Making Fire Behind the Mountain

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PHILIP stood in front of the mirror without moving. Fog misted the glass close to his nose, then disappeared as he breathed in. He looked intently, not at his face, but at something behind it, behind the room itself. He stood watching and staring—as if waiting at a window for the first glimpse of a long-awaited guest.

Philip disliked the mirror. It was hung between the old chest of drawers and his bed, and he had to go by it whenever he left his room for class. He was always late. No matter how he tried to ignore it, his reflection would always catch his eye. He would stop, close his eyes tight, turn, then look. It reflected in such a way that one received a peculiar sense that the room was bigger than it actually was. There was an entire world in there, and Philip was always caught. He would walk slowly forward, watching carefully, stopping only when his nose almost touched it. Then, somehow satisfied, he would leave for class.

But today was different. Today Philip stood much longer than usual. His eyes looked deep into each other, never blinking or looking away. They were opened wide, as if shocked, yet strangely intrigued. Tears formed in their corners and ran down his face, but still he would not blink. He knew that one careless action—a glance to the side, a blink, a cough, would send it all away. Philip was terribly afraid. The fog covered more of the mirror, his fists clenched and tears kept coming, but he would not let go. Today he wanted to stay forever.

Philip held the black notebook with both hands. He felt it pushing hard against his chest. His paper was inside. Just wait till they hear this one, he thought. He took the paper from the notebook and paged through it. Just wait. They’ll see me, and they’ll know I wrote it. Philip couldn’t
wait to read it to the class. He remembered Mr. Bausky, his teacher. Damned powerful, he said. Damned powerful, Philip.

Philip smoothed his paper down with his hand. Then he picked it up, letting it rest on both hands. Not a single mistake. He had typed it over and over until it was perfect. He smoothed it again, then carefully put it down, looking at it once more before closing the notebook. The two staples were perfect as well. They were lined up one directly under the other, straight and level. Philip could feel a surge go through his body and up to his head. They'll see me and they'll know I wrote it, he thought. Just wait.

Philip held the black notebook close to his side. He wondered what he should do when he finished reading his paper. Maybe some other teachers will be there to hear it too. Maybe they'll all stand and clap. Just a little bow will do, he thought. Just a little bow, then walk out while they're watching. Maybe he has to see his publisher, they'll think. Maybe his girlfriend is waiting for him. Philip walked past the old chest of drawers. Just a little bow and then leave. That'll do it. He saw the mirror, but he could feel the black notebook and his paper inside. Just wait. He opened the door and walked down the dark hall.

The sun always hurt Philip's eyes. He liked the curtains shut and the lights off in his room. He put on his dark glasses and started walking to class. Everything around him was dark and grey, but he could still see quite well. He saw the people and their faces, but his eyes were covered. Philip liked it that way. He looked down at the black notebook and thought of his paper inside. The surge went through his head again, making him slightly dizzy. It felt good.

Philip looked up. He was almost there. He started to run, but stopped suddenly. He wondered why everyone was staring at him. Some were talking to each other, glancing in his direction. Some were laughing, shouting, some screamed and ran. One of the girls put her hand over her mouth and vomited. Maybe they know I have my paper, he thought. Maybe they want me to read it. He
looked down at the notebook, started to open it, but froze. He could see his ribs, his throbbing heart, his grey, lumpy intestines. He kept shutting his eyes tight and opening them. He looked up at the people, then back at himself, covered his chest with the black notebook, and ran.

Philip threw everything out of the old chest of drawers. Shirts, pants, socks and underwear were scattered around the floor. He sat in the middle of it all and pulled on all the pants he could find. He put on his undershirts, shirts and sweaters. Then he went to the closet and took out the winter coat. It was thick and heavy and black. He put on his rain hat, pulling it low over his eyes.

Philip started to leave, but he saw the reflection in the mirror. His eyes closed down hard. I won’t! I won’t! He held the notebook tight in his hand. Just wait. They’ll see me, and they’ll know I wrote it. He pulled his hat down farther and drew the black coat hard around him. Just wait.

Philip waddled through the door and up to the front of the class. His big, puffy arms stuck out from his sides. His eyes gleamed darkly in the shadow of the hat. Some of the girls laughed. They must be excited about my paper, he thought. He lifted it from the black notebook and held it with both hands in front of him. It was hard to get his arms so close together. They laughed louder. Philip? This is all very funny, but I was in the middle of my lecture. Philip stood with both arms out in front, holding the paper. He looked up to see if they were all ready. They were glancing back and forth at each other. One of the girls covered her face. Another vomited on her opened book. Philip looked down and saw. He saw his lungs and his red, churning stomach and his throbbing heart. His mouth opened, and a high, crackling cry came out. Philip tried to cover himself with his paper, but it wasn’t big enough. He looked up, squeezing his eyes open and shut, and ran from the class. His paper dropped as he went, catching under his feet. It crinkled and tore.

Philip stands alone in the dark room. Big, puffy arms stick out from his sides. Fog mists the close glass.