

THE SHOWRUNNER

Frankie Thomas

Roger hates open casting calls, but the network is being a pain in the ass about casting “real kids” in the *Life According to Liberty* pilot. “Viewers should look at these kids and see themselves,” says the first in an increasingly inane series of memos. “Avoid overly polished child-star types.” They use the words “fresh,” “natural,” “organic,” and “raw” so often, you’d think they really just want to open a restaurant in Silverlake.

Roger hates a lot of things—rush hour traffic, the 405 any time of day, people who mispronounce “Hermès,” the smoking ban in restaurants, most of America east of the Harbor Freeway—but he especially resents wasting a workday on an open call, because, for the most part, he doesn’t hate his job. He does it damn well, too: if you have kids, they’ve probably clocked half their lives watching his shows. *Superpants?* That was him. *Second String*, *Friendship Heights*, *Passing for Paranormal*—all Roger Knox productions. It’s thanks to your kids that Roger owns a penthouse in the Hills, drives a black Maserati, wears a different suit every day (Armani, Zegna, Tom Ford, YSL, maybe breaking out the Hugo Boss when he doesn’t mind looking like a slob), and gets his shoes shined once a week even though he doesn’t walk enough to scuff them. He’s been here long enough that he no longer feels like he’s evading when people ask him where he’s from and he answers, “Hollywood.”

At the casting call, though, Roger is forced to interact with people who aren’t from Hollywood, people who even smell like the real world—babies, church basements, cafeterias, grocery-store shampoos. If there were just one or two of these people in here, it wouldn’t be so bad. When he’s vastly outnumbered like this, though, he sees himself through their eyes.

“My son really wants to break into the industry,” says one father from Rancho Palos Verdes. “Do you have any pointers for him?”

Roger turns to the boy and says, “It’s never too early to run away from home. Worked for me.” He can say shit like this to people he’ll never see again.

Today they’re auditioning boys, all good-looking in the same generically nonthreatening way, all reading the same generic lines for the same generic scene in which the generic heroine, Liberty, first meets her generic crush, Jonathan. “So you’re Liberty Larson?” each boy recites. “Hey, I think I know your brothers—Life and The Pursuit of Happiness!” They’re videotaping the auditions, so Roger will have to watch them all again later; he doesn’t look forward to hearing his own hastily written quips a hundred more times. “Thanks for coming in,” Roger says, all day long. “We’ll let you know.” It’s like a hundred one-night stands in a row.

“Kill me now,” he whispers to the casting director when the network people go out of earshot.

“Just one more,” she says, “and then we’ll break for lunch.” She hands him an improperly formatted résumé with a school-picture headshot and just one acting credit: “Pasadena High School, *Cabaret*—Master of Ceremonies (Lead).”

“What the hell kind of high school does *Cabaret*?” says Roger.

The casting assistant brings Peter in. Roger takes one look at the kid and knows immediately that he is, to put it tactfully, no Jonathan. Jonathan’s eyelashes wouldn’t be so long and feathery; Jonathan’s hips wouldn’t sway, not even slightly, as he walked into a room. Jonathan is the captain of the football team, and he would not be so slender that Roger could easily knock him to the floor and hold him down and snap his neck with one hand. No, this swishy little proto-twink could not possibly be less of a Jonathan.

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But he's memorized his lines, and his frumpy mother drove him all this way, so they might as well let him do the scene. Roger's assistant reads aloud: "Interior, school hallway, day—Liberty runs down the hall and crashes into Jonathan. Her books go flying."

Peter mimes the collision. "Oh!" he cries, flapping his hands (*flapping his hands*, like a goddamn drag queen, and Roger tenses with a mysterious rage). "Let me give you a hand. You're Liberty Larson?" Beat. "Hey, I think I know your brothers—Life and The Pursuit of Happiness?"

Roger takes a sip of coffee as Peter says that line, and on "The Pursuit of Happiness" it's all he can do to suppress a spit take. The kid lisps. He fucking *lisps*. Not a full-retard "Purthuit of Happineth" lisp—just a slight, delicate sibilance, the kind that no amount of speech therapy will ever straighten out.

So much for Peter's career, Roger thinks as he says, "Thanks for coming in."

"How did I do?" Peter asks eagerly.

The casting director's no moron—her gaydar must be pinging hard enough to crack her skull—but she's a pro. "We'll let you know," she says with bland optimism. The network people don't say anything at all.

Roger looks down at the boy's sad résumé. Poor Peter Lane. Lewdly or tenderly, he's not sure which, Roger thinks: Oh, Peter Lane, they are going to eat you alive. You have no idea, none at all, how much you are about to take it in the face from the world.

The maid is gone by the time Roger gets home, but he can tell she's been here. The *Vanity Fairs* are fanned neatly across the glass coffee table, the recycling bin invitingly empty and free of wine bottles. But the real giveaway is the guest bedroom, whose every surface has been wiped clean of L.A. soot. That's how you can tell a maid is really top-notch: She knows that the dirtiest room in your house isn't the one you're in most often, but the one no one's ever used.

Roger contemplates whether it would be less depressing to watch the audition footage on his plasma screen or on his laptop. He chooses the TV so he can drink without fear of spilling on his keyboard. He slides in the DVD, opens a bottle of pinot noir, and sits on his sectional to watch.

When Peter Lane's audition comes on, Roger fast-forwards through it. Even sped up, the sight of Peter—the *thought* of Peter—puts Roger on edge; he doesn't actually think of San Antonio, but he senses San Antonio slithering around the edges, rattling like a snake. He pours another glass and the rattling stops.

He watches the rest of the auditions and makes a note to call back Tom Devroye, a dark-haired dreamboat who's done a few Canadian soap operas but doesn't have his SAG card yet. He's twenty-four, older than Roger would prefer for Jonathan, but he can pass for high school and he's got the right look. Tween girls will cream their panties for him. With that settled, Roger can go to bed. Instead he rewinds back to Peter Lane's audition.

"Hey, I think I know your brothers—Life and The Pursuit of Happiness?"

Peter's esses are even airier on the recording. *Stop it!* Roger wants to yell. *Can't you hear yourself?* He feels self-conscious, suddenly, sitting in his living room watching this kid in high-def with that embarrassing voice blasting through the speakers. He switches the DVD to his laptop and carries it into his bedroom, along with what little is left of the wine. He sits on his bed and plugs in his headphones, and now Peter's voice—"Let me give you a hand"—is so clear and close and real, it's like it's originating in Roger's head; and while the video plays, Roger unbuttons his pants, not to jerk off, but just because it's the end of the day and he's already in bed; and then, since it's the end of the day and he's already in bed *and* his pants are unbuttoned, he jerks off anyway, so quickly that you can't really say it's *to* anything. When he's done, he opens his eyes and there's Peter Lane,

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still onscreen, still unharmed, still a kid. Fresh and natural and organic and raw, he's the exact fucking salad the network ordered.

