

Untitled

Chloe Bland

*I am writing a novel from a 10-year-old boy's perspective.
This excerpt is from a section in which I experimented with the
voice of a third-person narrator. (Archie is the boy; Coach J-1
Drab is his father.)*

—CB

For twenty-six years Coach J-1 Drab, born John Byrd Drab, offered no indication he would make history. Then one day he did. Not in any single moment you could put your finger on, but a whole history of moments, strung together like the planetary necklaces of fifth grade earth science projects assembled on newspapered kitchen tables after plates of wax beans and spaghetti have been cleared away. You can't explain what happened to the Drab family of northern Michigan that year—the Year of the Tiger, according to the free Chinese calendar from the library they had hung on their kitchen wall—without vigilant consideration of the life they had lived up until then. One moment followed another and history was made. Not in the spectacular, instantaneous blows of wartime, but the tepid coma of routine, where something sinister became indistinguishable from something decent. It wasn't like removing a bad tooth or a bad seed or a bad apple; once one moment went bad so did the ones that came before it; the ones that followed.

If you had driven into Grayling, Michigan, at eleven-o-four in the morning on Tuesday, January 28, 1986, entering on James Street from the south and turning right at the light at the intersection of James and Main, if you had then followed Main east, away from the old railroad station and the Trading Post tourist shop with its moccasins and fudge and dyed Davy Crocket raccoon-tail hats, if you had traveled on Main just half a block, there on your left you would have seen the popular Ben Franklin's variety store, whose

sign—thanks to a not-so-honorably discharged fifteen-year-old Girl Scout named Brinn—spelled Reb Flannink’s that week, and sitting right in front of Ben Franklin’s inside a parked 1982 yellow Honda Accord he called the Bumblebee, would have been Coach J-1 Drab, writing out the Grayling Elementary gym class agenda as he did every day, stopping somewhere on his way to school to choreograph small acts of dodge ball and jump rope—though last time he incorporated the jump rope, Sara Sloane’s skirt had proven too short so she was ceremoniously dubbed Jump Counter, a decision that made Coach J-1 feel noble as a gym teacher, but did nothing to further tone those undeniably smoking eighth-grade legs, legs which he allowed himself to appraise without guilt as he watched her dutifully ticking off Kristen Vincent’s then Jed Flower’s then Renny Shaw’s sad little hops, because this was the kind of appraisal one arrives at without will—no one could deny the savage beauty of this particular youngster’s legs—and besides, he told himself, sucking the hair on the top of his forearm into ducktails or little red-haloed waves, it wasn’t like he wanted to fuck her. No, all Coach J-1 wanted to do was call a spade a spade and watch the spade blow cavernous blue bubbles with her gum. Which is what he did momentarily that Tuesday morning, summoning Sara with neither stoicism nor lust in the white haze of daylight above the dashboard, as far as his memory and pending soccer lesson would allow.

He checked his watch. Eleven-twenty-nine, the digital interface read. If he wanted to catch the shuttle launch at Neil’s, he’d have to hurry.

Even though Coach J-1 had kept the engine running, it coughed a few rounds in the minus-twelve degrees before finally turning over and shifting into first. As he steered the Bumblebee further down Main then finally left around a corner onto Plum, he rolled down the driver’s side window and wiped away some moisture with his parka sleeve. Why no one had ever invented wipers for side windows, he still didn’t understand. Or snow tires for supermarket carts, for that matter.

A small patch of ice that remained on the window reminded him of a mermaid kissing an owl, and though he had never been one to champion unfinished jobs, he left them there, lady and bird, letting them disappear in their own time, sliding down the glass still intact, like figure skaters smiling ferociously through astonishing wipeouts.

As he brought the car to a full stop on the east side of Plum behind a white windowless van with a Grateful Dead sticker and a rusted California license plate, he caught a whiff of the coffee his wife Aurora had made for him, now lining its paper cup like the mudflats he’d seen gathered at the wrinkled knees of elephants in *National Geographic*. The smell of old coffee reminded him of the bedspread at the hotel in Marathon, Texas, where he’d gotten so drunk at a friend’s wedding he’d peed in his sleep. His wife had poured coffee on the bed to alter both the smell and the nature of the accident. Moy sorry, she’d told the maid. He’d admired his wife’s protective instincts and the maid’s pronounced clavicle, lit up with the embarrassment of strangers and heat rash.

The TV at Neil Mundy’s Barber Shop—otherwise known as Neil Mundy’s living room—was on just as Coach J-1 had hoped it would be. He could see it from across the street, glowing like a swimming pool in the corner of the room. Whose TV wouldn’t be on? He figured at this very moment in time he could walk into any home in town and find the same air of observance and anticipation.

Aurora would be watching it alone at home, and their son Archie would be watching it from his classroom at school, where Coach J-1 had considered watching it with him—after all, Mum Newboro’s classroom was just two halls away from the gym office where all the coaches had their seemingly unnecessary desks and a department freezer full of ice packs and Creamsicles for winners. But the truth was, Coach J-1 felt burdened by national events like this—presidential inaugurations, the Fourth of July, even the singing of the National Anthem at sports events made him feel unfathomably small. In the face of such collective hope, he found himself compulsively

regretting that he wasn't a president or opera singer or inventor of snow tires for supermarket carts. He was and always would be Coach J-1—gym teacher to Grayling Elementary, husband to Aurora, father to Archie, hero to none. And so, Coach J-1, feeling unremarkable, had decided to watch countdown and lift-off from the unremarkable driver's seat of his own car, for this was where he felt most remarkable. Inside its worn, black interior he could be anyone. From here he would watch the strange pageant of space tripping out of the sky.

He raised Aurora's bird binoculars and aimed them through the double glass of the Bumblebee and Neil's slightly warped but immaculate window. Unable to hear the countdown begin, he could see the rigging of the launch pad and the main engines of the *Challenger* whipping with fire.