

The Best White Rapper in Berea, Ohio

Kevin rapped about high school hos and Buckeyes, boxer shorts on girls, Jamba Juice, LeBron James and how he sucked, sex in closets and other confined areas, MySpace, cell phones, bacon, *World of Warcraft*, *The Office* (UK), Macs, this girl named Lisa who used to give him hand jobs, Eggo waffles, Grady Sizemore, Fritos, Karine (who never gave him hand jobs but was cool as shit). He made up new names, like Pinkeye, like Kevlar. He rapped about buttered toast.

He could rap about the weird, tall, junkie-looking dude walking up the street right then, right in front of the house. Kevin could see him from his bedroom window. It was their neighbor. Shit, Kevin could rap about anything.

He wrote down “white dude.” He wrote down “quite rude, super crude, *Family Feud*.” He wrote down “home schooled,” then crossed it out, then wrote it again. He wrote down “never nude,” like in *Arrested Development*.

He moved at the speed of thought. Write now, Google later.

He wrote, “My lines are so stressed they need Xanax.”

He wrote, “I’m hyper, rant like Mel Kiper.”

He wrote down “quarter-boiled, half-stewed.”

He rhymed things like *derriere* and “just don’t care.”

He wrote down the line “I’m six foot negative one!”

He wrote, “I’m as white as yo.”

He wrote, “Look at me. I’m Clorox.”

He was writing with a legal pad and an actual pen. Every time he got on a computer these days, he went right to Twitter. He spent so much time now checking Twitter and trying not to check Twitter and then checking Twitter again.

It was always there.

It rhymed with bitter.

Even now, when Bruce took a large breath, pain expanded in his chest, radiated through the bones and muscle. He tried to sip at the air, to take in just enough to keep going.

In the surgery, they had cut up his heart and sewn it back together. He still marveled at that. In sixth grade, when he was supposed to dis-

sect a frog, he couldn't even find the brain, had probably sliced right through it.

He was supposed to walk these laps, and throughout his life, he had done what he was supposed to do. He usually walked much later, after dark, when no one would see. If he had to tell Mrs. Graft how he was again—she radiated concern like some kind of empathy microwave—he would shrivel up and burn. She could turn herself up to High for a good ten minutes.

He hated these walks. He hated the pain in his chest. He hated all the weight he had lost. He hated being a pussy. He hated this neighborhood. He hated that frog.

That poor frog. He almost started to cry. He was doing that a lot, the almost and then the actual crying. They had said to expect depression. But it wasn't depression; this was mourning. He'd never be the same. He knew it.

He was the ghost of himself.

The Twitter account made things weird between them, but it was a good kind of weird. Karine didn't mean to do it at first. Well, she did, but it was supposed to be funny.

She had made up a fake account, IAmTheRapOverlord—Iatro—and her first post was "Kevlar couldn't wrap a sandwich." And then, "He couldn't wrap a present." And then, "Best White Rapper in Ohio my ass."

She had used so many inside jokes, but they flew past Kevin. She thought he'd know.

Kevin had called her up as soon as he saw, like in minutes. She knew he would. He checked Twitter all the time. And he had gone off on Iatro, and then she had gone off on Iatro, and then they had both sung along to "Song 2" by Blur, which was playing on the website of the local college radio station, which was playing on their respective computers, in their respective rooms, in their respective houses. The song was almost as old as they were. They had sung the "woo hoos" together.

It had been awesome.

If she said something about Iatro now, it might be the wrong thing.

And now that IAmTheRapOverlord was going, it was so hard to stop. She didn't want to stop.

Karine had just logged on and posted: "Kevlar's new song = shit squared." Then she—no, Iatro—had posted some other stuff.

The hard part was not calling Kevin or texting him and saying, “You’ll never guess what Iatro just Tweeted.” Because if she did, it would be breaking the rules:

1. Kevin had to discover new Iatro tweets on his own.
2. If he accused her of being Iatro, she would accuse *him* of being Iatro.
3. She did not allow Iatro to use personal information that would only be available to a close personal friend, such as Karine.
4. When they talked, she was not allowed to egg Kevin on about Iatro. She could only soothe and empathize. She was particularly committed to saying, “He’s just jealous!”
5. If she had the chance to kill Iatro somehow, kill him gracefully, she would do it because, honestly, it sometimes made her feel guilty.

Monica knew what she was doing could lead to her name appearing in the police blotter of the *Berea Sun* and possibly, but less likely, *The Plain Dealer*. She was not one of those stupid moms. She didn’t want to be some kind of “cool mom,” and not just because those moms were ridiculed behind their backs right after they served a plate of pot brownies or right after they gave some new graduate a blow job in the upstairs spare bedroom. It was gross to even think about, but there were moms who did it.

