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## To Hell With Good Intentions

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*Bard College*

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To Hell With Good Intentions

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Dash Charlesworth

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

## Dedication

To the halal guy on Forest Hills-71st.

## Acknowledgments

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*To Hell With Good Intentions*

My mother asked that I pick up her medication at the CVS some six miles out: 20 mg Lexapro, 25 mg Lamotrigine, 4 mg Ativan, and some diabetes thing I always forget the name of. I'd not gotten out of the house all day and it was 7 pm by then. I was too busy doing nothing at all. She asks me to fetch her medication because otherwise I get agitated. It's a deadly cycle: doing jack shit, then getting mad at yourself about it, and so you do some more jack shit until the day is all but up—and then repeat. It's not a matter of control or will. Things just happen, or maybe they don't. It's not up to me.

I drove past the strip mall when I saw a lady waving her hands. She couldn't have been more than 40, but her face was sunken so that she looked older. It was 65 out, but she was dressed for winter: she had on a knit blue cap, a scarf, maybe two, and a puffy jacket. A pair of black tinted shades hung from the tip of her nose. I wouldn't have thought to do anything about it, but I could tell she'd been out there for at least a few hours fixing for a ride. I parked my car and told her I could help her out, get her where she needs to go, but first I'd need to pick up my mother's medication. "The pharmacy here closes at 8," I told the lady. "Here, come along." She followed me into the CVS.

"Thank you, sir," she said. "My name's Marie."

"I'm Harry," I said. We walked through the snack aisle. I asked her if she wanted anything. "Some candy, or maybe a bag of chips?" She grabbed a pack of beef jerky and a Monster Energy. "Is that all?" She wondered if I could also buy her a bottle of Robitussin and I told her sure, no questions asked. It's not good to judge. One of the employees was giving us this horrible death stare. Probably because Marie smelled a bit odd. It wasn't bad, just odd. We

waited in line for pick-up. Marie told me she knew one of the guys ahead of us. They shoot up together and have sex sometimes.

“He’s very, er— put together,” she whispered in my ear. “You wouldn’t know he’s into that world.” The line cleared, then.

“Viola Elrod,” I told the pharmacist. “Birthday is February 19th, 1963.” She handed me the meds in four paper bags. It took a second, but we were out.

“What do you got?” Marie asked me. She gave me a little nod. “In the bags.”

“Oh,” I said. “My mom’s a real, certified depressive. These make her just a little bit less messed up there. I like to think they work, but who knows.” Marie got into passenger side. I got into driver. “Isn’t it the proper etiquette,” I said, “to get in the back?”

“I trust you is all.”

“How do you know that *I* trust *you*?”

“Because you offered me a ride.”

“There are shades to it,” I said. “Trust is a spectrum.”

“People like me don’t work in spectrums,” she said. “That’s for people like you. For people like me, it’s black and white.” I asked her where she needed to go. “Portland.”

“Which one?” I asked. “Oregon or Maine? Either way it’s a long ways.” I looked through the rearview. It’s funny: I see the same cars every single day. Where do they go? And why? I decided I was OK with a long ways. My mother could get her medication tomorrow or the next day. Next week, even. It wasn’t life or death. Maybe it’s what we both needed: a mental shift. Marie hadn’t realized I’d asked her a question. She was too busy staring into space. “Oregon or Maine, Marie? Which is it?”

“Connecticut,” she said. “I’ve got a friend there. I don’t know his exact address, but he’s there. He’s got a funeral for his grandpa. I’m invited, and I don’t like to miss things.” She said she didn’t have a phone, so it might be hard to track him. “But things just work out. I’ve never been late because God won’t let me. No matter how hard I try, it just won’t happen. And I always find the people I’m looking for. It’s not random. Life has your best interest I think. Roger’s his name, by the way.”

I typed the spot into my GPS: Portland, Connecticut. “It’s a five-hour drive from Buffalo,” I said. “If we get going now, we’ll get in at around 2 in the morning.”

“Roger doesn’t sleep,” she said. “He’ll be up. The funeral’s tomorrow anyway.” She removed her shades to reveal a left eye, bruised and purple. “I wasn’t in a rush because I knew someone like you would come around—it’s fate.” I backed out of the parking lot, and we were on our way. Marie tried to pick off the plastic wrap from around the cap on the bottle of Robitussin. Her nails were short and grimy, and busted up. I did it for her.

“What happened there?” I asked. She acted as if she had no idea what I was talking about. “Your eye.”

“I was sleeping on a bench at Delaware Park,” she said, “and a group of kids—probably in their teens—amped up on something, well, they attacked me. It was long after dark.”

“It’s a shame,” I said. “I’m sorry. People can be so cruel.”

“It’s OK,” she said. “Everything happens for a reason, or whatever. One of ‘em, he said his name was Johnny. He went, ‘You’re asking to be murdered—left to rot.’ I told him alright and he, well, you know. I think we both learned something that day.”

“What’d you learn?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said, “but I’m sure it was somehow beneficial.” She took a big sip of her Robitussin. I asked her if she was sick.

“Well,” I said, “are you?” I recoiled just a little bit. “It’s not contagious is it?”

“I’m not sick,” she said. “I like the taste, and the feeling.” She offered me a swig. “You gotta try it, Harry. The FDA knows that’s what it’s really for, but they’ll tell you otherwise.” She told me that we could go shot for shot for the next hour or two. The driving will come easier after we hit the third plateau. “Just don’t go beyond it, or you die.”

“I shouldn’t,” I said. “It’ll get us into trouble.” She let out a faint whimper and sunk into the back of her seat. I thought peer pressure died once you left high school. Maybe it was her eager eyes, brown and storied: I couldn’t disappoint her. I believed, in that moment, that she knew what was best for me. I wasn’t living. “OK, hit me.” I pressed the bottle against my lips. I could taste her on my tongue—dirt and booze. I took a sip, then another sip. That was the second choice I’d made that day (the first one being having picked up Marie), and maybe the 12th I’d made my whole life. There was a billboard on the side of the road that displayed an advertisement for a petting zoo on the next exit. I asked Marie if she wanted to go. Not that I did, but I thought I’d ask anyway. She said it sounded like a hoot.

“If I were to be reincarnated,” she said. “I’d love to be a yeti crab.” I told her I’d be a cheetah, or maybe a lion. Something fierce and noble. “I see you coming back as a nurse shark.” I took another swig, then she did. I must’ve been broaching the first plateau. Marie said she was already on the second one. “Nurse shark, nurse shark, nurse shark—” she began to slur.

I recognized a license plate on a gray Subaru Forester I often see on my errands: 393-SNJ. “The cars,” I said. “The ones I see every day. Where do they go?”



“Nowhere,” she said. “Just like in the movies.”

“Just like in the movies?”

“Like going offscreen,” she said. “They, er— the cars, and the people in them, exist only temporarily, and then they’re gone—poof. When you can’t see ‘em anymore that’s because they don’t exist anymore. We’re the only two people in the universe, but only for the next four hours.” There was comfort in that, truly. But the thought of parting ways with Marie and her retracting my very existence had worried me. I wanted to be real to her forever.

I turned at the exit and parked in front of the barn. A man with a big, burly beard and overalls told us his name was Carter. He was slumped over a makeshift booth that read: \$3 FOR CHILDREN, \$6 FOR ADULTS. We told him we were, in fact, children. Not adults. “Good one,” he laughed. “That’ll be twelve dollars.”

“No, no,” said Marie. “It’s true. We’re children, yes, we are—at heart.” I whispered in Marie’s ear that I had the money. Six for each of us wasn’t out of reach for me. “It’s not a question of whether you’ve got the money or not.” She told Carter we would do eight dollars, and no more than that or we’d be leaving a bad Yelp review. “Besides, is there not a couple’s discount?” That was when Marie squeezed my cheeks between her palms and gave me a wet, slobbery kiss. I drew back for a moment and wiped the spit from my mouth, then kissed her again. I’m not sure why. I could almost feel Carter giving the two of us a roll of the eyes. A family passed us, the mother pushing a stroller. They muttered something to one another about PDA. I wasn’t sure which PDA they were talking about. It’s an acronym for so many things. “You kiss like a middle school boy might.”

“That’s because I’m, er— ambivalent about it all.”

“I can tell you haven’t kissed much.”

“Are you buying or not,” asked Carter. “You’re freaking out my customers.” All four of them? Ha! We chuckled. “I can do ten.”

“Nine,” said Marie. “Nine, or no dice.”

“Whatever,” said Carter. “It’s not like nine’s all that different from twelve. Hope you put those three dollars to use. You look like you both need it.” He said they were closing up soon, so we shouldn’t linger too long.

We sidled over towards the fence. There were enclosures with a variety of animals: goats, sheep, alpacas, llamas, pigs, little horses, some ducks, geese, turkeys, and chickens. There were these gumball machines propped up against the fence, but instead of gumballs they were filled with crimped oats. Marie pulled a quarter from her back pocket and got herself a handful. “I could never hurt an animal,” she said. “Even if someone paid me a million-billion dollars.” She asked me if I could. I told her I wouldn’t ever, unless the payout was just too good to pass up. “Oh, that’s bad,” she said. She dangled her hand over the fence and held the oats in front of one of the sheep. Marie asked Carter who the sheep was, and Carter said she was named Vanilla Bean. Marie began to coo: “Hey, Vanilla Bean, who’s a good girl?” Then she turned to me and put on a serious tone. She asked me what sort of payout I’d need in order to hurt a precious thing like Vanilla Bean.

“Well, I suppose it wouldn’t be monetary or tangible,” I said. “I wouldn’t do it for a million dollars, either. The payout would have to be more abstract: freedom, deliverance, amnesty—liberty.”

“Those are all sort of the same thing,” said Marie. “No offense.”

I told her it might be funny if we hopped the fence. I could ride one of the ponies. I don't know what had gotten into me. I felt like we had to. I think I was testing myself. She said she liked this side of me. Not that she'd known any one side of me all too well. But whatever this one was, she assured me, it was her new favorite. I eyed the booth and Carter wasn't there. He must've been off to the bathroom.

"Yeah?" I said. "Are you up to it?"

"Count of three."

"OK."

"One... Two... Three—" and we both made it over. I made a dash for the pony, Marie made a dash for the chickens. The family who didn't like us much called us stupid vagabonds. I took it as a compliment. I almost said thank you. It felt good to be anything at all. "Cluck, cluck, cluck," said Marie. "Do you understand me? I'm one of you guys," and she crouched low, bent her arms, and flapped as if she were a bird. "Cluck, cluck, cluck."

I approached the pony with some caution. They say you come at it from an angle, never from behind. It seemed startled and gave me a not-so-happy neigh. I told it that I was its friend and that I meant no harm. "Hey, pal," I said. "I'm not trying to hurt you." I rested my hand against its hide, black and bristly. I tried maneuvering my leg over its backside. I felt as if I had pulled a muscle in doing so, but I managed to mount it nonetheless. The pony began to whimper and buck. I whispered kind, consolatory things but it didn't seem to understand me. I'd never ridden a horse before.

The baby in the stroller started crying. "Get off of him," the father shouted. "That's not what he's here for. You've made my baby cry." They began to boo and hiss and tell me I was a

sorry idiot. I saw fear in the pony's eyes. All the commotion seemed to drive it into a panic. It bit me on the hand and drew blood, before charging off. That's when I fell off and scuffed up my face. Carter came running up. He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me from the floor like a ragdoll. I told him I was sorry—I just don't get out much.

"I don't know how to behave," I said. "It's a symptom of—"

"Fuck right off," he said. "The two of you can fuck right off. Lady—" he let out a fierce two-finger whistle. "Get away from my chickens." Her coat pocket was stuffed with something. I wasn't sure what. We asked that he don't press charges.

"It was a test," I said. "I was testing myself." He told us to get lost. We gave him three dollars for his troubles. I had definitely pulled a muscle.

We scurried away, got in my car, and drove off. "What a rush," she said. She offered me a swig for good measure and I obliged.

"What's in your pockets?"

"Oh," she said. She pulled out an egg. "I found some in one of the nests. I thought I'd take them, just because." I asked how many she managed to snag. "Four."

"What do you intend to do with them?"

"That's the thing," said Marie. "You can do so many things with an egg: hard-boil them, scramble them, make them sunny-side up, fry them, poach them, too. Egg a house, er— drink 'em raw like the bodybuilders do."

"How much for me to crack one right into my mouth?"

"I dunno," she said. "I have nothing to offer you. I'll be saving one, though. Just to raise it all the way into adulthood. Can a human incubate the way a bird might?"

“It’s worth a shot,” I said. She tucked one of the eggs between her thighs. A smile lined her face. She told me she wanted a child, but also didn’t want one at the same time.

“It’s like the perfect middleground,” she said. “No crying, no whining. You don’t have to take it to school. But it’s yours, and yours only—and you get to give it all of your love.” I grabbed one of the eggs from her pocket and popped it into my mouth. It was wet and slimy.

“Tastes, er— *uterine*.” I bit down, shell and all. It did not go down easy, but I swallowed. They say the shell is good if you’re calcium deficient.

“I hope you don’t get, what’s it—”

“Salmonella?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s OK if I do,” I said. “I’m not worried about it.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Salmonella, er— it’s something to think about at the very least. A good conversation starter, too.” I could feel the bits of shell lodged in my throat. “Everyone needs something to think about, or they die.”

“I’ll join you, then.” She reached into her pocket, placed an egg in her mouth, and bit down slowly. “I’m sorry, child,” she whispered to the egg between her thighs. “Don’t think too much of it.” She crunched and crunched, and washed it down with the rest of the Robitussin. “Is this what it’s like to kill a man?” I didn’t respond to her question. My thoughts were just loud enough to make me forget I wasn’t talking. I told myself the answer was no. Killing a man was different from eating an egg whole, shell included.

“We still have one egg left,” I told her. “What do you say we do with it?”

“Oh,” she said. “I dunno.” She told me that she’d hit some sort of post-Dextromethorphan depression. It wasn’t that she’d drunk too much, no—it was that she hadn’t drunk enough. She needed another kick. It seemed she might just doze off. Her frail hand wrapped itself around the safety handle. A visible shiver juttled through her body from head-to-toe. It wasn’t even particularly cold.

“Are you OK?” I asked her. Her eyelids then closed shakily—all veiny and translucent—as if they’d never closed before. Was she dying right in front of me? “Are you dying?” She said no.

“Well, *no*,” she muttered. “But, aren’t we all?” She emitted a half-baked chuckle. “Aren’t we all, Harry? Aren’t we all, er— all the time?” Her head retracted back into the seat, such that her face was parallel to the headliner. I could see all of her boogers. Her nose must’ve been broken at some point—maybe years ago, even. The bridge of it looked like a fleshy wiggle worm. “What’s that word you used? ‘Spectrum’? Dying is a spectrum. Spectrum, spectrum, spectrum, sounds like rect—” Her mutters evolved into a hum, which then turned into a blissful snore. I asked her if she was awake and she didn’t respond. That was my answer, I suppose.

Out front a rest-stop I saw a little kid who must’ve been no older than six. He sat down on the stoop and dug a stick into the cement. He was barely pushing three feet. And I could tell he had some sort of social anxiety. Trouble making friends—definitely. Something in his dejectedness. Maybe the eyes. His parents must’ve been getting gas. I could have so easily driven up to the curb, scooped the kid up, and never looked back. Kidnapping is the easiest thing in the world, it’s just a matter of whether one has the guts. Doing things like that is all about the guts, and “having the guts” means doing the damn thing, yeah—the “thing” you wouldn’t have

done otherwise. After some minutes, the parents moseyed on over towards the curb. The kid's mother grabbed his hand and they walked into a Cracker Barrel together. I wanted to say to her: I was *this* close. Was I?

I received a text from my mother in all-caps. She was frantic and worried, and asked why I hadn't come home with the medication by 10 pm, as I always have the medication in her hands by 10 pm. She then gave me a call. I held the phone up in front of my face. On the black screen, I could see my own reflection. I saw a man, in his late 20s, who already had a hairline that receded back mid-scalp. He'd shaved at 3:15 because he shaves at 3:15 every day. I let the phone ring while I stared. At a red light, I almost rear-ended the car in front of me. Luckily, I slammed the breaks, and then I let it go to voicemail. I'd never not picked up a call from my mother before. The guy in the car in front of me craned his neck and gave me a dirty look. I wanted to tell him that car accidents are kind of funny. And friendships are born of them. I glanced over at Marie who was fast asleep, the egg nestled gracefully between her legs. She cradled the seatbelt as if she were a slumbering baby.

"Marie," I said to her while she was dozing. I wasn't sure how to lay it out for her. "Do you know how easy it would be to do horrible things to you and, er— and then kill you afterwards?" She gave me a little grunt and whisper, and a mix of jumbled words. She was a sleep talker, it seemed. "What I mean, Marie," I went on, "is that I have some control now. I could drive us right off a bridge. I have that sort of power." She muttered something about needing to find a replacement. "For what?" I don't know why I even bothered. She was probably dreaming something fierce. "A replacement for what, Marie?"

I spotted a group of ducklings following their mother across the road. I swerved around them so as not to run them over. I wondered where they were headed. Did they even know?

“White,” Marie muttered. “It all turns white: static and noise—that’s it.”

“OK,” I said. “Right.” I eyed the family of ducks through the rearview. A guy in a Ford pick-up ran his tire just inches from the lot of them. “That’s the problem with imprinting, Marie,” I told her. “You got things following other things, and they don’t even know why.”

After some miles I got antsy. Just a bit. I nudged Marie awake. She wasn’t having it, but after some poking and pinching and prodding she came to. “What is it?”

“I’m just bored is all.”

“Yeah?” She let out a yawn. “I dunno. You, er— wanna split that?” She made a broad gesture towards the backseat.

“Split what?”

“Your mom’s stuff,” she said. “Maybe it’ll cure us—and our souls.” I told her OK, it was worth a shot. I asked that she grab the pill bottles and pour out six of each into her hand. I’d take three of each, and she’d take three of each. And if it didn’t start to do anything we could work our way up: four, fix, six, and so on, right until it hits. She handed me the meds and I downed them with a big sip of her Monster Energy. Then, she did the same.

“What were you dreaming about?” I asked her.

“It was an apocalypse dream,” she said. “I was alone in the woods with a baseball bat, fitted with nails, and I was fighting off a bunch of zombies. I think I died at the end.”

“Oh, wow,” I said. “Are they always like that?”

“My dreams?”



“Uh-huh.”

“They’re always something crazy, yeah,” she said. “Sometimes it’s zombies, sometimes aliens. I’ve had ones where I have to defuse bombs or take a submarine into the deepest depths. I’ve fought dragons and mummies and vampires.”

“I have this recurring dream,” I said, “where I’m in some sort of social setting—say, at a school or a diner, or the bank—and I’m having a one-on-one conversation with someone. Sometimes it’s someone I know; an acquaintance or a very, very minor celebrity. Like D-list, max.” Marie took another handful of pills and mashed them violently with her first, until they were ground into a coarse powder. Then, she snorted. “And they’ll say something along the lines of, ‘Nobody likes you. Everyone that says they like you is lying, and everybody who says they don’t, well, you should really believe them.’ Then, we both go on our way. I don’t probe or anything—just listen, and go. I have this same dream almost every single night, without fail.”

“Sounds pretty stupid.”

“Even when I’m awake I feel like I’m dreaming,” I said. “Most of my thoughts are about killing myself. Not in a suicidal way, I don’t think. I just think a lot about killing myself.”

“It’s sort of the ultimate form of—”

“*Agency?*”

“No,” she said. “Not that.”

We passed a run-down building with a bunch of graffiti all over it. Maybe it was an abandoned hospital or something like that. One of the graffitis was this spray of Kermit the Frog holding up a peace sign. “I’d really, really like to be an artist, Marie,” I told her. “But, gosh, the

whole ‘getting good’ part is what trips me up. I wish I could skip all the practice, and just *make*. I have so many idols, Marie—and they’re all fucked up. Fucked up in a way I wish I were.”

“Well—”

“And I know what you’re going to say,” I said. “You’re going to say: ‘art is impermanent, it doesn’t last.’ That’s the thing: It’s not about infinity,” I said. “It’s not about lasting. It’s about knowing you’re not crazy, that you *could* be understood, if just for a moment.” I squinted my eyes, then. “That car—”

“What car?”

“The car in front of us,” I said. “While you were asleep, I almost ran into it. We’ve been cruising the same way for miles. Where do you think he’s going?”

“He could be headed for the funeral,” said Marie. “Maybe he knows Roger, or Roger’s grandpa, for that matter.” I honked and honked until the car in front of us began to slow. After riding up next to him, I had him roll his window down. He had long, frizzy hair—almost dreadlocks—which covered his eyes. His mouth was small and twitchy, lined with thin and crusty lips. A sweaty tank top hung loosely off his shoulders. He looked sort of like my dad in a way. We drove in tandem with one another. “Where are you headed?”

“What of it?”

“We’ve been going the same way for the past fifty-some minutes”

“Yeah, so?”

“Do you know Roger?” I asked. “Or maybe his grandpa?”

“Eugene’s his name,” said Marie. “Grandpa E.”

“Do you know a Roger or a Eugene?” I asked. “Are you headed to a funeral by chance?”

“No,” said the man. “I’m driving home from work. I’m a grower.”

“Oh,” said Marie. “Like a pediatrician.”

“Not a pediatrician,” he said. “I grow cannabis.” Then, he arched his brow. He seemed a little concerned. “What’s your name, man?”

“Harry.”

“You’re drooling, Harry,” said the man. “It’s getting all over your shirt.

“It must be because I’m on the second plateau,” I told him. “My bad.”

“Right,” he said. “You keep doing these weird little zig-zag movements with your car, like you’re about to hit me, but then you swerve the other way.”

“I’m immune to hitting people,” I told him. “It’s metaphysically impossible for *me*, specifically, to get in a car accident.” I told him that he looked like my father. He assured me he wasn’t. “My father,” I went on, “is a terrible person to look like.” We spent what felt like an eternity just eyeing one another. I grabbed the final egg from Marie’s pocket and threw it right at his face. It splattered all over; on his dashboard, the windshield, and his clothes, too. “This man,” I turned to Marie. “The ‘grower.’ He looks like my father. And I *hate* my father.” He then put on a horrid scowl, and wiped the yolk from his forehead.

So, we sped off—80 miles per hour—just like that. “Oh my,” said Marie. “Why’d you do that? He’s barreling after us.” I told her it was complex. There was no rhyme or reason to it. I just had a feeling. “We’re dead, Harry—we’re dead.” I gripped her hand as I steered. Her palm was calloused and rough. There was real definition in the creases. I wondered what a palm reader would have to say to her.

“The bad guys,” I asked her, “do they do what they do because they like it? Or is it something else?” The grower man began to honk and holler. I could hear his yelps even with the windows rolled up. Lots of fucks, and shits, and I’m going to kill you. He was gaining on us quick. “Maybe it’s a need, Marie.”

“He’s going to run right into us,” said Marie. “Harry—”

“Like, it’s a divine thing,” I said. “The bad guys do bad because they need to just to prove they can do otherwise.”

“You hear him?” asked Marie. “He’s not going to stop until we’re in the ground.”

“But is chaos, er— spontaneity,” I snapped my fingers in front of Marie's face. I asked if she was listening. “Are those things evidence of ‘doing otherwise’?”

“I don’t care,” she said. “I really, really don’t care.”

“The Calvinists,” I went on. “They believe that God—at the very beginning of time—chose only a select number of people to make their way to heaven. So, from birth—”

“Shut up, please!” It seemed she might cry.

“From birth,” I said, “a human is predestined for either heaven or hell, and there’s nothing they can do to stop or change their eternal fate.” I eyed the rear-view then. The grower man was brushing up against the trunk. I could hear the scratching of metal. “So the bad guys, Marie—they’re fighters. Freedom fighters, but, er— literally.”

“Stop the car,” said Marie. “Just stop it!” So, I hit the brakes and the grower man followed suit. The egg which Marie had so diligently incubated had fallen and shattered on the car mat. She let out a squeal. I got out and saw that he really scraped up the back of my car. It didn’t look so good. He said we’ll call that even, so we shook on it.

“Don’t ever try me again,” he said. He squeezed my hand super hard. “Or you’re done.”

“If I had a gun,” I said, “or some sort of weapon like that, well, I’d use it on you and call it a *crime passionnel*. The French get off for stuff like that.”

“Get back in your car,” he said. “You’re talking nonsense.” Marie hopped out to check on me. She gave me a hug and told me I was acting strange and foolishly, and that she really didn’t appreciate it. And her egg, yes—I was responsible for the death of her egg. The grower man drove off, then. On the side of the road was a long, shiny switchblade. He must’ve left it behind. Maybe it had fallen out of his pocket. Maybe it’d been there the whole time. I picked it up from the ground and told Marie that I had a change of heart.

“Tell Roger you won’t be making it,” I said. “Do you have his number?”

“What are you on about?” said Marie.

“Do you have his number?” I asked again.

She dug through her pockets, while I escorted her off the road and into tall meadows where nobody could see us. “Please let go of me. Please—” She pulled out a crumpled piece of looseleaf with writing on it. “I have it, I do—” she muttered. “But I don’t know what you’re trying to get at here.” It read 860-967-0492. I gave her my phone.

“Tell him you won’t be making it.”

“OK, OK.” I flicked the switchblade and picked at my cuticles with the blade. She looked up at me with a concerned frown as she dialed the number into my phone. “Your eyes—they’re red as the devil’s.” She then put the phone to her ear.

“Hello?” she said. “Roger, are you there?” I could hear the faintest yes. “I won’t be making it to the funeral after all. I’m sorry. I’m just, er— it’s not gonna happen.” She then wished him the very best. “I’ve got to go now. Oh—”

I pressed the knife to her neck. “No pleasure but meanness,” I told her. As I held the blade close against her skin such that each swallow, stammer, and breath was felt, Marie soon began to plead. She shook and screamed and cried uncontrollably. “No pleasure but meanness.”

“You’re one of my babies,” she said. “One of my only friends. Please—”

We stood there for what felt like thirty minutes. I drew blood—just the teeniest bit—but it seemed I hit some sort of wall which prevented me from acting further. The test ended there. “I tried, Marie.” I tried, I really did. But it seemed I had no choice on the matter. It wasn’t a change of heart after all. “I thought it was, but it wasn’t really.” I flicked the switchblade closed and helped Marie onto her feet. She had trouble catching her breath it seemed. “That’s not to say that your crying had anything to do with it—it was just natural law.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It wasn’t really a change of heart,” I said. “I just thought it was. We can only do so much to, well, you know.” I took her by the hand and we walked back towards the car. “Call him back,” I said, and handed her my phone. “Tell him you’ll be making it after all.”

*A Divine Comedy*

We met four years ago, outside of your school, in the spring of your sophomore year. I was 28 at the time and you were 16. One of your friends, Gabe, sent you my way after you had expressed to him that schoolwork was making you stressed and everything else was making you bored. I was sitting on a bench, keeping an eye out for you, watching as flocks of students made their way back home. Gabe said you were super easy to spot. “You’d know it’s him,” he said. “Just ‘cause he looks like nobody else.” And so, as the hordes of high schoolers started to disperse and, after some minutes, the building expelled only mere stragglers, you scurried out by your lonesome, your eyes looking eagerly for mine. I waved at you and you nodded back and came jogging over like someone who’d never jogged before.

“Hey,” I said. “You Freddie?” You said yes. I said OK, cool. We walked around the corner behind the building where nobody could see us. I asked you what you wanted with a lilt that indicated that the question could only be taken literally—weed, molly, percs; those were the sort of answers I was looking for.

“I’m looking for dimension,” you said, and I laughed, and you laughed too, rather awkwardly, swaying your long swoopy hair out of your eyes—and when I saw them, those blue, glassy swells, surrounded by a white turned bloodshot, I could not help but find you endearing. Put bluntly, your entire being was *awkward*. You were the foil to any would-be cool kid. You had an angular, sunken face that struggled to look happy even when it smiled. And you were quite lanky, barely 120 pounds, by my best guess.

“Most people that come to me aren’t looking to spice up their life,” I said. “They just want to block it all out.” You told me you were pretty straight.

“I’ve only ever been fucked up off red wine,” you said. “At one of my dad’s Super Bowl parties.” You told me it was easily one of the best nights of your life. “When you just get to loosen up, when your inhibitions go: it’s like, ‘This is the real me.’ I don’t have to suspend any dirty thoughts about other people. I trust my gut. In that way, alcohol is sort of taking care of you.” You pulled out a crisp 20 before I even got to peddling, and I knew you’d be an easy mark. I wasn’t in the business of selling off hard shit to soft kids (at least, not right away: I had my limits), so I rolled you a joint (probably half a gram) and charged you a full Jackson (I probably could have gone even higher; 30 bucks at least). I handed the thing over to you and you jumped around all excitedly. If I hadn’t known, I’d think you were going through some sort of withdrawal. I mean, fuck, you were antsy—just for some reggie.

“You pull, like you’re sucking from a straw,” I said. “And then you take a deep breath, and the smoke fills your lungs, and—” You pulled hard and long, for at least five seconds. This was something I noticed: first time smokers tended to take monster hits as if to assert a coolness. Or, maybe it had something to do with wanting to feel it—*the high*—tenderly, right away, and all at once. Back when I was younger, I used to smoke until it hurt because that was the only way I knew that it worked. When you plucked the joint from between your lips, a flurry of phlegmy coughs erupted from your throat and out your mouth, and your red eyes turned redder, and you got all teary-eyed. *Shit*, you muttered, and you started to dry heave.

“You got water?” I gave you a sip of my Redbull and it seemed to make the coughing worse. And then you stupidly took another hit, thinking that taking another hit would counter the first one—and you gagged an even uglier gag. I told you that it was really all about taking your time; that feeling good was more important than feeling *it*. That was when you started to green



out on me, and I could tell you were starting to get real deep inside your head because you got all quiet and spacey. So, I sort of just supervised you. I felt more like a nanny than a dealer. And, in between moments of long, abrasive silences, you'd mutter something incomprehensible about your psyche (of which I'm sure made a lot of sense to you, but not a lick to me). I played you some music off my playlist out of my shitty Family Dollar speakers. I think it was the Foo Fighters or Audioslave or something. Probably "I am The Highway," if I recall correctly.

"This shit is fucking awful," you said. And you really dug your heels in. I couldn't even bother to feel offended because I was just happy to hear you say something comprehensible, even if it happened to be spiteful. That's when you pointed at your shirt and I sort of shrugged, and you seemed cartoonishly offended by my having been mildly dismissive. "The Jesus Lizard. Heard of them?" I said no, and you dealt me a whole spiel about their greatness. As we walked and, as you talked, I suspended a smile, in awe of your music-induced lucidity. It was the only thing that seemed to draw you back into the present: talking about the bands you liked.

