Sins, Omissions, and Alibis

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Sins, Omissions, and Alibis:

Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

by

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The Incubator:

Some preferred to count the weeks that stuck together tightly, so it was difficult to detect distinctions between voices and air, night and midday. They were the art activists, the ones who had moved into the apartment from studios instead of offices. Those who came from desk lives, however, had a much easier time foregoing routine and timestamps. Perhaps they welcomed their newfound freedom to forego responsibility—a side effect of imprisonment. But the artists did everything they could to stay grounded.

The youngest boy’s curious expression was unconvincing. Carlos had lived half his life here—endured four winters sharing thinning blankets. His age would imply he had the most hope and naïveté of them all, but in fact he was a rather numb child, somber since birth. Unlike the others, Carlos hardly knew what he was missing. While they spoke with nostalgia about their old lives, or in urgent tones about methods of resistance, he paid them no mind. He spent the least amount of time looking out the window. Little about his world could surprise him.

As usual, they all sat down to dinner at 8:00 pm. It was Gustav’s turn to cook. He had made lamb and rice. The meal was robust, and welcomed by all. The food delivery was generous that week; perhaps they were behaving well. The impetus behind the variation in allotted groceries was unknown to them. It was unclear whether fluctuations in the amount and quality of food were related to their behavior, or to circumstances on the outside. One thing that came every week was wine—a cheap, rough red, but collective memory of the better stuff was waning.

It was notable that Martha was pregnant and abstaining. Sex and pregnancy hardly seemed viable or worthwhile given the circumstances, but even under duress, needs are met. Martha was one of the ones who still showered daily, rubbed on rouge, typically drank measured glasses of wine. But tonight no such portion-conscious glass existed. Instead, she pursued the
usual nod into her drink with a cup of grapefruit juice. She listened to a debate between a friend
and her lover, whose self-obsessed disposition would allow him to remain unaware of her state
until he saw the baby exit her. He gave a passionate performance.

“In the scheme of things, it was one moment of turmoil, but we let it grow, and now the
system has combusted and failed. Look who is left! Look who remains outside! Who is not in
this coffin of sins, this prison of the mind? Only the fascists and those they control. We should
have seen this coming. If we wanted to, we could have.”

Octavian, his typical partner in these conversations, chortled. “Nonsense! We were
jipped, manipulated, played like a record. Your nihilistic views are useless, dwelling on how we
got here, blaming ourselves—to what end? It is most important to consider how we can get out,
get back…”

“There are no options. I would have to renounce my life’s work, my functioning mind, to
join those who ask no questions. I could never live this way. I stay inside because I would surely
die out there.”

Armand was a masculine yet dramatic man. Martha watched him, wondering if it was
worth maintaining his interest in her, just to have more expedited sex on the floor, hoping not to
wake the others. Following the tradition set by the other children in the apartment, she could
assume hers too would be raised by everyone. She wouldn’t need Armand’s help, and she knew
he wouldn’t be particularly interested in providing it.

That being said, even this dry outline of a romance had the nice effect of occupying her
mind. If she weren’t thinking of what Armand thought of her blouse, she might remember the
occupation of her city, the indefinite sentence she lived.
Armand sipped his drink and motioned to his teenage son to bring him another cigarette. Most of the young people observed these debates with wonder, confused by their elder’s fervor, sheepishly agreeing without understanding.

The debates were expressions of codependence, coping mechanisms for these intellectual families who responded more desperately to mental stifling than physical incarceration. Though the children were encouraged and sporadically forced to read, after the first couple of years in lockdown, no one maintained enough optimism or energy to conduct formal lessons.

“They always have the same conversation,” Martha’s friend Genevieve whispered indignantly. The two of them leaned against the living room wall, in observation. “It’s time to either think of a different response, or change the discussion altogether.”

Martha knew that voicing her agreement would be an equally repetitive contribution. “I’d rather talk about literature.” She finished off her juice, prompting her friend to notice it. She stared for a moment.

“Are you--” Genevieve’s eyes darted to Martha’s stomach.

“Yes, I think I’m about three months in.” She spoke with detachment.

Immediately, Genevieve was upset. “And of course Armand has no idea. Because you’d rather him live in peace and comfort than even give him the chance to help you. Why do you have such little faith?”

Martha didn’t answer, irked by her friend’s correct presumption. Although she was unsure whether her silence derived from a lack of faith or a lack of interest in Armand, the end result remained the same. He looked up from his debate, drunk now, and acknowledged her from across the room with a thirsty nod.
“Unbelievable,” Genevieve said. “If you sleep with him again before telling him, you can forget our conversation about literature. I’ll speak of nothing else until you demand some responsibility from that man.”

Martha knew Genevieve was tipsy, but she was also certain that her friend found the entire situation to be rather disheartening. She was mostly angered, Martha ventured to believe, because she was unable to secure any of the men herself, and didn’t appreciate what she viewed as Martha’s ambivalence toward getting Armand, which she--and most other celibate women in the apartment--would consider a victory and a gift.

Women outnumbered men two to one. Competition was steep. Martha watched Genevieve walk away, shaking her head, and considered whether her temper bore any legitimacy. It did, incidentally, compel her to try to hold onto Armand--if only so she could take pride in his affection at some particularly unpleasant moment in the future.

Martha rid her mind of thoughts of herself. She walked to the kitchen to join the group washing dishes. Despite a schedule posted on the refrigerator, it was almost always the same people helping. Carlos, the eight-year-old, was one of them. His mother had fled the apartment a year after their arrival. Martha felt he was sort of beyond mothering anyway--a conception of him that perhaps prohibited her from feeling adequately sympathetic to his situation.

“Here, I can help you with that,” she said, offering a hand out to take over drying the dish Carlos held.

“No, thank you.” He was cordial and terse. She said nothing and watched him continue working; he was the picture of peace and efficiency.

“Do you like doing dishes?” She asked, genuinely curious but unsure how to properly speak to children.
“Yes. More than what they’re doing.” He gestured towards the older kids, some of whom were twice his age, who sat on the living room floor playing checkers. Genevieve's twin girls played chess.

“What? You don’t like board games?”

“All they do is complain about the games, or the apartment, or the adults, or the food, or the occupation. They always say the same things. I’d rather be useful.”

He walked a few feet away towards Gustav, who handed him some wet wine glasses to dry. “Carlos, the wonder of our world, the Jesus of our Galilee,” he said.

Carlos didn’t break a smile, and Martha wondered whether he understood the reference.

She approached him. “Do you think it has something to do with you not being able to remember as much, about the old way?”

He thought for a moment, polishing off a glass with precision.

“Probably.”

Martha’s own child would feel an even more dramatic version of this, living amongst a group of depressive intellectuals, who wanted nothing more than to return to their old lives, hostile or numb to their reality.

She lowered her voice, feeling selfishly curious.

“What happened to your mother?”

Carlos did not hesitate. “She died.”

“But how?”

“She didn’t like it here. She left and they killed her. Her body was thrown on our doorstep. Don’t you remember?”

“I meant--what led her to leave? When she knew what would happen…”
“I was five. She didn’t tell me.”

His patience seemed eroded. Martha let him walk away. She stood in the same spot, in the way of her cleaning apartment-mates, allowing the smell of dish soap to make her feel sick.

“Are you just going to stand there?” Gustav joked. “At least dance for us!”

Martha gave him half a smile and left the room, retreating to the one she shared with four others. It was empty. She sat on the bed and stared at the wall opposite her--which held an outdated, slightly vandalized world map. She considered the lines of division, picturing the person who had decided where Guatemala ended and Belize began.

Her eyes then lingered on her homeland. She remembered her grandmother telling her who she was named after--the Martha in the Bible. “Sister of Lazarus and Mary of Bethany, she was known for her obsession with housework. You could learn a thing or two from her--this mess!”

Her grandmother was relatively sexist. Martha heard the door open. It was Armand. He sat down and started speaking, since something is typically said before sex starts. She held up her hand to prevent his face from coming closer to hers.

“I’m pregnant. It’s yours, but I decided we’ll never tell the child of the outside world, or how things once were. Your task is to get the others to agree.”

Martha did not wait for his delayed response. She stood and walked back into the living room, stopping to sit on the floor beside Genevieve’s twins. She watched the one with brown hair beat her sister at a game of chess.
We Forgot To Kayak:

The porch smelled like the dinner we didn’t finish: lamb and oily vegetables, bright and sweaty under hanging lights. Four plates sat on the table; flies stabbed their scraps with miscellaneous limbs and bubble-gum eyes. Only Silas and I remained at the table; the other two had gone to bed.

“Three days.” He looked at me and swished the liquid inside his tumbler. He was a little overzealous with this gesture, and a few drops splashed onto the floor.

“I can’t believe it’s so soon.”

“Are you excited?”

“Excited, nervous, all of that.” I spoke quickly.

We had met at the lake house for a last minute reunion at a rented cabin near where the ceremony was to take place. John and I planned to get in early to relax and kayak, but I let Silas hijack the getaway when he called. He said he wanted time to meet John before the big day.

“So your family’s coming in tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’ll be great. I haven’t seen my brother in ages. He just got back from Argentina.”

“Oh, how long was he there?”

“Seven months.”

He nodded like he wasn’t that impressed.

I changed the subject. “So what was it like for you, the days before you married Carol?”

He got up and walked across the porch to get his lighter. His back was to me as he lit the cigar—an excessive accessory.
“I didn’t think about it too much,” he said. I pictured Carol sleeping above us. “The ceremony itself is a celebration of the exact love you feel most at that time in your life. It’s a kind of currency for yourself, a deposit you make to ensure you don’t run away once you forget what new love was like.” He rolled his eyes at himself.

“You’re eloquent tonight,” I said.

“You’re getting married in three days.” He looked out towards the sky, probably trying to magnify my presumption that he understood astronomy. “Now or never.”

It was quiet for a while. We listened to the radio. I had forgotten it was on.


“He’s alright, definitely seems to be a decent man. He can sure as hell grill a steak better than I can.”

“I made the steak, Silas.”

“Oh, did you?”

“You watched me do it.”

“He’s clearly a good guy.” He took a sip. “But just because I can tolerate you being with someone else doesn’t mean I’m gonna endorse it.” His teeth closed hard.

“You can’t do that.”

“Do what?” he ashed his cigar. He had only taken three drags. I think he mostly liked the feel of it in his fingers—a commanding, smoggy appendage he could direct and inhale. The smoke was making my eyes tear faster than they would have.

“You don’t want to be with me,” I said. “So stop messing around, trying to get a reaction. It’s childish.”
He blinked; his left eye tremored. “I do.” He let his eyes gesture towards the door of the house.

“Really?” I said, moving back into my seat and feeling dizzy from the wine and confrontation. “And you think I’ll leave him for you.” It was half question, half statement.

“I’d hope.”

“Well I wouldn’t leave anyone just to flirt with you.”

He stared. “I love you.”

“That’s not what I asked.” I hated saying it; I didn’t want to have to urge him.

He said, “As is, I can love you with confidence. You walk in the room and I’m stuttering. I could survive a divorce with the woman I married. But not you.”

Somehow I did not feel flattered. I said nothing and stared at the lake in the yard. I swatted flies off the crumbs on the plate in front of me. I was starting to get cold but didn’t consider going inside.

“I’m happy we talked,” he said.

I rolled my eyes.

“I’m sorry. Really.”

He stood up and kept his back to me for too long. He walked to the door slowly. I mentally urged him to move faster; I needed time alone to compose myself for bed with John. He opened the door and as he walked inside I thought I saw his left shoulder shrug.

The wedding went well. We wrote our own vows. I was sitting with my family at the reception, having just done a round of hellos and thank yous. When I saw Silas walking towards me, some of my happiness blurred and shed.
“Congratulations!” He was drinking white wine, which was dangerous. He finished two thirds of a glass in one sip.

“Thank you!” We hugged. He lingered for too long, and his hand ran too far down my back.

