind of bad."

“Why?” My wife’s red hair was in a ponytail with one braid running along the side.

“I feel like I’m to blame, but I’m not sure. If it was my fault, I could change and move on. If it were theirs, there’s not much to do. If it was the administration’s fault, I could ignore it. Where I’m at, I just kind of sit here and wonder and worry.”

“What do others say about this kind of thing?”

“That’s the thing. No one agrees and no one sees that this is really what all the arguments are about. Where does fault lie? Half the school blames the kids and the administration and half the school blames teachers.”

“Couldn’t it be a bit of all three?”

“I mean, that’s the answer,” I paused to put some ketchup on my dinner. “But if I take this fight today, for instance, how do I split the blame in three? What do I do about the fact that I can’t do the dishes right now, because I’m too busy fussing about tomorrow, ultimately making no decision to act and just wallowing in my own guilt?”

I hadn’t taken a bite of food since I put the ketchup on.

“Just know that you’re a good teacher and move on, I guess.”

We spent the rest of dinner talking about her day. We watched TV after while she mindlessly sketched a picture. My parents would fall asleep in front of the TV every night, but we never could.

Thursday April 25th

Hector told me to fuck off today and now I’m at lunch wishing I could flip his desk with him in it, a disturbingly pleasant thought. I thought about it as I fell asleep last night too, a consciously chosen dream.

It was work time when it happened. They had questions to answer about the book we were reading. The students were working, talking, complying. I could hear the sound of pencils scratching, that beautiful moment when a teacher can hear their learning against the paper. My mind thought of the sun-backed clouds in that brief moment of respite.

I didn’t understand what Hector shouted at this point, but I heard a curse in Spanish. I knelt down next to him to ask what was happening. He ignored me and shouted again to his friend with me right there. I asked him to step outside. He didn’t. I asked him again. He threw his pencil and obeyed. Outside he refused to talk about what he had done in the room. What

deliverance could confession give anyway?

He walked back in, flipped a chair, I said his name, and out came the expletive. He got his second out of school suspension this week, but will have a meeting with the principal and me first.

The meeting was a failure. It was seventh hour when they came around. The principal dropped him off and got caught up in a hallway dispute outside my room. Hector and I said nothing, alone in the classroom together.

He walked over to the board, grabbed a piece of chalk, and started drawing on it. I put my hand out to ask for the chalk. He ignored me and kept drawing.

“Hector, I’ll take the chalk,” I said.

“Hold on. Just a sec.” He shooed my hand away.

“Hector, that’s enough, I’ll take the chalk.” He was drawing a man with two big diamond earrings and a well-trimmed beard. I’d seen him draw it a hundred times. His drawing wasn’t an issue, but I had asked him for the chalk; now his compliance was.

“You always want something. Just let me be, man,” he flung

the chalk and started wandering around the room. He pulled a book off the shelf and let it clamor to the floor. I ignored it. He let another drop. Half a semester worth of consequences gained me no respect?

“Hector, sit down,” I said calmly. The principal was still busy in the hall. Hector sat on a desktop. He pulled out his phone and scrolled around the neon screen.

“You know I meant in a desk.”

He clicked his tongue, eyes on his screen.

“Put it away and sit in a desk.” I snapped.

“You always want something. What difference does it make right now, huh? He’s outside and we’re not starting this fucking conversation until he comes in. Chill, man.”

The suit came in through the door. To him, all of this was a low budget play, go through the motions and eat dinner after.

“Hector, please have a seat in a chair,” the principal said. Hector swung around the desk and sat down. The principal rubbed his eyes in faux impatience and began his act. “Listen, Hector, I don’t want to yell or chastise. You know how you’ve been behaving. So let me just ask you, how can we help you

succeed?"

He sat back in his desk, let out a little chortle, and looked around the room; he was following his queues.

"Hector, I worked at the high school before. I can tell you that this behavior will not be tolerated at that level. Mr. Maker here is going out of his way to help you. He doesn't need to have this conversation and they won't when you get to high school."

Hector looked down at the desk. The administrator adjusted his cuffs. I had turned to him for help and now we all knew that he couldn't.

