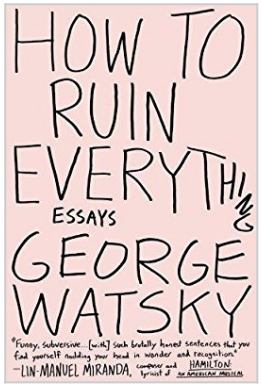

How to Ruin Everything: Essays

By George Watsky

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A *New York Times* Bestseller

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—Lin-Manuel Miranda, composer and lyricist of *In the Heights* and *Hamilton: An American Musical*

Are you a sensible, universally competent individual? Are you tired of the crushing monotony of leaping gracefully from one lily pad of success to the next? Are you sick of doing everything right?

In this brutally honest and humorous debut, musician and artist George Watsky chronicles the small triumphs over humiliation that make life bearable and how he has come to accept defeat as necessary to personal progress. The essays in *How to Ruin Everything* range from the absurd (how he became an international ivory smuggler) to the comical (his middle-school rap battle dominance) to the revelatory (his experiences with epilepsy), yet all are delivered with the type of linguistic dexterity and self-awareness that has won Watsky devoted fans across the globe. Alternately ribald and emotionally resonant, *How to Ruin Everything* announces a versatile writer with a promising career ahead.

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Editorial Review

Review
"Whether you're a fan of Watsky's poetry or hip-hop or a total newcomer, you will find joy in the words contained herein. Watsky in prose form is just like Watsky on a track—funny, subversive, and able to excavate such brutally honest sentences that you find yourself nodding your head in wonder and recognition."
—**Lin-Manuel Miranda**, composer and lyricist of *Hamilton: An American Musical* and *In the Heights*

"George's essays will lift you and light you up."
—**John Green**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Fault in Our Stars*

“Watsky is a skillful lyricist who has successfully transferred his wit, humor and humility into a smartly written collection of essays. *How to Ruin Everything* shows off his versatility as a writer and proves that the nerdy guys can also be part of the cool crowd.”
—**Russell Simmons**

“George Watsky is a lyrical mastermind. Unflinchingly honest, sincere, and gut-wrenchingly funny, *How to Ruin Everything* is one of the best books I've read this year. Watsky effortlessly translates his razor sharp wit from the stage to the page. This will be the first of many amazing books in the life of a tireless artist.”
—**Hasan Minhaj**, *The Daily Show* correspondent

"In *How To Ruin Everything*, George Watsky sets off around the world to find out why nothing ever explodes the way it should—not fireworks, spicy foods, hip-hop, sex with middle-aged women, or minor criminal activities. Along the way he captures how it feels to be young, in beautiful writing that is compulsively readable, gut-clutchingly funny, and deeply humane. Don't miss it."
—**Jeff Chang**, author *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, *Who We Be*, and *We Gon' Be Alright*

"At their best, these essays are incisive and soulful, suffused with scorching wit, careful observation, and probing self-awareness. And at their worst, they're still funnier than anything you're likely to hear at your city's most entertaining bar, even if you drink there every night for a month. Which you might have to, in order to process the fact that a guy who looks like he's twelve just wrote the best debut essay collection of the year."
—**Adam Mansbach** #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Go the Fuck to Sleep*

"He reminds me of myself, only a better writer than I can."
—**Rhys Darby**, *Flight of the Conchords*

“When George Watsky raps, the quantity and quality of his words and concepts often flow so quickly that you can only hope to let them wash over your consciousness and bathe in their essence, because it's impossible to stop time and live appreciatively in each individual moment. Thankfully though, in this collection of his writings, you can do just that, because that's how reading works. You can examine every drop of Watsky's kindness, thoughtfulness, self-awareness, curiosity, and adventurousness, seeing how he is continually and/or continuously growing as an artist and a human, and you will too."
—**Myq Kaplan**, comic featured on *Conan*, *Last Comic Standing*, and *The Late Show with David Letterman*

"*How to Ruin Everything* is laugh-out-loud funny, painfully honest, and subversively sincere. Watsky speaks

boundlessly and insightfully about the life of a creative person. It is instantly relatable, clever, sharp and observant."
—**Jonny Sun**, creator of the popular @jomnysun Twitter comedy account and MIT doctoral candidate

