



*They Made Kenneth Write A Poem*

Kenneth woke up on his mattress in the bakery a little after ten on Saturday morning. It was really just a garage, but they called it the bakery. Kenneth's wife, Mizzi, ran a small not-for-profit venture called Blessed The Baker which had outgrown the kitchen in the house a few years ago. But then it had also outgrown the converted garage, and she had begun renting a commercial space in a really bad neighborhood near downtown. Kenneth wasn't sure how they made the money to do so; they gave all of their bread away to shelters and old-folk homes and prisons. Something to do with grants.

Anyway, the bakery was Mizzi's thing, and it wasn't any of Kenneth's business. He worked at Bizuki, which made biscuit ovens purchased exclusively by a regional fast-food chain. While they were both technically in the baking industry, they never talked about it. Kenneth had tried to advise Mizzi on the purchase of an oven for the garage build-out, and it didn't go well.

A few weeks after the bakery had been vacated, Kenneth and Mizzi had an argument about his not offering to give her a ride home from a medical appointment. In the aftermath, Kenneth had dragged his son Boyden's old blue twin mattress out to the bakery and started sleeping in there.

He knew he had to mow the yard. He hated looking at it every time he pulled into the driveway. But he also hated mowing it. In his mind, all the other men in the vicinity were watching him from behind their slatted blinds, shaking their heads in disgust at his wobbly, uneven lines and

sloppy trimmer work. Once, his elderly catty-corner neighbor John Martin had come over and offered to let him borrow his edger, unsolicited.

But it had to get done. If he got it mowed today, he could let it go at least another two weeks before having to think about it again. He looked out the dirty little pane of glass in the garage door and scanned the yards of his neighbors as he unwrapped a Cosmic Brownie. Nobody was out. Crazy, everybody else on the block acted like yard work was their absolute reason for living. But it was silent. Kenneth looked at the bite he had just taken, the perfect impression his crooked teeth had made in the waxy frosting. He picked off a fuschia candy-coated morsel and ate it. He really liked the Cosmic Brownies, but Nutty Bars were probably his favorite. They called them Nutty Buddies now, which made him so mad.

He finished the brownie, walked over to the three-bay sink and bent down to get a mouthful of water which he angrily swished around and swallowed. He looked at his puffy face in the small mirror he had affixed to the wall. “Piece of shit,” he whispered at himself.

When he had finished mowing, he saw that he had a text from Zaimée. Zaimée was twenty-six, had a haircut he didn’t understand, and was his boss. They routinely wore outfits bearing their midriff, and used words such as “violence” and “labor” in ways that he was pretty sure were not correct. But they were the boss, and he mostly tried to just avoid them.

Zaimée technically worked for Firdium. Firdium had purchased Bizuki at the end of last year, and Kenneth was the only one on the R&D team who was still around. A buy-out was offered, and everybody else took it. Kenneth probably should have taken it, but the Bizuki facility

was only a three minute drive from his house, and he didn't know what else he would have done.

Kenneth was not a very good engineer. He didn't understand how the ovens worked very well, but thank God the people at Firdium didn't understand how they worked at all. Which made Kenneth an expert by comparison.

Kenneth leaned against the big stainless steel table and swiped open the text. *wht was tht thng abt the goldening limiter parameters? -zh* He sat down on his metal folding chair and tapped out *Hi Zaimie! The graph attached in the email lays it out pretty clear. A lot of those stats were just predictive, though, from previous models before we implemented the new fw, so it can be tricky to interpret.* 🤖 *We can go over it Monday if you'd like!*

Almost immediately after he pressed send, the three dots popped up and just sat there dancing on the screen for a full minute. He waited. Eventually the dots went away. After another minute, he turned off the screen, threw the phone on the mattress, and grabbed an Ultra out of the refrigerator. His phone dinged in unison with the cracking of the pull tab. *cn u cme in?? -zh*

Kenneth made an involuntary little "Wh-uh?" noise and stood there with the phone in one hand and the thin, sweaty can in the other. It's not like he had other things going on, but he had had two Ultras in addition to this one while mowing the yard, and he didn't love the thought of driving over and trying to bluff his way through an explanation of goldening parameters. But he also didn't really want to explain that he couldn't because it was 11:30am and he'd been drinking.