“You look beautiful.” He enunciated every word.

“Salias! So good to see you!” My mother hugged him and I let him take my seat next to her. My mother looked at me like he knew something.

“I’m so happy for her,” Silas was saying, picking up a miscellaneous half-empty glass from the table. “He’s great. She’s better, of course, but he’s great.”

My mother laughed. “I think they’re perfect together.”

Silas nodded with fierce agreement that I read as mocking. I leaned down to talk to him.

“Are you having a good time?”

“Yeah, absolutely. It’s a really beautiful wedding, Maggie. Really beautiful.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Almost as beautiful as you are.”

“Get a new word, Silas.”

“Are you mad or something?”

I answered in a whisper. “Please let me have a good time at my wedding.”

My family politely pretended not to notice our conversation.

“You want me to go?” He looked like a puppy begging for scraps.

“You’re drunk. You should probably go sleep it off.”

He stood up. I felt it primarily in my stomach—strong and proud, but aware that I was creating an end.
He addressed my family members. “So nice to see all of you.”

“Bye, Maggie.” He hugged me and spoke into my ear. “Great wedding. I love you, always will. Let’s stay friends if nothing else.”

Again, I watched his back, and again, I hated that he was showing it to me. My father stood up and asked if I wanted to waltz. I let him lead me to the dance floor.

He was smiling and told me he loved my new husband and he loved me. John and I made eye contact; he was beaming and hugging his sisters. He came over and asked my father if he could cut in. I rested my head on his chest and hoped he couldn’t read the resignation off the top of my head.
Modern Man:

Dave Mitchell was not a confident man. He was so humble, in fact, that at twenty-eight years old, he would not even call himself a man; he preferred the terms “young adult” or “maturing male.” He knew, following the American tradition of manhood, that being a “man” would imply he possessed certain levels of responsibility, productivity, and independence. He did not want to be misleading.

He had just been dumped by his girlfriend, Brittany. Dave had expected to undergo a period of bed rest and depression after the breakup. So he found himself far from flummoxed by the fact that he was on his sixth week of sleeping at his parents’ house--in the room that had been his but was in the paused process of being converted to an exercise studio--watching YouTube videos of “the weirdos of Walmart.” He found himself oddly comfortable bundled up in the twin sized bed, covered by a dusty Superman patterned bedspread.

He had returned home the day after Brittany let him go, which according to her had been a long time coming. In between videos, he bitterly recalled the breakup.

“Yesterday you called my best friend a bitch and ate all the food she brought over--for me and her to eat, by the way--in the span of the ten minutes we were outside with the dog...and that’s just a small thing, Dave. I mean you’re completely selfish. Since you moved in here you have contributed nothing but a shitty attitude and a clogged toilet!”

“I’m touched by your sensitivity, Brittany. You know my situation. I have no employable skills. It isn’t my fault. And bringing up my irritable bowel syndrome is just low.” He sat back down on the couch and crossed his arms.

“No! Get up! I packed your shit. I called you a cab. All you have to do is walk out of my apartment and into the car.”
“Really? That’s ‘all I have to do’? What about find somewhere to go? How am I gonna eat--”

“You are twenty-eight years old, Dave. From now on, that should be your mantra. When you find yourself asking someone ‘what you’re gonna do now’ or ‘how you’re gonna feed yourself,’ just repeat the mantra: *I am twenty-eight years old.*”

He pouted at her from the couch, his skinny ankles resting on the coffee table. She stared at him.

Dave said nothing, weighing his options.

“Leave now, Dave.”

The cab outside honked its horn. He remained silent and still.

“Do not make me call my brother, Dave.” Her brother was a cop.

He got up. “Of course you would threaten to call Jamal.”

“He left, dropping and ripping the box of belongings Brittany had packed for him on his way out. Some items--mostly comic books--fell out of the box and onto her yard as he walked across it towards the cab. He turned and noticed Brittany watching him from the window, shaking her head.

“43 Desert Lake Drive,” Dave snarled at the driver.

“Okay.” He put on the radio.

Dave’s mother opened the door with a smile that swiftly departed after she processed the person standing on her doorstep: her adult son, who had moved out only a year earlier, holding a torn cardboard box and frowning.

“Hi Mom,” he walked in without waiting for any discernable vocal or physical invitation.
“What? What happened? Why aren’t you with Brittany?”

Dave was irritated by her lack of empathy. He knew she had enjoyed seeing far less of him, but wished she’d be less obvious about it. He was going through a crisis.

“She dumped me,” he said, collapsing onto Joanne’s new leather couch. “She’s a bitch,” he had to add.

“Why? What did you do? You know what--it doesn’t matter. You can stay here for two nights. That’s it. After that, you need to get out. You are an adult,” she said, gaining composure and smoothing over her skirt. Dave knew this was a nervous tick of hers. “And we are setting boundaries, starting now.”

“Where’s dad?” he asked, picking his nose.

“It’s Sunday, David. Your father is golfing.”

The doorbell rang.

“Damn it,” Joanne said, surprising her son.

“Who is it?”

“Just go to your room and get settled. But not too settled--I mean it. Two nights.”

Dave stared at her in his dull way.

“Go!” She gestured her arms out of the living room and turned to answer the door. Sensing something was amiss, Dave did not go to his room, but rather, leaned against the living room wall, where he had a perfect view of the foyer.

“Hi Mike. Now is actually not a good time.”

Dave could just barely hear her shrill whisper.

“What?” A man’s voice answered, confused and annoyed. “I thought he wasn’t gonna be home.”
“He’s not--it’s….” she lowered her voice. “My son is back.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You know I had to say I was at a business meeting to get here. I’m not gonna be able to say I’m working on a Sunday again for months.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

Dave gasped, putting it together. He stormed off, shocked. He felt a sudden surge of sympathy for his father, who he never really spoke to. In an act of defiance, he sat back down on the couch, again, with his arms crossed.

“Who was that?”

“I told you to go to your room.”

“And I asked you a question.”

“Can you just leave me alone?” She sounded defeated. “If you go to your room I’ll make your favorite for dinner.”

“Do you even remember what that is anymore?”

“Yes, David. I know what you like to eat.”

She walked to the bar and poured herself a glass of Pinot Grigio.

“It’s three o’clock, Mom.”

“I have had a stressful day.”

“Are you cheating on Dad?”

A bit of wine dribbled onto her chin. “What?”

“Who was that man at the door? Certainly seemed like more than a friend.”

“Were you spying on me? In my home?”

“It’s my home too, Mom.”

“I’m going to Diane’s house. Clearly I won’t get any peace here.”
“Answer the question. Are you cheating on Dad?”

“Of course not,” she said, gathering her car keys and lipstick into her purse.

“Great. Then I’m sure he’d have no questions if I were to tell him that a man named Mike came here, and you kicked him out because I showed up and you couldn’t be alone with him.”

She stopped moving and pursed her lips.

“You little asshole.”

Joanne had lost her composure, and Dave was scared. But he kept his cool, matching her glare with insincere confidence.

“Fine. Yes, I’m seeing Mike. Your father and I--I’m not explaining this to you. But you cannot tell him.”

Dave leaned forward, happy to have stumbled upon the upper hand.

“I won’t. If you make sure I’m allowed to stay here as long as I want. And you don’t make me do anything I don’t want to do.”

And that’s how Dave ended up camped out in the family’s guest bedroom/gym, searching the internet for people more miserable than him.

Dave was most fascinated by the fatalities at Walmart. There were videos of Black Friday stampedes, shootings in Arkansas which sought to fulfill “personal vendettas,” parking lot car accidents, baby dumps, and WWE caliber fist fights. He wondered how many people died annually just because they walked into a Walmart.

Dave spent a Wednesday absorbed by these and other YouTube videos. When he got hungry, he placed ten Perdue chicken nuggets on a plate and put them in the microwave. While he waited, listening to the hum of the machine, he paced. He was finally feeling bored. Joanne
had gone on a run and left the keys to her Mazda on the kitchen table. Dave quickly ate his nuggets at the counter, grabbed the keys, and walked out to the car.

His last outing had been two days before--a trip to Taco Bell with his high school friend Steve, who had been home for his mother’s birthday. Steve was also a loser, but he had a way of finessing himself into situations that sustained his lifestyle. After they graduated, he joined a skateboarding troupe based in Bangkok and lived there for two years. Then he rode around the U.S. in a van of hippies following Grateful Dead cover bands for a few years. Most recently, he moved to New York City, to be near his infant son, and he got a job working for the sanitation department.

“Oh, it’s absolutely perfect. We start at 4 a.m. every morning, and you know I don’t sleep anyway, so I like look up from my magazine or pizza or whatever I’m focused on at 4, and I’m like, are you ready to rumble, Steve? Then I put on my uniform and go.” His mouth bled taco insides.

“Cool,” Dave lied. “It really sounds like you have your life together.”

“And I have a pension. Can you believe that? Me with a pension!” Steve got up sporadically and walked over to the Taco Bell employee behind the counter. Dave heard him ask her for her number.

He sat back down at the table. “Oh, and my son is really cute. We named him Ray, like Ray Charles. Or maybe Nicole was thinking Norma Ray. Works either way! Ha---that rhymed!”

Steve programmed the Taco Bell waitress’ number into his flip phone while Dave stared out the window and thought about walking into traffic.

“I’m gonna apply for a job soon,” he said, suddenly commanding Steve’s attention.

“No way! Where?”
“Walmart.”

“Cool, man! I love their frozen pizza section, it’s massive.”

“They also have pensions,” Dave added too quickly.

“Wow, that’s sick. I hope you get the gig, dude.”

Dave nodded in satisfaction. It was silent for a moment as Steve drummed on the table.

“Hey, wanna get some 40s and throw rocks in the river?”

So, two days later, Dave finally had the chance to sneak away in his mother’s Mazda and follow up on the goal he had voiced to Steve. He drove the twelve minutes to Walmart, parked, and stepped out of the car.

Upon noticing his reflection in the glass entrance door, he wondered whether he was dressed appropriately. He wore a red hoodie and jeans, with a faint nugget mustard stain on the neck of his sweatshirt.

“Whatsoever,” he mumbled, to nobody’s benefit.

He approached the Customer Service desk and asked for a job application. The woman behind the desk, whose name tag identified her as “Crystal,” picked up and slapped down a stack of papers without looking up from her crossword.

Dave filled out the application, noting his date of birth, address, and lack of a criminal record. A tall man scurried behind the counter, addressing Crystal.

“Manuel just quit. We need a replacement A-S-A-P.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll look through the applications.”

“He was our best driver,” the manager said. “It’s almost Thanksgiving. If we don’t get someone behind there moving inventory the way Manuel could--”

Dave recognized his opportunity. “I can drive.”
“Who are you?”
“T’m applying for a job here.”
“That’s nice,” the manager said, pacing the six foot area behind the Customer Service desk. “But I mean a forklift driver.”
“Yeah, I know,” Dave said. “I have experience driving forklifts. I can do it.”
The man looked at Dave, then at Crystal, who shrugged, then back at Dave.
“Leave your application on the table,” the manager said. “Come with me.”
Dave’s heart leapt.
“I assume you have a certificate?”
“Yeah,” Dave said, pulling out his phone and Googling, “forklift certificate.” The first result revealed he could get one online for $27.
“I can bring it in tomorrow or whenever.”
“That’s fine.”
They entered a large warehouse, with concrete walls, floors, and ceiling. The manager led him to a car-like machine with two huge prongs sticking out of the front of it. Dave understood the “fork” reference.
“Get in here,” the manager said, gesturing towards the machine, “and move these four boxes over there, where the blue forklift is.”
Dave nodded and climbed inside the red forklift. The keys were in the ignition, so he turned them and took a second to get his bearings. Other than the normal car-ish stuff, there were also three large levers off to the right side. The whole setup reminded him of a videogame they had at a Hooters/Gametime hybrid restaurant he used to take Brittany to for date night. She
always groaned when they pulled in the driveway, but he knew she secretly loved the place. Hot chicks, fun games, tasty wings, cheap beer--what’s not to love?

