

# **KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES**

By Nate Eppler

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

CALVIN JONES

ALEXANDER JONES

DR. MAUREEN ALLEN JONES

DR. ELLIS JONES

*The action of the play takes place in the house of the Joneses, situated in a suburb outside of Washington, D.C. October, 1984 and the Present.*

*The House of the Joneses. On stage is a grand piano. MAUREEN sits at it, motionless. CALVIN enters.*

CALVIN

This is how my father died.

*(MAUREEN begins playing the piano; it is a gorgeous movement she plays. Suddenly there is a loud gunshot off-stage. MAUREEN jumps up, and exits.)*

CALVIN

A great man once told me that in the next century, the how will never again be as important as the why.

This is why my father died.

*(The movement MAUREEN was playing continues in the air by itself.)*

CALVIN

My father worked for the United States government from April 1957 until October 1984. As a boy, I thought only three people worked for the United States government. President Nixon, Captain America, and my Dad. As it turns out, my Grandfather worked for the government, too, and his father and his father, the very first Dr. Jones in our family. There have been eleven since. My immediate family alone counts for three of those... My Grandfather is probably the most famous of all of us. He was *the* Dr. Jones on the Manhattan Project, if you enjoy keeping up with things like that. He died in '56. My father, all of sixteen years old, took over his post the following year. In 1961, Dr. Jones met Maureen Allen, a probably very beautiful ornithologist, whom he would marry the following year. They would have two sons. Both of them wonderful little kids, I would say. One in December of 1963, Alexander Jones. And his adorable little brother in the summer of 1966. Me.

Alexander's IQ is 196. They say he's the smartest person alive, on par with DaVinci and well above Einstein or Mozart. I'm somewhere around 170, 180 I guess, I try not to keep up with it all. There are things that if you think about too much they get a life of their own. They start to chew at you, get inside. And to be honest, I don't need that kind of stress.

That's more than enough from me, this isn't my story.

We'll start on October 15.

*(MAUREEN enters. It is time for dinner.)*

MAUREEN

Come, chicks, come! The worm is prepared!

CALVIN  
Could you not say things like that?

MAUREEN  
Shut up and help me set the table.

*(ALEXANDER enters.)*

ALEXANDER  
Is the patriot eating with us tonight?

MAUREEN  
He'll be here in a minute.

CALVIN  
What is this?

MAUREEN  
Nutritional perfection. Help me set the table.  
What should our topic be tonight?

CALVIN  
Why do we need a topic?

ALEXANDER  
What about the more subversive elements of pop music transforming the word "love" from a genuine emotion into a euphemism for sex?

MAUREEN  
Be serious.

ALEXANDER  
I am serious.

CALVIN  
I honestly think we ought to just follow the ebb and flow of natural conversation for once instead of forcing ten-point theses on some topic you read about in Time.

MAUREEN  
How are your fish?

CALVIN  
Don't ask.

ALEXANDER

Does anyone want to know what I did today?

(*ELLIS enters.*)

ELLIS

Did you re-enroll in your doctoral program?

ALEXANDER

It's good to see you, too, Dad. How was your day? Talk to the President?

ELLIS

"The childhood shows the man as morning shows the day."

CALVIN

John Milton.

ALEXANDER

"The kids are alright."

MAUREEN

The *Who*.

ELLIS

Not exactly Chaucer...

ALEXANDER

When the situation warrants it, I'll quote Chaucer, I promise.

ELLIS

*Can you quote Chaucer?*

MAUREEN

Ellis.

CALVIN

This looks really great, whatever this is, Mom.

ALEXANDER

As a matter of fact, I can quote Chaucer.

CALVIN

"And gladly would he-"

ELLIS

You don't need to help, Calvin. Alex is a big boy. He dropped out of college on his own, he can speak for himself.

MAUREEN

This isn't the time.

ELLIS

Well when is the time, Maureen?

ALEXANDER

I choose not to quote Chaucer because, unlike you, I'd rather not wear my brain on my sleeve.

ELLIS

Such a burden.

ALEXANDER

Millions of men and women get along just fine every day without quoting Chaucer, Dad!

ELLIS

Are you suggesting that you and these "millions of men and women" are interchangeable?

ALEXANDER

Oh, come on, Dad! Are you even aware of the world around you?

MAUREEN

Stop it! Stop it right now both of you!  
I will not do this again tonight!

*(Pause.)*

ELLIS

*Did you re-enroll in your doctoral program?*

MAUREEN

Ellis...

ELLIS

What?

ALEXANDER

No.

ELLIS

I can't ask him that?

ALEXANDER

I did not re-enroll in my doctoral program today. I will not re-enroll in my doctoral program tomorrow. I will not re-enroll the day after that or the day after that. I do not want to re-enroll in any doctoral program ever again. The last thing this world needs is another Doctor Jones.

ELLIS

You're excused.

MAUREEN

Ellis.

ELLIS

He's *excused*.

ALEXANDER

Fine.

*(ALEXANDER exits.)*

ELLIS

How are your fish?

CALVIN

They're all dead.  
May I be excused?

*(To the audience.)*

As I walked into the kitchen, I heard my mother say something like-

MAUREEN

I'm quitting my job.

*(ELLIS and MAUREEN exit.)*

CALVIN

I didn't think anything of it at the time. I really didn't. It wasn't until- No, I'm getting ahead of myself. You'll see. It wasn't always like that, the family dinners, I mean. They used to be... I don't know, comforting, I guess. I had a hard time in school, as you can imagine. Being the only pre-teen in a private high school has a long list of significant disadvantages. It was nice, when I finally got back home, to be with people like myself. Who wanted to talk about things. Who wanted to think about things. It was the best and safest place in my life. I mean, we've only got each other. That's literally all we've got. When he was eight, Alexander figured out that his communication level was so high, that he probably actually could not converse with over seventy percent of the population. Seventy percent! It used to keep him up nights... He'd just go around for days saying, "I hope I live near my thirty percent." I'll never forget that. That's one of the

CALVIN (con't)

problems with being a genius. One tends to have a long memory. I feel sorry for Alexander, now. There's almost no one left on the planet for him to talk to.

My fish are all dead.

Did I tell you about that? I'm doing my doctoral thesis on the memory of fish. Particularly the regenerative prospects of their tissue and the possibility of that regeneration being translated to a human biology. Mom always said fish are brain food, so I think it's a logical progression.

But where were we? Right. We had a fight at the dinner table, I went up to my room, and about thirty minutes later, Alexander came rushing in.

*(ALEXANDER enters. We are now in CALVIN's bedroom.)*

ALEXANDER

The man's a nazi!

CALVIN

Isn't that a little extreme?

ALEXANDER

You know what the man does all day. Making weapons for a better tomorrow.

CALVIN

I don't think that's an appropriate description of our father's work.

ALEXANDER

What happened to the fish?  
Did these die too?

CALVIN

No, they sleep like that. Fanciful little creatures...

ALEXANDER

How many groups is that?

CALVIN

That's the fourth. I have no idea what's killing them.

ALEXANDER

Can't be a random element, not at this point.

CALVIN

This is my fourth murdered batch, Alex. Happenstance is no longer a suspect. This is clear-cut murder.

ALEXANDER

Did you have to start all over?

CALVIN

My control is dead. What else can I do? I've already done it three times, why not one more?

ALEXANDER

Are you sure you're feeding them right?

CALVIN

Yes, Alex. Yes I'm sure I'm feeding them right.

ALEXANDER

How do you do it?

CALVIN

Do what?

ALEXANDER

I mean... If I had to keep scrapping data and starting over like that I'd be ready to spit bullets.

CALVIN

That's why I take all of my anger and shove it down, see? I shove it down into a little box until I can't shove any more in there. And, eventually, it bursts.

ALEXANDER

What happens then?

CALVIN

I don't know, I've still got some room left.

*(Beat.)*

Why do you do that with Dad? Try to get at him like that?

ALEXANDER

I don't "get" at him.

CALVIN

Oh, but you most certainly do.

ALEXANDER

I don't mean to... He's just so... I don't know. Close-minded. I mean, he can't tell me I have to go back to school. It's not his right.

CALVIN

He's supposed to say things like that.

ALEXANDER

Well. Not to me. I mean, he didn't say anything while I was playing the good little boy. The entire time I was in that program he did not care. And now that I'm out it's like he can't focus on anything else.

CALVIN

What are you going to do? I mean, I know you say you're not going back-

ALEXANDER

I'm not ever going back.  
Ever.

CALVIN

Why not?

ALEXANDER

I don't want to talk about it.

CALVIN

Well. What are you going to do?

ALEXANDER

I don't know.

CALVIN

That's not in your vocabulary.

ALEXANDER

Well it is now.

CALVIN

I know you, Alex. You're always two steps ahead of everybody, including yourself. I know you know what you're going to-

ALEXANDER

Do you wonder what's happening to our world? I mean really wonder?

CALVIN

I don't really- Is this a subject change?

ALEXANDER

There's something going on out there. There's a quickening effect... You can feel it. Events multiply and get more and more complex and come faster and faster the closer you get to a crisis. That crisis is coming, and I don't know what it is. But it's out there.

CALVIN

What does this have to do with college?

ALEXANDER

I don't know what's wrong with the world. But I fully intend to fix it.

