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Maintenance Boy

BY IRA SUKRUNGRUANG | SEPTEMBER 2018

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This is what my new boss at the tennis club said to me: "Make sure the hot tub is hot. That's why it's called a hot tub. No one gets into a warm tub or a lukewarm tub. They get into a hot tub. What do they want to get into?"

"A hot tub?" I said.

"What should a hot tub be?" the boss asked, kicking her feet up on the desk. The bottoms of her shoes had tennis-ball lint on them. She wore black-rimmed glasses and a sparkly tennis-ball pin on her white polo.

"Hot?" I replied.

"Are you asking or answering me? I can't tell."

"Answering?"

"Then answer. Why is it you teens say everything with a question mark? Tell me without the question mark what the hot tub should be."

"Hot? . . . I mean, hot."

"This is your most important function at this job: keeping the hot tub hot. This is what our members complain about most. Read the suggestion box. All but one says that the hot tub isn't hot enough. Or that we have the best 'cold tub' in Chicago. Our members are smart-asses. The only other suggestion: they want fancy towel service, like we're Wimbledon. Last time I checked, we're on the South Side of Chicago and not in England. But! But! I don't want to hear the hot-tub complaint anymore. I'm tired of it. So, again, what's your most important function at this job?"

"Keeping the hot tub hot."

"Good. Now go to it."

I had other duties besides the hot tub, like sweeping the eight racquetball courts every three hours with a wide broom; like driving the Zamboni-like machine that sucked up the dust and tennis-ball lint (it looked like fluorescent-yellow hair); like gathering the discarded tennis balls from the courts and disposing of them properly in the dumpster; like scrubbing the toilets and urinals and emptying the feminine-hygiene waste containers in the bathroom stalls; like pulling strands of hair from the shower drains.

Once, I pulled out a clump of hair that looked like a dead rat.

Once, I pulled out a dead rat.

Above all else, however, I had to keep the hot tub hot.

Being a maintenance boy was my first job. I was sixteen. My mother said it would teach me the value of money and hard work, something my father, who had moved out, did not know. She said I had a lot of my father in me, and it would be best to get rid of those qualities. After all, I didn't want to be like him, did I? "Do not be a coward, like him," she said. "Do not be him." The truth is I didn't want to be like either of them.

So I worked. I worked weekend nights and a couple of afternoon shifts during the week. Sometimes I requested more hours just to get away from home. Being away meant I didn't have to deal with the sadness that lingered in our house. Also I couldn't smoke at home but could smoke as much as I wanted at the tennis club.

I spent most of my work hours in the maintenance office, a small storage room where the club kept boxes of tennis balls and vacuums and chemical-smelling cleaning supplies. Tucked in a corner was a desk, and on it sat a composition notebook known simply as The Book.

The maintenance-crew members were supposed to use The Book to communicate back and forth about things we'd done and things the others needed to know. There were five of us: four ornery teenagers who didn't give a shit, and Jack, an adult who worked the graveyard shift, after the club was closed, and who gave a lot of shits. Jack wrote the most in The Book, going into great detail about things like fitness machines that weren't working properly:

> Dear Youngbloods,
>
> Tread lightly on the treadmill. (Ha, ha.) It nearly flung me against the wall. Do not take the BROKEN sign off it. Do not try to fix it. We are not treadmill fixers. We do not fix. We clean. We maintain. Heed my warning.
>
> Yours,
> Jack

No one but Jack took The Book seriously. Some of the other maintenance boys doodled in it, drawing smiley faces or stars or penises or stick figures farting. Jack would cross out the cruder doodles, but no matter how hard he tried, a penis was still a penis.

I'd taken this job in the hope that one day I'd be promoted to tennis instructor. I was one of the top high-school players in the area, and a bunch of seniors who'd started at maintenance were now teaching kids' lessons throughout the week. Groups of first- and second-graders followed them around like ducklings.

To help pass the time when I wasn't cleaning or smoking, I hung out in the maintenance office, where the boss never came, and read The Book. One day I opened it and saw a longer-than-usual entry. It started as a list of tasks Jack had done throughout the night, but it turned into a diatribe about hot tubs: worst invention of all time; chemicals that destroy the body; massive expense to maintain. "Why would you want jets of water up your ass?" He said the hot tub was a bourgeois invention, and no good Chicagoan would ever get in one. Not someone from the South Side, at least. North Siders were another story. His invective went on to a second page, stretching from margin to margin without paragraph breaks, his handwriting getting more and more illegible as he moved from the ridiculousness of hot tubs to our boss, who was the bane of his existence. She had called and reprimanded him for not making sure the hot tub was hot and said she expected more from a man like him than she did from one of these teenagers with barely any hair on their balls. "She reminds me of my ex-wife," he wrote. "Such a fucking nag." He ended with a reminder to whoever was working the next shift (me) to clean the tennis-court sweeper — the bristles were too filthy to catch any lint. Also the soap dispenser in the women's bathroom needed filling.

