

# ONE

**T**UK-A-TUK/TUK-A-TUK/TUK-A-TUK.

It was that soothing sound he got to hear only on those rare occasions when the halls were empty, like when he went to the boys' room during class. His hand trailing behind him, he'd slide his bitten fingernails across the seams between the multicolored metal lockers stretching down the hall in front of him, their angled reflections glowing off the polished floor. Tuk-a-tuk/Tuk-a-tuk/Tuk-a-tuk.

He was making his sound now, though he wasn't headed to the

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boys' room. And it wasn't soothing him, no, not soothing him one bit. Alone in the silent and gleaming hallway, he knew that something terrible was about to happen to him, and he had to find a place of solitude that very instant. He turned the corner, tried the door to the auditorium, and to his relief found it unlocked. He rushed down the raked aisle past the empty rows of gray-cushioned seats, up on to the stage, and behind the curtain to the darkened wing that connected the stage to the music room, where he unfolded a lone metal chair leaning against the concrete block wall next to the caged-in lighting panel, there as if it had been waiting for him.

Even before he sat, the tears started from a well deep within him, at once down in the unbearable weight of his stomach, but also up in the just-as-unbearable hollowness of his throat. For how long had he been expecting this to happen? Certainly months; maybe years now. He cried in the silent darkness, heaving and rocking and gasping for breath. For ten minutes, fifteen minutes, maybe twenty, he cried and he cried. Leaning his elbows on his knees, his hands pressed mercilessly against his heated face, covering his eyes, and daring not to let out a sound lest someone hear him, he cried and he cried.

Finally, silently, barely keeping his balance, he shakily stood. His knees were weak and his head was spinning, and he had to hold on to the chair back, but yes, he stood up, and made his way back out to the auditorium entrance. As he crept into the empty hall once again, he knew he couldn't make it much further: the tears were returning. Panicked that someone might see him, he quickly walked around the corner and into the nurse's office. Mrs. Lincoln looked up from her desk. "Seth? What's wrong!?" At hearing her question, and at seeing the office was otherwise empty, he finally let out a heaving wail. She stood up from her desk. "Are you sick? Did something happen?" He shook his head. "What's wrong, dear?" and he shook his head again. "Okay, lie down here." She led him across to one of the cots with their shiny dark brown vinyl covering bolted to their wooden frames, and closed the cotton curtain

around them. She stood in silence, and then, "Can you talk to me?" He shook his head no. "Seth? Would you like me to call to Dr. Sylvan?" When he nodded, she left him alone behind the curtain and called the guidance office.

"Seth, Mrs. McCabe told me that as soon as Dr. Sylvan is back from lunch, he'll come here to see you, okay? Here, have some water. Can you wait until then?" He nodded again, sipped from the cup she handed him, and was left to be. Now alone on the curtained-off cot, it was just he and Mrs. Lincoln in the silent office as she began scratching some notes at her desk.

Moments passed. He was stifling his crying behind his hands, his face sweaty and dirty, when finally, he heard Dr. Sylvan scurry in, his dress shoes now poking through under the curtain. "Seth? Can I open the curtain?" he asked with a warm concern, and slowly, he did. "What's wrong Seth? Did something happen? Did something happen at home?" He paused, and Seth's crying became ever more intense. "Okay. Seth? Do you think you can make it to my office?" And slowly he rose from the cot.

He sat down in the orange molded plastic chair next to Dr. Sylvan's desk. "Seth, tell me. Did something happen at home? Is everything okay?" Still, he didn't answer. He just kept on crying. "Try to tell me something, okay? Can you talk a little bit?"

And then, finally, "I'm just so *tired*."

"Tired of what, dear? Can you tell me?"

"Tired of *everything*."

"Okay, okay, I see," Dr. Sylvan said leaning forward, "Look, first just tell me. Have you taken any drugs or anything?"

Riled and insulted, he shook his head no. Dr. Sylvan and Seth's family lived on the same block. Seth grew up with his kids. They'd see each other at temple all the time. Drugs?

"I just don't wanna be here anymore," he finally spat out, "I'm just tired...of *everything*."

"When you say 'be here anymore,' where do you mean?"

"Just this school, this town, around these people."

"Okay, I understand, I understand. But maybe you can tell me

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a little bit about what it is you're so tired of? You think you can do that?"