Everything else was noise. That's when I took note of your outfit: a pair of busted Converse, some skinny Dickie's, and that band tee you so earnestly pointed to. You had cut off the sleeves so that it exposed your uber-frail arms. There was a lady on it, nude—doused in flames. You said it was the album cover of their first record, "Goat." I said OK, cool, and then you vomited all over the pavement and a little bit got on your shoes, and so I escorted you to your block and bid you adieu at the corner. You tried to dap me up and I followed suit. Your hand nestled in mine like a wet, slippery fish.

From then on, we'd meet once or twice a week and you'd score. I lowered the price a little, but not so much as to render it *not* a rip-off. I was charging you 15 a gram and it was some

trash weed, too. You still hadn't learned your lesson: you were taking fat hits until you could barely utter a coherent sentence. You said something about ultra fucked-upedness being the *ultimate truth* (your words, not mine). I told you that most people smoke weed simply to have fun. You told me that was *layman rhetoric* (your words, not mine). "I smoke until it floors me," you said. "When I get super deep in my head and it feels like I'm in a movie. It's like I have it figured out." I said I couldn't relate. I said that smoking just mellows me out. You told me I hadn't yet had my *brush with malaise* (your words, not mine). You asked me what I did for a living, and I said I do this. And then you asked me if I had shit going on before I ended up here, and I knew you weren't trying to be a prick (in knowing you for a few weeks, I gathered that this was just who you were), so I told you yes, sort of.

"I was going to trade school," I said. "I wanted to be a boilermaker. You know, like the dudes that build and maintain boilers, like, for heating and shit." I passed you a flask of Jose Cuervo and you took a little swig. You let out an uneasy breath and shut your eyes real tight. I finished it off and we were both a little crossed then. "I dropped out and ended up joining the military, but was discharged as a conscientious objector."

"What's that?"

"Well," I said. "I told them I was anti-war and found God and, truly, it was all a bunch of BS. I was just really bored of the whole thing. They let me off the hook after I claimed that, through divination, I had some great epiphany about the ethics of people killing other people." I let out a nervous laugh. "I was dating a girl at the time and it was a long distance type thing, so I came back, and we tried to make it work. I got bored of her, too." It was here that you seemed genuinely interested in my plight, if one could even call it that. I felt sort of tongue-tied ever

since that day. I think it was the way you leaned in when I spoke and, with your hazy eyes focused intently, and your eyelashes fluttering without so much as a single blink, and the way you nodded your head with an *mhm* that made me start to believe that maybe people—or rather, a *person*—liked me for more than just what I was pushing. “I think that’s my Achilles’ heel,” I said. “I tend to float around. Nothing really sticks. I think that’s why I deal, ‘cause it’s like a limbo of a job.”

“You have that ‘heartland’ thing about you.” I said what the fuck does that mean. You said something about me being all rootsy and blue-collar. “You’re secretly pretty soft, though—and smarter than you let on.” And I said what the fuck are you talking about. And I called you a pussy. And you laughed—*at me*, I think.

“I used to be a big reader,” I said. “When I was a kid. I’d stay up, curled up in my bed, with a sheet over my head and, with a flashlight, I’d read all these fantastical stories. After a while, those worlds start to get a little stale with age and you come to recognize them as not-so-real anymore.” Then I asked you about yourself because I was real sick of talking about me. You told me about your girlfriend and how you weren’t *super duper* sure if you loved her. You said her name was Ashley and that you guys had met in your biology class. She played lacrosse. You said she was really hot, but there was some sort of spark that had to be missing, ‘cause it didn’t feel all the way right. She had been badgering you about taking her virginity, but you were sort of scared about going through with it because you wanted your first to be special. And I said you probably did love her. “Teenagers love differently. It’s meant to be all perplexing and shit at your age. You can’t second guess it. You just gotta lean in, ‘cause it’s the only time in your life when you’re really allowed to.” And you said yeah, you’re probably right, Doug. I’m

pretty sure that was the first time you ever called me by my first name, and it caused a swell in my gut, and I felt a sort of fuzziness in the back of my head.

You asked me if I had done any dating, but I said not since my last girlfriend. “We were set to marry, but it didn’t work. It’s been two years.” I wanted to say I felt sort of stunted in that regard, but I suspended that thought because I wasn’t itching to get too deep. You told me you were fed up with your parents and I asked you why and you said it was hard to explain.

“I guess it’s just that they’re boring, really,” you said, and I wanted to laugh, but I could tell you were serious. “Boringness is the worst fuckin’ sin. I feel like ever since I was born they raised me to be just *meh*, you know? My dad likes cars and he takes me to car shows thinking it’ll do something for me. And my mom, well, she can’t stop telling me how handsome I am, and when you do that—when you keep telling someone how handsome they are—you’re gonna stop believing it after a while. And talking to my baby sister is like talking to a brick wall. I’ve never met someone so content. She’s happy, always giggling, even when shit’s pretty dull, and I ask her why and she says ‘I just am.’ I think that’s my problem with my entire family, close, extended and all: they’re all happy and they don’t know why.” It was then that you sat me down like I’d done something gnarly. I was slumped over on the swing at that shitty park that we soon made a habit of hitting up every week.

I was pretty blitzed, and you were too, but it’s funny; your *blitzed* was different from mine, so you were really keen on chewing my ear off, while I was really keen on taking a nap. It was here that you climbed on top of a trash can, looked down on me like some puny mortal, and said all the things I’d bet were riling up in your brain since infancy. “I think dysfunction is the answer. I think you haven’t really lived until you’ve mucked it all up. It’s drugs. It’s sex. That’s

it. That's all there is." You took a cigarette from my pocket and dangled it between your lips. I handed you my light. "I'm real tired," you said. "I'm tired of not mucking it all up. Give me agony, er— give me something, y'know?" I nodded sort of dismissively. My phasing in and out of sleep and consciousness seemed to compel you in such a way; seeing me, cuddled up against a rusty chain, my butt firmly planted against the rubber hold, my eyes only barely open—I think you took it as some great esoteric wisdom. "This right here," you took a drag, a real long one—and began to hack, "It's the only way of letting someone know you're on the side of death. That you're close to it; that you really get it." I lit one too, and we cheers'd to that.

It had gotten dark, and day turned into night. I walked you to your block and, at the crosswalk, you lurched forward as a speeding car came by. I pulled you back and you giggled like a dumb baby. You stressed that it was only a joke. You wanted to see how I would react. I told you that it was not a very funny joke, and that's when you hugged me firm. I wasn't so sure what to do with my hands so I just let them graze your hoodie. "I think I'd be perfect," you said, "if I was a little more like you." And I said that's the dumbest fucking thing anyone's ever said to me. I watched as you rounded the corner and made your way to your house, where I said goodbye with a wave, and you waved back.

From then on, I felt it my mission to deliver on your request. You seemed eager to *live* and on your very own terms. In my being the gatekeeper, dealing took on the form of something rather noble, yes, but acutely philosophical, as well. I was to ensure you access to the varied modes of drug-induced degeneracy in hopes of you finding your true, unerring self. That next weekend, I sold you a gram of shrooms I bought off my skeevy neighbor. They were home-grown in his own apartment. The place smelled like shit, as expected. They were pretty

dry and stale, definitely not fresh—but they were damn cheap. I sold you an eighth for 40 bucks and we tripped together.

We went to some local art dealer a few blocks from your school because you thought it would really do something for you. The spot specialized in selling water-colored paintings of birds, mostly tropical ones, like toucans and parrots. In the corner was a painting that really got you, it seemed. It stood out from the rest, opting for a muted tone of gray and brown: there was a peregrine falcon, standing nobly on the cement, its beak perked up towards the sky. Under its talons, lay a dead pigeon. You told me it was really freaking you out so we left. Before we exited through the door, you told the art dealer lady that she should consider burning it because it was messing with the feng shui. You were under the impression that the presence of that painting among all the others was some kind of sick game being played. “It must have been a prank,” you said, “for all the psychonauts that come in. She was trying to freak out all the druggies.” I said no, no—it wasn’t that deep.

We got ice cream at a little shop a few doors down, and you told me about how much the pistachio flavor meant to you; how its color, that chartreuse green, prodded a fiery nostalgia in your heart. It reminded you of how you’d ride your bike with your old friends and the ice cream man would show up just as you were getting parched and hot—and one of your little buddies, Derek I think, would always get that flavor. You thought it was a very sophisticated choice for a young kid. You told me it meant a lot that I’d take you here and that it did wonders in rekindling your childish curiosity, and I said OK, cool—you’re welcome.

The next week, we dropped acid together. I bought it from the same skeezy dude a while back and had them stored in a tupperware in my freezer for a few weeks, so they were definitely

pretty shit. I charged you 20 for a tab and we watched *Friday* (that movie with Ice Cube and Chris Tucker) in my car, on your little screen-cracked tablet. You told me that your laugh receptors would never, ever work the same way again and I asked if you meant that in a good way and you said you weren't sure. We discussed the various strands of comedy and how you thought it funny that Dante's *Inferno* and *Paul Blart Mall Cop* could be lumped within the same genre. "Living and comedy are one and the same: chaos to joy, that's the path we take." I was itching to keep watching the movie but you insisted I pause it. You put your arm in front of me to prevent me from reaching for the tablet. "Comedy," you said, "is the only thing that's really *real*." I said yeah, you're right. "It's our willingness to accept everything absurd about, like, living and, well, laugh at it. Everything is funny. Literally *everything*." We watched five more movies that night: *There's Something About Mary*, *Meet the Fockers*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, *The Mask*, and *The Passion of the Christ*. "It's all the same thing," you said.

One night, a few days after, we went to some pier—me, you, Gabe and Ashley. It was probably 11 pm and I was sitting next to you on the dock, my feet dangling above the water. You and I were taking turns listening to our favorite drug songs. I set up two lines of ket for us to both try. Ashley was in the water, drunk off some Guinness. Gabe was pacing up and down the boardwalk, smoking a cigarette. "Royal Trux's *Twin Infinitives*," you said. "They recorded it nodding off on heroin." The album was dissonant and detached and spacey. It sounded almost like nothing. The K was hitting and I felt some kind of connection to the distant vocals; the tired cadence—it sounded like they were somewhere else. "The band said that years after, when they both sort of cleaned up, the two of them were shocked by how it sounded 'cause they thought they were making some real normal, marketable stuff when in reality it was just fuzzy noise."

“Come in, Fred,” said Ashley. She was yanking at your leg. “I want your company.”

“In a minute,” you said. “I’m in a zone right now.” I played you “Cocaine” by Eric Clapton. I could tell you weren’t really feeling it because your head wasn’t bobbing. “I’m not so into that old head shit. Clapton is a square looking dude. It just doesn’t sound fucked enough. It’s all super calculated, you know? He seems like a calculated drug user.”

“Freddie,” said Ashley. Her sentences trailed off into gibberish as she spoke. “I want you to come in the water. I’m lonely down here—and cold.” You shooed her away with your hand. She swam some distance away, before taking off her bikini top and flinging it at your face, but you barely even reacted. “I know you like what you see,” and you didn’t even look up. You played me “Anemone” by Brian Jonestown Massacre. It had that psychedelic feel about it; all dazed and loopy, but melancholic all the same. Tracy, too. The singer’s vocals reeked of longing. *You should be picking me up, instead you’re dragging me down*, she cooed, and I really thought she was talking to me. “Gabe,” said Ashley with a sultry voice, and he halted at the sound of his name all slurred. “Freddie won’t listen to me. Why don’t you come over here?” Gabe put out his cigarette.

“Oh, alright,” he said, and took off his pants and shirt and cannonballed into the water. Then I played you “Perfect Day,” by Lou Reed.

“Such a classic,” you said, and I agreed. “It sounds so nice and warm and happy, until you get to the end: ‘You’re going to reap just what you sow.’ Damn.” We got talking about death, then. Gabe and Ashley were whispering things in each other’s ears and laughing. You told me that you were fascinated by the 27 Club. “It’s cool that all those people can join each other post-death. All so young, too: Janis, Kurt, Jimi, Jim, and others. I think 30 is the cut-off point,



when life isn't so much about living anymore. I think they all instinctively knew that." You told me you wanted to die young, too. "Maybe at 22," you said. "Or even younger." Ashley let out a weird little giggle and Gabe a boyish moan. I looked over at them off in the distance, their lower halves cut off by the murky lake. She was making tender motions under the water, her head tucked under Gabe's armpit, and he had his head tilted back, looking up at the night sky. *Just like that*, he muttered. *That feels so good*. Ashley jerked harder then, and faster, too—and it looked like Gabe might find God at any moment. I sort of nudged you and pointed in their direction, and it took you a second to snap out of it.

"Look," I said. "Look what they're doing," and you got up and peered out at them atop the boardwalk—and you let out a big smile, the widest I'd ever seen.

"Isn't that funny?" You pointed at Ashley, and she stared at you with a piercing sort of look, almost like she was peering into your soul. "You're a real comedian, Ashley." Gabe let out a whimper and did a little shake and shiver. *Ahhhh*.

"That's what you get when you ignore me, babe." Ashley wiped her hand on Gabe's swim trunks.

"I'm sorry," said Gabe. *Mmm*. And I think he was finished then. "I'm fucked up, and she's fucked up—and you know what happens when two people are fucked up."

"No, no," you said. "It's fine, Gabriel. It's all good. You're good, man. I just find it a little curious is all. Not in a bad way, either." I lit up a joint and handed it to you because I thought you might need it. You took a big hit. "And you're alright too, Ashley. I'm not mad. I appreciate it. We all need things like this." You handed the joint back to me. "Thank you. That's what I'm trying to say. Thank you, and have a good night." We both walked off towards the parking lot.

Gabe and Ashley were still in the water. They tried catching up but we left them behind. I drove you back to your house and you smiled the whole time, occasionally letting out the odd little chuckle. “Why don’t you come in? My parents are asleep by now. We can kick it.” I was just fucked up enough to say yeah, alright.

Your little sister was in the living room, sitting criss-cross on the couch. “What are you doing up? It’s nearly midnight.” She was eating from a tub of ice cream, wearing pink animal pajamas.

“Watching TV,” she said. I introduced myself and she said hi in a nervous way, like I was suspect—but I wasn’t offended. She was watching *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*. You plopped down on the couch next to her and I sat on the floor. We watched intently. I felt kind of like a kid again. The show was really hitting. It brought me back to a simpler time, and shit—I wasn’t even raised on Disney. Maybe it was the drugs. You seemed pretty into it, too. “How do you know my brother?” I told her I couldn’t remember.

“At a party,” you said, and the conversation died the way conversations die when you’re talking to a kid about anything other than kid stuff. We sat in silence for a while, our eyes all glued to the television. You looked over at me all keen and suggestive and I wasn’t so sure what to make of it. Your little sister said something about how adorable that Cody actor was.

“He’s cute and goofy,” she said. “And he makes me happy.” You told me to come sit next to you, so I did. You awkwardly rested your head on my shoulder and I told you I felt a little cramped. When the episode ended, you suggested your sister should go to bed. She agreed and made her way up the stairs and that’s when you turned off the TV and went into the kitchen. You grabbed your parents’ bottle of soju and downed the dregs of it. You planted yourself on the

couch, head first, bottle in hand, and crawled over to where I was situated, and that's when your lips met mine. I recoiled hard, but you were pushy about it. Your tongue weaseled its way into my mouth before I pushed you back, saying no, no, no—this is fucked up.

“I know,” you said. “But I wouldn't have it any other way. We're fucked up. That's who we are.” And you grazed my crotch with your hand and I felt that fuzz in the back of my head again, before kicking you off of me. You fell backwards and dropped the bottle onto the floor where it shattered into a million pieces.

“What was that?” shouted a voice from upstairs. It was your mother. I heard her walk down the stairs and then she peeked out from around the corner. “What on earth is goi—” and then she saw me and her face went white. “Who the hell are you?” she said with a fervor, pointing her finger dead between my eyes.

“He's just a friend,” you said, and your father came after, wearing nothing but his underwear. “I swear. He's a buddy of mine.”

“You a pervert?” asked your father, and he came rushing at me. “You trying to hurt my son?” I said no way, man. “Call the cops, dear. You're a dead man.” Your mother went into the other room and started dialing. I told your father to calm down. His eyebrows arched, and his bald head turned all red and sweaty, and that's when he socked me right in the face. I staggered back a little and a glass shard went through my foot.

“Don't hurt him,” you said, and you got between us, so I grabbed my shoes and went running out from the porch, my left sock covered in blood and dirt and my right eye swollen purple. Your father ran after me, calling me a queer or something fucked like that—and I drove off. Before I rounded the block, I peered into your window from the driver's seat, and saw your

face turned pale, as if all the funniness of life had been sucked from it. The next morning, Gabe called me and told me the news.

He said you were real fucked up. “He was blowing up my phone, yelling at me about that shit I pulled. I asked him where he was and he said on his roof. I said ‘Why the fuck are you up there?’ and he said wanted to try something new. He asked me if I thought he could fly and I said no way in hell, and then, well, he tried to fly.” Then Gabe said something about you being real selfish and that I was, too. “His damn parents ain’t even depressed about it, they’re just angry. He didn’t even think about how it would affect any of us. And fuck you, too, man—for letting all this happen. All you two ever did was think about yourselves.” I told Gabe I was as distraught about this shit as anyone else, really, even your damn parents—but if selfish is the worst thing a man can be, then consider me the shittiest dude in the world.

“So what?” I asked. “What else are you supposed to be? Who else are we supposed to give a fuck about?” and then he hung up on me. I went to bed that night in a real haze, but when I finally fell asleep I dreamed something dreadful. I was walking in the dark, across a railyard, and as I skipped over one of the tracks a train ran right over me. I call it a dream because that’s what it was; it was no nightmare. If I could go back in time and join you that night, I would, no doubt about it—so that we’d meet again on the other side. They say that faithful pets get to cross the rainbow bridge in death and that good men go to heaven and bad men go to hell. I don’t know what sort of surprise waits for people like us, but I’d sure hope, for our sake, it’s something God awful.

*Trillions*

It was supposed to be one of those “girls’ nights,” you know. When you and your friends, who happen to be girls, all hang out together. Maybe go out dancing and have some fun—get drunk, even. It was Max’s birthday, and he invited us (me, Molly, Candace, and Tina) to a house party he was throwing. James wanted to tag along, and I asked him why, and he said because it sounded like fun. I told him he didn’t have to get all paranoid about me fooling around behind his back or anything. After all, Max isn’t romantically interested in women. His interest is strictly platonic. But James insisted, said if I really loved him then our girls’ night would happily make room for a plus one.

James offered to drive us there in his busted 2010 Hyundai Elantra, and the three of us told him alright. I reminded him that the airbags didn’t function and that his brake was spotty. Molly said she’d rather just UBER there because she doesn’t like the odd smell in James’ car. And he’s always playing dreadful music. And it was supposed to be *our* night. I told her no, I get it, I do—but we should all just travel together. It’s easier that way. I mean, it’s hard saying no to James. Not that he puts on puppy eyes or has a gift for rhetoric, but mostly because he’s loud, and when he’s mad he gets louder. And sometimes he gets physical. Nothing crazy, of course. But it’s better to just have him take us there, and he can kick it, yeah—he can kick it with us.

I told James I’d be happy to drive there and back, as it was my turn to be designated driver anyway (we cycle each week: Tina went last time, Candace before that, and then Molly) but he said no way, it’s my car. And I wasn’t going to push. I asked him if he was planning on drinking and he told me it wouldn’t matter either way because it’s his car. “And you’d be foolish to think I’m not already a little buzzed, O.”

So we hopped in. I got in next to James on the passenger side, and the other girls climbed into the back. There was a bunch of junk on the floor in front of my seat: dirty rags and Trader Joe's bags, and empty fountain drinks from McDonald's. I told him before that he would have to get that stuff sorted. That it's pretty gross, and it sets a bad precedent for a night on the town. I think it's a stoner thing. I've dabbled, sure—but James really dabbles. Makes it harder to organize yourself. “This isn't acceptable, I mean look—” and I propped my feet up on the dashboard so that my back was arched uncomfortably. Seatbelt on, of course. “Are you sure you don't want me to drive?” He told me he had it figured out.

James doesn't wear a seatbelt unless I ask at least a few times. Sometimes I have to take on this maternal tone—raise my voice the way a teacher would scold a middle schooler—and it makes me feel like his mom. And that's a weird, unpleasant feeling: to feel like his mother. Because he doesn't wear his seatbelt, the car emits an annoying dinging sound with a red indicator warning him to put it on, but not even that does the trick. He's a good guy, just a bit stubborn. “Can we take turns with the music?” asked Candace. “I think it's only fair.” Candace said she wanted to listen to Fiona Apple's *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*, but James told her that Fiona Apple was not the vibe for tonight. Tina said how about some Jeff Buckley or something, and James said no way, who's that? He put on some random shuffle, and did get some pushback—mainly from Candace—but Molly told her to just leave it be, we'll be at Max's soon anyway.

Candace passed around a little flask, and when it came my way I told her no, I probably shouldn't. James snatched it, and I asked him not to drink from it, but he took a decent swig regardless—what can you do? Eminem's “Stan” came on and we all laughed, because it's a

funny song to hear in a car. It's a catchy tune—Dido's chorus is great—but it's hard to find the right vibe for it. You probably wouldn't want to hear it in a nightclub or a party. "It's great for when you're home alone," said Tina. "And you're feeling sort of feverish. It's a love song, you know. Just a real messed up one."

"I sort of wish someone obsessed over me to the point they'd fuckin' kill themselves," said Candace. "Kill someone else, for that matter." Molly told her what the hell? "I'm only half-joking," she said.

"I get where you're coming from," said James. He said something about obsession being a terrible but beautiful thing. That he feels it often. The way he talked—in that forcefully gruff, dejected tone—made any one of his musings, no matter how dark and unseemly, sound at least a little funny on the surface. And I looked back at my girls. Tina gave me that side-eye glance. Looked like she wanted to blurt out, did your dude really just say that? On our night? A girl's night out, yeah, and he wants to get pseudo-intellectual? I was sort of thinking it myself, but I don't instigate with him. Just keep it to myself.

"What about Olivia? Are you obsessed with her?" asked Molly. "You guys are going on like 80 years now, yeah?" Four. Loosely speaking, because we're on and off.

"There's a distinction between love and obsession," said Tina. "One feels like waking up to a warm, tender hug and the other feels like you're being squashed." James said we were broaching girl-talk and he'd appreciate it if we made the conversation more accessible to someone like him. Tina pulled out one of her pocket knives. She got this one in Cuba. She's got a bunch of them from different places all over. "I'll gut you," she said.

“Can you put on your seatbelt?” I said. “That noise, James. The dinging. It’s giving me a headache.” I reached over and grabbed his seatbelt. I tried clicking it in place, but he shoved me. He told me to just let him do his thing. I tried once more, but he wasn’t having it.

“Seatbelt on? Seatbelt off?” he said. “Either way you probably die regardless.”

“But the sound,” said Molly. “It’s that sound. Every second: doo-doo-doo-doo-doo. It’s driving me up the wall. Hell, all of us.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Exactly. It doesn’t bother you, James?”

“No,” he said. “I just tune it out. I’m amazing at tuning shit out. Person I don’t like? Tuned out. Shitty club music? Tuned out. Just formulate my own tune in my head instead. I’m so good at it that it sort of scares me. Rambling professor? Tuned out. Little bro—”

“I’ve got butterflies with one of my professors,” said Candace. “Professor Chambers.”

“The guy who teaches that *Anna Karenina* class?” asked Tina. “Tall, with a beard?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I don’t know if it’s platonic butterflies or romantic ones, or sexual even. I just know that his class makes me feel unwell. Agitated, y’know? In a good way. Fuck—”

“You’d fuck him?” asked Tina.

“Yeah,” said Candace. “I’d probably fuck him. Is that wrong?”

“It’s wrong,” said Molly. “Of course it’s wrong. You’d be jeopardizing a man’s career, first off. And don’t get me started on the imbalanced power dynamic. It’s predatory on his end, and foolish on yours. On top of that, it’s just plain gross.”

“As the owner of this car,” said James, “and subsequently the arbiter of conversation within said car—because it’s mine, and mine only—I’d rather we didn’t talk about this shit.



Every conversation I overhear from you, Candace, well, it's always about sexual intercourse. And I'm not a therapist or anything, but I feel confident in saying you're something of an addict." He asked her to pass the rum.

"Sex is a core tenet of society," said Candace. "I—"

"Tenet?" he said. "Like a principle or belief? Sex is a 'belief' now? Alright, here's the deal: we're switching subjects."

"Arbiter." James snatched the flask from Candace's hand, and she told him to lay off because there was barely any left. "I get socially anxious if I'm not tipsy enough, and I metabolize quick, so I'm saving it for when we get there." As I peered forward, through the windshield, I noticed flakes of snow illuminated by the headlights. They formed a fog. And, scurrying some 30 yards ahead, there stood a shadowy figure that looked like a deer, but I wasn't sure in this light. "Please give it back."

James took another swig, told Candace her name was dumb, and then in a near instant a group of three fawns dashed in front of the car, clinging close to their mother, and I exclaimed deer, deer, deer, four deer right in front of us, watch the fuck out, James. I gripped his arm, told him to keep his eyes on the road, and he swerved clumsily so that the side of his car brushed against a roadside fence. The sound of burning rubber, metal scratching metal, that annoying dinging sound, and one of James' horrid pre-party songs, made for terrible listening. "You gotta watch where you're going, James." I took a deep breath. "If I had a breathalyzer I'd use it. How many fingers am I holding up?" I held up three digits.

"Three," he said. "I'm not above a zero-point-one-two, I know that much. I could go as high as point-one-five and I'd cruise gently. Have faith, dear."

“God, you moron, James,” said Candace. “Look what you’ve done, all because you need shit to always go your way.” She began to sob, and I asked her why, and she said it’s just overstimulation. Too much sensory stuff makes her cry. She buried her head in between her legs the way a child might. “Why’d you let him come with us, Olivia?”

“James,” said Molly, leaning in so that her chin rested on the back of the driver seat. “You’ve made a mockery of our night.”

“I—”

“I am a firm believer in Karma, James,” she said. “Not in the pragmatic sense, but the spiritual one. Karma’s coming for you, at the hands of some higher being. Not from the vagaries of life itself, but something far, far greater—beyond life. Watch out.” And she stared at him through the rearview with gritted teeth so that she looked like she might strike him. James gave her a nod.

“Molly,” said Tina. “Calm it. We’re OK.”

“No, no,” said Candace. “Let him have it. I hate you, James. Hate you, hate you, hate you.” And Molly raised her fist, bearing her long, sharp acrylic nails. And James, cruising haphazardly, whacked her hand from out in front of his face. Told her she’s batshit insane.

“I’m only yanking your chain,” said Molly, and she laughed sort of forcefully. Nobody else was really having it. James gave an audible sigh of relief. “You are a prick, though.”

We got to the party at around 11. James pulled up in front of the place, and we all hopped out, probably looking a little worse for wear. Max greeted us at the door. “Hello, ladies,” he said. “You all look wonderful.” He eyed Candace, whose makeup was all dreary from the tears. “Candace, dear, I hate to see you down. Do you wanna have a sit-down?”

“No, no,” said Candace. “I’m fine. It’s the overstimulation. You know how I get when there’s a lot going on.” She hugged him. “Happy birthday, handsome.”

“Oh, I know how you get,” said Max. “And thank you.” He took my hand. “Olivia, gorgeous as ever. Molly, Tina—great to see you. Come in, now. Come in. Everyone’s here. Candace. I’ve got a cabernet just for you, ‘cause I know you love it.”

“Yes, Max,” she said. “A cabernet drunk is different from any other type of drunk. Fireball, Jägermeister, you name it. God, you know me well.” Max’s apartment was elegant and tidy. There were probably 30 people fit into the space, and all the party-goers maintained an air of dignity in their dress and demeanor. I suppose that’s what parties look like when you turn 21. James was hovering behind me and the girls awkwardly. He had his hand wrapped firm around mine so that it hurt.

“When you say the word ‘gorgeous,’ what is the implication?” asked James. He tapped Max on the shoulder.

“I’m sorry?”

“You called Olivia gorgeous,” said James. “I am wondering about the implication of that word, is all. And when you say, ‘You all look wonderful,’ I mean—what is the nature of such a statement?”

“You must be James,” said Max. “It’s nice to meet you, man.”

“Right,” said James. “Nice to meet you.”

“Olivia’s told me a lot about you,” said Max. “It’s funny, you two have been together for an eternity and we’ve not even crossed paths.” James shrugged, said that they probably bumped into each other at some point—maybe at a function. Max told him that was certainly plausible,

and escorted Candace towards the kitchen, his arm interlocked with hers. “I even have plum wine, if you’re into that, dear. Have you ever had plum wine?” Max glanced over his shoulder, and with wide eyes, it looked like he wanted to ask: why are you following me, guy? After all, Molly and Tina had gone their separate ways.

“Wait, wait,” said James. “Candace, I gotta ask: when you called him handsome, did you mean anything by it? Or was it from a place of, er— friendliness?” Max scoffed, stood still, arms out, as if to ask James to get a better look at him. He was no threat: one could see it in his bleach-blonde hair, his eccentric mannerisms, his light-wash jeans. I nudged James, whispered in his ear to lay off. That maybe he should drink some water to sober-up. I reminded him that weed makes him overthink a little bit and get all paranoid—had he smoked one before we drove over?

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I said. “I think Abe is here. Abe from my birthday party last year. You said you liked him.” James said he’d be happy to wait outside for me, but I told him that he should go find Abe. “I need a minute to myself, James. Do your own thing for now. Go find Abe, will you? You liked him, didn’t you?”

I entered the bathroom and there was Lucy doing a bump in front of the mirror. She waved at me, while her head was tilted up, finger pressed against her nose. Lucy’s really pretty, in a dark, ethereal sort of way. And she’s nice, if a bit spacey. Whenever I bump into her I have the urge to ask her about her parents. They both drowned on Rosarito Beach after a four-day bender. Apparently Lucy was home with a babysitter when it happened, and was too young to know they were gone. I always say to her “How’s your—” and then I remember it’s not an appropriate thing to ask. I don’t know why it always happens with her, because there’s always only one possible answer: they’re incredibly dead.

So I did the thing again, while I was in the stall. The “How’s your—” thing. Just a gut instinct, but she was probably too buzzed to notice. “I’m sorry,” I told her.

