

The Pole Vault Championship
of the Entire Universe

Conor Lastowka

one

It was the last day of ninth grade and Kara Everglades was about to meet her dead grandfather.

He wasn't actually dead. That was just her parents' stance on the matter, and Kara never had any reason to doubt them. There were pictures of her at the funeral as a baby, an urn of ashes on the mantel, and a framed death certificate in the foyer that her father insisted everyone tap when they came in or out the front door. They even kept one of his fingers under a bell jar in the bathroom, as you would a relic of a sixteenth-century saint. Kara had trouble getting classmates to come over to play more than once.

In retrospect, it would be very obvious to Kara that her parents were overdoing it on the whole "your grandfather is absolutely, without a doubt, 100 percent dead" angle. Right now, however, she sat in the waiting room outside the principal's office hoping she wasn't going to miss the bus.

Meanwhile, the cool kids were already getting drunk in a field, the less cool kids were getting drunk in an inferior field, and the miscellaneous kids were huddled in something that was *technically* more of a drainage ditch than a field. The rumor was they intended to race a bunch of bullfrogs at some point in time.

Kara wouldn't have minded attending either of the first two gatherings. Unfortunately, the third was the only one she had received an invitation to. "No bullfrog? No problem!" an eager but sweaty sophomore had insisted, while his friends stood behind him making wincing faces that indicated he was going way off the rails by inviting amphibian-less underclassmen.

Just when things looked to be going south with the frog kids, a group that by no means did you *ever* want things to go south with, the PA system had crackled and a stern voice summoned Kara to the principal's office. The frog kids slunk away, their backpacks wriggling and dripping rather suspiciously.

Kara glanced around the office where she would be spending most of her summer. She had been hired as an assistant to Jefferson High School's principal. Kara hadn't expected to get the job when she applied, but it turned out that filing and light typing weren't how most of her peers wanted to spend their summer vacation, and she had been the only applicant. Kara tried to think of other ways she might have preferred to spend her summer: lounging at the pool, sneaking into R-rated movies, riding her bike... But every time she envisioned an activity, the mental image was interrupted by a group of greasy misfits chasing a few confused frogs across the scene. If the state of her social life was this dismal, perhaps she would be better off at the office job.

"Principal Dunbar will see you now," said Nancy, a sweatpants-wearing sixty-something secretary who looked more like a lunch lady than any of the high school's lunch ladies did. Nancy had actually been the one who conducted the job interview; outside of school assemblies and a few chance passings in the halls, Kara had never actually seen the principal.

Kara didn't even have time to gather her gym bag before the door to Principal Dunbar's office swung open and Dunbar himself stepped into the doorway. He was a square-jawed man whose rigid posture made his six-foot-three height appear even more imposing. His haircut looked wildly expensive, and he sported a bespoke suit that would have fit right in on the cover of *GQ* or at a movie premiere, but

tended to look very out of place when he was disciplining fourteen-year-old boys for throwing tater tots at each other.

“You’re still here, Nancy?” Principal Dunbar said, flashing his secretary a winning grin. “You should head home, it’ll be fall before you know it!”

Nancy tittered at the joke that she presumably heard at the end of every school year. Dunbar chuckled briefly, then strode over to Nancy’s desk with a very serious expression on his face, reached into his pocket, and produced a small jewelry box, which he handed to his secretary.

“With my sincere thanks for another great year,” Principal Dunbar said, taking Nancy’s hand and pressing the box into it. “I couldn’t do any of this without you.”

Nancy’s eyes went wide. She gasped when she opened the box, and Kara could see the glint of the diamond earrings from all the way across the room.

“Tell Jerry to come out to the club any time. I’m still waiting for that rematch on the links!” Principal Dunbar said, grinning again. “This time *he* can hit the hole in one!”

Obviously touched by the principal’s generous gift, Nancy could only nod her head. She mouthed the words “thank you” as Principal Dunbar turned to face Kara.

“And you must be Kara,” he said, beaming as he stepped toward her and offered an outstretched hand. “I hear you’re one of the bright young stars on our track team.”

Kara had joined the track team solely so she could eventually list it as an extracurricular activity on her college applications. Her crowning achievement freshman year had been a fourth-place finish in an exhibition JV long jump event. A stray dog had pooped in the landing area sand right after Kara had gone, and everyone else refused to jump and was therefore disqualified.

Kara reached out and gently returned the handshake. “Well, you know what they say: *Citius, Altius, Fortius*. Faster, higher, stronger.”

“Ah, the Olympic motto,” Principal Dunbar said, giving Kara’s hand several approving, patriotic pumps. “I trust you’ll be cheering on our athletes when the games kick off in Hawaii in a couple days?”

Kara only knew the motto because of the incessant commercials that had been running on TV for the past month and had no intention of watching other people compete in sports she barely enjoyed playing herself. “Of course, sir,” she lied. “And who knows? Maybe you’ll be rooting for me in the games four years from now.” Kara quickly bit her lip to avoid giggling at the memory of the equipment manager futilely trying to get the dog to stop rolling around in his own poop before eventually calling off the triple jump as well.