*NP! See you in 15. Was mowing the yard, gotta jump in the shower!!*



On Monday morning, Kenneth had a meeting invite from Xosh. Xosh was twenty-eight, and was also his boss. Zaimiee was also invited to the meeting. There were a lot of “all hands” meetings, but Kenneth couldn’t ever remember having one with just Xosh and Zaimiee. He replied Yes, and then realized that the meeting was for right now. Eight minutes ago, in fact. He quickly clicked Join Meeting, briefly previewed his fat stupid face in the camera box, and clicked Join Now.

The computer speaker chimed “buh-buh-bwoop” and there was Xosh on the screen, his face largely obscured by his phone. Zaimiee’s square contained only a beige circle which read ZH.

“Hey guys!” He regretted saying guys.

“One sec, Kenneth.” A full minute passed while Xosh looked at his phone before he abruptly put it down. “Kenneth! Big Dog! What it do, my dude?”

“Hi Xosh. How was your weekend?”

“Kenneth, just wanted to get with you and Z and touch base on what went down on Saturday.”

“Saturday?”

“I guess you came in on Saturday to catch up on some things?”

“Zaimiee asked me to come in and help them write up the new goldening stuff for their presentation.” Zaimiee was on mute.

“Okay, that’s tight. Not gonna lie, I love to see it. You know weekends are all discretionary, though, right? Like, work-life balance is

super-super important to us here, right? Like, for our culture? It's one of our big-big things."

"Right, I get it. Zaimée just had some questions about getting that goldening stuff kind of translated for a general audience, so. It was just easier for me to come in, I didn't mind. It was tight." He hated himself so much.

"Okay, that's super dope. That's, actually like, really-really dope. The initiative and the teamwork dreamwork aspect. But, um." Here Xosh stuck his hand to his face and drummed on the bridge of his nose with a finger while inhaling and exhaling at length. His head was kind of bopping up and down in the box on the screen. "The thing is, Kenneth, Zaimée came to me over the weekend because they were concerned with some aspects of your interaction on Saturday, and I just wanted to get your POV on it. And, Z, this is not to diminish your retelling of what happened at all, I just want to say unequivocally that I super-super believe you. But I just wanted to get Kenneth's take before we proceed here."

Kenneth didn't know what the hell was happening, but he could feel that his face was getting red and he was reminded of the time he had started crying in front of his third grade class. Was this about the Ultras? He had brushed his teeth before he came in, and they were only like 4.2%, he didn't think Zaimée would have noticed. They were still on mute.

It was the shirt. He couldn't believe that he had worn it into work. The shirt had come from a seafood restaurant in Maryland, a visit on the occasion of his brother's wedding. There had been an outing with his

brother and the rest of the groomsmen, none of whom he had ever met. They all worked in insurance, and they were all assholes. They went to this seafood restaurant, which had kind of a crude, salacious theme to it, and the rest of the guys were laughing at these joke t-shirts that they sold in the gift shop. Kenneth couldn't believe some of the things the shirts said. He just couldn't fathom anyone wearing these shirts out in public, let alone the fact that they were displayed on the wall there in the restaurant for all to see. There were children at the restaurant.

But Kenneth's brother had had several Leinenkugel's with his steamed crab platter, and he thought it would be funny to buy one of every shirt and hand them out to the guys as impromptu wedding-party gifts. And Kenneth had to admit that it was funny, at the time. The shirts the cashier produced from behind the counter were all rolled up into cylinders and tightly secured with masking tape, and when they got out into the parking lot they launched them back and forth like footballs in the warm night air, and it was a really fun time.

After they'd gotten home, Mizzi had found the shirt in the hamper and asked for an explanation. Mizzi said it was disgusting, and that his brother was disgusting. This was hurtful, and in retaliation Kenneth had taken to wearing the shirt around the house sometimes.

He had carelessly worn it out once or twice before. An evening trip to Kroger to get Nutty Bars, paired with sweatpants. A walk around the block at an hour he assumed nobody else would be out. He recalled the look of confusion and revulsion on the faces of the cashier, the Linds sitting on their porch rocker, declining to return his wave.

He had taken another Ultra into the shower with him on Saturday, and when he went rooting around in his dresser drawer for

something to cover his pale, dumpy torso with, he wasn't at his most discerning. He hadn't even considered what it said on the back.