"Anything you'd like to ask, Mr. Maker?"

"Hector, I have just one question for you," I began. I paused. I looked back up. "How do you think your behavior affects the other students in the class?"

Hector couldn't stay silent anymore.

"My behavior? Why must it always be my behavior? You only know how to yell at me. Was I the only one talking? No, but you chose me to have a conversation with in the hallway. Was my paper the only one blank? No. Was I the only student who

got out of his desk? No.”

“Were the other students shouting while doing their work?”
I snapped back.

“And what about snapping your fingers?” He ignored my question. “How do you think I feel when you give a command and then snap your fingers like I’m some kind of dog. You treat me like an animal and I just smile and do what you say. I smile, Mr. Maker, for you. Because I sometimes respect what you’re trying to do, but not this. When I work, you yell at me. When I don’t, you yell at me. And I try to smile through it all, but sometimes I just can’t.”

He stood up and walked towards the door.

“Hector, stop,” the principal said. “We’re not finished talking.”

Hector sat down on my desk and pulled out his phone.

“Hector, what do you need from us?” The principal was pleading.

“Nothing. I’m good.”

“Obviously that’s not true,” the principal insisted. “You’re not succeeding here.”

Music started playing from Hector’s phone.

“I’m going to miss my bus.”

“We’re not done here,” the administrator said.

Hector stood up and walked towards the door.

“We’re not done here,” the administrator repeated.

“It’s a forty minute walk home. I’m going to miss the bus.” He didn’t look at us.

“You may go,” the principal conceded. When Hector was out of earshot, the principal said, “well, he’ll be gone tomorrow, but we’ll see how Monday goes.”

There’s a song: ‘Blessed Assurance.’ It’s about having faith in the assurance of an afterlife and the comfort that that brings. I envy that song. I remember listening to it in college at a coffee shop. I prayed to myself for a chair to rise off the ground, thinking that if it did, I’d know that God was real and feel comforted. The chair stayed on the

ground and Hector walked out of my class.

My professor told me that same semester that I should consider dropping out. I wasn't fit to be a teacher. I longed to have assurance then not about my eternal fate, but merely my career choice. Now, I have assurance that God is real and I have to go into work tomorrow.

Friday April 26th

I called in sick today. According to weather patterns, the clouds should be over Missouri tomorrow. They had begun here in Minnesota and slowly circuited the globe, now on their second pass. A town near the middle of the state was about a 10-hour drive from my home. I got in the car at 6 a.m. and started the commute.

It was a long drive to do alone and my brain went to places I had long forgotten. I remembered while I was driving just south of Rochester when I would lie in my bed at 12 years old. I wondered if I was the Christ. A ridiculously presumptuous thought for a child, it was one that I had held onto for quite some time. I had tried to fill an empty glass with my thoughts and learned to deal with the disappointment.

I don't think I actually thought I was Christ. I just felt like I was made to be something significant and that's how my young brain understood it. It was my freshman year of high school that I set my sights on running a Fortune 500 hundred

company and my freshman year of college that I settled into teaching.

I listened to a podcast of two guys talking about The Watchers when I was an hour out. The Watchers were a group of people who followed the clouds every day, posting up in a location for a few hours while the message appeared on one horizon and made its way to another.

"I don't know Charlie," said one of the podcasters. "We may look back and see that these crazies are the appearance of a new religious movement. The Watchers won't be the name they keep, but there's validity to what they're doing."

"It's all nonsense. Ridiculous. I looked into one of their websites. If you read through any of it, you'll see that it's just a bunch of rehashed mixture of eastern philosophy and 60's idealism, pseudo-philosophical babble. Click into another site and it's completely different."

"Give them time to figure it all out. The implications of this all could be huge. Some leader will rise up and start to systematize their beliefs."

"That's the thing. It's a disparate group of people without a leader. There is no central belief system. It's not a new movement. It's a justification for pre-existing belief systems."

Neither man had actually talked to or seen these pseudo-philosophical babblers. I wasn't one to jump onto any movement, but I was intrigued. God has always been away in the sky for me. At least with this group, I'd be able to see him.