“I used to run track myself,” Principal Dunbar said. “Finished just a few seconds behind the great Carl Lewis at a meet once. Of course he was running the mile and I was running the hundred-meter dash!” Back at her desk, Nancy giggled at another joke she’d surely heard dozens of times. “It’s great to finally meet you, Kara,” Principal Dunbar said, assuming a more business-oriented tone. “Nancy tells me you were by far the most qualified applicant.”

Kara resisted the urge to correct him. If diamond earrings were getting handed out for simple acts of secretarial work, she didn’t want to say anything that might scuttle her chance of a big-ticket reward. “Thank you, sir,” she said instead. “I’m looking forward to the opportunity.”

“Let’s step into my office,” Principal Dunbar said, gesturing toward the open door. “This won’t take long, I know you’ve got a bus to catch! I just want to get you up to speed on how this place works so we can hit the ground running tomorrow.”

Kara picked up her bag and stepped past the principal into his office. The room smelled of fine leather and pipe tobacco. On the desk were photos of the principal posing at a black-tie charity fundraiser with the local TV news anchor and taking part in a groundbreaking ceremony for a children’s hospital with the governor. Just to show that he could play as hard as he worked, there was also a picture of the principal clowning around on a homecoming float with beloved Jefferson mascot Jeff the Jackrabbit. Framed diplomas and letters of commendation lined the wall. Clearly, Dunbar was a well-connected big shot, the kind of guy college admissions officers respected and possibly received regular bribes from. Kara had hitched her horse to the right wagon.

Principal Dunbar pulled the door closed behind him and immediately began sobbing. Kara turned to look at her new boss. Tears streamed down his already wet face as he reached into his pocket for a handkerchief.

“It’s my father,” Principal Dunbar managed to choke out as he dabbed at his eyes. “He passed away last night.”

Kara’s jaw dropped. Once in fourth grade, one of her classmates had lost both his parents in a car crash. Unsure of how best to console a victim of such a monumental tragedy, Kara had given him her pudding cup at snack time. He seemed cheered up by it, to such a disproportionate degree that Kara wondered if maybe she had given it to the wrong kid. Kara patted her pockets, hoping for a miracle, but there were no desserts to be found. She began to panic.

Principal Dunbar staggered over to his desk chair, collapsed into it, and laid his head down on his arms. “Boo hoo,” he wailed. “Boo hoo hoo hoo.” Kara did not know that grieving people actually uttered the syllables “boo hoo.” She was in way over her head.

The principal raised his head up off his desk and looked at Kara with red eyes. “He would have loved you,” the grown man who had met Kara less than ninety seconds ago assured her. The principal got up from his chair and slowly wobbled toward her. “I would be honored if you’d attend the funeral with me,” he sputtered as he extended his trembling arms toward the terrified fifteen-year-old girl. “We don’t have much family, so it will probably just be you and me there. I hope you’ll be OK with doing a reading,” he said in a quivering voice. Kara froze as she realized that Principal Dunbar was about to hug her.

The attempted embrace was mercifully cut short by the sound of the door opening. Kara turned and saw Nancy leaning in to the doorway. “I’m going to take off for the summer, sir,” the secretary said. “I just wanted to say goodbye and thank you again for the earrings.”

“No, thank you, *Nancy*,” boomed a steadfast voice from behind Kara—confident, charismatic, and definitely not weeping like a baby. She turned back to the principal, and was amazed to see him sitting on the edge of his desk, looking relaxed and happy. His eyes were no longer red, and his face was not wet. The handkerchief was neatly

tucked back into his pocket and the smell of leather in the room had somehow gotten stronger.

Principal Dunbar flashed Nancy a wide grin. “And I’m serious about sending Jerry by the club!” he instructed. “Something about him brings out the best in my golf game. He’s my good luck charm, Nancy!”

Nancy chuckled and nodded as she withdrew her head from the doorframe. Kara heard the door click shut, and not a second later, Principal Dunbar was laid out on his desk again, blubbering and pulling at his hair.

“Boo hoo hoo!” he sobbed. Kara quickly scanned the room for additional exit routes and, in the process, noticed that there wasn’t anything in the office that was actually made of leather.

“Where is that leather smell coming from?” Kara wondered aloud, sniffing the air as Principal Dunbar pounded the edge of the desk with his fist. “You’re not permitted to smoke a pipe on school grounds either,” she mused, moving to inspect one of the bookcases while the principal blew his nose into his handkerchief.

“Is this a scented candle?” Kara blurted as she spotted the telltale flickering flame inside a glass jar on the bookcase. She reached out and turned it around. “Fine Leather and Pipe Tobacco” the label read, with smaller script spelling out “The Trappings of Success Collection” just beneath it.

Kara blew the candle out. Quickly, what must have been the room’s original musty odor filled the air again. It smelled like stale VapoRub and microwavable frozen entrees. Next to the bookshelf, a familiar logo on one of the principal’s diplomas caught Kara’s eye.

“You were presented an honorary degree by Burger King?” she asked in amazement. She leaned in closer to study it as Principal Dunbar wailed in the background.

“I just wanted to make my daddy happy!” the principal cried. “How was I to know they had a reputation as a diploma mill?” Kara continued to examine the diploma. “Bachelor’s degree in advanced deliciousness,” the embossed script read. “Congratulations on achieving *Summa Cum Whopper*.”