I don't remember what compelled me to reply, but I wrote:

> Dude,
>
> I'm sorry. I refilled the soap. The net on court four is two inches lower than standard. I don't know what to do about that.
>
> Best,
> Ira

Lifer. That's what a couple of the other maintenance boys called Jack. Meaning someone who would work at the club for life. I actually liked the lifers better than I did the maintenance boys my age. Debbie at the front desk was a lifer. She was in her forties, and I found her attractive the way horny teenage boys find older women — or any woman — attractive. She always wore a denim shirt and jeans, and her blond hair fell to her shoulders, except the bangs, which stopped at her eyebrows. Debbie never smiled and had refined the art of sarcasm: "No, ma'am, we don't sell tennis balls at this tennis club. . . . Oh, wait. Will you look at this? I see that we do. How stupid of me." She affected a Southern drawl when she spoke to members, even though her people had been straight-up South Side for generations. If I was in the vicinity when she made one of her sarcastic comments, she'd wink at me. I'd try to wink back, but it probably looked as if I had something in my eye.

There was rarely a day when Debbie didn't work: She controlled the lights on the tennis and racquetball courts. She answered the phone and took reservations. She helped the boss put the schedule together and made flyers for tournaments, leagues, and lessons. When no one was at the club, she'd come outside and smoke with me: thin Benson & Hedges that she held elegantly between two fingers of her right hand, palm up.

"Quit now," she'd say. "It's a bad habit. A handsome boy like you shouldn't have a habit."

Handsome from her mouth tickled my ear like a whisper.

But the crush I had on Debbie was not as big as the one I had on Sharon, who went to a private high school and taught Tiny Tots Tennis on Friday evenings. I could barely work up the courage to say hi to her. I was a lonely boy living in a house with a lonely mother who spent her lonely days gazing at the neighborhood streets and listening to Buddhist sermons about suffering. When I was home, I spoke little to her and came up with excuses to leave the house to smoke. I was hurting but didn't know why. I knew only that I was angry at the sight of my mother, and at the sight of our home, and at the sight of the empty spaces my father no longer occupied. And I was angry at being girlfriend-less and thought I was girlfriend-less because I was a weird Thai kid who worked as a janitor at a tennis club. One day all this anger made me write in The Book, "Life sucks."

The next time I got to work, Jack had replied, in his messy scrawl, "Why?"

I didn't answer him. We didn't begin writing notes back and forth like Victorian pen pals. That would've been too perfect: a friendship that blossomed through the pages of a composition notebook and lasted for decades. This never happened.

But not because I didn't want it to. I wanted to tell Jack how I was feeling. To tell him how I missed my father and didn't know where he was. To tell him how sad my mother was and how her sadness made her wander the upstairs of our house late at night. To tell him how I would sneak peeks at Sharon while she taught tennis to tots. There was so much I wanted to tell Jack, but I couldn't. Even though no one wrote in The Book besides him (and now me), the other maintenance boys might have occasionally glanced at the words while doodling penises in it, and I couldn't take the chance that any of them would read my tale of loneliness, horniness, and self-pity. I would never have lived it down: *Cry me a fucking river, Thai boy. You fucking girl.*

So I didn't answer Jack, but I did begin regularly updating him on what I'd done and what needed fixing:

> Dude,
>
> The hot tub was green this morning. I fixed it, but I'm not sure I got it right. It's 104 degrees. Pretty hot. We need to order more toilet paper.
> We got like three boxes last week, didn't we? People go through it like nothing. Clogged the toilet with how much they use. You should've

seen the mess. Nasty.

Best,
Ira

Jack always replied, usually with sardonic wit: "Our members got big asses to clean, Ira."

I looked forward to our exchanges as much as I looked forward to overhearing Debbie's jabs at members. It made the job bearable. More important, Jack was listening to me, even if we discussed only cleaning supplies and brooms and the broken elliptical machine that sent a dustpan flying into a glass door. I wanted to believe Jack enjoyed corresponding with this coworker he'd never met but whose handwriting was pristine, the way his mother had taught him.

