Hands tucked in my hand-me-down Carhartt, in bleak November chill, a darkened sky fills campus. My boots barely touching cobblestone, I search icy ground for traction as a group of white guys stumble behind me in the quiet quad, hands gripping empty bottles. Obscenities yelled in joy—or ire, I can’t tell, but drunkenly, unintelligibly, with shouts reaching to the skies without second thought, they grow closer. A glimmer of hope tells me they’re screaming cheers out at the half-lit moon, just their team’s fight song, but the bumps forming all over my skin warn otherwise. Wind touching my face, a mangle of slurred advances echo, Hey, boy! Yes, you! My speed hastens as their voices inch near me. I grapple with fears that, in this moment, my biceps mean nothing. All the hours spent lifting, weighted barbells touching chest, wasted in the face of six against my two, still learning, still wishing to grow here. Their calls deepen, You, boy! Hello?? in unison. Three, or four, or five of them—my mind starts to play cruel tricks. Instead of picturing sweet respite indoors, it conjures more pursuers, their empty beer bottles clinking, counting down the moments. A Caroline or Claire or Emma passes in the distance. She averts her eyes. They speed up. Quickly searching round for good, looking up to crucifixes perched atop academic halls, I start to pray that we’re not alone in this quad. Evening times mean lone janitors who look like me must be close—even if it’s just to act as witness. But divine intervention never comes. It’s just me. And them. Screams draw closer, my feet move faster, but somehow the library door that seemed once so near, moves farther away, space widening in front of me with unfriendly air. I look up again, but so low hangs a dark sky. My body flails. Boots slip. Just as I reach for the door—warm breath caresses my neck. Any good erodes, time stands still, and I wonder what it might feel like to have my head quietly bashed in.

So it is, laughs reverberating down hollow halls, they choose to pass me—but the fear lingers far past graduation. In good Catholic practice, echoes of shifting bodies and creaking oak pews fill the campus parish the following Sunday. So much so that I try to pay little mind to anything but liturgy. When kneeling for the Eucharist, I look to my side in good faith to find that I’m brushing one of their shoulders: sobered, well-mannered, and dressed. Deep into memory, so is it etched: a priest breaking host, asking Let us offer each other a sign of peace. Then my body, tall, frozen for good, unable to offer my hand when he extends his—his gaze matching mine just as he would any stranger.

1 This is a left-sided golden shovel, borrowing a line from Neil Diamond’s “Sweet Caroline.”