

A LITTLE DERIVATION

By Jamie Lewis Holt

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This short was submitted as a course requirement in Creative Writing. We don't usually take subs like this because they're seldom up to standard but 'A Little Derivation' was quirky enough to enlist our attention. The main character, Ben, is a fascinating mix-mox of stunted growth and 'unexplainable science'. To create a complicated character like this and make him believable isn't something you'd expect from a neophyte but here you have it. The prose is sometimes faltering and sentence structure could benefit from some close attention, but to us these are minor quibbles. The honesty of the story far outshines any shortcomings. The voice is authentic. The dialogue is strong. Give this writer a couple of years and you're going to say 'Hey, I just read this great story...' Quote: The teacher, irritated at Ben's always-direct questions, said, "Write about the educational system that has graced us with your presence as the only orphan too smart for public school. Or maybe about my kidney stones and the science of pissing a meteor-sized porcupine? Pick anything that is *real*, Benton."*

A Little Derivation

Ben wasn't afraid of getting caught, beat up, or even being framed for things he didn't do, he felt like it made him tougher for a kid his size. What he was afraid of was being *known*.

The cramped bathroom stall made an efficient use of the tiny window above the last toilet as Ben returned to his laptop placed on the cracked and glued top of the toilet tank. Music from the room above rattled the retrofitted drop ceiling above his head, dusting his curly locks with a fine-white powder, and coating his backpack on the floor in the corner. He was ditching Mr. Surly's English class across campus, hoping he wouldn't get caught. Ben had made the mistake of trusting an adult with his secret, his English teacher had been coaxing him to open up about

his life and then Ben found himself subsequently belittled for the truth he had shared. So now it was time to disappear, Ben wasn't spending another winter break working alone at a boarding school for rich kids when he the token charity case. Benton would rather be completely alone than ignored.

"Flimsy open source protocols," Ben said and adjusted his laptop on the back of the toilet, pausing to spit into the bowl between his straddled legs as the programming portal opened up the school's firewall settings. With not much thought to the crime he was committing, Ben wiped every last file with his pseudo name on it, including his term papers and state records, and slammed the lid shut. His bags were out the window, suffering from the cold that would envelope him when he dropped the ten feet to the ground and crossed the barren field to the crowded woods but what else could he do? He had slipped up, and he knew it. His English teacher had already pushed him for an explanation, refusing the truth in the paper he had written.

The door banged open and Ben crouched on the toilet, hoping the guy would be quick and be gone before people might be tempted to report him as missing from the last period of the day for the semester, but the bell rang, excusing the small predatory academy's student body for winter break and the dude was still at the urinal, pissing gallons.

"Screw it," Ben exhaled and pulled himself up to the tiny window, which now seemed ridiculous since the school had many exits and the students were pouring out of the buildings.

"What you doing down there?" a voice asked, the peeing ceased.

"I think some jerk threw my"—Ben halted, realizing this was Mr. Surly. "Never mind, I'll just run around, it's not that far." Ben exited the stall and brushed past his teacher, not meaning to look into the urinal, but the tubing hanging by the teacher's leg that was not a typical male bathroom item, had caught his eye

“Can’t,” the professor said and snagged Ben’s jacket in one hand.

Ben swatted up at the man’s hand holding his scruff with increasing force. “What are you doing? Let me go. Teachers can’t touch students.”

“I’m not going to touch you, I’m going to let them touch you, and then you can go find your stuff,” he said hauling Ben backwards while he dropped the I.V. tubing to the floor, the pee bag half emptied and spilling on Ben’s shoes.

Ben’s heart thudded the cold, knowing blood about his limbs, anger crystallizing in his veins as the door was pushed open and several more English students filed in.

“There’s the freak,” the first boy said. “Good little sneak, took us an hour to find you,” another rattled off as more boys entered.

“Don’t worry boys,” the professor said and walked towards the door, calling over his shoulder, “school is out for the next few weeks and nobody is looking for him. Make sure he doesn’t remember we were here,” Mr. Surly said and the bathroom door clicked shut.

A disturbing quiet settled in Ben’s bones, the bathroom deathly still.

Ben hadn’t hit a growth spurt and wouldn’t for years, he had skipped too many grades which always made him a target. Why the state put an orphan *and* assholes in the same building, Ben couldn’t figure. What he did know, was this was his last day here and the idea of snapping all their necks tracked back and forth across his mind. He knew he could do it, he’d done it before, but he didn’t want anyone looking for him. They wouldn’t dare report him missing after today, he felt the beating coming, he always did and Ben welcomed the abuse, it made him stronger in other ways.

“Is preschool out for a few weeks?” one of them hollered as the classmates bumped around the boy’s restroom. The heckling was always their first step to psych themselves up, the

assault would surely follow. “I heard Ben has to stay and help scrub the place down? They need dwarfs to get under those desks and that there,” Arthur said pointing a large finger at Ben, “is a stunted human.”