I pulled into the hotel, an island in the middle of an undeveloped field. The parking lot was full, so I parked on the street. Inside, a concierge was on the phone behind the desk. A few patrons were eating, laughing, and drinking in the hotel bar. It had all the banalities of a hotel during normal hours.

"Ah no, sorry, sir," the concierge said. His tie was too short. "Rooms with views of the clouds, are currently all booked. I could put you in a north-facing room and add you to the waitlist." The concierge was writing in a binder while talking. "No there is nothing I can do, sir," he rolled his eyes. "I've very sorry. As I said." He paused and started writing again.

I went up to the concierge. He was failing at regality.

"Stanly Maker. Here for a hotel room tonight. I believe I'm in a north facing room."

"Come to partake in the festivities, sir?" He wore a driving cap over greasy hair.

"To observe them."

“Quite an odd mixture of people coming through. All sorts.”

“And my room?”

“Ah yes, sir. Here’s the card key. Clouds will appear on the far horizon around 7 p.m., leaving just enough time to get the full show before sunset. Our bar is open until 11 p.m., so feel free to swing by and enjoy a refreshment after.”

“Thanks.”

I brought my bags to the room and then stopped down at the bar to get a drink before making my way outside to await the clouds and mass of followers. I’ve got a little time to reflect.

God has provided me no comfort. That’s how I finished journaling yesterday. Why not? This morning, I woke up before dawn and despaired the light on the horizon; I’m not scared of the dark, but rather of the morning calling me into the world.

In front of me is a man I feel compelled to become. He is exactly like me in all ways, but he is a man I could never be. All his intentions are pure. All his endeavors find completion. Like a finger drawn through water, he leaves a ripple upon the earth.

As I draw nearer to him, he steps further on away from me. If that man, that poverty relieving, wife honoring husband is who I'm called to be and cannot reach him, then the appearance of the morning sun calls me into failure and those clouds bring only condemnation upon it. I see them on the horizon now.

The followers came. They were more than an odd mixture. They were a veritable reflection of human extremities broken into groups. One group consisted of beards and skirts, hula-hoops and flowing scarves. Another had loosely fitting denim skirts with stiff-collared shirts and another an imam.

The mass grew. There were hundreds of them. They split off and sat down in clumped circles around the field. I began my walk through the archipelago. I started with the stiff collars. A man was speaking to a few, but loud enough for all to eavesdrop in.

"We must repent and draw near to him. It's exciting that, physically, we are as close as any human beings since the apostolic era, but now we must draw near with our hearts. God has given us this gift that we may come to know his son, Jesus Christ, all the more."

I listened for a bit. One of the young boys was playing a game on his phone. I moved on to the hula-hoops and flowing scarves. Two men in thick-rimmed glasses looked more sophisticated than their compatriots; they were sober.

“We spend our lives treating everyone as an object, an I-It relationship. We view them merely as a means to our own end. If we view everyone in their entirety, not breaking them into parts, but just as pure individual existence, we’ll tap into the eternal Thou that now manifests itself in those clouds.”

I continued through each group. I fit into none. I had a grey cap and a graphic t-shirt from Target on. I was not Christian. I was not Muslim. I was not an existentialist or atheist even. I was a veritable reflection of society’s ambivalence.

This whole affair was like Friday nights growing up. My father would make food from a different culture and teach us about it over dinner. I remember none of the facts and hardly any of the food, but it left one impression upon me: indifference. If all beliefs are equally valid, why choose any? The message made its way from the horizon. It would be directly over us soon.

I am real

– God

The flowing scarves started to sing. The Christians began their song. Allah. God. Eternal Thou. Oneness. They all sang to the same clouds in the sky. As each group grew louder, trying to out sing the others, their songs made dissonance and I made my way inside.

Saturday April 27th

The clouds disappeared. I scrolled through a few reactions while lying in bed and then I got up for my normal routine: a mile run and a few push-ups. The parking still had a few cars. One man who had been wearing a big colorful beanie and little else the night prior was walking downcast in the street wearing jeans and a graphic t-shirt like a dog reprimanded by its owner.

“Morning,” I said. He didn’t respond.

