

THE VOICE BY THE TRASH CAN
by Jacob Conner Harris

They told me not to begin a story with the main character waking from a dream, so instead that's where this story will end. Escaping a dream; a nothingless dream.

Who exactly are *they*; the “they” sharing this sagely writing advice?

They refers to my teacher, Deeds. I won't bother giving her any honorifics: Dr., Prof., Mr., Mrs., Mx., etc.; other than, I suppose, one could cleverly call her Miss Deeds—as in Misdeeds—for her frequent attacks on students' character and abilities.

“Take a seat,” Deeds told me after class (last Monday). *Thwump*, my hardcover binder of short stories dropped from her clawed nails onto the desktop. “David,” she sighed, knowing I hate it when people call me by my birth name; the name cemented in the school roster for all eternity. “You have a problem. You always start your little fantasies with the character waking up. It's wrong.”

I sat vacant and stone-faced. Maybe a single salty tear slipped from my eye. Maybe.

“I appreciate you sharing your writing. It's neat. But I don't have time to fix all of it for you.” Deeds brushed the dandruff accumulating on her shoulder, which caused a puff of flaked scalp to float down in a swing-dance motion onto the hard, black, plastic cover of my binder. “It's probably best if you focus on your classwork from now on. Remember, test week is coming up and everyone has to do really well if we want funding for our end-of-the-year field trip.”

Field trips blow. They're dizzy and sticky and break a predictable routine. But everyone else in class has a sick infatuation with them, so I have to wear a fake smile as to not appear "different." Through my twelve years on this planet, I've learned remaining silent is easier than correcting other's B.S.

The pattern goes as follows: Deeds calls me David -> remain silent. Pluto Jones refers to me as "he" -> remain silent. Pluto Jones asks why I don't eat lunch at school -> remain silent. Deeds asks why I'm not social like the other kids, why I don't play sports, or go out at recess -> remain silent.

Call it a severe lack of standing up for one's self. Call it lack of action. Call it whatever makes you feel comfortable, powerful, or a like a wordsmith: labeler of all things in the universe.

I call it survival. If I had to explain—no defend—myself one more time, I'd lose my mind.

Almost worse than that are the people who fluctuate too far in the other direction. Durgess—another kid at school and my neighbor—told me, "You just got to come out and own it, dude. Bro, you're a girl, just vibe with it, you know?"

But the thing is, I'm not a girl. But I'm also not a boy. I'm me: France, a writer and creative person, well-versed in video game history (specifically of Japanese video games). I would add poetry to my lists of interests, but only the act of penning it, not reading it. Poetry magazines can bite me. I submitted poems to ten competitions last summer and not one put me past the first round.

"Yo, France," Durgess called to me on my way home from school—a few hours after Deeds chastised my writing.

Me: Remain silent.

His used Sketchers skater sneakers scratched pebbles into the asphalt. A tug pulled me backward as he closed the zipper on my backpack. “Your bag was unzipped again. It looks so weird like that.”

It does doesn't it? An exposed inner neon green lining—marked up by pencil led and spiral notebook paper nibs adhered to it by static electricity—visible to any passerby.

Vulnerable. “Thank you, Durgess.”

“You know you can call me Durge. My buddies call me Durge.”

“You don't have buddies.”

“Yes I do. At home and stuff.” He paused his train of thought, and came forward to walk side-by-side down the road; our shoulders two inches from touching. I stepped away, giving our bubbles a greater buffer. “Yeah, yeah, I have buddies. One goes to another school is all.”

“I see,” I said, not really seeing.

“Can we play games at your house?”

“I don't like playing multiplayer.”

“That's ok. I can watch you play.”

“I don't play games that you'd like to watch.”

“That's not true. I like those anime games.”

“They're not anime games,” I corrected.

“Japanese role playing games then. I like that one with the blonde guy.”

“Which one? That could mean almost any of them.”

“Exactly. They’re all cool.” Not once in the time I’ve known Durgess has he dropped the childish, carefree and doofy tone in his voice. It’s as if his vocal cords were mutated into gooey, melting taffy. Sickeningly sweet and lacking nuance of flavor. One note. Pure orange-dream syrup.

“My brother doesn’t want you coming around anymore,” I dismissed with partial truth.

“I thought me and Abe were tight.”

My chin pushed upward, causing my lips to compress into prissy contemplation. “He doesn’t like guests.”

Durgess slumped at the shoulders, before quickly raising them again. “Maybe you can bring your console over to my house.”

Take a hint, I refrained from saying, instead opting for silence.

“We’ll figure something out,” he settled and turned off on his sliver of sidewalk leading up to his lopsided stoop. I continued on to the next section of perpendicular concrete to my house. “See ya, France,” Durgess called.