Increasingly irked at this invasion of his privacy, and of what he regarded as Dr. Sylvan's condescending intonation with its singsong lilt, Seth nonetheless mustered a few words. "I don't have any friends. I don't like anyone and they don't like me. I don't like the things they like. I don't like *anything*."

"Okay, I see," he said gently. "Well, I see you at lunch in the cafeteria, sitting with your classmates..."

"I guess so." He looked around the tiny office, windowless but for a glass pane facing out to Mrs. McCabe's desk, though all covered in oak tag; an office he'd never been in before, books and papers strewn about though looking as if they hadn't been touched in months. Just over Dr. Sylvan's shoulder on the back wall was a poster of a white kitten hanging from a branch; "Hang in there, baby," it read. On the side wall, over Seth's head, was another, with that quote from Robert Frost about taking the road less traveled by, and Seth just thought to himself, Dr. Sylvan's a jerk too.

"And I know you're working over at the library after school, right?"

Seth *hated* it there. The women who ran the library were bossy and stupid. "A child librarian who hates children," his brother once said about Mrs. Donegan. He had taken to purposely mis-shelving books because, as he put it to himself, "Who cares anymore?"

"Maybe library work isn't for you," Mrs. Donegan said after confronting him about the matter the year before, but for some reason, they kept him on. It could have been Mrs. Clark who intervened on his behalf, he mused. She was so nice to *everybody*, even stupid Seth, maybe.

"Yeah..."

"And you're doing all your schoolwork, right?" And again, Seth was insulted. "Of course!"

"Can you tell me, is your dad having any trouble at his job?" No, he wasn't, and Seth did not understand why it would matter if he were.

“Okay,” Dr. Sylvan continued, perhaps observing Seth’s increasing irritation with this line of inquiry, “What I’m getting at is, on the *outside*, from out here, things might not seem so bad. But since you say you’re so tired of everything, maybe we need to look on the *inside*, to try to understand why you’re feeling like this, and how we can try to make you feel better. Does that make sense?”

It did, maybe, but Seth gave no reply other than a dismissive shrug. “I’m not gonna feel better.”

“Okay, but maybe you can do me a favor anyway. Just tell me one thing you *enjoy* doing, okay? Just one thing.”

Seth thought momentarily. “I like the Beatles,” he said flatly.

“Okay, that’s good. Why not this: maybe when you get home from school today, you can just listen to some Beatles records? Just take a little time for yourself to enjoy that?”

“I don’t have the records,” Seth said with a tinge of annoyance, “I recorded everything when they did ‘Beatles A-to-Z’ on the radio last year.”

“Well that’s fine too. Can you do that for me?”

Seth nodded, and they sat in a silence that lasted for several moments.

“Is there anything else you’d like to tell me? Maybe a few more things you like? Or hate?”

More silence.

“All right, if you don’t want to talk now, I understand. Would you feel okay heading to class maybe? You can sit with me more here if you prefer, or would you like to go back to Mrs. Lincoln if you want to lie down more?”

“I’ll go to class.”

“Okay...would you feel comfortable coming back to talk to me tomorrow? Tell me how the Beatles went? It might be a good idea...”

Seth nodded, picked himself up, and with an embarrassment verging on shame, and with what he feared was a freakishly awkward gait, he walked past Mrs. McCabe without so much as a glance, making his furtive way back into the still-empty hallway.

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Tuk-a-tuk/Tuk-a-tuk/Tuk-a-tuk.

After stopping in the boys' room to ensure he no longer looked like he'd been crying, he quietly took his seat in Mr. Pizzuti's social studies class. Seth never had problems with his school work. It's true, back in middle school, he would sometimes call Shari Goldberg for help with algebra. Shari would take him through the problem sets so systematically. She was so clear and so organized, and she really did help him get through the class with an 'A'. Looking back, he knew he hadn't expressed sufficient appreciation for her help, though he felt unable to thank her now, so long after the fact. In high school now, all the other boys loved Shari. Everyone said she looked like Goldie Hawn.