All right. Roger will humor them. Without even getting up, he opens up FinalDraft and creates a new document: LIBERTYPILOTrewrite.fdr. He gives Liberty a wisecracking twin brother, Lyle Larson, just for Peter Lane. There: now they'll have a real kid on the show.

The network picks up the pilot, and the scramble begins: writing team assembled, contracts signed, storylines mapped out, impossible deadlines set, legally mandated tutors hired for the underage cast members, theme song commissioned for the show's star, Annie Braddock, and her upcoming album. Everything teeters constantly on the brink of disaster and it feels like home to Roger.

Peter Lane, the adults all agree, is a total sweetheart. Everyone adores him. He's *good*, and not just kid-actor good, not just hit-your-marks, take-your-direction, don't-forget-your-lines good—not just Roger Knox Productions good. He sells the jokes (“Liberty, if I ever see your ferret in my room again, I’ll pull a Cruella and trim my coat with him!”), so that even the feeblest one-liners (“Don’t make me do it—fur is so last season!”) earn their uproarious canned laughter. The directors marvel: He actually varies his line readings from one take to the next—he’ll be bitchy in the first take, awkward in the second, wistful in the third—which is unheard of among the kids in Roger Knox Productions.

The results come back from the first focus group: more Lyle. The kids love Lyle. They think he's funny. Lyle should have his own storyline.

The writers groan at the news. They've already plotted out every season arc on the blackboard in the writers' room, and they'll have to rework the whole season to fit in a storyline for Lyle. Roger stands in front of the blackboard, chalk in one hand and eraser in the other, as the writers call out suggestions.

“How about when Liberty accidentally becomes a teen paparazzo? We could give that to Lyle instead.”

Roger studies the blackboard. “But then how do we set up Liberty gift-of-the-Magi-ing her camera in the Christmas special?”

“Oh, shit, you're right. Could she give away something else?”

“No, the network specifically requested a Nikon.”

“Lyle could find a puppy. When in doubt, bring in a puppy, right?”

“But Lyle hates animals, remember? We established that in episode two.”

“Maybe we could just retcon it?”

Roger's waiting for someone to point out the obvious, and someone finally does: “We could give him a love interest.”

There's some nervous laughter at that.

“Not a *real* one. Like, a girl is pursuing him and he rejects her. Maybe Kiana.” Kiana is Liberty's black best friend. “We could play it for laughs.”

“Fantastic,” says Roger. “N-double-A-C-P Image Awards, here we come.”

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“No, no, he doesn’t reject her because she’s *black*, he rejects her because...” But she’s already given up.

“Poor Peter,” someone murmurs.

“You know what?” Roger snaps. “Go home. All of you. Seriously. I’ll take care of the Lyle thing myself.” He slams the eraser onto the shelf, and the room is empty before the chalk dust has cleared.

Assholes. He didn’t *mean* it.

He swings by the set to check on things. They’re shooting Liberty reaction shots. On cue, Annie Braddock giggles. Annie Braddock gasps. Annie Braddock winces. It’s a smooth operation; they don’t need Roger here. The prospect of free time sends him into something like a panic, and he’s considering just driving home and starting the evening’s drinking at five in the afternoon when he notices Peter Lane walking out the door. Impulsively, Roger comes up behind him and puts a hand on his shoulder.

Peter jumps, turns around, sees who it is, jumps again. “Whoa, hey.” He rubs one foot against the other. His feet are surprisingly big, like a puppy’s. “What’s up?”

“Relax. You’re not in trouble.” Roger knows how much he intimidates the kids on his shows, and he’d be lying if he denied getting a kick out of it. “You done for the day?”

“Yeah, just hanging out till my mom comes to pick me up. She doesn’t get off work for like an hour. She’s a social worker, so—”

“That’s bullshit. I’ll give you a ride.”

Peter does the “Oh, no, you really don’t have to do that! Really? *Really?* Are you *sure?*” thing for about ten hand-flailing minutes, even on the way to the parking lot, even as he buckles himself into the passenger seat of Roger’s Maserati. Then he repeats the performance on the phone with his mother. He’s so well brought up, Roger wants to smack him.

“Duh,” says Peter on the phone, “obviously I’ll be home by then! Have I ever missed our *Idol* date?...How about Pad Thai?...Awesome! Love you!”

“You’re too nice, you know that?” says Roger, nodding to the security guards as he drives off the lot. “You’re going to be a TV star. You need to practice being a diva.”

Peter giggles and takes too long to formulate his response. “Yeah, well...” This would be dead air on a talk show. The kid needs media training. “I’m totally gonna use that,” he says, “next time my mom tells me to take out the trash or whatever.”

The 101 is going to be its own circle of hell, Roger realizes as he pulls onto the entrance ramp, and the 110 will be even worse. Sure enough, the traffic is bumper-to-bumper, miles and miles of red brake lights blinking like hungover eyes through the greasy shimmer of rush hour exhaust.

“Actually, my mom would probably love that,” Peter is saying. “She’s always going, ‘Honey, share your feelings!’ and ‘Express yourself!’ and—oh, lame.” He’s just noticed the traffic. “This sucks.”

“What can you do?” says Roger. There are no police cars nearby, so he takes one hand off the wheel and one eye off the road to plug his iPod into the stereo. “Pick a song,” he says, handing it to Peter.

Peter studies the iPod long enough for the silence to become uncomfortable.

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“You’re overthinking this, Peter.”

Peter laughs. “Sorry! I’ll just put on a random playlist, okay? We’re gonna listen to...‘Workout Mix.’”

And Laura Branigan’s “Gloria” fills the car. Maybe it’s just the unexpectedness of the choice—there was plenty of Top 40 shit for Peter to choose from, Roger always stays current on what the kids are listening to—but from the first metallic chord, Roger is Peter Lane’s age again. He’s pressed up against sweaty dancing guys in the most crowded room of the most crowded city he’s ever seen; the music is so loud it pounds in his chest instead of a heart, filling his body until nothing else is left inside it, jerking him back and forth like a hand in a puppet.

“Hey,” says Peter, listening, bobbing his head along. “I actually really like this. Like, for real.”

“Oh, please.” Roger wonders if the other cars can hear what they’re listening to. He lowers the volume. “Nobody ever liked this shit. Not even at the time.”

“No, seriously, I’m so into this,” says Peter, rocking cutely from side to side, his seat belt holding him back from actually dancing in his seat. “Maybe it’s like the gay gene or something.”

Roger’s foot twitches against the accelerator and the Maserati lurches forward so fast they almost hit the moron in the Corolla crawling ahead of them. “Sorry,” he says. “The pickup on this thing is insane.”

Stop the presses, right? It’s not like Peter’s disco-loving DNA is *news* to Roger, or anyone in the world, probably. But Peter announces it so lightly and serenely, like it’s nothing at all, nothing that could get him tortured at school or beaten up by his father or kicked out of his house or condemned to hell. He is *how* old again? Are they all like that nowadays? Just the ones from Pasadena? Just Peter Lane?