“Sorry for what?” she asked. I could hear a snort, a rub, and a sigh, too.

“Oh, nothing,” I said. “Sorry. I—”

“Sorry?”

“No,” I said. “Not sorry. I take it back. My bad.”

“What’s your bad?” she asked. “You know, Olivia. That is Olivia in there, correct?” I told her that was correct. “Every single one of our run-ins, well—” she snorted again. “It starts with a misstep, and then an apology. Is it because of my past?”

“No, no—”

“Or are you just painstakingly awkward?” she asked. “No, yeah, it’s because of my past.” I told her that there was some confusion here. I was just trying to pee. “This shit happens with every single person I interact with. They see I’m in the room, they get a little quiet for a half-second, and then boom—they say sorry for no reason.” At this point I had finished peeing, but I wasn’t eager to leave the stall. She told me we needed to have a heart-to-heart and that meant looking each other in the eye.

So, I flushed and opened the door, and she met me with red, dilated pupils. She had a little coke booger hanging from her nostril, and I told her: “You have a—” cut myself off, though. “I’m sorry, nevermind.”

“Listen,” said Lucy. “In my case, I’d appreciate it if people were a little bit less tactful, you know? I don’t trust people as a result. When everyone’s so nice and polite with you it’s hard to trust them. I’ve never been insulted,” she said, rubbing her nose. “I’d love to be insulted.” She

got the coke booger. “I mean, my parents aren’t that important to me. I say it out loud, and it sounds a little fucked up, but it’s true. I didn’t know them. They were strangers to me. People seem to think that a healthy relationship to death is being mournful and sentimental and pensive—and to really feel. But I feel nothing when I think about them. Tell me that’s OK. I think that’s certainly OK, Olivia.”

“I think that’s OK, yeah,” I said. “Being chill about it is super OK.”

“And what’d you think when you saw me in here?” she asked. “I’ve OD’d on benzos, had serotonin syndrome from too much molly, all sorts of shit. People think: ‘Oh, no, she’s a product of trauma and a terrible upbringing, poor Lucy,’ but I just love drugs. I’d love drugs with or without dead parents. I’m not coping, no—I just fucking love drugs.”

“I think anyone can maintain a healthy relationship with any sort of drug,” I said. “Even the really hard stuff. If it makes you happy, then more power to you.”

“I never said they make me happy,” she said. “I just love them.” She embraced me. “Can I ask you a question? Do you think I’m pretty? And be honest, please. Be harsh if you have to.”

“I think you’re really, really pretty, Lucy.”

She scoffed. “I don’t believe you. Not for a second.”

When I left, I spotted James chatting with Abe on the sofa. They were passing a joint back and forth, and I’m pretty sure I saw him do a whippet under his shirt. He glanced back and waved at me. As I walked, James’ gaze followed. Abe tried to snap him out of it, but James just kept on surveilling me like I was up to no good. It made me feel a little awkward, and I got all self-conscious about the way I was walking. I said hey to this girl, Dana, who I used to be co-workers with at Dunkin’ Donuts. “That’s your boyfriend isn’t it,” she said. “The guy with the

floral shirt.” I nodded. “You know he’s been eyeing the bathroom door the entire time he’s been here. I’ve been holding it in, because I’m so scared he’s up to something.”

“He’s not,” I said. “Just a little obsessive. You shouldn’t hold it in.”

“I wouldn’t even drink next to him,” she said. “He looks the type to have a thing of rohypnol in his pocket.” I told her he was just an intense-type, and that she should go to the bathroom if she really had to. “He’s looking right at us. You should get a new boyfriend. He’s trouble, I can tell.” She told me it’s men like that who make headlines for shady, suspect stuff. “I wouldn’t be surprised if I saw him in the news for doing something cunty and illegal,” and she scurried off towards the bathroom. I told her I’ll catch her later, maybe, and she blew me a tepid kiss.

I spotted Candace, cooped up in the corner, on a beanbag chair. She was resting atop some guy’s lap. He was a tall, grungy sort who I’d never seen before. She was whispering things in his ear, so that I could almost hear the words coming out. He had a natural nonchalance, providing soft spoken answers to Candid’s frenzied speech. His back was slumped against the bag so that it looked like he was being enveloped. I ambled my way over there, just to say hello, and check on her. Maybe ask where Molly had run off to. “Olivia.” Max gripped me by the shoulder. I hadn’t even seen him come from behind me. “How inebriated are you on a scale of one to ten?”

“One,” I said. “I really shouldn’t.”

“You just seem a little uncomfy is all.” He tugged on my shirt, as if to try and lure me to some special, fuzzy place where all the intoxicants were. “My room,” he said. “We can trade a few shots of Becherovka. Come, come. Are you looking for an upper? Your eyes, dear. They’re

sullen. Is that the word? Sullen?" I told him I wasn't sullen, just a little tired. "Well, that's why you need an upper, Olivia."

"Someone needs to drive home," I said. "It can't be James. Look at him. He's trashed. Don't take it as an insult, or a slight, please."

"That's why you need an upper," said Max. "Best of both worlds. You drink to your heart's content, alright? And I'll have a line for you by the end of the night, when you're ready to leave. It'll sober you up like nothing."

"I really, really should not." I glanced over by the couch, and James had gotten up while Abe was mid-sentence. He just left him there, and I felt sort of bad. He made his way over to where Max and I were standing. He took my hand, and nodded without so much as a single word. Max told him hey, guy, and James said nothing. He clenched hard so that my fingers felt numb, and he looked aimlessly—not at either one of us, but at nothing—with pink, squinted eyes. I forgot what we were talking about. Max sized him up, and then glanced in my direction. He gave me a nudge. I muttered, alright, alright. At that moment, I felt thirstier than I'd ever felt before—all in a mere instant—for some Czech Beckherovka.

"Come," said Max. "Birthday shots. Just me and you." Max assured James that him and I had a mutual tradition where we'd drink together—just the two of us—and catch up about things concerning womanhood and gayness and such. James arched his brow, but ultimately told us to do our thing. He was going to find a girl to fuck.

"I'm only kidding," said James. "I kid, Olivia—you know that."



I followed Max into his room, where he shut the door with great resolve. I sat on his bed, and he grabbed the bottle from atop his wardrobe. “I forgot the shot glasses,” he said. “They’re in the cupboard in the kitchen. I can get them.”

“No, it’s alright,” I told him. “You don’t have to do that. I’ll just take a swig.”

“I don’t mean to peer pressure you,” said Max. “It’s the empath in me. I just hate to see someone all awash. Is that the word? Awash?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Your guy has a really, er—” he took a sip from the bottle, “he has a uniqueness about him. By uniqueness I mean—”

“You don’t have to sugarcoat it, Max,” I told him. “He’s unpleasant.” I took the bottle from Max’s hand. I took a sip. “I can’t take him anywhere. But I’m too scared to rid myself of him.” I saw a big, plastic cup resting on Max’s nightstand. I asked him if I could fill it up with the Beckherovka, that the one sip I had was awfully good and I wouldn’t mind just going to town at this point—to hell with it. “Do you know what Dana said to me?”

“What’d she say?”

“That he looks date-rapey,” I said. “God. That’s a bad look for me, Max. I don’t want to be caught with someone like that. They’ll think I’m a sympathizer.”

“Is he a— well, is he one of those?”

“No,” I said. “Not that I know of.” My eyes were just a tad teary, and my voice quivered. “Four years, Max. Four years, and I’ve been ashamed to know him for three-and-a-half of them. I don’t introduce him to anyone because I’m terrified he’ll make it all messy. He’s trying to muddy our friendship, Max. He thinks you’re a player.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s sort of flattering”

“Sometimes I wish he’d just perish,” I said. “Just fall off the face of the earth and die. Yes, Max: I want him to fucking die.” Max hugged me. I cried into his shoulder. “Enough about me, Max. Please, will you tell me about you?” I struggled to get the words out. “Will you just speak out loud for now? About you stuff?”

“Happy or sad me stuff?” he asked. “Do you have a preference?”

“Any sort of you stuff, Max,” I told him. “Just talk at me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “Did I tell you my grandma is, well, er— she passed like two days ago.” He was running his finger across the linens on his bed. He’d been looking down at his toes. They were massaging his fuzzy, white carpet. “I’ve told you about her Alzheimer’s stuff.”

“Gosh,” I said. “I’m so sorry, Max. You didn’t even tell me.”

“I’m sort of happy about it, frankly.” And he smiled wide.

“You loved her,” I said. “You talked about how much you loved her nonstop.”

“Eh,” he said. “I’m happy that she died.” We looked up at each other, and the tears were still streaming down my face, yes, but they took on a new form. “She was a whore.” We both laughed. My face was red and puffy and sad and content, too. “It makes it easier,” he said, “to tell myself that I’m happy about it ‘cause then I don’t even have to be sad. Trick your brain. Easy-peasy.” I chugged the rest from the plastic cup. I laid back on the bed, and looked up at the ceiling. I imagined the popcorn ceilings were made up of little organisms, each bump a tiny, living particle that breathed and thought, but forever stayed in place.

“They look at you when you sleep, Max,” I said. “And, every person who’s ever lived in this house. They look at all those people when they’re asleep. They’ve probably witnessed every

stage of life take place on this very bed. The bumps on your ceiling, Max.” I asked him if it was okay if I stayed here for a little while longer.

We started watching an episode of *How I Met Your Mother* and I thought about whether Candace and her guy had consummated their romance. Would they do it right there on the beanbag chair? And where was Molly? She was probably dancing, or chatting up one of her girlfriends. When the night dies down she likes to sit outside on someone’s porch or a stool, or even the ground, light up a cigarette, and reflect. I’ve seen her do it, even at strangers’ places. Maybe she was doing that and wondering where I was. And Tina. Where was Tina?

“You know something?” I propped my head up against the bed frame. “I felt nothing when my grandparents died. They passed within a week of one another. It’s not like I didn’t love them,” I said. “I think my grandpa was holding out for her. Then she died, and his heart must’ve decided there was no point anymore. Kind of funny in a way.”

“God, I’ll probably die young,” he said. “I have nothing keeping me here. Not a thing.”

We got about a third through the episode before there was a pounding at the door. Max got up from the bed, and rested his hand on the doorknob. “Who’s there?”

“Is Olivia in there?”

“What do you need?” asked Max. “Is it urgent?”

“Is my girlfriend there?” The pounding didn’t cease. “Olivia, I would like for you to come outside.” I whispered to Max that he should just stop responding, and maybe James would go away, but the pounding only got louder. It sounded like he was trying to kick the door down. “I’m going to wring your neck,” he said. “I’m going to tie you up, cook your flesh, and eat it.”

“OK, alright,” I said. “Me and Max were just catching up. We got a bit carried away.” I stood behind Max as he opened the door. James was there in front of the doorway, arms crossed. He smirked, then let out a forced chuckle.

“I’m ready to leave,” he said. “Let’s get going.” He took me by the hand, and then shoved Max against the wall with his elbow. He said it was all jokes, no hard feelings.

“Wait,” said Max. He spooned the house key he had chained to his belt loop into a little plastic baggy that had been in his pocket. “Key bump for the road, my dear. Perks you right up.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You’re a lifesaver.”

So, James had me by the wrist, and I followed after him like I was being dragged on a leash. We stopped by the beanbag chair where Candace and her grungy boy were rubbing noses and saying nice things to one another. He said his name was Clay. “We’re leaving now,” said James. “Either you’re coming now, or you catch a ride with someone else.” Candace said she’d be happy to leave now, but that Clay was coming, too. They followed after us, Candace’s head nestled into Clay’s shoulder. They talked about their favorite mammals. Candace said hers was a tree shrew.

Tina was in the kitchen, sipping on orange juice right from the pitcher. She took a whiff of some RUSH cleaning solution and she was ready to go just like that. “Molly’s out on the porch,” said Tina. “She’s doing her meditation thing or whatever.” We exited through the front door, and there was Molly sitting on a stoop, smoking a CBD cigarette. She was reading some Marcus Aurelius on her phone.

“OK,” I said. “I want everyone to listen to me. I’m going to need everyone to rank their fucked-upedness with a color. Green is A-OK and red is pretty sloshed. Give me a shade. Whoever’s the least fucked is going to drive.”

“I’d say I’m like a pinkish orange,” said Candace. “Clay, well—I think me and him are on the same wave right now. He’s a pinkish orange, too, yeah?” He agreed.

“I’m like a yellow,” said Molly. “Like a sun rising over some grassy fields. Maybe a tinge of magenta in there, too.”

Tina had to think for a while. She’d brought the OJ with her. “Just say red,” said Candace. “You’re red. I can tell. You’re nearly on my wave—but past it.” I said I was mostly green. The bump woke me up a little. It should be me who takes the wheel.

“I’m sober,” said James. “And I’m driving. No doubt.” His jaw hung low, and I could see his little fangs peeking out from under his lip. Saliva coated his lips like a rabid dog. His dilated pupils told me that he could’ve been rolling.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I don’t believe you, James.”

“Don’t believe me?” he said. “That’s rich coming from you, O. Remember this: It’s *my* car. Not yours.” He got all up in my face. “You can quote me on this, yeah, you really can: I fucking hate you.” He trotted off towards the car, and before he got in, he yelled: “Happy birthday, Max. Happy birthday. Happy birthday—” and he shut the door. I followed after him and got in on passenger seat. I propped my feet up on the dashboard because of all the junk on the floor. Candace and Molly and Tina got in the back. Clay scooped in so that he was resting clumsily next to Candace, but it was more like he was resting on top of her. It couldn’t have been

comfortable for either of them. “Faded outings are my thing,” he said. “This is a trust issue. No doubt.”

We were cruising down the street. I could hear Candace and her boy’s slobbery moans. I looked behind my seat and Tina was fiddling around with her Cuban pocket knife. She pressed the blade against the skin of her arm, and made a little incision. Candace told her to quit it because it’s gross and weird. I could hear the OJ swirling around in the container under Tina’s seat. James said he wanted to show us all a trick. “The dinging, James,” I said. “Please, just stop the dinging.” He sped around a corner so that he was doing a light drift. From outside the window, there was a cemetery in the distance, way, way out, past some fields. I swear, I saw a blueish specter out there. Something like the Grim Reaper. And there was a clown, too. And I wasn’t so sure, but I think there was also a Nosferatu-like creature tucked behind a gravestone. “Stupid kids trying to scare people,” said Molly. “Only thing they’re going to scare is themselves when they get trespassed.” I told James to slow down. Like really, man, slow down. Then he went fifty, sixty, seventy—

His brains were permanently embedded in the grooves of the steering wheel. I couldn’t find a head, no—it was all mush. And Candace’s boy must’ve flown forward from the impact because his mangled body was pressed up against the windshield. The cracks made the pattern of a cobweb so that I could barely see through it. Candace was screaming the way they do in horror movies. I took her hand and covered it with my other palm. Her breath was hot and labored. She looked like a zombie. “We’re OK,” I said. “We’re alive, and we’re OK.” Molly wasn’t in the seat next to her.

“This is all your fault, Olivia,” she said. “You let your grotesque boyfriend come with us, and—” she planted her head into the back of the driver’s seat. “Am I alive? I’m not so sure, Olivia. Am I?”

“Yes,” I said. “You are.”

“Your stupid boyfriend,” she said. Her chatter was muffled under all the sniffing. “He’s gone and killed himself. He’s killed Clay. Oh, Clay—” She let out a terrible, terrible scream. “I blame you. I blame you. I blame you.” I tried opening the door, but it wouldn’t budge so I climbed through the shattered window. My hands were all torn up, but it felt like nothing. The rear door opened with some force. Tina fell out onto the pavement. Her Cuban pocket knife had gone right through her neck. “And Tina,” said Candace. “Tina, too.”

“Molly,” I called out. “Are you there?”

“She’s probably abandoned us,” said Candace. “Nobody sticks around. They just leave. They die or they leave, Olivia.”

“Molly,” I said. “Where did you go? Molly!” I walked a little further, and I found her seated at a wooden bench, out in front of a very closed Stewart’s. “How long was I out for?” She was on the phone with the police. At least that’s what it sounded like. I said to her: “I can’t deal with them, nope—not a bit,” but I don’t think she heard me. “Too much money. I can’t deal.” So, I walked maybe half a mile down the road. My legs were a little wobbly, but I was OK. I think the bump saved me. The pitch-black darkness felt safe. The ground was icy, but manageable. The snow was slow-moving, and delicate against my skin. The cold worked its way up my legs, into my bones, and through my core. I felt a great numbness in my brain. At a bus stop, I called a Lyft and he came swiftly. I told the guy to take me back to my place.

His car smelled of cheap pinewood air freshener. He had one of those little trees hanging off the rearview mirror. I felt high off the fumes. As he drove, the numbness in my brain gave way to a profound jubilation. It was slow and pulsing, and filled my lungs with a fierce chill. I told him that I was light and free tonight. That I could rule the world, sir. “I can fly, sir. Jump right out the window and fly. You know that stars are around and beneath us too, right? People tend to forget that.” My compact mirror told me I was short three teeth. My nose was bent sideways, too. I tapped the man on the shoulder. “Can we go back?” I said, and the pain started to set in. “I want to go and get my teeth. I left them behind.”

“It’ll cost you,” he said. His accent was thick. He had what looked like a million forehead wrinkles. I told him to forget about it.

“You know my friend, Tina?” I said. “That was rhetorical. She’s er— how do I put it? She’s intensely unremarkable. She just exists behind and around you. Never in front. By the way, sir: drive as fast and unceremoniously as you want. It’s your car. Do whatever you must, OK?”

“I’ll drive how I like, thank you.”

“Tina, though,” I said. “She’s plain and boring, and sometimes a little weird, too. It’s a terrible combination, frankly. Inoffensive and weird, like a fly, maybe. On her worst days she’s more like a mosquito.” He said it was a pity, and inquired about the status of our friendship. I told him it was a little up in the air at the moment. “I’d have to sleep on it.” Looking out the window, I saw in the earth an innate plainness. It was all white and flat, and very, very plain. Those boys in their costumes must’ve been coated in snow. And the gravestones, well, they must’ve been completely submerged—invisible. I stared at the sky, and through it, too. Beyond it, even. “It must just be like earth, but whiter and plainer. And there’s these pale, cherubic angels



flying about and they're so handsome but so, so boring to look at. That's what the people want. Isn't that twisted? And then Hell's like the earth two-point-O, but redder and funnier—perhaps more interesting.” He told me that I wasn't making any sense. “I have to ask, sir, I really got to,” I said. “Do you think not feeling is OK?”

I told him about the time when I was 13. I had been attending a summer camp where we did sciencey stuff, like dissecting frogs and looking through microscopes, and sometimes we mixed chemicals and interesting stuff happened. One of the girls—I think her name was maybe Kelly—drank a whole thing of mercury and I watched her convulse right in front of me. “And I couldn't do anything but laugh,” I said. “It wasn't funny. Not a bit. But I laughed hysterically. The place was shut down not long after.” Then there was the time when me and my cousin were playing around on the monkey bars after school. She was hanging upside down and she lost her grip and her head split right open on the concrete. “She lived,” I told him. “But I swear I saw her skull. I just stared and said nothing. I was six and she was eight.” And I'll never forget the time when I heard some high school boys in the cafeteria talking about knowing a guy who accidentally offed himself playing Russian Roulette. “I told them, ‘Eh, that's life!’ How about that, sir?” If death had a body you'd think it'd make itself known to me by now, bow its head so that I can see its diabolic horns. It'd greet me with a wink, eyes made of fire. It would be so, so disappointed in itself.

At a McDonald's some days later Candace told me she was doing pretty alright. “No serious injuries,” she said. “But they found a bunch of teeny-tiny shards of glass all up in my body and face. Doctors said it might take a year for them to eject all on their own.” Her face was

pallid, and her affect was tired and worn. She was missing that essential pep in her body language. It almost looked like she'd been holding back days-old tears.

“I have a major case of whiplash,” said Molly. She dug into her Caesar salad. “I’m fine otherwise. It’s the guilt that’s eating me.” Her voice was low and skeptical. As if there was some higher force looming over the conversation. “I said that thing, yeah, no, I did—remember? But that’s not all, no. When we were in the car I made a prayer in my head. I told the highest I wanted James dealt with. ‘Dear God—or whomever, Buddha perhaps—I am having trouble with a man I know. James is his name. Ugly inside-and-out. Please take care of him. Thank you.’ And I looked up, too. I can’t shake it.” I recalled my conversation with Max in his room: was a wish different from a hex? “Here’s the thing, though,” said Molly. “Whoever’s listening, well, they’re not very discerning. I said his name, guys. But the Big Man would have been perfectly content to kill us all.” Is it a guy with ears that sits in a booth and listens? Or is it more scientific? Earth and its vibrations?

“Heyo,” said Candace. “Snap out of it.” She waved her hand in front of my face.

“I really wouldn’t read too much into it,” I said. “The intervention was not a divine one. It was purely, without a doubt, *human*.”

“I’m a murderer,” said Molly. “And if I went and turned myself in they’d send me to a psych ward, not a prison. It’s fucked.” I picked at my burger, but I didn’t feel all that hungry. The two of them looked like they were waiting for me to say something grand and insightful, but I had nothing, really.

“You’re being so quiet,” Candace said to me. “You look well-rested. Not an eye bag in sight. Aside from the banged-up nose and the goofy smile, I’d think it was just another day for you. You know it’s not good to hold it all in, Olivia.”

“I’m not,” I said. “It *is* just another day. I mean—”

“Just another day?” she said. Her jaw hung open. “You’re losing it.”

“I’m not.”

“What, are you in denial?” She began to cry. This random family sitting by us gazed in awe at the strangeness of our conversation. “Is that what it is? People we knew were once here, on this earth, and now they’re gone. And it’s just another day? Me, you, Tina, and Molly. A unit. That’s what we were. Now we’re three.” She gorged herself on a McNugget. “I can’t think about sexual intercourse. I can’t think about love and romance and all that pretty stuff without feeling Clay’s warm lips gone cold. I’ll probably be celibate for, well, the rest of my life. I see a cute boy in my midst and all I see is blood and gore. Makes me nauseous.”

“You knew the kid for like 30 seconds,” I said. “Besides, Tina, well, she’s—”

“Don’t say it,” said Molly.

“Please don’t say whatever you’re going to say,” said Candace. “You’re a sociopath is what you are.” She told me the overstimulation was hitting her.

“I wouldn’t call myself that,” I said. “And here’s this—”

“No,” said Candace. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“I’m happy,” I said. “So incredibly happy that James is dead.” Candace began to dry-heave. “And, wait, just wait until you hear this—”

“Olivia,” said Molly. “Don’t.”

“At mixers, yeah? At parties. At any sort of event. Guess what?” I said. “I’ll meet someone I’m charmed by. Someone I want to be close to. And I’ll tell them my boyfriend died in a car crash, his brains splattered all over the dash, and I’m screaming, screaming, screaming. And they’ll love me for it. It’ll be my ultimate superpower.” Candace was speechless. Molly had her arm wrapped around her shoulder. She told Candace she was so sorry. “It’s a story to tell, anyhow.” The family, who’d been listening intently, gave each other appalled sighs. Their toddler started to cry.

“You kids today,” said the father. “You’ve lost your moral compasses.”

“I’ve made my own,” I said. “And it works for me just fine.” He scoffed. “Death doesn’t have to look like a thing.” Candace stormed out of the place, her face planted in her palms, whining—Molly followed after. “I’m happy. Yeah, I am.”

I walked back to my place, and before I got there I received a call from Max. He told me he had felt terrible for giving me alcohol that night, and that all might’ve turned out OK if he didn’t push. He hadn’t slept in half-a-week because he was so distraught. I told him it was a pretty thought, truly, but it happened, and that’s how it goes. He said no, really—it was all his fault. It sounded like he might’ve been wasted. “I wish I could replay the scenario,” he said, “and do it all over again so that it all turns out alright.”

“Well,” I said. “You can’t do that. Again, a pretty thought.” I badly wanted to tell him about the objective nature of things. People just die, and it’s earth’s design. It wasn’t about him. “I’d hope that when I were to pass, they’d leave my body wherever it lay—in an office cubicle, at a Panera Bread, atop Bow Bridge, or tucked under the covers in my bed—and let me rest there for all of eternity until nature itself washes me away. It’s not poetic, it’s just earth’s design.” He

asked me if I was inebriated, and I told him I wasn't. When I got back to my apartment, I sent my mom and dad a text saying that I loved them and that I was doing better. I received an email from James' brother, reminding me of the funeral and I wrote back. Then I took a Lunesta, poured myself a glass of white wine, and went to bed.

It took place in the church where I said my first F-bomb. And I remember kissing a boy I had met under one of the pews when I was seven. Abe was here, which was weird. I guess he was deemed close enough to James to warrant an invitation. The casket was closed, but I imagined James' head would have looked like it was made of Silly Putty, and his hands were just silicone gloves basted with embalming fluid. I wondered what a joint funeral would have been like—if Tina and Candace's boy were part of the proceedings, too. Would they space the caskets out evenly or place them according to each one's relation to the other? If so, I'd imagine Tina would rest some 30 feet away from James, and Candace's boy would lay outside. Tina's was in three days. And I didn't hear anything about Clay.

We sang hymns and his father read a eulogy. He said James had so much potential. They played Foo Fighters over the speaker system. James' mom said something about them being the soundtrack to his life. "You must be so distraught," she said to me. "You know you were so good to him, truly. He'd want you to know that." She had gray, wiry hair and a leathery, smoke-torn face. "You do know that, right?"

"Well, thank you," I said. "I'm doing OK, actually."

"Oh, dear," she said. She rested her hand on her heart. "Oh, dear."

When the service ended, I shared a cigarette with Abe outside. We walked together through a dirt trail behind the church, which was hidden beneath a fallen tree. It led up to a bench

atop a little hill that overlooked a tiny, little woods. He told me what James said to him at the party. "There's so many trees," I said. "Just generally speaking." I leaned my head on his shoulder and he sort of blushed I think. "Way more than people. Probably trillions."

*The Trolley Problem*

It was Xavier that told anyone anything first. Diego and I merely existed to listen closely, nod our heads, and oblige. “Alright,” said Xavier. The three of us had been sitting on my porch, sipping on pink lemonade, and taking turns punching each other in the face. “I’ve got something to show the two of you. I’ll warn you, though: it might just upend your entire world. Everything you know and love—it might just fuck it all up.” Xavier wasn’t one to deal in specifics. He told us to bring our girlfriends. That we’d meet outside the woods, half-a-mile from his house. 8 am, tomorrow. “Matter of fact, bring anyone who doesn’t get it. Bring your moms if you have to.”

“Get what?”

“*It*,” he said. “Life, death, limbo—*it*.” This was how Xavier did it: he’d gather us up and tell us what it was he needed of us. Never a question, always a declaration. Purposefully vague—*probably*. We were never sure if he knew what he was scheming himself. Sometimes he’d have us spy through peoples’ windows. He’d ask: “Well, what do you think? What does it do for you?” One time we watched this couple fight in their bedroom. The drapes were open, the lights were on. They were throwing stuff at each other; telephones, mirrors, and dictionaries. We could only see the vitriol in their eyes. Couldn’t hear them. “It’s symbolic isn’t it?” Last Halloween, he had us steal candy from kids’ sacks just to ask us how it felt. “The thrill, the agony, the innocence, the impurity. Put it all together. Now that’s something.” And he always asks us what we think about the Trolley Problem. We tell him we don’t know. “The point is you can’t win. Food for thought.” So, we told him we’d be there. 8 am, sharp. We had to.

The following day, Xavier called me up. I was just a little hungover. He let out heavy, seething breaths. “Hey, man,” I told him. “I’m on my way. Phoebe’s with me, too.”

“You’re late,” he said. “It’s 8:02, and you’re not here—and it’s grinding my fucking gears, Nicholas.” He told me that things like this make him consider the strength of our friendship. “You’re on thin ice, here. That’s all I’m saying.” I told him I was sorry and then he hung up on me.

“Your guy’s weird,” said Phoebe. “I don’t know why you even hang out with him.”

“That’s why we like him,” I said. “He’s real, and we respect him for it.” I told her that whatever it was that Xavier needed, it was probably important. “He said it was necessary that you come, too. We go because we’re pretty sure he’d murder us otherwise.”

“By ‘we,’ do you mean you and Diego?” asked Phoebe. “You make it sound like a cult.”

“It’s not,” I said. “He’s just commanding, compelling, and articulate—and we say yes.”

We got there at 8:16. Diego and his girl were there, passing a joint. Xavier was sitting on a rock. He had crushed an anthill with his foot. “Finally,” he said. “You gotta realize. This thing’s time-sensitive. Every minute that passes—”

“We’re here,” said Phoebe. “That’s what matters.” Xavier looked her dead in the eyes. His face turned red, and he put on a scowl—but he stopped himself.

“Yes,” he said. “You’re right. Thank you for coming.” He led us into the woods. We had to duck under some brush. The ground was wet and mushy. There was a light drizzle overhead. We trudged onward beneath a gray, eerie sky. I thought about my cat, Barry, and how he’d gone missing just three days ago. I was worried he might’ve been hit by a car. Or eaten by something else. I told Diego that I missed Barry, and he laughed at me. “That’s no laughing matter,” said Xavier. “Every thing ever, yeah—we’re all equal. He’s no different from a missing human.” I wasn’t even sure I agreed myself. Phoebe held my hand as we went. None of us were



well-dressed for the occasion, but Phoebe was the biggest offender. She was wearing rubber clogs—sockless—and a grubby Minnesota Vikings t-shirt. Some white gym shorts, too. She shivered just a little bit.

“I’m sorry, Phee,” I told her. “Here, take my jacket.” She draped it around her shoulders, and told me thanks. Xavier plucked a cigarette from his pocket and had it dangle between his lips. He took an effortless drag, palming it so as to make sure it didn’t put out in the rain. It fascinated Diego and I: the way he held the butt to his lips without giving it any recognition, without making it known to himself that he was indeed smoking. Sometimes he’d let one bob up and down in his mouth unlit. We thought it certainly meant something, but we couldn’t parse it. He was two years older than us, and so we believed ourselves to be two years behind him—in growth, in wit, in command, and in power. The rain beat down harder, then.