She was becoming weird. That’s what it was.

If she didn’t buy them the beer, they would drink something worse—those energy drinks with booze in them. They would drink elsewhere. They would get arrested. They would suffer unthinkable things that she thought about all the time.

Not everybody, just Kevin.

She had premonitions: of him being arrested, lying on the highway, jumping into the Cuyahoga, being dragged out of the Cuyahoga, injecting heroin, being struck by lightning, getting ravaged by a pack of stray dogs, contracting scarlet fever. In all of these visions—once he was stabbed just like in *Rebel Without a Cause*—he wore that dark blue T-shirt that said “LeBron” across the front. It pulled some different color out of his face, a beautiful face really, thin cheeks, a sharp pronounced chin, good lips, a girl’s lips.

Then she noticed that he never wore that shirt anymore. Never. Like he was tempting fate somehow. She knew Kevin hated LeBron, hated how he left Cleveland, hated how he made the announcement on TV. But he had loved that shirt.

Maybe the shirt brought on the tragedies, sure, but maybe it didn’t. Maybe the shirt kept him alive.

She did know this: the beer kept him home. He and his friends drank in the living room.

Kevin had changed his MySpace page three times, from “The Best White Rapper in Ohio” to “The Best White Rapper in Northeast Ohio” to “The Best White Rapper in Berea, Ohio.” He would surrender no more territory. If he couldn’t be the best white rapper in Berea—if he wasn’t—he would rap no more.

Iatro had made him downgrade every time. Each time Iatro had given him shit about it, Kevin had seceded from the greater region, given up his claim to it.

Kevin said it like a word: Iatro, like Iago but not quite.

For a very short time, he thought maybe it was Karine. It could be Karine. Some of the comments were Karine-like, but that was too much of a bummer to think about. He had almost flat-out asked her once, but that would have been weird.

It couldn’t be her. Iatro hated him, and he and Karine were besties. When his left arm itched, he would look over and Karine would be scratching her elbow, same arm. They liked the same albums: *Paul’s Boutique!* They were in sync like that.

As he woke his computer and refreshed Twitter, something seemed to sting inside his throat, like he had swallowed a bee.

Iatro had struck again. He was always striking.

Kevin had posted a new song that said, “I’m so Cleveland my river’s on fire,” and Iatro had tweeted, “That burning’s just chlamydia.” Shit like that. Kevin was always dealing with shit like that.

He logged off and then on with one of his aliases. He had six fake Twitter accounts that he used to fuck with Iatro. He typed quickly.

“@iatro Kevlar is the best rapper in Northeast Ohio. You’re just jealous.”

Then he signed out and signed on with another name. He typed:

“@iatro Kevlar rulz!”

He signed out again, signed in again:

“@iatro You mess with Kevlar, we mess with you.”

If he had to, he could keep going, keep signing in and posting shit back at Iatro and signing out and signing in. That guy sucked.

He checked Facebook. Ray was coming over to hang out and rap and maybe record some new tunes. Karine too, of course.

She was a feisty chica.

Feisty chica could rhyme with beaker.

Give me the mic, then turn up the speaker.

He Googled beaker. He Googled himself.

You are not your search results, he thought, but he was always Googling something: “Kevlar the rapper” and his real name and all its iterations (Kevin Taylor Smith, Kevin Smith, Kevin T. Smith). He Googled his own lyrics. There was a girl in Elyria who quoted his songs on her blog, and he didn’t even know her, didn’t know her real name. (She blogged as Blackwidowsoul. Her interests included knitting.) He Googled Iamtherapoverlord, which brought him back to Twitter. He Googled Karine. He Googled bare butts and bare ass and bare buttocks, and each one brought up a different array of pictures, curves and cracks. He Googled himself again, but nothing had changed. No one was out there thinking of him. No one was messing with him at that very moment.

Bruce folded a napkin, and then he folded another, and then he placed the second on top of the first. If it weren’t for laundry, he’d do nothing. He had created such a nice stack of cloth napkins.

Since the surgery, Bruce hadn’t been back to work, hadn’t drunk a beer, hadn’t even drunk coffee, hadn’t had sex. The borders of his life had shrunk.

It was time to rest.

He was useless. Seven weeks ago, he had been full of use. Eight months ago, when he played third base for the company softball team, he could still bring it hard over to first. Now his medical leave was ending, and when he made a throwing motion—soft toss even—his sternum cracked, and his heart—well, he was always aware of it now. He liked it better when he wasn’t cognizant of discrete organs.