Roger looks over at Peter, who’s sitting there strapped into the passenger seat at groping distance from Roger, humming along, his eyes closed and his legs apart. It’s strange to think that Peter is the same age that Roger was when he ran away from San Antonio, and that Roger is now older than the guys who fucked him back then. Peter would never expect to be fucked the way Roger was—no, Peter expects to be *loved*, and why shouldn’t he? Peter was born to be loved.

How easy it would be for Roger to drive home instead, talk Peter into coming inside, pour the kid a drink and sweet-talk him and undress him and then pound him into the mattress so hard he’ll never smile that trusting smile again for the rest of his life. It scares the shit out of Roger, how easy it would be and how much he must not let it happen, never, not to Peter Lane.

Roger glances at Peter, who is still nodding to the song, oblivious, saying, “If I were rich, I’d throw ridiculous ’80s theme parties all the time.”

Roger pulls out the cigarette tucked behind his ear, lights it on the dashboard, sticks it into his mouth. “Stick with me, kid,” he says around the cigarette, enjoying how trite he sounds, how exactly like a caricature of a Hollywood producer. It’s one of those times he knows he’s succeeding at appearing the way he wants to appear. Raising his voice over Laura Branigan’s wail, he says, “I’ll make you a star.”

Eight hours later, after dropping Peter off and driving home, after two Red Bull vodkas and a time-release Ad-derall and half a pack of unfiltered Camels, Roger sends out an email to the team: the teen-paparazzo storyline will go to Lyle instead of Liberty, and instead of a single episode it will be a five-part story arc. They’ll have to rewrite the whole season to accommodate it, but Roger’s got it all worked out.

The plotline: Mr. and Mrs. Larson don’t approve of their son being a teen paparazzo. After a blowout fight with his parents, Lyle runs away from home.

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He hitchhikes, and in every episode he gets picked up by a new character. In one episode it's an ostrich farmer; when the man's prize ostrich escapes from the truck, Lyle catches it, and in his gratitude the farmer names it Lyle. In another episode it's a barbershop quartet whose tenor just quit; Lyle learns the part and steps in for him just in time for them to win the big competition. For drama's sake, Lyle does encounter a villain at one point (an unhinged beauty school reject determined to give Lyle a makeover), but a friendly policeman quickly comes to the rescue, because nothing truly bad can happen to Lyle. No one lays a hand on him. No one makes him do anything he doesn't want to do. Wherever he goes, people are kind to him and treat him like the lost boy he is. "You shouldn't hitchhike!" they all tell him. "It's dangerous, and you belong at home! Aren't your parents looking for you?"

They are. It was all just a misunderstanding, and they're distraught about it. Liberty's garage band writes a song for Lyle ("We Love You, Lyle" is Roger's filler title until they can get a real song commissioned) and makes a music video that goes viral on the Internet. Soon, the entire world is begging Lyle to come home, and in the Christmas special, he finally does. It's a joyous reunion.

The network calls on Monday afternoon to discuss the rewrite. Roger is already driving home. "The scene where Lyle runs away—it's a little dark, isn't it?" says the exec.

That's a note Roger doesn't get every day. "You think so?"

"For a Roger Knox Production, yeah."

"I can change it," Roger starts to say, but the exec is still talking: "But I like it."

The sun has disappeared below the horizon, and though Roger thinks it's stupid to rave about the sunset as if there hasn't been one every day since the beginning of time, you'd have to be blind not to notice this one, which is so intensely pink it looks like CGI. He takes off his sunglasses and says, "I like it too."

Life According to Liberty airs, and it's a hit in the demo: Roger Knox has done it again. The network renews it for another season, and the team panics. They haven't even written the second half of season one. What should they do—a message episode about body image? A *Twilight* parody episode? Maybe a celebrity guest spot for the role of Kiana's mom? And what about the finale?

"It's hard to give a shit," Roger says, surveying his scrawl on the blackboard—*School prank war? Going green? Puppy???*—"when it's all so fucking stupid."

"That's the whole point of kids' TV," the writers say. "You're always saying that!" Which is true.

At night, Roger watches the dailies on his laptop in the bedroom. It feels like drinking, and not just because he's doing that at the same time: Peter Lane is intoxicating.

"I *can't* go home," says Peter, as Lyle, in today's scene. "You wouldn't understand."

"Give me a chance," says the friendly policeman. In this take, an over-the-shoulder shot, Roger can see only the back of the actor's head. "Whatever you say, I promise I'll listen."

Unlike the other kids on Roger's shows, Peter understands the power of stillness; his face, as the policeman talks, is as motionless and marble-white as the moon. When did he become so *beautiful*? "The camera loves his face," the DP said the other day, and it's true. The camera lingers on Peter's face, holding it, caressing it: the camera is madly in love with Peter's face, and he becomes lovely in its eye.

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“I want to go home,” says Peter. “But I’m—” He pauses. Roger didn’t write a pause into the script there, but it feels completely right, and he’s dizzy with power: Peter is taking his words and making them real. “I’m scared,” Peter says and begins to cry. How does Peter weep so convincingly, so effortlessly? Most people have a hard surface layer (or two, or a bunch) to conceal what’s underneath, and most actors have to learn to strip theirs away, but Peter just doesn’t seem to have one at all. He reddens and glazes and snuffles and trembles until Roger wants to seize him and carry him away and hide him from the world, even though he knows that Peter has never really suffered a day in his life and never will, that no one will ever touch him except to worship him, to kiss him and stroke him and lick him and just pleasure him every way he wants, *when* he wants it, like he deserves...

And then it’s light outside and Roger’s forgotten to sleep. He takes an Adderall and orders three shots of espresso in his latte. He arrives at the studio with just enough spare time to meet with Peter and thank him, privately, for the job he’s doing with Lyle. He walks to Peter’s trailer and knocks.

He hears laughter inside it, and Peter’s voice: “What, do they not have the Circle Game in Canada?”

Another voice: “I don’t think they have it *anywhere* except your school! It sounds bizarre!” It’s Tom Devroye, the soap-opera pretty-boy who really is too old—who are they kidding, he’s about a *decade* too old—for the role of Jonathan. Tom and Peter have been pretty inseparable lately, Roger realizes.

“No, it was the best part of Diversity Day! The whole school would stand in a circle in the gym, and the leader of the Diversity Club would hold the microphone and go, like, ‘If you identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, step into the circle,’ and a bunch of kids and teachers would step in, and the leader would go, ‘How does it feel to be inside the circle? How does it feel to be on the outside looking in?’ We’d do it with all the minorities. I thought it was fun.”

“Yeah, no shit you did! You were the leader of the Diversity Club!”

More laughter. “Yeah, I guess mostly I was just into having a microphone.”

The laughter softens, and then the voices fall silent altogether. What the fuck are they doing in there? Roger knocks again, harder.

