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Pomp and Circumstance

Of all the bridges in New York I like the Verrazano the least. As I drive across it on a hot and humid Sunday afternoon to visit Edwin, a young, blind man from Staten Island, I try to figure out what I have against America's largest suspension bridge. My gaze glides to the right, over the hazy Lower Bay, then along the bridge's vertical suspender cables and its towering pylons into the sky. In one blow I feel the bridge's enormous dimensions and the precarious trust we bestow on engineering. Our faith in human abilities is invariably tied to our fear of falling.

I keep my eyes fixed to pylons and suspender cables until I reach the island; I try to trust in the lines that organize traffic, in maps and in people who smile, because that's what I see. That's what is tangible and present. But if I am honest I know that there is little to hold on to. I know that a map might be wrong, that rules can be broken, that bridges break and people's smiles fade. Yet the illusion of some sort of certainty appears better than feeling my way in the dark.

I don't trust but I forge ahead. This is one thing Edwin and I have in common: If there were another way of getting from Brooklyn to Staten Island, I would choose it. If there were a way to cross the street without having to depend on strangers, Edwin would take it.

There is another reason I don't like to cross the Verrazano Bridge. Even though the bridge was built to connect Staten Island with Brooklyn, it always reminds me of a lack of connection. Who, I wonder, moves to Staten Island voluntarily? Edwin didn't. He would have preferred to stay in the Bronx.

Edwin and I met at Visions, a nonprofit in Manhattan that helps blind people to live and travel independently. I came to

Visions to find out what it is like to live without sight. "You should write about the blind man," Edwin told me. "You should write about me." I watched him being trained to hold on to and trust in things unfamiliar to him and noticed that he sees and fears different things than I do. That interested me.

I park and walk up the block to where Edwin lives with his mother and his two younger brothers. The sun is beating down on boarded-up houses. Someone has spray-painted "30X28" onto a façade that tries to hide behind gray tarps. The road and chain-link fences are separated by a dense belt of high weeds. Plywood keeps people from entering vinyl-sided ghost houses. A high fence separates a suggestively-dressed girl from a group of teenage boys. The girl swings her skinny hips back and forth. The boys turn to stare at me angrily. Not wanting to come across as afraid or oblivious, I return their stares. One of the boys sucks his teeth at me. Another starts beating a dead tree with a two-by-four. This all happens in slow motion. The muggy air, thick and sticky like syrup, prevents acceleration. I'm afraid to expose my weakness and that the boy will turn his attention from the dead tree to me.

Edwin opens the door.

"How did you get here?" he asks in wonder.

"By car."

"*You drive*? But how were you able to find this place?"

"I looked at a map. Your house is very close to the bridge. It wasn't hard at all."

Edwin sighs, puzzled. Maps are a mystery to him, and the boroughs' relation to each other an abstract concept. There are no maps of New York City for the blind. Edwin's maps are inside his head and cover small territories. Instead of streets crisscrossing large pieces of paper, his maps have fences, curbs, trash bags and potholes, and the sound of approaching cars heralding the intersection of Vanderbilt Avenue and Targee Street. His maps are made up of the smell of warm dough at the pizzeria and of gasoline denoting the gas station at which to turn the corner.

Edwin rushes ahead and up the dark stairways. The liv-

ing room is scarcely furnished, the place of a family ready to leave. Edwin often listens to his mom's worries about money. How the family can't afford this or that. How her job as a maid doesn't bring in enough money, despite the long hours she works every day.

Edwin sits down on the couch, without offering me a seat. I pull up a chair. The sharp beep of a malfunctioning fire detector interrupts our silence. I try to focus on the music coming from one of the rooms in the back.

"What's that music?"

"Uh… one of my songs. 'Celebrity Ho's.'"

"What's it about?"

"It's about famous women and what I want to do to them."

Edwin says he composed the songs just for himself and that it might offend women. This one is about R&B singer Keri Hilson.

"What do you like about Keri Hilson?" I ask.

"She is sexy. Every man looks at her." He pauses and adds, "She is a very talented artist."