Every middle manager in every TV show, in every movie, was incompetence with hair or, even worse, incompetence without hair. He wasn’t like that. He was good at his job. He talked to people, liked them. He wasn’t a dick. Thirty-six people had come to visit him at the hospital. They didn’t have to. He didn’t even want them there. It was awful to see their faces, etched with the knowledge of how bad he looked.

He was sick of the niceness.

The niceness wasn’t really niceness at all. It was veneer. It was paneling. If you popped it off the wall, you’d see all the ugly guts of the house: years of dust, aging wires, that itchy pink insulation, a mummified mouse.

Even his wife was being too nice to him. But Amy was always nice actually. This was something different.

And then the night before, Paul Anderson from Accounts Payable had stopped by the house, and Bruce wouldn't even talk to him. Paul was maybe one of his favorite people at work. His jokes were actually funny.

"How's he doing?" Paul asked in his big low voice, so low it seemed fake. Bruce was hiding and listening from the den.

"All right," Amy said. "He's doing all right." She said it in a way that implied otherwise.

That's when he should have gotten up, hobbled into the living room, shaken Paul's hand, gotten him a beer, laughed up some shit, gotten an update about Hayes and his Chia Pet—by now it had to look like an elephant. But it hurt when he laughed, and he didn't want Paul going back to work and acting like Bruce was the Chia Pet.

"Tell him we miss him," Paul said, and it almost made Bruce cry, and then he had cried.

His mom was the only mom he knew—had ever heard of—who would buy beer for high school kids. There was the cheerleader's mom who was going to kill her daughter's rival, but that was in Texas. His mom wouldn't kill anybody. She couldn't even yell at him. When Kevin walked into the room, sometimes she would cringe, almost shudder. His mom was afraid of him. Sometimes he was proud of it.

She wanted him to go to Baldwin Wallace University, right there in Berea. She wanted him to live at home. His mom liked horror movies and shit. She said she didn't, but she did. He heard bloodcurdling shrieks from the TV in her bedroom all the time. Bloodcurdling! Milk didn't even curdle anymore—he didn't think so anyway—but his mother's blood curdled when she saw him. She liked the fear. She wanted to keep him at home and get a fear rush whenever she wanted.

He had figured all of this out because of psychology class with Mrs. Brennan.

Karine was super into psychology. They had talked about it.

They talked about Iatro: Kevin didn't know who could be so mean to him. The comments were not just about his rapping. They were about him, his haircut ("dorky," "like a bowl cut with a broken bowl," which was kind of funny actually), his voice (like a girl's), his penis (Iatro suggested a half-inch, but Kevin had measured, and he fell comfortably into the average range for American males), his inability to keep it real (there was absolutely nothing real about him, according to Iatro), and of course his music sucked too (his lyrics sucked; his beats sucked; his lyrics sucked even more than his beats and vice versa). He was nothing without technology. Even with technology he was nothing.

Someone hated him, and they wanted billions of people to know. It had to be a stranger, but sometimes something would pop up and he'd think, it's Mrs. Thurber from Honors English sophomore year. But she was sixty-five and not even on Facebook. He had checked.

Iatro had to be someone he knew, someone who heard all his raps, someone who'd been in his house, someone who was named Karine. It had to be her. He thought this sometimes, but it was a lot easier to get pissed at someone else.

Plus, it had to be a guy. He said dickhead guy stuff.

The dude said Kevin's flow was like a leaky faucet, which was a good one—wrong, but a good one. (Kevin's flow was like Niagara, which was too obvious for a lyric, but Niagara was the only falls everyone knew.)

The worst was when Iatro called him a white Will Smith.

Of course the dude was right: Kevin wasn't real. Kevin was fake. No, that wasn't true, but he wasn't real: he lived in a nice house, both his parents had boring jobs they dressed up for, he had never been shot, he had not even punched anyone since third grade, he had never smoked a blunt, he would never deal anything (besides cards), he had suffered no real trauma, he was psychologically well-balanced (Mrs. Brennan had said so in class!), he said please and thank you, he ran cross-country, he didn't even like Odd Future, he didn't even like Waka Flocka Flame, he was vice president of National Honor Society, he actually liked salad, he had only slept with one girl, he would probably go to a liberal arts college, the idea of getting a tattoo freaked him out, and most of the time now, he looked for excuses not to rap.

Downstairs he could hear his mom vacuuming, the mechanized purr of it. They had the cleanest house he'd ever seen. Even his friends noticed it. His father's apartment was furred with dust. He could never get anything done there.