I walked to where the watchers had gathered the previous evening. There were popsicle wrappers, flattened grass, and sprite bottles. A note was crumpled on the ground. I grabbed it. It was a prayer. I crumbled it back up and tossed it into the grass. Back in the hotel, the concierge had the same clothing on. I called my wife on my drive home.

“What was it like?” she asked. She was working still.

“It was disappointing, admittedly. According to the news, it’s a united mass, but really no one is connected. There was every group you could think of, a field of choices and I wanted none of them.”

“That’s actually kind of what I wanted to talk about. I’ve been thinking about dinner the other night,” she said.

She pulled the phone away for a moment and muttered some prescriptions to a nurse, presumably. "About who should get blame in schools. I was thinking; you can't assign blame, because you have no context. I have to guide patients to analyze their experiences within their belief system, but you have none," She paused. "I think we should go to church."

"Church? I know you never have, but I went to church with my family growing up. It was pleasant, but a waste of time. The pastor told nice stories from the news to make everyone feel good and then we went home."

"Just think about it."

"I believe in chocolate chip cookies and helping people. I don't need a pastor telling me what to feel guilty about."

"Well, I'm going tomorrow."

The wind passing the car was noisy.

"Honey, I've been thinking a lot about Hector," I said.

"What did he do?" she asked with a sigh.

"I met with him and the principal."

“How did it go?”

“About the same as always. He wouldn’t talk, then yelled, and then just walked out. I don’t know what to do. An assertive approach engenders rebellion. Consequences do nothing. Being kind upfront only enables him.”

“And if you had a belief system, at least one of those approaches would be right despite its effects,” she brought it back up. As a psychiatrist, she knows how to stick to a point even when her patient veers off.

“It’s not a matter of morals, honey. It’s a matter of what works.”

“Well, you can’t put all of that on you.”

“How can I not? It’s not guilt even, but what he’ll do on Monday and how I’m supposed to react that bothers me.”

There was a long pause. She couldn’t help either.

“We can talk more at home?” I asked.

“Yeah. Have a safe drive.”

We said our goodbyes and I hung up.

Monday April 29th

It only makes sense that now my friend wants to come visit me. We were roommates in college. He lives on the East coast, but flew in. The coffee shop where we sat smelled like chai tea and the barista had dreadlocks.

“It doesn’t prove anything.”

“How can it not?” I had to keep from shouting over the din of the café.

“Let’s assume it proves the existence of god,” he said. His t-shirt was ironed.

“Fine. Let’s do that.”

“Okay. Now what does that prove?”

“You said it. That God exists. Isn’t that enough?”

“Honestly, no,” he said. “What good is a God that isn’t involved in our lives? He exists. Ok. Now what am I supposed to do? An existence of God assumes an existence of morals. If I know God exists, it is all the more important that I do what he desires. So now he’s real, but the clouds are too ambiguous to extrapolate any morals and we remain condemned.”

They called out our order and our conversation was cut off. We both got up to get our drinks. He had ordered the sweetest one on the menu.

“Let me ask you this, Quentin,” I said. He was smaller than I was and yet I was the diminutive in this exchange.

“Where was I again?” He started. Whether he couldn’t hear me over the bustle of the shop or if he chose to ignore me, I’m not sure.

“Right. How these clouds complicate things. What stories do we have of God showing himself to people? Pillars of fire. Burning bushes. Prophets. He never declares himself and leaves without command. This is entirely out of character for any conception of God in any religion ever known to man. This is not the God of the Bible nor any other for that matter.”

“So then what is it?”

“It’s a collective delusion.”

“That makes less sense than a God working behind the clouds.”

“Does it? It can’t be a personal God or the message would have had more while an impersonal God of the pantheists would not have the conscious volition to write in the sky. It’s what the experts are saying.”

“So how does that work?”

“The same way belief in Christ’s resurrection propagated. Everyone wanted to believe it, so they created lies for themselves in which to believe. They say it started with one set of clouds that by chance did look like the message. From there, everyone projected their belief into the sky, making various clouds look like it to themselves.”

“So you’re saying that it’s more likely that several billion people tricked themselves into false belief through a subconscious act than that just maybe God actually exists.”