“I was a fool to think this idiotic Burger King degree was worth anything!” Principal Dunbar screamed from behind her. Kara turned just in time to see the principal lift one of the other frames off the wall and smash it in half over his knee.

“No, sir, *this* is the one that says Burger King on it,” she said quietly, not wishing to upset the man further.

“Please don’t mock me,” the principal said, tossing the bottom half of the frame at Kara’s feet before resting his forehead on the spot on the wall where it had been displayed. Kara looked down, and sure enough, the fast food chain’s logo was on the second diploma as well.

“How many of these degrees are from Burger King?” she asked, surveying the room in amazement. Principal Dunbar made a gurgling noise as he tried to catch his breath.

Kara’s curiosity was piqued. She wanted to get a closer look at the framed photos on the wall to see how many of the celebrities were being forced to pose with the principal at gunpoint or how many of the respectable-looking politicians were actually just several small dogs stuffed into a suit, but she didn’t want to stay in the office any longer than she had to.

“Sir, if that’s all you needed to talk about, I should probably get going,” she offered hesitantly. “Bus to catch and all.”

The principal turned around. He swayed back and forth for a moment before his eyes focused. He wiped his nose on the sleeve of his jacket and tried to scrunch his face into something faintly resembling the shiny smile he’d sported earlier.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t grieve very well,” Principal Dunbar managed to wheeze. “Thank God I’ll have you here all summer as a shoulder to cry on, Kara. It’s not going to be easy, but we’ll get through this together. So, the funeral’s at nine, what say I pick you up at 6:30 tomorrow? We can get breakfast beforehand.”

Through the office window, Kara heard the distant sound of her school bus lurching into gear and pulling away.

two

Kara kicked a rock into the street, hoisted her gym bag onto her shoulder, and slowly started to walk home. A grown man who also happened to be her new boss had decided that she was the only person he could cry in front of, and was probably going to do it quite often over the next few months. And now she had missed the bus and had a four-mile walk ahead of her. Summer was off to a hell of a start.

The walk wasn't too big a deal, Kara told herself. After all, she had routinely covered longer distances during track season. Her attempt to look on the bright side proved futile, though, as all positive thoughts were quickly pushed out of her mind by the mental image of Principal Dunbar bawling and stacking up a sizeable pile of soggy handkerchiefs next to her as his father's coffin was lowered into the ground.

As she walked, Kara's mind raced trying to figure out an excuse to get her out of attending. "I overslept"? "I've been grounded for bad final exam grades"? "I also died"? Everything that came to mind seemed destined to set Principal Dunbar off on another crying jag.

Kara was so preoccupied with the dead-father dilemma that she didn't even notice the car slowing down next to her until the driver gave the horn a quick honk. She looked up and saw a shiny red

convertible crawling along beside her. Kara panicked, fearing it might be Principal Dunbar about to pull a drive-by weeping.

The driver lowered the passenger window and waved at her. "Hello, Kara!" he shouted with a smile. Kara leaned down to look in the window. It was not a man she recognized. He looked to be in his late sixties, had a wild white beard, and wore a floral-print shirt. The tiny backseat was taken up by a large suitcase. It looked like he was on his way to or coming back from a vacation.

"Sorry, I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," Kara said, starting to walk again, this time at a brisker clip.

The car accelerated to match her pace. "I'm not a stranger!" the man in the car reassured her. "I'm your grandfather, Cornelius Everglades!"

"Nice try, sicko," Kara scoffed. "Do your research next time. My grandfather's dead."

"Dead?" The man in the car seemed shocked. "Is that what your parents told you?"

"Don't make me call the police," Kara hissed. She silently wondered if the police could also help her with her principal situation. Maybe she could accuse the man who claimed to be her grandfather of threatening to bomb the cemetery. It was needlessly elaborate, could easily scuttle her college hopes, and might ruin an innocent stranger's life, but at this point those all seemed like risks she was willing to take.

"I'm telling the truth!" the elderly man protested, slowly rolling along the road next to her. "Here, I'll tell you something that only I could know. Let's see... Oh, when your father was about eighteen months old, he was toddling around the house naked and his toy chest slammed shut on his wiener."

"Oh my God!" Kara said to the stranger who was providing unsolicited information about injuries sustained by her father's infant penis. She started to walk much faster.

The car sped up. "Is that not something he's ever told you?" the driver asked, chuckling nervously. "I sort of assumed that would be an embarrassing but beloved family story! I'd tease him about it all the time growing up. 'Oh, son, one of these days I'll be telling that tale

to your prom date!’ That sort of thing. He thought I was joking. When I actually did tell his prom date about it, she dumped him before the dance started, and that’s why he was single and free to dance with your mother!”

Kara stopped in her tracks. Unlike the awful toy chest story, the story of how her parents met at the prom when her dad got dumped at the last minute actually *was* Everglades family lore.

“He always told me that his date ditched him because he tried to force himself on her in the car outside the dance,” Kara told the driver.

“That’s his cover story?” the man said, justifiably appalled. “It makes him sound like a degenerate!”

“Yeah, it’s much worse,” Kara said. “The real version is only mildly embarrassing. In fact it mostly just indicates a lack of judgment on *your* part.”

“You mean me telling the story to his prom date or me letting him waddle around naked near a dangerous toy chest?” the driver asked.

