

Benny Brown

Ad Space

There are four of us on Cordova's summer crew, but it's always me who gets stuck out on the curb, at the intersection, with the sign. I think this is because I'm tall but totally unremarkable. Look at me. I'm six foot three, but I'm barely here. I'm bone thin. I'm clean shaven. No piercings. No tattoos, not that it would matter if I had any tattoos. My uniform—white sleeves to the wrists, bow tie, newsboy bill cap, name tag, navy pants—hides all of me. My arm span is immense, and I'm invisible. I'm like a clothes hanger or an easel. I hold up, but that's it. That's why it's always me who gets stuck out on the curb, at the intersection, with the sign. That, plus I'm able to stand for long periods of time without getting sore or needing a break.

Baxter, what you've got is stamina. That's what Loni, our manager, always tells me. She says, You might not have much else going for you. You might be a weird kid. You might be a weird, tall, ugly kid with a dog's name, but you've got stamina.

"He's got something, all right," Errol always says.

I pull double shifts without sitting down, even though our dress code requires us to wear these patent leathers, which chafe. I don't get blisters anymore; my ankles are permanently swollen. Same goes for my big toes. Clear sacs of fluid, crusted over, on the backs of my heels. On my big toes. Look.

At Cordova's, on weekdays, and on hot days especially, between 3:00 and 4:00, business slows to nothing. It's 3:00 now, and it's the last day of summer. RC, Errol, and I are fooling around behind the counter. We play one round of Worst Thing That's Ever Happened to You (car crash, "pass," dead dad) and one round of Describe Your Most Recent Experience with Illegal Substances (wine coolers bought with a fake ID, "cocaine sniffed off a frat house toilet seat," um ... weed?)

We have these types of conversations often: these giggly confessionals, disguised as games. One thing I've realized working at Cordova's, working anywhere, is that people will spill their guts without even being asked, just for something to do.

That's how bored you get. Once, at close, as he and I swept down the back line, I asked Errol why he chose to go pre-med at U of I when he might feasibly have gone anywhere, been anyone, been good at anything. I wasn't bullshitting him, saying this. I believe all of these things about Errol.

He must have realized how serious I was, because his face lit up when he said, "The money, obviously." He stilled his broom and stared off somewhere beyond the reach of the kitchen fluorescents, over the counter and into the dark, empty belly of the restaurant. He said, "I'd much rather be the one holding the knife than the one underneath it. Nothing like having a body slit open on the table in front of you."

Hearing that, my face must've done something strange, because Errol corrected, "I just mean I wouldn't mind spending eight hours a day looking down at ladies' nude torsos."

I asked if the blood-and-guts wouldn't put him off a little bit.

"Don't judge," he told me. "I'm not a freak or anything, but, honestly, it wouldn't. It doesn't." He feinted the handle of his broom toward my stomach and said, "So watch yourself, Bax."

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At 3:30, Loni pulls the sign out of the storage closet in the back. The storage closet is where we keep the products we use to wipe down tables, disinfect the drive-thru headsets, and sterilize the bathrooms. The storage closet is next to the break room. The break room is where we keep our lunches and dinners, and our wallets, and our bags, and a heavy yellow rain jacket. We keep our tubs of pre-cooked meat in the industrial freezer, our burger buns and dry goods in the kitchen, lofted over the drive line. We keep our ice cream cold and churning in a big silver machine. We keep the sign, folded into fourths, in the storage closet, tucked back between the brooms and a yellow bucket filled with blue cleaning solution.

Baxter. Sign, Loni says. She snaps once. Then she says, Don't try anything fancy, which is the same line she always gives, like she's afraid I'm going to try to triple flip the sign up

in the air, or pass it under my leg, or spin it on the tip of my finger. The sign is seven feet across and five feet tall, completely unfolded, so even if I wanted to try anything fancy, I couldn't. Besides, I wouldn't.

I won't, I tell Loni.

Satisfied, she hands me the sign.

"Try to look sexy," Errol says, and RC laughs because, well, look at me.

RC is okay. Errol says she talks too much. When she first started, I didn't think I was going to like her as much as I do now. RC is Cordova's latest hire. We recruit one or two new high schoolers every summer—girls, almost always. This past June, Errol and I—old guard—watched from behind the counter as RC shuffled in for orientation: newly fitted for her uniform, refusing to remove her bright rubber stud earrings.

Errol and I have been working together at Cordova's for six straight summers. Sorry. *Six. Straight. Summers.* Loni has been around for six years, too, but she's 30, and she's our manager, and she works year round, while Errol and I head back to our campuses come September. We're used to newbies like RC, to high school kids coming and going, on-boarding and quitting and disappearing and reappearing a year later at the McDonald's down the street.

RC heads the Hispanic Heritage Club at my old high school. Her first day, she told me the club had a 300% growth in membership last year, no thanks to the administration, all thanks to her canvassing efforts. Up from five students to fifteen. Still, not a great look, RC said. Low numbers, even for a high school in the middle of a cornfield, in the middle of nowhere, in Illinois.

I told RC how I'm studying political science in school and how growth projections—predictions, turnouts, outcomes—always trip me up. I can't forecast.

