

# A NORMAL KID

BY ROBERT LEWIS VAUGHAN

A DPS ACTING EDITION PUBLISHED BY

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*For Kieran Westphal—  
This wouldn't have happened without you*

An earlier version of A NORMAL KID (titled LOOKING BACK, WEST) received a workshop production at GableStage (Joseph Adler, Producing Artistic Director), Coral Gables, Florida. It was directed by the author; Matt Dellapina was Perry.

The world premiere of LOOKING BACK, WEST was produced by the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre (Steven Schipper, Artistic Director; Zaz Bajon, General Manager), Winnipeg, Canada, in 2010. It was directed by Steven Schipper, with Eric Blais and Carmen Melillo alternating the role of Perry.

This version of A NORMAL KID was presented at Axis Theatre (Randall Sharp, Artistic Director; Brian Barnhart, Producing Director) in Sheridan Square, New York, in February 2023. Kieran Westphal was Perry; Charlotte Peartree Moon was the narrator.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With love and thanks to:

Joe Adler, Derek Cecil, Matt Dellapina, Laurie Lam, Susie Medak, Marc Palmieri, Sayra Player, Gilbert Parker, Joel Stigliano, Charlotte Peartree Moon, Craig Pospisil and Stella Bowles at DPS, and Randall Sharp and Brian Barnhart at Axis.

## **CHARACTERS**

PERRY, late twenties/early thirties. He wears a T-shirt and Levi's. He has a backpack filled with sketchbooks, and pens, and pencils, among other necessities.

## **SETTING**

A park bench in a white space. Think of the floor and walls of the stage as watercolor paper upon which images will appear.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Perry is in a very happy place—he's remembering, not reliving the past. He may have a moment or two, here and there, where the emotions surface, but they don't take over. Keep it light and let the audience feel it, not the actor.

Regarding the images, I've noted some as we see them; use your imagination, but don't overload the text—it's not a slide show.

# A NORMAL KID

*As the play begins, we hear city noises.*

*Perry enters, sits on the bench, and rummages through his backpack. As he removes a sketchbook and a container of pencils, his phone pings.*

*He pulls the phone out of his pocket, opens it, and looks at a text.*

*The words “where are u?” appear in the white space and fade away as Perry responds. The words “Madison Square Park” appear in the white space.*

*They fade, replaced by, “they want you to illustrate the book. be at my office at three.”*

*Perry closes his phone and looks out, needing a moment to process the good news.*

*He digs into his backpack, pulls out a ragged, black-and-white composition book, and opens it.*

*Madison Square Park is replaced by an image of a suburban neighborhood as Perry thumbs through the book, looks out, and remembers.*

PERRY. When I was a kid, Tom looked at me now and then and asked, “How the hell are you still alive...?”

Davey would smile and wink. We knew Tom didn’t mean it when he said things like that; he didn’t have it in him. The better question—the question I’m asking myself right now—is, “How did you get here from there?”

How *did* I get here from there...? And do I really want to think about it?

Remember?

When did it start...?

When I saw my picture on the side of a milk carton, or...? No. It was when we moved. Again. We moved so many times that I don't remember how many schools I went to.

But the last time? That was the summer it started.

We'd never moved to a neighborhood that nice, and I thought it was a mistake. Don't get me wrong; our house was okay, but the places in the new development across the street were, like, from TV shows, and the grass was, literally, greener.

And the people who lived there were..., well, Jamie. His family lived directly across the street. He was everything I wanted to be but wasn't because I was a worthless piece of shit. Or, so I was told.

His mom looked like a model, owned a women's clothing store, wore silk scarves and sunglasses, and the wind stopped blowing when she went outside so it wouldn't mess her up.

She came over to welcome us after we moved in. I answered the door, and before she could say a word, my dad yelled, "Who's at the goddamn door? Get rid of 'em."

That was that.

I saw Jamie for the first time the next day when my dad sent me out to buy his cigarettes, and—

Okay, wait. That sounds weird. Kids can't buy cigarettes, but my dad knew the clerk..., so.

Anyway, Jamie was popping wheelies on his bike, and...? God, I wanted a friend. When he saw me, he hollered, "Hey, you're the new kid? I heard about you," then, his dad came to the door, glared at me, and told Jamie to put his bike away and get cleaned up. They were going to dinner and the movies.

Even after that, Jamie's mom always said good morning and waved when she saw me, but he looked at me like something on the sidewalk he didn't want to step in. So, no new friend for me, and there was no one else. One of the houses next door was empty, and the other had a family with two little girls. At least they had a dog.

*We see Perry's sketch of the dog.*



His name was Achilles.

I hadn't heard that name yet and thought it was awesome. He was old and fat and could barely get in and out of the house.

I spent hours in the backyard waiting for him to come outside so I could sketch him. Drawing was my thing, even then. You gotta have something when you live in your own little world.

A month after we moved in, I stopped seeing Achilles. I think he died, and that was depressing. I liked that dog. He kept my mind off Jamie, the Perfect Son Every Father Dreams Of.

