

DAVE HANLEY [THE GUILTY PARTY (EXCERPT)]

THIRD PLACE, JENNIE HACKMAN MEMORIAL AWARD FOR SHORT FICTION

Grant has seen the campus legends come and go, but he'll always remember Tyler Corbett. Any senior could tell you something about him; they knew Tyler well, maybe they drank with him every weekend. Graduates have carried his name outside the university, to their jobs and homes, their law offices and studio apartments. Right now, Grant says, someone out in South Dakota or Seattle is telling this exact story. How Tyler Corbett never graduated.

This was, of course, years ago, before Grant entered grad school and became the CA on your floor. When he first met Tyler, Grant was just a freshman here at the university. Just a regular student. Like you.

He says that growing up, Tyler had been normal enough. The type of kid who played varsity baseball, ran for student council every year, usually won, and worked part time at the local hardware store. That's not to say he didn't get into trouble every now and then, that he didn't occasionally show up late for work, or find himself in detention. Grant doesn't want you to get the idea that Tyler Corbett was the All-American boy. Because Tyler was just like anyone. He was the Everyboy.

Shortly before he graduated from high school, Tyler was almost killed in a car accident. Nothing so exciting as the traditional teenage tragedies: no alcohol involved, no best friend in the passenger seat. Just an avoidable sideswipe on the highway, enough to send Tyler's car over the guardrail and into the woods. There are, of course, the myths. Claims that Tyler was clinically dead before the paramedics revived him, that that's why a year later, after multiple surgeries and an intensive rehabilitation, he came to the university with a new outlook on life.

Sticking to the facts, Grant tells you that all Tyler came here with was a motorized wheelchair. The Everyboy became one of the rare, quadriplegic students you'd see zipping around campus, an immobile body weaving in and out of the walking crowds.

But he did the things a regular student did. Wheelchair or no wheelchair, college suited Tyler. You'd see him at parties on the weekends, drinking his beer through a long straw. During the fall semesters you

might catch him tailgating a football game, maybe skipping class to get some sun in the spring. It's hard to imagine enjoying life without the use of your arms and legs, but Grant doesn't doubt that Tyler Corbett was happier than most of the other students.

And he had friends. Tyler was really never alone. He'd roll through the dining hall with his entourage — football players who must have recognized him as a fellow athlete, one of their own, and taken to guarding him. And then there was his aid — a blonde volleyball player, cute, whom Tyler had hired personally through the work study program. He'd shoot her playful winks during class.

By his sophomore year, everyone knew who Tyler Corbett was. Sure, Grant says, he was easy to pick out in a crowd. But he had become singular through committing himself to being just like everyone else. Tyler was a sort of inspiration to the students who once thought heavy reading was enough to complain about. People respected him because he didn't preach. He just continued rolling from one place to another, creating a life at the university that wouldn't have been any different could he walk or shake your hand.

And if he had been able to shake your hand, he would have. In a school this large it's impossible to know everyone by name, but Tyler tried. Athletes, honors students, Greeks — he kept the company of all affiliations and picked up whoever fell between. You'd just as likely see him rolling next to that tattooed, dangling cigarette guy as with the red-sweatered Korean girl from Undergraduate Student Government. Grant remembers an afternoon when Tyler offered to keep him company on a long trek to the infirmary. "It's on the other side of campus," Grant said. "You sure you want to go all that way?" Tyler, already taking off and steering himself toward the building in the distance, told him "Hey, you're the one who has to walk."

And that, Grant thinks, is a good example of Tyler's character, of how you had to respect him. A good example, in fact, of how you'd feel bad for the things you said when he wasn't around. Because everyone, you see, said things.

You'd call him names like Speed Racer to your friends.

And then you'd blush, you'd play guilty. You'd put your hands up and say, "I'm so bad." But beneath the tsk-tsks and recriminations, everybody got a chuckle out of it. Everybody, at some point, made an innocent contribution. It was so taboo, Grant tells you. How could we not laugh just a little bit? How could we not joke? College students do, after all, love the subversive, especially when it's applied to their own universe.

And so you'd call him doorstep, paperweight.

You'd call him things like the vegetable cart.