"George Watsky does again what he does best: attaches disarming, unparalleled wit to the mundane, making meditation of the routine and human. Everything you've come to expect from Watsky the rapper and George the poet is housed in this brilliant and unmatched collection of essays. His unique approach to rhythm is buoyed by his precision of idea and economy of language…An instant classic."
—**Chinaka Hodge**, author of *Dated Emcees*

About the Author
George Watsky is a writer and musician from San Francisco, California. After getting his start as a teenager in competitive poetry slam, winning both the Youth Speaks Slam and Brave New Voices National Poetry Slam at the Apollo Theater, he has since branched out into hip hop and long-form writing. Watsky has performed on HBO's *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, the Ellen Show, the NAACP Image Awards, and his online videos have received hundreds of millions of YouTube hits. A committed live performer, he's played hundreds of shows, both with his band and solo, across the North America, Europe, Australia, and India, including festival slots at San Francisco's Outside Lands, Just for Laughs in Montreal, Rock the Bells, Soundset, Warped Tour, and released numerous music albums and mixtapes, including his most recent projects, a track on "The Hamilton Mixtape" in 2016, 2013's "Cardboard Castles" and 2014's "All You Can Do." He graduated from Emerson College with a degree in acting and dramatic writing, where he received the Rod Parker playwriting fellowship, and released a poetry collection, "Undisputed Backtalk Champion," on First Word Press way back in 2006. And although he was forced to write a lot essays in school, he considers this his first attempt at prose.

Fa Kieu

I'm just . . . worried about you . . ." Mom said through tears at the dining room table when I was fourteen. "What if you end up . . .you know . . . *stealing houses*?"

I thought about the feasibility of this, staring down at the table's soft red cedar, pockmarked and gouged from years of enthusiastic doodling. How would I do it? Pick them clean up off their foundations? Dismantle them brick by brick and rebuild them miles away? Move in when the owners went on vacation and barricade myself inside? It didn't make sense. But after that day's meeting with the police officers at my middle school's office, Mom imagined my sad trajectory: a referral one day, a suspension the next, and before you know it . . . stealing houses.

I made my first walk to the principal's office in kindergarten back when I was Jorge Watsky—just the first of many boneheaded, bizarre, and entirely avoidable delinquencies. Buena Vista elementary, in San Francisco's Potrero Hill District, was a language immersion school, meaning every class was taught in Spanish from the moment Mom and Dad dropped us off on the curb to the moment they picked us up. Classes were small and teachers truly cared about the kids. The only way to make yourself invisible was to speak English.

I'd been sitting cross-legged on the floor for story time one day, my grasp of the language—only a few months into kindergarten— delicate, my attention drifting. Catarina was, like many other Buena Vista teachers, an optimistic, young (but at the time, to me, very old) woman, the tendrils of her unshaved armpits creeping out from her colorful Mexican sundress. The dress fascinated me—the darkness underneath, so vast and mysterious. Everything was big- ger then. And after Catarina banished me from class, the hallway swallowed me too, endlessly quiet except for the echo of my foot- steps and my pounding heart. The principal reasonably wanted to know what possessed me to crawl under my teacher's skirt.

"¿Por qué, Jorge? ¿Por qué?"

"Because I—"

"Jorge, no," the principal cut me off. *"En español."*

"Quería ver lo que hay ahí abajo."

It was simple: *I wanted to see what's under there.*

Over Christmas break in second grade, my parents sat my brother and me down at the same dining room table at which I would contemplate house-stealing six years later, many of its battle scars yet to appear. Just from the stiff silence in the room, the way they'd staged us across from them, I felt an ominous rot in the pit of my stomach. Secrets hung in the air, consequences waiting to descend on us. I knew this emotion well: the feeling of being called to the principal's office.

We hadn't done anything wrong, they told us. On the contrary, this was fabulous news. They'd found a great new school for us, Alamo, much closer to our Richmond District house.

I hadn't thought of it as anything more than a funny story when I'd told my parents about Buena Vista's recess playground drills—how one whistle meant we were lining up to go back inside, two whistles meant earthquake drill, and three whistles meant to lie flat on your belly on the schoolyard asphalt, separated from the public park on Potrero by a chain-link fence. No kid ever got hit by a stray bullet, but once in a while our teacher's back

would stiffen when we heard a loud *pop!* coming from the park.

