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The Instructions

Written by Adam Levin

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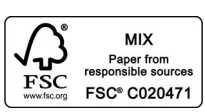
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1
ELIZA JUNE WATERMARK

Tuesday, November 14, 2006
2nd–3rd Period

Benji Nakamook thought we should waterboard each other, me and him and Vincie Portite. We wouldn't count the seconds to see who was bravest or whose lungs were deepest—this wasn't for a contest. We'd each be held under til the moment the possibility of death became real to us, and in that moment, according to Benji, we'd have to draw one of the following conclusions: "My best friends are about to accidentally drown me!" or "My best friends are actually trying to drown me!" The point was to learn what it was we feared more: being misunderstood or being betrayed.

"That is *so* fucken stupid," Vincie Portite said. "No way I'd think you were trying to drown me."

"You don't know what you'll think," Nakamook told him. "Right now you're rational. Facing death, you won't be. That's how methods like waterboarding operate." Benji'd been reading a book about torture. "This one guy," he said, "Ali Al-Jahani, specifically stated that—"

"Ali Al-Whatever whatever," said Vincie. "I'll do it if, one, you stop talking about that book—it's getting fucken old—and two, if Gurion's down. But it's stupid."

It did seem stupid, but Benji wasn't stupid, not even remotely, and I hated disappointing him. I said I was down.

Vincie said, "Fuck."

Splashing on a kickfloat a couple feet away was Isadore Momo, a shy foreign chubnik who barely spoke English, but the rest of the class was over in the deep end. Benji reached out, tapped Momo on the ankle. "You're wanted over there," he said, pointing to the others.

"By whom?" Momo said.

"By me," said Benji.

"Sorry. I am sorry. Sorry," said Momo. He got off the kickfloat and fled.

Benji told us: "I'll thrash before my death seems real. You'll have to keep me under for a little while after that."

"How long's a little while?" Vincie Portite said.

"Decide when I'm under. If I know, this won't work."

I clutched one shoulder, palmed the crown of his skull. Vincie clutched the other shoulder and the back of his neck. Benji exhaled all the breath in his body. He let his legs buckle.

We plunged him.

"How long then?" said Vincie.

A thirty-count, I said.

"How about a twenty?"

A twenty then, I said.

Benji started to thrash.

I counted off twenty inside of my head, tried pulling him up, but he wasn't coming up. He just kept thrashing. He was tilted toward Vincie, who was staring at the water.

Vincie, I said.

"Fuck," Vincie said. He pulled Benji up.

Benji sucked air.

Vincie said, "You count fast. Did you do Mississippis? I was doing Mississippis—I only got to twelve. Gurion. Gurion."

In the deep-end, some kids had rhymed "Izzy" with "Jizzy." I'd revolved to see who: Ronrico and the Janitor. Momo told them, "*Izzy*. I am *Izzy*, for Isadore. Isadore Momo. You may call me Izzy Momo." "Jizzy!" said Ronrico. "Jizzy Homo!" said the Janitor. Momo just took it, leaning hard on his kickfloat.

Benji cough-hiccuped, hands on his waist.

So? I said to him. What was the conclusion?

"Both," Benji said.

That doesn't make sense, I said. Which one was first?

"I said, 'Both,'" Benji said.

That doesn't make sense.

"You'll see for yourself in a second," he said.

"No way," Vincie said. "I'm going fucken next. Okay? Okay? I want to be done with this."

We held Vincie under and he started to thrash. We counted fifteen and we pulled him back up.

"Both?" Benji said.

"Neither," gasped Vincie. His pupils were pinned. His flushed face trembled.

"So what then?" said Benji.

"Who—" Vincie said, but he choked on some air. He showed us his pointer, laid hands on my shoulders. "Who cares?" he said, catching up with his lungs. "I don't even know. I feel fucken stupid. Dying is fucked. I don't want to die."