Obviously he owed Zaimée an apology. He agreed with that, and would have no problem doing so. But Kenneth had a little bit of trouble accepting the degree of fallout. Zaimée worked from home the whole rest of the week, saying that the office no longer felt safe. Xosh spent a long time talking to Kenneth about "clothing as text," going so far as to imply that wearing the shirt was, effectively, the same as inviting Zaimée to partake in the act alluded to on the shirt.

Technically, the phrase on the shirt wasn't even dirty. There were no curse words, no literal vulgarity of any kind. But, obviously, one of the words- a completely normal word you would find a hundred times in any seafood cookbook- rhymed with another, less defensible, word. And the full context made for a pretty off-putting double entendre.

Xosh said that while he believed the situation merited reprisal, he also believed in rehabilitation and education, and as such Kenneth would not be terminated. He felt that Kenneth was in need of tools that would allow him to better express himself constructively, and better understand the significance and power of language culturally. As such, he was asking that he attend an adult education poetry course at the community college, in hopes of "scaling that EQ." Zaimée had signed off on the punishment, and Firdium was paying for it, so what choice did he have?

Kenneth arrived early to the first session on Wednesday night. When he found the classroom, there were already a handful of participants seated at the large table in the center of the room. A really tall old guy looking at

his phone, a skinny kid in a Baja hoodie who seemed to be meditating, or at least had his eyes closed, and three or four ladies around Kenneth's age. He sat at an open spot on the unpopulated side of the table and looked at the dumb little green notebook he had bought on the way over.

At six, a small, spritely woman of about sixty bounded into the room pulling behind her a wheeled cart filled with binders, books, and stacks of Xerox pages. She had short, spiky, dyed red hair that was pulled into a tiny ponytail at her neck. She wore a faded black t-shirt which read "Cocteau Twins," and stirrup pants.

She parked her cart beside the desk at the front of the room, removed the top binder from the pile, and placed it on the desk. She clasped her hands together and smiled at them like a kindergarten teacher, like a dentist. "Thank you all for joining me here tonight. How lucky are we? I think very lucky. I'm so joyful for the time we're going to spend together over the next six weeks."

The young man in the garishly patterned hoodie raised his hand and explained that he might have to leave early if his mom called, but that it would only be tonight, not a regular thing.

When he got home, Mizzi was on the couch watching a show where two women in black dresses were yelling at each other. Sometimes it cut to a room where one man was eating spaghetti and another man was doing pushups.

"How was the class?"

"It was fine. We read a whole bunch of them. One was about a wheelbarrow that had been sitting in the same place on a farm for like forty years and then this other one was just about a kid scribbling with a

crayon on construction paper. The lady said we all have like a hundred poems inside of us and that they were ours and that we didn't have to share them with anyone else but that she hoped we would. Did you eat?"

"We had Il Battello."

"We?"

"Yeah, Boyden was here. Can you not stand directly in front of the tv?"

"Boyden came over?"

"What did I just say, Kenneth? He just left, maybe ten minutes ago."

"You knew what time I was coming back. I would have liked to have seen Boyden. I like Il Battello."

"Well, I guess you should have thought of that before you wore a vile garment to work that robbed a coworker of their personhood. Maybe then you wouldn't have been at the community college being made to learn about poetry when your son came to visit."

Kenneth was looking at the tv. The two ladies who had been yelling at each other were sitting on a big white couch together with really big glasses of wine. The spaghetti guy was gone, but the other guy was still doing pushups, and one of the ladies put her foot on him. "I didn't take anybody's personhood. Is there any Il Battello left?"

"No, Kenneth."

Kenneth was laying on his mattress in the bakery, looking at his phone and eating some Star Crunches. He was watching a video on YouTube where a guy was talking about how he used to be sad, overweight, and addicted to pornography. Kenneth had clicked on it

because the title promised that the man was going to tell the viewer a bulletproof method for limitless self improvement. But the video only had about two minutes left in it and he was still going on about how pathetic he used to be.

Kenneth swiped out of YouTube and typed *personhood* into the search bar. He watched a few TikToks about that, and he was pretty sure that he hadn't assaulted Zaimée's. Then he typed in *star crunch how made* and watched a segment from a Food Network show. Then he typed in *zaimée hwang firdium*. Then, *zaimée hwang facebook*. Then, *if you look at someone facebook can they find out*.