Monica emptied a half-eaten jar of salsa into the sink and then summoned the power of the garbage disposal: violence and water. It voided all of your mistakes. So long, tuna casserole. Pulverized, then banished.

She had chips for the kids, pretzels, sticks of celery and carrots, wedges of apple with caramel dipping sauce, Chex mix with peanuts, Chex mix without peanuts, two six-packs of Bud Light. She had made most of Kevin's friends take a pledge, hand up and everything: no one would ever drive home. Only one had smirked, a subtle quirk of his closed mouth. Restraint, which is why she hadn't cuffed that boy as he pretended not to smirk.

If she had punched him, even playfully, it would have transformed her. She was the mother who bought the beer, but there were borders she wouldn't cross. She lived in the country of Good Motherhood. She did. She did.

Karine was going to NYU to study abnormal psychology. She already knew. She had already been accepted. She got a little scholarship—here's eight thousand bucks for the middle-class Midwest white girl: take it before we change our mind. The letter practically said that.

She would have student loans out the ying-yang. She would undergo New Yorkification. When Kevin came to visit her and slept on the couch, she would say, "He's my first case study!"

They would have to have loft beds in the dorm room, so they could get a couch.

She was thinking about it as she walked over to Kevin's house. They were practically neighbors. They were going to listen to music and drink some beers. Karine felt weird about his mother's beer: it tasted like duress.

When his mother opened the door for her, Karine pretended toward his mother, and his mother pretended back.

This was called saying hello.

Kevin should keep track: was there ever a tweet—ever?—that came when he and Karine were hanging out, that came when he knew it couldn't be her? But how would he know? She was always on her phone. He was always on his phone.

She could be tweeting as Iatro right now as she sat across from him in the living room.

"Edible soap," she said.

"What?" he said.

"What do you think about the concept of edible soap?"

"It's on par, I think, with washable soup."

"Good one," she said.

She was taking a business class. They were doing a unit on entrepreneurship.

Maybe he was spending too much time with that Karine. Monica even thought of her as "that Karine," not just as Karine, and that seemed symbolic. Sure, she was cute, and Kevin was generally happier when he had spent time with her, but you wouldn't want to be stuck on a lifeboat

with Karine. She would eat your leg. She would make you eat it too, to preserve the rest of your meat for later on.

Monica wasn't going to feel bad for thinking that.

Karine—like her parents couldn't be satisfied with plain old Karen or even Karin. Her name sounded like careen. Karine had some steel in her; you could tell Kevin was aluminum. You could bend him a bit. Maybe that's why Monica didn't like Karine's steeliness. Or maybe that's why Kevin needed it. Like the can of beans in the cupboard could help the pop can toughen up.

Karine liked to loosen the lids of jelly jars, ketchup bottles, milk jugs, and then screw them back on tight.

"I don't like to do it," she said. "I just do it."

Kevin had never asked her why before. They were in his mother's kitchen, den of oatmeal, lair of tofu, Lean Cuisine-ville, and Karine was lidding a thing of capers.

"You have any real food?" she asked.

"Like?"

"Something with blood, something that bled."

He was drinking the beer his mother bought for him. It almost seemed like his mother *made* him drink it.

They made BLTs. The grease pinged and spat at them.

"This pig died for you, you and your bloodlust," he said.

They talked together that way. A bubble of grease zapped her arm. She knocked the side of her hip into his leg. He was too tall for them to match up right.

"Hurry up," she said.

"You can't hurry pig," he said.

"Bros before hos," Karine said, and she put out her fist, which Kevin bumped with his own.

What if he grabbed her and threw her down on the table and placed the butter dish and the plates gently aside and then kissed her like it meant something historic? He could imagine a spectrum of reactions, and he could imagine a mixture of possibilities from this spectrum: rabid enthusiasm mixed with withering disdain, for instance. She could pull it off. It was possible.

"What if I threw you down," he said, "and, like, ravaged you on the table."

She didn't say anything.

"Right here in the kitchen. Amongst the Pop Tarts."

She sighed. “I haven’t had a good ravaging in months,” she said. “Months!”

She was making her BLT into a little puppet face; two olives were toothpicked into the top, which she lifted to reveal a strip of bacon that looked like a tongue.

“Eat beef,” the BLT puppet said.

Then the doorbell rang: Ray ruined everything. Sure, Kevin had invited him over, but that didn’t mean he actually had to show up.

Kevin had been doing some amateur profiling: Iatro had to be a guy. He used these douchebag masculine words. He was older; Kevin figured from twenty-seven to thirty-eight. He probably had a job he didn’t like. He thought he could rap but really couldn’t. On several occasions, Iatro had misspelled “definitely” as “defiantly”: this was clearly an issue of spellcheck gone awry. The dude was drafting his Twitter posts. The dude was spellchecking. The dude was obsessed with him. In many ways, Kevin considered Iatro his biggest fan.