Lady League Nights were the worst. The club would be filled with the deafening chatter of women aged twenty-eight to sixty. Debbie would mime putting a gun to her head and pulling the trigger. "They are so fake," she'd say to me. "Fake people make my ass twitch." My workload doubled on those nights. The bathrooms would be a wreck of hair and tampon-clogged toilets. The lobby would be trashed from the pizza party afterward — cups and paper plates and discarded napkins everywhere. The women moved the furniture around and never put it back, and they drank red wine on the courts (which was against the rules), leaving stains that never went away, even after a coat of paint.

One afternoon a league from the North Side came to compete. The parking lot was packed with BMWs, Benzes, and Cadillacs. The North Side women wore white skirts and white tennis shoes and white tennis visors, even though they were playing indoors with no sun to blind them. They made passive-aggressive complaints about everything: "The pizza here is really *interesting*, isn't it, Betsy?" Translation: *The food here sucks. This club sucks. Betsy will back me up. Right, Betsy?*

That night my tennis rival, Nick, came to the club with his mother. Nick was ranked first in the city in our age group and among the top ten in the state. Every time we played each other, he won, but the match always went to the limit. I liked Nick, even though he grunted like a horse in heat when he played and had once hit a forehand right at my head. But I did not like his mother. She was the loudest of the North Side–league ladies. The captain of the team, she wore jewelry that dangled and clinked and a tennis skirt so short it exposed her pink bloomers. "Debbie dear," I heard her say, "I love that this club has magazines from three years ago. It's so *vintage*."

Nick's mother embarrassed him by bragging about how her superstar son was going to win state this year and already had universities offering him scholarships. My rival dug his hands deep into his fashionable jeans and bowed his fashionable head of blond hair. When he caught my eye, he shrugged.

Usually I'd hole up in the maintenance office to avoid seeing anyone, but the club was renovating the fitness room and using the office to store boxes of tiles and cans of paint. I took to wandering with a bottle of window cleaner and a rag, figuring if I looked busy, no one would bother me.

In a hallway the renovation crew had leaned twenty sheets of drywall against a wall, partly obscuring a bulletin board titled THIS MONTH AT THE CLUB. A newspaper photo of Sharon on the board caught my attention. She smiled with her big, perfect teeth and held a trophy. I wanted to read the article beside the photo, but the drywall was in the way. So I pulled the sheets toward me. They moved more easily than I'd expected.

Years later, when I retold this story to a friend who worked in construction, he said four sheets of drywall weigh about sixty pounds, which means twenty would be around three hundred.

Too late I felt the slow falling of the drywall. I tried to stop it, but it tipped over onto me, and all three hundred pounds landed on my leg.

I heard a crack.

I lay there, not moving. I couldn't have if I'd tried: the drywall pinned my left leg to the ground. Strangely I didn't feel any pain — at least, not at first. I didn't feel anything except embarrassment at the thought of yelling for help. So I didn't. I kept quiet and lay there, looking at a blown lightbulb in the ceiling that needed to be replaced. I could also see that the carpet needed vacuuming, and the water fountain had leaked, leaving a wet spot ringed with black mold.

I figured someone would find me. Everyone had to pass this way to get to the tennis courts, and I could hear their voices echoing beyond the glass door. I closed my eyes. The bottom half of my left leg began to burn.

"Oh, my God!"

I opened my eyes.

Nick's mother looked down at me. I looked up at her pink bloomers.

"Someone call an ambulance!"

Debbie came into view and mouthed, *Fuck*, before running off to the phone.

Nick's mother was kneeling and patting my face as if kneading dough.

Then Nick was above me, looking down. “Hey,” he said.

“You know him, Nicky?” his mother asked. The pitch of her voice was piercing.

“Yeah,” he said.

She told him to stay and talk to me while she tried to gather a few people to help her lift the drywall. Nick sat down, bringing his knees to his chest.

“*Nicky*?” I said.

He smiled. “Yeah.” He asked if I was OK.

I shrugged. Shrugging while lying on my back felt odd.

“I’m really gonna beat you now,” Nick said. “Like, you have no shot.”

“Whatever, *Nicky*.”

We both laughed.

It took six women and Nick to lift the drywall off my leg. His mother kept telling me not to move. She also said this would *never* have happened at her club.

As the paramedics hoisted me onto a stretcher, one of them saw the direction my foot was pointing and whistled in a way that meant, *Oh, shit*. Nick gave me his hand before they carted me off. “See you on the courts,” he said.

