
The Big Man in Cargo Shorts

Fiction by ALI BRYAN



LEONARD WAS THE FIRST TO find him. The man was face down in the school's outdoor learning space, next to a planter of basil. He was fat, his calves the size of a turkey dinner, his hair a gnarled mess of seaweed. Leonard wondered if the man was dead and then he wondered if the man who'd killed him was hiding somewhere on school property. Near the rock where Aiden G broke his arm, under the blue slide or behind the bench where Ms. Fleet maniacally ate her daily salad, as if it was a cheeseburger. No one on earth ate vegetables the way Ms. Fleet did.

There were no teachers on duty when Leonard's mom dropped him off on her way to the bus. The ice on top of the schoolyard puddles was still intact and the jackrabbits lazed undisturbed in the field. Leonard peeled the liner from a day-old muffin his mom had brought home from work and searched the pavement for signs of blood. There were none. After circling the body a few times eating his breakfast, he reasoned that maybe the man was just sleeping because he grunted the way Leonard's uncle did when he slept on their couch. Like he'd forgotten that he still needed to breathe.



"What is it?"
 "Shit, Jonah. You scared me." Leonard punched Jonah in the arm. Jonah's dad must have switched back to working nights.
 Leonard and Jonah stared at the body.
 "I think one of those washed up on shore after a tsunami." Jonah was a grade-sixer. He hadn't worn new pants in a couple of years. His ankles were bare.

"You mean a man?" Leonard plucked sleep from his eye.

"Huh?"
 "You mean a man washed up on shore after a tsunami."

"A sea creature." Jonah's mom had sent him to school with a two-litre tub of ice cream for lunch and it was cold against his back because he'd only worn a hoodie. There had been no clean spoons in the drawer so he'd packed a fork.

"It's a man," Leonard said.
 Jonah shrugged, allowed his backpack to slide onto the pavement and knelt down, brushing the man's hair away from his face. "I guess so."

"What are you guys doing?" Alice Mah appeared beside the planter.

"We're looking at this man," Jonah gestured.

"Is he dead?" Alice wore a first communion dress over snow pants.

Leonard shook his head. "I heard him snore."

Alice squatted down beside the man's face. His lips were banana slugs. "I see his breath." She stood up. "Anyone want to buy a fidget spinner?"

"Only if it lights up." Leonard pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. Another twelve minutes before the teachers would show up. Fourteen if Mr. Bell was on duty.

"Do you think he's just asleep?" Alice poked the man's boot with a stick. "I think he's a worker man."

"I think he's homeless," Leonard said.

"Bet you he lays concrete," Jonah replied, holding a fork. "That's what my stepdad does."

Across the street, Zane skidded down the slope of his front yard. His mom, wearing yesterday's nightgown, waved goodbye from behind the screen door. Zane hurdled the chain that stopped cars from driving into the schoolyard and joined the group. "Whoa, what is it?"

"A construction worker," Alice said. "He's having a nap." She made prayer hands and pretended to sleep.

"I still think he's homeless." Leonard pointed to a stain on the man's coat. There was a hole in the lining.

Zane sniffed the air. "He's passed out drunk."

"I don't smell anything," Alice said. "Do you want to buy a fidget spinner?"
 "Is it the kind with blades?"

Alice frowned.
 "Then no." Zane got on his knees. "I'm guessing whisky."

"That's what my dad drinks," Jonah said, whittling his fork into the bark of a nearby sapling.

"My mom drinks wine," Alice offered. "But only the white kind because the red kind stains her lips."

"My dad's not allowed to drink," Leonard said. "The last time my mom caught him she made him go live with my grandparents."

"One time my mom got so drunk she went outside in just her bra." Zane blushed and scratched the back of his head. "The cops had to bring her home."

"Your mom got arrested?" Jonah sat cross-legged near the man's body. "Do you think he's cold?" He touched the man's wrist. "He feels cold."