Peter opens the door and Roger smells the stale air inside the trailer, so warm and thick with boy sweat it could be a steam room. “Look! It’s Roger!” says Peter. He and Tom crack up anew, and Roger wonders if they’re laughing at him, if they were talking about him earlier. But they barely seem to see him; wherever Roger is, they’re worlds away.

At home, there’s a sick, unhappy frisson that runs through Roger every time he types the letter L into his browser, because its first suggestion is always Los Angeles Craigslist > Personals > Casual Encounters > m4m. God knows what quirk of programming is behind this; Roger doesn’t actually do the Craigslist thing that much, and he’s sure he visits the *Los Angeles Times* online (his browser’s second suggestion) more frequently. He needs to have his assistant show him how to clear his browser history—this is what he thinks every time, sometimes even writing it down on his to-do list—but he never brings it up with her. There’s such a cold authority to the computer’s verdict, he can’t quite bring himself to contradict it.

He scans the first page of ads—*discreet nsa no recip ski-friendly you host*—and feels himself degenerating into the creature his computer already thinks he is, something low and dumb and in heat. He scrolls through, comparing photos of naked flesh like so much raw meat, dashing off so many emails that when he gets one back, from a guy who signs off as “Steve” but whose Gmail address identifies him as “Ian Chase,” Roger can’t even figure out which ad was his. He gives Steve or Ian his address anyway, and Steve or Ian says he’ll be over in forty-five minutes.

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Roger mixes a martini, hoping to time his drinking so that by the time the guy gets here, Roger can have exactly one more drink with him and then be drunk enough to tell him what he wants. What does he want? He paces around the living room, thinking that he wants this guy to hurt him, smack him in the face and then come on it; that he wants this so much he might come right now, just from thinking about it; that he's lucky to live the kind of life where he can have what he wants on demand.

But then Steve or Ian shows up, and maybe Roger fucked up the timing of his drinking, but suddenly he doesn't want it so much anymore. He's disconcerted and turned off (as he always is when he does the Craigslist thing, he just forgets, every time) by the shock of this guy's realness—the human smell of him, his various individual freckles and scars, the strange sadness of the hairs growing out of the places he's waxed. They've barely sat down on the sectional before Roger starts kissing him, just so he can close his eyes and not talk to him; and he already knows, with exhausted resignation, that he's not going to come.

While they fuck, Roger thinks about Peter Lane. He's sure Peter's never done this shit before, but how much longer can it stay that way? How has he made it even this long?

"Sorry," Roger says afterward. It's the first thing either of them has said since they went into the bedroom.

"You're really not gonna get off?" says Steve or Ian. "Isn't that frustrating?"

"Not really," says Roger. "Not for me."

It's only a few days later that Peter Lane shows up on set mussed and blushing and so bruised on his neck, so luridly, obscenely bite-marked, that Roger's first reaction is panic—can they sue for damages if the makeup department can't cover those up?—and then a few minutes later Tom Devroye deigns to show up, fucking *struts* onto the set, smirking and wiping the back of his hand over his mouth and theatrically buttoning his shirt and yes, *okay*, Tom, everybody gets it, the boys are hooting and the girls are squealing and a couple of disgusting teamsters are *applauding* and at this rate it will be midnight before Roger can restore order on the set. Roger watches it all from the director's chair in the shadow of the camera, braced for some kind of shitshow—for someone to recoil in horror or use an FCC-prohibited word or take a swing at Peter, for Peter's face to collapse and then go blank and then harden forever.

"Up top, dude!" a guy shouts, high-fiving. "Peter and Tom for the win!"

"You guys are *adorbs!*" (What the fuck is "adorbs"? Is that a thing the kids are saying, or is Annie just being precious?)

And from the other girls: "So much hotness!" "Can I watch next time?" (Is *that* a thing now?)

Roger feels so old these days, he's not sure how he's even still alive.

"Tom," says Roger. "Hit your mark before we waste another million dollars waiting for you." Tom does. "Action!"

Annie says her line: "Please, Jonathan! It's for a good cause!"

"No way, Liberty," says Tom. "I'll have a bake sale, I'll go door-to-door, but I draw the line at auctioning myself off for bachelor in the charity—I mean, bacheloring myself off for—crap! Auctioning myself off for charity in the..." Tom laughs. "Sorry, Roger! Can I start over?"

"No, you can't," says Roger. "You're fired."

And so Tom Devroye is written off the show: after getting caught plagiarizing a school report off the Internet,

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Jonathan is expelled and sent to military school. The writing team is ready to stage a blood-in-the-streets revolt for all the last-minute extra work Roger just saddled them with, but tough shit for them. Kids, don't plagiarize. "Why?" everyone asks, and Roger's explanation is that Tom was difficult to work with—chronically late, always stumbling over his lines. "God knows I'm not one to judge," says Roger, "as long as it doesn't affect your work..." That's all. It suffices.

And Peter Lane is safe. On the freeway, in the shower, in his sleep, Roger comes back to this incredible thought: Peter is safe because Roger protected him. When he chooses not to touch Peter, it feels better than getting laid; and when he does touch Peter—harmlessly, always harmlessly, his fingers stroking Peter's hair lightly to preserve continuity, his mouth against Peter's ear as he whispers "Good job today"—it feels even better, so good that Roger wants to fall to his knees and cry out: *What can I do, Peter Lane? What can I do for you?*

"I've figured out the season finale," Roger says at the next writers' meeting. "Lyle comes out."

"Of the closet?" The writers snicker. They think he's fucking with them. "Was he ever in it?"

"I'm not kidding," says Roger. "I want to do a big coming-out episode for Lyle."

The writers stare, first at Roger and then at anything but Roger. None of them wants to be the one to say what they're all thinking, of course, but someone finally speaks up: "You really think the network will go for that?"

"Jesus Christ," says Roger. "I said a *coming-out* episode, not a *Lyle-gets-reamed-in-a-bathhouse* episode." He hears a few writers cough pointedly, probably mocking him: *Saving that for season two?* He talks over them.

"Heartwarming G-rated shit. *Mom, Dad, I'm*—you know. Mom and Dad tell him they love him, they're proud of him, blah blah blah, tears and hugs all around, twelve million viewers and a GLAAD award. Bam!" He snaps his fingers. "Dibs on writing it."

The writers exchange glances and fidget. This is the downside of hiring a team of agreeable suck-ups: they're all so fucking passive-aggressive when they disagree with you. "Has there ever been a gay kid on this network before?" they ask. "Has there ever been a gay kid on an American kids' show?" "Have you talked to the network about this?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Roger pulls out his phone, calls the president of the network and leaves a message: "Roger Knox here. The good news is, I'm about to make television history with the *Liberty* finale. And the better news is, you guys are gonna let me."

He snaps his phone shut and turns back to the writers' table. "Happy now?"

The writers gasp and applaud. This is the upside of hiring a team of agreeable suck-ups: it just blows their minds when you pull a stunt like that.

He visits the set and takes Peter aside to tell him.

"That's awesome," says Peter, beaming. "That's just so totally freaking awesome. Oh my god!" His hands are an animated blur. "I'm gonna have such a hard time not tweeting this! Can I tell my mom, at least?"

