

How It Is

by Roxane Gay

My best friend, Ryan, called me today. He was staring out his front window as the coroner removed two bodies from a burning house. Apparently, an elderly couple lived there, and the husband cracked, just as they were about to move to Florida. The old man shot his wife, doused the house in gasoline, and lit a match. Now they're both dead.

Ryan is depressed by the dreary scene. It doesn't help that it's cold and raining, he's home sick and I'm at work only half-paying attention to the conversation. "This is what life is," he says. "Just when you're about to reach the promised land, you get a bullet in the head." Ryan loves Florida because his parents took him to Disney World after an unfortunate incident while we were in high school. He spent two weeks getting to know every inch of the park, eating junk food, and ogling girls in short shorts so now, years later, Florida has become something of a *nirvana* for him. When Ryan isn't around, those of us who know him lament that he peaked at 17, at Disney World.

He gives me a play by play about the bodies being rolled out, shrouded in black vinyl. There's not much smoke, he says, on account of the weather, but there's not much left of the house either. He tells me about the dead couple's adult children, a boy and girl now man and woman standing in the driveway talking to the cops. It's the son, Ryan says, who's crying, leaning on his sister, making a mess of the moment.

When we were in high school, Ryan accidentally killed a kid, our other best friend, this guy named William Turner. They were wrestling on the cafeteria floor. The teachers sitting nearby didn't give a shit—they were eating their sad lunches and pondering their sad lives. It was one of those situations where a perfect confluence

of events ended badly. Will accidentally hit his head on the leg of a table, hard, sending lunch trays flying in every direction. Then Will stopped moving and Ryan started losing his shit, and then everyone else started losing their shit and Will just lay there with a couple ketchup-stained Tater Tots resting on his cheek and some pudding on his chin. Ryan was never charged but things didn't go so well for him after that because everyone in town started calling him Dr. Death.

“Should I go over there,” Ryan asks, but I ignore the question. “I think I should go over there,” he says. Ryan does this now—he's a self-appointed angel of death—always thinks there's something he can do in the face of tragedy. “We all grow into our reputations,” he once told me. I tell him I'll call him later and we hang up. As I pull into my driveway hours later, I look down the street toward Ryan's house. All the lights are off. Then I look across the street at the burnt skeleton of the old couple's house. Ryan is sitting on the concrete steps in front of the ruin. He's keeping watch. I raise my hand to wave, start to walk over, but then I don't.