The object of that game had been to kill as many aliens as possible by grasping and destroying their spaceships. The ships had three distinct sizes, and each type of ship needed to be handled with the appropriate lever. Dave would use the correct lever to scoop up and flip over the aliens’ ships. It was fun, and he often won, further impressing his girlfriend.

So Dave took to the forklift with a similar strategy, and was able to maneuver the controls without much of a problem. He wasn’t intimidated by the task asked of him, which was a rare occurrence. He usually couldn’t even get started trying to do something new because he felt too much anxiety and pressure from the idea of the task. But on the forklift, he was a different man.

“Alright, you’re no Manuel, but that was fine,” the manager said. He looked up from a clipboard that presumably displayed a calendar on it. “Can you work on Tuesdays and Thursdays?”

“Yes, absolutely, yes.”

“Great. You’re on the morning shift, 6 to 3.”

“6 a.m.?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, cool.”

Dave stepped out of the forklift and followed him out to “the floor--the term the manager used to describe the regular store area. He was learning already.

When he returned home, Joanne was sweaty and angry.
“Are you kidding me? I get home from my run, no explanation, my car’s gone, you’re gone. *I told you not to drive my car. I told you, you are not allowed to drive my car* and you take it anyway, big surprise, David getting what he wants with no concern for others.”

“Relax,” he said, sitting on the couch and picking up pillows in search of the TV remote. “I got a job.”

“Really?” She said flatly. Dave had expected more pride. “Where?”

“Walmart.”

“Well that makes sense. It’s a horrible company.” She started walking out of the living room. “You know they treat their employees like shit.”

“Whatever,” he shouted back to her, now fixated on the TV. “I need the car tomorrow and Tuesday to drive there.”

He heard her laughing loudly over the running water of her shower.

_________________________________________________________________________

At 5 a.m. the next morning, Dave masturbated. Then he sat up on his bed and stared at the elliptical machine a foot away from him. He went to the kitchen, looking for the keys to the Mazda. He did not find them. He took a fast shower, forgetting to wash his hair, and put on a t-shirt and jeans. He called a cab.

“The Walmart on Settler’s Avenue,” Dave urgently told the driver.

“Okay,” the driver replied, audibly confused by the request.

Dave was right on time. A different manager was on duty. This one was a Latina woman. Dave felt unsettled as she instructed him on where he would find his apron and where training was to take place.

“Training? No, I’m supposed to be on the forklift.”
“No forklift on Day One. You need to be trained first.”

He followed her and the other new person starting that day, an elderly woman who smelled bad.

“Hi,” Dave said, weirdly smiling at her.

She frowned and looked away.

“You’re gonna sit here and take an online course that goes through all the most crucial information for working here. Tricia--” She pointed to a purple-haired girl reading a magazine, “is going to supervise you.” Tricia smiled slightly at the word “supervise.” She looked like she was a couple years younger than Dave.

“Take a seat,” new manager said, and the old woman and Dave sat down at computers on opposite sides of the room.

The “course” was easy enough—pretty much a short-term memory test. Dave’s largest issues were his inability to focus and his desire to fall asleep. He rested his chin on his palm and leaned forward a bit, allowing his eyes to close softly.

“Yo,” Tricia appeared next to him, looking much taller than Dave expected she’d be standing up. “You get paid for training. You don’t get paid for sleeping.”

He said nothing because he was overwhelmed.

“Grandma over there isn’t sleeping,” she continued, sounding agitated. “And she’s old enough to be casket shopping. What’s your excuse?”

Dave looked at “Grandma,” who was typing quickly; he estimated about 50 words per minute.

“Yeah, sorry.” He finally sat up and moved around to crack his back a little.

“Ew.” Tricia walked back to her seat.
Slightly embarrassed, Dave completed the rest of the day sitting at the computer, successfully resisting the urge to sleep. He left the store at 3 o’clock, feeling proud.

It was a sunny day. He walked through the parking lot purposefully for a few minutes, before realizing he had no car, and no more cash to take a cab.

“Damn it,” he said, a little too loudly.

“What’s wrong?” Tricia stood behind him. “Is your mom late to pick you up or something?”

She had been teasing, but Dave answered sincerely. He kicked a pebble on the asphalt. “I wish my mom was picking me up. I took a cab here and am just realizing I have no ride back.”

Tricia’s expression changed to one Dave recognized well. It communicated what he read as unwarranted disappointment in reaction to something he said.

“So at 6 o’clock this morning you took a cab to Walmart and it didn’t occur to you to think about how you were gonna get home?”

“No-”

She cut him off. “I have a ton of groceries in there. I always wait for the sales and then buy in bulk.” He noticed for the first time in their conversation that both her hands were clutching three bags of groceries. “If you help me carry all the food to my car, I’ll drive you home. As long as it’s not too far.”

“Ten minutes.”

“Fine. My stuff’s all in a blue cart. Hugo’s standing guard over it right now.”

“Why don’t we just roll the cart right to the car?” he raised his hand to block the sun from his eyes. “Why do we have to carry them across the lot?”
“We’ve had some incidences of cart theft recently. New policy, hopefully temporary, no one’s allowed to wheel carts outside the store.”

Dave tried to look like this phenomenon didn’t scare and confuse him.

“Okay, I get it. And who’s Hugo?”

“Security. He’s a good friend to have here.” She paused and looked amused. “But there’s no way Hugo’s gonna like you. He hates lazy white guys.”

Dave didn’t respond, but walked back towards the entrance to retrieve Tricia’s groceries. What an interesting turn of events, he thought. He had had more social interaction over the last twelve hours than he had since Brittany’s birthday party the previous month, where he had tried to hit on one of her friends and ended the night vomiting in her bed.

“Tricia wanted me to help carry her groceries to her car,” Dave told Hugo, who was a very large, bald, black man who looked more equipped to be guarding an L.A. nightclub than seventeen Walmart grocery bags.

“Who are you?”

“I just started here. My name’s Dave.”

“Take two bags, Dave, and know that I’m watching where you take them. If you take them anywhere other than Tricia’s car, I’m coming for you.”

Dave decided to treat this as a cute hazing thing rather than a real threat. He grabbed two bags that looked light and walked outside the store. Unfortunately, he didn’t know which car was Tricia’s. So he stood still, looking around for her purple head. Hugo interpreted this hesitation as intent to steal her pantry items.

“I told you right to her car!” he yelled.

“I--was trying to, I don’t know where her car is. Do you?”
Tricia appeared and grabbed the bags out of Dave’s hands. “Nice try. I think I’ll take the Oreos and mac and cheese, you can go get my gallon of milk and box of seltzer. It’s the little green Toyota, right there.” She pointed.

Dave and Hugo both silently walked into the store. Dave and Tricia finished shuttling the groceries and got in the car. Tricia pulled out of the parking lot excitedly, lighting a cigarette and messing with the radio.

“Do you need directions?”

“Hell no. We’re going to my house first. You’re gonna unload all this stuff, and then I’ll take you home.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. This isn’t a charity.”

Dave looked out the window and coughed loudly in response to her cigarette smoke.

“Oh, would you rather me not smoke?” She said in a suddenly caring tone.

“Yeah, I really don’t like the smell.”

“Oh, okay,” she said sweetly, then took a huge drag and exhaled into his face. “It’s my car. If you wanna complain, you can walk.”

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes, and they listened to the Thrasher song coming out of the radio. Dave liked the song, and though his arms were crossed, his foot tapped along and he eventually let his head nod to the beat.

“Do you see that?” Tricia asked, her eyes darting from the rearview window back to the road.

“What?”

“That red Taurus. Hasn’t it been following us for a while?”
“Um, I don’t know.”

“Look, I put my blinker on and now he’s putting his on.”

“Do you know that guy or something?” he asked, examining the driver. He was a small brown haired man in his thirties.

“Yes.” She pursed her lips and pulled over. “He’s this guy I went on two dates with...” she trailed off, focused on watching the car behind them.

He drove past them slowly.

She shivered. “Jesus, I can’t believe he’s still following me.”

“What happened?”

“It was a few weeks ago. I had just broken up with my boyfriend Jeremy, after finding out he was having Craigslist sex with older moms. My friend Michelle wanted to do something nice for me, so she set me up with him—he works at Barnes and Noble with her. She didn’t know him well but assumed he was just a normal sweet guy, I guess because he’s quiet and works at a bookstore. So I meet him at this Italian restaurant, and for the first half of the date everything is normal.

But then things start getting weird, like he’s touching me way too much and keeps asking where I live. I wouldn’t have even met up with him a second time but I forgot the sweater I had been wearing at the restaurant and he texted me saying he took it home and would bring it to our next date, winky face. It’s like my favorite sweater--cashmere. The second time I just said we should meet at a coffee shop and before even finishing my drink I was like, ‘Okay I have to go.’ He flipped a shit and started yelling at me in the middle of Bean City--”

“Bean what?”
“The coffee place. The barista showed up and started telling him to calm down and I snuck off. But he knows where I work cause I told him at the beginning of the first date.”

“And he’s been showing up at Walmart?” Dave asked, caring slightly but feeling that his patience with the topic was waning.

“Yeah. I mean maybe I’m overreacting.” She started driving again.

“Are you sure? You seem freaked out,” Dave said, implementing his powers of perception.

“It’s fine. Never mind.”

Dave thought this guy sounded very suspicious, but he also thought she was probably just a paranoid girl. They listened to the radio the rest of the way home. By the time they got to Tricia’s apartment, the tension had diffused. He dropped the box of canned seltzer on his foot and shouted out in pain, which inspired Tricia’s nickname for him: Squealer.

“What? Change it,” he demanded. “I want a new nickname or no nickname.”

“No.” Tricia stuffed items into her cupboard and didn’t turn around to look at him.

Her apartment was nice enough. Most things in it were wooden. It was a spacious one bedroom but the neighborhood seemed pretty sketchy to Dave. He wondered how much she’d judge that he was living in his parents’ house when she realized it. As they walked back out to her car, he noticed a stack of Pokemon cards on her coffee table and wondered if she was into gaming.

She drove to his house and pulled over right in front of it, surprising Dave by making no comment.

“See you at Walmart, Squealer.”

“Bye.”
Dave ignored his mother asking him to take out the trash and opted instead to go directly to his room and pass out. He could not remember the last time he had done so much in one day. The shades were up—meaning his mother must have been using the elliptical, even though he specifically asked her not to. The sun shone brightly onto his face, interrupting his nap, but he lacked the energy to do anything about it.

He slept until dinner, during which he informed his father about his job.

“Well, it’s good you’ll be out of the house,” was all his father said, but Dave thought he picked up on a subtle tone of pride.

On Tuesday, he sat in the forklift and moved more things around in the warehouse. During his first fifteen-minute break, he sat in the employee lounge and played Tetris on his phone, but tried to make it look like he was texting someone. Tricia was the only person in the room he knew. He didn’t speak to her or anyone else. His second break was more eventful. He tried to take a shit in the single-stall bathroom, but was interrupted when Jo, his female co-worker, walked in.

“Damn it,” she said, shielding her eyes from Dave’s bare legs and squinting eyes. “Did no one teach you how to lock a door?” She left in anger. Dave found this reaction to be unfair, since he was the victim.

He never got his flow back and felt constipated for the rest of the day. By the time he was leaving work, embarking on what Google maps claimed was a seven minute walk to the bus stop, (though Dave had his doubts; the app didn’t know how slowly he walked) he felt not only grumpy and overheated, but also snubbed by Tricia, who he was hoping would be a real friend to him. He noticed her car as he meandered through the sun-soaked parking lot. He slowed and looked around. No one was nearby. He peered into her car window.
It was cluttered with empty soda bottles, brown bags, and fast food containers. Two sweatshirts and some books occupied the backseat. Dave leaned over a bit, his hands on his forehead to block out the sun.