Roger used to sleep with this tree-hugger type who once dragged him along on a mostly hellish eco-cruise trip to the Galapagos Islands, and though he'd rather forget that whole vacation, he suddenly remembers the mockingbirds he saw there—the way they hopped into his hands, their claws light and sharp on his open palm, and regarded him with bright, curious eyes. That's what Peter Lane is, Roger realizes: some wild island creature that hasn't encountered humans before and doesn't know to be afraid of them.

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“Don’t say I never did anything for you,” says Roger.

The season finale is a huge production, with the entire cast (minus Tom, of course, and minus Annie: in the B plot, Liberty accidentally gets locked in a supply closet—get it?—and stays trapped inside it for all of Diversity Day) crammed together in the gymnasium set with about seventy trillion extras, all standing in a circle. Kiana stands on top of the bleachers with a microphone.

“If you identify as white, step into the circle,” she says. “How does it feel to be inside the circle? How does it feel to be on the outside looking in?”

They shoot infinite takes of this, from infinite angles, first with the white extras and then with the black extras and then with the Hispanic extras and then with the Asian extras. Normally Roger would be worn out by now, but instead he’s edgy, hyperfocused: he drums his fingers and jiggles his leg compulsively and then, when it’s time for the money shot, just stands up because he can’t sit still in that director’s chair for one more second.

“If you identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, step into the circle,” says Kiana.

Complete stillness on set, just as Roger’s script calls for. The silence lasts maybe fifteen seconds—Peter is really dragging this out.

Roger can hear himself breathing and hopes the boom mic doesn’t pick it up. He’d have worn his gym clothes if he’d known he was going to sweat this much today.

Lyle takes a tentative step into the circle, Roger’s script says, and at last Peter does. He looks terribly small as he separates from the crowd, taking anxious little steps at first and then longer strides, drawing up his shoulders, raising his chin, finally standing all alone in the center of the circle, still scared but defiant and proud and breath-takingly beautiful in the overbright lights.

It might be a full minute—it might be an hour for all Roger knows—before one of the kids nervously breaks character and glances at Roger, who finally remembers that this is the end of the scene and he’s supposed to yell “Cut” and then shoot more takes, more coverage, more angles, but he can’t bring himself to do it just yet. He needs to keep Lyle in that light a little longer. Just another moment. Just another second of *this*.

Roger hears sniffing and turns around. It’s the gaffer with the fauxhawk. (Laurie?) There are tears running down her face.

“Oh, grow up,” Roger whispers to her, but when she smiles at him he can’t help smiling back. Then he calls out: “Cut! Let’s do it again.”

Six months later, it’s hard for Roger to remember a time before he was, as *Out* magazine puts it, “a pioneer in the final frontier of American entertainment: children’s television.” Pre-Lyle, you couldn’t pay the press to give a shit about him or his shows; by now he’s been profiled so many times, he gets recognized in restaurants. (“Are you Roger Knox? I’m *obsessed* with *Life According to Liberty!* Lyle kicks ass!”) The magazines can’t get enough of Roger—and not just *Out* and the *Advocate*, but real magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* and *Vanity Fair* and even a feature for the *New York Times* magazine, which ultimately gets killed, but Roger doesn’t have time to be pissed off about that or, really, about anything else these days. “I’ll take any excuse to talk about myself all day,” he jokes, though this isn’t true: he talks only about Lyle Larson.

All the reporters want to know: who will Lyle’s boyfriend be?

“You’ll just have to tune in and find out!” says Roger, and then, automatically, he rattles off the name of the

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network and the day of the week and the time (plus Central Time) that *Life According to Liberty* airs. It's a habit he can't break after a decade working in TV, but it's hardly necessary with *Life According to Liberty*. The network crunched the data for the Season Two premiere and discovered that the show had become a DVR hit—not just with tweens, they reported breathlessly in the email, but with “the 18-to-34 cohort.”

“Glad to hear it,” Roger wrote back, in the breezy, almost flirty tone of someone who's started to get laid a lot. “That's always been my favorite cohort.”

Nielsens don't tell you everything. But as Roger's publicist remarks, “We're definitely not in Kansas anymore.” That's the subject line of her email, which contains a link to the *New Yorker's* website. It's Nancy Franklin's latest On Television column.

“Much has been written, most of it using words like ‘overnight’ and ‘meteoric,’ on the popularity of *Life According to Liberty*,” it begins. “Its rise to the rank of Cultural Juggernaut—its swift passage through the preliminary stages of disposable tween bait, parental guilty pleasure, and hipster cult favorite—has rival networks rending their garments. Even as I write this, they are no doubt conducting their own analysis of the phenomenon, attempting to replicate it under controlled conditions, with the kind of urgency (and financing) once associated with the study of cold fusion. But even a child can tell you that *Life According to Liberty* owes its success entirely to the character of gay teen paparazzo Lyle Larson—and he is *sui generis*.”

How, the reporters ask, does Roger account for Lyle's cult following?

“Who *wouldn't* want to follow Lyle?” says Roger. “He's fearless. He's funny. And his fashion sense is impeccable. How can you not love him?”

Has anyone objected to Roger's decision to include a gay character on a children's show (they ask, feigning concern, palpably *aching* for controversy)?

“You know, that's what I expected,” says Roger. “But it's been a huge surprise to me—nothing but support from the network, nothing but encouragement from the viewers. It feels terrific. If I'd known it would be like this”—Roger laughs—“I'd have done it years ago!”

Some reporters dare to ask: is Lyle based on Roger himself?

“No,” Roger says. “Lyle is all Peter Lane. I created the character just for him, you know.” Yes, they know. Peter Lane's audition and Roger's subsequent last-minute rewrite of the pilot have become the founding myth of *Life According to Liberty*, the Annunciation and Nativity story of the Lylephiles (as the fans call themselves).

Roger's kept the promise he made to Peter last year, that day in the Maserati: Peter Lane is a star. If you've opened a magazine lately, you know who he is, whether you watch *Liberty* or not. *T* magazine styles him to look like James Dean, shadowy and haunted in too much hair gel. His spread in *Out* is Bowie-themed: Ziggy Stardust Peter, ethereal and luminous with lightning painted across his face; Man-Who-Fell-to-Earth Peter in a fedora and designer tweed; Thin White Duke Peter, exquisitely frail in a black vest and white collared shirt, his palms outstretched to mime being trapped in a box. “OH, YOU PRETTY THING,” says the headline. He looks more butch in the *Men's Vogue* spread, which is Village People-themed and uninspired: cop Peter, Indian Peter, cowboy Peter, biker Peter, construction worker Peter, G.I. Peter. *New York* goes edgy, with a shirtless Peter spread-eagled on a sequined cross, his bare chest gory with disturbingly realistic puncture wounds. “THE NEWEST GAY ICON,” says the headline. (A mini-controversy erupts when some Christians think the photo is mocking Jesus; the magazine's defense is that it's supposed to be St. Sebastian.) *Paper* goes flat-out porny, dressing Peter as a schoolboy in plaid shorts and a jacket and tie, giving him a cherry Popsicle and photographing him mid-suck, his lips red and wet and swollen. Roger keeps a copy of that one, but it's hard to keep track of the rest, the infinite different Peter Lanes as seen through infinite different eyes in infinite different fantasies, none of which ultimately have anything to do with the real Peter Lane, Roger's Peter Lane, Lyle Larson.