Then it was my turn. I let all my breath out. My friends held me under. They had a firm hold that I couldn't have broken, and the water got colder, and my chest drew tighter, and I thought I might drink, take little sips, that a series of sips imbibed at steady intervals could gradually lessen the pressure of the strangle, but before I'd even tested this chomsky hypothesis, air stung my face and fattened my chest. They'd pulled me back up before death seemed real.

What happened? I said.

"We waited and waited. You wouldn't start thrashing."

"Vincie thought you passed out."

I didn't, I said.

Nakamook asked me, "You want to go again?"

Not really, I said. If you think it's that important, though—

"*Fuck* 'go again,'" Vincie Portite said. "I'm out. I'm done. You can drown him by yourself."

Benji said, "Vincie."

Vincie said, "Nakamook."

The whistle got blown. Free swim was over.

Benji said, "Vincie," and extended a fist.

"What?" Vincie said. "Fine. Okay." He made his own fist and banged it on Benji's.

I counted to three and we raced to the showers.

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Were Isadore gay, I'd have probably hurt the Janitor for calling him a homo, and were he my friend, I'd have certainly avenged him—even just for "Jizzy"—but Momo was neither gay nor my friend. I'd had plans to fight the Janitor since late the night before.

I had never fought anyone without good reason, and I needed to learn

what doing so felt like. I needed to see if it felt any different. I'd been fighting a lot since I got to Aptakisic, and I enjoyed it so much—maybe too much. Each fight was better, more fun than the last, and I worried I was thrilling on the damage alone, rather than the justice the damage was enacting. I worried that the people I'd been getting in fights with might as well have been anyone as far as the fun I had pummeling them went. The only way to find out was to get in a fight without justification. If the thrill was absent, or in some way different, all would be well, I'd cease to worry. If the thrill was the same, though… I didn't know what, but I'd have to change something. So I'd picked a kid at random the night before—at least *somewhat* at random; I disliked the Janitor, he disliked me, we had Gym the same period—and decided I'd fight him in the locker-room.

Benji and Vincie were still in the showers—I'd won the race—and though I wasn't finished dressing, I saw it was time. If my friends got involved it could bance up the test, and I didn't need a shirt to get in a fight. I buckled my belt and ran up on the Janitor. A couple steps short of him, I towel-snapped his neck.

He whined and revolved. He said, "You're B.D. and you smell like cigarettes, it's nasty!"

No thrill yet, but we weren't really fighting.

I snorted up a goozy and twetched it on his toes.

"Towel!" he shouted. "Gimme a towel!" The Janitor dreaded all forms of dishygiene. He hopped on one leg. He threw wild punches. One caught my shoulder.

Now it was a fight.

I towel-snapped his eyes and he fell down sideways.

Someone said, "Your towel, sir."

"No, please, a towel, really!" the Janitor pleaded. He blinked like a lizard. His breathing got labored. He stayed on his side on the floor by his basket and begged for a towel while other kids watched.

The fight was over. No thrill at all.

I returned to my locker to finish getting dressed. My shirt was all tangled but I tried to pull it on. That's when Ronrico Asparagus attacked. He came from behind and charleyed my thigh-horse. I had to lean, but I didn't get deadleg. You only get deadleg if you're willing to kneel.

"Fight!" yelled some kids.

"Pee so pungent!" yelled some other ones.

Twenty came together to form a writhing wall.

I retreated four locker-lengths, struggling with my shirt. My head was through, and my shoulders were right, but the twisted sleeves were blocking the armholes.

Asparagus charged and kicked my flank.

I coughed, saw white. I slumped on the bench.

The wall swelled and hollered, waving its fists. Kids in the back shoved up to the front. Kids in the front popped out and fell down. Asparagus posed, just outside kicking range. "See that?" he said to them. "See that?" he said. "Gurion Maccabee. Big fucken deal." The wall got more dense, inched itself closer, squeezed itself tighter, popped out more kids.

Teeth shone everywhere.

My arms in their sleeves.

"Sit back down," Asparagus said to me.

I snorted and twetched, hung gooze on his ear. It moved like a yo-yo.

Asparagus lunged.