“Both!”

“Well, that’s something you can discuss with him later,” the man said. Kara had no intention of ever breaching this subject with her father and, frankly, after her last two conversations, was considering never speaking to a man again. But the guy in the car had made a persuasive case for being her grandfather. As she took a closer look, Kara thought that under the beard there might actually be a faint resemblance to her dad.

“Did you miss the bus?” the man who claimed to be Cornelius Everglades asked. “Why don’t you let me give you a ride home?”

“I’m not sure about that,” Kara said, glancing around for potential witnesses. “At school they tell us not to accept rides from people we thought were dead for the past decade and a half.”

“They do?” Cornelius replied. “That seems like an oddly specific safety tip.”

“Some kid got hacked to pieces and thrown in a storm sewer when he got in a car with someone claiming to be his dead uncle a few years ago.”

“Hm...” Cornelius mused. “I suppose that *is* the sort of thing that can drastically alter a lesson plan.”

“I think I’ll just walk the rest of the way home,” Kara told him. “I’d like some time alone with my thoughts.”

“Suit yourself—” Cornelius started to say, but his voice was drowned out by the loud motor of a pickup truck revving on the road behind him. Kara turned to look at it and was dismayed to see that the sweaty sophomore who had invited her to the frog race earlier in the day was behind the wheel.

Cornelius pulled his car over to the side of the road a few feet ahead of Kara, and the truck drove up to where the red sports car had been. Several kids sat in the back of the truck. Fishing poles and empty beer cans were strewn about. There were at least a dozen plastic buckets that were full of water, several of which frothed with activity just beneath the surface. Kara saw that the word “ribbit” was scrawled in the dirt on the rear windshield.

“Hey, Kara,” said one of the kids in the back of the truck. He held a large butterfly net in one hand, and a giant, cartoonish wooden mallet in the other. “It’s going to be a great race. You sure you don’t want to *hop* in?” The other kids snickered at what Kara later realized had been a frog pun.

Another kid leered at her. “The frogs really respond well to ladies,” he slurred. “It sure would be nice if you joined us.” He tilted back a beer can that was obviously not his first of the day.

Kara scrunched up her face in disgust. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Cornelius had parked the car and stepped outside to monitor the situation.

“He’s right,” said the kid with the mallet. “Sometimes if the frogs really like someone, they seek them out. At their home. At night. In fact, they just might—”

“Loose frog! Loose frog!” shouted the second kid. The boy who had been talking abruptly leapt to his feet in a panic. He bounced from foot to foot, obviously trying to avoid something that was now free in the bed of the truck as his friends started to shriek in terror. There were a few seconds of utter chaos before the boy with the mallet raised it up over his head with two hands, then quickly and repeatedly brought it down like he was playing the Test Your Strength game at a carnival.

“I think you should come with me before this gets ugly,” a voice whispered in her ear. Kara jumped. She was so preoccupied with the weirdos in the truck that she hadn’t noticed that the man claiming to be her grandfather had sidled up next to her. She glanced at Cornelius, then back at the truck, then back at Cornelius again. She forced herself to nod.

“Good decision,” Cornelius said. He took off toward the sports car. After another moment of hesitation, Kara followed after him.

What the hell, Kara thought, as she hastened her pace toward the passenger side. *If he hacks me up and tosses the parts in a storm sewer, at least I won’t have to go to my principal’s dad’s funeral.* As she opened the door and tossed her gym bag onto the suitcase in the backseat, Kara realized this was quite possibly the most depressing thought she’d ever had. She sat down and glanced at Cornelius as she pulled the door shut. He was leaning out the window, looking back at the truck.

“Watch out for frogs, Everglades!” shouted the first boy as the pickup truck peeled out and sped past them. “This summer they’re gonna be everywhere!” He gave the mallet a menacing shake for emphasis.

Cornelius gave the frog kids the finger as they sped off toward an evening of competitive amphibian racing and whatever other unspeakable activities went along with such a pastime. Then he drew his head back into the car and turned to Kara.

“Are you OK?” he asked. Kara was slightly unnerved, but none of the boys had been close enough to get frog residue on her. She nodded, but before she could even mutter the words “I’m fine,” her grandfather cranked the ignition.

“Then let’s haul ass, baby!” he cackled, flooring the gas pedal. The sports car exploded off the shoulder and onto the road where it began to accelerate at a rate unlike anything Kara had experienced before.

Kara barely had time to process what was going on, let alone fumble in terror for her seatbelt, before she heard sirens. Cornelius glanced in the rearview mirror. “Well, dammit,” he muttered. He slammed on the brakes and skidded the car over to the side of the

road. Once they had come to a stop, a thoroughly jostled Kara reached out and quickly buckled her seatbelt. She looked out her window. They'd come maybe five hundred feet from where the frog racers had hassled her. In fact, the truck pattered past them again as Cornelius applied the parking brake. The boy in the back shook his mallet at her again, but in a slightly less menacing manner since there was now a cop around.

"Let me do all the talking," Cornelius said, reaching into his pockets and pulling out some papers. Kara had no intention of talking to the cop, though she wondered if she could maybe blink some sort of coded message at him to indicate her sewer-based fears.