“Hey, Squealer, what the hell are you doing?”

Dave jumped back. “Nothing.”

“You’re sneaking around my car,” she said. “Why?”

“Sorry, sorry. I was just...bored.”

“So when you’re bored you creep around people’s cars and look at their stuff?” Her eyes were locked on him with accusation, but her hand dug through her purse, searching for the car keys.

“Could I possibly get a ride?” he asked, staring at the ground.

“Wow, you’re pathetic. How old are you? And you can’t figure out how to get back to your parents’ house?” She looked exasperated as she stuck the key into the car door. “Fine, get in.”

“Thanks.”

It took him too much time to get the door open.

She didn’t turn the radio on. The arm that wasn’t steering the wheel reached for a cigarette and lighter.

“I can...help.” His limp arm moved toward her purse.

“No thanks.”

“So what are your plans for the night?” Dave said, looking out the window and regretting the implications of the question.

“I don’t know, I’ll probably play some music and watch NCIS. I love that show.”
“You play an instrument?”

“Guitar.”

“Cool,” Dave said. “It seems like your life is so together.”

She rolled the window up. “What are you talking about?”

Dave said nothing.

“I’m late on my gas bill, again. I went to Wesleyan and I work at Walmart. I haven’t spoken to my parents since I graduated. The ‘check engine’ light on my car has been on for four months, and my roots are showing,” she said, tilting her head so he could see the black hairs along her scalp.

“Okay, well at least you don’t live with your parents, who hate you. And your mom isn’t cheating on your dad.”

“No, she is.”

“Okay, well…” Dave hadn’t removed his eyes from the scenery outside the window since the start of their conversation. He turned his head, not to face her, but to look straight ahead. “I still feel like you’re doing better than me.”

“That’s a huge comfort,” she said, making a turn without putting the blinker on.

“Do you remember where I live?”

“Yes.”

“Cool.”

A few minutes later they arrived at Dave’s house. Tricia parked the car and neither of them moved.

She put her hands on the steering wheel. “Do you wanna get a drink later tonight?

There’s a bar near here I go to sometimes.”
“Yeah sure, is it walking distance?”

“I’ll just pick you up.” She put the car back in drive. “At eight-thirty.”

He opened the door. “Okay.”

Dave spent the next five hours in a state of agitated anticipation, fighting with Joanne over the TV remote. When he got home at 3:30 she was already digging into the white wine, and Dave was gravely concerned about her alcohol abuse.

“Oh, Mom, you’re such an addict, I should tell Dad to leave you. Not that he doesn’t already have enough reasons.” He snickered and changed the channel from ABC to Cartoon Network.

“This is my house, David. I will watch the program I want to watch.”

“Whatever,” he said, scratching his side, staring at the screen. She rose in a dignified manner and walked over to him, with the intention of grabbing the remote out of his hands.

“I am done responding to your asinine threats, David. I birthed you, provided for you, clearly too generously, because you are still entirely dependent on me and your father. He and I have a complicated relationship, and frankly I don’t think he’ll care too much about Mike as long as I continue to act with discretion. So this time I mean it,” she said, inching her long red nails towards the remote and her wine breath towards her son’s face. “Two more nights. After that you are out of this house. And I don’t want to see you again until Christmas.”

He was surprised and angry. “Are you serious? You’re just gonna tell Dad? It’ll ruin your marriage. He’ll be so upset--I can’t believe you hate me so much that you would do that.”

“Please, David. It’s not about hating you. It is time to be your parent, not the sponsor of your existence. You need to support yourself. If you don’t do it now, you may never learn. You
could end up homeless. Your father and I will help you put a deposit on a reasonable apartment.
And that is it. You have a job now. I’d suggest saving your earnings.”

He had just picked up his first paycheck, and planned on using it to get a membership at
Blockbuster.

“This is ridiculous,” Dave said, getting up. He noticed the time on the cable box clock
and realized Tricia was going to arrive any minute.

“I’m going to get a drink with my co-worker soon. Her name is Tricia.”

“Great,” Joanne said, sipping her wine and flipping channels.

“Can I borrow twenty bucks?”

She sighed. “Of course you need money. Who is this Tricia?”

“A friend.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Sure,” Dave said and rolled his eyes.

“Does she have an apartment?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Take a twenty out of my purse, and try to go home with her. I’d like a night of
privacy with your father to fill him in on what’s been going on.”

“Thanks.” Dave walked over to her large white leather purse and took two twenties from
her wallet.

The first thing Dave noticed when he stepped into Tricia’s car was her perfume.

“Ready?” she said, seeming chipper.

“Yup,” Dave said, thinking fondly of the forty bucks in his wallet.
She pulled out of the driveway, and Dave noticed his mother watching them leave from
the window. She looked pleased. This annoyed him, and though he wasn’t going to let it ruin his
night, he needed to talk about it.

“My mom is such a bitch.”
Tricia scoffed. “Why?”

“She told me I have to leave in two days. Like way to have compassion for your only son
who just got dumped by his girlfriend.”

“Wasn’t that weeks ago?”

“Whatever,” he said, trying to tap into a sadness about Brittany that he did not feel.

“So, where are you gonna go?”

Dave leaned his forehead against the chilled window. He saw a red Taurus in the
rearview. He was startled for a moment, recalling Tricia’s paranoia from their first ride. But he
returned his focus back to his lack of options. He wanted to spend more time voicing his
disappointment and receiving validation.

“I have no idea. I’m open to suggestions. What would you do if you were me?”

“Move out.”

They were largely silent until they arrived at the bar. Dave looked around the parking lot
for the Taurus, but didn’t see it. He relaxed.

The bar looked like the kind of place Dave always imagined himself frequenting. In
reality he did not go to bars on anything close to a regular basis, and he wasn’t the best drinker.
He always felt disproportionately annoyed by hangovers, probably because he knew he had had
less fun than everyone else waking up with a headache on any given Sunday morning. The
concept of un-had fun made him bitter.
In high school, whenever he was discouraged by his lack of social mobility, he pictured a future version of himself walking into upscale bars in coastal cities with the confidence of a very different person. In college, he snuck into, and was kicked out of, a few dive bars. His modus operandi was to hungrily throw back shots of various kinds of liquor and cause some sort of scene that would inspire the bouncer to double check his ID. He never ended up in a physical fight, but he ran away from plenty of them. By the time he was legally allowed to drink, his attitude toward bars, and socializing in general, had soured significantly. He did nothing to make himself fit in, but still resented feeling left out.

He and Tricia sat down on a couple of tall black barstools. Dave’s wiggled. He shifted his weight and frowned. Tricia noticed and rolled her eyes, then asked him what he wanted.

“I’m not sure. What even is good?”

“They have well drinks and basic beers so you should just get whatever your usual is,” she said. “And I should probably order for you. Ollie doesn’t really pay attention to men, especially ones he doesn’t know.”

“Huh, that’s weird. I’ll have a gin and tonic.” He tried to make the sentence sound like one he said frequently.

Tricia leaned forward slightly, and the bartender instantly appeared. He was very tall and pale with dark eyes and hair. He reminded Dave of a life-sized Daniel Radcliffe, but one who was intimidating and towering, nothing like Harry Potter.

“Hey sweetheart,” he said, visibly exhausting effort trying to catch a glance at her breasts. He reached down under the bar for a rag, which Dave guessed he was doing to get himself at eye level with her chest.
“What can I get for you?”

“A Pilsner and a gin and tonic.” She seemed neither flattered nor annoyed. But Dave noticed she spoke with a voice much lower than he was used to hearing.

“You got it. Good to see you in here again.” Dave noticed he put the rag back in its place under the bar without having used it.

“Yeah, I missed the place. And we’re celebrating--my friend just got hired at Walmart.” Her tone was more sarcastic than celebratory but Dave blushed a little anyway.

“Congratulations,” Ollie said, looking at him for a moment, before turning back to Tricia. “How have you been? You still with that guy--what was his name?”

“Jeremy. And no,” Tricia said quickly. Dave noticed Ollie had not begun making their drinks; both his hands rested on the bar and he appeared more fixated with looking confident than doing his job.

“Good, I’m glad,” Ollie said, smiling at her. Dave thought this was overly explicit; he should have said, “Bummer” or “That’s a shame,” but with a tone of optimism.

“Me too. He was a shithead. I’m taking a break from men at the moment.”

“Really? More into chicks these days?”

“No,” she chirped. “I’m celibate.”

“Well, I’m gonna go get your drinks,” Ollie said. “Be right back.”

He walked away, and Dave turned to Tricia with an expression of deep distrust.

“Well, he’s creepy,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s whatever. Could be much worse.”
He did not know what she meant by that, so he asked her what she thought about their co-worker Jo, the one who walked in on him in the bathroom and had been pretty rude about it. Their drinks came. Ollie winked at Tricia, but then left them alone.

Dave was glad for this, although he wondered what it was about him that communicated to Ollie that he was not having sex with Tricia--so much so that he had felt comfortable openly hitting on her. Would it not have been fair to assume the two of them at least could have been on a date? Annoyed by his failure to elicit the image of someone who was sexually active, Dave stirred the straw in his drink instead of taking a sip.

Tricia was more present. “Jo is definitely cranky but she has a really hard life. She’s supporting like five kids on that salary.”

That was not the answer he wanted to hear, so he said, “Well I hope she teaches her kids how to knock.”

“I have to pee,” Tricia took a sip of her beer and walked towards the bathroom. Dave took a really big sip of his drink. He didn’t love it.

He looked around the bar. It was full of people who seemed to be around his age, but poorer. Some looked really punk, or like they hadn’t showered in a while. There were a few hot girls sitting at the corner table, who all seemed too drunk given the early hour. A man in a leather jacket and white pants strolled across the bar, blocking Dave’s view of the chatting girls, as he wondered if he might have a chance with one of them--especially the blonde one, who was looking at her phone and giving her friend the finger.

The girls sat on the other side of the room, so he had no chance of hearing their conversation over the noise of the bar. He turned around in his seat so he could focus his attention on reading their lips. This was a habit he developed as an adolescent, trying to find
entertainment in the lunchroom. Since he wasn’t much of a reader, his mother didn’t let him bring his Game Boy to school, and he had no friends, he would often sit alone at a table and observe his classmates in the lunchroom, hoping to catch snippets of their conversations by lip reading.

Like most other skills he tried to strengthen, however, his adeptness at lip reading never matured past an average level. Nevertheless, he hoped to use any information from the bar girls’ conversation to ingratiate himself enough with one of them to get a hand job or a phone number. Again, he focused on the blonde one, who had put down her phone and started speaking to her drunkenly captivated friend without gesturing.

“Broccoli and pie did not go out last night!” Dave stared at her lips, his body limp in his barstool as he sipped his cocktail.

The nose-ring brunette responded with what Dave read as indignation. “Oh yes you did. I saw Gigi’s snack rat and you were in it, making tequila bots and making out with a Cheeto!”

Though he had clearly misread some key indicators, it seemed to Dave that Nose Ring was trying to appear playful, but in fact was sincerely upset about the events that had transpired the previous night. Perhaps she hadn’t been invited out with the blonde one and others.

“I one snot at the club.”

“Pon’t lie--”

The one with the dyed red streaks cut off Nose Ring. “What, lever, are we trying pogo poo other bars tonight?”

He thought about what he would say if he actually spoke to them.

“Hey, how are you ladies doing tonight?” he pictured himself saying. He had heard it delivered in similar contexts on TV. But then Dave recalled that some of those women on TV
don’t react well to a line like that, even when delivered by a gorgeous male actor. He thought
he’d better re-think the approach.

“Hi, I like your shirt,” he imagined himself directing at the blonde one. “It’s maroon.”
Would that be weird? He wished he had a friend he could text to get counsel on the subject. He
didn’t, but he pulled his phone out anyway and considered Googling something. Instead, he
stared down at the screen, focusing on appearing focused, opening and closing apps at random.