At a shallow stream, there lay an uprooted tree. It reached across each end, serving as a makeshift bridge. Xavier went first, and arrived at the other side with ease. Then I went second. I pulled Phoebe up with me. She slipped about half-way, but I caught her before she’d have fallen. We were golden. “Gabs,” said Diego. “You go on ahead.” So, Gabby made her way across, her arms stretched out to form a capital T. After Gabby got to the other side, Diego told us, while hyping himself up: “Watch this.” He got a running start. As soon as he made contact with the tree, his shoelace got caught on a piece of jutting wood, and he fell face first into the stream. He was out for a good ten seconds. Xavier nudged Diego with his foot, and he rolled over onto his back. Xavier told him that the earth has a way of fucking you over if you’re not careful. You have to respect it, for nature is your mother. Xavier asked that I take Diego by legs, and we carried him over the stream.

“You look hideous,” said Gabby. “And you’re a goddamn idiot is what you are. Is this what you boys do?” She squatted over Diego, who wasn’t all the way there. “Toy around like assholes? You’re so much more interesting, Diego, when it’s just the two of us.” He muttered something incomprehensible under his breath. “I’m losing attraction—”

“We don’t toy around here,” said Xavier. “There are repercussions for such behavior: time moves on without him. And his face, well—it’s fucked up. I don’t believe God to be a man, but whatever’s up there, er— perhaps it’s astral, has quietly punished him.”

Phoebe whispered in my ear: “Why does he talk like that? And why doesn’t he smile?” I told her I wasn’t sure. “And why are we here, Nicky? I get it, sort of: you like weirdos, and Xavier’s weird—”

“He’s not,” I told her. “He’s just different.” After some minutes, Diego was able to stand up on his own. The rain cleaned him right up, though his shirt was now soaked muddy brown. Xavier scolded him for wasting our collective times. It was 8:23, and the man could’ve been all but rot at this point, he said. Maybe taken away, even. “You live with that wound, Diego. Let it be a reminder of life’s finitude.”

“Rot?” said Gabby. “Taken away?” Xavier said nothing. “What are you talking about? I want to go back. Diego—I’d like to go home.”

“Nah,” said Diego. His speech was garbled. “Trust in the man. It’s for our benefit.” He stumbled about. Gabby took him by the arm, so that he didn’t do another face plant. It seemed that he was concussed.

“Yes,” said Xavier. “It is for your benefit.” We all got quiet, then. Diego kept muttering nonsensical things to himself, and then he’d ask: what did I just say? Xavier told him he must be speaking in tongues. “Ladies,” said Xavier. “Have you heard of the Trolley Problem?”

“The point is,” said Diego, “you can’t win. Food for tho—”

“It goes like this,” said Xavier. “You have a trolley barreling down a double-track. One of the tracks has five people tied down, on the verge of death. The other track has just one person tied down. You have the option to pull the railroad switch that would prevent the death of those five people, but you’d be *responsible* for killing that lone person on the other track in the process. It’s very utilitarian, and deontological, for that matter.”

“I’d run as far as I can,” said Gabby. “I don’t want to get implicated. It’s not my business. If I didn’t watch it happen, er— what’s that saying? If a tree falls? Out of sight, out of mind.”

“Just, well, logistically/semantically/pragmatically speaking,” said Phoebe, “you *can* make sure the thing stops before it kills anyone. You wave your hands in front of the train, yell: ‘Stop!’ and everyone’s good. You saved the day. Better yet, if you happen to be a train operator, you must have the jurisdiction to call the conductor himself and tell him that he’s about to run over a bunch of people. So do that. Boom. Easy.”

“Well—”

“Listen here,” said Diego. “I believe in equity, or whatever. What you do is grab the little fucker on his own, and you put him alongside the others. Make six of them. Let ‘em all die. That way it’s all fair. They all win ‘cause nobody loses.”

“What do you think, Nicholas?”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, I’d probably hit the lever.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d rather, y’know, one person dies than five.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, because, statistically speaking, it’s the better choice.”

“What if the one person is exceptionally powerful and gifted and brilliant, and it turns out that the other five are grifters, druggies, and cons?”

“Then I *wouldn’t* hit the lever.”

“How come?”

“Just ‘cause, like, that’s the better choice, then. I—”

“You’re boring me to tears,” said Gabby. “The two of you.”

“I second that,” said Phoebe.

“The point is this,” said Xavier. “You can’t win. And people are dying every day. Every second, for that matter. Food for thought is all.”

“I need a sit-down,” said Diego. “My head’s spinning.” Gabby led him over to a stump on which Diego sat. We were all soaked at this point. He said he needed a drink.

“I’ve got a bottle of water in my bag,” said Phoebe.

“No,” said Diego. “I don’t want water. We’re swimming in it. I want something to kill the pain. Get me a fuckin’ swig of something.” Xavier said he was going to press on. We’d find him just a good 50 yards down the way. Can’t miss him. We told him alright.

“I have Gatorade,” I told him. “The blue flavor.”

“OK,” said Diego. “That’ll do, I suppose.”

“I’m thinking we all turn the other way,” said Gabby. “Diego’s out of it, and I’m just not feeling this. It’s a safety precaution if anything.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I told her. “Maybe we should pack it up. I’ll—”

“Nicky,” said Diego. “You prick. We’re here, and we’re staying.”

“I dunno.”

“You’re a bitch, and a pussy,” said Diego. “A meek, frail pussy-bitch. And Barry’s fucking dead.” Phoebe told him that that was mean, and to take it back, but Diego called us cowards. So we sat for a few minutes, while Diego rested up, and we pressed on.

“It smells,” said Phoebe. “Like shit.” And then we saw him. He was seated criss-cross, his hair swept to the side. Eyes attentive. It looked like he was focusing.

“What’s he doing?” asked Gabby.

“I dunno,” said Diego. “He looks at peace.”

“He looks empty.”

“That’s what peace looks like.”

Phoebe took me by the arm, and we crept forward. Gabby cowered behind Diego. She said she wanted to go home, that the smell was really picking up—God, it was horrid, like dying, and death, and yuckiness. Xavier turned his head to greet us. “It’s all good,” he said. “He’s still here. I would’ve thought he’d have disappeared or something.” Camouflaged by a tall patch of grass, there it was: a man—*dead*—on the ground, splayed out on his back. He must have been about 40 or 50 years old. His hair was thin and wispy and gray. He looked dirty.

“Oh, God,” said Phoebe, under her breath.

“I told you all,” said Gabby. “Jesus, you’re repugnant, Xavier.” She began to sob. “I, well, I—” she hurled all over the ground. She got it all over her pants and shoes. I think a little bit got on my shirt, even. It pissed me off just a bit. “Did you do this? I swear, you pretentious little excuse for—”

“No,” said Xavier. “I’m not deranged. I found him here.”

“I think we should call the police,” said Phoebe. She plugged her nose. “We’re here now. And it’s the right thing to do, isn’t it? This can’t be real—”

Diego laughed and laughed. He put on the widest smile I’d ever seen. “That movie,” he said. “What’s it? *Stand By Me*. We’re like *Stand By Me*. Oh my, it’s all sort of funny—*this*.”

“Is that one of those coming-of-age, loss of ignorance sort of movies?” asks Xavier. “I hope to God you’ve all come-of-age by now. *This* is not *that*.”

“I think I’m Corey Feldman,” said Diego. “Nicky’s Wil Wheaton. And Xavier, you’ve just got to be River Phoenix. Spitting image, you are. One of you girls could be Jerry O’Connell.” He chuckled. “Tell me it isn’t uncanny.”

“It isn’t,” said Xavier. “At least not in the way you mean.” He stood up, then, as if he were presenting a school project. “So, what do you think?” He pointed at me. “Nicholas?”

“I’m not so sure.” Phoebe began to dial the cops. I told her to chill out, for just a second. She turned away from me and got someone on the line. Diego grabbed her phone, hung up, and threatened to chuck it in the water if she didn’t get it together. She said OK, fine—no cops. Gabby was green in the face. She looked on the verge of passing out. Phoebe handed her the water bottle, and Gabby got chugging. She hurled once more.

“It’s really a shame,” said Xavier. “Nobody deserves a fate like this.” The guy wore a Carhartt jacket, and a pair of carpenter jeans. He had a scraggly beard. There was no sign of foul play. No bullet holes, no stab wounds. Could have been drugs. Could have been a heart attack. Diego said it was probably drugs. “Maybe it’s best if we offer a moment of silence.” He looked for our approval, then. “We love you, sir, we really do.”

“I don’t,” said Diego. “You act like you’ve known the fucker your whole life. It’s just a dead, old junkie is what it is.”

“I don’t have to have known him at all.” I thought it all vulgar, truly. How Xavier had just been sitting there, communing with the thing. I wanted badly to tell him just how lame it was to make intimate something so gross. It takes an idiot to try and communicate with the dead. “Were you going to say something, Nicholas?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “I’ve got nothing—sorry.”

“I wonder what his family’s thinking,” said Phoebe. “If he’s got one.” And Xavier loomed over the thing as if he were trying to reach it. Gabby rolled her eyes, and called Xavier a pervert. He told her to quiet up—he’s awaiting a response. What would it say back? Would it relish his curiosity or take great offense in it? Would it tell him the truth: how it ended up here, where it was before—and was it *sad*?

“It—”

“He,” said Xavier. “Him. His. Not *it*.”

“Your hopes and dreams,” said Diego, rearing his foot back, “crushed.” He stomped right on top of the guy’s face. All sorts of things came popping out: rotten teeth, and pus—one of his eyeballs, even. Gabby told him that they were done for—the two of them. She called him a

manchild. An ingrate. They were breaking up as soon as they got home. Then she vomited a third time. “So be it.” And he stuck his tongue out.

“Now we’re definitely implicated,” said Phoebe. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we were all put behind bars. I should call them, I really should.” Diego chucked her phone, just like he said he would. Phoebe stormed off, saying fuck this, and fuck that, and fuck you. She said she was going home. “You coming, Nicky?”

“I—”

“Go ahead, then,” said Xavier.

“I’m, er— I’m going to stay.” Phoebe scoffed. She told me to eat shit.

“I hope all of you get arrested,” said Phoebe. “How ‘bout that?” I told her I’ll see her in a few hours, maybe. Diego grabbed a branch from off the ground and got poking. He drove the stick against the thing’s belly, against its thighs, scratched its beard. He pried off his Nike Cortez’s just for fun, I guess.

“What do we have here?” He prodded inside his jacket. There was a slip of paper sticking out of one of the inside pockets. It was a Mega Millions ticket. He’d won three whole dollars.

“Well, we’ve gotta cash it in, yeah?” We all shrugged, OK.

“Let’s cash it in and go home,” said Gabby. “If that’s what it takes.”

Diego stuck the branch up one of the guy’s nostrils. “I wonder if it hurt,” he said. “Even if you die, like, naturally, there must be that one second—maybe a millisecond, even—where it just feels like hell, no?”

“Leave him be,” said Xavier. “Cut it out.”

“The fucker’s already done for,” said Diego. “Doesn’t even feel it.”



“Imagine he were you.” Ha! You really pulled that one out of your ass, Xavier.

“You really pulled that one, er— you really—”

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Sorry. Nevermind.” Xavier grabbed the branch from Diego’s hand and told him to knock it off, or he’d do something about it.

“Boo-Hoo,” said Diego. “Try me.”

“He told you to knock it off,” said Gabby. “You imbecile.”

“Any passing is as sad as the other,” said Xavier. “Dog, cat, druggie, drifter. The upstanding, too. It’s all the same, really.” And then he decked Diego right in the face.

“No, no,” said Diego. He spit out a tooth. His entire face was messed up. “There’s a hierarchy, and you know it. Asshole—” I thought about my mom. Decent credit score. No major offenses. Owns a home. Has at least half-a-dozen friends. Divorced, but there’s mutual love there, I believe. There’s a mutual respect, at least. She’d be walking in the woods for some reason. Maybe to go on a hike. She’d let her guard down for just a second. Then, all the sudden she’s attacked by a group of three skeezy dudes in balaclavas. They’d stab her, rob her of all her belongings, and leave her there to die. That’d be sad. Sadder than *this*.

“My mom would be sadder.”

“Huh?”

“I think that if my mom were to die in the man’s place, well, er— I think it would be sadder. No doubt.”

“Is that so?”

“It , er— it goes like this,” I said. “Insects at the very bottom. Then lizards, birds, and frogs. Dogs come after that. Then, well, when it comes to humans, there’s a spectrum in and of itself. I’d argue that a really, really loyal—and perhaps expensive—dog might be even sadder than, er— sadder than, well, *this*.”

Xavier laid his head next to the man. An unlit cigarette dangled out from the side of his mouth. It looked as if he were trying hard to produce an inkling of a tear. His face flushed red and his lashes fluttered. It seemed highly unnatural—uncomfortable, even—staring upwards at nothing. Gabby left, then, and so did Diego. I told them bye-bye. “Oh,” said Xavier. He pointed over at some brush, some ten yards away. Something was scurrying about—we could hear it. It was meowing, too. “Is that Barry?” Out from under the brush came a black cat. It looked a little lost. “Well, is it?”

“No,” I said. “Barry’s a tabby. And he has a collar, too.”

“Well,” said Xavier. “You know what they say about black cats, or whatever.”

“They say a lot of things about black cats.” Xavier packed it up, and then I did too. The five of us, one after the next—gone.

*Firestarter*

It was sixth period, and we were supposed to be in AP Bio. Mrs. Grundy told us we were to have a test on gene expression that very day, but we didn't study. Between the three of us, we had a collective average of about 70. Now, I don't check my grades much, not at all—but what I did know is that I got an 11 percent on the last test: meiosis, I think. Us skipping class had gone from a bi-weekly ritual, to an almost-every-day sort of thing. Besides, we were hopped up on my mom's leather cleaner I'd found in the basement. Those DNAs, RNAs, the phenotypes, too, yeah—they could wait. We had bigger plans: a thing of Tito's, a microfiber cloth, and a lighter, put it all together, and you're golden.

"Listen," said Hannah. Her eyes were glazed over. Red and nothing else. She took another whiff. "I'm a real auteur when it comes to this sort of thing. Ivan, yo, Ivan—" drool ran down the side of his lip. Hannah snapped her fingers in front of his face, and he did a little jolt.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm here." He fondled his scrappy little mustache like he was tweaking. I asked him: *are* you? I pantomimed a bump and a snort. He shook his head. It was easier that way—to pantomime. After all, he was largely monosyllabic.

"I was gonna ask you to stand guard, but I don't think you're all the way there for that sort of thing. You understand why we're here, correct? Yo, Ivan—" He nodded, mhm. He said he had it sorted. "OK, then I'm gonna have you stand outside the door. But if you see something, you say something alright?"

"See something, say something."

“Good,” said Hannah. “And if a teacher comes walking, you have to make sure you don’t get all suspect. God forbid Grundy comes—you run. Knock, like this. And you run. Then, we all run. And we never, ever come back.”

“Grundy’ll kill us,” I said. “Better the cops than Grundy.”

“Now,” said Hannah. She handed me the bottle. Hell, I was tempted to drink it. “I’ll let you do the honors, T. Get the cloth burning, then you toss it in there. Shut the door, and we’re out, no questions.” The truth was this: I would have done anything she asked me to do. Kill a man, even. I didn’t know why. At 17, you just can’t know why you do anything for anybody.

“I’m just a little worried about getting in trouble,” I said. “What was it that you said? That it’s like your ego dies?” We’d spray-painted walls, and egged houses, and even stole a crisp 20 off a ten-year-old. We yelled at old people at Costco. Stole stuff from their shopping carts. But we’d never done anything like this—the three of us.

“Yeah,” she said. “You throw it, hear the crunch of glass, the light shines upon you, red hot. And then your ego dies.” So I lit the thing. The warmth charred my lashes. The heat sobered me right up. I threw it in the corner, right next to one of the urinals, and I heard the crack. Then it spread, from stall to stall, and the great yellow light overtook me. There was a knock. Ivan peeked through the door.

“Grundy,” he said. “Grundy’s here.” Hannah took me by the hand, and we dashed. Ivan followed after. Grundy was down the hall shouting something fierce, her fist raised. I didn’t know what she was going on about. All I heard was: mutations, genetic diversity, natural selection, too. Darwinism. Don’t you dare forget it, boy. Biodiversity, Tyler!

When you're young and in high school—but not so much, because you're barely there—you start to feel like you're only half-human. Day and night trade roles, and you're made a lowly offender. On a Tuesday morning, 11:37 am, you'll seldom see a soul your age. Yes, a Tuesday morning at 11:37 am is the riskiest, most daring time for a trio like us. The guy at the Halal place will ask you why you're not in school, serving you up a lamb gyro—white sauce, hot sauce, please. “Half-day?” he'll ask. The lady who works at the 7-Eleven will ask the same question. And so will mall security, arms crossed—an arched brow to match.

I was high off those fumes in the bathroom, from only 20 minutes earlier: the fire-laden piss and shit; the faintest smell of vodka; the leather cleaner we'd been huffing all day; the endorphins, how they grabbed hold and commanded me, yes—they were religious, I believe. We went to the JCPenney at Colonie Center, and hotboxed one of the changing rooms. We made out with each other. Hannah told me I was a good kisser for someone so inexperienced, and I told her thank you. Ivan told me the same, his tongue down my throat.

“We gotta find the arcade,” said Hannah.

“That sounds wonderful right about now,” I said. “I'm itching to play one of those old head games. Galaga, maybe. Or Pac-Man.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Ivan. “Galaga.” We embraced each other, and huffed and huffed, until they threw us out. The lady there told us that the changing rooms were for changing only. She'd call the cops if we didn't get lost. We told her that sort of stuff didn't apply to us. We offered her a little whiff of the stuff, but she started dialing, so we scurried out of there.

The three of us had a blast perusing the various stores. We knew we had to find the arcade, but the mall was big, and we had trouble reading the map layout. We thought it best if we

just stumbled upon it. It'd be more exciting that way. We tried on glasses at Sunglass Hut. Hannah stole this crazy pair of Oakley's. They looked like sci-fi goggles: the lenses had this neon pink-to-orange gradient. The bits you put on over your ear looked like they were taken straight from *Alien*. We popped into Barnes & Noble and asked where the Marquis de Sade was. I told the two of them that he was the fucked up BDSM guy. I had learned about him on a BuzzFeed list. We read *120 Days of Sodom* aloud to one another, while we walked from aisle to aisle. We took turns every other paragraph. The words mixed into one amorphous blob. When it was Ivan's turn he uttered near-gibberish, but it sort of made sense in its own right. His cadence was rhythmic, almost. Like wordless beat poetry. It was musical enough to bob your head to. On the third floor was a stationary 2018 Ford Focus. There were signs that read, ENTER TO WIN! Hannah said she had one of those glass breakers at home. "If I had it with me, I'd tap it on the driver side window, and we'd ride off, through the mall doors," she said. "Take it cross-country. Now, that's winning."

The sun beats down through the ceiling windows and the sky is a clear blue. We say to one another: the world is ours. It has to be. We're the only ones alive right now. Everyone's sucked into something ugly. But we're free and alive, and profoundly awake—just us, and nobody else. Hannah kisses me on the cheek, and I'm staring up through those ceiling windows. A plane passes overhead, and I say to myself—they must see us. How could they not?

So we wandered around for what seemed like hours. The thing about presenting as a lowly offender at 1:14 pm, is that for every fifty skeptics, there's a quiet comrade. He'll understand you and your goings-on. He'll know just what you're about, and he'll approve, too. We ran into this guy roaming around by the Champs Sports who looked like he was on another

planet. He was stomping back and forth talking about a requiem or something like that. His hair was gray and wiry. We asked him for the goods. Did he have them? “You’re good kids,” he told us. “I see you, if you know what I mean.” We eyed one another—the three of us. I shrugged. I don’t know: did we?

We knew we were at the arcade because of the purple flashing lights. “Beautiful,” said Ivan. He began to drool again. The desk clerk asked for five each, and gave us wristbands. We’d get an hour of play. Ivan got on one of the arcade motorcycles. He started a race on medium difficulty. He took swig after swig from his flask, while he leaned left and right on the motorcycle so as to make the necessary in-game turns. He was in 13th place. The track looked like it took place on some tropical island. It seemed like he might just fall off at any moment. Hannah and I went two-player on House of the Dead. Hannah was schooling me in the points department. I kept on using up all of our lives. In between levels we huffed the dregs—and then we were out. “Shit.” The game almost turned slow-motion, then. The game got harder, no doubt—but it turned slow-motion.

Ivan was glued to the motorcycle. I told him we should play Dance Dance Revolution. Whoever wins owes the other a bathroom handy. He said OK. The game told us to pick a song and we picked the one with the image of an anime boy over it. We started dancing. Rather, we started to do what we thought to be dancing. In reality, we must’ve done something more akin to oscillating. Hannah cheered the both of us on. I felt like Michael Jackson. The image of that anime boy in the corner of the screen, the jet black hair, those big cartoon eyes. He was flashing a peace sign. Yeah, I was doing it for him. About two-and-half minutes in, Ivan slipped on one the pads and hit his head right on the side of the machine. He fell down on the carpet and his

brain shut right off. Hannah went and propped his head up under her palm. I kept dancing. I had to win the thing. She asked him if he was alright, but he had trouble uttering a proper word. Hannah told him: “Up boy, yo, up—” Then, he popped right up. He gave himself a little slap on the face. His eyes rolled back into his skull. But he was alright.

Ivan wandered back over towards the motorcycle and hopped on and did his thing. We told him to be careful. Hannah and I split a basket of cheese fries and toyed with each other, wedged in the corner of the booth. “Quiet,” said Hannah. “Or they’ll kick us out.” We shared a bump of something. Probably K. It certainly put me in a hole. Then Ivan came running up to us. I had my hand up Hannah’s shirt.

“A little girl,” he said. “She’s lost.” He was out of breath. “No parents. Nothing.” He pointed over by the claw machine game. There was a little girl, probably four-years-old, wearing a unicorn backpack. She had on some light-up Skechers. She looked all around, seemingly for her mom or dad. “We oughta do something.” Ivan led us over to her, and we followed.

“You lost?” asked Hannah. “Where’s your mommy? Your daddy?”

“Kid,” I said. “You got parents?” She shrugged. “The fuckers that raised you.”

“Parents,” said Ivan. “Big-Woman, Big-Man.”

“She’s in shock,” said Hannah. “That’s what it is. Poor baby.”

“Daddy’s on the toilet,” said the little girl. “I wait.”

“She’s hallucinating,” said Hannah. “My God.”

“Right,” I said.

“We have two options here,” said Hannah. “We take her to one of those foster homes. St. Catherine’s is about a forty minute bus ride from here.” And then she had us huddle up, and her



voice got real low. “Or we adopt her ourselves. Listen,” she went on. “Kids suffer because parents are so samey these days. It’s all the same shit with them. I’m sure she’s blind to the trueness of it all.” I told her I agreed. “We could be mentors to her.”

Hannah took the little girl by the hand. Her little feet struggled to keep up. She arched her back and turned her head, exclaimed: “Daddy—” Hannah told her no, no—you’re out of it.

“She doesn’t even know where she is,” said Hannah. “It’s a shame.” We trudged out of the arcade, then out through the revolving doors. We sat at the bus stop—the four of us. “You gotta register a kid, don’t you? Where do you go about doing that? A church?”

“Probably,” said Ivan. “That sounds right.” So we waited for a few minutes before getting on the bus to First Church. The little girl sat on Hannah’s lap. On the way over Hannah told me that she wasn’t even there.

“What?” I said. “Who wasn’t there?”

“Grundy wasn’t even there,” she said. “I looked behind us when we were making a run for it. There wasn’t a soul in the entire hallway. Ivan was just tripping the fuck out. You both were, I suppose.”

“My bad,” said Ivan.

“They can’t even trace it back to us,” said Hannah. “And if they do, well, they can’t do shit about it. We’re just dumb kids.”

“Forever and ever.” I smiled. The bus was mostly empty. The few that were there had their noses buried deep in their cellphones or their magazines. The sky began to dim. No longer did the sun beat on our faces. The bus driver picked at her eye crusties. She barely acknowledged our existences. We were lowly offenders no more. At 2:52 pm, we just *were*. No more funny

looks, no more arched brows—no more pointed questions. The world accepted us with open arms. We assimilated with mighty grace. The skeevs and low-lives paid us no mind, and we almost wish they did, for we loved them so. Hannah told the little girl each and every vital thing with great unabashedness: sex, drugs, love, life, death, and more love. Then you gotta fuck it all up. That was it.

“She needs a name,” said Hannah. The little girl had drifted off to sleep. She nestled her head in Hannah’s armpit. “What do you think?”

“Well—”

“Firestarter,” I said. “How ‘bout it?” Hannah and Ivan nodded. They said they loved it. Hannah began to sermonize. She said it was of utmost importance that we show Firestarter every dark alleyway, that she see every rated NC-17, that she try Everclear and Absinthe, that she listen to Television, and Wipers, and Gang of Four, too, that she love boys and girls on every spectrum, that she travel to every country and try every food, that she kill a man if she has to. We watched as hordes of bikers drove past us. At least two dozen of them, doing wheelies and shouting obscenities. Ivan pressed his face against the window, and one of them gave him a thumbs-up. We shouted, “We love you!” and they said it back. How I wanted to climb on the back of one of them and drive it to the end of the world—all four of us. Firestarter could sit in one of those sidecars. She’ll see every thing ever. No stone unturned. That’s the end of the world.

We got off the bus and walked on the side of the road towards the church. Hannah held Firestarter in her arms as she slumbered. The outside was made of red brick, and atop the roof stood two pale obelisks. Cars lined the outside. We entered through the big doors. We were met with pews and white walls. There was barely a person in sight. “Hello,” shouted Hannah. “Is

there anyone here?” She banged on the confession box, but nobody answered. We heard footsteps making their way from above. There was a man dressed in a nice purple robe. He asked us what it was that we needed. We were being a bit “minacious,” he said.

“Father,” said Hannah. “Is that what they call you? ‘Father,’ is it?” He said his name was Steven. “Steven,” said Hannah. “We have a child that we’d like to make our own. We assumed this was the place. Is there a form we have to fill out or anything? Her name is Firestarter.” He squinted, and there came that terrible, terrible arch of the brow! Firestarter had awoken. Hannah let her down on one of the pews. It looked like she’d been hit with a divine realization, and so she began to sob and kick and scream. Hannah told her you’re OK—yes you are, dear.

“We want to make it a three-way split,” I said. “She’d have three parents.”

“Three,” said Ivan. “Me, Ty, and Hannah.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Are all of you demented?”

“We’re on a lot of drugs,” said Hannah. “We’re demented—yes. In some capacity. Is it a prerequisite to not be demented if you want a damned child in this fucked-up country?”

“Yes,” said Steven. “It is one of the only prerequisites.”

“You look at us weird,” I said. “We live for it, you know.”

“I’m going to need you all to stay put,” said Steven. “I’m going to head down to the police station and have you detained.” He squatted in front of Firestarter, who’d been fussing about, stomping up and down. “We’re going to make sure you get home safe, child. You’re OK,” he whispered in her ear. “I promise.” We told Firestarter we’d be back for her—perhaps in another life—and that we loved her dearly, forever and always. And then we were out, just like that. We ran down the street and up the highway, for a good 45 minutes, before we called an

UBER. We told the guy to take us to our respective homes. We tried saving the day, we told him, but it's normalcy that gets in the way. He told us what a shame it was.

When I got home, my mom told me she'd gotten a call from Grundy that I'd missed her exam. "It's embarrassing, Tyler," she said. "To have a son that doesn't even show up for class." She told me she'd hate to see me live out on the street. That that's what happens when you miss tests. "It's a slippery slope, it really is."

Three days later, I remember we'd been day-drinking—all three of us—from 9 am to 3 pm. We stuck it through Hendrick's class, to Kiyama's, to Gutierrez's, to Grundy's. We were sloshed, but we stuck it through nonetheless. There was an announcement that came on the loudspeaker earlier that morning. Principal Carruthers had said that they were still trying to find out who it was that set the bathroom aflame. If someone didn't come forward by Monday, then there would be a collective punishment—detention for every single student. We went fuck that: maybe that's what we all needed.

It was dark when we got to riding our bikes all around town. We ran into that requiem guy in front of a Five Below. He was taking a piss right in front of the store. We offered him a hit and he took a fat one. He told us about all the lost souls of the 21st century. "We're all dead," he told us. "But not you three, no—you're good kids. And I see you all."

*On & On*

I had read somewhere online that genealogy dictates whether the sperm in your precum is sterile or not. This means that some dudes' precum can get a girl pregnant—and without fail—while others can go unstrapped and not have to worry an iota about getting their lady pregnant before they pull out. You *do* have to pull out, mind you (unless you got one of those vasectomies, but I'm 19—and I don't think 19 year olds do that sort of thing).

I wasn't too keen on asking my dad whether or not our shared DNA made it so that our semen only does the job when we go full orgasm, but I took a chance on Jenny nonetheless, having done some deductive reasoning beforehand. My dad, who did have something of a bad boy streak in his 20s and even mid 30s, no doubt had his grievances with the various modes of contraception. His arms are littered with tattoos and he is still a nicotine addict to this day—and this isn't definitive proof of anything at all really, but, considering his lifestyle choices, I had my doubts that he ever wore a condom in his heyday.

Me and Jenny were in my dorm room watching an episode of *The Bachelor* on her laptop when we started getting frisky. We were both a little tipsy off some Twisted Teas and we shared a line of coke I bought off my buddy, too. I had an edible some few hours before, so my heart was beating especially fast and so I was extra horny that night. Something about watching *The Bachelor* arouses something in me too, I think. And so I worked my hand down under her shirt and then lower even. “But I wanna finish this episode,” she said, in a playful, teasing sort of way. “You're always so touchy feely.” And I smiled and told her that I think she's beautiful is all and I just can't help it.

“I’m telling you,” I said. “It’s the show. The prospect of matrimony. I dunno. It’s corny, maybe. But kitschy love sort of turns me on. Like, I know it’s hella produced, but that sort of fairytale shit does it for me. It’s better than porn.” And she told me I was a hopeless romantic, it’s cute, darling—and I told her don’t you know it.

I mean, Jenny is gorgeous in ten billion types of ways. Not just on a physical level. Rather it’s metaphysical. It’s beyond material and it’s beyond objective. So when I eye her laying next to me on my bed as we watch a corny reality TV show I don’t just see her blatant beauty, which is undoubtedly and profoundly *blatant*, yes. But, I also see the qualities in her that are mostly imperceptible to the human eye, or rather to humanity itself. Like the way she blinks in that tepid, jaded sort of way that indicates that she’s really seen a lot of the world and she knows it like the back of her hand—that she knows more than you, and you, and you. And her voice which is kind, but not too kind so that you don’t trust it. And her lush, black hair done just right so that she looks like Siouxsie Sioux. She’s very new-wavey, and you’d happen to get a good look at her and you’d think she looked like her favorite album is *Heaven or Las Vegas* or *Disintegration* or something like that. And I love her for it.