Cornelius rolled down the window. "Hello, officer," he said with a smile as the cop approached the car. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"I had you clocked at one hundred and fifteen miles an hour," the cop replied, stone-faced.

"This seems like an odd spot for a speed trap," Cornelius replied, trying to sound friendly. "Wouldn't the taxpayers be better served with you out on the highway, busting the real offenders?"

"I'm here twice a day, sir," the policeman replied. "Protecting our most valuable resource: our children. This is a school zone."

"School zone, you say?" Cornelius sounded shocked. "You should put some signs up! How is a driver supposed to know there's a school nearby?"

There was a loud blast of music, and Kara, Cornelius, and the cop all turned to look. Ten feet from the passenger side of the car, on the other side of a fence, the high school marching band was gathered on the school's soccer field. The fifty or so students launched into a spirited version of "Louie Louie" as the drill team unfurled a giant banner spelling out "Welcome to Jefferson High School."

They're practicing already? Kara thought to herself. *At least I'm not having the lamest summer in school.* Just then, the song abruptly concluded, everyone set their instruments down, and two tuba players lugged a keg into the middle of the field. The drum major tapped it and started handing out beers to the kids who weren't already making out with each other. "Dammit," Kara muttered.

“Sir, the speed limit here is twenty-five miles an hour,” the cop said, turning his attention back to Cornelius. “You were engaging in triple reckless driving in a school zone. In this state, that’s technically a worse crime than genocide. In terms of points on your license, at least.”

“Are you not going to do anything about those kids and their keg?” Cornelius asked.

“The Jefferson marching band runs a very successful annual fundraiser for families of police officers who died in the line of duty,” replied the cop. “License and registration please, sir.”

Cornelius sighed and reached into his pocket. “I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this,” he told the cop in a tone of voice that indicated he was in fact quite pleased it had come to this. He passed whatever he’d removed from his pocket over to the cop.

“As my passport clearly indicates, I am a diplomat,” Cornelius continued. “You’re well aware of the policy of diplomatic immunity, no?”

The cop turned the passport over in his hands. “Well, of course I am, but…”

“Well, if you’ll kindly hand that back to me and let me go on my way, I’ll forget about the police department’s egregious xenophobia and we can avoid an international incident!”

“Where is this country?” the cop asked. “I’ve never even heard of Ha—“

“Typical Americans!” Cornelius shouted. “If it doesn’t have an NFL franchise or it isn’t the setting of a *CSI* spinoff, you can’t point it out on a map!”

“Is that the Burger King logo?” the cop asked, leaning in closer to examine the document. Cornelius reached out and snatched his passport back through the window.

“If the next words out of your mouth aren’t ‘have a nice day, sir,’ they had better be your badge number,” Cornelius said. “I can have an embassy full of protestors outside the precinct before you get back from your donut break.”

The policeman opened his mouth to protest, but then,

undoubtedly imagining an outraged euphonium player informing the chief that the Jefferson marching band was suspending its lucrative fundraiser in light of the scandal involving the diplomat's speeding ticket, reconsidered. "Have a nice day, sir," he said, before straightening up and hustling back to his car. Ten seconds later, the cop car was out of sight.

"I'm glad that worked," Cornelius said as he turned the key and pulled onto the road at a much more reasonable speed. "If he kept asking questions he might have found out that this is a stolen car."

Kara looked at her grandfather, mouth agape. "I don't think that stealing a car is the sort of thing that's protected by diplomatic immunity!" she eventually said.

"That's OK," Cornelius replied. "I'm not really a diplomat." Upon hearing this, Kara reflexively shrank back toward the passenger door. Her mind started to race as she tried to decide which limb she wouldn't mind him hacking off first.

Noticing her tension, Cornelius chuckled reassuringly. "I'm sorry, I phrased that poorly." Kara relaxed. "It's just that the country I represent technically doesn't exist."

My left foot, Kara thought as she jerked back up against the door. *I can get around on a scooter if I manage to escape after just that.*

"Would you stop twitching around like that!" Cornelius shouted as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "It's very distracting when I'm trying to drive a stolen— an *unfamiliar* car! Look, the country doesn't exist according to those eggheads at the United Nations, but that doesn't mean it's not real!"

Kara relaxed about halfway. Cornelius looked over at her, attempting to beam something resembling a reassuring expression toward his granddaughter. Considering he was an admitted felon, claimed to be a diplomat from a potentially fictional country, and until only recently had been presumed quite dead, it was an admirable effort.

"Look," he said. "It's summer break! This is the most exciting time of year for kids like you! Let's have some fun! What do you say we put on some music?" Cornelius fiddled with the radio until it crackled

to life. A classic rock station was blaring the festive opening notes of “Louie Louie.”

Kara darted her hand out and switched the radio off almost instantaneously. “I’m not really in the mood,” she said. She folded her arms and slumped against the seat back.

Cornelius drove the car in silence for a few seconds before speaking again. “I’ve got to say,” he lamented, trying his best to sound hurt, “you don’t seem too excited to see me.”

“Excited?” Kara shouted, her sullenness shifting to outrage. “I’ve gone fifteen years without a single birthday card, or Christmas present, or even a disgusting hard candy that I pretend to like from you! And now you just show up, tell me you’re not dead, and expect me to want to bounce up and down on your knee? Listen to your stories about Uncle Wiggily and Martin Van Buren? Fetch you poultices to help with your rheumatic elbow while you’re planning your next move in ‘Pinochle by Mail?’”