You' ll love Alamo! they insisted. *How could you not, with a school motto like "Be a Friend!" and a mascot like the goofy, grinning Alamo Alligator? Plus, Alamo is a feeder school for Estacada—the top public middle school in the city—and, best of all, everything's already been arranged. You start as soon as Christmas break is over!*

In Cantonese, "Happy New Year!" is *Gung Hay Fat Choy*, "fart" is *fong pei*, and "flower bridge" is *fa kieu*—a classic excuse to get away with saying "fuck you" on the playground. That's all I remember from my Chinese language–learning program, the only class at Alamo with room to take my brother and me midway through second grade. Twice a week we'd study Cantonese and take calligraphy classes, but none of it stuck. Buena Vista had been all over the map ethnically— Mission District Latino kids, black kids, white kids in tie-dye shirts with hippy parents. Maybe it was because we all started out together, or maybe we were just too young to appreciate our differences at Buena Vista. I was an alien at Alamo.

I had a brand-new nickname to replace Jorge—"white boy." It wasn't meant as a compliment. Alamo was so

packed with carpet- baggers like me spilling out the windows that they built temporary classroom bungalows on the yard, where I took third grade. Alamo's strengths fueled its budget woes in an ironic cycle: The school was strapped for cash because it was crowded, it was crowded because it was desirable, it was desirable because it was high performing, and, because it was high performing, it was further strapped for cash. Public schools in San Francisco are funded in a need-based system—the schools with the best standardized test scores get the least money. The schools that did the best were heavily Asian, and Alamo, boasting more than a dozen third graders with the last name Wong, was no exception. Kids ate Spam musubi and dry ramen for lunch, sprinkling the powder packets over the noodles and crunch- ing the uncooked chunks like crackers. Monday talk centered around weekend sermons at the local Chinese Presbyterian church. And on Lunar New Year, when we exchanged *Gung Hey Fat Choy*s

and kids stacked heavy piles of red and gold envelopes from their grandparents, uncles, and aunts, comparing their little skyscrapers of cash at lunchtime, I stewed in my envy.

Soon after arriving, my brother and I got more good news from our parents—we were getting braces. To be fair, braces aren't a scarlet letter in elementary school. Everyone's got 'em, everyone brags about the *tight* new holiday-themed color scheme of their bands—orange and black (Halloween), green (St. Patrick's Day, duh)—and everyone brags again about how smooth their teeth feel when they come off. But I didn't get standard braces. I got neck gear, a medieval steel rack that curves around the outside of a nerd's overbite and locks into bands around the back molars, ratcheted by a strap that soaks up neck sweat until the padding smells like spoiled cheese. For a few months, through a conspiracy between my parents and orthodontist, I even had to wear the contraption to school. My vintage look included my neck gear, my favorite black snapback hat with its severely bent red brim, and my turtleneck collar, pulled high.

Insecurity takes many forms. It can make a person shrink or put them on the attack; I got loud. I tried to neutralize the barbs by aiming them at myself, anxious that if I didn't cram myself into every silence, someone else might fill it with an insult. I had a seemingly unlimited wealth of annoying insights, and as elementary school dragged on, I was powerless to stop them from escaping the dungeon of my mouth, its orthodontic shackles and oppressive Lunchables breath.

"Actually, it's *octopi*, not *octopuses*."

Third grade was spent propping my arm up at the elbow until Mrs. Luchesi reluctantly called on me. In fourth grade Mr. Gomez was so exasperated he moved my desk into the hallway. In fifth grade I protested Mrs. Avery's rule that only girls could wear hats in class, "in case they have a bad hair day."

"Boys have bad hair days too!" I insisted. "Look!"

Constant hat-wearing and infrequent showering had given me disgusting dandruff, and Mrs. Avery and I found a good rhythm: I'd remove my favorite cap briefly to show her my greasy, matted- down mop, claw at my itchy scalp, send a thick flurry of flakes to my desk, pull my hat back on, she'd demand I remove it, I'd give her some lip, and she'd send me down to Darcy's office.

I remember the view from my seat in front of Principal Darcy Bustamante's desk vividly: the window to the playground over her right shoulder, where light streamed in on sunny days, Ms. Bustamante's hair coiffed in a high blond beehive, her brow furrowed in deep concern, warning me of the slippery slope of misbehavior as I nodded along, daydreaming, studying the framed poster over her left shoulder of a big red apple, popping against a white background, captioned everything i need to know i learned in kindergarten.