Dave took the last sip of his gin and tonic. He considered trying to order another one, to
test Tricia’s claim that the bartender did not pay attention to men. But before he could even try to
get his attention, Ollie approached Dave himself.

“Yo,” he nodded and looked down at Dave. “Where’d Tricia go?”

“Why do you care?” Dave said, although he too felt suddenly nervous about Tricia’s
prolonged absence; it had been at least a half an hour. He turned to the seat next to him and
looked at her beer, missing only one sip.

He walked towards the bathrooms. The door of the men’s room was ajar, but the
women’s door was closed. He knocked on it timidly, slightly feeling the gin he just drank.

“One minute.” It was Tricia’s voice.

“It’s Dave,” he said. “I was just making sure you’re okay--”

She opened the door rapidly and pulled him inside the bathroom. For a moment he
thought she was going to kiss him. Then he saw the blood.

The floor was covered in it, as were Tricia’s hands and shirt. One bloody finger pointed
behind Dave, so he turned around.

A small, brown-haired white man lay on the bathroom floor, apparently dead. He wore a
leather jacket and white jeans.
“Is this the guy--?”

“Yes! He’s the one who’s been following me in the red car--” She was crying.

“Remember? Remember the one I told you about the other day?”

“Of course I do, yeah.” Dave touched his forehead, recalling having seen a red Taurus behind them. He felt guilty. What if Tricia had come out on the other side of this altercation, all because he had failed to warn her about the presence of her stalker? He dropped the thought.

“Is he alive?” he asked, lightly kicking the man’s knee.

“No. He’s not. I didn’t see him in the bar, but while I was peeing he came in--I didn’t lock the door I guess.”

He tried to make his voice sound as neutral as possible. “So what did you do?”

She lifted her right hand, revealing a bloody switchblade. “The second I saw him, I was just filled with fear and--anger. I took out my knife and just kind of…”

He re-examined the body, this time looking for knife wounds. There were many.

“You just kind of stabbed him until he was dead?” Dave asked, still trying to remove judgment from his tone.

She was really crying now. “Yes.”

“Why do you even have a knife on you?” He asked, but allowed the question to stay rhetorical, realizing it was time to act.

“Okay, okay. Let’s just double check…” Dave turned back to the man. Blood stains ran down the wall and dripped onto his body. He leaned down and grabbed his arm, feeling for a pulse. There was nothing. He put his hand in front of the man’s nostrils, waiting for a breath. He remained crouched down there for two minutes or so, Tricia pacing behind him, but there were no signs of life.
Dave stood up.

“Oh, wash your hands.” He was gaining some clarity. He felt as if someone new was inhabiting his being, calling the shots. “Wash your hands and button your pants.”

She nodded and turned on the faucet. He liked watching his commands transition into action. He continued.

“When you’re done washing up, take your shirt off and put it back on inside out so the blood doesn’t show. Then go pay for the drinks. I’ll walk out of here a few minutes later and meet you at the bar, and then we’ll just go out to the car and drive away.”

“Oh, okay.” She did everything he said and left. He stared at the light. When it seemed like a few minutes had gone by, he walked out to the bar, where Tricia was chugging her beer.

“Did you pay?”

“Yes. Just finishing this because he’ll know something is weird if I don’t.” She spoke too loudly.

“Oh, okay, hurry.” Dave looked around in an attempt to look normal, though he knew if anyone cared to compare his behavior pre-dead body and post-dead body, he or she would notice clear distinctions.

Before, he had been relaxed and observatory, a calm kind of pervy, sipping his drink and studying the group of young women with mild hunger. Now he couldn’t focus his attention on any single object, including the hot blonde; his eyes darted and blinked downward. He was oddly aware of the weight of his left arm, and he kept shifting its position until it collapsed and jolted on his hip like a reeled in fish dying on the floor of a boat.

“We gotta go,” he said, and grabbed Tricia’s arm. She slapped his hand off but followed him out.
“Let me drive,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because.” He was annoyed by the inane nature of the question. A recent first time murderer should not be operating a motor vehicle. As she frantically fumbled through her purse, Dave wondered if it was, in fact, her first time killing someone. The thought scared and intrigued him.

He turned his attention back to Tricia’s searching hand, knowing she felt for the large and rectangular “CHICAGO, ILLINOIS” keychain when hunting for the car keys. It took her significantly longer than usual, and she cursed in annoyance. As she searched, he looked around the parking lot. The Taurus sat opposite Tricia’s car. Dave swallowed.

“Where--okay, here.” She finally handed him the keys, got in the passenger seat and locked the door.

He made a right out of the driveway and drove straight for a few blocks, paying excessive attention to the speed limit.

“Is there anywhere specific you wanna go?” he asked.

“Yes, go to my house. I’m gonna need some stuff.”

“Stuff for what?” he couldn’t help but feel a sinister doubt in her; did she “need stuff” to hurt someone else? A witness? Him?

“Stuff to live. I have to leave, I have to run away.”

“Run away? Why--”

“From the cops, Dave,” she said, turning her head towards him, suddenly angry. “If I don’t, I will go to jail. I killed him, do you get it?” She crossed her arms and Dave thought he
saw her eyes well up, which comforted him. It was nice to have evidence that she was emotionally taxed by the events of the evening.

He started to feel bad for her, which made him feel good about himself. He tried to be helpful.

“Maybe we should just explain what happened to the cops. That you were terrified, and he had been stalking you, and you--you didn’t have any other option.”

She said nothing.

“What do you think? Won’t that work?”

“I did have another option. The other option would have been to not take out my knife and stab him a bunch of times.”

“So...it wasn’t an accident?”

“Not to a jury.” She leaned her elbow against the car door and turned her body away from him.

Dave did not want to argue anymore. “Okay, we’ll go to your apartment. I need directions.”

He wondered if she had a record. Would Walmart hire someone with a record? These and other worrisome thoughts increased Dave’s heart rate for the remainder of the ride. Except for Tricia’s sparse and terse directions, neither of them spoke. She continued to cry to herself and both of them frequently checked the rearview window, though Dave didn't really know what he was looking for.

When they reached her apartment, she ran out of the car and darted inside. For a moment, Dave was unsure whether he was supposed to follow her. He did.
She was holding a large duffel bag and filling it with miscellaneous objects located throughout her apartment. He watched her stuff a frying pan and a pillow inside.

“So you’re sure you won’t consider going to the police and telling them what happened?”

“Pass me the peanut butter.” He picked it up and tossed it to her.

“I’m leaving. I have a cousin who moved to Mexico--I mean, she went on a Fulbright, but same difference.” Dave knew it was not the same difference, but did not point that out. “I hate the cold anyway, and what am I leaving behind?” She took on a tone that Dave found excessively cynical. “My job as a sales associate at Walmart?”

He looked around the apartment. “Hey, you’re really good at your job.”

She scoffed, picking up random articles of clothing from a laundry basket that sat on the floor in front of the TV. Dave pictured her watching NCIS, folding laundry and guessing who the murderer was. He shook the image away, finding it newly disturbing.

She made eye contact with him and shook her head. “Okay, I have to go. Time is of the essence.”

“Um, I really think you should take a shower.” Dave said. “You wouldn’t want to get pulled over looking so disheveled and bloody.”

She looked down at her body. “You’re right. Okay, I’m gonna take a two second shower, finish packing, and leave. I would rather just get right on the highway, so can you--call a cab or something?”

“Sure,” he said, but she hadn’t waited for his response. He listened to the shower water run, and paced around the living room. He felt a surge of jealousy towards her.
She was clearly filled with a sense of urgency to act— a sensation he had never experienced himself. He definitely did not want to go home and listen to his mother’s nagging, circling newspaper ads for apartment rentals in the area.

When Tricia returned from her shower, in clean clothes and wet hair, Dave was sitting on the couch.

“I want to come with you,” he said.

“What?”

“I wanna go to Mexico—or wherever.”

She leaned over and wrapped the ratty white towel around her head.

“Oh, why?”

“I don’t have anywhere to go anyway. I told you, I have to leave my parents’ place. And... I also don’t like the cold. Plus,” he added, unsure if it was too soon to joke. “It’s the only way you can be sure I won’t snitch.”

She frowned, flustered, more focused on packing than their conversation. “Whatever, you can come if you help pay for gas.”

“I just got paid yesterday!” He knew he sounded too excited. “So I have some money.”

“Hope you have more than one paycheck’s worth of cash. It’s a long way down there.”

He did not respond to that.

She threw another large bag at the couch. “Help me pack.”

They spent the next fifteen minutes hurriedly loading her car with whatever random items they thought might be useful: clothing, non-perishable food, blankets, makeup, cutlery, and a few books. They then stopped at Dave’s house to get his belongings, which was a much shorter process, as he had been dressing himself out of the box Brittany packed for him weeks earlier.
Neither of his parents were downstairs, so he decided to leave a note on the kitchen table, the family’s traditional mode of communication:

*Hey Mom and Dad, I moved out like I was supposed to. I can text you my new address if you want it. Please don’t convert my room into an exercise studio. Love, Dave.*

He left the house and got back in the car, this time in the passenger seat, which felt much more normal.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Tricia asked, after putting the car in reverse but before taking her foot off the brake.

“Yeah,” Dave said honestly.

She pulled out of the driveway. Dave stared out the window at his house, believing for the first time that he did not have to or want to stay there. The distinction was clearer to him than ever before. He smiled and looked at the houses on his street--the ones he had trick-or-treated at, the ones with kids his age he never got along with, the ones with old people who still dropped off cookies around the neighborhood during Christmas.

“We should get a *hacienda,*” he said. “It’s a big Mexican house.”

Unexpectedly, Tricia embraced his lighter tone.

“Okay, sure, with whose pesos?”

“We’ll get jobs. Does Mexico have a Walmart equivalent?”

“Even if they do we are not working there.”

Dave liked that she used first person plural.

“Or at least I’m not,” she added.

Dave frowned.

“What kind of job would you want, then?” he asked.
“I don’t know. I majored in Bio. I’d be down to work in a Mexican lab.”

“Yeah, maybe solving crimes.”

Neither of them said anything more for a minute. Tricia broke the silence.

“What did you study? You went to college, right?”

“For three and a half years.”

“You went for three and a half years and didn’t finish?”

“Yeah, halfway through senior year I just really wasn’t feeling it.”

“Who does that?” She said, merging onto the interstate.

Dave was used to this reaction, and had his response ready.

“I don’t think we should force ourselves into doing things we’re not interested in. I liked school, and then I didn’t. Why should I stay just to get a degree?”

“Because it’s not about--whatever.”

They drove without speaking for a while, while Tricia kept changing the radio station. He noticed her hand was twitching a bit.

“But anyway, yeah I did like school for a while.” He said, trying to distract her from whatever thoughts were making her hand twitch.

“Oh right, yeah. So what did you study for--seven semesters?”

“I majored in Spanish.” He suddenly understood the relevance. “Which is actually really convenient now!”

“No shit. Are you good?” She said, turning to him with a smile.

“Yeah, I was really good in school, and when I was living with Brittany I used to watch Spanish soaps all day, plus chat with the Mexican mailman.”

“Well, that’s pretty lucky.”
“Yeah. You know, I actually do have some useful skills. Maybe I’ll be able to get a real job down there.”

“I thought you loved working at Walmart.”

“It’s Walmart, Tricia,” he said, slightly shaking his head with the confidence of a much more accomplished man. “Nobody loves working there.”
Climbing Mountains:

*Jade Dragon Snow Mountain is located in the village of Baisha in Lijiang City, China*
For the second two years of college, I rented a house in the village five minutes from campus, sharing it with a few transient and a couple of permanent house mates. We all learned how to cook, clean, remember that Wednesday is Garbage Day, stay up late watching videos, go to bed early on a pact, fight, get over it, get drunk, and fight again.