The evening of the next class, Kenneth was sitting in his car in the community college parking lot, finishing his Funyuns, when he saw the poetry teacher pull into a space in the row ahead of him. Her car was green, and small, and it only had one hubcap in total. There was a bumper sticker from the presidential election eighteen years ago. Kenneth watched her wrestle her poetry cart out of the backseat, along with a small avalanche of loose papers and a Wendy's sack. She flung the debris back in and then stuck the top half of her body into the car and rooted around for a while. Kenneth noticed that she was wearing two different colored socks. He wondered if it was an accident, or if it was because of her creativity. She emerged after a minute with a small stack of paperbacks and added them to the cart. Kenneth watched her as she bounced toward the building, her free arm swinging back and forth like a little elf in a cartoon.

When Kenneth got home, Mizzi was sitting on the couch cross-legged. When he was in school they called it “Indian style,” but they didn’t anymore. Mizzi was wearing yoga clothes and had a great big glass of wine like the ladies from the show she was watching the other night. The glass said “Mama juice” in cursive letters. She was looking at her laptop, which had a young lady speaking excitedly about a stabbing murder on it.

“Is there anything to eat?”

“What? No. How was your class? Did you write a poem yet?”

“No, we just talked about them. And about what their purpose is.”

“What’s their purpose, Kenneth?”

“I don’t know. I guess they’re for when you have something you really want to say to another person, but you want to make sure to get it perfect, so you just write it down instead.”

“Is that what the teacher said?”

“I don’t know. It smells like pizza.”

“Yeah, we got Tommasso’s.”

“You and Boyden?”

“And Keighleigh.”

“Who’s Kaylee?”

“It’s Keighleigh, Kenneth. Boyden’s girlfriend. She’s the sweetest. She gave me this.” Mizzi hoisted the glass.

“You got a present? Did they get me anything? There’s no pizza left?”

“Kenneth, I’m trying to watch this.”

For their final project, the poetry teacher told them that they could turn in either a suite of poems, one “epic” poem, or a “special project,” which was open-ended and would require her approval. Kenneth approached her after class.

“Miss Riley-Rosenquist?”

“Yes? Kenneth, right?”

“Yes. I wanted to ask about the special project. Could it be anything we wanted?”

“Well, in a sense. Poetry can, of course, be anything you want it to be. Poetry would never impose limitations on you, Kenneth. But poetry is also about parameters, and strict adherence to rigid structures. Did you have something in mind for a special project?”

“Do you know about, um, clothing as text?”

“I don’t know that I do, no.”

“It’s about how clothing can sometimes be expression, and sometimes people can look at your clothing, like your shirt maybe, and they can feel things about it? Like, interpretation. Like the poems we’ve been reading? And the way they read it might not be the way you meant it. Like, reader and author, like we talked about? I was wondering if my project could be clothing as text?”

“That’s interesting. It sounds like you’re looking for a way for your poetry to come ‘off of the page,’ so to speak. I’m inclined to agree, Kenneth, but I’m going to caution you that clothing can have cultural associations that must be respectfully navigated. There can be intersections with delicate rights of way. Do you understand?”

“I do. It’ll definitely be real-real respectful.”

Kenneth stopped at the Dollar Tree to pick up some Zebra Cakes. They weren't actual Zebra Cakes, they were Baker's Treat brand Stripey Smiles. They weren't as good, but they were fine, and about a third of the price. He did a quick lap around the store to see if there was anything else he needed, and in the little arts and crafts section he saw the shirts. They were rolled up into cylinders like the ones from the restaurant, and right next to them were these little bottles of puffy fabric paint.

He had planned on having the shirt professionally printed, but the final class was only a week away and he wasn't sure he would have time. Besides, these shirts were only three dollars, and the paint was a dollar per tube. The shirt-printing websites he had looked at had really confusing pricing structures, but he was pretty sure it was a lot more. For less than ten dollars, he could knock the whole thing out tonight.

On the way home Kenneth thought a lot about what he wanted it to say. He knew from the class that every word was supposed to be important, and he wanted to make sure it was perfect. It also helped to remember that a lot of the poems they had read didn't make any sense to him, so if his didn't make sense to someone, they might just think it was supposed to be like that. Besides, there was really only one person it was for, and they weren't even in the class.

Back at the bakery, Kenneth cleaned off the big stainless steel table and stretched the shirt out. The paint tube recommended that he put a layer of cardboard inside the shirt before he started, so he carefully cut open an empty box of Swiss Cake Rolls and slipped it inside. The shirt was lime green, because that was the only XL they had. If anybody asked, he could tell them that the color was to be disregarded.