I told RC how Errol's set to graduate this year, how he's leaving Cordova's for good, for a real job, and how I wish I could say the same. I told her how strange it always felt for me to be back around high schoolers, seeing as I've never been all that interested in re-litigating my high school experience, and she said, If you use words like re-litigating, I bet you didn't have

such a great time in high school. And then we were friends.

RC is only 15, but she has a steady girlfriend, Teja. Four or five times a week, Teja rolls through our drive-thru in her mom's Honda Odyssey, orders a cup of ice, kisses RC through the cash window, then drives off.

When I'm at college, I have a boyfriend, who is shorter than me but taller than Errol. Errol's a small guy, with blue eyes and a snub nose. He's not handsome, but he has a loud voice. Some people have gravity. Errol has gravity.

The first time my boyfriend kissed me—10:00, sitting on his dorm bed, on his blue-and-orange-striped sheets—I lost track of my body. They say in those situations, your body's supposed to take over. They say you're supposed to go on instinct, that you just know what to do with your mouth, with your hands. But the first time my boyfriend kissed me, it was like I didn't have a mouth anymore. I didn't have hands. When I told my boyfriend this, he said, Huh.

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Sign folded under my arm, I take myself out to the curb, out to the intersection. It's a trek. Between Cordova's and the main road there's one big box store and two restaurants—our competition—one selling hot sandwiches, the other cold. Then there's a Famous Footwear and a Pet Emporium. No one can see Cordova's from the main road until it's too late, until they've already passed the offshoot road. That's why I'm sent out with the sign, which says, in block letters, COME TO CORDOVA'S [LARGE RED ARROW]. The large red arrow points in the general direction of the offshoot road which filters into our lot. I'm supposed to lure cars away from the intersection, but I've never been particularly successful. I'm not sure anyone knows we're here.

Once I make it to the curb, I unfold the sign. It takes me a while to buff the creases out of the cardboard, and, as I'm attempting to do this, I hear my mom's voice in my head. She asks me, as she often does at home, why I have to be the kind of compulsive who does things like buff creases and straighten edges and pick at my skin and pull at my hair and not the

kind who wants to vacuum her rug. Once, I plucked my right eyebrow totally clean, to a bald and shiny ridge. The next day, at work, Errol grabbed my chin and drew me a new eyebrow with one of the pens we keep by the front register for scribbling down orders. He gave this new eyebrow a comic slant down so I looked like some kind of super villain. I looked like a schemer. He paraded me around the kitchen, the drive-thru area, the break room. It hurt, the press of the pen on my raw skin, but it was pretty funny.

When I plucked the left eyebrow off, too—that’s when I realized there might be something wrong with me, something I might fix. But I’d gotten on too well for too long to justify doing anything about it.

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Eventually, I get the sign just how I want it. I’m sweaty from the cross-lot trek. I’m sweaty because our uniforms weren’t designed to be worn outdoors, at least not in August.

But it’s chic, Loni argues, whenever I complain. It’s 50s chic. Mr. Cordova founded this place in the 50s and Mr. Cordova’s the reason any of us has a job, so we all look like Mr. Cordova. The 50s. Mr. Cordova started with one burger stand and now he’s living in Palo Alto, 96 goddamn years old, snorting blow every morning and pulling chicks every night. He made a hundred million bucks dressed like this. Don’t you want to make a hundred million bucks.

I wouldn’t mind making a hundred million bucks, I tell Loni. I want to tell her that death by heatstroke probably isn’t the shrewdest financial maneuver for me right now.

I’m the kind of person who sweats a lot. Look at me. It’s not attractive. I know it would help if I cut my hair, and I came close once, when I was 19. I took my dad’s old electric clippers into the bathroom and locked the door. I set the clippers buzzing, but I just couldn’t do it. My hands started shaking so bad I was afraid I might scalp myself. I had a vision, or a premonition. I saw myself taking the hair off, only the skin came off with the hair, so all that was left was red gristle and skull. When I came back to myself, I came back with the realization that I like my

hair the way it is. I like that it covers my eyes and ears and the back of my neck. If I do come back to Cordova's next summer, maybe I'll dye my hair some lighter color, something cooler like red, or pink, or platinum blonde.

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I'm out by the curb, at the intersection, sweating. I'm standing on a patch of grass lining the intersection, not trying anything fancy, using my body to prop up the sign. I watch cars pass under the stoplight. I watch the sky cloud over. I checked the weather this morning before work, so I know there's a chance it might rain, but around here you can never be sure if, or when, or how much. One minute it's clear and the next: torrential downpour. It starts raining huge, heavy droplets, but I can see this bluish patch hovering just over the Mobil across the street, like a portal, like someone went and got themselves trapped in a grey burlap bag and they cut a hole to breathe and this bluish patch is the hole.

On the days I'm put out with the sign, Loni sends Errol to collect me so I can be in before the dinner rush. When Errol collects me, he takes me by the elbow. Sometimes I unbutton my cuff and roll up my sleeve so he has to touch my bare skin. It's like one of those Greek myths: some god or creature, some magic baby, curses a man to fall in love with the first person he sees. I think that's what must have happened to me. A curse not of sight, but of touch: Errol touching my elbow, touching my back, six summers ago. That's what did it.