Before moving off campus, when I lived in a dorm room with a roommate, I would try to temporarily claim a public space as my own in order to get a second to myself. I’d wake up at 6 a.m. on a Saturday, just to sit on the little couch in the common room and think--happy to be alone. Sometimes I wouldn’t even think. I was simply immediately calmed by not hearing someone else’s breathing, by the knowledge that I could make a weird face or noise and no one would look at me expecting some kind of explanation.

Someone who lived in the dorm the previous year had left a boom box and a single CD on the windowsill. I popped the CD in and played it one morning, to discover that it was a mixed tape of soothing songs that spanned all genres, some of which I knew and some I did not. I needed these mornings in order to calm my frustration toward being constantly surrounded by people. Even when she was doing nothing wrong, my roommate was a nuisance because her presence mandated acknowledgement. I found this unending social expectation to be exhausting.

So at the house, since I had my own room and could retreat to it whenever I wanted, I came to seek precisely what I had previously avoided. I felt a newfound pleasure in being around the people I lived with, rather than resenting them, as one would a forced roommate, or, say, a family.

I was a double major in Writing and Chinese Studies, and traveled to China twice in college--once on a study abroad program, and once independently, accompanied by no one except one of my housemates, Bolivia. She also studied Chinese throughout college and had the
same inclination to learn about China. While at home, Bolivia and I were not together 24/7. We were close friends, but maintained busy and separate lives under the same roof.

This dynamic changed drastically when we met up in Bangkok in June, 2016. We planned on meeting there since we both wanted to see and understand Southeast Asia, and its relationship to China--our adopted motherland. I had just turned 21 and hadn’t slept in three nights, since I was out partying on my birthday and then got on my cheap flight with multiple layovers that took a couple of days to complete. I showed up at around 11 a.m. at the hostel, to find Bolivia fast asleep in one of the dorm beds.

“I have arrived!” I screamed, jet lagged and delusional. I started babbling about wanting pad thai and a beer, and she got herself out of bed instantly.

“Just give me two seconds to get dressed and we’ll go. I have to tell you about what I did last night.”

She had been in Vietnam alone before arriving in Thailand, and beat me to Bangkok by one night. Excited to hear about the place and what I could expect, I rushed to the communal bathroom to brush my teeth. I laughed aloud while doing so, for no reason other than lack of sleep and giddiness to be in Asia. Everything was already exciting. There was so much going on in the streets below--and it wasn’t hectic in the way New York is, with its unacknowledged classicism and repetitive office buildings. No one donned the fake urgency that is characteristic of New Yorkers. If they screamed something at you from across the street, it was because it needed to be said. Everything was real. Nothing could annoy me. I spit out my toothpaste.

It turns out I was right. That instinctual excitement I felt in the Bangkok hostel never truly tempered throughout our six week adventure, most of which took place in various parts of China. While at home I could not picture us happily dealing with, firstly, each other’s constant
presence, and secondly, the various obstacles we encountered--misplacing both our debit cards, being chased by a group of Chinese men who cat called us and did not appreciate our sassy rebuffs, and losing each other, multiple times--in China none of these things ended up spoiling our mood. They were serious problems, yes, and we often felt terrified, worried, and endangered, but never bored, and never annoyed.

It turns out this phenomenon--this acceptance of circumstances, mannerisms, mishaps, and occasional tragedies, applied to many aspects of traveling in the Middle Kingdom. In China, everything unpleasant I dealt with--heat, hunger, lines, ruined plans, danger, confusion, missed trains, mistranslations, and food poisoning--was all experienced with the backdrop of sincere euphoria and a desire to learn about my surroundings. One of the major examples of this disproportionate tolerance is my experience climbing Chinese mountains. By the time we reached southern China in July 2016, between my study abroad trip and this expedition, I had climbed a total of five giant mountains in China. I have climbed zero in the United States.

Simply put, if it’s in China, I am drawn to it. This isn’t because I’m some kind of travel junkie; if it’s in another part of Asia, I’m still interested, but primarily insofar as how it relates to China. If it’s in Greece or Mexico, I’m mildly interested, and if it’s in France, I will avoid it at all costs. My years of studying the language and trying to formally and informally educate myself about the culture and reality of China had led to a kind of unbreakable devotion to the country and anything it might contain.

One such thing was Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. Embracing this attraction to and acceptance of all things China, we, two relatively non-athletic, indoor girls, headed from Kunming, the southern capital, towards Lijiang, in pursuit of our next mountain.
For 36 USD per night we had a private villa with a view. But accessing the mountain was unexpectedly expensive and complicated. Bolivia and I had to employ our combined Chinese language skills, and patience, to explain to the concierge what we wanted to do and why.

“Hello. We very much like your hotel. We want to hike up Jade Dragon Snow Mountain today.”

“Are you with a group?”

“No, we would like to go by ourselves, in order to save time and money.”

“It’s very dangerous,” she said.

“It’s all right, we’re not scared. We have an interest in the history and beauty of the mountain and want to experience it firsthand.”

She continued smiling but her face did not move and she said nothing. I sighed.

“Can you please get us the number of a cab?”

“Yes, of course. Where do you want to go?”

“Get us the number and we’ll call the driver, okay?”

“Okay!” she said in English.
We had arrived in Lijiang a few days earlier. Lijiang, China has a population of 1.2 million people. It contains one of China’s last remaining ancient villages; the old town is still configured the way it was 800 years ago, although now you can buy canvas bags and t-shirts with Obama photo shopped to resemble Chairman Mao, in addition to your dried yak meat. Located in Yunnan province, close to the Himalayan foothills and the Myanmar border, the small city embraces tourism with dignity. Jade Dragon Snow Mountain is about six miles north of Lijiang’s old city, in the village of Baisha.

We paced in our villa, feeling confused, spoiled, and impatient. It was almost noon and we had woken up at 8 o’clock expecting to just hop in a cab and say, “Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, please.” But we soon found out Baisha, unlike the big cities we were accustomed to, did not have any cabs readily available.

We had walked off the premises of our hotel and along a dirt road, waiting to encounter the familiar Chinese traffic frenzy. Instead, the dirt road led to another dirt road which led to a few bodegas and one large “jiating” (家庭) meaning, “restaurant that prepares local family style meals.” Since it had become apparent we weren’t going to get a cab, we decided to find somewhere to eat breakfast and draft our Plan B. The jiating was closed, so we went to the nearest little shop and bought ramen. I couldn’t read the characters specifying flavor so I chose the one with a panda on it.

As we waited in line, I turned to Bolivia and said in English, “I guess we should go back to the hotel, eat our ramen, and talk to the woman at the front desk about how we can get to Jade Dragon.”

“Whoa--is that a cow?” She pointed to a large animal walking solo down the dirt road.
“Talk about nine cows, and one strand of cow hair,” I said, jokily uttering the English translation of a Chinese idiom we had just learned. The phrase is supposed to communicate something that is difficult to find—much like one strand of cow hair in the midst of nine cows.

We watched what became a procession of cows dominate the road. The handful of locals who were out paid the cows no mind; one woman continued removing dead chickens from a basket, laying them out on the ground, and beheading them with precision.

We held our ramen and waited for them to disperse.

“How do they know where to go?” I asked the shopkeeper. The cows were accompanied by no humans, but seemed to have a clear path.

He looked up from his newspaper. “Who?”

I pointed. “The cows.”

“They’re going home.”

“But how do they know how to get home?”

He looked at me like I was dumb. “They live there.”

We headed back to our villa, circumventing cow dung along the way. When we arrived, we boiled some hot water for our breakfast.

Bolivia took the first bite. “Damn it!” she screamed. “It’s way too spicy.”

“Shit,” I said, smelling my own bowl hesitantly. “Let’s see if mine is.”

Mine was not spicy, and instead tasted like nothing.

“This is super mild,” I said. “Do you want some?”

“No,” she was already looking through our stash of snacks. “I’ll just have some Oreos and nuts.”

“Right.”
So by the time the cab driver arrived, about an hour after being called, it was already one o’clock. We got into his black car and before he moved, he turned around to talk to us.

“Can you speak Chinese?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. So it’s 200 kuai there and 200 back. Give me half now.”

We looked at each other with suspicion.

“Is this stupid?” I asked in English. “Would he leave the mountain without us?”

“I don’t know. He seems nice.” We both looked at his smiling face and outstretched hand.

“You will wait for us at the mountain, right?” I asked. “You won’t leave until we are done climbing?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Let’s just do it,” Bolivia said and I agreed. We each gave him 100 kuai.

The ride was long. I thought about the research I had done the previous night about Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. The Naxi ethnic minority has inhabited the area around it for centuries. I read that the mountain is regarded as sacred by the Naxi people, and their protective god Sanduo represents the mountain itself.

The Naxi legend of this god tells of a young and strong hunter who, in the process of riding his horse up Jade Dragon, became intrigued by a large white rock. To his surprise, he was able to carry it with ease; it was shockingly light. Later on he stopped, as the story goes, to take a cigarette break. When he tried to pick up the rock again, he found that it was somehow deeply rooted into the ground and was much too heavy to lift. This white bolder became a symbol of Sanduo: the Naxi people’s guardian and protector. He is celebrated on the eighth day of February
every year. Since he was said to have been born during the year of the Goat, the celebration--
which includes dance and prayer--ends with the sacrificial killing of a young goat.

In the backseat of the cab, I put in my earphones until the view outside my window
became more interesting. It was a rainy day, and as we rode farther up towards the mountain, the
air got lighter and the fog got denser.

The drop-off was hectic. The driver stopped short in a parking lot and pointed towards a
large factory-esque building that stood before us.

“Go in there to get your tickets.”

“Okay.” We quickly gathered our belongings and jumped out of the car. Before I closed
the door I said, “See you in around three hours. We will call you with our location.”

He nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes, yes, yes.”

The ticket line was confusing. There was a foreigner line and a Chinese line, because
tickets were more expensive for non-Chinese. We got in the empty foreigner line and walked
straight up to the ticket counter. People standing in the other line pointed, talked about us, and
took pictures of us as we bought our tickets.

Then came the ascent. Most of the next ninety minutes were comprised of standing in line
and accepting the stares of hundreds of people. We were corralled into waiting room after
waiting room, herded like cattle through stages of the line.

Why do people climb mountains? I thought, feeling both hot and cold in the damp indoor
purgatory. When asked by The New York Times why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, British
mountaineer George Mallory (now famously) answered, "Because it's there." He died during his
third expedition to Everest in 1924.
China has a relatively mountainous environment; the world's 14 mountains taller than 8,000 meters -- also known as "eight-thousanders" -- are all in Asia. The fifth, fourth, second, and first largest ones are all located in China or along one of its borders. There’s an idiom in Chinese, “有山有海” meaning, “it has a mountain and it has water” which is used to describe desirable areas. But I think the larger reason has more to do with the flexibility one assumes while traveling. When mountain climbing in China, I repeatedly accepted what I usually deem unacceptable: walking in groups, heat, steep heights, sun, hunger, and triggered blisters. Elements that would have been deal-breakers were instead virtuous--validated because I was deepening my understanding of China.

And of course I embraced the chance to partake in any activity that raised the stakes of my ability to speak Chinese. Without a tour guide, I had to plan and execute the expedition entirely in my second language. Additionally, it was easier to chat with people at the same tourist destination as me as opposed to locals on their way to work.

I made small talk with people in line, asking parents where they were from and kids what their favorite color was. While in New York, I don’t talk to children unless I’m getting paid to do so, I felt no aversion to interacting with Chinese children. I learned that many of the families there had traveled to Lijiang from all over the country. I examined the hordes of people visiting the mountain that Wednesday and thought about the amount of disposable income needed to make the trek; I wondered whether the rise of the Chinese middle class has led to more travel within the country.

In fact, Chinese domestic tourism has been increasing about 10% per year, and it is estimated that this industry contributes 4% to China's GDP of 9 trillion dollars. There are so many Chinese people that overseas tourism is not half as important as ensuring the continuation
of domestic travelers. It seemed that at every tourist attraction we visited foreigners were noticeably outnumbered by Chinese. I liked this; it suggested that the country did not need us, making me feel more compelled to earn my place there.