Of course, maybe Ray was Iatro. But Ray used to rap shit like, “You don’t do it / You don’t know how / Try to stick it in and the girl say ow.”

Kevin sort of coached Ray and stuff, tried to help him write better rhymes.

When Kevin looked at Ray, he thought of the word “lumbering.” Ray was trying to mold himself into a Christian rapper. He just started using the nom de rap Ray of Christ.

Ray was in Kevin’s living room right now—well, his mom’s living room—but he was there because of Kevin. Kevin was rapping with Ray. He was letting Ray wear his old blue LeBron T-shirt because Ray had spilled beer on himself. Ray always did stuff like that. If Ray were Iatro, he would have spilled his guts a long time ago.

Right then, Ray was rhyming “Jesus” and “lead us” and “he needs us.” Kevin yelled, “Febreeze us!”

Karine laughed even though she was mainly playing with her phone.

Ray was a Christian; he wouldn’t do that Iatro stuff. He was probably too dumb to be Iatro.

Kevin had his laptop plugged into the speakers, so they had the beats he made with Fruity Loops (version 9) dancing through the house. They were drinking beer, but he didn’t want to suffer booze tongue. He should write a song about it: “Booze Tongue.” He could drawl the chorus. When he looked at Karine sometimes, it seemed like they were the only two people in the room. The power of the two of them made Ray disappear.

She was wearing a tight pink shirt. He'd save those three words—tight pink shirt—for when he freestyled.

All of this benefited only the cat. Bruce was a cat futon.

He woke up on the couch with the weight of the cat on him, and he couldn't deal with it. It was the weight of death.

He was wearing clothes that were exactly like pajamas—loose and flowing, an old, broken-in Oxford shirt and a pair of cotton chinos—perfect for an ailing body, but Amy believed it had become an affliction of the mind. She tried to be a good sport about it. She did, but she looked at him like he was a different person now, which of course he was.

Stacey had been fine, but Milo was freaked out after the surgery. He had said, "That's not him," and then wobbled into tears. "That's not Daddy."

They had explained the surgery, had explained things about the valve of a pig.

Milo had whispered, "He doesn't look like a pig."

Bruce worried that some part of himself wanted to die. His organs were conspiring against him. The psychologist didn't want to put him on anything—Prozac?—until he'd had a chance to recover from the surgery. But it was clear to him now: Bruce would never recover.

They said the muscles in his back would start to mend after a few weeks. But that was not what happened.

They said he would feel more like himself after five weeks or so. But that was not what happened.

They said the itch in his heart would go away in a few days. But that was not what happened.

In fact, they said the itch was not even there. The itch was in his mind.

But it *felt* like it was in his heart, which had been cut up and sewn back together.

They wasn't even a *them*. *They* generally meant Dr. Klise.

Of course Amy would listen to him, but he had no idea what to say to her. He lay on the couch in the darkened living room and thought, and when he was done doing that, he would take a nap and then he would go upstairs and go to bed.

That's when he realized it wasn't the cat that woke him up. He could feel a low boom, boom, boom that wasn't his heart.

In his fake nasal nerd voice, Kevin rapped, “I talk shit on the Internet / I say things about people I ain’t even met.” He had to get a line about Boba Fett in there. It would kill.

He just went with it and broke off with “I’m dense / It doesn’t make sense.” He couldn’t think of anything else. He let his head chug with the beat, and he thought about doing his LeBron dance, even though he wasn’t wearing his LeBron shirt. Freestyling was not his thing. He was 99 percent work, 1 percent bling. He should have rapped that, but the moment was gone.

Ray’s rhymes were almost as good as his.

Kevin might have to make another adjustment to his MySpace page. What if Ray were actually the best white rapper in Berea, Ohio?

Bruce would never sleep. The need for it clung to him, sure, but it wasn’t going to happen. From the house across the street, the low sonic rhythm of bass crossed the road and then shook Bruce’s house. The rapping neighbor kid. It had to be. They had written about his songs in the *Berea Sun*. The rapping neighbor kid *would* throw a party and make everyone listen to his own music.

Why did the bass cross the road? Because some asshole had it turned up too high. Sometimes he heard a grunt of something that could have been words, but they weren’t words when they got to him.

He went in again to check on the kids. Stacey was asleep, a comma-shaped squirm. Her nose was just like Amy’s, and Amy hated her own nose. Would the hate be in the genes too? The party—the bass—was just a whisper here.