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Peter Lane is the first actor in television history to be nominated for an Emmy for a children's program. Not a Creative Arts Emmy like the one Roger already has for *Superpants*, but a Primetime Emmy, a *real* Emmy. Roger's never been to the real Emmys before. He thinks, as he steps out of the limo, that he could get used to it.

It's easy to find Peter on the red carpet in front of the Nokia Theatre: you just have to follow the screams of the Lylephiles. There are hundreds of them, little girls and dirty old queens and everyone in between, holding up their cameraphones, throwing themselves against the barriers, shrieking and weeping with love. Or pain. Roger can't tell.

And there he is, sleek as a dolphin in the silvery Dior suit Roger picked out, wincing at the flashbulbs and the crowd noise. Squirring away from the leathery lady with bleach-sautéed hair who's trying to face-fuck him with her microphone, Peter waves Roger over. "This is the guy you want," Peter tells her. "This is Roger Knox. He's the real Lyle Larson. I just play him on TV."

"Don't be so modest," says Roger, snaking his arm around Peter's waist and drawing him near, for the cameras. "You're Lyle too. We're all Lyle, every one of us. Lyle lives inside us all. Like Jesus. Uh-oh, did we just piss off the Christians again?"

The reporter emits this practiced "ha-ha-HA" TV laugh. "Peter," she says, "how does it feel to be such a huge star all of a sudden? I mean, you're only, what, seventeen?"

"Eighteen," Peter says, rubbing one foot over the other; Roger gently taps his own foot against Peter's, silently warning him not to scuff those thousand-dollar shoes. "I just turned eighteen."

"Ooh!" The reporter turns to the camera. "Hear that, guys? He's legal!"

Peter stiffens and stammers and visibly colors, and Roger, in a surge of affection, gives Peter's waist a protective little squeeze. Then another reporter swoops by and snags Roger, and he doesn't see Peter again until they go inside for the ceremony.

"Big plans for tonight?" Roger asks as he takes his seat next to Peter's. He observes and then quickly un-observes how ashen and twitchy Peter looks.

"I don't think so," says Peter. "I don't really go out." Peter's moved out of his mother's house in Pasadena; he lives in West Hollywood now.

"Smart kid," says Roger. "Stay out of trouble."

"No, I mean, I *can't* go out." Peter makes a nervous, high-pitched sound that's sort of like a laugh. "You know. The Lylephiles..."

The house lights are already going down, and Roger isn't really listening. It's the closest his life has ever come to being perfect, and what makes it so sweet is the feeling that things are *going* to be perfect, that he's about to get what he wants and that when that happens he will, at last, be happy.

"Don't be afraid," he murmurs in Peter's ear as the Emmy theme music begins to play. "They love you. Everybody loves you."

Peter, for his part, manages to act almost relieved when he doesn't win (for that performance alone, he deserves the Emmy), but apparently the camera catches Roger sneering or grimacing or something, because the next morning he gets some shit on the blogs for being a sore loser. Several people helpfully send him the links, so that's the first thing Roger sees online the next morning. The next thing he sees is the email from Annie's agent:

"Annie Braddock will not be renewing her contract for a third season of *Life According to Liberty*."

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There's more, but Roger has already jumped out of his chair and grabbed his phone. "What the fuck?" Roger yells, even before the agent has finished saying hello. "What the fucking *fuck*, Kathleen?"

"It's Annie's decision," she says, with that infuriating earth-mother calm of hers. "My client feels underutilized on *Liberty*, and she's ready to explore—"

"Underutilized? For fuck's sake, it's her show!"

"Oh, Roger, come on," says Kathleen. "We both know that's not true anymore."

This line of thinking doesn't go over so well with the network when they find out.

"What do you want me to say, Roger? The show is called *Life According to Liberty*. How can we renew it without *Liberty*?"

"Change the title," says Roger. It's been a while since he last found himself in damage control mode; he's out of practice. "Or don't. The kids won't even notice *Liberty*'s gone. They're not watching for *Liberty*. They love *Lyle*."

"Not as much as you do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying," says the exec. "If you wanted to do the *Lyle* show, you should have pitched *Life According to Lyle*, instead of screwing around with *Liberty* and pissing off our cash cow."

This is meant as a rebuke, but it gives Roger an idea. The exec will not shut up—"Yeah, sure, Peter brings in the awards, but it's always been Annie bringing in the revenue. The *Lyle* merch just doesn't sell like the *Liberty* merch. The kids love *Lyle*, but they want to wear *Liberty*, and that's what matters. You know how the system works. You practically invented it"—and Roger is nodding into his phone, saying "Uh-huh" during the pauses, but he's already brainstorming the *Lyle* Larson spinoff. It can be about *Lyle*'s paparazzo career—that way it doesn't have to end when *Lyle* ages out of high school. They can call it *The Lyle Files*.

Roger doesn't even need Adderall to write the *Lyle Files* pilot: he gets it done in one espresso-fueled weekend. He looks forward to writing more episodes; he's already making a list of celebrities to call for guest spots. (Roger's outdone himself with *The Lyle Files*: the celebrity guest spots are built right into the premise!) He wonders what the magazines will write about him when it airs. If he was a pioneer just for including a gay character on a kids' show, what will he be for giving that character a show of his own? He's Christopher Columbus. No, Neil Armstrong.

When he gets the call from the network, he's on the lot. He circles outside the soundstage, humming "We Love You, *Lyle*," to take the call.

"It's a great pilot, Roger. We had a lot of fun reading it." The exec pauses. He sounds uncomfortable. "But ultimately, at this point, I don't think we can afford to risk it."

"I know, the locations will be expensive," says Roger. "But after the pilot we can just rebuild them on top of the *Liberty* set. And you know Peter Lane works for chicken feed—"

"It's not about that."

"What is it?" Roger paces around the lot. He can never stand still when he's on the phone; he should just replace his workout mix with a recording of a network notes call. "Hit me with it."

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“I hate to say it like this. But I respect you, so I’ll be honest with you.”

This is ominous. No network executive has ever had to utter the words “I respect you” to Roger Knox before; it’s always gone without saying.

“It’s the gay thing.”

Roger stops walking.

“Yikes, that sounds bad, doesn’t it?” The exec laughs. “Look, a gay supporting character is one thing. It’s great. We’re all for diversity. But an entire *show* about a gay kid ...this is a family network, you know. We can’t lose sight of that.”