And so I was looking at her that night and loving her so, so much. Maybe it was the drugs: the edible that Jared and I had split earlier that day, and the Twisted Teas that were becoming a nightly routine, and the coke I bought off of my friend—Pedro. “I love all these things about you, Jen,” I told her, and planted a kiss on her cheek. “So many things I believe only I understand and think and, I dunno—like stuff that’s too weird to say out loud.” And she told me to say them and I tried my best, but I’m awkward about being gushy—even though I love gushiness and sentimentality and warm love, love, love—so I said a bunch of drunken, awkward

things I can barely remember, that are better left unsaid and un-recollected, like how I really like her bass playing and her artistic sensibilities.

What I do remember, though, is that we had ceased watching season 18, episode four of *The Bachelor* and she had put her laptop atop my desk and we began making out and doing all the other things. She had asked if I had a condom and I said not this time, I had forgotten. And she was hesitant. Told me maybe it was best if we left it at that. “I’m a bit tired anyway,” she said. “And I want to be safe about it. You understand that, don’t you?” And I told her I did and I nodded, too—and assured her I wasn’t in the business of doing anything she wasn’t up for doing, that I wanted to make her comfortable and everything. So we lay next to each other and talked about family shit. I told her about how my mom got a promotion at her teaching job, that she was happy about it, and I was too. And my sister’s made some new friends at her nursing program. And she told me nice, nice. “You know,” she said, and she turned over to her side so that her back was facing me. I was staring up at the green constellations lit-up on the ceiling. “I was meant to be a little sister. A younger daughter. Did I ever tell you that?” I shook my head and said no. “Well, four years before I came into the world, there was my brother Nicholas, and—” and Jenny began to tear up a little, but in a shy sort of way, so that I couldn’t tell all the way how she was feeling.

“We don’t have to talk about this,” I said. “If you’re not feeling it.”

“No, I am,” she said. “It’s fine. I am. Four months old and SIDS happened. Sudden Infant—” She laughed in a nervous type of way. “I don’t know why I’m even bringing this up. It’s the alcohol. I overshare, you know this.”

“I’m so sorry.” And I kind of awkwardly grazed her shoulder with my hand. And she turned over so that she was looking at me straight now. “Truly. I am.”

“It’s cool, honestly. It’s not like I’m torn up about it. It happened before I was born. And my parents are cool, too. They wanted a kid and they got one. And they’re cool.”

“As long as y’all are OK.” *Uh-huh.*

“My point is this, er— what I’m trying to say is that it completely fucked with the dynamics. Not the event itself, but the fact that I’m an only child—eldest and youngest all at once—and not a sibling. I mean think about it: if I had an older brother, I’d be a younger sister, and being a younger sister is a whole different animal.” I was sort of zoning out a bit at this point, but I was listening. “And my mom and dad would treat me like a younger daughter. Not just a kid, but a younger daughter. And I don’t know exactly what all that means or entails, but I know that I’d be exponentially different today, right? And it would all have to do with the innate shape of our family.” And she chuckled. “Is that stupid? Did I just sound stupid?”

“Not at all.”

“Like, say with your sister. She’s what—four years older?” And I said mhm, nearly five. “That very fact, coupled with the fact that you’re brother and sister to each other—not brother and brother, but brother and sister—and that your parents recognize that you’re brother and sister—” And I told her right, yeah, for sure. “It completely made you who you are today.” And she kissed me on the cheek, told me OK—no more talking about this sort of shit. We were pretty quiet then and the vibe was pretty muted and awkward. I grabbed another Twisted Tea and we split it. Busted out the laptop once more, too, and we resumed our show. Juan Pablo was in Seoul with the 13 bachelorettes and Sharleen got the one-on-one date. During their date, Sharleen said



something to Juan about not particularly liking children, and me and Jenny both found her candidness kind of charming. After the show finished, and Sharleen had won the rose, we were both getting pretty handsy with each other. And I asked Jenny, with a bit of drunken slur: maybe we should just give it a go?

“Let’s take a gamble. But no pressure either.” And she said OK, let’s take a gamble.

Later that week, I got a call from my dad telling me that Mom was in the hospital after having tripped and fallen down the stairs. I drove over there to see them and check up on her. My sister was there, too—and she was being her hospitable self. The doctor told us that she would be okay—that it *wasn't* good, but there wasn't *that* much to worry about. He said that she was concussed, with a minor skull fracture, a broken leg, and had a bruised rib, too.

Doc whispered something in my dad’s ear, but I couldn’t catch all of it. Something, something *moderationOKbecarefulcantriggeryouknow*. He nodded, said I know, I know. Mom looked pretty out of it. I tried chatting her up, but she was pretty loopy. I don’t know if they hopped her up on some drug or what, but her eyes were glassy and drained of that ocean blue in them, pupils big and black and sort of empty looking. She told me thanks for coming, but you arrived hours after Dad and Mikaela—just be grateful, please, that I’m still here. I know you forget sometimes. My sister was seated next to her on a little stool, had her hand wrapped around Mom’s, telling her sweet little things with an attentive, hushed voice, asking can I get you something, anything, water, Pepsi, are you too cold? Want more heat? Ask Doctor Reyes for another blanket, another pillow?

My dad was sweaty and agitated-looking, doing that leg shaking, foot tapping thing. He went out for a smoke and I followed after him. “What happened?” I asked. “Were you there?”

“Yeah I was there,” he said, and took a drag. “Your aunt Nina invited us to this little party to celebrate her and Harold’s anniversary. I told you about this. You were invited, too. It was fun, very up-tempo, eh— what were you asking?” And he took another drag.

“I asked you what happened.”

“Right,” he said. “Well, I was there, yes—I just don’t fully, 100 percent remember the exact details. We went home, and we took a taxi, I promise you that. You know she’s epileptic. You’ve known that. And, well, when you mix—” and he pantomimed. “You know. And, well, your mother, she likes to mix. It’s her trademark. You know, she doesn’t think you care about her. She’s worried that she’ll pass and you won’t even feel anything. Won’t even cry. Says you don’t appreciate how much of an ordeal you were. Way more than your sister.”

“I would definitely cry, like hell,” I said. “She’s my mother. No shit I would cry.”

“I know. That’s what I tell her,” he said. “All the time, that’s what I tell her.” I asked him what that meant; that I was an ordeal. And that my sister wasn’t. But he seemed keen on changing the subject. “How’s Jenny, by the way?”

“She’s good,” I said. “We’re good. We’re definitely approaching a new stage in our relationship. Did I tell you we’re not open anymore? We’re exclusive and monogamous, as of eight days ago.”

“Congratulations on that,” he said. “That’s big. So no more poly stuff or whatever? Just one girlfriend.”

“Just one girlfriend, yeah.”

I told Mom it was best I got going because I’ve got classes to get to. I had missed my WW2 film history class just to see her, and that it’s once a week for some four hours every

Monday, and I don't want to fall too far behind. I promised I'd be back in a few days to see how she's doing—and I'll call when I'm back at my dorm. I wished Mikaela well, told her it was nice to see her, and gave her a quick, awkward sort of hug. She told me it was a shame that I was leaving so soon—that it would mean a lot to everyone if I'd stay just a little longer—and she had her hand clutched around Mom's the same way it'd been for hours now. I told her school beckons me, that my GPA is already suffering enough, I love you Mom, always—goodbye Mikaela. Just got a text from Jenny, by the way. She's sending you love and hugs. And goodbye Dad. Mikaela shrugged and met me with that consolatory smile she wears so well. Told me bye bye, little brother, just a little disappointed is all. “But you do you. School beckons. I'll be here, taking care of Mom.”

That night after I got back, Jenny threw a little function at her place. I was sort of late to the party because of the drive back from the hospital. I did a little pre-gaming in my room with my guy Pedro. Traded shots of some vile Turkish Raki. Nearly vomited, honestly. Knots in my stomach and everything. Apparently you're supposed to dilute that shit with water. My guy Pedro cut up some lines for us. Speed this time. Snorted like three of those bad boys and I'm golden. Smoked a spliff too on the way over there because fuck it. We were a few blocks away from Jenny's when I told my guy Pedro about the stuff with my mom and he told me *awIamsorrybruh*, pat on the back too. *lifeberidiculous*. “She could have died,” I said. “Hell, this shit could happen again. She toys with death, for real. This isn't the first time.”

We walked up the little path to her apartment and Pedro rang the doorbell to buzz us in. *itsmepedroalsoderektoo*. I started getting those weird cold sweats, hands all clammy—and my jaw clenched up. Definitely the speed, but fuck it. Had this weird little gut feeling that something

was kind of off with Jenny. Because we were texting earlier and the texts she was sending back didn't seem all that enthused. Rather, they seemed sort of reserved. "You know when you can sort of read into a text, Pedro? And something's off? Like you can't really figure it out, but something's really off. And I don't like to use emojis as like some quantification or anything, because they're just emojis, God—but we were on different wavelengths." Hell, his eyes were rolled back in his skull. *yeahforsurebitchesarecrazy*. And I got rambling then. Got all gushy. Not a good look at all, but that's what happens when I'm on the shit I'm on—and I'm on that shit nearly every day, no joke. "I have no doubt in my mind: I wanna marry her." *whatinthefuck?*

When we entered, the vibe was not what either of us were expecting, really. I mean, the lights were on, and the drinks weren't out, and there was no music blasting, either. For a second I thought we'd walked into the wrong place, but no—Jenny was there, seated at the circular table in their little common. There were her roommates, too: Tati, Lola, and Fatboy Gary. When Jenny said it was a little function, I didn't think she meant there would be like four people, and shit—I got tweaking a little bit. "What's the mood for tonight?" I asked, kind of stumbling in through the door, and my guy Pedro followed after. "Where are the drinks? Where's the people?"

"Game night," said Jenny. They had Monopoly busted out on the table, and a deck of cards, too, and Uno, and a podcast was playing quietly—calm feminine voices discussing political shit or something. Or maybe it was movies or some book. They were nice angelic voices tickling my scuzzed-up brain. "I wanted a chill night. Decided it best I cut out the smoking, go for a T-break, too. And, well, alcohol's not doing anyone any favors." She pulled out a chair for me to sit. And she eyed Pedro who was swaying back and forth—faded. "Hey Pedro. Come join

us.” *heyjennyokiwill*. And he haphazardly plopped into one of the chairs, and got fiddling with the thimble. He was dead set on the thimble.

“Y’all sober?” I asked. “Jenny is apparently. But—” I pointed at fatboy Gary. “You sober?” He was sipping an A&W root beer like it was liquid crack. “You didn’t spike that or anything?”

“Mostly, yeah,” he said. “Just root beer.”

“And T? And you, Lo?”

“Yeah,” said Tati. “We shared a little joint but that’s it.”

“And Jenny is stone cold? Full Sober Sally? Straight.”

“Stone cold.”

“And there’s no one hiding?” I said. “Like, it’s not a surprise thing? Like if I peeked into your bedroom—”

“Nah, this is it,” said Jenny. “I mean, maybe Kev’ll come. Maybe Chris—but this is mostly it. What’s wrong with a chill night?”

“I just—” I stammered. “No, it’s cool. Me and Pedro just got prepared for something a little different I guess.” So I sat down on the chair, sweat glazing my brow, even though it was like 60 out. I picked the doggy, rolled the dice, too. Felt like I forgot how to roll dice. Must’ve been Jenny’s stare—so layered and deep, and I rolled a nine. I landed on Connecticut Avenue. “I’ll buy it. How much?” And I handed over the 120 dollars, and my leg got shaking and my lip quivering, and I felt the eyes on me. “Why are you looking at me like that, Jen?”

“Like what?” Like she’s got something on her mind—and I can’t read it.

“I need a drink,” I said, and I got up from my chair and started digging through the cabinets. Got hold of some shitty Corona hard seltzer, all lukewarm too, but I chugged that shit like water because my mouth was really, really dry—and I got another and chugged it, too. I rolled my dice again and landed a three, and I bought the damned thing, I did. I bought it without even looking at what it was. Jenny was looking at me weird. And we couldn’t hold a conversation. Not when she was sober and I was fucked. *Yougoodbro?*

I went for a leak after some minutes. The others were calling me back, saying wait: before you go to the bathroom, take your turn. It’s your turn, Derek. Otherwise, we’re going to have to wait. But I couldn’t just come back and take my turn. The stuff in my brain—the *drugs*—were telling me that navigating this situation (turning around and rolling those dice, picking up the doggy, moving it along the board properly, and then potentially making a purchase on some new property) was too hard. And I had to piss really bad, too. Like a racehorse.

So, I stumbled towards the bathroom, glanced behind me, and they were all staring at each other, probably thinking I’m being a tool. Pedro’s looking up at the sky, though. He’s somewhere else. And I shut the door. Took my piss. Washed my hands. Stared at myself in the mirror: my eyes wide open, bloodshot, too. My hair a little sloppy but that was usual. I look OK, I was thinking. I look like I’ve been dabbling, but I look OK nonetheless. And I nabbed a towel and dried up my hands, wiped the sweat off my forehead. And I noticed, wrapped under a bunch of toilet paper, was a pink, rectangular box that said—mind you, the room *was* spinning, but I could read the font full well—FIRST RESPONSE. It was open and everything, and it was empty, too. I saw that much.

I dug around a little. Poked through the cabinets, on the shelves, behind the toilet, under the bathtub. If anyone saw me they'd think I was crazy. I found nothing, really—other than some Advil, which I popped (like four of them) because my head was throbbing hard. I peeked my head out of the bathroom and there they all were, chatting to one another, podcast still going. Pedro was spaced the hell out. And Chris and Kevin had arrived, too. “Took a minute,” said Jenny. “Kevin took your turn.”

“It’s cool,” I said, kind of gruff. “I don’t care. I don’t want to play anyway.” I pointed at Kevin, then at Chris. “Y’all sober? Not on anything? No drugs?”

“Nah,” said Kevin. “We’re pretty fucked actually. We each dropped a tab before we got here.” And Pedro smirked. *thatswhatsup!*

“That’s what’s up,” I said. “No doubt. Thank you for coming. Sincerely.” I dapped them both up. “Jenny—” I grazed her arm with my hand, and gave her those puppy dog eyes, too.

“What was that thing I found in the bathroom?”

“What thing?” she asked in a hushed voice, leaning in as if to make it so that nobody could hear but us. “You have to be more specific, Derek.”

“The—”

“What’s this podcast you got playing?” asked Chris. “What are they talking about? Music? Books? Politics? It’s kind of hard to follow.”

“Well—”

“Whose turn is it?” asked Kevin. “Fatboy? Is it mine?”

“The box in the trash can,” I whispered in Jenny’s ear. “The pink box in the trash can. Is it yours?” And Jenny sort of recoiled then, put on a face of disdain and horror and confusion all

at once. I glanced over at Tati, and then Lola, and then Fatboy Gary, too. Got up off my chair and stood up like I was giving a speech or something. “Listen, Gary—you’re off the hook ‘cause you’re a guy who fucks other guys. But Lola. Tati. I gotta ask, just because I’m getting a little heated now: is that box—the pink one in the trash can—either of yours?” And they both went dead silent. “There was a box in the trash can, right? I’m not crazy, right? I’m not tripping, am I? There was a pink box in the trash can. FIRST RESPONSE, fucki—”

“It’s Jenny’s,” said Lola. “I’m sorry, I—”

“Lola!” shouted Tati. “Now he’s going to freak out.” And I stormed off into Jenny’s bedroom, and Jenny grabbed my arm, telling me wait, don’t go in my room, that’s my personal space, Derek—don’t you dare go in my room, you coked-up asshole. But I did it anyway, and I threw off her sheets, dug under her mattress, opened all the drawers, tossed her clothes and curling iron and moisturizers and books and shit all over the floor. Stop it, Derek—stop being a paranoid dumbass. Stop. Stop. Stop. And there it was, tucked under some flimsy underwear, in a ziploc baggie: it read two lines, not one.

“I was gonna tell you,” said Jenny. “Just not tonight.” I left, and waved goodbye to everyone, said peace out, I gotta cool off. The vibe in the room was cold and dead and awkward. I gave Jenny a flimsy hug, told her I’m not mad, just scared—really, really scared. It’s not your fault, it’s mine. Good night.

I walked back to my dorm, hands in my pockets, looking like I was on a mission. It was cold that night, and it felt especially dark. In my periphery were good old kickbacks, and bonfires, and there were fratty types doing what they do best, and wallflowers finding their place, and the music was everywhere, and it was thunderous. And across campus—somewhere at least;



maybe in the very dormitories I was passing—there had to be young lovers finally announcing their feelings to one another, and friends being embraced in spite of a dark, embarrassing secret, and floaters who found their pack, and artists who felt like they'd actually made a dent, and thinkers who thought a beautiful thought, and doers who *did*—tonight. And I said to myself: if one were to gather each and every event of the night, big and small, jot it down, and qualify it—to measure just how irreconcilably momentous their respective situations were—I believe mine and Jenny's would be number one. And how quiet it all sounded—the space around me. And how loud everything was outside of myself.

So the drugs started to wear off, and the world started to get more real. And I wondered if maybe, just maybe, Jenny and company were still playing that game of Monopoly, and if it was too late for me to come back and pretend like nothing ever happened. And I could roll the dice and move the doggy, and maybe win—but probably not. And I'd have Jenny, nudged into my chest, and I'd kiss her on the forehead, and we'd talk about The Jesus and Mary Chain—and we'd be kids, like we'd been just days before.

When I got back to my room, I thought about calling my mom, but I didn't. I was under the impression the news might just be the nail in her coffin—that it would literally kill her. And my dad wasn't so much in the business of saying much of anything about anything, really, so I thought it best I didn't call him about it either. And if Mikaela knew, gosh, she would act like it's her business and nobody else's. Jenny sent me a text saying that we would have to talk about the whole thing, that it doesn't have to be tonight, but soon—maybe tomorrow? OK, tomorrow works, I texted back. And so I rolled up a joint to put me out quick, but it barely helped, so I lay

there and lay there, with my headphones on, bumping some music, until my brain finally told me it was time to doze off.

I do remember my dream that night: I was walking in some big, bustling New York City-type looking place, and rain was pouring down hard—and in an alley I spotted this huge dalmatian hunched behind a trash can, and it's crying out to me with a pleading howl. And so I come to investigate, and there's this litter of little puppies, popping out of this dog, one after another. Hundreds, thousands even, and it never ends. And as each little dalmatian comes out, the mother gnaws through each umbilical cord with great ease and efficiency, like she's on an assembly line. And the newborn puppies, pink and hairless, nuzzle against her stomach, suckling from their mother's breasts without any guidance or gesture, like they just know. And the whole event functions without a single hitch, as if these sentient animals were one well-oiled machine. And I watch, wondering if there's anything I could do, and I approach, arms outstretched, hands reaching towards the mother's womb, and she snarls at me, growls as if to say no, Derek, there's nothing to be done here. Your assistance is not welcome. Nature never fails. And I tell her: but there's so many, thousands of them. They're crowding the entire city. And she barks: yes, and I love them all.

The following morning I met Jenny at the local coffee place. It was eight in the morning and I had a class in two hours. I was a little grouchy, so I slurped on an espresso, asked if I could get anything for her, but she said no, no—it's fine. "So what's the plan?" I asked. "Where do we go from here?"

"Well," she said. "I don't think I can be a good anything to anyone at this stage in my life, let alone a child. I'm a mess. We both are."

“Is it too late to take a Plan B or something?”

“Way too late, Derek. You should know this by now. I mean—” she started to tear up a little, and I gripped her shoulder to which she recoiled and said please, don’t touch me, I hate being touched.

“Listen,” I said. “Maybe this is what we need. I dunno. It’ll propel our relationship and our maturities, and really turn us into valuable people. Isn’t that why people have kids in the first place? To make *themselves* better? Get on the straight and narrow?”

“No,” said Jenny. “Listen to yourself. God.” And she looked around the place, eyes darting, as if to indicate that this conversation was deeply embarrassing, especially so in public. I recognized some faces here, hell, I recognized nearly everyone here. Waved at a few of them, even. “I like to think people have kids because they like kids.” And I wasn’t so sure—truly. “I can’t do it. Not now. There’s no way. Could you?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. “I like the idea of having one, sort of. Like, the notion of bringing life into this world, that happens to share my DNA, and looks like me, and acts like me—” And I took a sip of my espresso. “Looks like us.”

“You like the novelty of it.”

“Well,” I said. “When you put it like that—no. But yes, sort of.” And Jenny sort of rolled her eyes, then, looked like she might just get up and leave. “I like the prospect of having a kid that does great things, and that’s handsome—or *beautiful*—and I know you’ll call me stupid, I know you will, but I like to think a kid can right your wrongs, er— our wrongs. Our collective wrongs.”

“Derek—”

“Catch this: you’re an artist. A brilliant visual artist. And we both know that. And I’m, well, I’m a decent filmmaker, and I know my stuff isn’t great, but it’s OK. And you’re stunningly gorgeous, Jenny—you are. And I like to think I’m at least a seven or an eight. If we come together—which we have, clearly—and have this child that’s an amalgam of the best qualities in both of us, then it—or *they*—no doubt have to be destined for something great.”

“You’re treating it like it’s a video game or something. What ‘amalgam,’ Derek? I can count our good qualities on one hand. And our bad ones, well, I’d need to write a book to fit all of them. And that’s besides the point. We don’t have the funds. We don’t have the space.” She began to cry. “I don’t want it. I want to work on me. To *do* me.”

“We can make the space. We can figure out the money, too. We can work on us, together.”

“Easy for you to say,” she said. “It’s not the one clawing at your insides. It’s not the one feeding off you like a parasite.”

I took her by the hand. “I love you, Jenny.” And her hand slid from out of my grip, and she did a little scoff to match. “I think we’ve got to tell our parents. I tell mine. You tell yours.”

“Why? That’ll just cause chaos.”

“I dunno,” I said. “I think it’ll *ground* your decision.”

“I’m going to make an appointment with the obste— Planned Parenthood, whatever the fuck,” she said. “But I can’t guarantee anything. I can’t guarantee I won’t just pay someone to deck me in the stomach. To stick a wire up there.”

We decided it best to drive back to my parents house together, so that I could check up on my mom, as well as deliver her the news. Kill two birds with one stone. On the car ride over,

Jenny didn't speak to me very much. I was blasting some tunes she liked, but she didn't really seem to budge. I asked her if she wanted to play iSpy or 21 Questions or something, but she said no, Derek, please shut the fuck up. At a turn, this middle aged dude in a truck cut me off, and when I honked, he stuck the middle finger at me. In the bed of the pickup were four little kids, rolling about without any seatbelt on or anything—nothing suspending them in place. They could have easily fallen out, smashed their heads on the pavement, got hit by a car, even. And I was overcome with great sadness, knowing deep down that these children were bound for some horrible fate—even if it wasn't tonight; and even if it wasn't as immediate and gutting as death itself. The father at the driver seat, his arms red and veiny with fury, shades down, cigarette between his lips; the kids in the back, jittery and spastic, and on the very edge of *everything*. It wasn't their fault, no way. I stuck the middle finger back.

Here and there I would glance over at Jenny, who wouldn't dare glance back at me. I got a great view of her nose, which has a prominent bridge, and a considerable arch (she had broken it as a child), making it a little Roman—and a little Jewish—I suppose. It's much cuter than mine, which is smaller and daintier, but has much less character. Her eyes, though glazed over with a wash of tears, so that they're a little red in the whites, have this great forest green coloring, with a little mix of gray and brown. Mine are straight brown, verging on colorless. She's also got jet black hair, almost like Joan Jett's (this is not her natural hair color, which is actually dirty blond—she dyes it frequently), where mine is a light brown—wavy, with some curls in there—almost like a Matthew McConaughey. My favorite quality of Jenny's is this eyebrow slit she has on her right side. She told me she got it after being pushed down a slide when she was nine years old, so it's not genetic or anything. She does have these clubbed thumbs

that make it a little harder to win thumb wrestles and send speedy texts, but otherwise they're harmless. I've inherited webbed toes from my dad—sort of like a frog's—which limits their mobility, as well as makes room for lint and toe jam. My grandfather has these, as well as my sister.

I like to think that a kid is a 50/50 split (in regards to aesthetic, physicality, smarts—and demeanor) between mother and father, indicating that there's a natural symmetry in a child's very being, and in nature itself—though I know this thought to be not so realistic. I love the thought of caring for a child, who scurries around with our respective webbed toes and clubbed thumbs, who has a nose that corrects the respective faults in our own, whose eyes are brilliant like Jenny's but thoughtful like mine. Ideally, a child would have Jenny's lush hair, her visual acuity (she has perfect sight per the doctor's words), her palate, her creative ability, as well her sense of style, among other things. In my case, a child should inherit my taste in music and film, my romantic flair, my stellar hearing, as well my capacity for introspection. There are a number of traits between Jenny and myself that would be better left uninherited (like our hot tempers, lack of foresight, my ADHD—and her BPD), but I suppose that's beyond our control.

I'd hope that, if we were to have a boy, he'd be handsome and do well with the members of his preferred sex and, if we were to have a girl, that she'd be beautiful and free, but discerning. And if said child were to grow up confused—about who they are, and who they like to make love to—I'd hope they would confide in me first, so that I could tell them stories of my youth: how I'd fuck men, women, and everything in between, without shame nor repression. How I'd masturbate to society's fringe. How I'd love, love, love so incredibly much—ah! I asked Jenny what she thought about all this. She was tracing raindrops on the window with her finger.

Met me with a little sigh. “I haven’t given it a thought,” she said. “I don’t plan on thinking about it until, er— unless I need to. And if I *were* to think about it I sure wouldn’t make it all about myself, Derek. When you get too involved with the science of it—the genetics and everything—you forget that it’s a real child, who truly doesn’t belong to *anyone*. Not even us.”

“I think it’s just fun to speculate,” I said. “It’s like math. Derek plus Jenny equals?” And I laughed and she sort of rolled her eyes. I asked how it could be so that my kid couldn’t possibly belong to me.

“A parent’s responsibility is to care, and that’s it,” she said. “Think about squirrels and shit, birds even: they feed their kid, until they don’t have to—and then it’s free. That baby never belonged to anyone. They just needed that initial push. You really think mama bird has any sense of ownership—that it feels like it *owns* its offspring?” I told her I wasn’t really sure.

“OK, but hear me out: I’m not sure if it’s semantics or what, but I kind of feel like my parents own me, at least a little bit. Not in, like, an overbearing sense, but I feel like I’ll always be *theirs*. I owe them goodness and smarts and thoughtfulness. When I’m under *their* roof, I have to play by *their* rules.”

“And I think it’s bullshit,” said Jenny. “It’s a construct. Do you know what a construct is?” I nodded. “I think love can be the *only* thing. Love can be the only thing *ever*. In a perfect world, you raise a kid, and you *love* them. You have no expectations for them, either. They owe you nothing. The catch is that the kid has *one* expectation of you: that you love them so tenderly and brilliantly, and without any ulterior motives. That you care for them, not so that they turn out great, but because it’s your responsibility—to love.” And she averted eye contact then, and got really, really quiet. “I don’t have it in me.” I took one hand off the steering wheel, and grabbed

hers, and she reciprocated, nestled her clubbed thumb in my palm. She told me maybe we should just turn around and get the operation done—never speak about it again, too. Or maybe look into some DIY thing on Craigslist. But I said no, no—we’re almost to my parents’ place.

By the time we got there, Jenny was pretty exhausted and I had to nudge her awake. It was like six pm, and I’m not so sure they were expecting us. I sent my dad a text earlier that day, to let him know we’d be stopping by, but he never responded (he doesn’t check his phone much). I took a little swig from my flask and rang the doorbell. Offered Jenny some, but then I remembered. My dad opened the door and he looked a little surprised to see us. He was in some boxers and a Black Flag t-shirt. “Oh,” he said. “Hi Derek. We were not expecting you. Nice to see you, Jenny. If I knew you were coming—”

“No worries,” said Jenny. “I didn’t know we were showing up unannounced. My apologies. It’s nice to see you, too.”

“Hey, Dad,” I said. “How’s Mom? We came to check on her—and we’ve got some news. It’s good or bad, depending on, well, a variety of things.”

“You can surely check in on her,” said my dad. “She’s watching TV in the other room. She’d be happy to see you, Jennifer.” And Jenny smiled. “I’m making chili. It’ll be ready in a few minutes. And the news: would it make the room tense? Is it— well, how about you both come in?” And my dad whispered in my ear: It’s not a criminal thing right? You’re not in trouble with the law? And I told him no, nothing unlawful, well, depending on how you spin it. It *could* turn into something “judicially awry” given “extreme circumstances.” And his brow arched a little. *Judicially awry?* Jenny asked him about his vinyl collection and it took the heat off. He told her he just got Wipers’ *Youth of America* for a good four bucks at the local record shop.



My mom was in the living room, watching an episode of *Dateline*. “Look what the cat dragged in,” she said. “You took what I said to heart didn’t you, Derek? It’s nice to see that you’re putting in the effort. I missed you, of course.”

“Hello, Missus Warner,” said Jenny. “It’s really, really great to see you.” I won’t lie: my mom looked rough. She wasn’t seated on a couch, no—she was slumped in a wheelchair, with her leg done up in a cast, and a bandage wrapped around her head. She was pressed up close to that television, too. “Are you feeling better? I’m so, so sorry to hear about the incident.”

“I am indeed doing better,” said my mom. “Thank you, dear.” And she gave me a nod. “You could learn a thing or two from her, you know.”

“I don’t really like asking how people are doing,” I said. “I prefer to show that I care with actions instead of words.” My mom laughed, and then Jenny let out a little chuckle, too—and I could hear my dad’s cackle in the kitchen. I asked my mom about the episode of *Dateline* that she was watching—whether it was especially eventful or enlightening—and she told me it was about this investigation into this dude who ended up killing his own baby brother with an aluminum baseball bat, and that it was eventful, yes, but not particularly enlightening.

“Might I ask Jenny,” said my mom. “What exactly did you hear about ‘the incident’?”

“Oh,” said Jenny. “Nothing really. Just—”

“Dinner’s ready!” shouted my father. He said that we were in luck because he’d made just enough portions for everyone. Himself, Mom, Jenny, and I. “And Mikaela, too—but she won’t be back until late.”

“Mikaela’s here?” I asked. “She’s not back in school?”

“She’s taking a little time off,” said my mother. “Just to support me—and the family as a whole. I told her that her studies were more important, but she insisted.”