He wrote out the first line in sparkly purple. He messed up the second word. Not because he didn't know how to spell it, but because painting words felt a lot different than writing them. Anyway, he was able to fix it pretty good by turning the extra O into the A that it should have been. It was a weird looking A, but he could just say that was on purpose.

Halfway through the third line the purple paint ran out. He hadn't really noticed how small these tubes were. He only had the yellow one left. He opened it up and finished the line, and then realized that the yellow was pretty hard to see against the green. The Dollar Tree was all the way across town, though, and he wasn't going back. He could just say that was on purpose, too. He also realized he would have to make it shorter, as he was running out of both space and paint. Cut the last line. The teacher had told them they had to be ruthless about their editing. But with three words left in what was now the final line, he ran out. There was just enough to squeeze out three little dots after the last word.

Kenneth walked into the classroom, carrying the shirt in a Kroger sack. He was really excited. The session was dedicated to the students presenting their final projects. One of the ladies read a suite of poems that were about how the president was really brave and strong. The kid in the hoodie had a guitar and sang a really long song. The teacher liked the song, and there was a discussion about how song lyrics and poems were similar, and how they were different. The kid said that what he always liked about the song was how the lyrics were really poetic. The teacher asked if he had not written the song himself. The kid said he hadn't, and then there was a conversation about how he had misunderstood the assignment. But the teacher wasn't mad.

When it was Kenneth's turn, he pulled the Kroger sack from beneath his chair and removed the shirt. When he unfolded it, there was a brief issue with two of the puffy letters sticking together. But he got them apart without much damage and pulled the shirt over his button down. He walked to the front of the classroom and stood.

"Kenneth has a special project for us which concerns a subject that was new to me, 'clothing as text.' Kenneth, is there anything you'd like to say, or should we just let your clothing do the talking?"

"No, it's just the shirt, so I guess you can just look at the shirt."

"Okay. It's very colorful. It's a little bit... Is it okay if we come a little closer?"

"That's fine."

The poetry teacher approached him and stood with her face very close to the shirt. She backed away and considered, and then circled him slowly. The rest of the class stood and waited for their turn to come look closely at Kenneth's shirt. He stood with his hands at his side, looking almost straight up. It seemed to take a long time, and nobody said anything.

"Okay. Does anybody have any thoughts about Kenneth's project?"

The tall older guy said that he liked how it made him consider that a poem didn't have to just be in a book.

"Yes," said the teacher. "So often it can be difficult to lead people to poetry, but in this case, Kenneth is going to be really bringing the poetry to the people. Anybody else?"

The lady who thought the president was brave said that she liked the colors. Kenneth was getting ready to say that the colors weren't part

of it, but then everyone else seemed to agree that it was a good thing, so he didn't say anything.

"And what about the words themselves, does anybody have any comments on the words?"

The guitar kid said that when he first read it, he thought it was kind of funny, but then when he read it again, he thought it was sad, or maybe kind of mean, and asked Kenneth which it was supposed to be. Very quickly, the teacher advised Kenneth not to answer that.

"I think what Kenneth has made here is really special. It gives me lots of questions, but one of my very favorite things about poetry is that I can tuck those questions away in my mind and in my heart, and keep them with me, for years and years if I want. Maybe someday, something will happen in my life, and I'll think of Kenneth and his shirt, and some of those questions will come back, and maybe even some answers. Thank you so much, Kenneth. Who would like to go next?"

Out in his car, Kenneth typed the address into the Maps app on his phone. It said it would take fourteen minutes to get there. He propped it in the cupholder and turned left out of the community college parking lot. It was starting to get a little bit late, and he hoped that it wouldn't be dark out before he got there. It might be a little bit creepy to show up after dark. Also, the shirt might be harder to read.

It wasn't super hard to find their address. He had their phone number, obviously, and with that and their name, it only took him like two minutes to find the address online. He had to pay nine dollars for a thirty day subscription to peoplefinder.com, but that was okay. He was a

little bit worried that it wouldn't be correct, but when he pulled up outside, he recognized their car from work.

Kenneth opened the messaging app on his phone and tapped letter by letter with his index finger. *Hey Zaimie! Can u come outside real quick? I've got something I want to show u!* 🗨️