“Well there are other explanations still. It could be that there was legitimately a cloud floating through the sky that said ‘I am real – God.’ It’s a small chance, but it’s possible. If there are an infinite number of universes, then every situation imaginable, no matter how small the odds, will exist necessarily. It could also be some jokester with an

airplane and a smoke machine.”

“You’re preaching more miracles than religion.”

“Experts believe it.”

“Well, screw the experts if that’s what they believe.”

Tuesday April 30th

There were only four conversations that ever happened in the teacher’s lounge: pregnancy, teacher’s unions, everything the administrators did wrong, and everything the students did wrong. Today, I ate my lunch there anyway.

My sandwich was dry and the ham was starting to go. Two gym teachers joked with their backs to me. Angela walked in and sat down across from me. She was notoriously Christian.

“What’s that on your wrist?” she asked me after a few silent bites.

“It’s a tattoo. It says ‘choose life.’”

“What’s it mean?”

“It’s from the Bible. I remember reading those words when I was a kid and liking them. I’ve never been able to find them again, but I remember those two words and got a tattoo of them. I just like the phrase ‘choose life’. It’s kind of my mantra, I guess.”

“Do you go to church?”

“I went as a kid,” I answered. “It put me in a good mood in the short run, but just made me feel guilty about things. It scratched an itch, but only made it worse over time.”

That ended the conversation. She had been looking for a personal connection that didn’t exist and had not planned an alternate route.

“Hey Angie, what do you make of the clouds?”

“Looks like they’re going to rain.” Most of the world had forgotten about the message already.

“No. I’m talking about the clouds from last week. The ones that said ‘I am real.’”

“They honestly didn’t affect me that much. Maybe God really did put them up there. Maybe some dumb prankster or scientist found a way to screw with us all. I’m inclined to think the latter is true, but neither option would change much what I think.” I was surprised by her agnosticism.

“But you now have definitive proof that God exists. Every argument you have with an atheist or agnostic has unquestionable evidence on your side.”

“The Bible says that the skies themselves teach of God and proclaim his glory. He already speaks to us from the skies. I need no distinct message.”

“Creation gives no proof of God.”

“Creation doesn’t give definitive proof, maybe not, but the God of the Bible does not rely on parlor tricks to prove his own existence. Honestly, God behind those clouds would cause me to feel more doubt than comfort. I’d rather believe somebody flew them up there.”

And that ended our conversation. I had always thought that dogmatic believers in any religion did so out of fear or weakness. Angela’s choice, though, was preference.

Friday May 3rd

With yet another suspension, Hector's parents were asked to come in and have a conversation. His mother and father were young. They could not have been older than thirty. The father spoke only a little English, so his mother did the talking.

"Afternoon, Mr. Maker," she said. I shook each hand and we sat at a small table intended for students.

"As I'm sure you know, Hector has been struggling behaviorally in most of his classes, not just mine. Now, I don't like to start with the negatives, but he swears, rarely works, shouts across the room, wrestles with his friends, the list goes on. What is particularly frustrating, though, is that when he does work, it is the best in the class."

"I'm sorry, what do you teach?" his mother cut me off.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I teach Language Arts."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"Well, we're currently writing an essay. Students always have independent reading books, which they read and discuss in small groups."

I pulled out a few young adult fiction novels for reference.

"Students get a choice for what they want to read," I continued.

"He can't read that," she cut in. "He's only been in the states for a year and a half now. Why are you giving him books like that? He needs help with more basic things."

"Well, if we push him to that level, he'll achieve."

"Pushing my brother is fine and all, but he can't read those books. He hardly knows his alphabet. I agree that he can achieve, but obviously this isn't working for him."

I heard little of what she said.

"Wait. You said he's your brother. I thought you were his mother."

"Me? No. Our mother died a few years back in Mexico. Hector walked up here by himself and has been with our oldest brother, Gustavo. Unfortunately, Hector and Gustavo got into it and Hector got himself kicked out. Now's he's with me and my husband."

I flipped through one of the novels. It was about a soccer team in the suburbs.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” I paused. “How can we help?”