He would spend as little time as possible on his homework, yet still, he'd earn his teachers' praise; he was always in the honors classes without giving his accomplishments a second thought. He'd recently encountered what he thought to be some clever terms that captured the difference between him and the kids in his classes: some people were "book smart," but others were "people smart." Seth regarded himself as "people smart" more than his "book smart" honors classmates like Shari, in part because he wasn't at the very top of his class, but more because he had disdain for what he regarded as their hollow intellects, their superficial concerns, and, perhaps especially, their lack of warmth toward him. The girls might go out for cheerleading, the boys might play on the tennis team. As for the dumb kids, the girls might play field hockey, and, worst of the worst, football and wrestling for the boys. And the woods. The dumb kids would go into the woods and drink beer or smoke cigarettes. And they were just so hateful, and so *dumb*, most of them. Even Shari was a cheerleader, which meant that Seth would always be suspicious of her intelligence.

After completing his homework, Seth got out his reel-to-reels, set one up on the spindle of his father's upright Tandberg recorder, put on the good Sennheiser headphones, and pressed the solenoid "play" button that now glowed green in the darkened living

room. Just as his father always did, he'd marked each tape's contents on the back of its box with a black grease pencil, the sort whose wax was wrapped with perforated paper that you could peel away in strips by pulling on an embedded string, thus exposing more: Beatles April 24th, Beatles April 25th... Having been listening to his beloved tapes practically every day for a year now, he took great pleasure—even a certain amount of pride—in being able to sing note-for-note accompaniments, to the mournful horn on “For No One,” to the dancing harpsichord on “In My Life,” to George's rare, gorgeous, guitar solo on “Something.” He delighted in accompanying the high harmonies on “I'll Be Back,” the low harmonies on “Baby's in Black,” singing the counter-melodies on “Help!” and “She's Leaving Home,” in pounding along to the guitar downstrokes on “And Your Bird Can Sing,” in doo-doo-doo-ing along with Paul's bass on “Rain,” in trying to get Ringo's incredible fills on “A Day in The Life,” wrapping his mind around his genius mockery of a drum solo on “The End,” or bashing madly to the fearsome assault of “Helter Skelter,” with its sinister and taunting false ending. He loved every consonance, every rare dissonance. He ached to befriend “The Fool on the Hill” and the “Nowhere Man,” and longed to know who were “Julia” and “Eleanor Rigby,” or *what*, even, was the elusive “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” He could even tell which numbers the Beatles *didn't* write, simply because they just weren't as good. The one exception to this rule was “Words of Love” by someone called Buddy Holly, a number displaying a songcraft that genuinely rivaled the Fabs' in its sheer melodic and harmonic perfection. Still, he would get frustrated and angry with himself for not understanding John's “I Am the Walrus” or “Come Together.” Was he just stupid?

This mid-spring evening, he listened to his tapes' final stretch of songs, and, as always, cringed with condescension when the deejay Alison Steele incorrectly said that “Yes It Is” was from “that same White Album” as was the previous track, “Yer Blues”: his brother had bought the White Album when it first came out, with its embossed cover and stamped copy number, and Seth knew it inside

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out. He would also, as always, get deeply annoyed at the very end when, after “Your Mother Should Know,” a split second after the final “Yeeeah...” Steele abruptly and boorishly chimed in, “That’s it! That’s all we have!” Still, it was all such a fantastic trip for Seth, listening to these magnificent explosions of melody and harmony and beat over and over again, feeling completely certain that these four effortlessly loveable magical spacemen from another world were in direct, intimate contact with him and him alone, or at least him especially. The Beatles were Seth’s own little secret he would assure himself, knowing full well how silly that sounded. Of course he knew that everyone felt a special bond with the Beatles. It was part of their magic. But still, no one could possibly love them as much as he did...

And he laughed with disdain as he thought of Dr. Sylvan, as if Seth needed any encouragement to listen to his beloved Beatles.