I tagged his grill with my wrist while pivoting. The blow was glancing, but the pivot added torque; he landed on his tailbone, swiping at air.

The air was sweaty.

I limped to my locker and snatched off the padlock, jammed home the U and slid in my pointer and swear to the knuckles.

The wall of kids: silent.

Ronrico had his legs again.

I told him, Be the hero.

"Fucken," he said.

Spring so fast you blur.

He vaulted the bench.

I uppercut the sweetspot under his ribs, that charliest of horses where every nerve's bundled. He stumbled forward folded, hugging himself, the scalp in his part agleam like the padlock, inviting me to fuse the two in imagistic deathblow.

Instead I kicked his ankles, finishing his chapter. His leftward collapse on the wall of baskets clattered so loud it roused Mr. Desormie.

Desormie didn't mean anything in Italian. He taught Gym in shorts that his wang stretched the crotch of.

"What's all the noise?" said Mr. Desormie. "Who is responsible for this brand of nonsense?" The tip of his collar was curling toward the ceiling. "Why's the Janitor balanced on one of his feet instead of both of his feet?" Desormie said. "And who made Asparagus wheeze and sway like a person

that's dying or fatally wounded?"

"It was Gurion!" "Gurion!" "Gurion did it!"

They ratted me out. I didn't see who; I was staring at the collar.

Desormie scratched his throat and told me, "Go nowhere."

I got on the bench to make an announcement: A kid who tells on another kid's a dead kid.

That was a line from *Over the Edge,* a childsploitation flick starring Matt Dillon.

"Hey!" Desormie said to me. He wanted to punch my nose through my face but wouldn't break rules. He crouched beside Ronrico. "Asparagus," he said. "Hey, Asparagus," he said. He hefted him onto the bench by the pits.

Someone in the distance said, "Kids who tell are dead and dead!"

Blake Acer, Shover President, ran from the bathroom, asking what happened. The Flunky whispered, "Gurion spit on the Janitor, then he whammed Asparagus deep in the solarplaces." Someone near Acer said to someone behind him, "Maccabee pissed on Flunky Bregman's little brougham. Ronrico's xiphoid process is shattered."

The Janitor continued to ask for a towel. Desormie told him to act mature.

Then the elephant sounds of lockers denting, the clicking of shock-numbed hand-bones getting shook.

Someone said, "Gurion battled two guys at once."

"Like that?" said the guy who was punching the lockers.

"Like that," said the guy who the puncher showed off for.

Back by the showers, Nakamook was shouting, "Gurion's my boy! Do not play with us!"

"Do not fucken *play* with us!" flaved Vincie, beside him.

Snarly toplip, eyebrows tensed, I mock-aggressed with my face at Ronrico. He didn't respond. Stunned? I said. He just held his chest. The gym teacher told me, "Cruisin for a bruisin."

I tried to break my fingers, to see if I could. It was something I'd try every couple of hours. I'd match up the tips of right and left and push. They wouldn't ever break. I'd think: They can't. This time was no different.

I stepped off the bench and I leaned on my locker and waited for Desormie to take us to the Office. He waited for Ronrico's wheezing to subside. The Janitor lay there, waiting for a towel. Everyone else in the locker-room verbalized.

"Your knuckles are cut." "It doesn't even hurt." "The Janitor's toe's broke."

"Gangrene set in yet?" "Do not *play* with us!" "No one fucken *plays* with us!" "Look at that latch. That's blood on that latch." "I didn't even notice the blood til you said." "Do not look at us." "…not fucken look at us!" "Bleeding's weird." "I bet I could take him." "No one here can take him. He's from Chicago." "He's only, like, ten, though—I'm twelve." "So's Asparagus." "Do not think of us. Do not talk of us. Do not try to be us." "…much *less* try fucken being us." "A sock full of flashlight batteries you're saying." "I haven't bled in a really long time." "Duracell mace." "Except for hangnails." "Blew out the ligaments with a special chi-punch." "Then the bodyslam." "Bam Slokum could take him." "Totally beside the point." "Full-nelson to suplex, closed with a sleeper-hold." "Blonde Lonnie could take him." "Blonde Lonnie *could*n't take him—he's standing right there." "Do it, Blonde Lonnie." "Blonde Lonnie fakes deafness!" "An axe-kick to the shoulder to top off the evening."