“He comes home and I can tell when he’s had a bad day. I tell him that if he needs something, whatever it is, he needs to speak up. Whether it’s materials or just to talk, we can help, but he needs to tell us. He just says he’s fine, though. He’s good.”

“I tell him the same thing. Sometimes we’ll talk during study hall, but mostly he just sits on the computer and listens to music.”

We both looked over at Hector’s brother-in-law for input. He had two diamond earrings and a well-trimmed beard. He said something in Spanish and the two started to argue before his sister turned back to me.

“He said that Hector needs a rude awakening,” his sister translated for me. “He wants him to work a factory job for a year to scare him.”

The two started arguing more in Spanish. We were sitting in my classroom, but it felt like I was in their home. I didn’t belong in this conversation. Were they welcoming me in or trying to push me out? Maybe that’s why they were arguing.

“Listen, Mr. Maker,” his sister finally spoke to me. “We

appreciate what you're doing for Hector, or at least what you're trying to do."

I had felt confident until that moment.

"Hector needs a lot," she continued. "Let's keep this conversation going. Anytime he opens up a bit to what he needs let me know and I'll do the same."

"We care about Hector here and we just want what's best for him. I really do like the kid," I think I was telling the truth at that moment. "I want him to succeed. He'll make it through."

By the time I'd finished my bromides, she'd already started to gather her things.

"Thank you," she said still organizing. Hector's brother-in-law and sister stood up and walked out. We didn't shake hands and I don't think I'll contact her again this year.

Saturday May 4th

It was raining today. The clouds were an indiscriminate grey mass with a few darker patches, a Rorschach test in the sky. I wanted to drive around and relax with an album, but I hate my

neighborhood when it's raining. It feels like getting tangled in blankets. The trees bend and puddles clutter the ground, all crowding me in.

I turned to drive around downtown. With buildings and concrete, it makes no difference if it's wet or dry. The shops were largely empty. One woman was shuffling down the street with an umbrella and her small daughter dragging behind, unaware that her tantrum was only prolonging her deliverance into a dry room.

I looped around a few times. Its familiarity cheered me up a bit. While everything else is changing, I can count on a good cup of coffee and a walk around this main street. I turned to drive through another part of the town. On the way I detoured through a park that I expected to be empty, but I saw a man bent over, thrashing in the trees. He was a ghost against his grey background. He wasn't alone. Underneath him was another man. The ghost wasn't thrashing; he was punching.

I stopped my car.

"Hey," I shouted out the window. "Leave him alone."

The man turned to look at me. The eyes recognized me. It wasn't a man. It was barely more than a child. It was Hector. He crouched down, picked something up and ran. I got out of my car and splashed through the park to help the kid on the ground. Hector was too far away to catch and I was in dress shoes.

“Are you ok?” I crouched down to help the kid up. I didn’t recognize him.

“It hurts,” the kid said back. He had a bloody nose, but it was still straight. I asked him to bend his legs and arms.

“What hurts?”

“My ribs and stomach.”

He took a few good punches, but nothing appeared to be broken.

“That kid picked something up before he ran. What was it?” I asked

“He took some stuff.”

The kid’s answer was vague. After a few years teaching, I’ve learned that ambiguity usually means dishonesty, but I didn’t press further and called 911. There were blue lights, a ruined pair of dress shoes, and a cop who checked his phone while we were talking. I didn’t use Hector’s name with the officer either. However, I gave a description with more details than a passing glance should have been able to give. The cop didn’t seem concerned.

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The implications of this event are clear. I give Hector's name and am rid of him, but he gets expelled or may even go to jail. Conversely, I remain silent to protect a kid who doesn't need more trauma, but we spend the rest of the year both aware of what I'd seen. All of me wants to maintain my pretense of ignorance and let this pass, but apathy in this moment is a decision; inaction is protection for Hector. I'm resigned to choose.

Sunday May 5th

Before I begin this reflection on what to do with Hector, I have one more story I need to relate from my past. This decision is not just about Hector.

It was early December and uncharacteristically cold. Any other year and the fresh powder would have brought me back to my balmy childhood, digging snow tunnels and drying my gloves on the heating vent. That early morning, it was one more obstacle.