CALVIN

Your plan is you're going to fix the world? Somehow I thought it would be, you know, less specific than that. Alex, what does that mean?

ALEXANDER

The world needs a dominant resurgence of hope and idea. Something to look up to.

CALVIN

But you just said you didn't know what was wrong.

ALEXANDER

I don't. Not exactly. I see the symptoms every day, I just can't see the cause.

CALVIN

But you've somehow divined the solution.

ALEXANDER

Yes.  
I came across the logical next step.

CALVIN

You "came across the logical next step?"

ALEXANDER

Yes.

CALVIN

And what, pray tell, is that?

ALEXANDER

The world needs a superman.  
Someone to look up to. Someone to set a worthy example.

CALVIN

Are you serious?

ALEXANDER

Wait here.

*(ALEXANDER exits.)*

CALVIN  
*(To audience.)*

He was serious. Isn't that funny? But nowhere near as funny as what happened next. I mean, I have known him all my life and nothing, nothing could have prepared me for-

*(ALEXANDER re-enters. He is wearing a superhero costume over his clothes. It is red. There is a mask that covers his nose and eyes, and a cape and cowl. He strikes a super-heroic pose.)*

ALEXANDER

Well?

CALVIN

Oh my.

ALEXANDER

It took me forever to make it. For a genius I don't make a very good seamstress.

CALVIN

This is a joke?  
 This isn't a joke.

ALEXANDER

Not a joke.

CALVIN

Not a joke.

ALEXANDER

Not a joke.

CALVIN

Well what- I mean- You can't just- I think- No, but- You gotta say something here Alex, you can't just-

ALEXANDER

I'm thinking about "The Crimson Knight." How does that sound? Is that chintzy? It's chintzy isn't it?

CALVIN

Alex, what the hell are you doing with that thing on your head?

ALEXANDER

I'm going to do what I can to make a difference, Calvin.

CALVIN

Are you saying that you're going to fight crime, is that what you're saying?

ALEXANDER

If and when it comes to that, yes. My intention is to be a symbol people can look up to. I fully intend to take this endeavor step by step.

CALVIN

They'll lock you up.

ALEXANDER

I may not be understood, but I will be appreciated.

CALVIN

What the hell does that mean? This is impossible! Do you know how foolish you look?

ALEXANDER

How foolish do a tin star and a blue uniform look? Or green and brown fatigues and face paint? People need symbols to feel safe, Calvin. America was founded almost entirely on symbols.

CALVIN

This is faulty logic here...

ALEXANDER

I am not re-enrolling in my doctoral program because I have no desire to be another Doctor Jones. I want to help people. To actually get my hands dirty and help them. Not sit high above them and decide from an ivory tower what help they are fit to receive. I will train my mind and body and go out into the world and stand in between them and the things that hunt them down. I cannot have the power and knowledge to fix things and sit idly by. Not anymore.

CALVIN

You even sound like a comic book... "Ivory Tower," Alex? This is so surreal...

ALEXANDER

I am going to do this.

*(Pause.)*

I already made the costume.

CALVIN

You've got to take that thing off... I can't even look at you like that...

*(ALEXANDER turns to go.)*

CALVIN

No don't. Look, I don't understand this... This is the conclusion you came to? I mean, isn't it awfully-

ALEXANDER

Thank you. I knew you'd understand.

MAUREEN

*(Offstage.)*

Calvin! Are you up here?

ALEXANDER

The Crimson Knight must spirit himself away.

*(He furtively looks around, swirls his cape a bit.)*

It really fits me doesn't it?

*(ALEXANDER exits.)*

MAUREEN

*(Entering.)*

Who were you talking to? Oh, Calvin, are they all dead too?

CALVIN

Fourth time.

MAUREEN

Well it can't be a random element. Not anymore. What are you going to do?

CALVIN

I think I'll buy more fish.

MAUREEN

If I didn't know you so well, I'd say you were being sarcastic. What's wrong?

CALVIN

Nothing. Honestly. The fish are just... Weird, I guess.

MAUREEN

It was dinner, wasn't it? I promise things won't be like that forever. It's fall already and Halloween will be here before you know it. It'll all change soon. I promise it will all change soon.

*(MAUREEN kisses CALVIN and exits.)*

CALVIN

*(To the audience again.)*

And I didn't think anything of it at the time.

You know, I don't care how smart you are or not, sometimes, most of the time, the hardest thing to do in the world is listen.

And so that was life for the Joneses. Is it all making sense? I hope so. I really need to get it all out you know? For the next few days the constant talk of the family was my fish. And their consistent and unexplained deaths. Everyone had an opinion.

*(ELLIS enters. It is not so much a scene as direct address, but he is talking to CALVIN.)*

ELLIS

Calvin, you worry too much.

CALVIN

Dad, I think I'm killing them.

ELLIS

Calvin, the fact is your fish are dead. However, that is the fault of the experiment, not the scientist. You can either take control of the situation and find out why this is happening, or you can stand still and mourn your losses until it happens again. Be careful of letting the work get to you, Calvin. If you get too close you'll never be able to see your way out of it. And in my experience you need to keep one eye on the forest and the other on the trees. Now, I know this is important to you. And I know that to you, these fish are more than just fish. But, Calvin, they *are* just fish. So don't worry too much, alright?

CALVIN

Thanks, Dad.

*(ELLIS exits. MAUREEN enters.)*

MAUREEN

You know what, Calvin? You shouldn't worry too much about the fish. I know you care about them-

CALVIN

Mom, I think I'm killing them.

MAUREEN

You're not killing them Calvin, that's the way fish are. That's why the plural is the same as the singular. When you have fish, you don't have some specific fish, you have fish. That's why you can't take them out and pet them. God knew what he was doing, Calvin. Fish are fish, and when they die, they die, but it's not your fault, honey, okay?

CALVIN

Thanks Mom.

*(MAUREEN exits.)*

CALVIN

But the fish wasn't what I was interested in. No sir. I was having a hard time keeping my mind on anything except-

*(ALEXANDER enters in full costume shouting.)*

ALEXANDER

Beware... The Crimson Beacon!  
I changed it, what do you think?

CALVIN

I think this is the weirdest week of my life. Does Mom seem alright to you?

ALEXANDER

The Crimson what...? Crimson.... Fog maybe? Or the Crimson Sable?

CALVIN

Have you talked to her lately?

ALEXANDER

Crimson Scimitar?

CALVIN

She seems, I don't know, sad sort of.

ALEXANDER

Or! Captain Crimson!

CALVIN

Captain Crimson? Are you even listening to me, Alexander?

ALEXANDER

Yes. Trouble with Mother, ah, I see.

CALVIN

Will you stop talking like that? Please?

ALEXANDER

I'm trying to match wits with a significant mystery worthy of the Crimson Scimitar. Sable. Something. Crimson Something.

CALVIN

A mystery? Yesterday you said you were going out to fight crime.

ALEXANDER

Today is a new day, my young friend.

CALVIN

This is so weird, Alex.

ALEXANDER

The weird and unexpected is the friend of the night bound crimefighter.

CALVIN

Did you just make that up?

ALEXANDER

Oh, I'm an idiot!

CALVIN

Well...

ALEXANDER

No, that's not what I mean. Your fish!

CALVIN

My fish?

ALEXANDER

Your fish! Of course!

CALVIN

*(Not getting it.)*

Of course!

ALEXANDER

It's so obvious!

CALVIN

Is it.

ALEXANDER

I...

CALVIN

Yes?

ALEXANDER  
The Crimson... Tanager.

CALVIN  
Tanager?

ALEXANDER  
It's a heroic-looking bird.

CALVIN  
"Heroic-Looking?"

ALEXANDER  
I, the Crimson Tanager will solve the mystery of the fish!

CALVIN  
Wait- That's probably not such a-

ALEXANDER  
I'll question your professors and pump them for information. See what they know about mysterious fish deaths. And then, I'll go to the pet store, and bust some heads in the name of righteousness.

CALVIN  
Okay, that's definitely a bad idea.

ALEXANDER  
No, it's too late for that! I won't let you down. The Crimson Tanager will not be stopped! Do you have any idea how difficult it is to talk like that?

CALVIN  
I had a feeling.

ALEXANDER  
I mean the costume was tough to build, and the name is still giving me trouble. Do you like "The Crimson Tanager?" But I mean, *talking* like a super-hero... And I figure I'll need to talk real "tough," too. You know? I mean I'm not necessarily the athletic type.

CALVIN  
I had noticed you were more of an intellectual.

ALEXANDER  
I need to terrify my enemies into submission well before it comes to violence. I just don't feel like there's enough time to turn my body into the so-called "well-oiled fighting machine." And believe me my brother, I am racing against time. How did that sound?

CALVIN

You have no intention of questioning my professors or roughing up the clerks at the pet store, do you?

ALEXANDER

No.  
Did you think I was going to? Did you? Did I sound tough?

CALVIN

You... you sounded pretty tough. I believed there was a real possibility you would go after the pet store guys.

ALEXANDER

But not the professors?

CALVIN

It's your current attitude towards higher education. I knew you wouldn't want to step foot in a college unless you really had to.  
You did sound tough though, Alex. You really did.

ALEXANDER

Thanks.

CALVIN

Can I ask you a question, Alex? Has anyone else seen your Crimson Tanager outfit? I mean does anyone else know that...