"It is very hard to offend me," I lie.

We go to his room to get a better listen. In the intimacy of his bedroom I feel like an awkward teenager. I shouldn't be sitting on his bed, I think, and get up. I stare at the bare walls and notice a hole the size of a head in the curtain.

Edwin downloads the instrumentals from the Internet. He then raps his lyrics into his little digital recorder.

"I love celebrity ho's," the small speakers blast. Edwin's voice is laced with suffering. "Hooo's, Ohhh-ho-hoooo! Fuck off, celebrity ho's."

I like how the refrain goes from "ho's" to the howling sound of a coyote and from there to the rejection of the desired subject: "Fuck off, celebrity ho's!"

Inaccurately, in Edwin's song Keri Hilson has a "big chest, big ass titties shaped so pretty." The song continues along these lines. "Most definite-ly, bitch, you'll be my wife-y. Celebrity ho's, let me put it in your ass…"

"How do you know what Hilson looks like?" I ask.

"Uh, I watch her videos."

"You mean you listen to them and someone tells you what she looks like?" I ask.

"I don't like to say *listen*, because it makes me sound like a blind kind of thing."

At twenty-one, Edwin is a handsome and charming young man, skinny and tall with broad, muscular shoulders. His big, soft nose contrasts with his angular features. Often his fingernails are lined with dirt. Dark butterfly sunglasses cover up the uneven, skim milk tissue clouding his eyes. He was treated with oxygen when he was born prematurely, and his retinas detached before he gained the ability to see. He was bullied all the way through elementary school. In 2004 his family lost their home; they moved from a poor section in the Bronx to an even poorer section in Staten Island.

Every morning Edwin commutes with Access-A-Ride to Lavelle School for the Blind in the Bronx, where, he says, he was transferred erroneously a few years back. It takes him almost two hours to get to this place he dislikes so much. Lavelle is a school for blind children who suffer from autism, emotional disturbances and a wide range of developmental disabilities. Edwin says he suffers from nothing: "I might be a blind nigga, but I'm no fool." His graduation is just around the corner, but it doesn't mean much to him. He knows that Lavelle students graduate only because their time at school has run out. The school's special high school diploma does not allow its graduates to move on to college. For most, it only marks the transition from one program to the next.

"I like my girls with long hair because I like to do stuff with their hair," Edwin tells me as we stand in his room talking about Keri Hilson. He claims to have two girlfriends, both of whom he met online and who are sighted. "I don't get involved with girls that have the same problems I have," he says. One of his girls lives in Atlanta, and Edwin says he recently visited her. Until a few weeks ago, he even had three girlfriends. But he had to dump one that was lazy. "The women today don't like to cook," he explains.

Comforted by the fact that he likes long-haired women with big breasts who cook for him and that he apparently already

has two girlfriends who fit his criteria, I ask him how he pictures me. If there was a misunderstanding about our relationship, this may be the right time to take care of it.

"You have short blonde hair and blue eyes," Edwin says. "When I first saw you, I was looking at you up and down. Is she hot or not? You are the type who wears jeans."

My hair *is* short. I *do* have blue eyes and often wear blue jeans. My hair used to be blonde but turned brown as I got older. In any case, I am relieved. I am not his type. Edwin concedes, "I am never one hundred percent right, but I can see a lot by the way someone sounds."

Edwin can tell whether it is night or day. He can tell the season by the strength of the sun. He says he can "feel a shadow" before he bumps into a wall. He can't explain how or why, but the shadow is not an external experience. It is a feeling that comes from within. It doesn't have anything to do with his eyes. Neither does it have anything to do with "echosound" or "echolocation." Blind people can learn to determine the size and distance of objects by the way echo bounces back. The echo can be created by tongue-clicking or cane-tapping, or by listening to one's own footsteps approaching an object. In any case, this is not how Edwin "feels" a wall. The wall is virtually non-existent until he is twelve inches away from it. It appears suddenly, but only if it is over six feet tall. If it is a small hurdle, Edwin doesn't feel it and may bump into it. He doesn't "feel the shadows" of cups, tables, or chairs.