On the way out, I saw Nick’s mother screaming and jabbing a finger at Debbie, whose arms were crossed. The last thing I heard before I went through the doors was Debbie saying, “Listen, bitch . . .”

My mother was already at the hospital when I arrived. She wore my White Sox baseball cap because she hadn’t done her hair in a long time, and the roots, which she usually dyed, were graying. She looked at me and shook her head. I looked away. We didn’t say anything.

We hardly spoke for the next three months while my broken ankle healed. We hardly spoke after I went back to work with a cast. Except for snarky jabs, we wouldn’t say much to each other until after I left home and went to college and time began to mend whatever wounds we had.

As soon as I returned to work, Jack and I renewed our correspondence through The Book. He went on a rant about the ineptitude of the renovation crew, and how our boss didn’t care about the maintenance crew, and how if I had been crushed to death, “she wouldn’t have batted an eye. God, I hate her. Anyway I’m glad you’re back. Yours, Jack.”

At school the story circulated that I had rescued a little girl from the falling drywall. I knew one of the other maintenance boys had started the rumor, but I wasn’t sure which one. Even though the maintenance boys didn’t give a shit and doodled penises in The Book, there was a sense of solidarity among us. One of them wrote, “Ira the hero,” in The Book and drew a stick figure of me in a Superman cape.

My new celebrity gave me confidence — so much that I mustered the nerve to ask a girl named April to the prom, the theme of which was “Open Arms,” after the hit Journey song I listened to obsessively.

April was in two of my classes, and while I was on crutches, she helped carry my books from English to French. One Friday, after school, I swaggered up to her locker and asked her to be my prom date.

She told me no.

This wasn’t the answer I’d expected. The week before, April had said I had nice hair. She’d even touched it. On our walk between classes, she’d told me she was hoping someone would ask her to prom. *Hint, hint.* But by the time I asked her, she was going with someone else. Thank you. Sorry.

Embarrassment spread from my face all the way to my extremities and propelled me to my car. I drove as fast as I could to the tennis club, though it was hours before my shift. I was tight-lipped with anger: Anger that made me speed. Anger that made me blast heavy metal. Anger that came from the same place as my sadness. But I was tired of being sad, of living in a sad home with a sad mother and imagining my father being sad somewhere.

When I arrived at the club, Debbie was filing her nails. She asked why I was there so early. I zoomed past her and onto Court One, where I knew Sharon was teaching Tiny Tots Tennis, giving singsong praise whenever the students hit the ball or even just didn’t let the racket soar out of their hands. I burst onto the scene like the hero in a play. The little kids froze. Sharon stood with her racket in midair, her head tilted.

“Ira,” she said.

"Sharon."

"Hi."

"Hi. . . . Do you want to go to prom with me? It's cool if you don't. I—"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Cool."

One of the little kids asked, "Is he your boyfriend, Ms. Sharon?"

Another made a kissy face.

I went back to the lobby to wait for Sharon to finish teaching so we could talk some more. Debbie, who never smiled, was smiling. "What the hell was that?" she asked. When I told her, she called me Casanova. I didn't know who that was.

"I went to prom," Debbie said. "Do you know what happened?"

I shook my head.

"I got pregnant and started working here."

Sharon and I talked on the phone every night. Because she went to another school, I saw her only at work. We didn't know much about each other, except that we both played tennis, both worked at the club, and both liked musicals — especially *West Side Story*.

"Are we in *South Side Story*?" I asked.

"Slow your roll, buddy," she said.

I liked when she called me buddy.

A week before prom, Sharon and I decided to go "cosmic bowling": on Saturday nights the alley turned on black lights and blasted pop music. She agreed that I could pick her up at ten.

"It's a date, then," I said.

"Sure," she said. "If you like labels."

There were some club members we called lifers, too. They always came at the same time on the same days and reserved the same courts. One older gentleman — I don't remember his name — came every Saturday at 8 PM on the dot. He had a bushy mustache and always wore a white T-shirt, white headband, and paint-stained gray shorts. Debbie wasn't fond of him because he called her "sweetheart" and "doll." He used the fitness room, always following the same routine: treadmill for twenty minutes, weights for twenty, and then the hot tub and a shower. He always left exactly at closing, just as I was locking up, and he always said the same thing to me on his way out: "All right, sonny. Onward."

I was coming around to the idea that being a lifer wasn't so bad. The South Side of Chicago was filled with lifers. My mother was a lifer. She'd worked at the same hospital since she'd come to America. My father had been one, too, before he left, clocking in at the textile factory on Archer every weekday. Debbie was a lifer. Jack, whom I had still never set eyes on, was a lifer.