It didn't matter how big-hearted Tyler was, or how hard he had worked to salvage a life from the auto-wreckage of his body. It only made things funnier when he wasn't around. Right now, Grant says, someone in an office somewhere is rehashing a bad joke about Jesus Christ or Anne Frank, someone's laughing about that teenage surfer who lost her arm to a shark, putting his hands up and saying, "I'm so bad." In this way, the fact that everybody loved Tyler Corbett only elevated the need to spite him.

And anyway, everyone had the idea that all those innocent comments and nicknames didn't exist, so long as Tyler never heard them.

Plus, they joked, it's not like you can't hear him coming.

This happened, Grant says, during their junior year. A little before your time. February, in the coldest winter he can remember.

The night before had been a busy one at the bar. Valentine's day. Couples were getting plastered before going home for holiday sex, single students simply rushing to form new couples for the night. The music was loud, the atmosphere heavy with a sexual urgency. The kind of night when nobody goes home alone. Anyway, Grant says, the entire school was there, it was hot, and you could barely move. The kind of night when even the dance floor grinds to a halt in its own traffic. Tyler had been out there, rolling between the dancing bodies. He liked to dance. With his head, at least.

Through the plate glass windows surrounding the bar, you could see the snow coming down hard. The wind wasn't so invisible anymore. It was a sea of ghosts illustrated in frost, crashing into the trees and rocking the cars, throwing up ice and snow on every campus surface. Drunken and belligerent, they shook the plate glass windows. They howled to get in. But the bar was a conscious being — it had a certain sense of self-interest and preservation. As the night wore on, the place began sealing itself off from the storm. The windows fogged up. The music got louder, faster. Everyone seemed to forget how cold it was outside. Students were comfortable in their booths or where they were standing, warm with alcohol. You had to separate yourself from the heat and the noise and the flash of the bar — you had to look closely — to see those windows shaking against the wind.

Toward the end of the night people began leaving together, holding hands. Outside the front door, Grant saw Tyler sitting in his wheelchair

beneath the floodlights, watching the wind's random patterns. He was drunk — his eyes glassy, his chin sinking toward his chest. He was alone. The night was freezing, but Tyler wore only the button-down dress shirt and the new jeans he had on inside the bar. Hair blew in his face.

"You're not walking home, are you?" Grant asked.

Tyler didn't look at him. "I can't walk," he said. His attention was detached from the crowd behind his chair, those loud voices leaving the bar. Tyler was out at sea with the wind. "The defensive line is taking me home in the van," he said. "I'm fine."

This was almost reassuring. Grant, in a hurry to get his girlfriend back to his dorm room, warmed up, then stripped down, asked: "Shouldn't you have a hat or some gloves? It's like, ten below, Tyler."

Tyler broke his gaze from the gusts of frozen air and gave him a flat look. "No worries," he said. "I can't feel it."

The next morning, Grant's girlfriend left Mitchell Hall at six. She had an eight o'clock class and still needed to get books from her dorm room. She never skipped, Grant says, but on that morning it wouldn't have been a bad idea to stay in bed. Out in the quad, Tyler Corbett's frozen body sat facing the building, not fifty feet from the front door.

Still a little drunk from the night before, Grant's girlfriend first thought that a new statue had been installed between the buildings. Tyler's corpse certainly looked that way with all the snow piled upon its head and arms. It stared up at Mitchell Hall with mixed expressions of wonder and horror — its dead eyes wide and frozen over, its mouth an open cavern. Tyler's skin shone like meat from the freezer. It had turned black and blue and purple in spots.

Even when she saw what it was, Grant's girlfriend didn't scream. She couldn't.

She did, however, skip her first class.

It was determined that the battery in Tyler's wheelchair hadn't failed. It had plenty of energy when the coroner arrived in his puffy black ski parka and black wool cap, his black suit and his black tie visible underneath, black gloves shaking around a cup of coffee, light and sweet. The cops must have joked, looking back and forth between him and Tyler, saying things like: "At least somebody dressed warm." But no, Grant says, it hadn't been the battery.

Tyler was simply too drunk to steer himself out of a patch of broken ice. He must have passed out trying — either from the alcohol, or most likely, from the cold.

But of course, there are the myths.

Lost in their own fun the night Tyler died, some students couldn't

help noticing how his mood changed from one moment to the next, going from hot to cold as if passing from the fever of the bar to the snow storm outside. Jackie John claims that Tyler had left the dance floor in a hurry, that when she tried rolling him back he told her to get lost. Some say that Tyler had been dodging people, going off on his own to the shadows by the pool tables.