“Have you ever actually met someone over the age of sixty?” Cornelius asked.

“It’s too little too late, Grandpa,” Kara said, turning to look out her window.

“Look, I know I haven’t been the Grandfather of the Year. That competition is rigged anyway. Corrupt sons of bitches... But look, never mind that! That’s the old me, Kara,” Cornelius said, lowering his voice to a somber, serious tone. “Going forward, things are going to be very different between you and me. You’re my granddaughter, I love you, and I’m going to make up for a lot of lost time. Starting now!”

Cornelius gave the wheel a sharp left turn. The tires squealed as the car lurched across oncoming traffic and into a parking lot. Cornelius gave the wheel one more jerk and then slammed on the brakes. The car came to a stop in the drive-thru lane of a Mexican fast-food joint.

“May I take your order, please?” came a garbled voice from the intercom. Kara stared at Cornelius skeptically.

“Well, I didn’t mean starting this exact instant!” he protested.

“Come on, I haven’t eaten all day!”

“Chicken burrito?” the intercom attempted to confirm.

“No, dammit!” Cornelius yelled out the window. “Give us a minute!” He looked back at Kara. “Trust me,” he told her. “I’ve got some news that you’re going to find extremely exciting.”

three

“Mom! Dad! I’m home!” Kara said as she flung the front door open and dumped her gym bag on the floor. “I made the A/B honor roll, Grandpa’s alive, and Principal Dunbar wants me to come to his dad’s funeral. I’ll be in my room!”

Kara instinctively reached out and tapped the death certificate of the man who was still fumbling with the emergency brake of the car he’d stolen and started up the stairs. She had only taken a few steps when simultaneous shrieks of “WHAT?” came from the living room. Kara froze, rolled her eyes, turned around, and slowly walked back down to the main foyer.

Her mom and dad were standing in the entranceway to the living room with their arms crossed and worried expressions on their faces. Kara reached down to pet her corgi, Buster, who had waddled up next to her and was panting happily.

“Did you just say what I think you said?” Mrs. Everglades asked. Her father nodded emphatically to indicate his shared concern.

Kara avoided eye contact with both of them. “Uh, I think so,” she said, suddenly very interested in the coat rack next to the door.

“A/B honor roll?” her mother shouted. “What did you get a ‘B’ in?”

“Never mind that!” her father said dismissively. “What’s this other nonsense?” Kara looked at the still-open front door trying to find the words to describe her ride home from school, but her father continued before she could speak up.

“A funeral?” he bellowed. “What the hell’s wrong with that guy! I’m calling the school!”

“Ask them if there was a mistake on her report card, dear,” Mrs. Everglades said. “A ‘B’? Honestly, Kara!”

Before Mr. Everglades’s phone was halfway out of his pocket, Cornelius burst through the doorway, rooting through a paper fast-food bag. “I swear to God, if after all that they still got the order wrong,” he muttered, brushing past Kara and her parents. Mr. and Mrs. Everglades’s eyes went wide as the formerly dead grandfather made his way toward the kitchen. Buster barked at the intruder twice before losing interest.

Kara’s mom looked like she might faint. “I thought you were kidding,” Mr. Everglades murmured.

“But you accepted without question that my principal wanted me to come to his dad’s funeral?” Kara asked, somewhat bewildered.

“Dammit!” Cornelius shouted from the kitchen. Kara’s parents looked at each other, then slowly started to make their way down the hallway. Kara followed after them, Buster at her heels.

“Kara! You said you checked this bag!” Cornelius said through a mouth full of food. He held a burrito with a huge bite taken out of it.

“I did,” Kara said, pushing past her parents so she could see what her grandfather was talking about. “I mean, I looked in the bag. It was obviously a burrito.”

“A *chicken* burrito!” Cornelius said, waving it around in disgust. “I knew that idiot on the intercom couldn’t understand me! Terrific, now I have to go back!”

“Dad?” Mr. Everglades finally spoke up. “Dad, what are you doing here?”

This was a tone of voice that Kara had never heard her father use. Gone was the furious man who was about to berate her principal. In his place was a nervous child addressing a parent. Cornelius, as if

seeing Mr. and Mrs. Everglades for the first time, stopped waving the burrito around and took another huge bite.

“Franklin,” he said, nodding at his son while chewing. “It’s good to see you. Hope you’re steering clear of any toy chests! And Marcy! It’s been quite some ti— Good Lord, this burrito’s terrible!” Cornelius made some exaggerated retching noises and coughed a few times. “Get your grandfather some water, will you, Kara?”

Kara started toward the cabinet that held the glasses, but her mother stopped her. “Stay where you are Kara,” she said in an icy tone. “You don’t have to do anything this... this *maniac* says!”

“The hell?” Cornelius said, indignant and insulted. “I’m choking on bad burrito here!” Apparently unable to control himself, he took another gigantic bite. As he chewed, he made a few more gagging noises, then snapped his fingers to get Kara’s attention and pointed toward the cabinets. Kara walked over to them, pulled out a glass, and filled it with water from the dispenser on the fridge.