I fumbled for my house key in my front pocket, as a car drove slowly by; its passenger gawking their finger out the window at several houses, including our own. Their eyes met mine, sending an intense anxiety through my bowels. *Move along*.

Cars rarely appeared on our dead-end street. The only house beyond ours belonged to old man Turnip Green who lost his drivers license in a K-Mart more than ten years ago. None of his

family cared to visit him either. They were all “dead, married or queer” according to his regular clocked screams to the UPS driver on Saturdays. I didn’t like him.

My fingers finally pinched the slick silver coating of my pocketed key. Its blade clacked against the inner working of the lock as it slid through its belly-button hole. It snapped 90 degrees counter clockwise, allowing me entrance into our house. My brother’s coat hung on the hook behind the door. “Abe!” My backpack and shoes flung off to a pile off the entryway.

“Yeah, buddy?” he returned.

I followed his voice to the kitchen. “You’re home early.”

“Hell yes I am. It’s your birthday after all. Thought I’d whip you up some of my special enchiladas.”

“It’s not my birthday.”

The knife rocking through an onion supported by his left wrist stopped. “Are you serious? Am I off a day?”

“It was yesterday.”

Abe turned full around to face me, his eyes damp with onion induced tears. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

I remained silent.

“C’mon, France. You got to help me out on this stuff.”

“Today can be my birthday instead,” I suggested and snagged a Squirt from the fridge.

“You’re right. We’ll make it work, but hold me to it next year. What will people think if they knew I forgot your birthday three years in row?”

“Who are they?” I asked; that non-descriptive *they* never leaving my ears.

“They, them, people, you know what I mean.”

“People would probably think you were a neglectful caretaker, or too busy with your other commitments.”

“Harsh, France.”

“I don’t think those things. I think you’re bad at dates. And you have better things to do than hang out with me.”

“I’m your sole provider, France. Everything I do is for you. Don’t forget that.” His knife wielding hand fell back to the cutting board. “Did you open your present?”

“Where?”

“On the table, goof.” Indeed, there was a large plastic bag decorated with snowflakes and reindeer atop the small circular particle board kitchen table. “Figured you wouldn’t mind the holiday bag.”

I peered inside its cavity. A blue plastic rectangular prism laid motionless in the bag’s white sheened bottom. *A game: Dragon Quest XI*. “No way! Abe, this doesn’t come out until September. How?”

“It’s a Japanese import. I know it’s not totally ideal, but you’ve been learning Japanese so I thought it’d make good practice if nothing else.”

Light glimmered across the thin film sealing the game box as I teetered its near weightless body between my fingers. “Can we skip dinner and start playing now?”

“It’s got install first remember, so we’ll eat while it’s doing its thing.”

“You’re right.” I slid the disk into the PS4’s tray. A motor whirred from within, spinning its data onto the hard-drive. The TV displayed a long empty bar. 2% application copied. 73 remaining minutes. I repeated the information to Abe.

“Perfect timing. We can eat and then play for about a couple hours before bed.”

Bed meant sleep, meant waking up too early, meant school.

“Did that Durgess kid talk to you today?” Abe asked.

I remained silent, watching the bar fill ever-so-slightly.

“I feel bad for him. He stopped by this morning after you left for school. Asked if he could play games with us this weekend. I didn’t know what to say.”

“Say no.”

“I told him to ask you.”

“I told him you don’t like him coming over.”

“Dammit. You serious?”

“Yes.”

“It’s your choice. I feel bad if you don’t have any friends because of me.”

“I don’t want friends. I don’t like those people.” The bar moved to 4%.

“You say that now, but, I don’t know, you might miss out on the fun stuff about being a kid. I mean, I didn’t want friends either, so I get it, but... What am I saying? Mom used to push me into sports and clubs and stuff, and I hated every second. You can make your own choices.”

5%.

“Alright. They’re in the oven.”

“They?”

“The enchiladas. You’re keeping me on my toes today, France.” He sat on the couch. Me: still on the floor nearest the glowing screen as possible.

9%.

“You do anything in school?”

“Deeds returned my binder.”

“What’d she think?”

“She didn’t like me starting my stories with the characters waking from a dream.”

“What do you think about that?” he asked, his voice deeply inquisitive, awaiting a genuine response and not my defacto silence.

10%.

22% installed, 39 minutes remaining.

“It won’t download any quicker with you watching it. Get set-up at the table and I’ll pull the babies out of the oven.” Abe’s hands reached below my armpits, lifting me up to my feet.

I sat in my chair facing the kitchen window. Evening set-in turning the pale green paint on our walls into an iridescent orange-ish beige. Abe gripped the tray in the oven with stained cotton mitts and removed it from its rack. Clouds of steam condensed into droplets of savory, garlicky water on the underbelly of the microwave above the stovetop as he placed the pan in its new home.

“Soup’s on,” Abe said and scooped a red saucy tortilla wrap onto a doubled-up paper plate. “Happy birthday, buddy.”