"Argh! That damn fire alarm!" Greg says as he arrives at Edwin's home for today's home management session. "It's been beeping since March." It is now the beginning of June.

Greg works for Visions and for the past three months he has met with Edwin twice a week to teach him to live and travel independently. His mobility and home management sessions are the first steps in Edwin's future plans: He wants to move out from his mom's and rent an apartment in the city. "The sky is the limit," he once told me, optimistically. "I reach for the stars."

Today's plan is to go to the store to buy cheese, bread,

and cold cuts and make a sandwich. Neither Greg nor Edwin likes to cook. Besides, the one time they organized the kitchen cabinets so spices, pots, and pans would be easy to reach and to recognize, Edwin's mom messed up their system. It didn't take much for them to give up. The mother scolded Edwin in Spanish, and Greg didn't know how to intervene. There was no need for Edwin to cook, because she cooks for him, she said. For a blind kid, cooking is an invitation to disaster. What if Edwin accidentally turned the wrong knob? What if something caught fire? What if he scalded himself with burning water? There simply were too many what-ifs, so Greg decided to focus on cold meals, ironing shirts, and organizing Edwin's closet.

"Is that your car?" Edwin asks as we exit the building to go to the store. What? My rental is up the block, invisible from where we stand. He can't possibly be able to "feel the shadow" of the cars in the distance, or can he?

Edwin has often heard others say things like, "Is that your car?" and "You look good today!" and repeats them nonchalantly to make conversation, to get feedback or to touch base and make sure that the other person is still around and listening. When I act perplexed—"Which car? What do you mean?"—he doesn't respond. He strides ahead, his cane tugging him down the street. His question has fulfilled its purpose.

Across the street the boys are clinging to the fence and to the sexy caged child on the other side. They now crook their heads backwards but don't let go of the fence. Their jaws drop. Edwin is the only distraction in their steamy, lusterless day. I am reminded how Edwin once told me on the phone about the kids in his neighborhood. I had asked him whether he feels safe enough in Staten Island to go outside by himself. "Everybody in the neighborhood shows me love," he said. "They know I'm a rapper. They say, 'Hey, whazzup, man!" Then he put me on hold for ten minutes to make arrangements with his mom.

Today the neighborhood kids offer no words of praise or love for the rapper. No *Hey man, whazzup*. They just stare, seemingly angry about life, yet astonished about its vagaries.

Edwin stands at the intersection and waits. He does not respond to the calls of drivers.

"Hey man, it's clear. You can cross!" some shout from their rolled-down windows.

When he finally crosses, he turns into an empty parking lot and gets caught between fences. He nervously pokes the fence with his cane, trying to find the exit. Edwin is supposed to either help himself or ask someone for help.

"I guess this is turning into a mobility session," Greg chuckles. We stay behind and watch him struggle until a woman who doesn't see us rushes to his help. She leads him to the adjacent store, where women in colorful African dresses and turbans mix with teenagers wrapped in Puerto Rican flags. Behind us in line, a Mohawked girl with a facial tattoo stirs restlessly. Edwin, unaware of the people's impatience, takes his time. *Rolls. No, wheat bread. Cold cuts and Swiss, no, American cheese.*

Back at home Edwin pouts, "I thought we were going to make *real* sandwiches, like the ones at Subway."

"It's the same thing," Greg says. "They just put more stuff on it. You should have said what else you want on your sandwich."

Edwin mumbles something incoherently and slams the cheese and meat on the spongy white bread. "Done!" he says. "I'm not hungry. I'll save it for later."

Greg shows me Edwin's closet and how he has neatly organized it by color. Many of Edwin's t-shirts carry flashy images of rap stars and brand names. "Brands are very important to me," Edwin tells me. Enyce, Ecko, Rocawear and Nike Jordans. Edwin knows that jeans go with anything, so that's what he sticks to. When he goes shopping, he takes his thirteen-year-old brother along to help him with the t-shirts and sneakers.