One afternoon I was working on a drawing and heard noises. I looked out my window and saw Jamie and some friends—a girl and two other guys—washing his mom's car. They were wearing swimsuits and hosing each other down. It was like watching a TV commercial for Mountain Dew.

I was so jealous. It got worse when I realized the other boys were identical twins, more perfect-looking than Jamie.

That was the first time ever that I was happy when my dad yelled for me because it took me out of my head. I mean, seriously. I almost didn't care if I was about to get a lesson for something I didn't even do. And...

That was the beginning of summer, and everything after that was a blur until...

Before he went to work one morning, my dad told me to clean up the backyard. While I was doing it, a squirrel sped by and went up our tree. A cat was after it.

When I looked up, the squirrel was staring at me, like, "Do something, you stupid kid!"

My dad had been giving me lessons—as he called them—all my life, so I totally identified with the squirrel. And I loved cats, but...I scared it away. The squirrel relaxed, and I had a problem.

My dad kept a fifty-pound bag of unshelled peanuts in the house to munch on while he drank his beer. Since I never had a pet, I wanted this squirrel to stick around, so I stole some of his peanuts.

I dropped some at the tree trunk and cracked one open for myself.

The squirrel eyeballed me. I cracked open another peanut; it scurried halfway down the trunk and...

After my dad left the next morning, I made a beeline to the backyard with more peanuts, hoping the squirrel was still there.

It was.

I named him Achilles Junior and started hiding peanuts in my room. I knew I had a *don't-you-eat-my-fuckin'-peanuts-you-piece-of-shit* lesson coming my way, but I loved taking care of Achilles Junior.

I loved it even after getting the lesson I knew was coming. It was a pretty bad one, too, so from then on, I was careful about how many peanuts I stole.

By the end of summer, I was hand-feeding Achilles Junior and even scratching his head.

...Jamie who...?

Then school started.

Like always, I got the *don't-be-a-fuckin'-pussy-you-piece-of-shit* lesson, but it was worse that year. I'd grown, so we had to spend more than usual on my back-to-school clothes. Money was tight, and my dad hated spending what little we had on anybody but himself.

The registration lady was touchy-feely, and when it was my turn, she grabbed my arm and patted me on the back. It hurt because of the lesson, but I didn't wince or let on. I never drew attention to myself, and my dad knew not to mess up my face.

During my first library time, I learned that Achilles was a who, not a what. I loved it even more.

And if being the new, weird kid at school wasn't stressful enough, Jamie was in my homeroom.

So were his friends, the twins. And I was right about Todd and Troy Miller. They were more beautiful and perfect—and more popular—than Jamie. But they weren't snobby and stuck-up; they were nice to everybody.

And it's such a stupid little thing, but...I really liked it and looked

forward to Jamie's mom waving and saying good morning to me as I left for school. One morning in October, though, she didn't. She just got in her car and sat there.

I went into a funk on the spot.

A minute later, her car pulled up alongside me and slowed to a stop. Jamie's mom waved me over and... She said, "I saw your watercolor hanging in homeroom at the parent-teacher conference last night, Perry. It's lovely. A very lovely painting. Striking, actually. You have an excellent sense of composition, and your use of color is wonderful. Very advanced for your age. I hope you don't waste your talent. Have a good day."

And then she drove off.

I just stood there. Nobody had ever...

When I got to school, I stared at my watercolor. It was real. And for the first time in my life, so was I. Someone saw me. Jamie's mom saw me.

Next to Achilles Junior, that was the best thing that ever happened to me.

After that, school was a blur, but I did more drawings and watercolors than ever.

When it started getting cold, I worried about Achilles Junior. I knew tree squirrels didn't hibernate, but I didn't want him to leave for a new place with better shelter. He didn't; I was happy.

I wasn't happy when the Quick Stop got a new clerk. He wouldn't sell me cigarettes, so I went home empty-handed, but I didn't get a lesson. My dad put me in the car, drove over there, dragged me in, screamed at the clerk, and told him to sell me his cigarettes or else.

The clerk was scared shitless. I was relieved and good until Christmas. When my mom asked me what I wanted, I told her a fifty-pound bag of peanuts. My dad backhanded me across the room and said, "Smart-ass piece of shit."

I got the peanuts, though. My mom sneaked them into my closet. She also got me a new notebook to sketch in.

I was surprised by that. I...? I didn't know she paid attention to my...

She put socks and underwear under the tree for me.

When spring came, people with teenage sons—older than me—moved into the empty house next door. I steered clear because they looked like the type who beat up other kids for the fun of it. I had enough to worry about.

And things were...well, things got...?

My dad was *between jobs*. Again. So he was home all the time. I started going to school early to avoid him.

One morning, police cruisers, an ambulance, and a black Mercedes were parked in front of the campus. I got there as they put a body in the ambulance.

I found out later that Todd and Troy Miller's dad shot himself at dawn in that shiny new Mercedes right in front of the school.

Why would he do that to them? They were...?

Besides Jamie's mom, they were the only people who spoke to me. They were always like, "Hey, what's up?" and "Hey, what's up, new dude? It's Perry, right? How you doin', man?"

