

DEREK MILMAN

A DARKER MISCHIEF



SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

Copyright © 2024 by Derek Milman

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-339-00993-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 24 25 26 27 28

Printed in Italy 183
First edition, July 2024

Book design by Christopher Stengel

"one's not half two. It's two are halves of one."

Copyright 1944, © 1972, 1991 by the Trustees for the E. E. Cummings Trust, from
COMPLETE POEMS: 1904–1962 by E. E. Cummings, edited by George J. Firmage.
Used by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

CHAPTER ONE

LONE WOLVES

SEPTEMBER—SIX MONTHS EARLIER

I'm sitting alone in Graymont Dining Hall. Graymont looks like a cafeteria you might find on the ground floor of a museum. Round wooden tables on parquet floors; paned oval windows, flanked by heavy tan curtains. We're required to be in Academic Dress for dinner: white collared shirt, tie, blue jacket, dark slacks. I loosen my tie—it's legit strangling me.

Boarding school isn't exactly what I expected. When I learned I'd be leaving my shabby public high school, I got consumed by fantasies about my new life. I imagined myself striding down wide, verdant lawns, my tie flying in the autumnal breeze, chatting feverishly with earnest classmates about nineteenth-century poetry, while referring to any authority figure I didn't like as "that old windbag."

I imagined myself giving a presentation in front of stained glass windows to thunderous applause. And being congratulated later at dizzying parties in elegant common areas, spinning colored lights flashing off domed ceilings with crown moldings, as champagne bottles popped.

Yeah, not quite.

I tap my fingers on the table, glancing over at Ashton Jarr, Toby Darling, and Lily Rankin. They're sitting one table over, and I'm going to tell myself they're unaware of me instead of actively ignoring me. They walked in together after I was already eating. We're tenth graders in the same English class—Mechanics of Word and Identity—a fancy-shmancy way of saying we're studying basic grammar and learning to write complete sentences in our own style. Toby and Ashton are also my housemates.

For a while, we were a loose, casual friend group. The type that forms the first few weeks of school and then dissipates or culls its members. I'd been invited along to watch movies with them or grab coffee in town; we usually sat together for cafeteria meals, and we traded numbers. But lately, I've seen them go off and do stuff on their own (they post everything to their Instagram Stories), so I'm not really sure where I stand.

Last week, Ashton asked if I wanted to crash this upper-class party with them. I was flattered, thinking, *I've been officially accepted*, and spent the whole week trying to hide how excited I really was.

Tonight's the night. But no one's texted me. Or mentioned anything.

Part of me wants to go up to them, be direct, ask *what's up*. Part of me fears the awkwardness of the conversation. But I'm really terrified of the possibility of rejection, and the emotional spiraling that could follow.

The faculty take turns joining us at dinner. Tonight, it's

Mr. Dempsey, an English teacher. I watch him making the rounds. Sometimes if a teacher sees you eating alone, they'll come over and talk to you. Suddenly, I would rather experience literally anything other than Mr. Dempsey cracking dad jokes and asking if I'm making friends here while everyone stares.

I get up and walk over to Ashton, holding my empty tray.

"SZA was paying tribute to Princess Diana," Ashton is saying. "Like Jessie Ware was with that Warhol polaroid of Bianca Jagger at Studio 54."

"Huh," says Toby. "And Kendrick with *Damn*?"

"That was just him, dude."

They're always talking about either sports or the history of album covers, encompassing this oddball knowledge of pop culture history, trying to outdo one another.

"Physics homework tonight," Lily says to Ashton, tapping his knee.

Ashton turns to Lily. "I'll meet you at the library." Ashton finally sees me standing there. "Hey," he says, clapping me on the back while Toby flicks my ear, simultaneously, as I sit down. Toby is a goofball with a streak of snark. In twenty years, he'll probably bring golden retrievers into dive bars. Girls are *really* into Ashton; I get the appeal. He's tall, athletic, radiates sensitivity, has a mop of chestnut curls piled on his head, piercing dark eyes that don't go with the rest of him—a pretty work in progress.

They go on chatting while I sit there staring at my empty tray, until I clear my throat and Ashton raises his eyebrows at me. "Just checking—you guys still going to the party tonight?"

Why does my voice sound so high MY GOD.

Ashton and Toby exchange glances. Uh oh.

"I have . . . like . . ." I try not to stammer. "I have . . . someone else . . . other plans . . . just need to know for scheduling purposes." *Scheduling purposes?*

Ashton rises. "Let's walk."

We walk three feet in the direction of the exit, where students are dropping their empty trays, before Ashton clamps his hand down on my shoulder. "Look, man, it's . . . not a good fit." I turn to face him. The way he frowns involves all these furrows and creases bunched together like an ancient map of waterways.