So, we sat and ate dinner, Mom at the head of the table, rolled up in her wheelchair. The chili was good, no complaints. My mom was slurping on a Coors Light. I asked her if she was supposed to be doing that, and she told me just a little bit couldn’t hurt. I told her I was going to cut her off at one, though, just to be safe. And then my dad asked: “I didn’t forget. There was news to share, was there not?” And me and Jenny locked eyes, as if to say telepathically—*you wanna tell ‘em or should I?*

“We—” she cut me off.

“We’re pregnant.”

The following morning, my mom suggested we do some sort of bonding activity to take the edge off (and as a means of ushering in a new generation or some shit, per her words). She suggested bowling, so we pulled up to Jib Lanes in my dad’s hatchback, and loaded her wheelchair up in the back. Dad was hogging the aux cord, blasting some of his 80s hardcore stuff, like always. Mikaela tagged along, too. She didn’t know about the news. I asked that Mom and Dad keep it on the down-low, just because I knew she’d spin it. So the vibe felt a little constrained, like everyone—aside from my sister—had these big, ugly thoughts that they wouldn’t dare say out loud, no matter how bad they wanted to. I could tell my mom was on the verge of combusting. Jenny was pretty quiet, more than usual, and I asked her if anything was up, but she said no, Derek, with the type of shrug that says the opposite. Begged me to probe a little further—but I didn’t.

So we ambled on into this bowling alley, probably looking a little demented while we were at it. Like something out of a cartoon: Mom in her wheelchair, Mikaela pushing from behind in a state of blissful ignorance, while the rest of us are in some haze, hopped up on last night's fumes. My mom went first, and she rolled up right in front of the foul line, Mikaela at her hip, saying don't strain this, don't strain that, here let me help you. And Mikaela would pick out the lightest ball for her—some six pounds—and hand it off to my mom gently, saying let me know if you're aching or anything, I'll be here, right behind you, as always. And the bumpers were up too, so my mom would hurl this ball with minimal force, and zero momentum, so that it rolled down the lane at a snail's pace, bouncing up against the sides, until it finally reached the end, which took forever, just for her to hit a measly four pins. And Mikaela said good job, Mom—let's go for a spare. And she hit two pins the next time around. It was the banality—the benignity, the commonness—of bowling, especially at such a seedy spot as this, that seemed to suck any and all life out of even the most perilous concerns. Maybe that was what we needed. Maybe that's why we were here.

When it got to be my turn, I approached the ball rack, and nabbed this nine-pounder, and cradled it in my arms—this brilliant purple marble, with orange streaks, perfect, healthy weight, and a nice firm four-hole grip, so that you really have some control over the thing. They're heavy, you know. Heavier than you'd think at least. And so I ran up to the foul line, motioned my arm with great dexterity and flow, took a deep breath, and then you just let it go, because you have to—just like that: strike. And it comes back, staring right back at you, almost winking at you with those voidless eyes. It's satisfying. It's not much, but it's satisfying.

My dad was cleaning up on that lane. Strike after strike, and with little effort, too. Jenny said she didn't want to play, so she just sat in the booth with her arms crossed. After we finished our first game—which Dad ultimately won, and I came second—I sort of pulled Jenny to the side over by one of those claw machine games with the plushies in them. “Does it take off some heat,” I asked, “after having told my parents? Do you feel ready to move forward?”

“Move forward? Who said anything about that?”

“I thought maybe last night would be the, er— impetus?” She shook her head, said no impetuses here, Derek. And then she covered her face with her hand, looked like she was trying to block out the entire world. Told me I don't want to be here anymore. Impetus? *Impetus*, Derek? “Well, did you tell your parents by chance? Over the phone?” And she said no, I didn't, hell, I wasn't planning on it—ever. “Well, you know how *I* feel.”

“I do, Derek. I fucking do.” Mikaela waved us over from the booth, where they were all seated. So we waltzed back and cozied up on the sofa, and she told us she was going to get herself a Moscow Mule at the bar.

“Can I get you guys something?” asked Mikaela with that consolatory look, and she pulled out her wallet to check how much money she had in there. “I'm buying.”

“No, no,” said Jenny. “I shouldn't.”

“Derek?”

I did a little side glance at Jenny, who looked pretty eager. I could see it in the way she was scratching at her arm, almost like a dope addict. Her dry lips said it, too. Hell, I wanted a drink myself. “Nah, I'm good.”

“Really?” asked Mikaela, who looked a little put-off. She did a double-take, even. I said yeah, no, I bowl worse when I’m tipsy. And Mikaela squinted her eyes, like she knew something was up. She turned her back towards us, and got headed towards the bar before Mom said wait, wait, get me a shot of tequila. Make it two, actually. “No,” said Mikaela. “Not on my watch. I’m just looking out for you.” Mom said of course, of course—I appreciate it, dear.

I started to zone out while Mikaela was away, thinking really, really deeply about just how bad I wanted the taste of liquor in my mouth. I was all for solidarity, no doubt, but I’m also so, so, so fucking crazy about a good old fashioned, or even a whiskey sour. Or a goddamn negroni. Hell, I’d love a Tom Collins, no matter how shitty. I asked Jenny if she thought Jib Lanes knew how to make a Tom Collins—even a bad one. If maybe they had a soda maker in here. My mother leaned in, really got up in our business, rested her hand atop Jenny’s knee—pinched it. “Did I ever tell you what Derek was like as a child?” Jenny shook her head. “He wasn’t easy, I’ll tell you that much. Very—”

“Mom—”

“You were very, very rambunctious, Derek,” said my mother. “Full of surprises. ‘Surprise’ is the perfect word, truly. You stumbled around, putting everything in your mouth, tripping over furniture, and banging your head on things. We tried to put you in various programs to help with your inattention, but it didn’t help.” She turned to Jenny. “We wanted to get him into swimming, painting, herpetology, even. Nothing clicked. You know what herpetology is?” Jenny said yes, it’s the study of reptiles, right? And my mom said right, then got her face really close up in Jenny’s like she was about to let her in on something. “The truth was Derek came into our lives rather *unexpectedly*.” I asked what she meant, but I don’t know if she heard me. “The great

thing about having kids is that they pick up the pieces for you. They're sort of a safety net. Not economically, per se, but aspirationally. I wanted to be a doctor. A surgeon specifically, did I ever tell you that, Jenny?" Jenny said no, you didn't. "Well, life doesn't always give you what you want, or need, for that matter, but—"

"You flunked out," I said. And I glanced over at the bar. Mikaela had gotten her Moscow Mule. It looked like she'd ordered a whiskey coke or something to go along with it.

"What I'm trying to say is this: Mikaela was a blessing, in that she took the reins. Picked up where I left off. She's doing what I had set out to do when I was her age—and she's doing a damn fine job. I can rest easy, knowing that my legacy continues. That it wasn't all for nought. And that's the great thing about being a parent. It's a second shot at greatness. And I wanted greatness so very bad," she nudged my dad. "Right?" He nodded. It looked like he didn't want to be here. Shit, he'd barely said a word since we entered the place. My mom then looked Jenny deep in the eyes, sort of embraced her. "Derek *needs* this."

When Mikaela came back she offered me the whiskey coke, saying that she knows I want it, but I stood firm, and told her no. But she kept pressing me—saying this is unlike you, I'm just trying to be thoughtful, I don't want it to go to waste—so I caved. And damn, it tasted good, I won't lie. My mom looked kind of upset at me, like I was giving into peer pressure or something, that I blew this chance to show some real growth. Or maybe it's because she really wanted a drink herself. We got talking about how my dad needed to get the pipework fixed in the house because the shower kept shooting out cold water no matter what. And Mikaela made some mention about how the Wi-Fi had been really spotty and that maybe it was time to get a new router. I was slurping down that whiskey coke, feeling like a king, thinking about my boys back

at college. My boy Pedro, and Chris, and Kevin, and even Fatboy Gary. How I'd love to just kick it, and get wasted with them. Mikaela asked Jenny why she was being so shy—that her behavior was a little abnormal—and that's when my mom blurted it out.

I gave my mom an ugly glare, muttered something under my breath about her being a bit of a cunt, and then Mikaela straight up nestled her way between me and Jenny, hovered her hand over Jenny's stomach, said oh my God, this is amazing. "Have you thought about any names? For if it's a boy? Or a girl? Studies show that the name that you give your kid actually aids in determining who they are, personality-wise, at least." Jenny said no, we haven't. "Are you considering a home birth or a hospital birth? I'm personally in favor of a hospital birth, just because you're right across from the NICU, in case it's premature or if there's some birth defect. There's a lot less risk involved, you know?"

"We—"

"I mean, there's benefits to a home birth, too," said Mikaela. "People say it helps being in a comfortable, safe environment, without medical intervention—painkillers, forceps, and all that—but I'd say that's actually a drawback." She hugged Jenny. "I'm going to be an aunt. I'm going to have a little nephew. I— this is unreal. Have you looked into getting prenatal care? You want to check your blood type, and have them measure your hemoglobin, check your immunity to chickenpox, and rubella, too. This is so, ah— it's so incredibly exciting."

"Let's get another game in, shall we?" said my father, who got up from the booth and started fiddling with the bowling interface thing. Mikaela finished off her Moscow Mule, told Jenny that she couldn't wait to take part in this new stage of existence, and Jenny began to cry, scooped off the couch, turned around, stammering—told me I don't think I like you enough,

Derek. I don't think I care about you enough to let this happen. You're not my person. And she stormed out making utterances about how her art comes first, that she has a crit coming up for her printmaking class, and that that's what matters most to her right now. I tried running after her, but she said don't fucking follow me, asshole.

So we played another game. Dad won again, and I got second. After we left, and drove back home, I tried calling Jenny, but she didn't respond. I even sent her a few lengthy texts, telling her how much she meant to me, and she just ignored them—or didn't see them, maybe. My mom said that Jenny was just blowing off steam, and that she'll be back soon enough, and I told her that she was probably right. I found a little dimebag of coke in my jacket pocket, funnily enough, so I did a little bump, and it sort of made everything OK again.

I was kicking it in my old room, laying on my old bed, with the corny polka dot linens. I've got a Soundgarden poster right above the bed frame. *Superunknown*. I don't even listen to them anymore. It's funny: there's this framed photo of me on top of the wardrobe. I must've been like 10 or so, wearing my little league soccer jersey, red knee high socks, and these flashy neon cleats. I'm with all my old little league buddies. I think it might've been the semi-finals. We didn't make it to the end. I think that's why I look so mad. Had my tongue stuck out and everything. There's another framed photo right next to it, where I'm holding this little sea bass that I caught while fishing. It was a family trip to Montana. I was probably eight years old then. Mom kept having to retake the photo because I kept flipping her off. There's also one of me and my sister in Hawaii, after we went on a zipline. I was in fifth grade, and she was in ninth. I remember this because it was the first trip we took that wasn't just us visiting a family member in some random state. I've got this terrible bowl cut and some baggy cargo jeans, and a



*Nevermind* tee to finish it off. I've got my arms wrapped around my sister tight, because I loved her so, so, so much. I guess the scary thing is that the soul—*my soul*—is there, right in those photos. I've always been the same kid from birth. I think we all are. The soul stays forever—we just grow up. And it's corny, yeah it is, but it's true.

My dad came in and asked if I wanted to split a J with him, and I told him yeah, sure thing, so we went into the backyard and lit one up. As he took a hit—pulled with his lower lip—I noticed just how similar our jaw lines were. Sort of rectangular, like Ben Affleck or something. If you probe a little, my dad will tell you all about his younger days, when he was a devotee of French New Wave cinema, and how he aspired to be the next big thing in the 80s; a straight C student at Chapman University. How he had a shitty hardcore band named Beetlejuice, fell hard for a punk rock girl named Viola or some shit, got way too stoned all the time (so he says), and ultimately dropped out only to become an English teacher a few years later. If you ask him if he feels like he got his artistic due he'd say no, I wanted to be the next Godard—but that's life, I suppose. He'll tell you how hot and spicy my mom used to be, and how crazy ambitious she was, too. How they met at a library of all places. She was checking out a book on medicine, and he was there reading a novel for some night class he was taking at his local community college. He'll tell you about his tattoos: the Toltec petroglyph on his ankle, the serrated eyeball on his chest (from *Un Chien Andalou*), the name Sally Warner (his mother, who died when he was six) on his arm, and the cartoony black sheep on his shoulder—because he “always feels out of step.”

Looking at him, and hearing him speak in that pensive sort of way—his tonality much like that of my own—got me thinking that maybe it's all nature. No nurture. That we're born, affixed to a certain identity and being right from the get-go. That our lives follow a set

path—with little to no free-will—where the “end” is simply recognizing that you’ve really just been your dad the whole time, and your dad’s just been his dad, and on, and on, and on. “Is it true,” I took a hit, a fat one, “that y— and please don’t lie to me, for real. What Mom said earlier: is it true that y’all didn’t mean for me to be born? It’s OK, it’s just—”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s true.”

“OK,” I said. “That’s OK. I mean—”

“Before you came into our lives, I was a bad person, Derek,” said my father. “Hell, I’m still not great. I can be real selfish. I’ve cheated, I’ve stolen, I’ve been a general, all-around prick in my day. And I know you hate these father-son talks because they’re too saccharine for you, but I can’t help it.” He took another hit. “Do you know my theory on ‘grace’?” I told him no, I didn’t. “I’m not even talking from a biblical sense or anything. You being born gave me *grace*. It allowed me to be good—yes, *good*—in ways I couldn’t be otherwise.” He told me that I allowed him to be a decent-fuckin’-human, that he’d probably have fallen off the face of the earth if not for me, thank you, thank you, thank you.

“And what about Mikaela?”

“Mikaela is great, and I love her to bits, but she was easy,” he said. “Very low maintenance. Loving her was *easy*. No other way to put it. But you, Derek—you were my first real opportunity to put someone before myself. And I needed that bad.” He tried giving me an awkward hug. “Thank you. I’m so grateful. From the bottom of my heart: Thank you.”

I drove back later that night, arrived at around midnight, and kicked it with my boys. Pedro had all the goods, and we went hog-wild. I remember doing a shotgun and hanging off the

ceiling fan, Chris pulling me by the legs, telling me to get down from there. Jenny wasn't there, shit, I never saw her again.

*You'll Dance to Anything*

Seamus was a sound technician at a little concert venue in Queens; a “knob-twiddler” as some call it. His job was quite simple, really. He would be responsible for setting up the amps, the monitors (so that the band could hear themselves), the microphones, and working the mixer. It was his duty to make sure the band sounded good (often “good” simply meant loud) on stage; that the vocalist could be heard over the guitar; that the guitar was not too muffled; that the bass wasn’t lost. He would come in about an hour before the show started where he would meet and greet the performers that night. He would get the lay of the land, tease out their sonic sensibilities. This was what Seamus coined “network time.” This hour allowed Seamus to insert himself among young, burgeoning musicians of which he could prod and pester for insider knowledge on the *scene*. Seamus, quite desperately, wanted someone—anyone—to join his band. He knew full well that art, especially music, was a game of connections found and lost. This was a fact made even more apparent for those of the niche crowds that he so heartily adored. Such a realization bothered Seamus, yes, though it did not hinder him. He was not ready to declare, at the ripe age of eighteen (a teenager born at the turn of the millennium), that punk was resolutely dead. *It could not be so*, he would say. Deep down, however, he believed such to be true.

The venue was once a Jewish synagogue. The exterior still maintained all of its former trappings with its pseudo-Romanesque architecture and stained-glass windows. Admittedly, the building was more Brutalist, however, with its blocky construction and imposing nature. If it were not for the big, black banner strung along the top of the doors reading “HISSING PRIGS” one might think it were still a place of worship. The inside was pretty sparse: the pews had been removed so as to make more room for concert-goers. The rug, too, was torn out leaving only a

coarse, splintery hardwood floor underneath. The thrust stage jutted out quite awkwardly. All across the walls were murals of lions and tigers and elephants and other wild animals. There was a shoddy bar in the corner that looked very much out of place, with its marble countertop and fancy bar-stools. Overhead, there hung a large, aged chandelier that illuminated all the dinge. The venue housed mostly contemporary *punk-ish* acts with names like “Cum Rag” (straight-to-the-point; vulgar), or “Girl Talk” (tongue-in-cheek feminism a la Babes in Toyland), or “Smudge” (abstruse enough to be considered cool and cool enough to be considered abstruse; these were often noisy shoegazers).

Seamus entered the doors at 8 pm. The concert would be starting at 9. He walked in such a way that made him look dejected, his shoulders slouched, his eyes fixed to the ground. It was not conscious it seemed: it was, put simply, just the way he was. It was a common occurrence for people to ask him—with a coy smugness—why he didn’t just smile a little more. He would always fall silent when greeted with such a question, but he would be thinking quite vigorously—you *try carrying this damned burden*. Seamus certainly could not put this “burden” into words. It was the weight of things inexplicable; the sort of crisis that only arose among those of his ilk; an ilk that, like that of the “burden” itself, was rather inexplicable. Perhaps that is why he mostly *thought*.

Today, Seamus wore his 1987 Big Black *Songs About Fucking* concert tee that he ordered off eBay for a sum he would rather keep to himself. The shirt was thin and hole-riddled, and at least twice Seamus’ age. He had a boat-load of authentic band tees, bought second hand from online vendors—collector’s items if you will: there was his 1991 MBV tee and his 1995 Unsane tee and his 1981 This Heat tee and his 1979 Swell Maps tee and his 1993 Superchunk tee and his

2001 Unwound tee—and a litany more. He wore his busted chinos and a pair of old beat Converse. A book bag hung one-strap atop his shoulder. The bag was adorned with a number of pins: one with the Black Flag logo (the four rectangles situated next to one another so as to replicate a flag blowing in the wind), another pin with the iconic lightning strike upon the US Capitol Building courtesy of Bad Brains and, perhaps his most cherished pin—the big, iconic straight-edge XXX. It was true. Seamus was in fact straight-edge, and not in the light, half-hearted sense. He was Minor Threat straight-edge. He swore by the gospel of Ian MacKaye. He lived by the mantra, “Don’t Drink, Don’t Smoke, Don’t Fuck.” It was true. He did none of those things. Asceticism was his M.O. It was up for debate, however, whether Seamus’ hearty denial of any-and-all indulgence was a result of staunch principality or, rather bleakly, mere circumstance. It was not as if he had a fake ID to buy liquor, and it was not as if he were consistently offered drugs on the street, and it was most certainly not as if girls were throwing themselves at him. In this case, the mundanity of Queens teenagerdom trumped any sort of strict moral abstinence one might have. For Seamus, being unequivocally straight-edge was easier than he would ever care to admit.

Seamus lived in a little house in Rego Park. His mother was a nurse and his father a businessman. They, like Seamus, listened to the music of yore. Their era of choice, however, was the 70s—the boom of big progressive bands with long frizzy hair and wide-eyed imaginations (concept albums about totalitarian societies banning music, and 90-minute rock operas about teenage alienation reigned at this time). His mother listened quite obsessively to the classics: Yes and Pink Floyd and Rush and Emerson, Lake and Palmer. His father was a big proponent of Frank Zappa and King Crimson and Gentle Giant. His parents’ taste irked Seamus tremendously.

He believed that when a band was too big, and too grandiose, and too enterprising it meant that they were trying too hard. He believed that trying too hard was one of the most abominable sins. Iconography, in Seamus' eyes, worked in a very fine-tuned way; there was very much a sweet spot. When an icon had become too *iconic* it worked conversely to upend their very legend. To Seamus, the likes of David Bowie status or Elvis status or Michael Jackson status were all quite antithetical to the status that he deemed rightly, justly, and freshly *iconic*. Likewise, Seamus pitied bands that were ultimately lost to the annals of history, and for the better (ie. G. Love and Special Sauce or Cherry Poppin' Daddies). The sweet spot went as such: to be a truly iconic icon with objectively iconic iconography was to be a huge part of something small. Seamus' idols were important, but self-effacingly so. He said prayers for Kim Deal and Kim Gordon and Genesis P-Orridge, too.

Seamus' room was the place wherein he practiced his fierce devotion to the Gods of Niche. It was a practice in minimalism. He had only one jacket hung up in his closet. His band tees were shoved haphazardly into his wardrobe, making it quite difficult to find the one he was looking for. His floor lacked a rug. His bed sheets were a plain, drab white. He was averse to tchotchkes and trinkets. The main attraction was his wall which housed a number of old posters from concerts he had never been to: There was Throbbing Gristle's 1980 gig at Oundle School and Television's 1974 gig at Max's Kansas City and Fugazi's 1991 gig at Fort Reno, as well as concert posters for Squirrel Bait, Sebadoh, Wire, and The Replacements. In truth, Seamus had not been to too many places. He was not one to travel out of state to see a show. He was not one to travel out of state to see anything. He could not drive, and his friends were not so keen on taking him to some concert 1,000 miles out, only to meet a bunch of 40-something old

heads—and absolutely no girls whatsoever. So, he settled for concerts within New York City. Often, the concerts he attended were phoned-in revivals with grizzled bandmates in a desperate plea for their old flair. He relished those concerts. Seeing his heroes, musty and gray-haired—it made him feel like part of something. Seamus believed himself to be the last true and uncompromised youth.

Seamus swore by vinyl. He declared his listening procedure akin to the work of a sommelier. He was a self-proclaimed audiophile. He would tell others that vinyl sounded better because of the polyvinyl chloride it was made of and how the grooves in the record itself were actually wave formations and that in listening to a vinyl record one does not lose any sort of audio data. Under his bed, Seamus had a big basket of vinyl records: Sonic Youth's *EVOL* and The Refused's *The Shape of Punk to Come* and The Breeders' *Pod* and Slint's *Spiderland*. Atop his desk was Seamus' record player that his uncle had found—and gifted to Seamus for his birthday—after rummaging through his basement. It was old (most likely from the 80s per his uncle's best guess) and had a seemingly permanent coating of dust all over it. Next to the record player were a pair of Wharfedale Diamond speakers. Seamus was a firm advocate for analog audio. He would give others a similar spiel about how analog audio was better because of unlimited bandwidth and higher resolution and that one would miss out on essential flourishes, dictated by the artist themselves, if they opted for digital instead.

The first band came in at 8:07. They were a Jersey three-piece riot-grrrl band called Cunt Luvvers. "Heyo," said the band leader. "You our guy?"

"Yeah, that would be me," he said. "My name's Seamus."



“Katya.” She had pink hair with a messy fringe. She wore a leather jacket with all sorts of patches on it. As she moved about, her platform Doc Martens clapped loudly atop the floor. She could be heard from a mile away. “And this is Nance. Our drummer.” She waved hello. Nance had green hair. “And of course, Beatrice, the shredder.” Beatrice’s hair was blond—dyed. That day, the band had taken a hot, steaming public bus all the way from Chatham to Queens. They were evidently tired, running on short fuses. Seamus went into the equipment room. Katya and her bandmates were all huddled together, in agreement that the show had to be absolutely riotous.

“Gotta be off-the-rails,” said Nance.

“Better be bonkers,” said Beatrice.

Seamus grabbed an amp and placed it on the stage. It was a wretched, old Line 6 Spider with defective knobs. “All we got,” said Seamus.

“I’m gonna use this,” said Beatrice. From her bag she removed a pedal: an Ibanez Tube Screamer. Seamus nodded. He took it from her hand begrudgingly. Seamus would not admit it, though he was quite irrevocably displeased. *Garbage*, he muttered under his breath. It was a common occurrence for bands to come in with shoddy equipment. He took it to be a marker of devotion: those that brought in high-caliber equipment were, put simply, more *devout*. *Cunt Luvvers* had proven to Seamus rather sacreligious. *Blasphemers*, he thought. He was hoping for the day when someone would come in—with a Big Muff Pi—and, with great earnestness, confide in him the profundity of sound.

Seamus had to set up the two loudspeakers and the microphone. He grabbed the loudspeakers from the equipment room, one by one. He grabbed a microphone—a mic stand,

too. The band was to do a little soundcheck. Seamus stood by the mixer as the band donned their instruments: Katya on the mic, Nance on the drums, and Beatrice on her old, paint-chipped Squire Bullet. “Alright,” said Katya. She pressed her face close to the mic. Beatrice began to strum. The guitar sounded fuzzy and thunderous. Nance pounded on the kit. Katya began to yelp and whine: *I’m so sorry if I scare you, boy! I’m just a fierce, fierce girl that’ll take you down! Yeahhhh! I’m so sorry if I freak you out! I’m just a fierce, fierce girl who—* Katya turned away from the mic. “Stop! Stop!” said Katya. She had a bitter scowl on her face. “You’re too damn loud, Bee.” She glanced over at Seamus and pointed at the console. “Either turn me up or turn her way the fuck down.” Take two: *I’m so sorry if I scare you, boy! I’m just a fierce, fierce girl that’ll take you down! Yeahhhh! I’m so sorry if I freak yo—* “I’m telling you, she’s too damn loud. I’m hearin’ too much of her.”

“This always happens,” said Beatrice. “You want the voice louder and louder and then I get drowned out.”

“She’s right, Kat,” said Nance. She was twirling the sticks between her fingers. “You tend to make it a bit of a one-woman show.”

“Oh, you two can fuck right off,” she said. “I write these damn lyrics and I want them heard. That’s what it’s about.” Take three: *I’m so sorry if I scare you, boy! I’m just a fierce, fierce girl that’ll take you down! Yeahhhh! I’m so sorry if I freak you out! I’m just a fierce, fierce girl who’ll make you drown!* As Katya sang, Beatrice’s once thunderous fuzz had devolved into nothing more than a muted din. Her voice had won out, booming and visceral. One could hear every ounce of phlegm residing in her throat, every bit of spittle that hit the microphone. She looked content. “Just right, yeah?” Nance and Beatrice were rather expressionless. They seemed

to be used to it by now. “We’re set, then.” Katya went out for a smoke. The other two stood around. Beatrice’s Strat hung unceremoniously around her neck.

“She’s real bossy, isn’t she?” said Beatrice.

“She can be a nasty bitch,” said Nance. Seamus sat in the corner musing about time and history and how the new generation had failed it. He thought about Kathleen Hanna and Corin Tucker, and even Courtney Love. They set all this in motion—*All this!*—just for some rabid Jersey girls to go and tarnish it all. *Heresy!* It was all heresy, he thought. And though Seamus was quite disillusioned, having witnessed—right before his eyes—the destruction of auditory feminism, he knew that it was now in fact “network time” and, seeing as Katya had gone out for a cigarette, he followed after her hoping to attain some necessary epiphanies.

“Y’know,” said Seamus. He was leaning up against the railing. Katya blew smoke in his direction. He coughed a little. “I noodle on guitar.”

“Do you now?” She looked rather unfazed.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “I’m alright, but not too good. I’ve stopped taking lessons, ‘cause I don’t want to turn into a guitar hero or anything, y’know? It’s when you’re too technical that you kinda miss out on the little things.” She nodded. “I wanna start a band.”

“Well, you’re out of luck,” said Katya. She chuckled. “I’ve already got one.”

“I mean, I’ve got ideas,” he said. “I want to cross-breed all genres such that I make my own.” Katya held back a smirk. “A noise rock band with electronic beep-boops and lots of dissonance, as well as gothic sensibilities—with flurries of post-rock and musique concrete. That’s what I’m going for.” Katya tossed her cigarette to the ground and stomped on it with the heel of her big, chunky boots. “Nobody sticks around. I’ve had bandmates and it just doesn’t

mesh. We don't share the same virtues. A band is something of a covenant and a covenant is rule-based. People forget that, right? They lose sight of the vital principles that make punk *punk*.”

“You sound like a preacher or something.” Katya walked back inside. “Not interested.”

It was 9:12. The venue had begun to fill up. Cunt Luvvers took the stage and began to play. Seamus was situated in his little corner, standing upright next to the mixing console. The lights were dim such that it was hard to make out people's faces. All that could be deciphered were the ghostly movements of ill-defined bodies, raging, warring, jumping—dancing. Katya yelled into the mic. *My body is on fire! You bastard! You bastard! I'm just so tired! You bastard! You bastard!* Beatrice's guitar let out a whimper. Each chord was rendered subordinate to Katya's domineering howl. She wore the face of defeat, her eyes gloomy, her cheeks sunken, her fingers shaky. Nance pounded on the drums with great tenacity. The place had no A/C and Nance was living proof; big, speedy bullets of sweat rolled down her forehead, one after the next. She was red in the face, her sticks—the pounding—her only respite. It seemed she would collapse at any moment. *My body is on fire! You bastard! You bastard! I'm just so tired! You bastard! You bastard!* It was here that Seamus found himself markedly alone. Because of the very nature of such a job whereby the audience is given its own floor and the band its own stage, the lowly sound technician becomes something of a sad enigma. He stands off to the side in his very own designated area with about five feet of moveable space. He is given ample time to view both the crowd as well as the band with a breezy detachment. *My body is on fire! You bastard! You bastard! I'm just so tired! You bastard! You bastard!*

So, there were Cunt Luvvers in their own sort of fractured harmony, grooving doggedly as if trying to catch up to one another. There was precision in their play, but not in the technical sense—nor was it skillful. No: they had mastered the art of precise dysfunction. Every note was hard-won, every yelp honed, every bang and falter a welcome addition. And there were the concert-goers, too, their own exploratory simulacrum of noise in tow. As one spectral body thrust itself onto another, twenty others pushed back. Every little humanoid chunk meshed together, combining to form one big, ugly thing. The only marker that singled one out from the rest of the heap was one's shriek, scream, or gasp; a calling of a name. *Billy*. A reunion. *I've missed you*. A dose of vitriol. *Get your stubby, fat fingers out of my face*. Love. *I love you*. Camaraderie. *I love you—man*. And there, too, was Seamus with his arms crossed. He thought about all sorts of things. He thought and thought and thought. And as he was thinking, a mosh had started. Arms flailed. Bodies contorted. He thought about that. They were doing it wrong—they were moshing *wrong*. They must have been rolling—on *molly*. Or they were drugged out in some other way. They must have been on cocaine—all of them. They would mosh to just about anything, he thought. They would mosh to *fuckin' Green Day*. "Hey!"

Seamus got a tap on the shoulder. "Hey, man. Hey!" It was the voice of a woman. He could barely make out her face. Seamus leaned in close. "It's too quiet—"

"What?"

"The band," she said. "They're not loud enough."

"What did you say?"