My fork cut into its corny, meaty filling and flew into my mouth. “Spicy, just how I like it.”

“I’m glad.” He sat across from me, two enchiladas piled atop each other.

“I thought you were trying to lose weight.”

“Special occasion,” he deflected and took a gargantuan bite.

I turned to review the install progress on the TV: 24%.

“So, what are you going to do with your writing?” he asked; food in his mouth.

“I don’t care. I don’t like writing anyway.” Pain seeped its way into my throat, throttling my uvula.

“Oh, buddy. I know that’s not true. You need a little more practice is all.”

“You agree with Deeds?”

“A broken clock is right twice a day. Teachers are the worst, but in this one instance, she might have a point. Try starting your stories with action, or something funny. Have I ever told you about Catch-22?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” He went for another full bite.

Turned away again: 25%, 42 minutes remaining. *It's slowing down.*

“How was work?” I asked.

“You know. Same old.” His dull expression lit up. “Actually, Thom talked to me. Asked if I wanted drinks this weekend.”

“What did you say?”

He raised one eyebrow as his gaze remained fixed on the tines of his fork. “I said, ‘Hell yeah!’ Well, actually, I said it more like, ‘Oh, yeah, sure, if you’d like.’”

“Why?”

“To sound mysterious, and cool. Romance rule #1: Don’t come across as desperate.”

“Noted.”

42%.

“You got anybody you like at school?” He never asked me this before, and the words sounded as if they were spoken in a foreign language.

Gritty breath squeaked through my teeth. *Cringe.*

53%.

“Well that was a good dinner,” Abe patted himself on the back. His finger pumped foaming soap onto the dirty casserole dish precariously perched in the sink’s small basin.

“Thanks for the birthday, Abe.”

“No problem. You’re worth it. Hey, do you mind taking out the trash?”

“Fine.” The bag leaned against the kitchen door to the alley. I held its top with both hands and drug it outside into the darkness. Calm, crisp breeze greeted my nostrils, taking me someplace far away. In the emptiness of night, I might’ve been anywhere. No lights to correct my way. No sounds to tell my position.

“David,” the wind barked, far away to my left side. My hold on the bag loosened, causing it to slump at my socks. My ear scanned for the noise to repeat. *Pebbles on pebbles. Spiders in grass. Whispers or water.*

A flicking spark ignited a lighter’s flame and moved through the void to transfer its heat to a cigarette, providing the shallowest highlighted outline of a figure. Avian in stature. Round in shape. Too dark to see their face, eyes; lips. “Do you know about your brother?” it asked; its voice heavy, drawn, yet delicate enough to announce every syllable.

“Possibly,” I answered. It didn’t evoke fear. Strangely, no part of my being covered in its hollow presence.

“Good answer. My question was too vague to answer definitively. My apologies.” The cigarette’s embers grew in intensity from its deep inhale. “Do you know your brother is selling your house?”

No. “No.”

“Do you know your brother lost his job?”

Stop asking me questions. “No.”

“Do you know your brother is \$80,000 in debt?”

Shut up! “No.”

“He still loves you though. You’re quite lucky. You know that right?”

I nodded, but no one could see.

“No one loves old man Turnip Green. No one loves Durgess. No one loves Pluto Jones. No one loves Deeds either. Not real love anyway. But—someone—loves—you. Beautiful Abe and bountiful David: two brothers who love each other more than Bezos loves his own net worth.”

“I’m not David. I’m France.”

“Correcting me? I thought corrections weren’t worth the energy.”

Silence.

“One without speech says more with a single breath than one who never breaths at all,” it mused. My mind went to Durgess, and his incessant need to speak at every turn. I hated him for it.

I picked up the trash bag and threw it in the direction of the dumpsters, ready to be done with this conversation.

“France,” it said.

I waited for its closing statement.

“France sounds better on you than David. I like it.” The cigarette went dark, and the voice dissipated. *What were you?*

By the time I returned inside, Abe was asleep on the couch. The install bar read 100%, and the title menu booted on its own. Dragon Quest’s classic theme rolled across the speakers. “Abe, it’s bed time.” I nudged his arm.

“What? Oh...” His eyes were groggy.

“Bed means getting up early, means school,” I said with looming dread.

“Means work for me,” he tacked on.

“I know,” I said and pulled him to his feet. “I know.”

He started for his bedroom, stumbling left and right along the way. “Happy birthday, France. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

And we went to sleep.

Dfadfaef

The band plays loud music on Thursdays after school. Timeline caught up to present time, no longer reflecting on the past week. We're here. Thursday. After school, like I said. The band is playing loud music outside.

Why here?

Why in our neighborhood?

The dead end street. With a bigot at the end. And the bird-like creature in the dark alleyway. And the for sale houses. And the two brother who love each other.