No one was speaking to any one person. All of them were speaking to every single person. Everyone was going on record. I'd performed specific actions on Ronrico and the Janitor, but the hows and the whos didn't matter to the rest of them. What mattered was something had messed up the arrangement. They wanted a part of that, so they tried to explain it, but didn't know how, so they made things up, working together, though none of them knew it, like bouncing molecules forming gases.

"Bleeding doesn't hurt." "If your *face* was bleeding, trust me it would hurt." "And the Flunky's not stepping up either, is he? And he's the Janitor's very own brother!" "A spring-loaded sap like Maholtz has." "HCl in a two-dollar squirtgun." "I've cut my lip—didn't ever hurt." "Boystar, too." "Boystar! Tch." "Co-Captain Baxter, then." "I've never seen him fight." "I'm saying your nose, getting punched in your nose." "A punch in the nose would hurt cause the bone. It's snapping the nosebone's the pain, not the bleeding." "Boystar and the Flunky and the Co-Captain together, then. Plus Bam Slokum. And Blonde Lonnie." "There isn't any nosebone." "Five guys is cheap. Especially with Slokum." "Tell it to my nosebone. He's standing right here." "A pointed fucking instrument." "Slokum's beside the point." "Nose is all cartilage." "Slokum's the *whole* point. Slokum's indestructible." "What the fuck's cartilage?" "He's fucking immortal." "He fucking jammed a screwdriver in dude's *fuck*ing earhole!"

Desormie yelled, "Quiet down!" at the ceiling.

Vincie Portite yelled, "Quiet down!" at Desormie.

Desormie yelled, "Quiet!" into the floor. To me, he said: "You've got trouble coming."

I should have said, Bring it. Instead I said, I know.

Someone said, "A dead kid." Nakamook shouted, "Ve vill crush you like zeh grape!" "Ve vucken vill crush!" Vincie Portite flaved.

Asparagus coughed, then started breathing normal. Desormie said "Good" and sat the Janitor next to him. "The office'll send for you later," he told them. "For now you go back to the Cage."

"Let's go let's move," he said to me.

After counting to seven, I hoisted my bag.

On the way to the door, I looked over my shoulder and saw the Janitor eyeing the gooze that was still on his foot, eyeing a t-shirt laying on the bench, about to decide to wipe one with the other. The t-shirt belonged to Leevon Ray. Leevon was the only black kid at school, unless you count halfie Lost Tribesmen—I don't—and he refused to speak, which is why he was Cage, but we'd sometimes trade snacks and play slapslap at lunch, so I knew we were friends, and to spread word through kids was no form of ratting, but it took me a second of sorting that out before I cued Leevon to safeguard his shirt. It took me a second because of the fight. My chemicals, after fights, often fired weird; during a fight, they were always reliable, tunneling my thinking so I could be simple, but after a fight the opposite happened and sometimes the tunnel would loop til it knotted and wouldn't untangle until I noticed.

Your shirt, I told Leevon.

The Janitor flinched.

I entered B-Hall behind Desormie. Up at the B-Hall/2-Hall junction, a red-lettered banner that hung from the ceiling read

JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL
APTAKISIC ^ FOREVER

They had to jam in the "Junior High School" because of genocide and irony. Most of Aptakisic's people were gone. Aptakisic was a chief. His tribe was called the Potawatami, but the Aptakisic basketball team was called the Indians. I got called a Jew, but Jews were no longer; we were already Israelites.

I took a running start and jumped to tear the banner down. I missed the lower edge by three or four feet.

"Don't test me, Maccabee," Desormie said.

You, kinesiologist, will soon be delivered.

He said, "What did you say to me?"

I said, Into my hand, Gym teacher.