"I want it louder." She was almost shouting at this point. "The guitar. It's not loud enough." Seamus nodded rather dismissively. "I've done this type of work before. You gotta turn

them up.” She trotted off in a drunken manner. Seamus turned up the fader, albeit begrudgingly. The mystery woman faded back into the shadowy heap, just another nameless body. She was a somebody, if for a single moment, and then she was no one. Seamus thought it quite funny, absurd even, that someone—*a nobody!*—had told him how to do his job. She must have been absolutely plastered. She must have been an instigator—a drunken one at that. She danced and jumped. She danced like she had come here only to dance, and do nothing else. Fun? Was that what she was looking for? A good time? Dance-a-teria type, she was! *Choke on this—*

Katya pointed towards Seamus and then pointed towards Beatrice and then pointed towards the ground. She mouthed the words: *Turn her the fuck down!* Seamus couldn’t make it out. *Down. Not up.* “Beatrice?” *Yes, Beatrice. Down. Turn her down. Not up.* And it was then that Katya’s bitter scowl reemerged. “Down, who?” Beatrice’s guitar had finally trumped that of Katya’s voice and it seemed she was finding a groove, playing deftly—happily. *Down. Down. Beatrice. Down. Me. Katya. Up. Beatrice. Down.* Seamus nodded, gave a thumbs up. Katya found her voice again. Beatrice lost hers, all in an instant. The bitter scowl had ceased. Beatrice let show a coy little pout. Nance kept playing and playing. *Choke on this!*

Seamus scanned the crowd for the mystery woman. He saw her silhouette, bobbing up and down. He knew it was her because she danced in a way separate from all her peers. It was a fluid, loose sort of dancing. She had not an ounce of stiffness. It was free—and for no one. And as Seamus watched her dance he was, at first, quite cynical about it all. He made utterances to himself about how dubious her passion must have been for anything at all: music, art, and *taste*. But it was after a few minutes of thinking that Seamus realized said thinking did nothing to alter, transmogrify, or blemish her tune. His thoughts willed absolutely nothing. She kept on dancing

as if she had come here only to dance, and do nothing else—and she was quite good at it. Her arms moved as if jointless and her torso as if made of jello, and it was then that Seamus noticed just how tightly wound his own jaw was, and how tense his own shoulders were, and how his own hand almost instinctively balled into a fist. For the first time ever, Seamus took note of just how much space he was taking up. No more than three or four feet, he thought. And then he thought about himself and his body and his very corporeality—at school and the cafeteria. Home, as well. There were times, he recalled, whereby he could not have possibly taken up any space at all. He looked up. The ceiling was so incredibly high. Thirty feet. It would take at least five of himself, stacked atop four pairs of his own shoulders, to reach the very top. “Thank you, everyone!”

The lights turned on. “Stay tuned for Dumpster. They’re running a little late right now, but they’re a hell of a band.” The mystery woman had revealed herself. She was tall and olive-skinned. She scampered out of the venue with great pep, drunk on liquor and warm bodies. “We were Cunt Luvvers. Thanks for sticking it out. Catch y’all on the flip.” Katya’s mascara had smudged along her cheeks such that it looked like corpse paint. Beatrice’s guitar was just about finito. Nance’s sticks were bloodied. They were clearly exhausted, gasping, and fed up with one another. Seamus ran out after the mystery-woman-no-longer-inscrutable.

“Hey,” said Seamus. The mystery-woman-no-longer-inscrutable was perched up on the railing, chatting with others. They were passing around a joint. Seamus weaseled his way into the huddle. “Hey, I’m Seamus.” The mystery-woman-no-longer-inscrutable took a hit and passed the joint to Seamus.

“You want?”

“No, no,” he said. “What’s your name? I’m Seamus.”

“She’s too old for you, buddy,” said one of the guys in the circle. Everyone laughed heartily. Seamus was not so amused.

“It’s Patti.” *Patti. Like Smith.*

“Well, you see,” said Seamus. “I saw you and, well, I thought you would be fit for my band. I would love for you to join it. A band is something of a covenant—”

“I don’t even play an instrument.”

“That’s okay. I’m looking for an energy connection. A synergy in principle and thought.”

“Like Danny said, she’s too old for you, pal,” another guy said. Everyone laughed. Seamus did not.

“I’m awfully flattered, Seamus,” she said. “But I couldn’t be of any help. I come here for fun. I go to shows to let loose and talk to people. Smoke a joint, drink a little. I don’t know the first thing about being in a band.”

“That is not a prerequisite,” said Seamus.

“Too. Old. For. You.” Seamus walked back inside, teasing out bitter nothings from under his breath. He stood in his little corner, arms crossed. He watched as Katya and crew packed up their gear. They all walked off backstage, with a slow and tired gait. In came Kyle and Caleb and Jennifer. They were Seamus’ classmates. They regularly pulled up to shows here.

“Seamus,” said Kyle, running up to him like a giddy child. He spoke with a breathy sort of diction. It seemed he could burst at any moment. “Good to see you, man. Really good.” Sweat-drenched curls dangled in front of his face such that one could barely make out his face.



“Hello Seamus,” said Caleb. He had his arm around Jennifer. They looked at one another with red, glassy eyes—pressed their foreheads together, rubbed noses. Seamus thought they might just initiate a sloppy make out right then and there.

“Man,” said Kyle. “I saw you doing your thing over here.” He could barely stand up, swaying about. “I just had to run over.” Caleb and Jennifer laughed and smooched and held each other tightly like the young lovers they were. “There’s gonna be a little after party at my place. You best pull up. Parents are out of town.” Seamus nodded. “You know the way.”

“I’ll try,” said Seamus.

“I wanna see you wasted,” said Jennifer. “No more of that sober shit.”

“Yeah,” said Caleb. “We wanna see drunk Seamus.”

“Drunk Seamus!” said Kyle. “Drunk Seamus!”

“I wanna see you kiss a girl,” said Jennifer. “I wanna see you fuck.” She chuckled. “I wanna see Seamus fuck.”

It was 10:23 and the crowd began to fill up the venue. The band had yet to show, however. Kyle and Caleb and Jennifer trailed off into the crowd. They were standing up close to the stage. Seamus watched as Kyle inserted himself with ease into every pocket, every circle, every group. Caleb and Jennifer kissed and groped and fondled one another. They made the floor their very own exhibitionist exhibition. *Wow*. Seamus thought about intimacy and love and friendship and not being alone. And as Kyle floated around and did a whippet or two and rubbed his nose like he’d just snorted a line—*he must’ve just snorted a line!*—and jumped up and down and yelled about nothing, Seamus concluded that Kyle could not possibly have friends (real ones, at least) because if he had friends he would stay in one place. And as Caleb and Jennifer made

some sort of kiddie love to one another—*right in front of everyone!*—and whispered wonderful, hushed things and nibbled at each other's ears, Seamus concluded that such love could not be real love because it was closer to sin, and if they did not exercise such physicality they would then be left to talk, and in talking they would come to recognize the terrible fragility of their arrangement.

It was 10:45 by the time the band had made it, long after they were supposed to arrive. Seamus asked if they needed help with anything but they shrugged him off, all four of them. “No, we got it.” Seamus watched as they clumsily plugged in—set everything up; the bass, the guitar, the mic. They all reeked of booze. Seamus did not catch any of their names. They did not ask for his. “Sorry we're late, everyone,” the bandleader slurred, while holding the mic rather awkwardly. “We're gonna play some tunes for you now, alright?” The audience whistled and cheered. “Okay. Alright.” And so Seamus stood in his little corner, occasionally making the odd tweak on the mixer. The lights went off and the shadowy mass had formed once again. Seamus watched the band as they fumbled about, kicking up dust. The singer held the microphone tightly as if it were a broken neck. He yelped with eyes closed, face red and in agony. There was the guitarist, too, who slung his instrument low to the ground such that his spine arched at a near-perfect right angle. His strumming took on a noisy southern drawl. The bassist riffed all distortedly like the great Kevin Rutmanis. The drummer pounded and pounded and pounded. And as their eyes darted about and closed and reopened, it seemed they were not so aware of anything or anyone other than each other. Though Seamus had taken something of a liking to their sound, he found his enjoyment hampered by evolution itself. He thought about 1987 and 1989 and 1991 and 1994 and noise and no-wave and all the bands that preceded

Dumpster—from Cherubs to Cows to Boredoms to Pussy Galore to The Jesus Lizard—and decided, quite adamantly, that Dumpster and friends were foiled and trumped by their very sonic ancestors.

From the corner of his eye, Seamus spotted a shadowy figure approaching him from the shadowy mob. As it came closer, the figure revealed itself to be none other than his old friend, Chrissie. “People watching are we, S?” They had met while attending Christian camp as little kids. She was at least a few years older than him. Though Seamus could hardly admit it to himself, he was rather charmed by her; the way the orange freckles lined her nose, almost like a rainbow, and how her smile formed rich dimples at each end, and the way she talked—*learned*, he thought. “Let’s do what we always do then, shall we?” Seamus nodded. Their game was simple; like iSpy, but for young adults with sprouting frontal lobes. She spotted a shadow atop another’s shoulders. She talked about how such a display was often familial; that if their identities were to be revealed one would spot a father and daughter; that such a display in tandem with their tepid body movements was an indicator of genealogical relations. She inquired as to why a father would bring his daughter to a show like this. Maybe they were friends or lovers, she would say, but platonism does not look like that, nor does romance—or does it? And then she pointed: “You see the girl jumping up and down? The real tall one.” *Uh-huh*. “Well, she seems a real Bohemian type. In truth, I wish I could move like that. All free and untethered.” She then spotted a shadow and on its shoulders she swore there sat a weasel. It could just be a weird hairdo, she would say, or maybe the hood of their jacket, but it looks like a furry weasel, does it not? And if it was in fact a furry weasel, how would it have made its way into the show? Was it a service animal? But what sort of service does a weasel carry out? Was it a seeing-eye weasel?

And then she pointed again: “You see the couple? Just going at it? Pressing their faces against one another?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I think they’re in love. I can feel the pheromones bouncing off one another and on to me. It’s almost contagious, really.” She then spotted a shadow standing quite still, almost like a statue. They tilted their head here and there, scanned the room. They must have been looking at us, she would say, just like we are looking at them right now—and in our communal watching they must feel like they have made some sort of acquaintance. We made a friend, Seamus, she would say. She pointed once more: “And then there’s that speedy guy. With his curly locks. See him?” *Mhm*. “He is chameleonic in his ways. You see the way he bounces around from person to person like that? I think his way must be true. I think it’s the friendly equivalent to polyamory, in a sense.” So Chrissie went through a list of nearly each and every individual she could spot at the venue and made great, often cheerful, clinical judgments regarding their livelihoods and families, their occupations, their favorite books and movies. The shadow right there, she would say, sitting on that barstool; see him?—his favorite movie was *Barry Lyndon*. And the shadow sitting next to him, she would say—her favorite movie was *Dr. Strangelove*. And they loved each other for it.

As Chrissie exhausted every single query and observation one could possibly make just by standing where she was standing, Seamus began to notice the terribly knotted knot in his back and how he could only quell the pain by standing up straight. He noticed how his toes pushed up quite uncomfortably against the inside of his shoe. Chrissie soon faded back into the mob, her words trailing off as she did so. Seamus bid her adieu. His breathing was slow and labored. He thought his body must just hate him. He watched as Chrissie hopped around all excitedly. She

yelled along, even. And he looked up at the band and none of them glanced back at him; and he knew right there, disgustingly so, that he was nothing to them. With a little flick of the finger, Chrissie beckoned him, and he wanted to, yes—he wanted to.

At 11:52, Dumpster called it quits and trotted off the stage without so much as a wave goodbye. Seamus followed them all backstage. There were Katya and friends pressed into the ugly, leather couch. They passed around a handle of Tito's. Dumpster—all four of them—settled into the corner, standing about. They whispered cool things to one another. A herd of groupies eased into the space. They asked for autographs and hugs and kisses and other things. Seamus squeezed past them. "Would you like to join my band? Any of you?" The band laughed uproariously. "Can I join yours, then? I— We've lost sight of the vital principles that make punk *punk*." The band talked among themselves about things that Seamus did not understand. They were all so much taller than him. "Yeah? Can I, then?" And they laughed again. As they shoed him away and Seamus plodded off, he felt lighter just for having asked—and so he caught up to Chrissie, who was walking down the street, and implored they go to Kyle's party.

"The friendly guy? You know him?" Seamus nodded. He walked with his shoulders upright. Chrissie scurried around, jumping atop fire hydrants and blowing kisses to the sky. And as they walked and Seamus looked her in the eyes, he saw in her a great capacity for living rightly. It was then, having seen her buoyant soul twinkle in her eyes and exit her mouth—"I just want to have fun," she said. "Fun is how I want to live"—that he decided that she was perhaps the most punkish punk he had ever met. So they walked and talked, and what they talked about was their parents, and their parents before them, and just how brilliantly counter-counterculture they all were for keeping the bloodline alive in spite of all the world's faults. They both agreed,

with a hearty laugh on both sides, that Seamus' mother looked ever so slightly like Viv Albertine of The Slits.

Kyle's house was in Elmhurst. They walked up the path and in through the feeble metal gate. He greeted them at the door. "Seamus," said Kyle. "You made it." Kyle hugged him tightly. Through the doorway, Seamus could see the flickering of lights. He heard music blaring and people laughing.

"This is Chrissie," said Seamus. And Kyle hugged her too. Seamus plopped down on the sofa and made chit-chat with strangers. In the corner were Jennifer and Caleb making their kiddie love to one another, and Seamus smiled but he was not so sure why. The speakers blasted Sum-41, and he smiled again. Mounted on the wall was a brass figure of Jesus on the crucifix, looking down on everyone with great ambivalence. And Seamus thought about him and Buddha and Martin Luther and Zarathustra and Confucious and how they were all men—*really, just men*—who lived and died before him. Kyle brought in a bottle of Smirnoff and poured Seamus a shot. "Take it," said Kyle.

"Do it," said Caleb. "Take the shot." And so he did.

*Superman*

Christopher Reeve. Superman. 1978. Name me a better role model. Blue eyes, jet black hair. Wispy, too. Well-built. At least 6-feet-tall, no doubt. Humble. You can see it in his blue eyes, you know. The way they seem to just know shit. Yeah, I'm not gay, hell—you'd never catch me among those types, but he's a hunk. Got to be one. Sincerity is his game. No flash, no thunder. He's just a guy who's hot shit. Lasers and all that. The guy can fly. I bet he fucks, too. But he wouldn't brag about it. He ain't the type to brag.

I remember first watching that movie. Directed by Richard Donner. Made a pretty penny, too. Some 300 million dollars. It was 2008 when we got the thing on DVD. I was nine years old, fresh out of 4th grade. Fresh off of a tight 10-9 little league game I pitched—hit a home run, shit. Walk off. Fresh off being an accessory to a shaky divorce between Mom and Dad two weeks prior. Fresh off of giving my little brother Jeremiah a black eye the day before. We got arguing about who's the smarter one. I grabbed one of those bookends, shaped like an animal. Zebra or something. Threw it right at his face. No emergency room. Couldn't afford that sort of thing. It's Wichita, motherfucker. Ice packs and lots of crying is what we got. Mom telling me I'm a fuck up. Dad telling me it's alright, kid, but I don't wanna be involved—go home, I'mma be cruising in my fucking truck. Jeremiah telling me I'm a prick. *A prick*. Seven-year-old calls you a prick and you want to break something. You want to break yourself.

Watched it with my dad in his fucking truck. Cruising. On some shitty monitor he got hooked up to the dash. Shitty speaker spouting bullshit out from the monitor. Shitty ass internal speaker, yeah. Dad telling me we gotta make it quick, he's got a lady friend coming. So we watched it in increments. He'd fuck lady friend and I'd play Gameboy outside. Pokemon Yellow,

hell fucking yes. He'd fuck lady friend, and it sounds like they may be having fun, but I'm missing Mom, then. I'm playing Pokemon then, and I'm missing how they would hug and kiss and stuff. I'm missing hearing them exchange *I love youuuuu* to one another. Old news. That's just life. You love then you hate. Fuck it. And then he tells her—his lady friend (Catherine, maybe?)—she gotta go, but to come back later for another fuck. I gotta watch this shit with my son now. He likes superheroes. He wants to be like them—hah. He wants to be a hero, bitch.

So I cozied up in the passenger seat, while my Dad sort of dozed off in the driver seat, and he made weird coos and murmurs, and he'd snap awake sometimes, in a real state of confusion, at the sound of a laser or cool explosion. I'd tell him it's just the movie, go back to bed, Dad, and he would, but not before smoking a cigarette, or rubbing his nose like he had coke on his finger. Did he? He downed like three little bottles of Honey Jack. Drunk as fuck. He told me that once the movie was done, he'd drive me back home, that he wanted to cruise in his fucking truck—alone. Like a man. I said uh-huh, OK.

The movie finished, and I'm loving it. I'm loving Christopher. He's everything a man is about. I see myself in him. He's a good guy. He's human. And he does big things. Love him. Feeling like I love him. Not in a homosexual type of way. I just relate. He's relatable. Dad is in a stupor. Always in a stupor. Credits roll. He missed the whole thing practically. I nudge him, but he's out like a light. I pinch him, too. And he's up, then, saying why the fuck'd you just pinch my ass? I said I best get home, no? And he slapped me on the face. Hard, too. But I was used to it. He was a hitter. Hit Mom, hit Jeremiah, hit me. Hit lady friend, I bet. Pulled my gym shorts down. Spanked me hard so there was a loud slapping sound. I said no, no, no, please stop, Dad—you're hurting me. He says no, kid, you don't pinch your father. You don't pinch your old



man. I slapped him back. He yells. Grabbed my cock, too. Takes a swig of Honey Jack. Told me to blow him. I blocked out the rest. Can't remember shit past that.

He drives me home, ride's a little shaky, thinking we might crash, but he's always drunk driving—nothing new. He's telling me to never, ever tell Mom about this, or your brother for that matter. Forget it ever happened, alright? Go home and go to sleep, I'll see you next weekend. We can watch Spider Man 2. We can watch the new Hulk when it hits theaters. Hell, we can watch those Christopher Nolan Batman movies. Whatever you want. *Just keep your mouth shut.* OK? And I hug him tender, and he says go now, please Gregory, go home—I'll see you next weekend and we'll watch whatever superhero flick you want. So, I hop out the truck and I'm crying, I remember, but I'm not super duper sure why—something hurts and it ain't physical. More mental than anything. Crying because I feel like I've lost something and I can't get it back. Feel something weird in my cock. Weird sensation in my penis. It works its way up to my heart, to my head. And I'm sobbing. Face red as hell. Vision hazy. Sobbing because I've lost something and I'm not even sure what it is. Crying because I've lost everything and nothing all at once.

I went home that night and Mom was in the kitchen, eating ice cream from the tub. I said hello, a lump in my throat so heavy she just had to ask me what the hell was going on. I told her I tripped on a rock and fell and that it really hurt. She said oh, dear, you'll be OK, let me take a look and I told her no, I think I'll be okay, my face wet as a mop. I think I'll be OK. I think I'll be OK. Dammit, I think I'll be OK. And she looked at me with dead eyes and a sunken smile, flimsy arms out, thin and meek, like a fucking anorexic worm. She was telling me I was a good kid, eating her ice cream as she did so—and I could tell what drug she was nodding off on this

time. I could see the heroin in her cheeks. Kids can see that shit. Doesn't take track scars. Doesn't take dying. They just know.

And she let me go, said I love you Greg, and I headed over to the living room, yelled out *iloveyoutoo* all slurred and unconvincing. Could hear the huff and pull of teensie whippet canisters as I left. Could hear those immaculate sighs. Gosh—sounds like happiness. Jeremiah was watching the football game, sipping on some Sunny D. It was real late, too. I told him I wasn't feeling too great and he sort of shrugged me off, told me I don't care, Gregory—look at my damned eye and tell me why I should care. *Prick*. And I wanted to off myself, maybe jump off the roof of the house so I break my leg or my arm, or my face. Just so I can be somewhere that isn't here. Maybe slit a wrist. Nine years old and I wanna fucking slit my wrist.

The Patriots were winning. The Chiefs were losing. Jeremiah is telling me he got an A on his essay on polar bears. And he got a 94 on his subtraction test. Asked me about my grades. Ha! Great, they're great, little J. Truth is, I didn't go to school that day. I walked over there, yeah, right to the fucking gates, all the kids lined up to enter the doors—then I bounced and went somewhere else. Teacher assistant calling after me, telling me that I'm going the wrong way, pretending I can't hear her, then I run. They could've called Mom, telling her I ditched. Mom probably wouldn't care—hell, she didn't say anything in the kitchen. Maybe called Dad. Dad definitely wouldn't care. Wouldn't even pick up. Thank God. I was out kicking rocks and dreaming about saving the world. Gave myself the power to read everyone's minds. And to jump really fucking high. And to love everyone. Tell Jeremiah I got an A on my essay on the solar system—didn't write any damned essay on the solar system. It's called escape. It's called being somewhere because where you are right now sucks ass. It's called being a little out of step. Tell

me Reeve ain't a little out of step. Christian Bale, too. Tell me heroes ain't a little out of step. And I'm crying again.

I'm going to my room, then. I was sharing it with Jeremiah. We had bunk beds and shit. I'm on the top bunk, playing with my Wolverine action figure. Got my Catwoman, too. Got Iron Man also. Got a bunch on a shelf. At least two dozen. Got comic books I keep under my mattress. Think it'll give me good luck. Typical kid logic, I guess. I'm reading Fantastic Four and it's doing things for me. I'm reading it and I got a pencil and I'm drawing myself into each panel. Fantastic Five—eh. Teary-eyed, looking ugly as all hell, whimpering, too—but I'm fantastic.

Sometimes I would look out the window and pretend I'm controlling the weather. I mean, no—I thought I could really control it. That night it was raining, I remember. They say rain means change. In the movies, at least. Watch any gangster movie. Watch any movie with rain. Shawshank Redemption. Shit changes when rain hits. So I'm thinking I might just turn this rain into a storm. Into a hurricane. Into something crazy. And the rain gets harsher. I'm playing with my action figures. They're fighting. And the rain gets louder, thunder hitting, too. And I'm seeing lightning in the distance. On the faraway fields, over by the little farmsteads. And I swear I'm the one doing it, and I'm hearing a voice from up above, piercing my head, gutting my fucking brain. It's the voice of Christopher Reeve 1978, and he's telling me he's sorry for me. Sorry that shit like this happens to decent kids. Sorry that shit like this'll turn a decent kid to a bad one, to a terrible one, to a dead one. And I'm saying back, or maybe in my head, no, Chris, it's OK—it's my power. My power is that I can deal with that sort of shit. I'll be a good kid

forever. My power is cerebral. Didn't know that word then, but it's the perfect one. My power is cerebral.

Jeremiah's rushing in, telling me he's scared of the noises. Says that he could use the company, and I say alright, man, do your thing. And he's telling me how he wishes he could live where it's always sunny and it never rains. How he wants to move to CAL-IF-OR-NI-UH. And he cuddles up on the bottom bunk, with his teddy bear clutched to his chest, and he's asking me if I had a good time with Dad, and I told him I sure had a time—yeah. He told me he doesn't get why parents can't just be together. That in a perfect world everyone would just be together, all the time, and be OK with it. He tells me that he wants to grow up to construct worlds of his own, where everyone gets exactly what they need. And he can be the leader, like Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*, and he can be the child king. I didn't tell him that all that's just Max's imagination. That's the twist. That it's not real. It's all a figment. The twist is that Max is just a normal kid. Maybe I didn't know that at the time, either.

I went to bed that night, through the loud thunder, Mom knocking on my door just to check if the two of us were awake or not, whispering things to herself about the sanctity and holiness of us being asleep, so that she could make sly movements in the dead of night, doing drugs and fucking strange men. I barely got a wink of sleep, truly, no—I heard the ugliest of sexual murmurs, the sound of jaded thrusts, of meek slaps and name calls, the noise that was being devoid of passion. I heard debauchery; the sound of speedballs and bourbon and unprotected intercourse. And then I heard the big one; the sound of a vehicle pulling into the driveway. And I looked out the window and it was Dad's truck.

He was ringing the doorbell like no tomorrow and I could hear that Mom was mid-fuck. And I was looking out the window and Mom had opened the door and Dad was talking to her in an amped sort of way. I could see it in his movements. In his face. That he had something to say. Couldn't tell if he was angry or what, though. Could've been anything. Could've been asking for forgiveness, for all I know. And he's yelling then, and I could hear it from up in my room, and he's telling her that he's fucked off of his liquor. Too much Honey Jack, and he knows she's fucking another guy right now. It's Stan the neighbor, ain't it? Stan who sometimes comes over and does handiwork for free. Free, huh? And Stan comes out, too, in nothing but his tighty whities and he's yelling about how y'all are donezo, no? She can fuck whoever she wants at this point, you dimbulb. Dad has a bottle in his hand and he's pointing it dead at Stan's eyes. Couldn't make out all the words through the storm but I'm pretty sure Dad said you're fucking dead if you don't get the fuck out of here. And he's drenched in rainwater. And Stan's a little wet, too. And mom's standing just under the porch roof so she's mostly dry. Stan says I ain't leaving and Dad says well, then *yerfuckingdead*. Mom says the both of you need to calm down or she's calling the police. Mom's crying so I run down the stairs. Jeremiah's sleeping through the whole fucking thing. Wow.

I'm probably a good four-foot-eight, and not even 70 pounds, no way, but I'm trudging down those stairs like I'm hot shit—like I'm a big man. Out there to dispel all the badness in the air. Dad throws the bottle at Stan's face and it bounces off his head and shatters onto the ground. He's bleeding a little on the side of his face, and Mom is saying God, make it stop, why was I given a messy life like this, I just wanna be somewhere else, be someone else—God, make me good, make me something likable, something redeemable. God. Stan is slumped over on the

cement, holding his head. And I say, before getting square in the middle between the three of them—I say, stop it, please, stop it, all of you. And Dad’s looking at me like I’m a ticking time bomb, like I might just say something crazy. And Mom’s looking at me like she knows I’ve got something bubbling up. But I keep that shit to myself. All I say is, go home, Stan. Go home, Dad. I’m trying to sleep. Go home. That’s how we fix this shit. We all go home. And Dad says alright, but if I see you again, Stan, I’m gutting you, and he says uh-huh OK, whatever, man—I’m going home, I’m off. Dad drives off in his shitty truck, having some trouble getting out of the driveway because he’s so sloshed and Stan walks off, the rain pouring the blood off his face. Mom says, thank you, Gregory, thank you for coming down here—you saved the day.

At 23 years old today, my life doesn’t look all that different, in all truth. I work in electronics. I have an ex-girlfriend I still love. I don’t see her anymore. I live in a car. I do drugs on occasion. I have dabbled, I will admit. And I really, really, really, really like alcohol. I like collecting things, like old baseball cards and Yu-Gi-Ohs, and little figurines, too. Got them stored in the glove compartment. I sometimes masturbate three times a day. I almost had a kid with the ex but she miscarried. I don’t see her anymore. My life is distinctly middling. My days range from bad to negligible. And God, I love collecting weird nerd shit.

And when you grow up, and become an adult, no doubt, your *taste* develops. Yeah, I know Camus. And I know Kafka. And I’ve watched Tarkovsky. When you grow up, you watch adult things. I’ve seen Persona. And I can name a whole lot of high-brow names. And that shit’s great, yeah—it’s fucking excellent. And it makes you feel smarter. But it’s a double-edged sword, because that sort of shit—that sort of media—is for dudes who got it figured out. You’d never catch me saying this out loud, but it’s for the comfortable. If I gotta bust out some

entertainment you'd bet I'm watching Superman 1978. Same copy I've had since I was nine-years-old.

*Helen, in Furs*

So, there was Leo splayed out on his back, in the living room, with his pants and underwear wrapped around his ankles. There was a bungee cord strung up around the ceiling fan. It had snapped, assumedly after Leo put his head through the loop. INXS was blasting on the speakers. Something nasty was playing on the TV—sound and all. “Leo,” said Helen, rushing over to help him, “What on earth is this? Please talk to me, God, talk to me—”

“Oh, honey,” said Leo. He spat a lemon wedge out his mouth. He was most certainly not all the way there: his speech was shaky, and his eyes looked all spaced out, and his face was an almost-crimson red. His forehead was draped in sweat. “I wasn’t trying to hurt myself. I was just trying to feel. That’s all.” Helen eyed the wedge on the floor. A savage bite had been taken out of it. “When you’re starting to black out, you bite into it and it knocks you awake—so you don’t die.” He laughed and then propped his head up and looked down at his blood-swollen penis.

“Put on some clothes,” she said. “I think I should take you to the hospital.” She grabbed him from under his arms and he started to wince and told her he was seeing stars; that it was best if he just lay there a minute, or 20. So, she let him down gently on the sorry carpet where he looked up at the popcorn ceiling and seemingly thought about nothing, or everything all at once. She wasn’t so sure. He hummed some diddy in the dazed sort of way. *I got a new sensation. Mmmm.* She couldn’t dare look at him in such a state, I mean really, it was pathetic, and insulting, she thought. So, she glanced over at the television and felt rather queasy then, too, like she was in some pitiful sex-crazed funhouse. *Live, baby, live.* And she went and grabbed the remote and turned off the television and Leo said no, no, no—I was enjoying it, Helen, and I haven’t enjoyed something in a while, you know.



She trotted off and slammed the door, too, saying something to Leo about how she's in need of a grown-up, certainly not a little kid—that she can't be the only one that has it together, I mean, fuck! “I thought you just tried killing yourself, but no, you're just a damned deviant. A gross, hedonistic man.” And he said something about how it's all nature, baby. That's just what a man likes; what a man needs—*baby*. “I'm going for a walk,” she said, peeking through the door. “I'll see you later.” *Deuces*, and he gave her a sad, flaccid peace sign, and a chuckle to match.

Helen walked down the street and around the corner, towards the park. It's funny, she thought, we met right there, Leo and I—at the hot dog stand of all places. He was standing there, in front of her, and he turned around and asked if he could buy her one, and she thought it was the sweetest, nerdiest thing a guy had ever done for her. That was some six-odd years ago, and he retains all that nerdiness, she thinks, but much of the sweetness has withered. They met for coffee the following morning and the rest was history.

Helen sat on one of the benches and watched the passersby doing their pedestrian things, some in couples, some in big cliques, some on their own—and there was Helen, invisible almost; alone and invisible. At least, that's how she felt. She made little nibbles at her hot dog, but much of her hunger had dissipated after such a scene back home. Nothing seemed all too appetizing at that very moment. Foods were too mushy and liquids were all too liquidy. It reminded her of bodily fluids and yucky excretions. This hot dog sucks, she thought; the mustard too slimy, the ketchup too sweet, the bun too dry, and the damned dog itself too slippery. Though Helen and Leo had known each other for many years, and shared a bed for just as many, too—and made secret plans together, and had flurries of great romantic romance in their prime, any discussion of marriage had ceased to exist. She felt there was a subtle rift between them that had gone

unspoken (for years, at that—and still to this day, more than ever). Perhaps out of fear, she thought, but it was mostly laziness, really. There was love there, she said to herself, I mean shit, I hope so—it's just sort of buried real deep.