"Fit?" This was my fear. I try not to hang my head like a child being scolded.

"Us. The party." He scratches the back of his neck, clearly not wanting to have this conversation. "Look, uh. Lily is friends with Gemma Brassaud. It's her birthday party, at Quinlan. Lily's sister went here, and she knew Gemma's sister. That's how we—"

"Uh huh."

"They asked who we wanted to bring, like outright, and crossed off your name."

I feel sweat forming on my upper lip. "Literally? With a Sharpie?"

Ashton throws his head back and laughs, like, *You're so charming and that's totally why we've been friends until right now.* "No, verbally. Like: *Not him. Don't bring HIM.*"

I don't feel the need to make this easier for Ashton. "Not. Him."

"I . . . sorry to be blunt." He sighs, doing the solemn thing again, like he's an army commandant bringing tragic news to a slain soldier's wife. When I get any kind of tough news, I always take it in stride. But it's like radiation sickness. It'll really hit hours later.

And then Ashton says that stupid thing people always say that helps nothing.

"It's not personal."

The empty tray is beginning to wobble under my arms. I want to get out of here. "Well, yeah, hey, have fun. Definitely don't let me hold you back."

"Cal, I'm sorry!" I hear behind me as I throw down my tray and exit Graymont.

I'm a sophomore transfer, and after I got over the stress of the morning rush for the showers, I learned that the rules of Essex are unwritten, but they're like electricity coursing through everything. You don't see them, but they power the school. The international and day kids tend to stick together, for instance, and everyone courts the day kids because they have cars (though we're not supposed to ride with them), and they're the ones who sell weed to everyone. Cliques are huge here. They offer a measure of protection against the elements. But I'm not in a clique. I'm cliqueless. A lone wolf. And no one trusts lone wolves . . .

After dinner, I walk back to my dorm feeling weighted down by Ashton's spurning, a hopelessness creeping in. I tell myself: *I'll spend the rest of the evening burying myself in homework! That'll take my mind off the party I got uninvited to!*

Another thing I had to figure out here were all the various pranks I might fall victim to, so I could mentally prepare for their eventuality. As I walk upstairs to my hall, I'm too distracted to notice all the heads half peeking out of cracked-open doors. As soon as I step inside our room, our small plastic wastebasket, filled to the brim with water, perched precariously above the door, tumbles onto my head. "TSUNAMI!" I hear everyone in the hall shout behind me.

Oh, fuck me.

The Tsunami is a common prank around here, especially for under-class students. It doesn't mean you're hated. But the timing sucks.

The force of the water literally knocks me to the floor.

At that moment, another lone wolf enters the room and sees the mess. "Oh shit, sorry," my roommate, Jeffrey, says, closing the door behind him, the jeering in the hall growing softer. "My bad. I forgot to lock the door."

"How am I so drenched?" I pull at my cold, heavy clothing sticking to my skin.

"Those things hold a lot of water."

"Shit." I hold up my phone. It won't turn on. I restart it. Nothing.

"Ugh," says Jeffrey. He reaches into the bathroom and throws me a towel. I wrap it around my shoulders. "I think I can fix that. Hold on!" He runs out of the room while I stare at the brown institutional carpeting, shivering, dripping.

Jeffrey Gailiwick hails from Freemont, New Jersey. We got put together because he's a sophomore transfer too, and Essex

must have thought if we had that in common, we'd be friends for life. It's been a neutral situation so far. Jeffrey's hard to get to know. He can get quiet and stare into space for long periods of time.

With limpid eyes the color of pipe smoke and a mane of tousled black hair, there's a definite Byronian vibe to him. He spends a lot of his downtime listening to Sufjan Stevens, reading *The Wasp Factory*, and scrawling in black leather journals. We share a double in Foxmoore House—an imposing, stately brick building covered in ivy.

Jeffrey rushes back into the room holding a glass measuring cup and a plastic bag of rice.

He rips open the bag and pours it into the measuring cup. He jumps up, runs into our tiny bathroom with the energy of an ER surgeon; I hear the medicine chest opening and closing, the sound of plastic caps being twisted open, thrown on the floor. Jeffrey returns and adds a handful of those little plastic cylinders that come in pill bottles. "Give me your phone." I hand it over. He drops it in the measuring cup and shakes everything up, like he's making a magical potion.

"I'm skeptical."

"Trust me," he says. And he's right. After an hour, I sigh with relief as the Apple logo flickers back on to my cracked screen. It hasn't been *that* long, and I'm not sure why I was expecting anything else; it's one of those moments where I realize no one was looking for me. There are no missed calls or texts. No DMs. No notifications about anything. I didn't get tagged anywhere. There's nothing at all.