“I want you out of this house!” Kara’s mother snapped at Cornelius. “Our daughter does not need bad influences like you in her life!”

“I’m a bad influence?” Cornelius said, spraying flecks of tortilla and salsa all over the table. “You’ve been lying to the kid for fifteen years! You told her I was dead!”

Mrs. Everglades looked too enraged to speak. Kara walked back to the table and handed her grandfather the water. He tilted back the glass and took a huge swig. “If Grandpa’s not dead,” Kara asked, “whose finger is that under the bell jar in the bathroom?”

Cornelius spit the water all over the table in shock, causing Mrs. Everglades to fume even more. “You told her my finger was in the bathroom?” he shouted while at the same time snapping and pointing for another glass of water. “What the hell is wrong with you people?”

Kara dutifully fetched more water while Cornelius chowed down on more of the apparently quite edible burrito. She handed her grandfather the glass, then walked to the bathroom, where she retrieved the bell jar that housed the mysterious severed finger. She returned to the kitchen and set it on the table, while her parents exchanged a nervous look.

“Jesus Christ,” Cornelius said, smacking his lips and taking another bite of burrito as he eyed the bell jar. “This is some serious dedication. What did you do, pay off a morgue technician? Drug a hobo? Hit up an alley in Chinatown?” Kara was somewhat disturbed by how quickly these potential finger-procurement techniques sprang to her grandfather’s mind, but she was more interested in hearing her parents’ answer.

“Sausage,” Mr. Everglades eventually said. He swallowed deeply before continuing. “Old, dried-up sausage and a bunch of raisins all mashed together.”

Cornelius shook his head disapprovingly. “And I’m the maniac,” he said. Kara took a closer look at the contents of the bell jar. Now that she knew what she was looking at, the “finger” was obviously just a tightly rolled mixture of old meat and raisins.

“What’s the dog’s name?” Cornelius asked. He set down what was left of the burrito and reached out to take the lid off the bell jar.

“Buster,” Kara replied.

“Here, Buster!” Cornelius called. Buster waddled over to the table.

“No, Dad, don’t...” Mr. Everglades started, but it was too late. Cornelius raised the “finger” up in the air, Buster sat down to beg, and Cornelius dropped it into the dog’s open mouth. Buster chewed once or twice, licked his chops, then panted happily, hoping for more. Kara’s parents looked horrified.

Cornelius sat back in his chair and smirked. “Now!” he said, sounding rather self-satisfied. “What do you say we set the record straight with my granddaughter about what really— Oh God, the dog’s throwing up...”

Kara looked down at Buster, who had indeed thrown up all over the kitchen floor. “That finger must have been incredibly toxic,” she said. “He eats his own poop almost every day and never does that.” Buster lay down on the floor next to his pile of puke and started to turn green.

“I know how you feel, Buster,” Cornelius said as he polished off the last bite of the burrito. “Consider yourself lucky you didn’t have to choke this mistake down!” The last few words were difficult to make out, as his mouth was full of chunks of said mistake.

Kara's mother fumed, her father looked down at the floor, her grandfather licked his fingers, and her dog emitted a slow wheeze. Kara decided to seize the moment. "Why did you lie to me?" she asked, turning to face her parents.

"Excellent question!" Cornelius applauded. "I would love to hear the answer! A child has a right to know her grandfather."

"Not so fast, old man! Where have you been?" Kara said. "Why are you only showing up now?"

"Whoa, whoa!" Cornelius protested, suddenly on the defensive. "I am not the bad guy here!"

"Not the bad guy? You killed my dog!"

"Hey, he might not die!"

"Enough!" Mrs. Everglades shrieked. Mr. Everglades jumped a little and Kara and Cornelius snapped their attention toward the irritated woman.

Mrs. Everglades took a deep breath. "Kara," she started to explain, in a tone Kara recognized all too well. It was a tone that said "It is requiring great effort to speak calmly right now, for with every fiber of my being I am suppressing the vile harpy who lies within purely as a courtesy to you, the harpy's potential victim." Kara had heard her mom employ it in many situations: when she was on the phone with customer service representatives, when she was playing hardball with clients, while inquiring how a neighbor's sick relative was. Come to think of it, it was really her mother's only tone of voice.

"Your grandfather," Mrs. Everglades continued, "was not somebody we considered a good influence for a young girl. He had wild ideas and dangerous theories. Fortunately, right before you were born, as a direct result of these ideas and theories, it appeared that he'd never be allowed back in the country. And we thought we might be able to raise our daughter in peace. As a decent lady." She looked pointedly at Cornelius as she delivered this last jab.

"Looks like you thought wrong!" Cornelius cackled. He immediately backtracked. "Oh God, that sounded bad, didn't it? I didn't mean you were wrong that you could raise Kara in peace as a decent lady. I'm not here to do anything indecent. I meant about

me never being allowed back into America. You were wrong about that.” Cornelius looked from Kara’s mom, to her dad, then to Kara. “Nothing indecent!” he announced to the room, a little too loudly.

“How did you get back into the country, dad?” Mr. Everglades asked, determined to move along before Cornelius dug himself any deeper. His voice was meek, but he sounded genuinely curious.

