

PROMPT #2: You open a book and a note with a letterhead falls out. At the top it says: If you are reading this, ...

[Untitled]

by **Kaeman Wilcox**

Darrien walked slowly through the biology section of the library. The smell of old books and wet pages bogged down the air. There was a chronic roof leak in the library, and the plink of rainwater dripped into buckets resting on the otherwise empty top shelf. He had a research paper on proteins due in less than a week that had yet to leave the beginnings of the outline stage. A hardback book, blue canvas, and gold detailing stood out to him; the book was titled *The Protein: Macromolecule Handymen* written by some author that Darrien had never heard of. He picked up the book with a sense of relief, he could even feel the theoretical weight lift from his weary shoulders. Upon inspection of the index, he was slightly disappointed, but decided somewhere in that entire book must be something to use as a source worthy of including in his paper. He fanned through the damp pages only for a folded letter to fall out and flutter to the ground. *Just great, people never take care of things, always leaving things where they're not supposed to. I don't get it, why not just throw away your trash?* he thought. Darrien was naturally quite negative and chronically uncomfortable, a combination of traits making him remarkably unpleasant to be around. He was always grumbling and shifting when he talked to you like he was warming up to run off as soon as it was opportune. Internally, he was indeed wishing he could escape the vast majority of conversations and situations he found himself in.

The paper was folded unevenly, with the letterhead visible. "If you are reading this..." and that was all. *Someone fancying themselves a great comedian, the next Eddie Murphy, Seinfeld, George Carlin type of guy who thinks he's the funniest guy alive left this. Surely trying to freak people out. "If you're reading this, I'm probably dead", "if you're reading this, there's a killer loose on campus and only you can catch him", "if you're reading this, the world ends in twenty- four hours.", or "if you are reading this, you are being watched."* All these things raced through Darrien's mind.

“Nope,” he said in a semi-whisper and put the paper back in the book, reshelfed it, and walked away. He couldn’t be bothered to read a real book anyway, so he resolved to look into databases later. On the walk back he thought about the paper and the type of person who just leaves things shoved in books for the librarians or other students to pluck out and discard. It could have been some sort of tract advertising some “new and improved” branch of any old religion. Darrien regretted leaving that paper in the book. He should have taken it and discarded it so the next person didn’t have to. All he would have to have done was ball it up and put it in the recycling bin, but no, his temper got the best of him. *Overreacting again Darrien, this is why we are always alone.* His thoughts toward everyone were negative including himself, which is what justified his tendency to judge others.

Upon arriving at his dorm, Darrien did the same thing he always did: first, he switched the overhead light on and then off a minimum of four times, landing in the off position, slid his shoes off then left them parallel to the wall next to the door, and turned his lamp on then off then on again. He readied his desk for the ideal working conditions: a mug, filled with water, not coffee; one ballpoint pen with liquid ink, not gel; one pencil with a cap eraser; a blanket around his shoulders; and his legal pad that he used to put ideas onto paper, lest he forget them, which often happened if he didn’t write them down as he was so chronically uptight that he could not focus on anything other than his uptightness. *Something still felt wrong. What was it? Everything was done the way he always did it.* He got up and looked at his dorm. His desk was in the right place, his floor swept, his rug straight, his picture frames also straight, and his bed made. Everything was the way it should be. His room was the only place where everything was the way it should be.

*That letter.* He needed to get his mind off of it, and relax. Darrien put on his best record, not his favorite because it wasn’t as quality a record, and laid in his bed in a ball thinking about all the things he could do about the situation. *I could just go check it, but then whoever did it would be getting what they wanted. It’s probably nothing, and dinner is soon. I don’t want to go all the way to the library when dinner is soon and it’s on the exact opposite route than he needed to be on to get dinner. It’s meatloaf. Bad, just like mom made it. Can’t be missed. Can’t be late.*

By that time, Darrien had decided to ignore the metaphorical pea under his metaphorical mattress and go to the dining hall at his normal time, leaving his room at six forty-three to arrive at the dining hall at seven exactly (he liked to dally). On his walk, he tied his shoes and saw two squirrels, five couples, and one old man blowing leaves. He was jealous of them all. They didn’t seem to care about anything. Upon arriving at the dining hall he was sweating

because he refused to wear anything but his long down lined, black suede jacket with pockets and a waist that cinched to prevent cold air from rushing inside. It was about ten degrees too hot, but he knew that when he left dinner he would want it.

