

VIGIL

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The man in the green jacket holds the door. Children with bulky backpacks arrow inside, speedy and awkward as baby turtles. Siblings amble in clusters; bigger boys hold lacrosse sticks. Any other morning, the school's front door is a stopper. It's designed to be. It requires a buzz-in. It's heavy. It strains their thin arms.

It appears that the man in the green jacket is doing everyone a favor.

"It's nothing," the man in the green jacket says, smiling. Is he a parent? You've never seen him before. He holds the door, smiling, for a very long time. You are watching. The man in the green jacket isn't the only one bound by duty.

Everyone thanks the man in the green jacket. Minutes ago, you thanked him too. Approaching the door, you caught his eye, and he nodded, gentleman-like (for what else is a man holding a door for schoolchildren?). You and your daughter laced fingers and walked in. These days, she finds a classmate and heads off, never turning back. She's in kindergarten. Her classroom is at the other end of the school, through halls crowded with fifth graders who are taller than you. Your daughter is six. She walks the hallway's centerline. The crowd closes behind her like a curtain, but still, you wave.

The man in the green jacket holds the door as you exit. He holds the door as the stragglers arrive. A girl stomps past him, wet-haired, crying. At the curb, the PTO president's van doors sleekly slide as her children unload dioramas. A hatchback stops long enough for the doors to creak open; the driver's head drops as he pulls away, texting.

The man in the green jacket is invisible to everyone but you. Why is he still here? Wouldn't a parent have somewhere to go?

Now, the man holds the door for the flag-raisers, a boy and a girl fumbling with a ladder. No child does this with particular skill. Once, you watched two boys puzzle over the ropes until one fetched the new principal, a woman with a sharp haircut you've studied more than her name.

The man in the green jacket crosses a line of propriety that isn't easy to explain. (What would you report, exactly? *Excuse me, but that man in the green jacket is being too polite.*) You can't even describe him adequately. "Green jacket" is overbroad. Green as the leaves on the late-budding trees? Green like innocence? Don't dwell on likes. The jacket is army green but not army style. The jacket hangs open over a white T-shirt, khaki pants. The jacket is loose enough to hide things. You could tell a sketch artist about his casual stance, as if he had all the time in the world.

Instead, imagine your daughter has arrived at her classroom (with its large locking closet, its proximity to exits). She's studying the science project: an incubator of chicken eggs. Daily, she describes the chicks' forming lungs, the nourishment of yolk. She finds comfort in measurable facts. Lately, she's gone from sunny and unfazed to perpetually fazed, overwhelmed by social nuances. She's a water balloon in a room full of pins: thin-skinned, swelled with justice. Last year, in Pre-K, adults fixed everything; in kindergarten, adults do not. She says she's the only one who follows rules. Her seatmates squish her on the bus. Her friends grab her hat during recess. Girls link up in chains that close without her. No matter how many times she's painted into someone else's picture, or saved a seat at lunch, she weeps to you nightly over broken pinky promises.

She assumes saviors. She assumes goodness. She does not assume a stranger at a school door is why she practices hiding under desks, silent, as the teacher turns off lights.

Look now. The man in the green jacket has vanished. The door is closed. Is he inside, walking to his child's class—or slipping into a bathroom? Is he loading a grudge—or fiddling with his camera? Has he left the building for work—or for the woods that line the playground?

Best to stay here. You have the time. Soon, you'll have to pull away.

In her classroom, your daughter stands at the incubator, waiting for a peep. Any day now, it will happen: beaks will punch through shells. *It's called an egg-tooth*, your daughter corrects, explaining how the heart grows.

Not all of them will hatch, you tell her.

Wait and see, she says.

You do.