My car was low on gas and I hadn't dressed warm enough. I had left myself at least an hour of work to do before school started and each minute that passed would be a minute

unplanned in class, a minute of unstructured time where I could lose control. Normally, a sweater and a lighter outer layer would suffice at this time of year. At five in the morning, I needed a lot more and shivered all ten miles to the gas station. The pumps were broken. I had to drive across town to the other station.

On the way to the second gas station, I took a turn a little too hard. My back wheels slipped on the fresh snow. To my surprise, I wasn't scared; I reveled in the feeling. It wasn't an adrenaline rush pleasure. Rather, I fantasized about an upturned car. I took another turn too fast. The rush returned. I didn't want to kill myself; my wife and a memory of pine trees by a ski lift kept that thought at bay. I wanted to hurt myself. If I quit my job I'd be a failure. If I stayed at it, I would continue to suffer. If I flipped my car and broke a few ribs, I would have to take a month off.

I skidded my car again. I lost control. The end of the car fishtailed left, right, left, right and my steering wheel moved the reverse. The car stopped. I was crooked in the middle of an empty two-lane street at five in the morning thinking about injuring myself. I punched the steering wheel four times and screamed. My car was on all four wheels. I had to go to work.

That was only this year. It was before the clouds. I haven't thought about that moment since they came. If god were present in that car with me that morning, would it have made any difference? If an almighty power sat shotgun in that car with me and adjusted the heat, would I have spun my car out? I guess it depends on what kind of person that God is, but I can't call him a person.

In my every action and moment in life, it feels like I stand before an open field compelled to walk forward. If God is real, then someone has littered this field with tacky signs saying, "do not walk on the grass" and "turn right." My life is stifled choice. If God is real, certain choices are wrong and others required. The morals he brings make constant little demands upon my freedom in every action I take. However, my own stumbling feet still bring me to those roped off areas, thereby bringing condemnation.

If God is not real, then the entire field is open for me and I'm compelled in no direction except where my own whims take me. Perhaps someone has still slipped in and placed signs here or there, but they are arbitrary and to be ignored. The various choices of where to proceed can be immobilizing, but if I can only get myself to move, then there's an entire field to enjoy.

Or, finally, I can take Jerry at his words. I can acknowledge the signs and pay them no heed. I can walk about wherever I want even if I'm compelled elsewhere.

If God is up there, does he see this situation? He tells me to go back to work and he sacrifices my life in order that Hector maybe makes it through high school. He tells me to get Hector expelled and he sacrifices Hector, so that I can make it through my vocation. Either way, if god is real, I disappoint him and it's only a matter of which of the two of us can he save.

Monday May 6th

Hector is not at school today and I didn't go to church with my wife yesterday. I went to the police department instead. It was more sterile than a hospital. I asked for the officer who I worked with the day I saw Hector commit assault. I explained the situation and gave him a name. Turns out the boy who was beaten had a fractured rib and it was all a drug deal gone wrong. He also told me that I wasn't supposed to know any of this yet, but it would all be on the nightly news tomorrow anyways.

My wife was disappointed in my absence from the service, but she's said that she just wants to see me free of anxiety. This decision is the path I see to that end.

I taught once after a student of mine committed suicide. It was two years ago. The principal came over the loudspeaker and said that anyone who felt the need could go home that day and hallway passes would not be necessary. Another teacher came into my room during prep and kicked a garbage can across the room.

For Hector, no announcement was made, but the feeling was similar. I felt guilt hang on my heart like a pendulum. A group of students asked to be excused to the restroom. They knew that my rule allowed only one student at a time, but I let all three go.

The day the girl died a few years back there were no redeeming emotions. Today, I was relaxed. A geyser used to sit in the front row, and at any unexpected moment it could erupt and send boiling water on us all, taking weeks to recuperate and heal. The geyser was now filled in. I chose peace with guilt over constant fear.

I smiled in the face of the student's disappointment and handed out a quiz. Half the class failed the quiz. I had to call one student's father, because he talked through the entire thing. Perhaps it will be better tomorrow.

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