ALEXANDER

No. You're the only one that knows, Calvin.

CALVIN

I just wanted to let you know... Your secret's safe with me.

*(ALEXANDER takes CALVIN's hand to shake it. It quickly turns into a hug.)*

ALEXANDER

Thank you.  
Calvin? I will find out what happened to your fish, okay?

CALVIN

Thank you, Alex.  
I'd really appreciate that.

(ALEXANDER exits.)

CALVIN

Now we're going to skip ahead, that was October 19th. And we're going to jump to the 23rd. Not that important things didn't happen during those four absent days. As a matter of fact, two really important things *did* happen. One, Alex began investigating the unexplained fish deaths. He set up a makeshift crime lab in my room and began extended analyses of the water, the food, and perhaps sort of morbidly, little fishy bodies. I was, to say the least, unhappy about that particular development. I had not expected my room to become the lair of the Crimson Tanager. The second important thing that happened was, I forgot an assignment I had to write for my Shakespeare class. I know it seems insignificant, I mean, I haven't really talked about my day-to-day life at all. And I suppose, other than the fact that I actually forgot something, the assignment itself was insignificant. But see, Alex was using my computer to conduct his superheroic business. His had taken a mysterious and fatal wound from a baseball bat to the monitor the previous summer. My parents, figuring for sabotage, had not replaced it. So the household as a whole was down to three computers. Father's was off limits. The family of a government physicist is not extended top-secret clearance, even for Shakespeare homework. And my computer was, as I said, in the grip of the Crimson Tanager. So I had to borrow my mother's. It is now Saturday, October 23rd. I am on my sixth set of curiously short-lived fish. The Crimson Tanager toils in my bedroom, and I adjourn to my mother's office. I find this.

(He holds up a printed page.)

I know it was wrong for me to read it. It was, and remains to this day, none of my business. Before I could even finish reading it-

(MAUREEN and ELLIS burst in, already in the middle of a heated argument.)

ELLIS

It is *not* acceptable!

MAUREEN

Oh, then what is acceptable?

ELLIS

There's no talking to you when you get like this...

MAUREEN

When "I get like this?"

ELLIS

Well what am I supposed to do?

MAUREEN

This is out of your hands, Ellis... I should have never listened to you in the first place...

ELLIS

What is that supposed to mean?

MAUREEN

This was not what I wanted!

ELLIS

You're being irrational...

MAUREEN

Good! At least I haven't preconceived each single emotion down to the nanosecond!

ELLIS

Are you saying that's what I do? Are you? *That* is uncalled for.

MAUREEN

I guess I just don't have the interest in minutiae that you have, Ellis.

ELLIS

You've never done anything else!

MAUREEN

That's exactly my point! I'm almost sixty!

ELLIS

You are not almost *sixty*...

MAUREEN

Well I'm close enough.

ELLIS

I'm almost sixty...

MAUREEN

And it scares me, Ellis, it actually scares me.

ELLIS

No, it does not.

MAUREEN

Why do you have to disagree with everything I say?

ELLIS

I do not disagree with everything you say.

MAUREEN

I'm sorry, Ellis, I don't know what in the world I was thinking.

ELLIS

Oh, stop this. You know it's perfectly natural for you to feel this way. Everyone goes through this sort of thing at some point or another. Someone else feels exactly the same way you do right now-

MAUREEN

But I am not someone else! I am Maureen Jones, I am your wife, and *I* am going through this right now! I don't care how natural it is! It's mine! I will not let you undercut my-

ELLIS

Oh, I didn't do this to you!

MAUREEN

This is mine! This is how I feel!

ELLIS

Don't you put this on me.

MAUREEN

Oh, just shut your mouth, Ellis...

ELLIS

What did you say?

MAUREEN

This is still my life and I will do whatever I goddamned well please!

ELLIS

Fine! Yell at me! Solve all your problems by-

MAUREEN

Stop talking, Ellis-

ELLIS

-screaming at them until-

MAUREEN

Stop talking, Ellis-

ELLIS

-the only thing you can hear is the sound of your own voice-

MAUREEN

Stop it-

ELLIS

-drowning out everything around you... You're just like your son.

MAUREEN

Stop talking!!!

*(MAUREEN storms over to CALVIN, who has witnessed the previous scene. She tears the paper out of his hand and reads it directly to the audience. ELLIS exits. CALVIN remains on stage to watch.)*

MAUREEN

To whom it may concern:

I was one of those lucky children who knew exactly what she was going to do when she grew up. As soon as I learned the word "ornithologist" there was nothing else in the world for me. And it has been my world for as far back as I can remember. While every other child was lining up to be an astronaut, to walk on the moon and catalog the stars; I was watching the skies for a less earthbound fantasy. I have spent almost my entire life looking straight up.

There was a hawk on the farm where I grew up. An enormous and majestic member of the *Accipitridae*. My father used to tell stories about how that same hawk had lived there ever since he was a child. And forever before that. About how he was a powerful Egyptian god, trapped on earth to watch over and protect our family until the end of time. And how I would have to keep the secret that lay behind those marbled eyes.

As a child, I watched that hawk stand watch over the dark world. I watched his black shadow tear through the night. A solitary protector of a place unaware. His presence was always a comfort to me. His history a thing to inspire awe.

And my entire life has been devoted to shattering the mystery of the very creatures I so ardently worshipped. I have spent my professional life reducing the regal majesty of the hawk to flesh and bone. A mathematical prediction of behavior and purpose. A blueprint. A sketch. A sentence. I have taken creatures God saw fit to give the gift of flight, a gift he could have never given me, and made them trivialities. Facts. Things. Simply because we have the tools and terminology to define something as majestic as a hawk does not mean that we *should*.

I cannot watch a bird any longer. I am not allowed to see the majesty. And I miss it. I miss it with all of my heart.

Due to the above, I am immediately terminating my position with the American Ornithological Society. Thank you for your time.

Maureen Jones, Ph.D.

October, 1984.

CALVIN

And so she did.

*(MAUREEN exits, resignation letter in hand.)*

CALVIN

And that, I suppose, is where our story really begins.

Have you ever really thought about what kind of improbable confluence of circumstance it takes to make things happen? I mean, the random chance that anything ever happens at all? Or how easily things might not have happened the way they did? One amoeba goes left instead of right, tectonic shift goes astray, nothing crawls out of the primordial ooze... Everything changes. What's that nursery rhyme? "For the want of a nail?" The blacksmith can't find a nail to put a shoe on a horse and one thing leads to another and soon a kingdom is lost over the want of a nail. That's all it takes. One nail, and everything changes. I've spent a lot of late nights thinking about this, believe me. Mother quitting her job was one hell of a nail in the otherwise rosy story of the Joneses. And I believe in my mother, I do. Furthermore, I firmly believe she made the right decision. She absolutely believed she needed to terminate her position at the Society. But I can't help but wonder what would have happened if she had not. Things might have been... Different. But the fact is, she did quit. And for better or worse, the story went on.

*(CALVIN withdraws a small notebook.)*

When my father died, I inherited this...

*(Reading from the notebook.)* "October 24. We are now closer to the edge than ever before. In Chicago, I nearly missed my train. Even though I continue to work on these military projects, they insist that I use public transportation. Sometimes there are hour-long delays, sometimes longer. Coming out of Washington you can lose as much as a day. I was on the phone with my wife. She says our son is doing well. He's only five, and already I know I don't know him. I wanted to talk longer, I wanted to hear his voice, but the train was leaving. Today we decided to move forward. Today I informed a panel of austere looking military personnel that the only way to face the future was with the unleashed atom. As I finished, I wished I had stayed on that phone. I wished I had missed that train and was still in Chicago. I wished it were different. I find myself wondering where in this brave new world will my family fit?"

Signed, Dr. Richard Jones. October 24, 1945. My grandfather. As it turns out, some things never change. Thirty-nine years later his grandson would still be asking the same questions. I sought out my mother...

MAUREEN

You should be in bed.

CALVIN

Nah, I still have homework to do. Where's Dad, is he in here?

MAUREEN

I don't know. He's not in here. I don't know where he is.

CALVIN

Are you alright?

MAUREEN

Your mother's fine. Why? What's wrong?

CALVIN

Nothing, you just-

MAUREEN

It's never nothing with you, Calvin. The minute you get upset, you have to make sure everyone else is okay.

CALVIN

I don't do that...

MAUREEN

You *do* do that. You've done that since you were a little boy. I suspect you will always do that.

CALVIN

I don't...

MAUREEN

Did you hear us fighting?

CALVIN

Yeah.

MAUREEN

Well. I'm sorry, Calvin, I didn't mean for it to-

CALVIN

It's okay, Mom.

MAUREEN

I'm just sorry.

CALVIN

Are you really going to quit your job?

MAUREEN

Do you ever think about what it would be like to be President?

CALVIN

Sometimes...

MAUREEN

I mean here we are, in the heart of the nation's capital. The infernal machine all around us. Not one of us is a politician. Isn't that odd.

CALVIN

Well Dad-

MAUREEN

I bet I would have been a great President. Hail to the chief, President Maureen Allen. The things we think we can't do...

CALVIN

I don't think Dad would make a very good First Lady.

MAUREEN

You'll notice I didn't say President Maureen *Jones*.

