

Graduation Day

JUNE 6, 2017

He did not want to arrive for graduation smelling like doughnuts, but he promised Mrs. Peterman he'd work until 4:00. Now it was 4:16, and all the seniors were instructed, reminded, and all but threatened that they had to be at the school by 5:00.

Kevin, being Valedictorian, should arrive early. "Very early," Principle Betar insisted.

Now there was no way.

"Hope graduation is going to be everything you dream of," Mrs. Peterman said, talking over the counter as Kevin fled to the back room of the doughnut shop to change clothes. "We are all so proud of you and I have my fingers crossed your special plan works today."

"Thanks, hope it does too," he called over his shoulder. Stripping off his brown apron and red visor, he uncovered the suit his mom had bought him, out of the gray plastic garment bag.

"What a difference a year makes, huh?" Mrs. Peterman said loudly from the front of the shop as she wiped finger smudges off the doughnut display windows. "Just thinking about everything that happened this last year – and your sweet, little brother, God love him."

"Yeah, things are different now, that's for sure," Kevin replied, quickly stuffing his shirttails into his dress slacks. Kevin was certainly relieved that everything that happened with his little brother was no longer the talk of the town, or not as prevelant.

Hopefully, the suit would transform him from an everyday doughnut shop worker to what looked like a respectable Valedictorian. He had begged his mom not to get a boring navy-blue suit, but she insisted it was the best she could find. At least she found one that worked on him; being scrawny and six-foot-three made it hard to find the right fit.

Looking in the small mirror that hung on the backroom wall, his face fell. It was bad enough being the skinny, geeky kid, and the curve-breaker in every class. He looked unhappily at his reflection,

I look like a freakin' banker

But, his face changed when he thought about *her*. A smile replaced his disappointment. He adjusted his tie, pulling it tighter, but that did no good. His shirt collar still gapped, emphasizing his long, thin neck.

At least my acne didn't blow up this week.

Running his fingers through his curly, fire-red hair, he hoped the result would make him look hip. It didn't. He glanced quickly at his phone: 4:26, then back at himself in the mirror.

Oh well, it will have to do.

“Look at you!” Mrs. Peterman yelled out. She darted out from behind the counter, took his face in her hands, and gave him a kiss on both cheeks.

Mrs. Peterman only came up to Kevin’s chest, so she stood tiptoed to reach his face. A waft of older woman perfume mixed with the chalky sweet smell of makeup enveloped Kevin’s nostrils.

“You give them the speech of your life!” Mrs. Peterman said. Kevin saw tears forming toward the bottom of her eyes.

“Thanks!” he replied, bending over and hugging her, hating that his voice was shaky.

It was a hot day for only being the 6th of June, and he prayed he wouldn’t perspire too much. Otherwise, he’d look like a sweaty mess, and he felt his hands tremble at the thought of standing on stage in front of half the town. Baxton’s most recent census counted 867 residents.

He could just imagine

“He’s not breathing while he’s talking!”

“Look! He’s shaking!”

“Gross! He’s sweating through his shirt!”

He picked up his pace when his phone vibrated.

MOM: *We’re almost there!*

HIM: *Great!*

It was 4:40.

Out of breath, he sprinted the last few yards, and finally reached the exterior door of the school auditorium. A group of girls from his class were just arriving. Feeling queasy and flushed, he respectfully held the door open for them.

All he could think about was, *Will his plan actually work?*

“Smelling good, Kevin!” Amanda Holstedder commented, as she walked through the doorway.

He’d used deodorant and the cologne his mom brought back from her trip to New York last year, but that was in the morning. After Amanda passed, he quickly sniffed at his armpits.

Donuts.

Everyone always said Kevin smelled good. Not because of the cologne he tried to cover the scent of fryer grease with – but from the lousy donuts.

The auditorium was a sea of faces and echoed with the noise of folding seats opening or slamming. Above the stage, up front was the school's crest – an head of an elk. Two huge floral arrangements decorated either side of a central podium.

He swallowed hard and felt his scalp tingle with nerves. His mouth went dry, and he noticed he was having trouble catching his breath.

Mr. Betar, the principal, was at the podium, tapping the mic – with a sound tech off to the side telling him to stop doing that.

“THERE HE IS!” Betar's voice boomed through the overhead speakers, setting off a loud shriek of feedback.

People plugged their ears, and the tech shouted something.

“Kevin Christopher. This is *your* day!” Betar proclaimed. “Come on up here.”

Now up on stage, Kevin took the principal's outstretched hand, and felt like his arm would come off as Mr. Betar pumped and pumped it.

Pastor Huntington got up off of his white, folding, rental chair and put his hand on Kevin's back. “Big day, Kevin. You are going to do great.”

Kevin couldn't believe what a long way the two of them had come over the last year – all the obstacles they had overcome.

“We're *way* behind,” Betar interjected, jotting notes on his program and clearly making a point. “Could you please test out the microphone for yourself? You do have your speech with you, I hope?”

Kevin nodded, and scanned the auditorium, watching the crowd grow in size.

It felt as if time was being swallowed up by his anxiety and the minutes were spinning out of control, faster. He stepped up to the podium, legs feeling wobbly, to test out the mic.

He unfolded the four pages that contained his speech and tried to press out the wrinkles. Attempting to take in a deep breath, he felt as if the room was depriving him of air.

He really, really wished *she* could be in the actual audience, but if his plan worked....

Suddenly, he felt his legs go weak.

Pastor Huntington's hand slid strongly under one arm, holding him up. “I've got you buddy.”

The next thing he knew, his body was mush and he was holding onto Pastor Huntington as if his life depended on the strength of this other human being. He let himself be held up for what seemed like an eternity. After he caught his breath, he pulled away from the Pastor, found his legs again and stood on his own.

“You've got this Kevin,” Pastor Huntington said, squeezing his arm for reassurance.

Looking out at the audience, he saw them all staring back at him. Silent.

Do it for her

“Just a few words, Kevin. That’s all we’ll need,” Mr. Betar said compassionately, stepping up to hand him a tissue.

The lights were dimming now; Graduation was about to start.

He leaned close to the microphone and spoke with as much energy as he could muster. “Testing, testing, testing?”

“Sounds good, dude. Congrats!” a student’s voice assured him from somewhere back in the dim cavern of the auditorium.

The tech gave him a thumbs up.

He took the seat beside Pastor Huntington, who looked at him with a wide, encouraging smile. Kevin gazed out past the glare of the theater lights and saw that the auditorium was almost full.

He checked his phone again – 5:17 – and then felt it vibrate.

MOM: *We’re here!*

Pastor Huntington put his arm around Kevin’s shoulder, giving a firm squeeze. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for her, for us. You’re brother opened all of our eyes.”

Images of the previous nine months played through his mind – some painful, some beautiful.

The ceremony began and before Kevin knew it, it was half-way thru when Mr. Betar announced...

“... And the Baxton High School Valedictorian for the class of 2017 is Kevin Christopher!”

His phone vibrated again.

Finally!

He tapped his phone’s screen, thanking God for Facetime.

Yes! The plan worked!

There *she* was.

A warmness grew inside his chest as he saw her beautiful face squeezed in amongst his parents, and his younger brother’s.

Carrying his phone up to the podium, he placed it facing him as the audience stood and applauded. He took a deep breath and began to deliver it – what he hoped was the speech of his life.