"I have extra mittens in my backpack." Alice pushed her glasses on her face and rummaged through her bag. "Fidget spinners," she said setting half a dozen on the ground. "And... mittens!" She waved them in the air, victory flags. They were black and decorated with emojis. "Help me put them on him."

Zane reached for one. "One time we had to put gloves on my dog because it was too cold and he wouldn't go outside to use the bathroom."

"I wish I had a dog." Leonard sighed. "My dad said we'd get one if my mom and him got back together."

Alice fitted a mitten over the man's fingers, his thumb exposed as though it was hitchhiking. "My mom's allergic to dogs."

The man lifted his head. There was a ribbon of dried blood on his cheek. He made a sound like an excavator and then his whole body heaved.

"I think he's going to puke." Jonah stepped back.

Leonard took off his jacket. "We got to move him onto his side. Help me."

"Why not his back?" Alice inquired.

**"Do you think he's just asleep?"
 Alice poked the man's boot with a stick.
 "I think he's a worker man."**

"Cause he'll choke on his barf." Zane took the man's shoulders, Leonard, his hips, Jonah, his legs. They rolled the man away so he rested on his side.

"I'll get him a pillow," Alice called, disappearing into the playground equipment. She returned with a scarf, lifted the man's head and shoved it underneath. "There."

"You think he's thirsty?" Jonah asked. "I have a juice box."

"No way, no juice. Trust me. My mom says only water. She'll drink like a whole bottle."

"Anyone got water?"
 Jonah emptied the contents of his backpack on the ground.

"You have ice cream?" Alice rose up onto her tiptoes. "What kind is it?"

"Neapolitan."
 "I'll trade you three fidget spinners for it?"

"I got water." Zane held up a squeeze bottle.

Jonah rifled through the pile of fidget spinners and selected three. "Deal."

Leonard gently tugged on the man's lower lip. "Just pour a little."

Zane tipped the bottle and squirted water into the man's mouth. The man swallowed and grated, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Alice replied, removing the ice cream lid and inspecting the contents of the container. She swiped her pinkie across the surface and licked her finger clean. "Yum." She replaced the lid, zipped the tub in her backpack and climbed onto the planter.

"Now what?" Jonah asked.
 "Sometimes I rub my mom's back," Zane said, "but I'm not rubbing his."

"Yeah, my dad says it just takes time, or another beer, but none of us have one of those." Leonard checked his phone again. "Two minutes."

"I saw Ms. Fleet go into the school." Jonah ran the fork through his hair. He hadn't washed it in a week and it stayed

where the fork moved it.

"Mr. Chen too." Zane placed a hand on the man's shoulder. "I think he's going to be okay. Doesn't seem too old. I bet you he's thirty."

"My dad's thirty." Leonard picked a piece of basil, and twirled the stem between his thumb and finger.

"My dad's forty-three," Alice said. "My parents married late."

"That's really old."
 "I know. He's, like, already losing his eyesight."

The school's front door wheezed open and Ms. Fleet stepped out with her safety vest and bagel.

"Go, tell her," Leonard said.

"Ms. Fleet," Alice yelled. "We found a big man in cargo shorts."

Ms. Fleet put her hand to her ear like she couldn't hear.

"Alice," Zane said. "I think you have to go over there and tell her."

"Fine," Alice sighed. She jumped down from the planter and ran across the schoolyard, ice cream jostling in her backpack.

Jonah collected his fidget spinners and shoved a tattered Ziploc of pretzels into the pocket of his hoodie. He threw his fork into the street and wandered over to a group of grade fours hanging off a goal post.

"Want to come to my house after school?" Zane looked at Leonard.

"I have to babysit my sister," Leonard replied.

Zane's mom hollered from across the street. "You forgot your lunch!"

Ms. Fleet was now charging across the schoolyard. Leonard noticed the man's socks were crumpled into his boots. He pulled them up, one at a time, to cover him. ■

Ali Bryan's second novel, The Figgs, was a finalist for the 2019 Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour. Bryan lives in Calgary.