Sometimes, when Roger was a kid—when his father was being an asshole, or later, when some older guy wanted to fuck him and it was easier to let him than to try to stop him—Roger would get into an elevator. That was how he always thought of it: he’d step into an invisible elevator and its doors would close around him and somehow, without even moving, Roger would rise up and away from wherever he was, for as long as he needed to be gone. Even as an adult, he still has the elevator sensation now and then—during sex, for example, or when the Adderall kicks in, or at the first sip of his first drink after he’s laid off booze for a while—but he hasn’t had it in some time. He forgot how much it physically feels like going up in an elevator, the way his stomach drops and his head goes light and his feet get heavy. There’s even a vague, metallic elevator smell.

The exec is still talking. “The world has changed, but not that much. It’s easy to forget that there’s a whole country between L.A. and New York. And we already get enough hate mail from there as it is, just for *Liberty*. It’s not politically correct, but it’s the world we live in. Maybe in ten years...you still there?”

“Yeah.”

“You okay? You knew that, right, about the hate mail?”

“Oh, sure.” Roger didn’t. “Believe me, I get what you’re saying. It’s no big deal.”

After hanging up, Roger walks to the parking lot, gets in his Maserati, and emails the Liberty team. “I have jury duty,” he types. No, not jury duty—they can still call him if he has jury duty. He deletes that. “I’m going in for surgery,” he types instead. “I’ll be out of touch for the next”—three? four?—“few days, so you’ll have to wrap without me.”

Is that it? Is it really going to end like this?

“Tell Peter,” he types, but then he deletes that too.

“It’s been a pleasure working with you all on LIBERTY. Sorry I can’t be there to see it through to the end.”
Send.

Seconds later, his phone starts ringing. He turns it off.

Then he turns the ignition, drives to a liquor store in Culver City where they don’t know him, and stocks up on Ketel One—enough to knock him out and then knock him out again when he wakes up, enough to get him through the sick shaking hours after he can’t knock himself out anymore. Enough for five days, he thinks, though he always lowballs; it’s never enough. He drives home and closes the curtains and doesn’t bother with tonic or ice or a glass.

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Who says L.A. doesn't have seasons? It has more seasons than anywhere else in the world. Pilot season. Mid-season replacement season. Season one, season two of whatever show you're working on. Basketball season, when you shouldn't even think about driving anywhere near downtown unless you have some kind of fetish for sitting in gridlock. The season when there's always someplace nearby that's on fire. The season when the Grove blasts the shoppers with Christmas music and fake snow that you probably shouldn't inhale or touch. The season when you can see real snow on the blue peaks of the San Bernardino mountains, though they say there used to be more of it, before global warming. The season when it rains so hard you can't see anything at all, not even the lines painted on the road, and at night all the wet cars swerve blindly around each other like sweaty drunk people grinding together under disco lights. Awards season. Gala season. Last season, which all of Roger's clothes suddenly are.

Roger lets the seasons pass, just as he lets all the dick-swinging muscle cars pass him on the freeway. His Maserati isn't the latest model anymore, hasn't been for a while, but he never gets around to choosing a replacement. He's too busy, he thinks, though he's never been less busy. On his new projects, *The Platinum Card Kidz* and *Gross-Out!!!*, he's credited as creator and executive producer, but he's chosen not to be the showrunner for either one. That means he doesn't have to write or direct or supervise the casting process or interact with the actors, unless he feels like it, which he never does.

He tries not to Google Peter Lane. He'd like to avoid thinking about him altogether, but that's impossible: in his line of work, he can't help hearing about the roles Peter turns down. At first there are a shitload, and Roger is beside himself—what the fuck does Peter think he's doing? Doesn't he get that this is the whole point? That his momentum isn't going to last forever? But gradually the offers subside, and if Roger doesn't look into it, he can almost convince himself that Peter's got it figured out. Maybe he's moved somewhere like Santa Barbara or Monterey, someplace scenic and clean and far away from all this crap. Maybe he has a boyfriend. Or a cat.

But sometimes, when it's late at night and Roger is drunk and alone in his bedroom, he gives in and Googles. He sees the abandoned Twitter page, the news items about Peter Lane getting fired from this or that project, the tumbleweedy IMDb profile with the unchanging header: "Known For: Life According to Liberty." He sees the fansites, the hate sites, the galleries of images Photoshopped to make Peter naked, the writings of the crazed Lylephiles: *Please tell me where I can find Peter...why doesn't he write back...when I meet him I'll hold him down and skull-fuck him until he chokes on my dick and then I'll pull out and come all over his face until he cries because he's so pretty when he cries...* And he sees the paparazzi photos, recent ones, in which Peter looks unwashed and undernourished, though in most of the shots he's wearing sunglasses or covering his face with his hands. "COME OUT, PETER!" the headlines say, or "SMILE, LYLE!"

And Roger thinks about apologizing. He does. But where would he start? He can't single out one bad thing he did to Peter; he'd have to apologize for Peter's whole life. And why stop with Peter? Why shouldn't Roger apologize to the viewers he disappointed and the staff he abused and the boys from Craigslist and every washed-up child star who ever burned out after doing a Roger Knox Production? He should apologize to everyone he's ever met for everything he's ever done and, let's face it, everything he'll continue to do until the day he dies, because Roger sure as hell isn't going to change now, not at his age. Whereupon Roger closes his laptop and has another drink, and another, and however many more it takes to calm the fuck down and forget about Peter Lane once more.

So when Peter's email pops up in Roger's inbox, it's an honest-to-God shock. It's a reply to an email that was apparently sent the night before at 4:38 AM, and which Roger has no memory, none at all, of writing. He's per-versely proud that it's typo-free.

Peter, did you know there's a dance club in West Hollywood called the Circle? I drive past it a lot and it always makes me think of you and the Circle Game. How does it feel to be inside the Circle? How does it feel to be on the outside looking in?

Peter's written back: *haha ive been there but i never thought of that before. youd like it there btw, they play old school disco sometimes.*

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When Roger sends his own response—*Meet me there tomorrow at 9pm*—he’s half-hoping Peter will ask why, or claim to be too busy, or just ignore the invitation altogether. But Peter Lane always was too nice, and he still doesn’t know better.

Roger is halfway through a vodka on the rocks when Peter texts to say he’s on his way. Despite the DJ’s occasional old-school disco choices, the crowd at the Circle looks young enough to be in the target demographic for Roger Knox Productions. Roger wonders if they’re all looking at him, pitying him, asking each other what this old guy is doing here alone at the bar. He tries to remember what he thought when he saw men this age at clubs, but he doesn’t remember seeing any, and it occurs to him that he might simply be invisible to them now.

“Roger?”

Roger turns, braced to find Peter changed beyond recognition. But as bony and haggard and hollow-eyed as Peter is now, his sweetness is undiminished—he smiled that same shy, needy smile on the day he auditioned—and this is somehow even more of a horror.

“It’s so awesome to see you again!”