CALVIN

I did notice that.

MAUREEN

Do you think I would have made a good President?

CALVIN

Yeah. I do.

MAUREEN

Thank you, Calvin.

CALVIN

What are you going to do? Are you really- I mean, you can't just stop working with birds, can you?

MAUREEN

Calvin, the one gift we share, is the ability to do what ever we put our minds to. Don't ever tell yourself no. I've wasted so much time...

CALVIN

You haven't wasted-

MAUREEN

I have. And when you get older you'll understand why. And I don't regret what I've done. I have two wonderful sons and a family I'm very proud of. I'm extremely well respected in my field,

MAUREEN (con't)

and I've only noticeably embarrassed myself in it on two noteworthy occasions. And one of those, believe me, I could have done without...

You know, I really thought I was doing what I wanted? I thought I was right where I wanted to be. Calvin, I was as far away from right where I wanted to be as I could get. And I'm not going to do that anymore. I am going to start living for me, Dr. Maureen Allen, and I am going to start right now.

I don't want this for you, Calvin. Not you. You don't have to be so smart... You don't have to do what you think you *ought* to... Just because you can grow up and be a doctor doesn't mean it's right for you. I want you to promise me you will do something you enjoy, something for you...

CALVIN

Mom, I'm happy...

MAUREEN

Your brother lived for Ellis for so long.... All he wanted in the world was approval from that man.

CALVIN

Mom, we shouldn't-

MAUREEN

And now look where they are. And they can never go back.

CALVIN

Mom, have you been drinking?

MAUREEN

Yes.

He grew up so fast... And your father, well... They can't even stand to be in the same room together. They're so much alike it makes me sick.

CALVIN

Mom.

MAUREEN

Well it does.

CALVIN

I always thought Alex was more like you. You guys have this bond I mean...

MAUREEN

They're both so goddamned *stubborn*...

CALVIN

I mean, you two are so close. I always wished that I could-

MAUREEN

Make decisions for yourself, Calvin. Not for anybody else. And never, ever forget why you loved it in the first place...

CALVIN

As it turned out, my mother really wasn't in the mood to listen. I was still upset, so, as my mom pointed out, I needed to make sure everyone else was okay. I found my father in the basement...

ELLIS

*(Digging through boxes.)*

Well I- I don't believe it...

*(He withdraws a comic book from the box. It is tattered and old and barely holding together.)*

CALVIN

What is it?

ELLIS

Oh, Calvin. I didn't know you were down here. Did you finish your Shakespeare thesis?

CALVIN

What is that?

ELLIS

*(Flipping through the comic book.)*

What was it again...? Something about Lear's daughters, isn't it?

CALVIN

Dad?

ELLIS

Oh. Oh, this? It's just a... I mean, I was just looking through all these old things down here. You never really realize how much you've got shoved away in boxes until you open them all up. It's just...

CALVIN

It's a comic book?

ELLIS

It's, yes, it's the Green Lantern. He was my favorite as a boy. I mean, obviously, I... I thought my mother had thrown all of these away years ago. The woman never had a good sense of what to keep and what to throw away. This is probably the only one left. It has a great story.

ELLIS (con't)

The Green Lantern is a sort of an interstellar patrol officer. He has this super-powered ring, green of course, that allows him to create anything and do anything that his mind can think up. That's why Green Lantern was always my favorite. He was only limited by his imagination. He couldn't just automatically dodge bullets or fly, he had to actually choose to do those things. In this story, these criminals steal a plane made from gold, and the Green Lantern tries to stop them, but every time he uses his ring on the plane, nothing happens. It turns out the one thing his power ring is ineffectual against is the color yellow. So, The Green Lantern has to outsmart his opponents and he learns that having a power ring isn't what makes him a superhero. It's sort of a... Morality tale. I'm sorry. Did you need something, Calvin?

CALVIN

No. No, I'm fine. I just wondered how you were doing is all.

ELLIS

And what is it that you're upset about? You heard your mother and I fight I take it?

CALVIN

Yes, sir.

ELLIS

Are you worried we're going to get divorced?

CALVIN

No. No.

ELLIS

Sure of that, are you? Are you worried about your mother quitting her job?

CALVIN

Well.

ELLIS

We're financially very stable, Calvin. I don't know if you have heard or not, but I have done very well in my field.

CALVIN

Yeah, I know that but-

ELLIS

But?

CALVIN

However.

I'm worried about mom. What will she do?

ELLIS

Well. "It's her life dammit." Surely she will think of something.

CALVIN

Dad.

ELLIS

I'm sorry.

I have no idea what Maureen intends to do. And I suspect I no longer hold any influence in regards to direction specifically, perhaps you ought to ask her.

CALVIN

I did.

ELLIS

What did she say?

*(Pause.)*

I'm sorry. She'll tell me when she's ready.

I'm glad you came down here. I wanted to show you something. I'm sure I would've gotten around to it sooner or later...

Look at this...The best Christmas present ever.

*(ELLIS reaches deep into the box closest to him. He withdraws a tattered case. It is not as much well-worn as it is just plain old.)*

CALVIN

What is it?

ELLIS

It's your birthright, Calvin Jones.

CALVIN

*(Opening the case.)*

It's a clarinet.

ELLIS

It's a clarinet.

CALVIN

Why is it a clarinet?

ELLIS

By the time I was one, I was talking, so, your grandparents figured that by the time I was five I ought to be a musical wunderkind.

CALVIN

Mozart.

ELLIS

Exactly.

December 25, 1945, a very confused and very small boy found this lovely clarinet waiting under the Christmas tree for him.

CALVIN

But you don't play the clarinet.

ELLIS

But I don't play the clarinet.

CALVIN

You couldn't do it.

ELLIS

I could barely make a sound. That's not hyperbole, Calvin. No music has ever ushered forth from the bell of this clarinet. I took lessons until I was *fourteen*.  
Nothing.

CALVIN

You're kidding me.

ELLIS

I have as much talent with this clarinet as I have at levitating.

CALVIN

After nine years of lessons?

ELLIS

Nine years.

CALVIN

That's funny.

ELLIS

I thought that might cheer you up. As much as he wanted to be, your dad just wasn't the Green Lantern. So. Enjoy your new clarinet.

CALVIN

What do you want me to do with it?

ELLIS

Well, I surely won't be using it, and your mother has never played a musical instrument in her entire life.

Your grandfather would have wanted you to have it.

If science and biology don't work out for you, you can always try and be the brilliant musician that I never was.

CALVIN

Thank you.

*(ELLIS exits.)*

CALVIN

It's probably redundant for me to say, but I did not expect a clarinet.

I slept in Alex's room that night. He was nowhere to be found and there was a superhero crime lab occupying every corner of my bedroom, so I figured he wouldn't mind.

The next morning, all the fish were dead.

*(ALEXANDER enters, he is not in costume and he carries a box.)*

CALVIN

They're all dead.

ALEXANDER

I know. They died in the night. I'm sorry.

CALVIN

I don't know how much more of this I can take...

ALEXANDER

You know, I've been missing something this whole time... I'm no superhero. It's so obvious, it's no wonder I missed it.

CALVIN

Do you know what's killing them?

ALEXANDER

I had it backwards. All backwards.

CALVIN

Alex?

ALEXANDER

Who am I fighting? What am I fighting against?

CALVIN

Please listen to me, Alex... Do you know what's killing them? I haven't had any time to work on this, and I thought, god I don't know what I was thinking, I thought that you really would figure out what was happening, and if I show up to class tomorrow without any data or explanations, they're just going to fail me, I don't want to fail Alex, I've never failed anything before in my life, and while you were gone wherever you were...Yesterday was a very weird day, Mom and Dad they-

ALEXANDER

Dad.

CALVIN

Dad? Right Mom and Dad-

ALEXANDER

Dad.

CALVIN

They had this fight- Alex, Mom's quitting her job, I talked to her yesterday and it sounded like she's going to-

ALEXANDER

No, Calvin. It's Dad.

CALVIN

Well I guess, although she seemed pretty unhappy in general- What's Dad?

ALEXANDER

Dad has been killing your fish.

CALVIN

What?

ALEXANDER

Dad has been killing your fish.

Do you know what Dad does for the Department of Defense? Dad works in a very restricted area, as it turns out...

CALVIN

What are you talking-You broke into his office?

ALEXANDER

I broke into his office. I broke into his team's offices. I broke into their computers. I broke into everything. The Crimson Tanager struck with speed and impunity.

CALVIN

You broke into Dad's office?

ALEXANDER

Yes.

CALVIN

Dad's office is the government of the United States of America, Alex.

ALEXANDER

It was easier than you'd expect.

CALVIN

You're going to prison...

ALEXANDER

They'll never catch me. Do you know what an electromagnetic pulse is?

CALVIN

What? What does that have to do with-?

ALEXANDER

Hear me out. When a nuclear weapon detonates, it creates nuclear and electromagnetic radiation.

CALVIN

No, no, we are not doing this. I can't handle the Crimson Tanager right now...

ALEXANDER

Now, the nuclear radiation, that's what kills every living thing within hundreds or thousands of miles depending on the blast radius.

CALVIN

Are you making this up as you go? What does this have to do with Dad?

ALEXANDER

I need you to pay attention. Electromagnetic radiation is radiation caused by scattered Compton-recoil electrons and photoelectrons in the blast. That radiation creates magnetic and electrical fields with wildly modulating frequencies...