We continued to stand in line. We were offered the opportunity to buy ponchos, umbrellas, hairnets, and oxygen tanks.

“No thanks,” I said to the oxygen tank man, then turned to Bolivia. “How high is it exactly?”

She shrugged.

A few families around us stocked up on oxygen and rain gear, anticipatorily swallowing huge gulps of air out of aluminum bottles. The massive waiting room was filled with orange ponchos, making us stick out even more; I wore an inherited drug rug that my mom bought years ago on Long Island.

After an hour or so we were loaded onto a bus that would take us farther up the mountain. Getting onto the bus was a feat in its own right: people pushed, stomped, and ducked under others in order to get on first. The bus driver sat in his seat and did nothing to calm the chaos, save close the door once there were enough people on board. We barely made it.

“Jesus Christ,” I said, clutching the handrail. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, but that was insane.”

A group of middle aged men overheard the English we spoke and looked at us with curiosity. “Look, pretty foreigners.”

“Where are they from?”

“Maybe England, could be Russian.”

“The brown haired one is pretty but the red haired one is just okay.”
“Yeah,” one of them said. The others took another look at me and nodded in agreement.

I made eye contact with one of them and, in my adopted Beijing accent, said, “What are you looking at?”

The man I had addressed looked like he just saw a scarecrow come to life and start talking.

“Oh, nothing,” he said. “We were just saying you are beautiful women.”

“We don’t date Chinese men,” I said, which was not true. No one responded directly to us but they mumbled about it for the rest of the bus ride.

We were then loaded onto a gondola. We shared it with two couples; one husband was reading the news on his phone and telling us about a factory explosion that had happened in Shenzhen, while the other was consoling his terrified wife who kept looking out the window and shrieking.

“I wanna go home! Take me home!”

“It’s okay, we’re almost at the top,” the husband said. She squeezed his hand tightly in a way that reminded me of childbirth.

The moment we stepped out of the gondola and onto solid ground, her demeanor changed drastically. She shrugged off her purse and handed it to her husband, commanding him to take a photo with her and Sanduo’s legendary white bolder. After each picture was taken she examined the most recent photo and shed her smile like an old scab.

“No! I’m moving in this one. Get it right!” she’d say, posing all over again. We took our own photos, and then started getting invited to join family group shots.

“Excuse me,” the kid would ask, whipping out his grade-school English. “Could you take a picture with us please?”
“Yes, of course!” we’d answer in Chinese, to his confusion.

We climbed all the way to the top of the mountain, and bought some corn and hot dogs at the snack shack.
I looked around. There was a man walking along the boulders and picking up litter, collecting it in a large black garbage bag. A group of young women who sounded like they were from Shanghai positioned themselves to take a photo, moving slightly so the garbage man was out of their shot. He had impressive balance; it was clear he had had a lot of practice, but I still thought he took a bit of a risk by hiking all the way to the top of this mountain just to collect trash. Wasn’t there enough litter on the streets below? Perhaps he wanted to preserve the natural beauty of the mountain.

Suddenly, his foot slipped slightly, and his whole body fell forward. He caught himself at the last second, his hands breaking his fall against the rock, though it looked like his palms sustained scrapes. I thought again of the risk he was taking and what possible purpose it could be serving; perhaps the top of Jade Dragon was the closest place to find a lot of litter in his area, and
he was there more out of financial necessity than an environmental tilt. I fixated my gaze on the
spot where he lost traction, imagining what would have happened if he had fallen and died.

“Oh my god!” Someone would have screamed. Someone else would have called 9-1-1; the mountain
officials would have shown up and instigated the process of recovering his body. A crowd would
gather and be ordered to disperse; the mountain might even be evacuated, certainly closed to new
visitors that day.

News would spread down the trail that someone died, but the details would be become increasingly
inaccurate, and people would panic, assuming they were in danger as well. The story of this man’s
death would not stand alone as its own narrative; it would devolve—first perceived as a threat to the
hikers, and eventually as simply a part of the longer anecdote people would tell of their experience
climbing Jade Dragon. The story wouldn’t be told in this man’s honor or out of respect for his life, but
through and within the context of the tourists’ own trip and the death that spoiled it.

The Shanghai girls giggled and reviewed their photos, each of them claiming the ones they wanted
to post. Knowing the reaction would be vastly different, I edited my reverie so that it was one of
these well-to-do young women falling to her death at the tourist trap peak. There would be far more
shrieks and photos. Her friends would lose their shit. The state-run media would print a story, and
literate Chinese citizens and netizens abroad would mourn for her.

And if it were a famous person who was slaughtered on Jade Dragon—someone like the pop star
Jay Chou or, god forbid, a Communist Party member, the reaction would be far more frantic, much
more publically mournful. Even if you didn’t care, you’d have to act like you did, for appearances.
I chewed my corn and thought about these relative ripples of death. Having dedicated this much thought to the hypothetical death of strangers, I considered the likelihood of having similar thoughts in my own country.

When I was ten or eleven, having spent a day in Manhattan visiting my father’s law office, I sat in his conference room and wrote an essay on a legal pad about class in the city. “In New York, you’re either a millionaire, or homeless,” I wrote. “Half the people walk around sending emails on their Blackberries, wearing designer clothes, while the other half hold out a used paper cup and ask for money. In the suburbs, however, everyone has just enough money.” What a cute idea.

So I had this particular well-intentioned train of thought that day in New York, and being a socially engaged young adult attending a liberal college in a liberal part of the country, I have of course considered social issues with an increasing consciousness of their import. Still, I don’t think I spend enough time in my everyday life thinking about the phenomena, poverty included, whose symptoms are palpable, yet would fall into the category of “cultural unmentionables.”

Depression, racism, kleptomania, Down syndrome, illiteracy, lying, hunger, gun control, the classism of higher education, the easy changes we could make to offset climate change, farting in public, and sexism. We think about these unpleasant realities at disproportionate frequencies and depths, and some of them end up totally cast aside. Many members of the educated elite tend to identify these icky subjects early on and spend the rest of our adult lives quietly ignoring them, or making wide-sweeping social justice-y comments about them at dinner parties, continuing to reject thorough consideration of the issues when they show up in our daily lives unexpected.
I am guilty of participating in this selective care and apathy at home, but in China, I’ve noticed that when confronted with an issue, I address it. Bolivia and I had far more sociologically substantive conversations abroad than we do on a regular basis in New York; we talked about the reasoning behind the prominence of sex work in Thailand, the severe tactics used by Chinese beggars (i.e., cutting off their own limbs and carrying around dead babies), the role of the media in Communist China, and racism targeted at China’s 56 ethnic minorities.

In America, I go to work, I spend time with my friends, I go to class; I do my shift. Elements of daily life, like using the bathroom and calling my mom, are easier, but a downfall of living here—specifically as a middle class white girl—is the fact that I can tune in and out of injustice. Since I am more engaged with and fascinated by my surroundings in China, I become a much more vigilant social warrior—a visitor with an agenda. This is not to say that I am more bombarded by social issues in China because they exist more there than in the United States; in fact, I often find myself arguing the opposite. Instead, I think it has to do with my elective commitment to the nation that compels me to work hard to understand both its beautiful and distressing realities.

The descent was dull. It seemed the creative designers of the mountain were aware that visitors might feel downtrodden, and had decided to include some messages of motivation for our enjoyment, Google translated into English. My favorites were: “Long Journey, Good Behavior As Your Company” and, “Every tree and flower has purposes, every word and action has good behaviors.”

At first I was merely amused. But then I considered the text with more depth. That’s a good point, I thought. When traveling, your own behavior really is the only consistent “company” you keep. You have limited control over your expectations and surroundings, but
you do get to decide how you conduct yourself. I settled in the thought for a moment and assigned the words a new legitimacy. Maybe all flowers really do have purposes.

As we got closer to the bottom, we passed through a turnstile that kept track of how many people had waited in line that day: 8,000.

“And it’s only four o’clock!” I said. “There are so many people in China.”

We called the cab driver and described our location, and were pleasantly surprised to see that he was waiting at the agreed upon spot. We left the mountain tired and relieved.

Everything else we chose to do on that trip was more logically aligned with our interests: food markets, bars and ladies nights, and lots of museums that explored China’s art and, in a way, politics. In every city we visited we tried to spend most of our time in the areas that “locals actually like”--and we found these primarily by making young friends and having them take us out or give us suggestions. There was the friend we made at a club in Kunming, who invited us to sit at her table and drink with her and her friends until we wanted to go home. She then hailed us a cab and paid for the ride in advance, bribing the driver to ensure he drove safely.

There was “Felicity”--the friend we met when asking for directions to the art neighborhood in Beijing, who took us to dinner and casually explained why young people in China don’t trust or care about the news media, recognizing it as an extension of the government that is irrelevant to them. She took a lot of pictures with us--her American friends--and posted them on Wechat and Weibo, answering our endless questions about China as candidly as she could. The relationship was both transactional and beautiful.

When I tell them I’m moving to China, my friends are encouraging, while strangers ask, “Why, exactly?”

Why learn a language? Why wonder what a cow is doing? Why hike a mountain?
An appropriate answer now strikes me as obvious: “Because it’s there.”
Don’t Touch the Dead Whale

And Nine Other Commandments
Don’t You Think:

The smart people are colluding against us, sitting in the coffee shop at the table near the bathroom, to accommodate the pee schedules of each other’s beautiful biracial babies, while society’s alleged prodigies are stuck at Dunkin Donuts, with their Pillsbury dough boy pale as can be clone children? When the smart people smell bread, they start emitting words like peasant, pastry, hybrid, hobby, retirement, seasonal, Florida, condo.

Meanwhile, the cutout men and women interact with members of their own gender at the office and the wine bar, respectively, respectfully asking personal questions and trying to appear uninterested in the answers. “I kind of feel bad for her in a way. I mean has your husband ever cheated?”

“No I didn’t get the promotion, I think it’s going to Steve, again.” They all hold their drinks with loose pinkies and make tentative plans for next Friday; the energy drink in me keeps walking but the sandwich that never settled takes two steps back.

Intellectuals always say they have to be heard, but what they mean is they have to be seen being heard, so private conversations wherein the other party is listening are not sufficiently ostentatious; one needs to have his name listed on promotional materials, in bold, until he becomes a professional panelist—talking and repeating and condemning and retreating until the moderator says, “Alright, thank you all very much—” then his mind goes blank and he shakes many important hands with an absent yet tough grip trained by muscle memory. He can embark on these formalities without thinking much and without listening at all.

“Do you have any money on you today, sweetheart?” the gay barista asks the homeless man who just wants coffee. He has been sober six days and needs a kick to keep it going.
The Elocution of an Overtired Mind:

Her Range Rover ran over my rotating urn; I thought, funny that she’d be the one to finally make me stop spinning. I was born to a Midwestern steel town; “Was there something you wanted?” the waitress asked her, since she had been sitting at the table for almost forty-five minutes.

She had used a broom to sweep up the flecks of her father from the driveway. It was a hectic ordeal, and her hands rested on the diner table, folded together. She was rather certain some parts of me were caught in the creases between fingers; she ordered French fries and vowed to eat them with a fork.
Cyanide:

The road was only its sounds, both ambient and abrasive. Passing cars were loud but seemed absent; they were slugs with no memory. I saw Charlie talking to the man who exhaled silk and thought I’d tune in a while.

“Listen, daisy, I’m not here to bump gums, if this doesn’t go down right we could both end up in the big house. I know you’ve been pullin’ a Chinese squeeze on my operation for months now, and I don’t want to have to give you the third, you understand me, I’d much prefer us talk open and honest about how you can get me back the twenty large you owe me and my roscoe here.”