Ben squinted back at him. “Dwarfism is a medical diagnosis, I doubt you knew that. And I am four years younger than you, which I know you are aware of”—

“Shut up, loser,” Arthur said and shoved past Ben, his zipper down and starting to piss before he hit the stall. “No one believes you have any superpowers.”

“Oh good, may I leave now?” Ben asked and pointed to the door, grateful he had already slung his stuff out the window so the cretins couldn’t smash his laptop again.

“Oh, sure,” the first boy said and stepped aside, gracefully bowing to let Ben pass.

Moonlight was the only sign of time passing in the small bathroom window when Ben stirred, wincing, his face felt mushy when he pushed himself off the floor and hurried to the outside doors, that were locked. Ben shifted the tumblers in his mind and slipped silently from the school, locking the door again without ever touching it. Several things occupied his thoughts as his fingers tenderly traced the bumps on his head and face, cursing as his back hit the wall, digging for his stuff in the bushes but nothing was as painful and fierce as loneliness and revenge. The boarding school had been his last stop in this state, an exception they made since Ben tested out of every other high school in the region and they felt like the rich kids would ‘look up to a little prodigy,’ they said, ‘take him under their wing,’ they had promised. Instead, he had his wings broken by brutal attacks, spurring him towards what would now be his only way of survival.

The forested dirt path came and went, cycling in the daylight and moonbeams, stretching further into the uncharted nothingness of the forested northern territories and just as Ben had

hoped, he was completely alone. His bag and pack floating behind him, the mental strain a bare minimum to keep them aloft while extracting the moisture in the air into the water bottle in his hands. The droplets danced, dizzy and alive in the afternoon sun, combining in a mystical rainstorm, a micro universe in Ben's bottle waiting for him to find something else to concentrate on, to release them from his mind's potential.

Ben's thoughts returned to his bumbled attempts to trust someone. Mr. Surly's kidneys had been Ben's mistake, right in English class after he belittled Ben's attempts at a creative non-fiction piece. Ben had written what he knew, the unexplainable science he was capable of, expecting the first adult he'd ever shared it with to shelter and mentor him. The man had seemed nice but Ben was ridiculed for not understanding the assignment and verbally upbraided in front of his peers.

"No one can manipulate matter with their mind," the professor had said. "This is a nonfiction assignment, try writing about something that is real if you want to pass, okay? Let's read Arthur's paper, it's better, more to the point of nonfiction," Mr. Surly said with much emphasis.

"What kind of reality were you hoping for?" Ben blurted out with genuine curiosity at what constituted non-fiction for his teacher. He was too young to be knowingly sarcastic, that would develop over the next few decades.

The teacher, irritated at Ben's always-direct questions, said, "Write about the educational system that has graced us with your presence as the only orphan too smart for public school. Or maybe about my kidney stones and the science of pissing a meteor-sized porcupine? Pick anything that is *real*, Benton."

The teacher had gone on to praise Arthur, leaving Ben sitting in a huddled fury and imagined the man's kidneys, both of the meaty organs, and like the teat on a cow's udder, Ben milked the stones loose. Even when his teacher puked all over his desk, Ben kept milking. A prideful show that left the skeptical teacher with a pee-bag and Ben absolutely certain it was time to leave for good.

In the frozen tundra far to the north of the abandoned towns Ben had passed in his search for solitude, the search helicopters drew closer and Ben hid beneath a massive pine tree, pulling foliage over his packs and mentally shifting the dirt around him to tuck him in for the night. The bright sphere in his hand dimming, the humming ceasing as his eyes fell shut.

There was a pulse in the stillness Ben could feel, as tangible as his mother's black velvet handbag had been when she let him hold it for her on the trains. A blackness that beckoned him, soft and smooth, and when Ben reached for it, expanding his mind beyond the walls of the school, he felt not small and alone, but invincible.

Pain was his education, hatred his motivation, and solitude his teacher.

Maybe the blackness that pulsed in his bruised tissue, the stillness lulling his mind to sleep understood who he was after all; a little anomaly, a derivation, a blackhole.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The prompt for this flash fiction came from a much longer story in the works, as part of an English class assignment to explore a character's backstory. The history of orphans and their exploitation was found in doing research for a paper on early America's child work force in another English class and spurred the idea of his isolation and abuse. As a mother of five children, I can't comprehend the abuse some children suffer at the hands of bigger (not smarter, not older) just meaner people and it turns my stomach. I wanted Benton to be able to fight back, in his own way, to find a future where he can be who he is, without fear. I think all children are endowed with that potential to change the*

*world and in this flash fiction we see the start of what one child is capable of.
Benton, The Little Derivation.*

AUTHOR BIO: *I am a senior at Utah Valley University, graduating in the Spring of 2021 in Creative Writing, minor in Digital Media and love all creative outlets; writing, reading, drawing, painting (the house), photography (have had photographs published), and recently thanks to an excellent professor, poetry.*