In Milo’s room, the sound was louder, different, and when he nudged open the door, he heard Milo making his own sounds, hisses and buzzes that roiled with the beat.

“Buddy,” he said, “you have to go to sleep.”

“I can’t,” Milo said. He was happy about it.

Karine was half-watching and half-listening, which added up to a whole, so it seemed all right. She knew all of Kevin’s songs—half-listening was enough.

Ray was kind of cute in a dorky way, but he rapped like he had a mouthful of pancakes. Kevin had some great new beats actually.

She was texting Lisa, and she was tweeting (but not as Iatro!), and she was reading *Great Expectations* on her phone, for Honors English.

Monica poked her head in the living room, which she reserved the right to do.

Kevin seemed to be rapping a song about a particular brand of athletic shorts, but she could be wrong. Sometimes when she thought his songs were about one thing—say, sports announcers—they were about something else, usually girls. When in doubt, guess girls.

All three of them looked bored. The other two were nodding their heads politely to Kevin's music. It was not the stuff of music videos. Monica could remember the first time she saw "Thriller," which actually wasn't as good as "Love is a Battlefield."

She went back upstairs where she could watch *The Amityville Horror* in relative peace.

As he walked, Bruce realized he was doing more than walking. He was almost kind of running. He wasn't going to put up with this crap.

The crap got louder as he crossed the street to it.

When the doorbell rang, Kevin thought *pizza!* even though they hadn't ordered any pizza. Maybe his mom had.

It was the weird-looking dude he saw earlier, their neighbor.

The guy was tall and he had a big poof of hair, and he just sort of stood there on the steps. "Poof" was exactly the word, and Kevin tried to store it for later—"big poof of hair" could easily transition to "throw your hands in the air." The guy was kind of out of breath.

"Um," Kevin said.

"It's eleven o'clock," the guy said. "My kids can't sleep."

Maybe it was a "pouf" of hair, not a poof. It deserved further investigation.

"Can you turn it down?" the guy said.

"We're not hurting anyone here," Kevin said.

"Just turn the fucking music down."

He wasn't sure, but the guy seemed to pause—just for a blip—after the word "fucking," like he didn't know what he was hearing, like he didn't think it was music at all.

"Sorry, dude," Kevin said, and he started to close the door, but the guy threw his skinny arm out to hold it open.

"Sorry meaning yes, I'll turn it down," the dude said, "or sorry meaning no way?"

It was the kind of stupid shit parents said. The guy was acting like his fucking dad. No, he was acting like his fucking mom. Fucking dude was coming over to parent him.

“Sorry meaning fuck off,” Kevin said.

“Turn it down!” the guy said, and he stepped closer to Kevin.

“Nah, man,” Kevin said.

“No one can sleep,” wacked dude said. “Turn down the music.”

If Kevin looked that weird, he’d just stay at home. He’d live like Boo Radley, hiding presents for kids at night. This dude never hid any presents.

“Just go home,” Kevin said.

“Turn down the music,” the guy said, and he took another step forward. He was all up in Kevin’s grill now. Wacked dude was breathing Boo Radley all over him.

It wouldn’t have been a big deal to just turn it down.

Shit, he could have gone back inside. He could’ve turned it down.

That’s what Iatro would have predicted. One time Iatro suggested Kevin get a “Thug Lite” tattoo. In general, Iatro implied that he was a pussy. In general, Iatro implied that he was a wuss. One time Iatro said Kevin’s mom wrote all his raps.

It was all such bullshit, but his mother probably would be out there soon—to make this neighbor disappear. She’d take care of it. She would.

“Turn it down,” the guy said again, and Kevin reached out with both hands and pushed the guy in the chest.

The man’s face exploded in some way. He looked wild somehow. The dude was fucked up. He had stepped backward with the push and almost stumbled off the steps. And then Kevin kind of shoved the guy in the chest again, and the dude stiffened up, started fucking going off on him. Who knew what he said? Raving mainly.

“We’re not hurting anyone here, man,” Kevin said, and he knew he didn’t have much time. His mother would come. She would take care of it.

So he reached out and sort of shoved the guy again. The guy had no pecs at all. Then Kevin shoved him again, and the guy was talking so fast. The guy was pissed. He thought the guy would cry.

The guy yelled, “Don’t do that!” and Kevin was going to shove him again. He wanted to shove him all the way across the street.

“Don’t fucking push me!” the guy yelled.

Then his mother was at the door.

“Don’t you yell at my son,” she said. “Don’t you dare.”