Yeah, right, I thought. *Sell it to Jorge.*

Unlike Alamo's, the principal's office at Estacada Middle School was not designed to make convicts comfortable. There were no scenic views, no cute inspirational posters. Cloudy glass windows latticed with wire honeycomb allowed a trickle of light to complement the unreliable overheard fluorescents. Every object and surface, with the exception of the gray polystyrene ceiling tiles, linoleum flooring, and Principal Lim himself—a slight Chinese man with a thin pencil mustache—was made of the same heavy walnut original to the 1929 building: the door, the room's trim, the chairs, and the massive desk, covered in little nicks and scratches, varnished and revarnished. The principal's desk reminded me of my dining room table, how I could read its history by running my hand over its wounds, imagining nail marks of kids in the thirties clawing at the desk during canings.

Urban public schools don't run on sympathy. I don't think it's a coincidence that Alamo was named after *the* Alamo—the famous Texas fortress—and *estacada* means "stockade" in Spanish. Or that the crop of San Francisco's district middle schools that sprouted in the1920s share suspiciously similar Spanish colonial revival architecture with the maximum-security San Quentin State Prison across the bay. For most of middle school I got straight As, with the exception of gym class, but I viewed teachers suspiciously. Estacada's a good school as city schools go, but with five hundred kids in each overcrowded grade, and a staff of underpaid, overworked teachers, the system functions through discipline, Ritalin, and respect for authority—anything to keep the school from descending into anarchy.

But I always had to know why: *Why* can't we be on the yard during a free period? *Why* can't I chew gum? *Why* do I have to sing the national anthem? *Why* can't I end a sentence with a preposition— what's that all about? I never got satisfying answers. But whenever the gray intercom wall phone rang in one of my classes, I knew where I was headed.

By middle school, my neck gear, dandruff, and turtleneck were gone, but I tried on whatever version of myself I thought would help me fit in: I played percussion in the orchestra. I rode the bench on the baseball team. I showed up to chess club practice once—the day the yearbook picture was being taken. And I ran for the least competitive student government position available—sixth-grade treasurer—landing on a student council consisting of myself and sixteen Asian girls.

I experimented with weird varieties of jeans—stone-washed and whiskered one month, baggy the next. I bought a pair of huge floppy raver pants at Aéropostale, puffed my navy blue And 1s (puffing is when you pull the laces out of your shoe, roll up a pair of socks and stick them under the tongue to make your feet look like an anime character's), meticulously planned my first-day-of-school outfit (in seventh grade it was all-red nylon pants and a red Old Navy Tech Vest), and tried spiking my hair, the popular look at the time. Straight black Asian hair is perfect for spiking: You just add a layer of gel to the comb, run it through your hair backward, and boom—perfect hedgehog spikes. But Jewy hair doesn't work that way, and more gel just gave me a slimy perm.

Then, in spring of seventh grade came the FUBU debacle. One weekend I took the 5-Fulton bus to a shop on Market Street that sold gaudy, supposedly trendy, extra-baggy Girbaud jeans with red stripes under the knees and functionless diagonal zippers, plus the latest lines from Rhino, Phat Farm, and, of course, FUBU. I knew instantly when I saw it hanging on the rack—the Golden Fleece that would elevate me to high society—a huge baby blue baseball jersey that hung halfway to my knees, fubu in white cursive across the chest.

I wore the jersey only once before I permanently retired it to my closet, laughed out of homeroom the second I stepped through the door.

Don't you know what FUBU stands for? my classmates marveled.

For Us By Us.

Cheeks burning, I brought the jersey straight to my locker in passing period and wore my undershirt the rest of the day.It's not totally fair to say I had no friends. There were kids who let me eat lunch with them, who I cracked jokes with in the halls. Bryan Wong, Jeffrey Chu, Oliver Li, and Will Hsiang put up with me as a Kramer who dropped by their bench every once in a while, but they looked down at the floor when I asked if I could go to CUPC, their church summer camp, or if I could try out for Taisho, the Asian youth basketball team they played on. I didn't have real friends—the type you hang out with after school, or talk to about your problems. The type who want to be around you as much as you want to be around them.