He clammers onto the barstool next to Roger’s, and Roger has to lean away so as not to be overwhelmed by the sudden closeness of Peter Lane, the surreal juxtaposition of the familiar (the coltishness, the lisp) and the new (the grayish skin, the faintly putrid smell).

“Jesus,” says Roger. “Where the hell have you been? You look great.” It’s a Hollywood compliment, somewhere between a white lie and flat-out sarcasm.

“Thanks!” Peter needs a haircut. Well, he needs a hell of a lot of things, a haircut not least among them. He jabs away, and the music is loud, but it’s still early enough in the evening that Roger can make out most of what he says. “I haven’t seen you in, like, forever. We never even got to say goodbye, right?”

It’s true. Roger should apologize, but he doesn’t want to start off by apologizing for that, of all things. Instead he asks, “What’s your drink?”

“Whatever you’re having.”

Roger orders Peter a vodka on the rocks, plus a refill for himself, before the sign on the wall catches his eye and it occurs to him to do the math. Even after all this time, Peter Lane isn’t twenty-one yet. He was so young on *Liberty*.

He notices that Peter is pulling out his wallet. “Put that away,” says Roger. “It’s on me.”

“Oh, no, you really don’t have to do that!” The bills quiver in Peter’s fingers. “Seriously, I—you’ve always been too nice to me.”

“Oh, spare me.” Roger drinks.

“No, really!” Peter’s voice is the same, breathy and light, and Roger can barely hear it over the thumping music and other shouting voices. “I seriously miss you guys. How is everybody?”

Roger brings Peter up to date on various *Liberty* alumni, and Peter nods politely at all of it before asking—with such studied nonchalance that Roger has to roll his eyes—“And what about Tom?”

“Who knows?” says Roger. “I think he might have gone back to Canada.”

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Peter wilts a bit. “No, I knew that, from Facebook stalking. I just thought he might have...I don’t know. I mean...” He trails off with a spastic little shrug-laugh.

“He was a little shit,” Roger starts to say, just as Peter blurts out, “My mom *adored* him. Every time he came over, she’d, like, make cookies and stuff. She was always going, ‘If you don’t marry him, I will!’...and it was funny?” he adds, uneasily, when he sees Roger’s face.

Roger doesn’t know what to say. He wants another drink. “How’s she doing?” he asks, even though he’s barely met Peter’s mother.

“Oh...” Peter picks up his glass, but it’s empty. He tries to slurp the melted ice through the cocktail straw. “I haven’t seen her in a while,” he says, playing with the straw, poking it around the ice cubes until it bends. “I brought some stuff home and she got weird about it, so...”

This kid, Roger thinks, has never finished a goddamn sentence in his life. “So?” says Roger, and either he says it too sharply or Peter just doesn’t get that Roger is echoing him, but Peter looks wounded. Wishing he hadn’t said it, Roger tries to change the subject. “Are you still living around here?”

“Kind of,” says Peter, and it’s too early for him to look as tired as he does. “I’m kind of between things right now?”

Roger suddenly gets it, and without thinking he says, “You can stay with me. I have a guest bedroom I never use.”

“Oh,” Peter begins, but Roger talks over him: “And save the whole song and dance routine about how I don’t have to.”

“You *don’t* have to!” says Peter, but Roger can tell he’s thinking about it.

“I know. I don’t have to do anything. I do what I want.” Warmth is spreading through Roger; he has a vivid image of Peter asleep in the guest bedroom, far from anyone who might try to hurt him, an entire wall separating him from Roger. “And I want you to be safe,” says Roger, “because”—he finishes his drink—“I am a *terrific* person.”

“No, I know,” says Peter, not being sarcastic. “I know you are.”

This makes Roger laugh. He can’t remember the last time he laughed this hard. He orders another round for both of them, and as Roger drinks, Peter says, “It just sucks, you know, doing the couch-surfing thing.”

“I know,” says Roger. “God, I know...” He drinks some more. The music’s gotten even louder, shaking the building like an earthquake.

“My first night in L.A.,” Roger begins, and Peter says “What?” and Roger says, “*My first night in L.A.*—I was about your age. I went with some kids to a party on the beach and there was this guy there, and he seemed *really* old at the time, but who knows how old he really was. Maybe forty. Which I thought was, you know, older than God.”

Peter laughs at the correct moment, but then he says “Wow,” the way you take a guess and say “Wow” when you didn’t quite hear what the other person just said. Roger leans in and talks louder, right into Peter’s ear. “He had a tab of acid, and I didn’t really want it, but I took it anyway, because I was an idiot, like you.”

“Hey!” But Peter says this, Roger thinks, almost flirtatiously. Their knees are touching.

“Don’t worry, it’s part of your charm. So he took me back to his place, and we fucked, and the whole time...” Roger slices the air with his free hand, as if this will make Peter understand. “It was like I could *feel* my whole

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life, everything before and everything after, and every single decision I'd ever made was wrong, and every single decision I'd ever make from then on would also be wrong, and that moment—*any* given moment was just one point in this string of wrongness that wouldn't end until I died. You know that black thread of shit that runs through the middle of a shrimp?"

"What?"

"A shrimp. Before it's deveined. That's what my life was." Roger's voice is hoarse and broken from shouting. He can't even hear it himself anymore.

"Oh my god," Peter says in a way that makes Roger think he didn't hear a word of the story. He hasn't moved his knee away from Roger's.

Roger orders one more round, and once again Peter makes a show of pulling out his wallet. "Put that fucking thing *away*," Roger says, and he reaches out and slaps Peter's hand so hard that the bills scatter across the bar.

Peter cringes, but doesn't protest. Roger pays. The loudness of the music has pummeled them into submission, and for a while they no longer even bother trying to talk. Then Peter gets up and says something unintelligible. Roger follows him. Someone's in the bathroom, so Peter waits by the door and Roger stands behind him.

After a moment, he puts his hand on Peter's waist. Peter doesn't even turn around; he stands rigid as Roger leans forward, pulls Peter backward, grinds slowly against him.

The bathroom door opens. "All yours," says the guy coming out. Peter goes in. Roger follows him in and locks the door behind them. The bathroom is small and dimly lit, and Roger's ears roar in the relative hush.

Peter looks down at the grimy, puddled floor and rubs one foot against the other. Roger glances at their reflections in the bathroom mirror, but looks away quickly because he looks like hell. Not Peter, though. Peter Lane is still beautiful.

It's not too late, Roger thinks as he reaches for Peter's wrist. Peter's hand is trembling; he looks like he might try to get away, like he's about to say no, stop, this isn't what he wants. The world has changed and it's not too late for Peter Lane.

Roger lifts his hand to touch Peter's mouth. Peter's lips are soft; they part, pliant, as Roger sticks his finger inside, and then another finger, and Peter closes his eyes and his jaw goes slack and his throat is warm and wet and tight and, no, Peter isn't going anywhere. He doesn't get it yet—this is Roger's last thought before he stops thinking altogether—Peter Lane still doesn't understand; he needs to be shown.

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