He glanced referentially at the gun he held against the other man’s head. “I know you got yourself hard into the nose candy, but stealing from Charlie Cylinder just don’t go over well for no one, and certainly not for a nancy like yourself. Now if I get nailed, I’ll know for sure you dropped a dime, and I’ll fill your skull with daylight.”

He turned away and started walking. I followed him.

“Hey, hold on a minute!”

“I ain’t interested in no chippy tonight, honey.”

“I’m no chippy.” My tone made him look me up and down.

“What are you doing around here? You look like the daughter of a goddamn shytster.”

Now I’d known this man’s reputation, since I was a little girl, and I knew not to give him any lip, but I resented the way insults and implications streamed outta him just like Chicago lightening out his heater, easy as cake.

“I know you think you’re some fat cat butter and egg man whose cabbage talks for itself, but I can see through you, Charlie Cylinder, and I know you’re just as scared as the rest of us. And by the way, it’ll be your own dumb mistakes that land you in a Chicago overcoat for good. So next time you wanna bully someone innocent, just know you’ll be hearing some chin music from me and mine.”

I extended my arm and waved down a taxi. Charlie followed me in it, and ended up telling me his whole story that night over eggs and beer at the Stargate, but not before kissing me first, which I pretended to expect, like church on Sunday.
A Small Glass:

No one filed for divorce in 1992; that was the year of goodwill and breakfast wine. Lots of wives who had given up on caffeine got coffee makers for Christmas in fifth grade, fighting over Santa and seven nights, fractions and decimals. It’s a matter of precision and the rationale gauge; would you rather have more thin toilet paper or less thick toilet paper?

Never mind. You’d just do whatever you were told, such a suck-up you’d lick dandruff off a teacher’s eyebrows.
To Shake:

Imagine my surprise when I expected a microwave and instead found a van, seven children living in it, off of grilled cheese and Sharpies. You are a human forest fire and my grease paws are the firemen, the fishermen, and the farmers

Markets can be unpredictable: I sold cookies for double their value and answered the door with a gun. Police are on the roof picking up broken noses. Don’t worry about him, that’s just John, the only guy I know who has been given the Last Rites three times.
Crucifix Transplant:

I had nothing to report to your pointed face during the all-nighter in a booth. The early blue morning chewed on a hairnet while you poured crack for the second time down the toilet. I assumed you were the parrot’s accomplice until proof of innocence emerged and I made it back to God, I’m such a church mouse.

Confession cured all, obviously, but five decades in I can’t get used to the chalkiness of Eucharist. That being said, the deacons were the worst--nothing but hands.
A Slow Death Produces A Specific Will:

It takes a certain kind of mother to ignore a baby’s cries. She read the method as fact and implemented it posthaste.

The son’s friends came after school, but not before stopping at home to put ties on. They paraded through the hall, dressed for a very sober prom. The furniture was pardoned from a historical mansion to carry grieving backsides. Meanwhile, one of the deceased’s sisters was drunk, telling kids to see live music whenever they get the chance.

At the cemetery, she handed me a yellow rose. She said serotonin is released in a woman’s brain when she sees a flower. I expressed doubt, but after I stared at the thing, I reciprocated a stranger’s interest in small talk.

She wanted peonies but they were out of season. “We can eat avocados in the winter but they can’t breed peonies?”

We stood there with thin hair. For the last few weeks, “No” was her only word. It meant something different every time she said it.
When Geography Fails, Try Geology:

I think you should try setting your stories in places other than coastal cities. It’s obvious you’re pausing to Google every other sentence, “What is Flat iron?” or, “How long would it take someone to get from Hollywood to Venice Beach?”

Don’t write what you know, just stop pointing out everything you don’t.

Look at me like that! Don’t pull the fire alarm in here! Don’t be late on rent this month. My god my jesus my son my dog my pots my pans my pants! You should start collecting rocks and studying their properties, pouring coffee flawlessly, “there’s nothing wrong with laying brick!” My father knew the merit of labor.

Rights are human rights are women’s rights are all right, someone call the alt-right; we’re having too much fun.
Chores and Soda:

Nine earths sat on the fence and swung their legs, drinking Coke. The third earth knew he needed brain surgery, but he sipped his soda with the calm of an old, cold rock.

You’re turning 33: Jesus’ age. We’re burning cheap candles in what was mislabeled as the land of geishas, enjoying the sun, since the earths have no legs to dance.

But they are terrible flirts, vying for attention from goddesses whose needs have already been met by Chevrolet or Ford.
Musical Enema:

Marcus Flannigan and I stole these from the hotel we were staying at this weekend. We took sacred oaths to preserve the creeds of orthodoxy, so we played elevator tag at the Hyatt and grabbed towels off the maid carts.

Marcus was good company. But his parables condemned my thicket of sworn attachments, so I cut it off. I contribute nothing to the attainment of eternal life upended by a worldly impulse for the metal doorknob, the Prada backpack, the light bulb.
The Path to the People:

St. Catherine of Alexandria was a martyr and a virgin. Pale, faithful, and intelligent, she is the patroness of philosophers and preachers.

On the way to the circus, camels co-opted the caravan because they were the biggest, and the thirstiest.
After converting to Christianity through a vision, Catherine denounced Maxentius for persecuting Christians. Fifty of her converts were burned to death.
The camels united and became dominant over all other animals, calling the shots with their second humps.

Unrelenting, the Emperor Maxentius offered Catherine a royal marriage if she would renounce the Faith. She refused and was imprisoned.
The driver of the caravan, a simpleton, tried to stop the bus, but the camels threatened to kill him. He kept driving.
While in prison, Catherine managed to convert Maxentius' wife and two hundred of his soldiers. He had them all put to death.

Some people don’t hold a grudge, but camels do.
Catherine was beheaded. Her figure remained unscathed.
Womb Cult:

Counting the eyeballs in the embryo, you have to start a three tiered release just to get the sound through.

Concerning the criterion of life, cannon or carton, conception or consciousness: In Korea, people are one year old when they’re born.
I Drive To Krav Maga In My Prius:

Today I am self-deception. I am reclaiming my apathy in the presence of the conference room co-worker
had a cold and I tried not to look annoyed every time he sniffled and dripped. I spun around in my Office Max chair,
but I show I have empathy by keeping my plants alive and visiting churches when I travel. I carve messages into restaurant tables, things like, “you’re not alone”
Again, on another nothing night. The kind of night most people wouldn’t mind being alone during,
The commercial break, tapping my leg with the anxiety of a felon fleeing the fuzz on the blanket sticks to my stubble and I flick it off.
You Said You Wanted to Live in a Better Time:

So we weekended in the seventeenth century, but I am cold and these people don’t have any antibiotics. While you explored the sites that would become historical, I met an attractive servant. She was too pedantic to hold my interest--although she was bright and skinny like a streetlamp.

The golden era is never now; you’re full of words but I am fuller. The longer we were apart the more I wanted to hit a gong; I was drawn to percussion plus the endangered process of becoming goth.
The Man Who Was Down On His Luck:

You could call loose leaf tea the oil price basis effect, or mistaken eye contact--specifically the kind with repercussions. I used to have money. I owned a private contracting company, I’d build bridges and drink juice with flavors extracted from multiple fruits, no one and done OJ shenanigans.

You only take the time to take stock of your life if you have too much of it: time, I mean, not life churned out phrases like curdling milk; during the Tang dynasty people would--and this is historically proven--sit down and watch the worms make silk.
You:

Tube, Socks, applying fresh deodorant, paired with the guilt of having a penis. Let’s get together for a cold glass of seltzer.

A Jeep is only as good as its white van cousin, so I chose to work on a fishing boat. I thought of it as a prereq to writing the next *Moby Dick*.

I spent most of the summer noticing that even people from the same place have different accents and wide-ranging work ethics.

Then I wrote what I consider to be the next *Moby Dick*. 
Inmates on death row are allowed a last meal of their choosing. Someone hungry is someone flirting. Most want comfort foods. Crying wolf, I wear fur coats until about June. They want fried chicken. They are five times more likely to choose soda than milk.

Sweat is juice a broom can’t touch. Data collected reflects the foods inmates requested. Pussy riot on the breath. We can’t know what they ate.
**Thermometer:**

Superman with the common cold. The weather got sick and tracked in unearned mud. It can be fun to save someone from his fate.

In America, girls rap, arrive late, and eat whole pizza pies. Even the little ones do it sometimes. They’re not always thinking about Paris and BMI’s. Flannel folks. Flannel, folks! Domestically produced, far from your rice. I hated the way the receptionist greeted me, so I left before my interview.
The Word “Posh”:

A man wearing a powder blue beret sips water from a plastic bottle. The Republicans are like a used tampon. Red, disgusting, and inevitable. Everyone in earshot agrees. The man’s cell phone is clipped onto his jeans and he does not have email. But people exist who aren’t in earshot. They’re at the grocery store. They’re in public parks.

Sometimes you wish you saw a hickey on a girl who just plays the violin. To avoid the glare of the sun, first class ship passengers sat in port out and starboard home--posh.
Folds:

You are familiar with the fight from the calendar, a wrinkle in the repeat we don’t discuss. But we are a species that talks, despite our incorrigible cotton thumbs. They hang by our sides, dormant and severed by the sip. You were cornered into thinking of me as the maraschino bear, the humming lipgloss you had no problems not sticking to.

Well, we’ve all run dishes through the vanity cycle. Afterwards, you have trouble keeping track of the most shrugged parts of your identity—name, age, hair care products. You sit on ice.

By the time you cannonball, I’ve untouched the Inuit. I gripped her baby bottle, filled it with gusto, and took a sip beside myself. I knew then you wouldn’t know her. The trees in her portrait took baths without us.
He salvaged what he could. Prescriptionless lenses, ponds dug by humans. He wanted to win the candidate more than the election. He remembered her, predicting the breeze of a bailout. She called pine trees Susans. “I’m sure you want to get back to the hospital.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Too much traffic.”
Grillz on a Baby Rapper’s Gums:

It’s interesting that “seizing the day” can be an introductory clause, like “on the contrary,” or “furthermore.” Grammar is a movie everyone has watched and no one can summarize.

Words come after the fact. Color and content are always read first. We serve ourselves mashed sweet potatoes. But we’re too young to chew, so they swing around our mouths like Listerine.
Repetition:

Starbucks for lunch. She only dates men in uniform. She got a Teddy bear from the techno cop, who has usually been drinking. She hugs the bear, referencing the cavity in a meow or a child.

Is she only dating them when they’re in uniform? Her instinct is to pretend to be asleep, like the kid who wants to be carried. Every day is a refreshed context, asking: “Do you prefer Venus or Serena?”
The Result:

You know all my ex-girlfriends had an aversion to setting lines between jokes. Instead, we’d discuss how to go about spreading the good word in countries where missionary work is illegal.

The relationships would settle and flee like friendships between selfish white women. My faith in god depended on my faith in the girlfriend. So I’d end up single and godless, eating lasagna out of the pan, amused by a memory of something funny I had done years before.
Eye Sockets:

Girls in jail do pull ups on stripes, take breaths on plaid. Sprint on cheetah print. As they bulk up, their trials last longer and their sentences get deadlier. By the end, they aren’t girls at all. They’re felons with muscle contributing to rising rates of recidivism. The judge’s gaze lingers on her shedding pearl earrings, assuming they’re fake.
She Fed Me Sugar With A Porcelain Hose:

Creasing between finger and dust, I tilted my patterned knuckles like a fighter getting ready. She counted out the curbed risk of me, a doomed gambler, wound up but penitent. I synced with the color of foreign blankets--those with smallpox and those without. I captured a goldfish with one hand and squeezed it so that shards of milky ice fell from my grip.

I’d order another drink for her stepmom, but I think she’s getting exasperated by my eyes on her forehead, that oily canvas, that white purgatory.

At the garage sale she bought me two portrait frames, but I couldn’t think of anyone famous enough to hang up.

She wanted to disempower the disposable culture of salt shakers. So she purchased a rug like she had a goal to find beauty elsewhere.