

ON THE CORNER OF TOMORROW AND TODAY

By Ben Gillman

[MR. MEISTER, a middle-aged band teacher, is bundled in an overcoat and scarf. The night is dark and silent as he braces against the cold and wanders around a lonely street corner.

He steps into the street and looks down each direction of the street.

He closes his eyes and imagines:

The sound of a high school marching band softly building. Quiet and low at first but building louder and louder in his imagination. The snare drums. The brass section. The winds. The precise stomping of a hundred feet in synchronicity.

After a few moments, Mr. Meister moves along with the music. Small movements at first. The bob of his head. The twitch of his right hand. The pump of his knees. Until eventually-

As the music comes to full volume, Mr Meister gives into it all and marches along with his imaginary band. His lead arm extends and falls in perfect beat. His feet clap against the pavement in exquisite time. His spine and body are in beautiful, strict alignment. But-]

RYAN: *(off stage- with a yawn)* Why're we here so early, Mr. Meister?

[The music cuts out suddenly.

Mr. Meister quickly composes himself as-

RYAN UMBERG, a droopy eyed teenager maybe sloppily wearing his band uniform, stumbles in. Still half asleep, and apparently unaware of Mr. Meister's "little show."]

MR. MEISTER: Ryan! You made it.

RYAN: What's going on, sir?

MR MEISTER: You made it. Good. We have work to do.

RYAN: Why're we here so early? It's-

MR MEISTER: I know what time it is, Ryan. I thought you were serious about this.

[This takes Ryan by surprise. He startles and composes himself.]

RYAN: I am. I just-

MR MEISTER: Then don't worry about the time. This is your time, Ryan. Trust me, there's only so much of it. Do you really think sleeping would be the best use for it?

RYAN: No, but-

MR MEISTER: Do you want to do well tomorrow, Ryan?

RYAN: Yes, but-

MR MEISTER: You know there'll be colleges there tomorrow, right?

RYAN: Of course, but-

MR MEISTER: Then why are we still talking about this?

[Ryan nods.]

MR MEISTER: What should we be talking about instead?

[Ryan stares wide-eyed.]

MR MEISTER: What could be more important here in this spot?

[More blank stares.]

MR MEISTER: What music do you hear, Mr. Umberg?

RYAN: There is no music, Mr. Meister.

MR MEISTER: *(with an exasperated sigh)* Do you know where we are, Ryan?

[Ryan looks around. He squints at some street signs.]

RYAN: The corner of Main Street and 5th Avenue.

MR MEISTER: What will soon be constructed on the corner to my left?

RYAN: *(slowly dawning on him)* Places for people to- Stands. Bleachers.

MR MEISTER: For who?

RYAN: People watching the parade? Families? Kids? The judges!

MR MEISTER: The judges. So what music do you hear, Mr. Umberg?

RYAN: We Will Rock You!

MR MEISTER: We. Will. Rock. You. The height of our routine. The pinnacle of our months of work. Nearly fifty of your fellow LaSalle High School students playing in perfect unison. Hundreds of people - men, women, and children - eagerly watching, listening, wanting to be rocked. And you, Ryan Umberg, are going to lead it. Did you really want to be sleeping right now?

[Ryan's awake now.]

RYAN: No, sir.

MR MEISTER: Let's go through the routine.

RYAN: Sir?

MR MEISTER: This is the corner that the judges will be watching at, Ryan. Colleges care about this time right here. Everything leads to this spot. Up until this point, it's just practice. After this point, it's all too late. Do you really want to leave anything to chance?

RYAN: No, Mr. Meister. No, sir. I just mean, shouldn't the rest of the band be here?

MR MEISTER: The rest of the band will follow you, Ryan. You know the song.

RYAN: Yeah.

MR MEISTER: You know the routine.

RYAN: Yes.

MR MEISTER: Then the music's in your mind. Let's go through the routine.

*[Ryan nods. He rushes to the far side of the stage.
Mr Meister stands on the corner and watches.]*

MR MEISTER: We're finishing up "Gangnam Style." Can you hear it?

RYAN: Yes.

[The sound of a marching band playing Psy's "Gangnam Style" plays.]

MR MEISTER: It's a crowd pleaser. The crowd loves it. How do you feel?

RYAN: I feel good.

MR MEISTER: How do you feel?

RYAN: I feel great!

MR MEISTER: Will you rock me?

RYAN: Yes!

*[Ryan marches forward as he lifts and drops his imaginary baton to the sound of-
A marching band playing "We Will Rock You."
And Ryan is getting into it, he snaps and pops as he slowly moves across the stage, but-]*

MR MEISTER: What was that?!

[The music stops.]

RYAN: What?

MR MEISTER: Is your arm a noodle?