CALVIN

This is ridiculous.

ALEXANDER

Shut up! When those fields come in contact with electrical systems, the systems are completely overloaded. Do you understand?

CALVIN

Alex, I'm not listening to you.

ALEXANDER

An EMP disables any electrical system in the blast radius. *Any* machine that gets hit by the EMP will instantly shut down.

CALVIN

How?

ALEXANDER

It's like lightning hitting a car battery. There's too much juice. The battery overcharges and it shuts down completely! Do you see how this could be an attractive weapon?

CALVIN

No.

ALEXANDER

This is a weapon you use against weapons. It's a weapon to fight anything powered by any sort of electricity-

CALVIN

Alex-

ALEXANDER

Pay attention! The purpose of war is not just to wipe out the enemy! Please tell me you've learned something from your very expensive education. The purpose of all war is to take whatever it is they've got in their column and write it down in your column. In a nuclear war nothing is left but irradiated soil. The only benefit of a nuclear blast is the total destruction of the enemy. But if the EMP happened on its own, without the nuclear explosion, no people die. The soil isn't affected by radiation because there isn't any radiation. It's clean warfare! Buildings are all left intact and the affected area can't put up any militarized resistance because the power is out for good. If you strike first with an EMP the other side *can't* strike back!

CALVIN

But how can they create an electromagnetic pulse without a nuclear blast?

ALEXANDER

Well they can create limited electromagnetic fields-

CALVIN

But nothing that could affect a whole country, nothing like it would take to use as a weapon...

ALEXANDER

Now you're listening!

They haven't been able to. They can't create that type of real electromagnetic pulse without setting off a nuclear bomb.

Enter the brilliant Dr. Ellis Jones.

Why use a real electromagnetic pulse? What if you designed a signal, like a radio wave, that simply mimicked the basic properties of an electromagnetic pulse? Armageddon by facsimile.

CALVIN

How do you-

ALEXANDER

I memorized it from his notes.

CALVIN

But he hasn't built it...

ALEXANDER

No. And I don't know if he'll be able to... Some of the math was so complex I couldn't even figure it out, and a lot of it was in code... Basically, it's just an idea.

But the idea is one that our father, the man sleeping down the hall from us came up with. And that, brother, is how Dad spends his days.

CALVIN

What does that have to do with my fish?

*(ALEXANDER withdraws a stopped watch.)*

CALVIN

Oh, of course. The watch factor.

ALEXANDER

It's stopped.

CALVIN

Alex... Look, you've got to get out of here, this is all very fascinating and I'm sure it makes some kind of strange, elastic sense in your head, and honestly, I thank you for making me once again absolutely terrified of nuclear war, but I have to put together some kind of an explanation for the fact that my experiment is a total failure...

ALEXANDER

Have you noticed Dad in the basement lately?

CALVIN

I was down there with him today...

ALEXANDER

Do you know what he's doing down there?

CALVIN

From what I can tell he's reading comic books and avoiding Mom.

*(ALEXANDER opens the box and dumps it. It is full of stopped watches.)*

ALEXANDER

I found it in the basement. They're all stopped. To work on the problem of how electromagnetic pulses work, what would you need?

CALVIN

I don't know, Alex.

ALEXANDER

What would you need? What would you need to make a weapon that copied exactly the effects of an electromagnetic pulse?

CALVIN

Alex, I'm not going to-

ALEXANDER

You'd need something that created an electromagnetic pulse. Or something close to one. Wouldn't you? You would have to be able to study how electromagnetic fields behaved. You would have to study the pulse exhaustively to make a copy of it. You would need, say, a working model in your home to test. You know, to tinker with on the weekends.

CALVIN

Why would he bring it into our house? Why wouldn't he just leave his work at his lab?

ALEXANDER

Why is there a box of stopped watches in our basement? Something must have stopped them.

CALVIN

What you're suggesting is ridiculous.

ALEXANDER

Is it?

CALVIN

He would never do that. He wouldn't risk exposing any of us to any sort of radiation.

ALEXANDER

He would do that.

There wouldn't be enough radiation to hurt *us*. You'd have to be very small to be effected by the radiation. Furthermore, you'd have to be very close to a conductor for the radiation to travel through. Any sort of conductor. You'd have to be, oh, I don't know, *living in water* to be affected by the radiation. You'd have to be say, for example, a tiny, tiny fish, living in an aquarium full of water to get hurt.

CALVIN

Dad-

ALEXANDER

Dad killed your fish. The watches, the dead fish, it all makes sense... I'm sorry. I had it backwards, Calvin. I can't just choose to be a superhero. You can't do that, you can't just decide things like that. Fate drags you along whether you like it or not. A true hero is marked by purpose. Do you see that? Everything has purpose. You can't just do good things. You can't just fight for Truth, Justice and the American Way. That's fantasy, that doesn't make any sense. A hero is a man responding to a crisis. A true hero is a man who realizes he is the only one, the only man on earth that can solve that particular problem. I solved the mystery of the dead fish, Calvin! That's an act of heroism. And now that I know what dad is doing... Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. No one else knows what our father is doing, Calvin. I am the only one. Every good hero needs a villain, right?

*(ALEXANDER ceremoniously dons his mask, cape and cowl as CALVIN looks on.)*

The Crimson Tanager will not rest.

CALVIN

What am I supposed to do?

Alex? What am I supposed to do about this?

Don't just stand there... You can't just come in here and tell me- You're the smart one! What am I supposed to do?

ALEXANDER

I don't know.

*(ALEXANDER exits without the usual flourish. CALVIN is left alone. He takes his clarinet in both hands, and smashes his fish tank into a thousand pieces.)*

CALVIN

And... I guess... That's what happens when my box overflows. Maybe it seems immature or irrational... But it was the only thing I could do.

*(He surveys the damage. He finally sits down with his clarinet, puts it to his lips and begins to play. It immediately makes a most wretched series of noises and squawks. He tries again. It sounds even worse.)*

CALVIN

Of course not.

*(He places the clarinet on the stage and rises. He begins to walk off. Before he is gone, MAUREEN enters. She picks up the clarinet. She puts it to her lips, and the most beautiful and eloquent music pours out of the clarinet. She looks at it, amazed by this event, and smiles.)*

*End of Act One*

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**ACT TWO**

*(Same as in Act One. The grand piano is on stage again, and MAUREEN sits at it motionless. CALVIN begins by speaking directly to the audience.)*

CALVIN

This is my mother. Dr. Maureen Allen-Jones. She is forty-two years old. All her life, Maureen Allen wanted to be a bird watcher. In May of 1961, she graduated with a degree in Field Biology from Michigan State University near the farm where she grew up. She did not graduate in the top of her class, but as one of her professors would later write: "Dr. Allen exhibited that most rare and precious trait so few of us share: A true love for her subject." She would go on to do graduate work all over the United States and Italy, and eventually find herself the proud recipient of two doctorates in the field of Ornithology. She would marry a man she met in Italy, and they would move to the United States. They would have two children and she would become the Assistant Director of the American Ornithological Society. She had achieved all she set out to do. And yesterday she discovered she was a musical genius.

*(MAUREEN plays the movement from the beginning again. She stops.)*

CALVIN

Nothing can ever prepare you for life.

*(MAUREEN exits.)*

CALVIN

Today is October 30, 1984. Tomorrow, my father will die.

*(ELLIS enters. He is carrying a tray with food on it.)*

ELLIS

Come, chicks, come. The worm, I believe, is prepared.

CALVIN

Where's Mom?

ELLIS

I have cooked dinner for us tonight, Calvin. Nothing to fear.

CALVIN

But where is she?

ELLIS

I am not your mother's keeper.  
Where is your brother?  
Touché. Shall we eat?

CALVIN

What are we having?

ELLIS

Surely it's all very nutritional...

CALVIN

You made all of this?

ELLIS

Yes. Are you so surprised? There was a time when your father had to fend for himself in this great big world.

CALVIN

Dad, it all looks very wonderful. Thank you.

ELLIS

Well... You're welcome. Eat your food.

*(Pause.)*

CALVIN

*(To the audience.)*

At this point, I feel the need to describe how unusual this dinner truly is. Generally, we, as a family, eat dinner together. It's a time for conversations and sharing of the day's events. But it doesn't always happen. I'd like it to, but the world intervenes. Every so often someone can't make it, or someone works late. It is not always all four of us. However, even taking all that into account, I have never had dinner alone with this man in my life. Furthermore, he has never, to my knowledge, set foot in a kitchen with the intention of food preparation. From my point of view, this is a red-letter day in the life of the Joneses. Sitting here, I am absolutely astounded by the gravity of this situation. Dr. Ellis Jones and his youngest son are eating a meal together for the first time in the history of the world. And are doing so in almost total silence. At which point I take it upon myself to open the lines of communication with my father. I am given the opportunity to ask only three questions.

*(To ELLIS)*

Have you talked to Mom?

ELLIS

Apparently not enough.

CALVIN

*(To the Audience.)*

It was not the answer I was looking for necessarily. It was, however a fair response. In truth, he had apparently not talked to Mom enough. Recent events have proved that beyond question. I decided to let it pass and move on to my second question.

*(To ELLIS)*

Have you talked to Alex?