In the winter, at school, I study politics and I have my boyfriend. In the summer, at Cordova's, I hold my sign and I have Errol.

Had Errol.

This will be his last trip out to get me, which is why, when it begins to storm, I don't bring myself in from the curb. I stand there, letting rain waterlog the cardboard, letting myself get soaked.

It's a few minutes before I spot him, wearing the heavy yellow rain jacket I should have had the sense to bring outside with me, sprinting across the big box parking lot. My white shirt

goes translucent and water pools in my socks. The rain comes down so hard it hurts my face. I can just barely make out the blurry yellow blip that is Errol. Passing the first sandwich shop, then the second sandwich shop, then the Famous Footwear and the Pet Emporium, the yellow blip becomes larger and more defined, until finally it—he—is standing in front of me. He puts his arms out. He grimaces, teeth bared against the wind.

“You fucking idiot!” Errol yells, but the wind steals his voice.

I wipe my eyes and read his lips. Yes, I say. Yeah, that’s me.

“Are you crazy?” He says. “Come inside!”

And then he does take me, but not by the elbow, by the back of the neck, and I think, as I often do, that if Errol just hauled off and clocked me in the nose, hard, once, I’d be fine for the rest of my life. My head would be so fucking clear.

Together, Errol and I run back toward Cordova’s. A few times, I see myself slipping, my head splitting open on the asphalt, but in reality I manage to keep upright all the way to the front doors. Cordova’s has two front doors. The first lets you into a kind of pass-through entry way, a glass cube with a mud rug for wiping your feet. The second door lets you into the heart of the place. Errol shoulders open the first door, shuttles both of us inside, and shuts the door against the gale. Then we’re standing alone together in the cube, rain battering the glass. Errol shucks off his rain coat, which should’ve been my rain coat. The air in the cube is hermetic. The same Paul Anka song that always plays from the tinny speaker overhead is—surprise—playing from the tinny speaker overhead.

It’s ambience, Loni always says. She says, it’s classy. The 50s.

I’m in the glass cube with Errol. Through the pane of the second door, I scan the Courtyard. “The Courtyard” is what Loni calls our seating area, six read-and-white pleather diner booths across from the main counter. On the main counter sit three electronic registers, spaced evenly, and RC stands behind the middle register, below our giant, glowing menu board, nodding politely at the man who wants to sleep with her. Her skinny, pink-nailed fingers clutch either side of her register screen. The

man at the counter is one of our regulars, has been ever since RC started on. Polo shirt and pocket protector, sad eyes and slumped shoulders, his name is Arnie, and every day at exactly 5:00, he sidles up to the front counter and orders two cheeseburgers, plain. Then, he asks RC to sleep with him. Obviously, RC never tells him yes, but she also can't tell him to fuck off.

Arnie has just now given up on this latest round of vain negotiation. He snags his paper bag from the counter with a brittle crunch and cuts a furious path toward the doors, no longer sullen and sad-eyed, but taut, simmering. All of a sudden, like someone's pulled the pin out of him, he's volatile. One of his dress shoes catches on nothing and squeals against the tile. He stumbles.

On his way out the doors, Arnie shoves between Errol and I, breaking us apart, but Errol replaces his hand on my neck and ushers me through the second door.

Welcome back, genius, RC says. What the actual fuck were you waiting for out there? Wet T-shirt contest? Did you win? And she laughs at this because, well, look at me.

I don't tell her that I was waiting for Errol to come get me. I don't tell her that I've been waiting for Errol to come get me for six years. I tell her, speaking of genius, she should really quit chewing gum unless she wants to pull a spoke in her braces.

Errol rolls his eyes at our sniping and ferries me past the counter, through the break room, and down a short, dark hallway. When we reach the end, I leave my sign propped on the wall, and then I am in the men's bathroom, with Errol, holding my soaked shirt under a hand dryer.

I feel bad for making you run out, I tell him, over the hot howl of the dryer.

"You should," he says.

I want to tell him that I feel bad about almost everything. I want him to tell me, Good. Tell me that I should feel bad. I open my mouth, but he puts his index finger on the space between my nose and upper lip. I shut my mouth, and the dryer goes quiet.

"This is the philtrum," Errol says.

Is that what it's called? I ask. I didn't know it had a name.

He says, "You should really know more about yourself," and I have a brief but satisfying vision in which Errol presses

harder, puts his full weight onto my face and caves it. When he removes his hand, I'm concave, like a rotten jack o'lantern.

"What are you gonna do without me, Baxter?" Errol asks, with mock pity in his voice and in the hard press of his lips.

I don't know, I tell him. I'm not sure.

He crosses his arms and, with his back pressed to the bathroom wall, he eyes my flat, white chest, my sopping shaggy-dog hair, my skinny arms supplicated beneath the dryer's residual heat.

"Oh, look at you," he says, and my heart races, because there are things I want said, and said aloud, and to me, over and over again. Oh, look at me.