And then there are those who Tyler ordered to stick his straw in shots of vodka.

A life like Tyler Corbett's, Grant says, well, you get stories. You only get the facts between flourishes of fiction. It's hard to tell the details and the embellishments apart. But what's generally received as the truth, the one story that seems to explain all the hearsay from that Valentine's Day at the bar, is that Tyler overheard one of his nicknames.

He finally caught on to the big joke.

Apparently, Tyler confused his friends over who would drive him to his dorm. When the night came to an end, none of them were waiting in the parking lot with the van. But it's hard to call that suicide. He had tried to make it home, after all.

Maybe Tyler was just too drunk to know what he was doing. Maybe he was hostile at the bar because it was Valentine's Day and nobody looked at him below the neck. He was the one kid who would wind up going home alone.

But it was obvious that Tyler was still interested in sex when you saw the girls who trailed his wheelchair around campus.

Maybe he had blown the chance to lose his virginity before that car crash. Maybe it was something like that, Grant suggests. Imagine it eating at him all those years, knowing that he would never experience sex, that he was locked forever in that wheelchair, in that body. Tyler Corbett, locked in virginity.

And how fitting, that when Tyler was out in the quad freezing to death, the rest of the student body was paired off and beneath the covers. The windows of the dorm rooms surrounded Tyler's death seat, and behind almost every one, students were engaged in something, if not just sleeping peacefully, side by side, while Tyler died alone a few stories below.

But if you want to know what Grant really thinks, he'll tell you:

Maybe he was the one who said something at the bar.

It could've been anyone, really. With the cheap beer and the cheap conversation flowing so fast it spilled on the floors, who could remember?

The following week, the university hosted a memorial service for

Tyler. A somber, elaborate affair. An obligation to attend. Only this, Grant says, wasn't the memorial service it was supposed to be. This was the guilty party. The students filled their small, paper cups and paper plates with diet Coke and crackers, taking nervous sips and bites while trying to remember that night at the bar. Those who had been there shrugged shoulders at one another from across the ballroom, trading sidelong glances that seemed to say: who knows? Portraits of Tyler stood at every corner of the room, smiling at them through the distances of death and photography as if to say: I do.

The photos haunted the space of the university ballroom, high school pictures of Tyler in his football uniform, his track sweats. Tyler on two legs, standing posed; the nerves between toe and hip still working and accounted for. And then the before and after, the enlarged photographs of Tyler in his wheelchair giving campus tours — pace car for the crowds of parents and students at the backs of his wheels — or pulling pranks in the hallways of the dorms, duct-taping his neighbors door shut, pulling an empty trashcan over himself and being wheeled around, laughing.

They hadn't counted on pictures at the memorial service. They didn't expect to see his face again. None of them wanted a chronicle of Tyler's life progression. They looked away. But he was everywhere — standing and sitting, running and wheeling — every stage of Tyler Corbett's being haunting the group-soul of a class on the verge of graduation, going on to jobs and places and lives he'd never see. Making it to the next stage.

But some of them, of course, made it into the photographs. They stared back at themselves from the flat, cardboard surfaces, from over Tyler's shoulder at the winter carnival or the homecoming concert. In one, Grant saw his face beside Tyler's, the two laughing and breathing steam beneath winter layers, wool coats and mittens dusted with snow. It had been taken two years before, during a blizzard. Classes were cancelled and they spent the day building obscene snowmen, throwing snowballs at the girls from their floor.

Grant couldn't eat, and so he put his plate down and wandered the ballroom.

When Grant made it toward the front of the room, he approached Tyler's parents. A handshake for the father, a hug for the mother, his condolences and heartfelt apologies for these two who had outlived their son. But they weren't as broken as he'd expected. They hardly even seemed to be crying. Grant saw that the two of them were beyond hysteria warmed by the deepest sadness, a pure grief that had begun forming long before Tyler died.

And not a sliver of suspicion in them.

Grant felt relieved. He walked away, knowing that he'd never have to see them again. Others followed. They approached Tyler's parents and showered them with hugs and apologies, silently dropping the weight of that night at the mother and father's feet. Each felt forgiven or found innocent. One by one they formed a line, a black procession inching through the hollows of the hall, students stepping up to the front of the ballroom to shake hands and graduate from guilt, from death, from Tyler.