ELLIS

What could I possibly have to say to Alex?

CALVIN

*(To Audience.)*

This answer was more rhetorical than I would have liked, but also fair. I don't even know what to say to Alex. So, without much hesitation I move on to my final question. Now you have to realize... At this point, I don't know my father is going to die. I don't know this is one of our final conversations. And I certainly do not know the part his work will play in his death. So Calvin Jones, me, the wide-eyed innocent says:

*(To ELLIS.)*

How's work?

*(ELLIS, without finishing his meal, stands up and exits.)*

CALVIN

And that's that for dinner.

That wasn't the last time I would talk to my father. I get the chance to talk to him one more time. Believe me, I am very grateful for that. I never had a very close relationship with my father. I really only began to understand him in the last year of his life. But I treasure every moment I did have with him...

I just wish I had more.

I sit in the silence of the House of the Joneses. I finish my meal. And not knowing what tomorrow brings, I still worry that something terrible has gone wrong with my family.

I adjourn to my room. There's something comfortable about a world that's entirely yours... And at this moment, I needed that very badly. However. The Crimson Tanager had usurped all comfort from my room in order to display his impressive crime-lab. There was no room left for me. So, my room no longer had that "homey" feeling I was used to. Honestly, at this point, I didn't care. I just didn't expect Alex to be in there, too.

*(CALVIN is suddenly terrified at the sight of ALEXANDER hiding in the room.*

*ALEXANDER is not in costume.)*

CALVIN

Oh! Jeez! Alex! What are you doing here?  
Where have you been all day?  
Alex. What are you looking at?

ALEXANDER

How was dinner?

CALVIN

Dinner was fine.

ALEXANDER

Did you have a good talk?

CALVIN

Alex.

ALEXANDER

Did you? That's a fair question. Isn't it?

CALVIN

It was fine. Where have you been?

ALEXANDER

How is he?

CALVIN

Why are you doing this to yourself?

ALEXANDER

How is my father?

CALVIN

This is so weird, Alex... Dad is not your "arch-enemy..." Why don't you just talk to him?

ALEXANDER

The Crimson Tanager? Talk to Dr. Ellis Jones? Hah.

CALVIN

You're doing the voice again.

ALEXANDER

*(He hands the blueprints to CALVIN.)*

Have you ever seen these before?

CALVIN

No. What are these? Are these blueprints?

ALEXANDER

To the idea.

CALVIN

How did you get these?

ALEXANDER

I needed proof, didn't I? You didn't want to believe what that man was capable of... Well, now you can see for yourself. I went to his office again today.

CALVIN

Are you ill? Should you be seeing some sort of a doctor for all of this? These are the offices of the Department of Defense that you are so casually breaking into! If they find you... I don't even know what they'll do to you, but it can't be anything good... Why are you so obsessed with this?

ALEXANDER

These are blueprints to a practical electromagnetic pulse weapon.

CALVIN

What? But you said-

ALEXANDER

It works.

CALVIN

But it can't- I mean that's science fiction...

ALEXANDER

Thanks to our father that's not the case anymore. Dr. Ellis Jones has taken the lead in the arms race. And you want to hear the best part?

CALVIN

What?

ALEXANDER

They're not building it.

CALVIN

Who's not?

ALEXANDER

The design team our father is the head of is not building it.

CALVIN

Why not?

ALEXANDER

I don't have that information. I was hoping to ask you about his mood. Might give me some clue as to what's going on at work. But you're not being very cooperative.

CALVIN

What are you talking about? You hide in my room, speaking in super-fragments and scaring the crap out of me... Why don't you ask him? You ask him how work is going... I think you should talk to your own father, Alex. That is what it boils down to. How is that not being cooperative?

ALEXANDER

He is my arch-enemy! I can't just walk up to my arch-enemy and shoot the bull about the weather and electromagnetic fields and why the design team he is the head of at the Department of Defense has a perfect blueprint for a clean weapon of mass destruction that they seem to be avoiding building! However, you did sit down and shoot the bull with the man and I would like to know what he had to say.

CALVIN

He was in a uniquely reticent mood. Even for him.

ALEXANDER

Is he upset about something?

CALVIN

I'm pretty sure he's upset about Mom...

ALEXANDER

Did you talk about work?

CALVIN

Not exactly.

ALEXANDER

Meaning?

CALVIN

I asked him, but... He never answered, he just stood up and walked away.

ALEXANDER

That's not very helpful.

CALVIN

Well, I'm sorry.

ALEXANDER

I see now I have a lot of work to do. Give me my evidence.

CALVIN

Your “evidence?” Evidence of what? That you’re smart enough to break into the pentagon? Isn’t that all this is?

ALEXANDER

Let’s not lose sight of what we’re talking about here, Calvin. That is evidence that our father, the man who raised us, is solely responsible for a new era in global warfare. Just like his father was.

CALVIN

Don’t be so dramatic.

ALEXANDER

You are being naive! No one else is building these! Our father’s singular genius is the only place this idea was cooked up, and he’s surely not sharing it with anyone else. This shouldn’t even be possible, Calvin! Thanks to our father, we have taken the lead in the arms race! What do you think will happen if the rest of the world finds out? Calvin, they haven’t built it yet! That means there’s still time and-

CALVIN

And what? You’re going to stop him?

ALEXANDER

I will make things right.

CALVIN

How? How, Alex? Do you know how?

ALEXANDER

We have to do something about it, we’re the only ones who know....

CALVIN

This is ridiculous.

ALEXANDER

You need to relax. This is what life is like for a superhero.

CALVIN

Oh, you are not a superhero.

ALEXANDER

What did you say?

You are not a superhero.

CALVIN

Take it back.

ALEXANDER

No.

CALVIN

Take it back and give me back my evidence.

ALEXANDER

No.

CALVIN

Take it back and give me my-

ALEXANDER

No.

CALVIN

Give it-

ALEXANDER

No.

CALVIN

We are all adults here. Give-

ALEXANDER

No.

CALVIN

Give it back right now!

ALEXANDER

*(ALEXANDER rushes CALVIN. They  
wrestle around a bit.)*

You are not a superhero!

CALVIN

Take it back!

ALEXANDER

Alex Jones is not a superhero!

CALVIN

Take it back!

ALEXANDER

*(They go down in a heap. They wrestle around, grunting at each other. It eventually turns into hysterical laughter at the situation. They separate, still laughing.)*

Aw... You wrinkled my evidence...

ALEXANDER

*(More laughter.)*

I'm sorry...

CALVIN

Yeah...

ALEXANDER

What are you going to do?

CALVIN

About what?

ALEXANDER

About Dad.

CALVIN

I don't know.

ALEXANDER

And then it happened.

CALVIN  
*(To the audience.)*

*(MAUREEN enters, and begins playing the clarinet.)*

What is that?

ALEXANDER  
*(Hearing the music.)*

CALVIN

I forgot to tell you...

ALEXANDER

What is that?

CALVIN

So much happened. Last night...

*(ALEXANDER walks over to his mother. Listening. ELLIS enters. He is far removed from everyone else. MAUREEN finishes her piece, she notices ALEXANDER and they embrace. ELLIS exits. MAUREEN and ALEXANDER remain onstage together.)*

CALVIN

Nothing can ever prepare you for life.

October 30, 1984. Overnight.

It's cloudy outside. Like they say something in the air... The whole world, so far as I can tell, prepares for All Hallows Eve.

Tomorrow, my mother will give her last speech to the American Ornithological Society. It's a good speech. Not a great one. There will be strained applause. Some questions will follow. She will attend a short reception dedicating a library in honor of the Society. She will drive to her office for the last time. She will resign at 2:10pm Eastern Standard Time and will not set foot in the hallowed halls of that society for the rest of her life.

Tomorrow, my brother will prepare for his inevitable confrontation with our father. The puzzle of my father's creation not being built is too much for Alex. He can't stand to leave any question unanswered. He will return to my father's offices to search for more evidence. He gets frustrated. And then sloppy. Security will spot him, and chase him. He will somehow elude capture. To this day I do not know how he did it.

Tomorrow, I will wake up one hour late for school. I will attend my classes. I will explain to an unforgiving professor about the fish. He asks me *how* it happened. I will cry and leave. I will travel to the pet store before I go home and buy the very last batch of fish.

Tomorrow... My father...

We'll be there soon enough. It's still October 30, and Halloween is hours away.

Alex and Mom talk into the night...

They talk about-

ALEXANDER

The music.

CALVIN

And how-

MAUREEN

I didn't know that I had this in me, Alex, all these years...

ALEXANDER

I'm proud of you, I really am. But I don't understand...

CALVIN

And she doesn't either.

MAUREEN

But it doesn't matter...

CALVIN

They are as close as I've ever seen them.

And it hurts a little. It does. I don't get to have that. Ever. I'll never know what it is they share. I'll never know what goes on between them. I know my mother loves me. I'm not saying that. But now with the music... The two of them are more alike than ever. And that means I'm further apart. Well that's how I feel. I mean, I know that's not the case... But I look at the two of them...

*(MAUREEN and ALEXANDER embrace.)*

CALVIN

And it hurts.