The man stepped forward, toward his mother, and Kevin pushed him again, harder, and the man gasped, like it was all a big shock, and he stumbled backward and right down one step and then the other. The

guy didn't fall, but Kevin towered over him now. Spit shined on the dude's teeth.

Kevin's mom kind of gasped too.

"Get the fuck out of my yard," Kevin said.

Dude actually turned, walked fast, made a big show of calling the cops with his cell right from the street.

Bruce was sure his sternum was split back into two. They had cut it in half during the surgery and then wired it back together. The kid must have shattered it; they'd have to cut him open again. The sutures could have ripped right out of his heart. Inside his chest, some kind of faucet ran. He couldn't turn it off.

No. It felt like an umbrella opening inside of him—the sudden expansion but also the vinyl sense of it, the metal spines—right inside his chest, close enough to his heart to be his heart. He sat down on the curb, tried to get the damn umbrella to close up again. He could put it away, slip it into some closet of the body.

He took a gulp of air because maybe he hadn't been breathing, and that sent a shuddering from his center to the margins. He was all pain, and then he was all nothing, and then he wasn't sure. The tar, concrete, whatever was under his butt, was cold. He watched the house across the street, which was so quiet now. That's what he'd wanted.

That kid would probably never be splayed out naked on a metal table, waiting for the anesthesia to kick in. Before the surgery, an orderly had shaved him completely, everywhere except for his head, and Bruce hadn't asked why. He supposed there was a chance they might need to rip you apart somewhere else, shove some kind of shunt into you. You could cut in anywhere on the body and there'd be some kind of bloody line to the heart.

Everything led back there.

To the operating table. To the fucked-up heart.

For Bruce anyway, but not for that kid.

That kid had never been broken.

That kid didn't even have to try: his big dumb heart just pumped away. No matter what, it pumped away.

Monica should have been paying attention to Kevin, but the boy in the dark blue LeBron shirt had a bottle of beer in one hand and a carrot stick in the other, and he was using the carrot stick as a pointer. It was definitely Kevin's shirt. It had to be. The boy was in conversation with Karine, but Monica couldn't hear them. The boy poked Karine in the

shoulder with the carrot. He tapped his own head with it. Please don't eat that, she thought. And then he ate it.

Kevin was explaining to his mom what happened, but honestly, he didn't know what happened. The guy had come over and acted like an asshole.

"It's Iatro!" Karine said. "I know it is."

"Who's Iatro?" his mom asked.

"This guy who makes fun of Kevin on Twitter," Ray said.

Kevin wanted them all to shut up. He wanted to push everybody.

Monica watched the boy walk out of her house and toward some other house, into some some other life that didn't depend on her. She could predict that future but not with any certainty—maybe he lived in an apartment, not a house. Maybe he lived in a trailer. He wore the dark blue LeBron shirt, though. He would wear it all through his days. She was comfortable with that as the only knowable.

Doppelgänger. The term was doppelgänger, and she even thought it had an umlaut.

He was Kevin's doppelgänger. She thought of all the bad things that would happen to that boy now.

And he didn't even look that great in the shirt.

"Karine," Monica said, "you better go home too." She almost wanted to say, "Take Kevin with you. He's yours."

She wasn't even sure if they were a couple. Kevin never touched her, but sometimes Karine touched him.

Just take him, Karine, Monica thought, but instead she just smiled. Monica offered to drive her, but Karine said she'd walk home. She'd be all right. It wasn't that far.

"Bye, Mrs. Taylor," Karine said and swatted at an imaginary fly. It was almost a wave, in the same way a blow job was almost sex. The two of them made her think about sex. It must have been the absence of it. She knew Kevin had sex. He had told her about the first time. He had been sixteen.

Karine gave Kevin a hug, and they held it for too long.

"Text me," Karine called from the front yard, and Kevin said, "I will," and then he closed the door on her.

Monica was behind Kevin, and she stepped forward and gave him a backward hug, arms around his chest. Monica rested her head on his shoulder for a minute, which was really just a few seconds, but you were allowed to round up, call it a minute.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said.

The boy in the dark blue LeBron shirt had tumbled out the front door and into the night. He was off to get arrested, to bleed in the street. He was the one now. Kevin was safe. All in all, it was an excellent night.

Bruce watched from the street, which belonged just as much to him as to anyone. He wanted to watch the arrests, and then he would ask the cops to call an ambulance. Something was ripped and chugging, but he didn't think he'd die, not yet. If it was a heart attack, it was a slow one.

But just two kids left the house, and the street was deserted, so maybe it wasn't a party at all?

By the time the police got there, most of the house lights were off, and the street was silent, except for his own ragged breathing—a lung was torn too, he bet, punctured.