But no matter what, I always had Thursday to look forward to. Thursday was Nacho Day, my weekly deliverance from rectangular pizzas so oily they'd cling suctioned to their plastic containers when held upside down. I survived Estacada on a diet of Fritos, Sprite, and anticipation—the faith that Thursday would come again, when the home ec class would set up in the courtyard a period early and heat the cheese vat, and for two fifty I could buy a tray of yellow corn chips drowning in queso, homemade chili, and sliced jalapeños.

Jalepeños were first come, first served, and they went fast. Maybe it's a stubbornness I inherited from my dad—the way he insists that a Papaya King hot dog is incomplete without sauerkraut—but I've always felt passionately that nachos are naked without jalapeños, and I devoted elaborate efforts to getting in line before they ran out. I might fake sick early on in class, dip out for a bathroom break before the bell, and race to the courtyard. Or maybe I'd skip the period before lunch entirely and accept an absence. Every minute counted with kids queuing up fifteen minutes before the bell, and realistically I had to be no more than sixth in line to get peppers. That's not because public school jalapeños come eighteen to a jar— it's because of backcutting.

Backcutting is one of the most shameful practices known to man. Unlike standard cutting, *back*cutting requires an accomplice in line who allows the cutter to nip in *behind* them. There's a special place in hell for backcut accomplices—gutless suck-ups who shoulder none of the misery they pass on to the chumps after them. The effects of backcutting in a middle school social environment are devastating. I've seen desperate social climbers let five or six popular kids backcut them in a single nacho line, each backcutting cool kid becoming another potential backcut vector, virality taking hold. I've been fourth up, only to see the line's head suddenly bulge like a tumor, thirty-five kids served before me. And I've been kid thirty- five only to see the last jalapeño slice served to kid thirty-four. I've cried in the nacho line. But I've never bent over for a backcutter.

The lunch yard was a tribal wasteland divided by benches: the cool kids—mostly Asian with a smattering of the school's few black, Latino, and the ultra-rare popular white kid mixed in; the FOBs (fresh off the boat—their term of endearment, not mine), wearing exclusively black-and-white clothes and puffed white K-Swiss sneakers; the Russians (not considered white); several varieties of nerds (band nerds, science nerds, theater nerds, although many nerds ate lunch inside); and the AZN Pryde girls (girly-girls who commissioned full-page yearbook spreads for friend groups dubbed "AZN Dragonz," or "The Tiger Lilies"). There was some overlap between the cliques, but mostly their borders were fixed and fiercely guarded.

If there was one bit of glue that held the fractured social world together though, it was hip-hop. We had other cultural bonds— Gap, the mall at Stonestown, the Giants and Niners, Pokémon, Hello Kitty—but no common language was more widely spoken than rap. At Estacada, there were only a few things that reminded us we were all human: When you had control of the radio dial, you turned it to 106.1 FM—hip-hop and R&B on KMEL. And at the end of lunch, when the seagulls perched on the roof swarmed down to fight over our garbage, we were all fighting in the same war, fleeing for cover as bombs dropped around us.

For Christmas in eighth grade, my parents bought me a big black Sony CFD boom box, and for the rest of the year I brought it to school every day, tucking it under my desk when my teachers would allow it in class, propping it up diagonally in my locker when they wouldn't, swinging it through the hallways in every passing period blasting Nelly's "Country Grammar," the first CD I bought from Tower Records on Columbus Avenue, the purchase quickly followed by albums from Mystikal, Eminem, Outkast, Roy Jones Jr., Jadakiss, and Cam'ron. After school I'd watch BET's *106 & Park*, salivating over the weekly Freestyle Friday battles. And that year, when MC Jin, a Chinese-American rapper from Queens who rhymed in a patois of English and Cantonese, won seven straight Freestyle Fridays, becoming the first Asian solo rapper to land a major label deal, Estacada went crazy. I loved the wordplay, the underdogs, and the fact that you could stand up to your enemies by the power of wit. I finally felt as though I'd found myself in hip-hop. But at twelve years old I couldn't separate the lyricism from the lifestyle, and I memorized lyrics about coke dealing, poverty, depraved sex acts, and murder as if they were scripture—worlds far removed from my life, where repercussions for misbehavior were much more permanent than a walk to the principal's office.