It hurts. And I don't know what to do with it all. I get upset, angry. I can't stop thinking about how far my family has slipped away from me in one week. Suddenly my mother is a musician and my brother is a crime fighter and my father may or may not be trying to destroy the planet. I can't believe what's happening to them. I feel like I am the only one not infected by all this *change*... And basically what happens is, I blame him. I didn't mean to. It's what psychologists and those types refer to as "acting out." I felt like my life was out of control, and I desperately needed to exert control over something. I needed something to lash out at... They say it's normal. They say it happens all the time. Everyone does it. Happens every day. Well, that doesn't make it any easier for Calvin Jones. Because I never in my whole life get to talk to him again. I find my father in the basement.

ELLIS

Leave your father alone, Calvin. He's alright. The kids are alright...

CALVIN

What are you doing down here?

ELLIS

Building a bomb shelter.

CALVIN

What are you really doing?

ELLIS

My father built a bomb shelter; did I ever tell you that? The old man built the atom bomb itself and still had the gall to put a flimsy hole in our backyard to protect us from it. Doesn't that seem awfully ironic.

CALVIN

Can I ask you a question?

ELLIS

He was a good man, though. His shoulders were so big...

CALVIN

Dad-

ELLIS

I told you, Calvin. I'm alright. Your mother and I have some things to work out. She has some things to work out in her own life, I expect... It needs to happen. It's been coming a long time. It has nothing to do with you boys, you know. That was her upstairs playing your birthright, wasn't it? Well. Your grandmother used to say "Nothing can ever prepare you for life..." It was the very last thing she said before she walked out on your grandfather and I, in fact. "Nothing can ever prepare you for life" and then the door swung closed. I always thought that was such a stupid thing to say...

CALVIN

Dad, what do you do at the Department of Defense?

ELLIS

Calvin, you know I can't...

I'm involved with- I work in experimental weapons research. I do the same job my father did. Ensuring freedom by threatening the world.

CALVIN

Your family is part of the world.

ELLIS

What?

CALVIN

Whatever happens to the world happens to your family. Do you ever think about that while your busy ensuring freedom?

ELLIS

Calvin, you have no right-

*(CALVIN holds up the blueprints.)*

Oh, Calvin.

ELLIS

What is this?

CALVIN

I don't know.

ELLIS

Don't say that.

CALVIN

No, don't misunderstand me. I know how it works. I know how to build it. But I don't know what it is. I don't know what it means.

ELLIS

Does it work? Alex says he thinks it works. He says the blueprint makes sense.

CALVIN

Alexander has seen that?

ELLIS

Does it work?

CALVIN

Yes.  
It works.

ELLIS

How could you do something like this?

CALVIN

Don't ask how.

ELLIS

Don't ask "how?"

CALVIN

In the next century the how will never again be as important as the why, Calvin.

ELLIS

Why then? Why did you do this?

CALVIN

ELLIS

It was all “How” at one point, wasn’t it? How does this work, how does that work, is this possible, how do we do it. Now we can do anything, Calvin. Anything we want. We are restrained only by our own genius and that is a dangerous place to be.

CALVIN

Don’t make a speech to me, not right now-

ELLIS

Do you understand what I’m saying? Why is the only question that matters. Why would you do it. Why would I build a weapon so terrible? Ask me Calvin, ask the question.

CALVIN

Why would you build a weapon so terrible?

ELLIS

Because I thought of it.

Because in one fleeting moment I was inspired by genius. And every infinitesimal object Dr. Ellis Jones thinks up must be pursued.

Do you know why we have an arms race, Calvin? It’s to keep up. Do you see that? We have to keep up. We have to be neck and neck with the neighbor... In a moment’s notice we have to be able to give them exactly what they give us no matter what the cost. No matter what that means your father has to build... No matter what that meant *my* father had to build. No matter what it means to the world. And do you know what the benefit is? Constant acceleration. We are in a constant race with an invisible opponent. And that means we must pursue every contingency, we must follow up every flash of genius. Because there is a chance someone else... Someone on the other side has thought of it first. And the balance must be maintained. But that constant acceleration only leads to one end, Calvin. There is only one possible conclusion, one inevitable finale. So when I thought of this... I thought this would be the solution. I thought I had solved the insoluble. I thought I had discovered an end to the race.

But no one else received the inspiration I did, did they?

All I did was upset the balance.

They haven’t built it yet, Calvin.

CALVIN

And what makes you think they won’t?

*(He drops the blueprints on the ground. ELLIS picks them up and looks at them. He exits. CALVIN addresses the audience.)*

CALVIN

I went to bed. I overslept one hour. Today is October 31, 1984.

When we talk about today, and there are times when we talk about it exhaustively, my mother always mentions that she intended to bake cookies. That is true, she did intend to bake cookies on Halloween, and life interceded, and she never got around to it. But it is odd though, isn’t it?

CALVIN (con't)

The things we can't let go of? The tiny insignificant minutiae that we can never forget? Of all the things that happened on that day, a batch of unbaked cookies weighs in just as heavily.

I attended my classes. I explained to an unforgiving professor about the fish. He asked me *how* it happened. I cried, and left. I traveled to the pet store and bought the very last batch of fish. And I solved the mystery.

It's 2:45 in the afternoon. Alex has already broken into the Pentagon. My father is away on the secret errand, and my mother has already resigned, which is why I'm so surprised when I find her at home.

*(MAUREEN enters. She is carrying the clarinet. She sits down, and begins to play the movement.)*

CALVIN

Mom? Oh, you'll never believe-

MAUREEN

What is this from?

*(She plays it again. It is the same melody we have heard all along.)*

Have you heard this before? I know I've heard this before...

CALVIN

Mom, my fish-

MAUREEN

Did you buy new fish?

CALVIN

Yes, but- What are you doing home?

MAUREEN

Oh, I'm fine.

CALVIN

Is something wrong?

MAUREEN

What do you mean?

CALVIN

Why are you home?

MAUREEN

I terminated my employment with the American Ornithological Society.

You- CALVIN

MAUREEN  
Today, as they say, is the first day of the rest of my life.

CALVIN  
How could you do that?

MAUREEN  
Excuse me?

CALVIN  
What is happening to my family?

MAUREEN  
Calvin. This is what I want to do. I've discovered something about myself that I didn't know was there...

CALVIN  
What is happening around here?

MAUREEN  
Oh, calm down.  
Do you know what I did today? Do you? I dedicated a library. Do you know what that entails? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Except words, of course words... Words that mean absolutely nothing. Just absent ideas floating around in the air. Your mother is tired of dedicating libraries and saying absolutely nothing.

CALVIN  
But that was your job.

MAUREEN  
Not anymore. I came home, and I played the clarinet all afternoon. I have never felt like this in my entire life! This is something real, Calvin. The music I play is real. It's not ideas or facts or figures, it's tangible.

CALVIN  
That doesn't make sense.

MAUREEN  
As I play the notes I can see it in my head. It all just... flows... It's really pouring out of me. Me! It's something I made.

CALVIN

What are you going to do?

MAUREEN

That's the whole point, Calvin. I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm free to make that decision when and how I want. With music or with something else I discover I could do all along. Don't you see? I'm finally doing something for me.

CALVIN

What about your family?

MAUREEN

I need you to understand this, Calvin.

CALVIN

I need you to be my mother.

MAUREEN

Am I not? Should I go bake cookies, Calvin? Would that make you feel better?

CALVIN

How dare you.

MAUREEN

Calvin.

CALVIN

How dare you do this to us? Do you realize what's happening to your family?

MAUREEN

Calvin, don't misunderstand me-

CALVIN

Alex is dressing up like a superhero. And your husband is-

MAUREEN

Calvin, I need this! I haven't been happy, Calvin... I feel like I've been given an opportunity to start over... Do you understand what the music feels like to me?

CALVIN

I can't believe you're being so selfish!

MAUREEN

I'm making the right decision.

CALVIN

Did you just say the right decision?

MAUREEN

Calvin, I don't know who I am anymore...

CALVIN

You know who I am. Do you know what this moment does to me? Every single time I face any decision that might take me away from my family, I will worry about this moment! This moment! You standing there telling me that you're not happy and you don't know who you are. I don't care how small a decision it is that I'm facing, I can't let it go. I pray that I never have to decide between myself and my family because I don't know how to do it. I wonder if I'm making the same mistake you did, I wonder if somehow by putting myself in front of my family, I will accidentally tear them apart!

MAUREEN

Calvin, how can I possibly know that-?

CALVIN

Because you are my mother! You are my mother and you're supposed to know! Because I can't be the only one who realizes what is going on! Because I can't live with the guilt of being the only one who knew!

*(To the audience.)*

But I didn't say any of that. She said:

MAUREEN

Should I go bake cookies, Calvin? Would that make you feel better?

CALVIN

And I said: No.

And then, I ran upstairs. How cliché. I did not mean to hurt my mother. I was and am very proud of her and all her achievements. I want her to be happy in her life, I do. I really do. I just couldn't figure out what was happening to mine.

It's almost four o'clock now. It happens very soon. I sit in my room and assemble the new fish tank. I place the new fish in their water. They swim around and seem very, very happy. I bought four. One of them will die this month. Two others die just before Christmas. But one of them, he stays alive until just after the following Halloween. We had many late night conversations he and I. After Alex moved out, he took the brunt of my neuroses. I'm surprised he held on for so long. Sitting there, watching them swim I thought a lot about what my father had said. About the world being in a race with itself. To this day, I don't really know how I feel about his philosophy. But sitting there, watching those fish... I firmly believe there is something to be said for letting the world happen. It's a lesson I am still trying to learn.