“The party was right there,” he said into the window of the cop car. It framed a serious face, mustache, limp-lidded eyes.

“You okay, buddy?” the cop asked.

“Just tired,” Bruce said.

“Let's all get to sleep,” the cop said, and the window hummed up and closed even as he spoke.

I'm dying, officer, he thought.

Those would be his last words: “just tired.”

Karine would miss being Iatro probably, but she was glad he was dead. She actually knew a lot about him. He smoked imaginary Kools in his imaginary house. He wasn't that bitter actually. He was just trying to express something that was really hard to say.

She liked Kevin. She really did. But the fact that she had to remind herself of that—convince herself of it?—was problematic. The whole Iatro thing was getting weird. She wouldn't have done it to an enemy. She didn't have an enemy. Amber Pearson didn't count. Amber Pearson with her bangs. “Bangs” was a cool verb, but never ever a noun. Kevin understood things like that. He was smart and talented. But she was smarter and more talented. She was being objective. These things were measurable. He was just louder about being smart and talented.

That was the failure of Iatro. He should have been funnier, meaner, snarkier, more committed to music criticism than to personal critique, and they always referred to him as a he. He should have been Iatra: I Am The Rap something-that-starts-with-an-A. Only a dude would declare himself an overlord. It was the perfect video-game touch. She would

miss Iatro. He should have aimed higher. He could have punked Justin Bieber, but Justin Bieber never called her to say, Hey, what's up?

Karine could even rap better than Kevin. When they were messing around that time with his recording equipment, she could see his acknowledgment of it—a severe crease across his face. Even his eyes seemed creased. It aged him, and she could see the future version of him, creased and balding and wearing Dockers with pleats. She had better flow.

She had freestyled, “I get more syllables per minute packed in with beats. I’m the one quoting Shelley and Keats. You’re the ghost of yourself wearing Dockers with pleats.” Then she *had* quoted Keats: “What men or gods are these?”

“Good one,” he said, and then he had shut down the equipment. They had gone down to his mom’s kitchen to make smoothies. He needed his mommy then, she knew.

“You should back me up on some tracks,” he had said.

The blender pulverized frozen mango.

His lines were clever, and he cared more about it. He created songs, good ones. But she had better flow.

On his legal pad, he wrote, “Karine, string bean, spleen, guillotine, squeaky clean, I’m the professor, you’re the dean.” Oh, man, he forgot Sizzlelean.

He wouldn’t stop. He couldn’t.

He pressed the button, the size of a dime, just as shiny, and the computer chimed once—a sound that sometimes made him sad. It made its grinding preparatory arrangements, and when it sprang to life, he clicked on Explorer, which summoned Twitter, his home page.

Iatro had written, “@kevlar You aren’t even good at pushing. You push like a girl.” And then a minute later, a tweet from Karine: “@iatro We all know who you are. Give it up, old man.” She must have logged off and then logged in under her own name right away. And then she must have deactivated the Iatro account.

Because it was gone. He kept checking and checking, but it didn’t exist anymore.

There was no way that guy was Iatro. He could tell. It was all Karine, and now she was crushing Iatro, sticking a fork in him.

She did this—all of it—because she loved him. She had to in some way. She had to. She wanted to fuck with his head, and fuck meant a lot of things, so many, too many. It felt like the chorus of a song.

She was all blue light: she zapped his heart like a bug.

The kids were asleep. Amy too.

Bruce would just lie down for a while, and if it got any worse, if it didn't get better, he'd wake Amy, and she'd call the ambulance.

He was more awake than he'd been since forever, since before the surgery.

He was jacked. He was wired. His fingers shook.

He was going to die.

But his heart felt fine. He couldn't feel it at all, and he had no pain in his left arm, none of the signs of a heart attack. He was just buzzed somehow.

He listened to Amy's breathing, the long in and the short out. He could smell the vanilla—no, coconut—cream she rubbed on her face before bed. He touched his sternum, and it felt the way he expected it to feel. Fine, he guessed. He was too hot for the covers, so he lay there on top of the comforter. He wiggled his toes. The pump of the heart pumped. It did pump. It would pump. It will pump.

He ran his fingers up the still fresh scar on his sternum, felt the bumps of wire where they strung the bone together so it would heal.

He almost relaxed, almost drowsed, but then something within yelled, Don't fall asleep!

His limbs were electric. He was made of neon.

It was adrenaline! It had to be. He wanted to go down and kick that kid's ass!

He had to laugh right into the pillow, so he wouldn't wake up the house. But the pillow knew. He was alive again.