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## The Sexual Predator's Handbook

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## THE SEXUAL PREDATOR'S HANDBOOK

Viet Dinh

1. Always stay alert, remain vigilant.
2. Assure yourself: there is nothing wrong. They are old enough to kill grandparents for another day of vacation, to wear boxers with baggy carpenter jeans. They yawn and stretch like Teamsters, arms raised and backs arched, interrupting your *Romeo and Juliet* lecture with an elastic waistband, a white flash of stomach, a bellybutton trailing hair. When you show the movie, they stifle laughter when Romeo stands naked, bathed in sunlight, and they bite their knuckles when Juliet's breasts flash across the screen. Don't be obvious when they cross their legs and fold their hands in their laps, desire and shame irreducible.
3. Demand respect. Make them take off their baseball caps. They run fingers through their lopsided hair and stumble over the 'thee's, 'thy's, and 'doth's. On the day the girls are called out of class for an in-service, they snigger when the scrawny boy, the one who hangs out in the empty theater room during lunchtime, volunteers to read Juliet. Learn to cherish him. The others have sun-dappled legs or wear satiny soccer shorts that offer a shadowed crux of crotch when they prop their feet on the back of other students' chairs—but he, he reminds you of yourself at that age, and you close your eyes as his voice quavers: *Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say 'Ay.'*
4. Find excuses. Help the chain-smoking drama teacher with her production of *Annie Get Your Gun*; edit the expletives out of the yearbook; monitor the

lunchroom. Each time you see him, act surprised: *What a coincidence!* Even if he doesn't look you in the eye, examine how his bones push against his skin, as if testing its elasticity; his body is a lesson in skeletal anatomy: *fibula, scapula, femur, pelvis*. Make your presence known. Wave with a solicitous smile. Others equate your enthusiasm with an unspeakable lack of cool, but they don't see the tongue behind your lips, tracing the sharp edges of your teeth.

5. Persistence pays. One day while forming red Cs on quizzes, using the same motion with which you stir coffee, he asks you to look over his essay for a Veterans of Foreign Wars contest: What Patriotism Means to Me. Nonchalance is a weapon: *Sure, why not?* He looks at you with earnest awe. Help shape mediocre platitudes into astounding platitudes. Push yourself further under your desk so that he won't notice your erection. After he thanks you, pat his shoulder *You're welcome* and, quickly, imperceptibly, brush your thumb against his shirt. Imagine, if you will, the flesh underneath.

6. Remember this first touch. Let it linger on your tongue like hard candy. Rub your thumb and forefinger together in an approximation of contact. You will need this feeling on nights you find yourself tortured and alone. Desire is a mystery. A therapist would likely pin your desires to a childhood trauma, but what if there is no trauma? What if you begged to be touched, wanted to be held, demanded to be loved? What if you knew exactly what you wanted—and still do?

7. Give favors. Leniency for a two-day-late paper. Absences that would normally be reported to the attendance office. Hall passes for spurious reasons—or no reason whatsoever. He tries your generosity, but don't be petty.

An implicit secrecy exists. These lagniappes accumulate as a bill to collect later.

8. Wait with leonine patience. He advances to the state competition, and other civic clubs beckon: The Optimists, the Kiwanis, the Jaycees: gatherings of old men who pay to hear their past glory reflected back by the young. During the field trip to the Shakespeare festival, he rides in the front seat of your car. You almost feel embarrassed by your preference for easy listening music, but he mouths the words to the Burt Bacharach tunes. He fingers the vinyl piping on the side of the seat, and you could, if you dared, stretch a pinkie from the stick shift and touch his knuckle. But witnesses surround you; the school bus honks in good fun when you pass. He looks out the window, as if memorizing this escape route from school. Your heart beats so fast it almost breaks.

9. Avoid distractions. There are many: jocks teasing midriff-baring girls with breezy brutality; hangers-on with eager smiles and secondhand laughter who snap up the jocks' crumbs; nerds who cradle their books like babies, instead of holding them under their arms; football players whose thick muscles render their necks immobile; black boys who don't react when everyone turns to them during *Othello's* racist sentiments; skater boys sporting scuffed knees, scarred elbows, and airs of invulnerability; basketball boys with legs that branch out voraciously; preternaturally high-voiced choir boys who daily are slammed against the lockers; boys who wear sweatpants every day; boys who wear the same pair of sweatpants every day; boys who move through class heads down, hoping not to attract attention and dying from lack of it simultaneously. So many boys, so much suffering: you want to help them all.



10. Know when the tide turns. He eats lunch in your classroom and empties his tray in the waste bin by your desk: apple cores, pizza crusts, chicken nugget breading. When the two of you work on his speech late into the evening, after the janitors have turned out the hallway lights, offer to drive him home. Ask if he wants something to eat, your treat. Between French fries, he tells you how his parents pressured him to join Future Business Leaders of America, how drama was a waste of time. *You're the only one who listens to me*, he says, holding a burger. Sesame seeds stick to his greasy fingers, and you want to grab his wrist, hold his hand still, and lick them off. *No one understands me*, he continues, and you realize this truth, the loneliness implicit therein. How wise he is beyond his years; how adult he is!

11. Seize the opportunity when it comes. Next year will be his last, a flurry of SAT Scantron sheets, college recruitment brochures, extra-curricular activities plotted to round out the most indifferent student. He will fade as soon as you turn the page in your grade book. Already, other boys clamor to replace him: colleagues warn of up-and-coming troublemakers in the sophomore class; warm weather brings out thinner and thinner t-shirts, biceps and pectorals taking shape underneath. The appetite for summer vacation threatens to shake the school apart; truancy cleans out more and more desks. You are running out of time.

12. Use your leverage. Schedule an after school conference. Tell him: you've been letting his poor class performance slide, but it can't continue. College acceptances hang on a knife's edge. Speak slowly. Lay out his misdemeanors, the circumstantial evidence, the damning truth. Listen

as footsteps and residual chatter drain from the halls. Pretend to straighten the desks in the corner of the classroom, away from the windows and the door. Let him know that you *know* he's a good student. You're concerned about his future. You want to help, but. . . . The trail you leave is full of ruin. Worry blots out the resistance behind his eyes; he tears up and trembles. Tell him: *It's okay. We can work something out.* Close in for a hug. Press his body against yours. Feel how reassurance comforts and stiffens. You could snap him in two if you wanted—leave him broken and bleeding at your feet—instead, envelop him in your arms. He no longer pulls away; the remnants of his urge to flee dissolve; his twitching dwindles to a shudder. Tilt your head and promise protection, safety, silence. Let him know he is loved. Brand his neck with a kiss.

13. Remember this moment. He will whimper and cry from the pain, sharp and unimaginable, but this is how it always is, isn't it? It's not just the physical pain—it's the pain of knowing who you really are. The pain of getting what you want. Afterwards, hold him. Smother the sobs falling into your shoulder. He will shake from the shock, and you will know that from now on, he will fear authority, he will worship authority, and he will shiver whenever someone grasps his upper arm. But by next year, you will no longer care. There will be another.
14. Congratulations.