I mean...?

School sucked, but it sucked harder after that. Then, picture day came. Since I'd been convinced I was a worthless piece of shit, I hated myself, and I hated having my picture taken. Photographic evidence of my existence was...?

To make it worse, Jamie went before me. I had to watch as Mister Movie Star sat smiling and posed effortlessly. And then things got worse.

After I got home and fed Achilles Junior, my dad sent me out for smokes.

There was another new clerk; she refused to sell cigarettes to me.

I didn't want to go home.

I knew how to handle lessons, but my dad was drinking earlier than

usual, and he'd already switched from beer to Cutty Sark or whatever. This was going to be bad. Bad, bad.

And he couldn't go to the store because my mom had the car. She was out looking for a job.

It was...? ...I was...?

When I got up off the floor, my dad said, "Get your ass in your room, you useless piece of shit," then he started picking cigarette butts out of trash cans and trying to light them.

I went but stopped in the bathroom to wash my face. My nose was still bleeding.

I wished my dad would kill himself in front of the school.

Then I slept. A lot. Until the next morning.

When I woke up, I tiptoed past their room. My dad was snoring, and my mom was gone. I don't know if she checked on me—I don't know if she knew what happened.

I went outside to feed Achilles Junior just in time to see the teenage boys next door shoot him with a pellet gun.

One of them said, "One shot! Hey, Kid! Did you see that shot?"

I ran over to Achilles Junior.

He was dead.

I...?

*Perry's sketches of Achilles Junior fill the space and fade as he continues.*

Things went black. I didn't blackout, but...?

I was floating above my body, watching myself. I didn't know what I was doing, but my body did.

Achilles Junior was dead, and I...? I picked him up, went inside, put him on a bed of paper towels in a food storage container, sealed it, and put it in a grocery bag.

I went to my room, still not thinking, and took off my T-shirt and pajama bottoms. I put on as many layers of clothes as possible, my hoody, and then my socks and boots. I took off my boots—no clomping. Don't wake Dad.

I tiptoed into the kitchen, got another grocery bag, and put all our bread, peanut butter, and jelly in it.

I went back to my room, gathered my sketchbooks, pens, pencils, and all my drawings, and put them in my backpack.

As I walked by their room, my dad said, "Put my coffee on, boy, and bring me a cup when it's done," then he hawked up a loogie and spit it into the little trash can he kept on his side of the bed.

I did what he said. It meant I was safe, and I knew what I had to do next. I knew where my mom hid money.

I went to the bathroom, opened the cabinet under the sink, took the Ziploc bag out of her box of feminine supplies, and put it in my backpack.

When the coffee was done, I took a cup to my dad.

He didn't look at me; he didn't see me. He said, "Get to school."

I told him it was spring break. He told me to clean the yard.

I put my boots on, gathered my stuff, and left.

I left.

I watched myself walk to school.

When I got there, I sat in the grass, trying not to cry as I buried Achilles Junior under a crab apple tree.

And then...?

I counted the money I stole from my mom.

It was almost four hundred dollars.

And then...?

I had to get out of our neighborhood. I walked toward this expensive apartment complex called Monument Meadows. They had a gazebo by a stream where I figured I could hide and make a plan. And believe it or not, I was hungry, so I went to the Quick Stop first.

The clerk who knew my dad was back. When he saw me, he gasped and looked sick. I knew I was in pain, but I guess my lesson was worse than I thought...? I wouldn't know; I never looked in mirrors.

I got a burrito, a Coke, and some M&Ms—peanut, for Achilles Junior. When I paid, the clerk asked if I needed cigarettes.

I just looked at him, walked out, and went to Monument Meadows. They were doing maintenance; the gazebo was roped off. I'd seen kids hanging out under the overpass, so I went there.

I was still hovering above myself, watching. I saw myself eat, and then I fell asleep, using my jacket as a pillow.

When I woke up, somebody was sitting there, watching me. It scared the shit out of me.

He lit a cigarette, looking at me as he inhaled. "Want a smoke?"

"No."

"Let's go for a walk."

I shook my head.

He said, "Your dad? Your mom's new boyfriend? An uncle?"

"My dad."

He said, "So...? Did he just beat the shit out of you, or was it sex stuff, too?"

"He just taught me lessons."

He laughed, smiled, and said, "I'm TJ. Come on, let's go for a walk. I got your back; you'll be okay."

There was something about him. He made me feel better, but things started hitting me when he asked how long I'd been gone and how serious I was. "You gotta make up your mind, or you should just go home now."

He knew what he was talking about. His grandfather did "sex stuff" to him; to all his grandkids. Everybody in their family knew about it, but they didn't do anything to stop it. They prayed and went to church instead. When TJ grew up and got tired of being fiddled with, he taught his grandfather a lesson, told his family to fuck off, and left. He'd been on the street ever since.

He smoked Marlboro Reds, wore black motorcycle boots, ripped-up blue jeans, and a white tank top T-shirt to show off his arms and shoulders.

**The play doesn't end here...**

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