Brands are not important to Greg and he shifts my attention to a little gadget Visions got for Edwin: a palm-size machine that detects color. He holds it close to his student's blue shirt. "Dark gray!" a robotic voice announces. Edwin giggles. He suggests holding it to my skin. "Beige!" Then he presses it against his own skin. "Dark brown!" the instrument drones.

“Where are we going?” Greg asks upon arriving at Visions. Edwin rattles back the directions I just gave him. To get to McNulty’s we have to go west on 23rd Street to 7th Avenue. At the intersection we have to take the southbound M20 Bus and get off at Barrow Street. From there the directions follow the confusing street pattern of the Village.

I am speechless. Edwin misled me to believe that I was helping him with his school homework. That’s what all his whispering was about. “Don’t tell anyone you helped me,” he said.

Edwin’s cane is almost too fast for him. He strides ahead, his hobbling gait echoing the back-and-forth rocking he exhibits when excited. Pedestrians part like water as he approaches, jumping across the tip of his cane, frantically typing into their Blackberries and iPhones. Greg tells me that one of his main challenges is to teach Edwin to accept help from strangers. “Independent traveling” is really about allowing yourself to *depend* on others to help you cross intersections and tell you the numbers on buses.

At 7th Avenue Edwin stops. His forehead furrows and his eyes look strained. He is caught behind wooden barriers. People come to his help but he rejects their offers. He rocks back and forth and listens. He is entirely by himself, inside of himself, like a child who has covered his eyes, assuming that no one can see him. A young man offers his help, but Edwin waves him off.

Edwin’s rocking is one of various modes of Blindism. Some blind people poke or rub their eyes, some flick their fingers. Others rock back and forth. It is said that these behaviors occur mostly in small children who suffer from a lack of sensory stimulation. The children rock, poke, rub, and flick because they don’t know what to do with themselves. Blindism is thought to be caused by a lack of social interaction and by limited opportunities to learn socially acceptable behavior. Early intervention can prevent, or at least help, but the older a child is, the harder it becomes for him to stop the poking, rubbing, rocking, and flicking.

Edwin doesn’t always rock. But there is something about

sudden excitement and insecurity that seems to catapult him back into the lonely and dull moments he experienced as a child. Maybe the lack of outside stimuli taught him to focus on small details that you or I wouldn't notice? Once "entertainment," does the rocking now help him survive? Maybe his intense focus allows him to block out disturbances? The ear-piercing sirens of a passing ambulance briefly drown out the sidewalk guitar player. The steady sounds of passing cars resemble the gush of a river. A homeless man mumbles incoherently. Edwin decides to cross the four-lane street all by himself. I close my eyes in terror. I don't trust green lights in New York. According to the law, a blind person with cane always has the right of way, but relying on this here is treacherous. Due to its proximity to Visions, 23rd Street and 7th Avenue has an audible signal that indicates if it is safe to cross. Yet to know whether a car is turning or running a light, one needs sight.

When I open my eyes, Edwin is standing on the other side of the street.

"Where is your ticket?" Greg asks.

"Oh, I forgot," Edwin mumbles. "I have no money." The M20 bus approaches. It huffs, brakes, and moves on. Greg smiles. He knows that Edwin has money from his monthly disability payments. He has even seen him spend money on gadgets at Radio Shack.

"Forgot again, huh?" Greg winks at me. "I guess we have to go down into the subway and buy one."

Whenever Edwin does something wrong, is embarrassed, or lets out a little lie—three things that often seem to go together—he mumbles, purses his lips, and tilts his head like a bird. This gesture is charming and makes you forgive him at once.

The Metrocard machine turns out to be broken. Edwin starts talking to the little window of the MTA booth. Its glass walls are covered with old newspapers and the booth has been closed for months. When no one responds, he stands in the dark tunnel and waits.

"I'll give you a swipe," a stranger offers, his Indian accent choppy and harsh. "Come on, I won't charge you," he says,

grabbing Edwin's arm.

"How do I know what you give me is any good?" Edwin snaps.