I didn't have a lot of public opportunities to showcase my rapping, but there was no better moment to transform an image than a school dance. The day of the spring formal, the DJ, our student council secretary's older cousin, pulled into the parking lot in his Honda Civic, junky spoiler screwed to the body, and grabbed a pair of milk crates from the backseat. He and his friend took turns hauling the box of vinyl singles, belt-drive turntables, crappy mixer, mic, and tangle of cords up the double staircase to the basketball court. And while they were setting up the audio equipment, the student council dance committee girls transformed the smelly run-down gym into a smelly run- down gym disguised with streamers and balloons.

The kids trickled in and the DJs kicked off their carefully constructed set of Top 40 hip-hop and R&B. The cool kids freak- danced at center court, we commoners orbiting around them, boys separated from girls. When the energy peaked, the DJs spun a K-Ci & JoJo slow jam, and the guys on the fringes made beelines for the girls we were crushing on, whose locations in the gym we'd been peripherally tracking all night. I savored the three and a half minutes with Valerie's head resting on my shoulder, her boobs against my chest, until the song ended, we awkwardly parted, and the genders quarantined themselves again.

I made my move right after the slow dance, creeping up nonchalantly while the DJs were distracted. I grabbed the microphone from its resting spot on the folding table and freestyled for as long as I could, rapping in a squeaky pubescent voice over the track vocals to an audience of confused classmates, until the pissed-off DJs slammed my fader down and snatched the mic back. Guerrilla freestyling is like bull-riding. You know you're gonna get thrown off at some point; the victory is in lasting as long as you can. I strutted away into a dance circle, supremely confident that I'd lit the world on fire with my rhymes. But business continued as usual. The cool kids kept on freaking, each twenty minutes the sexes came together for the next slow song, and mostly we stood around, trying not to do anything uncool, our backs stiffening every now and then from a loud *pop!* when some kid stomped on a balloon.

Teachers had to be tough or they'd get walked all over. Kids pounce on weakness. But everyone agreed that Charlie's punishment was cruel and unusual. Asking a thirteen-year-old to pick every piece of gum off the wooden gym floorboards with his fingernails—the caked-in, blackened ones, pounded down by fifteen hundred kids, 180 school days a year (185 if you count dances), every year since the Roosevelt administration—was like giving a man a butter knife to chop down the redwoods.

Mr. Marsden, a slender guy in his early forties, shorts pulled above his knobby pink knees, whistle dangling helplessly from his neck, skeleton keychain rattling on his belt loop, hairline retreat- ing, was a man under siege. He spoke in timid, erratic bursts, piling on perceived troublemakers like a saltshaker whose lid had

been unscrewed. It was easy to press Mr. Marsden's buttons, but he had one especially tender spot—a personal shame I never understood: He hated being reminded he was Canadian. But even if I couldn't grasp why it was embarrassing being born north of the border, I could appreciate how a simple statement of fact could be wielded as a weapon, which Charlie didn't mean it as a compliment when he called Mr. Marsden a "crazy Canuck" during warm-up stretches one day, and Mr. Marsden's face went the color of his flag's maple leaf, as quickly as Charlie's fate was sealed.

However much Mr. Marsden disliked Charlie, it was dwarfed by his loathing for me. I can't blame him. I was a deadbeat in gym—a perennially tardy back-talker with poor flexibility. But I escaped punishment by exploiting loopholes in the rules. A big part of our grade was based on whether we showed up to class wearing the navy-blue- and-yellow San Francisco Unified School District shirt and shorts. But the rule didn't specify *whose* uniform we had to be wearing, and when I forgot mine at home, I'd raid the big canvas lost-and-found bin in the corner of the locker room and become someone else for the day.

Increasingly, I was Katashi. Katashi Yamada was the most fearsome of the fobsters. High school size after being held back a year for truancy, known for his classic black jacket and jeans, white T-shirt, two long, dangling, bleached-tip bangs, and cutters (baseball batting gloves with the fingers cut off meant to bust an eye open, no relation to backcutters), Katashi was the one kid who all the fake badasses on the yard refused to pick a fight with. One day at lunch, I thought I smelled a *fong pei*, only to realize that Katashi, using his modified disposable lighter with its four-inch-high flame, had lit my hair on fire. I don't think he had anything particularly against me. He was just bored. And he was bored again a couple of weeks later in Mr. Galway's physics class, when, for no particular reason, he decided to squeeze two blocks of dry ice in his hands. Katashi was out of school for the next week

with frostbitten fingers, his attendance spottier and spottier as the year dragged on, until eventually he just stopped showing up.