I lived in a city of lifers. Maybe I would become one, too. They were happy, weren't they?

At closing time the old gentleman still hadn't come out of the locker room. I told Debbie she could go home; I would close up. She winked and said to have fun on my date with Sharon.

I opened the locker-room door a crack and called, "Closing time, sir!" Then I went back to the lobby and straightened the chairs and wiped down the countertops. Ten more minutes passed. I cleaned all the windows of finger smudges. Five more minutes. I locked up the maintenance office. Another five. I called Sharon and told her I was going to

be a little late; some asshole was still hot-tubbing.

At 9:30 I went into the locker room. He wasn't there. I checked the showers. Nothing.

"Sir?" I said. "We totally closed a half-hour ago."

He must've fallen asleep in the hot tub; a lot of people did that, though one of the safety protocols posted on the wall was DO NOT FALL ASLEEP. Another sign read: IF THE HOT TUB ISN'T HOT, CONTACT MAINTENANCE.

I couldn't see into the hot-tub room; the glass windows were fogged, which meant the tub was hot.

I opened the door. Warm, moist air rushed out, steaming my glasses. I couldn't see the man at first. The jets were off — they were on a timer. "Sir?" I said. My voice echoed off the blue-tiled walls. "I need to close up." I cleaned my glasses with my sleeve, and that's when I saw the gentleman sitting upright. His back was to me. The lights in the tub made the water seem to glow. "Sir," I said, "you need to get going." He didn't move. I could see a swirl of gray hair on his back. "Sir." I touched his shoulder. He didn't respond. I touched him again. Nothing. Then I realized why.

I wouldn't make it to my date with Sharon, though we would go to prom and kiss afterward on a cruise of Lake Michigan and see each other for about a year before breaking up.

The man's heart had given out. An ambulance came to get his body. Its rotating lights lit up the brick facade of the club. The boss talked to the police, and the police talked to me, and I recounted the night's events. One officer put a hand on my shoulder and asked if I was OK. I said I was fine, really. I didn't know why I was fine. I'd just found a dead man in a hot tub. I'd touched a dead man. But I was fine.

The word *fine*, I would learn, is a kind of deflection. I wasn't fine. But I didn't know what else to say.

Jack came to work later that night. He was shorter than I'd thought he would be. Like my father. And he walked with his toes pointing outward. Like my father. But the similarities stopped there. Jack was white and wore an old bowling shirt and a baseball cap. He knew what had happened. The boss had called him. The boss asked me if I was OK. I told her I was fine.

"You sure?" she said.

I nodded. "Perfectly fine."

She said I should go home, but I didn't. I wanted to stay. I wanted to help Jack clean the hot tub.

Before she left, the boss made a joke: "Guess the tub was hot enough."

Jack and I didn't laugh.

First I drained the tub, and then we went in with rubber gloves, face masks, and industrial-strength cleanser. We didn't say much, just did our work. Occasionally Jack muttered, "I hate this tub," and I laughed. Jack didn't ask if I was OK. He didn't ask anything. What need was there when he knew so much about me already? Instead we chatted about beef sandwiches. He loved a good beef sandwich dripping with juice: "You know what I mean? One of those sandwiches where the bread's like a sponge and soaks it all up?" Jack squeezed his sponge, and water and suds trickled between his fingers.

"You mean one that you have to lean in to eat," I said, "so it doesn't mess up your clothes?"

"Exactly."

We talked about sandwiches, and we talked about how the Bulls were nothing without Jordan. We talked about the possessed exercise bike in the fitness room and how it would sometimes pedal on its own. We talked about the boss: "What a bitch." "Yeah, a bitch." We didn't talk about the dead guy. We didn't talk about our problems. We didn't talk about anything that mattered. But sometimes that's what you need. Sometimes not talking about it *is* talking about it, and talking about it is saying nothing at all.

It was past three in the morning by the time we finished. My shirt was wet, and my knees were red from kneeling. We did not fill the tub back up. Jack hung an OUT OF ORDER sign on it. The tub would remain empty for the next two weeks.

"Done," Jack said. "Go home." And he went to record what had happened in The Book.

I stayed behind for a moment. I had never seen the tub so clean. The metal railings shone. Jack had used a toothbrush to scrub around the nozzles of the jets and the caulk seal. My face was reflected in the blue veneer, like a blue-dream Ira in a blue-dream world. Maybe in that world the old gentleman was still alive, and I went on that date with Sharon, and when I got home afterward, my mother and father were both there.

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