"What do you have to lose? Nothing!"

"But how do I know that it is any good?"

Edwin addresses a point many blind people struggle with. If they buy something at a deli and hand over a twenty-dollar bill, how *do* they know that the clerk returns the right amount of change? If someone grabs them by the arm "to help," how do they know they won't be robbed or pushed or abandoned in the middle of the street? But in this case, Edwin's suspicion is beside the point. He needs to get on the bus, not the train.

Edwin sometimes doesn't get his associations right. He mixes things up. The Indian man's offer distracted him from the fact that he needed to take the bus, not the train. All of a sudden his focus switched. His suspicion, not the content of the offer, became his main concern. But then again, maybe he *should* be suspicious when a stranger approaches him. Maybe he sensed something in the Indian man's offer that set him off, something I was unable to see.

"I'll give you my card and be your escort," Greg says. "It's not ethical but it works."

It works once Edwin finally gathers the courage to ask a stranger for help getting on the right bus. An hour has passed since we left Visions and another hour passes until we finally reach McNulty's.

It is graduation day at Lavelle School. At first, Edwin isn't sure whether I'll be allowed to attend. He tells me, "It's like the White House. Difficult access and stuff." I wonder whether Edwin doesn't want me to come. But he reassures me that I am welcome and seems genuinely excited when I call to confirm.

The receptionist waves me through without ceremony. The glass-framed hallway looks out on some small-scale gardening project. Colorful, faceless felt puppets and amorphous papier-mâché sculptures adorned with buttons and pom-poms sit on window ledges. On a tactile world map, France is represented by a tiny plastic baguette and Mexico by a sombrero. There are

pyramids in Egypt and a little gold satchel with a dollar sign in the U.S. Clichés that have effortlessly crossed over into the world of the blind.

Ten gowns and mortarboards shade the end of the hallway a royal blue. Personal aides in fine clothes are trying to get their charges lined up. The auditorium's ten-foot-high windows are covered with curtains. The space appears dim and gloomy. The cutout silver stars hanging from clotheslines do little to give the bare space a celebratory atmosphere. Rows of parents and siblings fidget in anticipation.

The students are led in by their aides. Some of the students are in wheelchairs, others are crooked and limp. Their eyes are dead. One of the boys jumps up and down, yelping and muttering like a toddler, while his aide unsuccessfully tries to readjust his mortarboard. A man gets up from his chair to touch the arm of his son as he passes. Our eyes meet. "Our Scotty!" he says proudly and laughs. Edwin hides his eyes behind dark sunglasses adorned with frivolous golden temples. He seems unmoved.

"Pomp and Circumstance" flows from the stereo speakers.

Born and raised in Europe, I am only vaguely familiar with this composition. It dawns on me that this is the first American graduation ceremony I have ever attended. I'm not often overwhelmed by sentiment, but here at Lavelle I am suddenly flooded by the juxtaposition of—pomp and circumstance. Dignity and despair. Pride and humility. Hope and hopelessness. It is this unacknowledged subtext that makes me cry. Lavelle's graduates walking down the aisle to the regal tune of "Pomp and Circumstance" epitomize what we all strive for—and how some of us fail through no fault of our own. I am overcome with feelings of heaviness and futility. Never have I seen the drive to succeed and the defeat so irreversibly entangled. Edward Elgar wrote "Pomp and Circumstance" with patriotic sentiments in mind, but he was also aware of the devastation of war. Watching those ten contorted graduates being led down Lavelle's ill-lit auditorium reminds me of scenes of wounded soldiers coming home from the war. I remember Edwin saying, "The sky is the limit," and suddenly realize how

close to the ground his sky must be.

The "Star-Spangled Banner" follows and I somehow manage to pull myself together. National anthems have a sobering effect on me. By the time Frank Simpson, the school's superintendent, starts reading his long, wooden welcoming speech, my cheeks are dry.

"You will be doing very well in the programs you go into," I hear Simpson say. "God Bless You." Predictably, his speech ends with "Reach for the stars! Not only reach for the stars—you are all stars in your own special way."