When I discovered Katashi had abandoned his uniform in the

lost-and-found, I quit bothering to bring mine to school at all. More and more, I rented his smelly trunks and shirt from the bin, then wore them to class, hitching his massive shorts up every cou- ple of steps during warm-ups, katashi yamada scrawled across my chest, flashing a shit-eating grin at Mr. Marsden, who, as much as he hated it, couldn't punish me within the rules.

I hobbled toward the end of middle school one Nacho Day at a time, one office visit to the next, carrying my boom box and a tense energy, the righteous indignation of all the rap I'd been listening to, the compensation for my failure to find my place, and a belief that I had within me the power to defeat the enemies keeping me excluded—if only I could figure out who they were. In every moment I was ready for that final challenge, the instant when I would Enter the Wu-Tang, the real me emerging gloriously from a pile of awkward ashes.

So it was in the hallway outside the locker rooms, five minutes before the end-of-gym-class bell on the sunny Friday before eighth- grade spring break, only seven weeks until my release from The Stockade, just algebra class separating me from vacation. Other kids began gathering outside the locker room in their civilian clothes, Mr. Marsden and his whistle blocking the archway to our next classes. I always thought the rule requiring us to stay in gym, even after class had ended, was particularly unfair, and I asked Mr. Marsden to explain the policy.

"*Why*, Mr. Watsky?" he jabbed. "Because the bell hasn't rung yet, that's *why*."

I felt the showdown I'd been waiting for brewing. To the puzzlement of Mr. Marsden, I started fumbling with the buttons on my boom box, cued up "Ride wit Me"—my favorite song on *Country Grammar*—and

assumed a hostile stance.

And then I started rapping—at Mr. Marsden—with all the passion I could conjure, as if I could bring his unjust regime to its knees with the power of my punch lines. I have no idea what I said. I can only assume I was regurgitating all the explicit content I'd been consuming and that the rest of the kids scattered around were completely bewildered by the spectacle of a student picking a rap battle with his teacher. I just kept rhyming until the shrill passing-period bell cut me off midsentence, then scrambled away, leaving Mr. Marsden standing there, stunned. Moments later I'd forgotten about the confrontation and headed to algebra class, where, fifteen minutes from the bell that would have delivered me to spring break, the classroom phone rang, and a familiar nausea washed over me.

It was my final visit to Estacada's principal's office.

Threatening the life of a public employee was the official charge. A felony in the state of California, the police officers told my mom and me, after reading my Miranda rights—serious enough to send me straight to juvenile hall, depending on their mood. I asked where Mr. Marsden was, so I might be able to apologize to him. *Sitting in the next room,* Mr. Lim said, *far too shaken up to see you right now.*

Vice principal Victoria Crowder, Principal Lim, the officers, and my mom brokered a compromise to keep me out of juvenile hall: my name scrubbed from the honor roll, forfeiture of my spot on the eighth-grade trip to Washington, DC, and a five-day suspension that would become an expulsion should I step out of line in the final weeks of school. I wish I could say I had a sense of humor about it at the time, but I was the kind of kid who cried in the nacho line. Beyond being punished by a school I had no respect for, I didn't want to disappoint my mom, who I could see was starting to question whether screwing up wasn't just what I did, but who I was.

"I'm not going to end up stealing houses," I promised her back at home, scanning the old weathered dining room table, remembering years of well-meant sit-downs and talking-tos.

I kept an uncharacteristically low profile when I got back to school from my suspension, and seven Nacho Days later, I was free.

The next year, when I was in high school, I heard Mr. Marsden had been fired from Estacada for scratching a troublemaker he'd caught running in the hall with one of his skeleton keys. It crossed my mind that maybe I'd driven him to the brink of insanity, and this new delinquent was simply the last straw. I think the hurt was deeper in Mr. Marsden's soul, though. Looking back, I see more of myself in him than I would have admitted at the time.

Maybe Mr. Marsden didn't have parents who made him proud to be Canadian or who taught him the difference between rules and fairness. But I hope he did. I hope he was lucky enough to have folks who cared about him as much as mine cared about me. I hope he called his mom up in the Yukon after he got fired from Estacada,

and she cried, *Honey, I'm worried aboot you . . . fired for scratching a kid*

with keys one day, and you' ll be stealing hooses the next . . .

And first he thought about how he'd get away with it, and then it made him want to prove her wrong.

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