The next morning, Seth made it to the bus just on time. The older buses, numbers two through seventeen, had low seatbacks lined with metal tubing around their edges. Uniquely, bus two’s interior was painted shocking blue, like a Charms Pop; bus one was retired, hence a great mystery to Seth, although some of the older kids claimed to remember it. “It ran on rubber bands and chewing gum!” insisted David Jacobs, who lived just around the corner from Seth in a big house with columns. But these newer buses, starting with shiny bus eighteen, which the district put into service when Seth was in fourth grade, and was the one everyone in elementary school hoped would be used on their route—designed with modern sharp angles rather than old-style curvy ones—these had higher seatbacks that were padded all the way around. In high school, Seth especially liked the newer buses because their seats afforded him a moment’s privacy while the other kids were yelling and acting like wild jerks all around him. Sometimes he’d miss his bus of course, and so his mother would make him walk the mile-and-a-half down the hill to school. On rare occasion, she’d now allow him to take the old green Duster that his parents purchased—



supposedly for a dollar—from the neighbors. He loved that old car. His father said that the Plymouth Duster and the Dodge Dart were basically the same car, and that it had a really good engine. Driving the old thing, Seth could actually see the road passing beneath him through the rusted-out floor. It gave him a thrill.

And yes, he went to class, and dutifully handed in his homework, and had lunch with the honors kids, just like every day. But in the afternoon, as gym was looming, he went to see if Dr. Sylvan was available. Again, he self-consciously walked right past Mrs. McCabe, and gently knocked on Dr. Sylvan's closed door. It opened to Dr. Sylvan sitting behind his desk, but there too was Dave Miller, just leaning back into the molded plastic chair; well-built, with more than the beginnings of a mustache, a black hair pick forever sticking out the back pocket of his Lee's dungarees, and, certified pothead that he was, almost certainly stoned.

Upon seeing Dave—someone Seth hadn't really known since middle school, because he was never in any advanced classes—he went flush with embarrassment. He's gonna tell everyone I was here! And what's a pothead doing in here anyway? Heads are cool kids, why would they need to talk to Dr. Sylvan?

"Oh Seth! Take a seat outside, we're just finishing up here, okay?" And moments later, just after Dave walked out and gave Seth a surprisingly warm greeting—"Hi Seth!"—Dr. Sylvan poked his head out to invite him in. "Come in, come in."

Recovering from a mild sense of wonderment at his encounter with Dave—their sudden mutual acknowledgment downright frightening to Seth, Dave's unexpected if not exactly reassuring smile—he silently walked past Mrs. McCabe once again, and took his place in the orange chair next to Dr. Sylvan's desk.

"So, Dave comes in here?" He asked tentatively, "How come?"

"He has some problems at home that he wants to talk about sometimes," Dr. Sylvan replied matter-of-factly.

"And he doesn't mind that I saw him here? He just opened the door like that?"

"*He* opened the door for you, not *me*, so I guess that's your an-

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swer. I'm certainly not going to tell him *not* to," he smiled.

Dr. Sylvan had a caring, gentle manner that veered toward the feminine, even the prissy. When he was a little boy and was over at the Sylvans' house playing with Caren, a year older than Seth, Dr. Sylvan—*Mr.* Sylvan in the neighborhood—with his soft way and his breathy voice, always seemed more like the wife, the plainspoken Mrs. Sylvan more the husband. Sitting on the bright red carpet in her messy bedroom, Caren would regale Seth with her latest crushes—Jack Wild one week, Bobby Sherman the next—while listening to records her parents bought for her: the soundtracks to “Oliver!” to “Sweet Charity,” to “Henry, Sweet Henry.” Little Seth knew that, as a boy, he was supposed to be embarrassed and even disdainful as Caren went on about her new doll that could wet itself, or her new makeup set with a mirror that could light up, but honestly, though he really didn't care for such things one bit, he was perfectly content listening to her rambling on and on. Now, now Caren was practically belle of the ball at school, with her confidence and her ostentation and her curvaceous endowments, and Seth, Seth was in pieces, sitting across the desk from her father in the plastic chair in the guidance office.

“How are you feeling today Seth?”

Seth shrugged. “Better than yesterday,” he offered.

“Well that's good to hear! Beatles good?”

“Always,” Seth mustered, and inwardly scoffed at what he felt was either Dr. Sylvan's feigned optimism, or his outright stupidity; as if something in his life had somehow actually improved since yesterday? Still, he was a bit more prepared to talk than he had been the day before.

“Would you like to keep going from yesterday? You said you were just tired of things, of being here.”

He was silent, then sighed. “I just don't think they're really my friends. They always say that I think I'm a know-it-all, that I always think I'm right. Doesn't everyone think they're right? Why would someone say something if they think they're wrong? I just don't think the same way they do, that's all. I disagree with them, and