I sit up in my room watching those fish a long time. And then I hear it. The commotion. There are voices. There are thuds. There are pops and squeaks. There is the sound of many men leaving my home. I get to the top of the stairs in time to see my father staring at my mother, who is crying, and the brand new piano he bought for her standing inbetween them.

*(ELLIS and MAUREEN are on stage with the piano as CALVIN described. MAUREEN has tears in her eyes.)*

MAUREEN

Ellis?

CALVIN

And suddenly my father is given the opportunity to change it all. In this moment he can change the course of the rest of the day. He can run into her arms, hold her close and say he's so very sorry for not understanding. He can scream at her in this moment, and make her say to him all the things she's been holding inside. All the things that have been eating at her so much they brought her to where we are right now. He can ask her for help. He can reach out. But he won't. I know he won't. I know exactly what he'll say. I've heard him say it in my head a million times. They are the very last words I will ever hear him say. I would give the world to have heard him say-

ELLIS

Maureen, I'm so sorry...

CALVIN

But that's too easy. And that's not what happened. Instead, he said-

ELLIS

I thought you might need one.

CALVIN

And he left.

He just walked away.

He went down into the basement for the last time and left my mother crying on her new piano. I went back into my room. I don't think I really realized what I had just seen. I certainly didn't realize it was the end. I mean that was it. Those six words were the end of their relationship. The end of their life together. The end. I've often wondered how it began. I mean, they used to tell us this story. Mom was in Italy to meet some world famous philosopher who was a bird aficionado, and Dad was there on secret military orders and they literally bumped into each other.

Underneath some famous clock, Dr. Ellis Jones and Maureen Allen come crashing into one another like errant atoms. He screams at her and says-

ELLIS

Are you people physically incapable of avoiding moving objects? I'm obviously in a hurry! I know you saw me coming. Couldn't you see me?

CALVIN

But she just looks at him.

ELLIS

If you could speak English maybe I could teach you how to be aware of the world around you...

CALVIN

At which point she says-

MAUREEN

I do speak English.

CALVIN

And I think he fell in love with her right then and there. When he told the story, he would say he loved her because she was the first person to ever make him feel stupid. And if love was about anything, that was it. He chases her around Italy for a month. She pretends to be mostly upset about the first encounter. They see each other every other night, fighting what history already has in store for them, but it's no use. They go to the opera, and although he doesn't speak Italian, he cries at the spectacle. She stares at him for most of the dénouement and finally, in a surprised voice, says-

MAUREEN

My God, Ellis... I love you...

CALVIN

And it begins. That's all it takes. Six words. One night that leads directly to this moment. And that's it. Their entire relationship. From-

MAUREEN

My God, Ellis... I love you...

CALVIN

To-

ELLIS

I thought you might need one.

CALVIN

And he walks away.

*(ELLIS exits.)*

CALVIN

The piano is why she never gets to bake the cookies. After our argument, she went into the kitchen and made dough for chocolate-chip cookies. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that an amazing thing to do? The men with the piano arrived just before she could put them in the oven. And then everything happens. The uncooked dough ends up sitting there overnight. We don't notice it until tomorrow. She didn't mention it, you see. She never says anything about it. It's not until I find it

CALVIN (con't)

sitting there that I even know she was going to actually bake cookies for me. She chose her family over her freedom. And tomorrow, as I stand there and scrape the dough into the trash, my father's death suddenly seems real. I finally cry.

But today isn't over yet.

My mother sits down at the brand new piano my father bought for her and doesn't go back into the kitchen tonight. I sit upstairs and I can hear her crying. And just when I wish someone would come and save me-

*(ALEXANDER bounds into  
CALVIN's bedroom.)*

CALVIN

The Crimson Tanager appears.

ALEXANDER

Calvin! I failed!

CALVIN

What are you doing?

ALEXANDER

I figured it out! I failed! Get it?

CALVIN

What are you talking about?

ALEXANDER

Dad didn't kill your fish-

CALVIN

I know.

ALEXANDER

You know?

CALVIN

Yeah, I went to the pet store...

ALEXANDER

You bought new fish...

CALVIN

Yeah, after I-

ALEXANDER

There weren't any watches.

CALVIN

What?

ALEXANDER

That was the thing, the thing I couldn't figure out... I mean I could see all the evidence that was there, but I couldn't see the evidence that wasn't there.

CALVIN

Well that makes sense.

ALEXANDER

Nobody was building it because they didn't know it worked! Don't you see?

CALVIN

Honestly, no- Alex-

ALEXANDER

There weren't any stopped watches there. Not one. There were other watches. Running watches. Box after box of them. The exact same watches. But none that were stopped. See?

CALVIN

No.

ALEXANDER

He was too clever for them... Too smart... They aren't building it because they think it doesn't work.

CALVIN

But... It does work?

ALEXANDER

Yes!

CALVIN

And this is good?

ALEXANDER

They'll never know. He has all the evidence. He was too smart.

CALVIN

For what?

ALEXANDER

Dad wasn't testing anything in the house. He didn't kill your fish at all. He's been hiding evidence here. Every time they test the transmitter and it works, he steals the watch. There's no proof of it ever working in the first place! That's why there are all those boxes of stopped watches downstairs. Get it? I can't wait to talk to him about it! My arch-nemesis... Isn't that ridiculous? I failed to stop my father from saving the world! Do you see? They think it doesn't work, they don't build it, the world stays in balance, do you understand? He's the only person that knows!

I don't know how he expects to keep it up... It would seem like they're bound to figure it out sooner or later-

CALVIN

*(To the audience.)*

And that's when I knew.

Before that I had no idea, but in that moment, I realized what had been going on all along. She started to play the piano over what Alex was saying...

*(MAUREEN starts playing the movement on the piano.)*

ALEXANDER

They don't build it, the world stays in balance, you understand?

CALVIN

I will spend countless nights wondering exactly what was happening downstairs...

ALEXANDER

I don't know how he expects to keep it up...

CALVIN

What he was looking at, what he wished he had time to say...

ALEXANDER

It would seem like they're bound to figure it out-

CALVIN

What was the last thought that crossed his mind?

ALEXANDER

-Sooner or later.

*(Everything stops. No sound. No music. CALVIN stands transfixed. MAUREEN sits still at the piano.)*

CALVIN

This is how my father died.

*(MAUREEN plays the movement for the last time. It is exactly as it was at the beginning. It is loud and beautiful. Suddenly a loud gunshot is heard. She jumps up, and runs offstage. CALVIN is left alone.)*

CALVIN

I didn't run downstairs.

I stood in my room watching my fish let the world go by. Alex found him first.

*(The movement plays in the air by itself.)*

CALVIN

I was never more afraid than I was in that moment. I suddenly couldn't imagine life without him. I couldn't imagine Alex and I worrying about his doctorate, or my mother claiming her life out loud to no one. I thought about that comic book, that ridiculous comic book... I couldn't fathom even one dinner without my father. And the rest of my life without him stood in front of me. The very face of the world had changed. And I didn't even cry.

Eventually life goes on for the Joneses. It is never the same. It can't be. But it does move forward. After the new year, they offer our father's post, the one originally held by our grandfather, to Alex. He initially turns it down, and even though they are persistent, he avoids his destiny for some time. Eventually, fate tracks him down. He holds that post to this day. And he keeps up our father's work of deftly misinforming the Department of Defense. He has yet to build a superweapon that works. I firmly believe, in my heart, that on the weekends, he dresses up and fights crime. I'm married now. Have children of my own. Both of them very smart little girls. It hits us all very hard when my mother dies. "Inevitability," she says in her final days, "Doesn't ease the pain any." After that Halloween, she didn't play the piano for years. It stayed in her home to remind her, I think, but she couldn't bring herself to touch it. Not until my youngest expressed a desire to learn how to play.

Every Saturday afternoon for nine months, Mom taught her to play. Right up until her death. Life goes on for the Joneses.

Oh, before I forget. One last thing.

The Blue Damsels.

I never told you what actually happened to the fish. I walked into the pet store that Halloween determined to buy fish and a tank and start all over again. I had never failed anything in my life, and I didn't intend to then. Especially not in the face of such life altering upheaval. I picked out a fresh water tank, put it in my shopping cart, and went to purchase the fish I had purchased so many times before. Blue Damsels. I would not be defeated. Not by this. As I stood looking at the fish, a man who worked there asked if I had a saltwater tank at home. I said no, of course not, I had a freshwater tank. He said I couldn't have Blue Damsels then. Due to the fact that they were *saltwater* fish. I had merely read their description incorrectly. For all the times I wandered

CALVIN (con't)

through that pet store, all the times I sought out new fish to possibly put to death, I never, ever, read the label correctly.

For months I put saltwater fish in fresh water.

I murdered my fish.

My fish had all died due to a young man misunderstanding a simple label.

Isn't that funny.

Some things, if you think about them too much, get a life of their own.

Sometimes things get away from you, move too fast for you to get a hold of.

And some things that happen... Aren't your fault. You can't know everything. There are some things that happen... And you'll never know why.

Nothing can ever prepare you for life.

*(Curtain.)*

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