Simpson's speech is significant only for what it leaves out. Graduating from Lavelle must be scary for kids who have become accustomed to—and dependent on—a safe place and its people. Many of them will be transferred into daycare programs, where new spaces and new personalities loom. Edwin's life is uncertain as well. Just the previous week his mother announced that she is moving the family to a cheaper apartment in New Jersey. If Edwin wants to continue his mobility training he needs to find a licensed teacher within the jurisdiction of New Jersey. His sessions with Greg have ended abruptly. Much of what he has learned does not apply outside Manhattan and the small area in Staten Island with which he has become familiar. Becoming an independent traveler means foremost being able to navigate familiar routes or, at least, a familiar subway and bus system. To Edwin, New Jersey is a dark, unreadable place. His big dream, to get his own apartment in Manhattan, has died. For an unemployed blind person who depends on public assistance, moving from one state to another by himself is virtually impossible.

Next up is Jessica Jones, the school's art teacher, with her seeing-eye dog Chef and a speech titled "The Top Ten Reasons Chef and I Will Be Sad Tomorrow." Jones's performance is endearing not only because she shares the stage with a handsome Labrador retriever. She acknowledges the students' traits and appreciates them. Her speech gives us a feeling for the struggles she and her students face on a daily basis. Despite the burdens, Jones clearly likes her children.

There is Anthony, for example. He once surprised her by

giving her a hug from behind—and a very wet kiss. Taniqua, who deeply immersed herself in her projects, shushed her teacher each time she offered her help. Dimitri liked to interrupt class by playing with Chef's harness, and Dan gave other kids advice when it came to girls. ("Just tell her how you feel," he would say.) Obsessed with Mariah Carey, Eric sculpted his favorite subject out of Styrofoam, clay and paper-mâché. And Scotty always demanded that she accommodate him specially. One day he asked her to spend her Saturday with him at the zoo.

While Edwin has fewer disabilities than the other kids—most obviously, he can walk, talk, and hear—his story seems the most problematic. "Reason number eight why Chef and I will be sad tomorrow…" Jones's anecdote about Edwin begins. "One day in art class he said to me, 'Miss Jessica, you look filthy. Do you actually go on the train like that?' He then told me how to 'catch a man.' He said, 'Hide your clothes, take a shower, put on some make-up'…"

Unlike the other kids, whose idiosyncrasies seemed harmless and lovable, Edwin's remarks were condescending. But with a twisted smile on her face Jones manages to turn Edwin's insult into an amiable anecdote. "Chef and I will be sad tomorrow because Edwin and his advice are graduating today."

After Jones's speech, it is time for Edwin's rap. "Are you ready?" he shouts into the microphone, rocking heavily back and forth. The song "A New Beginning" is meant to remind the kids to hold on to their good memories, while looking forward to future endeavors. "It is a sad time and some of us may even cry," Edwin raps, "but think about and realize the memories that we shared. They won't go away because Lavelle showed us that they cared."

Then the chorus, made up of children from different grades who are capable of singing and following directions, joins in. "I won't pout, I won't fret. It's time to celebrate. I will smile, I will laugh. It's time to meet my fate. Yes, I am scared and yes I am nervous, but it's not the end of the road. It's actually a new beginning."

The ceremony concludes with ABBA's "I Have a Dream."

But the CD accompanying the singers gets stuck. “D-d-d-d-d-d-rrrrrrream!” the speakers stutter.

“One should, for example,” wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, “be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.” One should be able to see that life is uncertain—and sometimes even frightening—and yet be determined to forge ahead. But a less fearful life requires one to recognize her fears. And to trust, one has to take into consideration that there are people who aren’t trustworthy. The dreams of the young, blind man without means are to cross the street by himself, to have a girlfriend with long hair, to have the respect of the kids on his street and to rent an apartment in Manhattan. Although his dreams begin with a stutter, Edwin forges ahead.

**The names of Edwin’s schoolmates have been changed to protect their privacy.*