RYAN: No.

MR MEISTER: Then pop it! I want to see snap! I want straight lines. Sharp angles. Do it again.

*[Ryan backs up the other side of the stage.
"We Will Rock You" starts again. He leads the march for a while, but-]*

MR MEISTER: Are you driving a race car?!

[The music cuts out.]

RYAN: Huh?

MR MEISTER: Why are you going so fast, Ryan? This is your chance to shine. You got here at least ten seconds too fast. Take your time. Own this. Do it again.

[More frazzled, Ryan returns to the start.]

“We Will Rock You” gets going again. Ryan leads, but-

MR MEISTER: Is this a joke to you, Ryan?

RYAN: I was doing the best I can.

MR MEISTER: The best?! You were, at best, a quarter note faster at the end than you were at the beginning. Does music speed up and slow down? You are supposed to be a human metronome. A metronome (*clapping his hands in rhythm*) keeps. per. fect. rhy. thm.

RYAN: I’m trying, Mr. Meister.

MR MEISTER: The way you’re doing it, the front row of snare drums will be giving all sorts of miscues to the tubas in the back. Anarchy, Ryan! Anarchy! Is that what you want?

RYAN: No, I just-

MR MEISTER: Is it, Ryan?

RYAN: No, I-

MR MEISTER: At this rate, I’ll never get into college!

*[Mr Meister freezes at what he just said.
It sinks in for Ryan too.]*

RYAN: College...?

MR MEISTER: That’s not what I meant.

RYAN: Why are you trying to get into college, Mr. Meister?

MR MEISTER: I meant, you’ll never get into college, Ryan.

RYAN: That’s not what you said.

MR MEISTER: Forget what I said, I meant-

RYAN: Are you leaving us, Mr. Meister?

MR MEISTER: (*a long pause*) Yes.

RYAN: (*a long moment of stunned shock*) But- But you can’t leave us.

MR MEISTER: Ryan, I got offered the job at Columbus State. I wasn't looking for it. But it came. And I have to take it. Don't you see, this is my-

RYAN: Next year's my senior year. You've been my director for-

MR MEISTER: Ryan, it's time for me to move on.

RYAN: I don't know if I can lead everyone tomorrow knowing you won't be with us-

MR MEISTER: I am with you.

RYAN: You have one foot gone. I thought you cared about us, I thought you-

MR MEISTER: Umberg, pull yourself together! Do you know why I chose you to be Band Captain even though you were just a junior?

RYAN: Because-

MR MEISTER: Because you're a leader. You lead and they follow, Ryan. The band needs you.

RYAN: But-

MR MEISTER: The band needs you.

RYAN: The band needs me.

MR MEISTER: The band needs you. And I need you. Can I count on you, Ryan?

RYAN: Yes.

MR MEISTER: Let's go through the routine. Let's get me that job.

RYAN: Wait, what?!

MR MEISTER: Damnit.

RYAN: You don't have the job yet?

MR MEISTER: Ryan-

RYAN: You said they came to you. You said you weren't looking for it.

MR MEISTER: I wasn't-

RYAN: You're not leaving us. You just want to leave us.

MR MEISTER: No.

RYAN: Then why are you applying for this job?

MR MEISTER: Ryan, you don't-

RYAN: Why?

MR MEISTER: You don't understand.

RYAN: Why are you trying to get away from us?

MR MEISTER: I don't have to explain myself to some kid.

RYAN: This kid leads your meal ticket. This kid owns you. Why are you leaving us?

MR MEISTER: You're going to run the routine like we practiced-

RYAN: I lead, the band follows. I'll march them right into a wall. How will that help your chances of getting the job?

MR MEISTER: Let it go, Ryan.

RYAN: I'll give different cadences to the trumpets than to the clarinets.

MR MEISTER: You wouldn't dare.

RYAN: I'll signal the cymbals three beats early.

MR MEISTER: You don't have the guts.

RYAN: I'll drop the baton right in front of the judges stand.

MR MEISTER: You little monster!

RYAN: Why are you leaving us!?

MR MEISTER: Because I have to! This is my chance, Ryan. I've been stuck at this corner for the past twenty years. I've watched kids like you march on to colleges and professional bands for twenty years. And it's been wonderful. But I stay here. Always here. And I want to go on.

[Mr Meister sinks down to sit on the corner.

After a moment, Ryan moves back to the far side of the stage.]

RYAN: Let's go through the routine.

[Mr Meister raises his head to look at Ryan.]

RYAN: Let's do it again.

[Mr Meister stands up to watch Ryan.]

RYAN: Sir, we will rock you.

["We Will Rock You" rises.

Ryan marches and leads.

The lights fade to-]

BLACK OUT

THE END