“That’s a great question, son.” Cornelius’s eyes twinkled. “As it turns out, when they detain you at customs, if you make a big fuss and start shouting about how they’re not letting you into the country, eventually they’ll just give up and wave you through!” Cornelius sat back in his chair and beamed. Everyone else looked stunned.

Eventually, Mr. Everglades spoke up. He sounded incredulous. “You arrived at the airport... got detained by border security... and you just yelled at them until they let you through?”

“That’s right!” Cornelius seemed to relish sharing his tale of triumph. “Just got real angry at everyone! Called them all sorts of names, flew into a rage, broke a few things. Made some various threats. I guess they just didn’t want to deal with it anymore and told me to get out of there.”

“That is wildly unsafe!” Kara’s mother sounded horrified.

“I was frankly surprised that it worked myself,” Cornelius conceded. “It was pretty much a Hail Mary.”

“You’ve exposed gross incompetence at our borders!” Mrs. Everglades continued. “Our entire nation could be at risk if any of our enemies discover how easy it is to—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Cornelius said, cutting her off with a dismissive wave of his hand. He didn’t sound like he appreciated having his technique questioned, especially as a means of aiding and abetting terrorists. Especially abetting them.

Mr. Everglades cleared his throat. “Dad? Are you still living in... well, *on*... um, you know what I mean?”

“Yep!” Cornelius beamed. “And believe me, it’s a great time to be there. Exciting things are happening.” He gave Kara a knowing wink. She was about to open her mouth to ask what the hell he was talking about when Buster whimpered from the floor.

“See? Not dead!” Cornelius said proudly, as if he’d played a role in reviving the sick dog instead of being the primary cause of its current state. “Now, tell me, son. The mascot costume. Do you still have it?”

Ever since Cornelius arrived, Kara’s father had looked like he had seen a ghost, or at least a particularly horrible traffic accident. But upon the mention of “the mascot costume” his face fell even further. Now he looked like he’d not only seen a ghost, but the naked ghost of an elderly relative, or he was being asked to identify the victim of a particularly horrible traffic incident, and it was an elderly, naked relative. His jaw quivered as he tried to find the words to respond to his father.

“The... the... the...” he sputtered.

“The damn mascot costume, boy,” Cornelius barked. “Drag it out of the mothballs, I’m going to put it to use.”

“We don’t have that filthy costume anymore,” Mrs. Everglades hissed, her voice sharp and final. “Franklin got rid of that awful thing when we got married.”

Cornelius leaned back in his chair. He stared at Mrs. Everglades for a moment before turning back to his son. “Is this true, Franklin?” he asked with a raise of an eyebrow. Franklin avoided eye contact and started to scratch the back of his neck.

Mrs. Everglades spoke for her husband. “Of course it’s true,” she said, a hint of delight in her voice. If Cornelius was upset, then Kara’s mom was happy. “I watched him march it out to the dumpster the day we returned from our honeymoon. There was no way I was going to live in a house with that filthy heap of rags.”

Cornelius refused to look at Mrs. Everglades, opting to narrow his gaze at his son until he was staring at him through icy, narrow slits. “Three generations of Everglades wore that costume for Jefferson,” Cornelius said. “Am I to understand that you just threw it in the garbage?”

Kara’s eyes darted around the room trying to get a read on the situation. She had no idea what “the mascot costume” was or why it was such a sore subject, but she’d never seen her parents like this. Her dad was sweating and pale. His comfort level appeared similar to Buster’s just after the dog had eaten the sausage finger. Mrs. Everglades,

on the other hand, looked delighted. Her lips were pulled back into a ghastly little smile and she clapped her hands in excitement.

“If that’s what you came back for, you may as well hit the road!” she cackled. Cornelius grumbled something under his breath and shook his head in disappointment. “If you could see the look on your face!” Mrs. Everglades continued. “Maybe you could go out to the dump and search for it! All these years decomposing next to the rest of the garbage may have improved its looks!”

Mrs. Everglades threw back her head and emitted a wheezing, nasal laugh. The sound of it made Kara glad that her mom so rarely displayed such unfettered joy. Kara thought that if a blind person had wandered into the kitchen at that moment, they would have totally believed it was the sound of two penguins having sex. Kara closed her eyes for a few seconds to test this theory before she started to worry that people would be able to tell what she was imagining. She popped her eyes back open, but nobody was paying any attention to her. Her mom was still laughing, her dad was still sweating, and her grandfather was slowly getting to his feet, a defeated man.

“He didn’t even put up a fight about throwing it away!” Mrs. Everglades hooted. Cornelius started to shuffle toward the hallway. When he reached his son, he paused. Kara’s dad looked down at his shoes. After a few seconds, Cornelius shook his head before continuing on.

“He said he never liked wearing the thing!” the taunts continued. “He said the tradition was stupid! He said he would have rather been a male cheerlea—”

But before Mrs. Everglades could deliver what certainly sounded like something that was shaping up to be a definitive backbreaking blow to any father/son relationship, her husband interrupted her.

“I never threw it out,” Mr. Everglades said quietly. Cornelius froze in his tracks and Kara’s mom ceased emitting the sound of amorous penguins. Kara’s dad raised his gaze from the floor and took a deep breath before continuing. “I kept the costume. It’s still in the basement.”

The penguins’ silence proved to be brief.