In the dining hall, he got the same salad he always got and sat down in the seat in the far corner that he always sat in and tried to work on his paper. He did his best work in the dining hall. Meatloaf was across the building. Walking across was always a great time as he observed and eavesdropped on every conversation that he possibly could. There was a short line, typical of meatloaf. He could see it now, a cube of meatloaf dripping grease sitting on the plate next to an ice cream scoop of mashed potatoes with the skin in it and canned green beans, all unsalted which he would rectify the moment he arrived at his little table. Once the food came into view his heart sank. Bratwursts... the worst. *Nothing is ever good. Nothing is sacred. Bratwurst, cabbage, and disappointment, everything a growing boy needs.* He couldn't work. Darrien ate as fast as humanly possible so as to not think about how much he disliked his food, but then his stomach hurt because he ate too fast. Everyone was looking at him. They stared because he was eating fast, and they thought he was piggish. Everyone always looked at him and judged him for everything all the time. He cut his losses and left. He punished the dining hall workers for their deceit by leaving his dishes on the table instead of the bin.

On his way out more people were looking at him. *Is something on my face?* He wiped his face with the back of his hand. Clean. The reflection in the mirror of his face was a bit distorted but clean. *Not that. The letter. There's something happening to me. A mass prank. Pick on the loser.* He looked behind him; two girls were in deep conversation. *About me?* They laughed. *About me.* Something was happening. That's why everything was off. *My instincts are cat-like, I always know these things.* He took bigger strides. From afar he looked like a spindly daddy-longlegs spider, which did make the girls laugh. The cold slid its fingers down the back of his neck into his coat. *The letter.* With haste, he made his way to the library. He would be the butt of nobody's jokes. *Not today.*

Darrien walked through the Biology section of the Library looking for the book *Proteins: Macromolecule Handymen* by an author he had never heard of.

"Can I help you?" asked the beefy man behind the help desk.

"I really doubt it."

He carried on to the very last aisle. It was nowhere to be found. The water from the bucket, which was now full, dripped down the bookcase and the binding of the books whose glue

was reactivated due to all the moisture. *Nobody takes care of anything.* The book was gone. *That's it. I am done. I hate it here.* Darrien shed a tear. *The dam broke.* Like a switch had been triggered deep within him he finally appeared to have lost it. Darrien began tearing every book off the shelves. *Nothing is getting by me. It is here.* The beefy man stood at the end of the aisle mouth agape. *Where is it? They are hiding it. They know I know.*

“Can I help you?”

“ I REALLY doubt it,” Darrien smiled and flung his head back to clear the sweaty clumps of hair from his eyes. *Embarrassing.*

He began opening books. All of them had papers folded and shoved inside. *It's everyone.* He held a pile of folded papers in his hand and with the other, he flipped through the wet books. *It's so hot in here.* He peeled the coat off. In the distance, the beefy guy was on the phone with someone. *I am gonna see what was so funny. What was the trick? What was I supposed to do?* Darrien slid down the pillar between shelves. The first paper he tried to open ripped because it was sopping wet. He couldn't tell what was tears and what was rainwater. The second paper's ink bled so badly that it was illegible. *I can do this all day. They left like twenty.* Now the third said, “If you are reading this... have a nice day! - Love, the library staff”. *A joke.* The fourth letter, fifth letter, and so on were identical. *What is this? These terrible people. What did I do wrong? Who thinks this is funny?* Something caught his eyes through the tears, across the aisle a teal paper taped on the other pillar. “We know midterms are stressful. The library can be your safe space. The university cares for you and your mental health. So, if you are reading with us... have a nice day!” The air left his lungs. He turned red as tears, sweat, and water dripped down his face. He lolled his head toward the onlookers. *This was it...what they were waiting for.*

“Oh,” croaked Darrien.