Helen was a small-time opera singer, and though the pay was nothing special, it was what she loved to do and it made her happy to do it. Standing in front of an audience, baring her voice and subsequently her soul; these were things that made her feel important. Now, Leo was an accountant and he made a good chunk of change, but it was a job that he wasn't so keen on expounding upon outside of the workplace. Her friend Mary, who was on her fourth husband, told her once that those sorts of jobs, the drab white collar ones, were a gateway to misbehavior. "Money, plus stress, plus free time, plus malaise," she said. "It leads a man to dark, dark things. My uncle, who was a computer programmer, got busted on child pornography some few months into the job. I'm not saying there's a causality, but there is most certainly a correlation." Helen knew men were simple creatures in that regard, and that idle time and mild living could so easily lead one to society's fringe. And so she believed this newfound sexual misdoing on Leo's part was perhaps a response to the burden of living menially; that maybe all he needed was something to spice things up. And she eyed a couple across from her, sunbathing on the grass, exchanging loving pecks and tender embraces and making hushed purrs. It was then that Helen felt some sort of incalculable guilt—that that gross display just an hour ago, unashamed, unabashed and uncouth, was nobody's fault but her own.

Helen went home later that night after a lonesome, tawdry dinner and crawled into bed next to Leo. He was watching *Desperate Housewives*, eating some microwaved ribs in nothing but his boxers. "Hey, honey," he said, and he rested the plate on the nightstand, and went for

something of a hug before realizing his hands were covered in sticky BBQ sauce. “I’ll be right back.” So he got up and went to the bathroom and Helen cozied up under the blanket with a certain apprehension. She thought it best that the happening earlier that day go unspoken. After all, he may not even have remembered, I mean—he cut off oxygen to his brain; that was how it worked, no?

And when he got back she asked him a question she hadn’t asked in years: “Do you find me attractive?”

And he was silent for a moment before getting into bed, his head resting against the bed stand. “I love you, honey—more than anything. You know that,” and he leaned in, and it seemed like he was aiming for a kiss but she wasn’t so sure, so she let his head dangle awkwardly, inches from her own—and he retreated back, his eyes feeling sorry for himself. “I think I’m just tired, really. It’s the same old rigmarole. I mean, you know that. We go to work and do our daily errands and come home, and maybe have sex, but mostly not—and when we do, it’s boring. It’s vanilla. And I’m tired of being vanilla,” and he turned his head and eyed her with a shifty glance. “I love you, honey, and you know that.” And it was then that Helen went in for a sultry peck, but it was really more of an innocent one—and she pulled his boxers down and made motions on his chest, down to his stomach, and lower even. And he muted the TV, so that the sound was off, but the image remained, and then uttered soft, red-blooded whimpers, and breathy *babes* and *uh-huhs* and *yes-just-like-thats*. And Helen got up and rounded the bed to take off her dress and kissed Leo intensely as she did so. He tried unclasping her bra, but he had some trouble, and so it took some seconds before Helen decided that she’d do it herself. She rounded back and jumped into bed and moved her hand to where it was prior, and sure enough he was soft as a slug. “Gee,

I'm sorry. Give me a minute." So, Helen gave him a minute, whatever that means—and Leo jerked himself off trying to revive his sad, little thing.

"We don't have to, you know," said Helen. "I'm sort of tired anyway."

"No, no," he said. "I want to." And he went and grabbed his phone from the charger and got in next to Helen. He typed some expletive-riddled search into Google while Helen lay there, rather turned off. "This sort of thing helps. I guess I just need a little stimulation or something." And so Leo asked that she go down on him while he watched some foul, grisly porno on full-volume; something about a pizza delivery, a step-sister, bondage, and interraciality. And she did as he asked, though begrudgingly, and he groaned and grimaced and said it felt pretty damn good, all before he came in about eight seconds flat. But, hell—it felt more like eight hours. He told her he was sorry that he finished prematurely and that he was really hoping he could please her too, but it's pretty late now, dear and I'm pretty tired now, dear, so I think I'll go to sleep now, dear. I love you, okay?—I am in love with you, okay?; and I will always love you, okay? And he nodded off in an instant before saying something about needing to try new things, that their relationship would thrive if they tried new things, and that they'd be happier if they were to try new things; and Helen sat there, her feet poking out from beneath the bedsheet and her lips glazed, as the *Desperate Housewives* did their desperate housewifey things on mute, and how she wished she were them, oh—how she wished she were them.

The next day, she met a few of her friends for brunch; Mary, Pier, and Belle. "I'm not so sure," said Mary. "It's rather sick, all of this. I wouldn't dare have this sort of debauchery in my home." Mary was a rather stout, matronly woman whom Helen had met at the Percy Grainger Wind Band Festival. She was the naive sort, truly, and the type that seemed far-removed from

any considerations surrounding sex and pleasure. She spoke in a breathless, amped sort of way and had staunch opinions on morals and civility. “I would break up with him, right away. My husband and I, well, we don’t even talk about this sort of stuff. It’s icky.”

“You’re a prude,” said Belle, and she grabbed Helen’s hand softly. “Helen, you know, I think it’s time you *did* explore. I mean, hell, life is short and if you’re not fulfilling wild fantasies, then you’re really not living at all. You have that sort of autonomy in this day and age. You’re allowed to fuck in ways you couldn’t 100 years ago. It’s a beautiful thing.”

“Yes, yes, my *beauty of the day*,” said Pier, and he took a sip of his espresso. “It’s time you made a real change. You are beautiful, Helen, and sexy too—you just don’t act like it. Not one bit.” And Helen asked herself what it meant to “act like it.” Was it the way she dressed? Was it her cadence? Was her cadence unsexy? Was it her damned nose? Or the way she walked? She’d heard so much about women carrying themselves in certain ways. *Carrying themselves*. Ha! Did she carry herself a little off?; a little unlike that of a sexy woman? And Pier leaned in close, so that Helen could feel the bristles of his mustache itch against her ear, and with his fine Italian accent, he whispered, “How big’s his dick?”

“Pier—” said Mary, and her face turned a cartoonish red.

“Oh, do tell,” said Belle, and her soft, lush face looked more serious than ever; her feline eyes wide and her perfect red lips comically agape. The truth was this, and Helen wouldn’t dare say it: he was *small*. Smaller than any woman would feel comfortable admitting. Four inches hard. Subtract two or three when he’s soft. Gosh, and screw that motion in the ocean crap—there was no motion. Call it violence. Call it inertia. Just don’t call it *motion*.

“Jesus,” said Helen. “I feel like we’re in an episode of *Sex and The City*. All we ever do is talk about men and fucking them. And if we’re not talking about fucking them then we’re talking about how we relate to them. Alison Bechdel would have a field day with us.”

“Who? What?”

“It’s a film and book thing,” and Helen chuckled. “We’ve failed her test.”

Helen returned home at about 8 pm, after getting groceries and picking up Chinese at her and Leo’s favorite spot. He was typing away on his laptop and when she waltzed into the door, he glanced her way sort of dismissively. *Sup*, and then he asked if she had gotten the extra packets of szechuan sauce because he really liked szechuan sauce, and she said ah, sorry, I forgot, Leo. And he said it’s fine, really, no it is, but she knew it wasn’t all the way fine because his tone said otherwise. “Thanks anyway,” he said, and she dropped the groceries on the marble countertop, and set his pork fried rice next to his desk, and asked what he was doing. “Business,” he said. “I love you, by the way.” And Helen said I love you, too—but why do you say it like that? You say it a lot. Why do you say it like that? And he said it’s to remind her. It’s sort of like upkeep. “I have to remind you so you don’t forget and so I don’t forget and, God, I love you, Helen—so much.”

“Well, I love you, too, Leo.” And she asked if he was horny and he said, well, no, not really, but it’s not often that I’m turned on, frankly.

“I’m not particularly happy, just like on a baseline,” he said, and he wedged his plastic spork into his box of pork fried rice and took a big hearty bite. “I’m not talking about us. Just existentially speaking. And when I’m not existentially happy, I’m not so turned on. I mean, in regards to regular sex. The passion I would feel for you, Helen, oh my, you don’t even know—if

I was just a little happier.” And Helen tiptoed behind him at his desk, and rested her chin on his shoulder and gave him a little nuzzle and said, rather earnestly, with a nibble of the ear and kiss on the cheek, well, Leo; my Leo; darling Leo, I want to *make* you happy— “Wow.”

And she whispered vulgar things, and Leo laughed, and he said she sounded like some sort of *Fatal Attraction*-type movie woman, but shit, he was down—though it would have to be on his terms. And Helen said oh, but of course, who else’s? So, Helen took Leo by the hand and led him to their bed, where she pushed him onto the mattress and made tender kisses on his nose and forehead, and stroked his hair gently; and Leo sat there upright, as Helen rested atop his lap, his chin nestled in her bosom. “You know I got myself some poppers,” said Leo, and he opened up his bedside drawer. “Amyl nitrate. From one of my work buddies. It’s supposed to help me get it up.”

“God, Leo,” said Helen. “No, it’s like a gay drug. Men use it ‘cause it gives them a rush and loosens up their, well, you know—” and Leo kissed her, made out with her, forced his tongue down her throat, shit—so that she couldn’t utter another word. And she recoiled and asked, rather nicely, and a little proper even, that he please maybe slow down, just so that she can cum too, and that it’s called foreplay, Leo, the stuff before sex, yeah—foreplay is the term for it. And he guided his hand down beneath her skirt and told her about the clitoris. And he rubbed her there, a little too rough so that it hurt, and she bit her lip, but not in a good way, no, not in a good way, and then he said, and with great candor, too; “I thought we were doing this on *my* terms.” And Helen looked him in the eyes and thought, well, he is handsome. More cute than handsome, but he’s handsome, nonetheless. And he has a full, well-trimmed beard, and his eyes are a pretty hazel, and his hair is nice and full and brown, and he’s got a nice hairline, and the

orange freckles on his shoulders are rather endearing, and the way there's a cleft on the tip of his nose, well, it's cute, really—and he's handsome. More cute than handsome, but handsome nonetheless. “Now pin me down,” he said. “Wrap your hands around my wrists and pin me down like I've done something real bad. Like I murdered somebody.”

“Are you sure?” she said, and he said he was very sure, just do it—please.

And so she pushed him forward so that he was on his back and she was on top of him. “And call me by my full name.” He sort of awkwardly pulled his underwear off and slung it off the bed—and he was inside of her then. “Helen Alphonse Francois, I want you to call me by my full name.” She hated the sound of her own name, hell—he said it like he was her mother or something. And she wasn't opposed to all this, certainly not, but it all felt a little trite, no? Like something he'd read about in *Penthouse* or *Playboy* or seen in *Eyes Wide Shut*—it was trite, it was tired; it was a little done-in. And that was Helen's big problem with the more niche sexual forays: She wasn't so sure how much of these interests boiled down to mere play-pretend; that it was perhaps a form of acting—this kinky sex stuff; that nobody really enjoyed it; that it was feigned and phony, just for some edge, just for some added character—dammit. And she'd heard it before—the no kink-shaming rule—but maybe the world could do with some chilling out. I mean, sex isn't everything, no, not one bit. It's a big chunk, but it's not everything. “Call me by full name,” he said. “I command you.” And Helen said, well, alright.

“Leopold Ritter,” she said. “Leopold Ritter, you dirty, dirty man,” and Leo said yes, yes, excellent, now talk bad—say something *mean*. And Helen thought for a moment or two.

“You're sick in the head,” she said. “You're deranged. You're a freak, Leo.”

“OK, yes, just like that,” he said, “keep going. Use my full name.”



“And you’re friendless,” she said. “Every person you meet is turned off by you, er— Leopold Ritter.” And Leo glanced up at the ceiling like he was trying to process the very degree of truth in Helen’s feral words.

“Really get to the crux of it,” he said. “Say something fucked. Hurt me, Helen.”

And she looked him dead in the eye, and without so much as a stutter, she proclaimed, with great frankness, “You are puny. People see a meek, frail man. Everyone on our floor pities you. My friends? They pity you. They see a little boy. A child. A mama’s boy.” And Leo told her that she was doing good, and he really appreciated the effort, seriously—though she could stand to say something a little less personal, because her words, though fierce, weren’t particularly sexy, per se. OK, alright, I’ll try, she said, and she pressed his face into her chest. “Why don’t you suckle on mom’s tits? Why don’t you ask for a diaper change?” And they both laughed wildly and Leo began to gasp and his face turned red and he could barely utter a word. And Helen, too, could barely keep it together; and their eyes met one another, this time for a good few seconds, and it felt like some sort of momentary solace, this mutual gaze; it was like they knew each other, understood each other, even—had some sort of special bond, yes!

“Now punch me in the face,” he said. “Or slap me real hard. Don’t hold back. Give me a black eye. Release all that tension in your balled up fist. Fucking hit me.” And Helen asked him if he was super duper sure about that, I just don’t want you to regret it, Leo, and he said yes, I’m fucking sure—take it out on me, and don’t hold back, you whore of a woman. And he asked that she put her hand on his throat, and apply pressure, really choke him out. “Now strike, dear mistress, and cure my heart—”

And Helen socked him right on the bridge of his nose, and she heard a crack and a wince, like a painful one, but there was an orgasmic sigh, as well—and Leo put his hand to his nose as blood trickled out of both of his nostrils. “I’m sorry, babe—”

“I think you broke it,” he said, and he asked that she get some paper towels or tissues or something to stop the bleeding. So, Helen went into the bathroom and fetched him a roll of toilet paper, and shoved two bundles up each of his nostrils, but the blood poured and poured with seemingly no end. “It’s not your fault. I thought it was kind of sexy, to be honest. I mean, it hurts, and something’s most definitely deviated, hell, I’ve broken it twice before, but it was damned sexy.” And he looked down at his crotch like it was some sort of divine entity. “I finished in case you were wondering.” And Leo scooped over on the bed so that they were lying next to each other, looking up at the ceiling, post-coital, the way couples do. Their bodies were arched around the wet spot square in the middle of the bed—the way couples do. Leo propped his head up so as not to choke on his own blood, and Helen lay on her side, wondering just how much wetness in the wet spot was her own. “I would love for you to start wearing lingerie,” he said, his voice nasally and coarse. “Like really dress up. For me. Even when we’re apart. When you’re at work, and I’m at work.” And Helen nodded and said yeah, OK, I can try. “I think presentation is a lot of what goes into attraction and, well, you can stand to be a little bit less *proper*? I don’t know if that’s the word. I just—”

“Yeah,” she said. “It can be done.”

“And, you’re gorgeous, yes—you know I know that, and you know that, too, right?” And Helen nodded, mhm. “But, this right here is a journey, and you’re going to have to make accommodations. I have so many ideas I’m toying around with in my head, I mean, the

possibilities are endless—for both of us.” And Helen began to drift off to sleep, and in her hazy state, she heard Leo make mention of raging orgies, no—harems. Just him and loads of women, and you, Helen—you too, of course. They’ll be skinny women, he said, and you’ll be there as well, Helen, obviously. And they’ll punish me with sturdy whips and gags and dirty things; and you, Helen, well, you’ll be the queen among them; you’ll make me your little bitch. “I wouldn’t be opposed to you cheating on me,” he said. “Forsaking me, darling. Bedding another man. It’s all in good fun, really.” And Helen kissed him on the cheek, and said I’m sorry about your nose, truly, and that she was real tired now; so tired that she could sleep for a thousand years.

So, in the following days, Helen ordered various sets of lingerie per Leo’s request and, at mixers, events, afterparties, performances, and dinners, she’d wear these sets under her fancy, bespoke gowns. And at shows, singing her heart out, with pretty lalts and fine squillos, she’d feel in her core an air of promiscuity, maintaining such a dirty secret; that perhaps she was some sort of fiend amongst all these saintly folk who, without so much as a second thought, lived and breathed virtue and refinement. And no matter where she went, and how far she was from Leo, his presence, though not always corporeal, was nonetheless always there, ingrained in the very fibers of the leopard print thongs and silk bralettes he had her wear. And in engaging with friends and colleagues and important people in her sphere, Helen would receive probing texts from Leo, while she was out communing at fine steakhouses and fancy sushi restaurants, asking that she send him suggestive photos in pristine, high-class bathrooms, and write him charged sexts, indulging his wildest defeatist fantasies, telling him he was a dirty, dirty boy and that she would teach him a lesson when she got home; oh Leo, you’ll learn something while I tie you up and fuck you like the sad man you are. And then, almost comically, she’d return to the fold, after

having sent him a well-lit picture of her breasts or a graphic text about spanking him with a paddleboard, and promptly converse with Pier, Mary, Belle, and others, and make articulate monologues about the things that truly interested her, like music and freedom and literature. And in her great, profound conversations she'd pretend like this secret world of hers simply didn't exist at all.

After these eventful evenings, Helen would then return home, and there would be Leo at his work desk, or on the couch, watching TV or playing video games, or in bed, even—toying with his phone, often in nothing but his underwear and a shoddy, well-worn t-shirt, and they'd engage various erotic vices, often upping the ante with each successive night. This very routine went on for weeks now, and Helen found it rather tiring, both physically and mentally, though she rarely if ever said no, as she desperately wanted to please Leo, well, because she liked to see him pleased. On one particular night, after having showcased a variety of newly-bought sex toys he'd ordered off Lovehoney, Leo asked that maybe they add a third person, just for a night perhaps, and preferably a woman, too—and he asked if Helen knew anyone that might be interested, perhaps a late-night friend of hers with salacious desires, and Helen said, no, not anyone that I can think of, really. And Leo said that she should really get thinking about it and report back, and he'll do some thinking, too, and that he would like to have sex now, and that he is in the mood for sexual intercourse, preferably now, and sex sounds rather nice, yes, Helen. So, Leo rummaged through his toy drawer and dug out a pair of handcuffs and a leather flogger and asked that she chain him to the bed and make hits on his chest, thighs, and private parts, and Helen obliged with a tired sort of apprehension, one imperceptible to someone like Leo, whose

nose was bandaged at its bridge, his eyelids adorned with a purple-black swell on each side, so that he looked beat and tired, and rather sad no matter what.

And after he finished, which was pretty fast, she told him she was a little parched, and said she would like to get some water from the kitchen, and he said yes, OK, thank you dear, I learn so much from you every day, do you know that, Helen? That I learn so much from you every day? And Helen went mhm and he said that he feels reawakened in a sense, and he's glad he has a woman that can do that for him, and that also I learn so much from you, Helen, every waking moment, truly. "I think the love is coming back," he said, "I think it's there," and Helen told him that you think so much about love that you don't even know what it looks like anymore; that you could do without so much thinking, y'know; that love is not a concept; it's a feeling that can't be manufactured—you've forgotten what it looks like, Leo, you've forgotten. And she kissed him goodnight and said sleep well, dear, I might snooze on the couch tonight, just because I feel a little restless. I'll think about arranging a threesome for you. And then she went about getting some water from downstairs. "I hope you've learned something from all this too, my beautiful Helen. Because I sure have."

So, Helen filled up her glass and lay herself on the couch. She felt a little antsy, so she got up and perused the bookshelf, hoping to find a novel to lull her to sleep. And she scanned the various rows of books, and there was *Lolita*, and there was *To The Lighthouse*, and there was *The Member of The Wedding*, too, among others, all staring at her with withered spines—and, gosh, it hurt her, it really did, you know, seeing those books lined up, calling her name like they were sorry children. It caused a ugly, painful tinge in her heart. Dolores Haze, my brave child, who are you without your dastardly Humbert Humbert? Does your story not start and end with him? And

Mrs. Ramsay; is it not Charles Tansley's arrogance and latent misogyny that gives you your compassion? Is it not Mr. Ramsay's being burdened by the importance of his own work—hell, his damned insecurity—that gives you that existential bent of yours? That patience? That humbleness? And Frankie, my dear Frankie, how I love you so, but it was that soldier, through his very terribleness, that taught you how thin that childhood veneer was. He taught you what it meant to grow up—fuck. And what about your John Henry? Was his death not the symbolic manifestation of your own?

Helen couldn't dare read a book about humans, that stuff was just a little too tender—so she nabbed *Watership Down* from the shelf, wedged in the corner. And though the book was brutal and rather dark, too, she found great solace in all the characters being damned rabbits. But even then, she knew these sad animals couldn't exist without their villainous human counterparts. And *Charlotte's Web* and *Animal Farm* and Stuart-motherfucking-Little, too. How she wished she could indulge in a life without fucking character. Be a plant or something. But even then they fulfilled some sorry narrative; a sedentary lover squat in the middle of a love triangle among sun and rain—gosh. Oh, to live without a prodding gaze. Make me fucking nothing, please.

After a mostly sleepless night of tossing and turning, Helen met Pier, Belle, and Mary for lunch at a nice Thai restaurant, and they all talked about what's new. Mary told everyone that she was having some trouble with her fourth husband, and that she had found a potential fifth at the church she frequents. "He's an angel," she said. "He's polite and upstanding and innocent, in a good way. He's 27 and hasn't had a real girlfriend yet, so the idea of being his first is really enticing to me." She asked about whether it would be a good decision to consider getting a

divorce from her current guy and Helen said yes, that seems like mostly a pretty good idea. Pier told everyone that he was planning a trip to Salò, his hometown in Italy, where he was going on some crazy 120 day retreat with some old friend of his, and that he would miss everyone dearly, but he'll be back in some months, he promises. And Belle said she was doing just great, aside from some grievances with her boss—and how are you, Helen?

“Well,” said Helen. “It’s Leo. I’m starting to feel like his babysitter. His mother, even.” She took a bite of her panang curry and a sip of her lychee juice, too, and looked down at the table in shame, and the others eyed one another with a resounding unsureness. “A manic pixie dream girl.”

“A what?”

“It’s like a literary thing,” she said. “In movies, too.” And Mary gripped her by the shoulder and gave her a consolatory look and, with her slow, overenunciated tone, told her that it was okay, honestly—that you’ll be okay, dear.

“Men are just like that, sweetie,” said Mary. “You get with a man, marry him, even—because you’re the only one that can save him. It’s in our DNA. It’s a complementary thing, too. Men are how we mark time. Heavens, I couldn’t grow, couldn’t change, couldn’t look back on my life and fix it, if I didn’t have a man beside me. It’s like a biological calendar, dear. There was Tony era, and Dave, and Gary, too—”

“That’s bullshit,” said Helen. “Just bullshit.” And Mary’s jaw dropped like she came right out of a sitcom.

“No, no,” said Belle. “I think Mary’s right. The whole world boils down to yin and yang. Think about it,” and she wiped the tom yum from her face. “And I’ll be damned if you ever meet

someone, romantic or not, where there isn't a compromise. Your compromise with Leo is that you have to dig him out of that pit of despair he's in and, well, you get a man that loves you."

"He wants a threesome," said Helen. "And I don't know if I can do it, frankly. I don't even want to talk about it. I don't even want to talk about him, but it's everywhere. I see it in everything. Everything is sex and love and fucking, fucking, fucking—and I want none of it."

"Stop it," said Mary. "I'm trying to eat."

"Helen, dear," said Belle. "Sex is all anyone has. I hate to break it to you. Life *is* sex. And I must say, threesomes are great fun. I wouldn't knock it. There's great empowerment in adventures like these."

"I agree," said Pier. "This sort of thing allows you to really come face-to-face with the profound cracks in any one relationship, and the good things, too."

"There's sites for these sorts of things," said Belle. "And apps for swingers and stuff. Getting a threesome arranged in the 21st century isn't hard by any means. I say do it." And Helen said OK, if you think so—but I'm hurting.

So Helen went home that night while Leo was out at a bar with one of his work colleagues. She had Belle on the phone, who was advising Helen on how to go about arranging one of these threesomes, and Helen was asking whether it was safe and if STDs were a concern, and what if it was a big scam? Like, some creepy dude comes by and they're not who they said they were? Or they *are* who they said they were but they come into the place and rob us, Belle? Or murder us? "Trust me, it'll be fine." And so Helen sleuthed about on a few sketchy websites and found a couple in their early 30s that seemed rather dependable and put-together and, well, the wife was simply gorgeous with long, pretty dreadlocks and elegant dark skin and brilliant



style (the dude not so much—but that was okay, she wasn't really planning on dallying with him), so Belle gave her the go-ahead, and Helen sent out a request with the one condition being that the husband maybe doesn't come along. And he messaged her back and said OK, I'm coming regardless, but I won't engage as long as I get to watch, and Helen told him fine, go ahead, but don't be weird about it.

That very night, after Leo had returned home from the bar, the swinger couple had knocked on the door, much to his intrigue, and Helen, saying she had a surprise for him—a great, fun, sexy surprise—ran over to open it. “Hello,” said the woman. “I'm Justine. And this is Roger, my husband. You must be Helen.” Yes, she said. Hello Justine. Hello Roger. And Roger let out the faintest grin. He was probably 6'3 and big, too—and with a stoic gaze, he uttered not a word. Helen nodded and told them welcome, it's so nice to have you both. “And this must be Leo, correct?” Leo was standing behind Helen, sort of awkwardly, like a shy kid. He waved at the couple and greeted them with a yes, that's me. So Helen escorted them to the bedroom, where Roger got comfortable in the corner. He was sitting on the floor, in a criss-cross position. And when Helen turned the lights off, she felt uneasy knowing there was some guy, quiet as a mouse, watching her intently, so she asked if it was cool if the lights were on, and Justine said sure thing, that works for me—and Roger gave her a thumbs up, nothing else.

Justine whispered in Helen's ear: “What are you guys into?” And Helen told her that she was into whatever, really, and that it was mostly for Leo over here, in all honesty, but I will say, Justine, you are incredibly gorgeous and seem really sweet, too; What are you into? And Roger said, with a gruff tone, that he would like them all to get to fucking, right now preferably, and that he is going to take his pants off now so he can have a wank while you guys do it, please.

“Leo,” said Justine. “Would you like me to go down on you?” And Leo said yes—I would love that. So Justine went down on him and Helen wasn’t so sure what exactly she should be doing; if maybe she should join in, no? She positioned herself at the foot of the bed and sort of just watched as Justine did her thing. She’d occasionally glance over at Roger who was staring very, very intently at Helen for some reason, jerking himself off with a deathly grip. She thought that sort of thing must hurt; no lube and his hand so tight around it— it must burn or something, the friction and all that.

“Helen,” said Leo. “Would you tell me dirty things? I hate to see you so unsure of yourself.” And Helen said yes, I can do that—you’re so putrid, Leopold Ritter. You are such an obscene little man. And Justine told Leo that it looks like he’s flaccid. Like, completely flaccid. “It’s a me thing,” he said. “Not you. I promise.” Helen told them that she felt like she needed to loosen up, so she went and poured herself a glass of red wine and brought it back with her, along with the entire bottle, too. Justine was asking Leo about where his pleasure points were, or something like that, and whether he’d ever had a finger up his butt. And Roger was doing his thing in the corner with great efficiency. Helen sipped from her glass rather diligently and, once finished, she went about drinking straight from the bottle. Leo said maybe Roger should join so that things get a little more lively and Helen said hell no—I don’t see him that way. I do not find him attractive. “Will you spit on me, then, Helen?” And she took a huge swig of wine, and having swallowed, then did as he asked. He seemed quite pleased, and he told her to do it again, but Helen began to chug at this point until she drained the entire bottle, and she had forgotten what he’d asked for. She stumbled out of the bed and got herself a handle of Don Julio from the cabinet, and came back and asked if anybody else wanted; that she’s feeling a little

self-conscious right about now, maybe everyone should have a drink, right? And she took three big gulps and then Roger raised his hand, so she handed it off to him and he drank like a fiend. She glanced over at Justine and, fuck, they were having full-fledged sex, the two of them.

And Helen told him you sick man, Leo, you sick, sick man, and Leo said right on, Helen, I like that. You're unstable, you're pathetic! And I regret ever knowing you. And Leo groaned, and told her she was being awfully sexy right now, and Helen began to cry and cry, and she said drunken things about the nature of their relationship, that being an accountant was such a dull, sorry job, and she was sick of his insensitivity, his jadedness, his apathy—where are your friends, Leo, where are they, dammit?—which only made Leo more turned on, and then she vomited all over the carpet and some got on the bed, and a little on Roger, too.

“I’ll be right back,” said Helen, and she ran into the bathroom where she propped up the toilet lid and puked right into the bowl. Justine followed after and held Helen’s hair back, so that it wouldn’t get messy.

“You’re okay,” said Justine. “I’m here—don’t be embarrassed. That’s just life.” And Helen barely let up. Once finished, she wiped her face with her hand and her eyes were a blood red and her face was streaming with tears, and she told Justine that she was a really, really wonderful human—she can just tell, you know—and that she’d like to be friends after this, perhaps grab a bite to eat or see a movie together, or go shopping? And Helen hugged her tight and Justine said yes, of course I’d like to be friends after this. You seem pretty wonderful yourself, Helen. I can tell you have a big heart. Almost too big.

And Helen gripped Justine’s hands and whispered, “Do you love him?” And Justine asked who. “Roger, what’s it?”

“I’m not sure,” said Justine, and she laughed and Helen laughed, too. “I couldn’t tell you.” And they sat there, huddled together on the bathroom floor talking, for what must have been hours, about the cities they wanted to travel to, and their favorite TV shows, and what self-actualization means to one another, and about animals, and the current state of the world, and their favorite presidents, and the bands they’ve seen live, and their Myers-Briggs personality types, and their middle names, and sports, and their SAT scores, and their hometowns, and their favorite siblings, and their first ever friend, and their silly, crazy, fucked up dreams. *Good night. Good night—*

Helen had woken up pretty hung over, and the room was a little spinny once she opened her eyes. Leo greeted her with a nice homemade breakfast and some flowers, too. He told her that it might be nice to go out tonight, maybe at a restaurant or a bar or something like that, and Helen said she had to nurse this headache of hers, but she was probably down. At 8 pm they went to the same old bar that Leo often frequents after work. The place certainly wasn’t romantic, in fact it was pretty divey, and there was barely a soul in sight. They sat next to one another at the bar counter, on some wobbly barstools, and Leo ordered himself a Coors and two shots of Jameson, and Helen opted for some tap water. She was staring out the window. The day was gray and dismal and rainy. She wished she could be home instead, no—in another city. Leo was chatting up the bartender about the Bears vs. Cowboys game. She wondered if it was weird to stare at other people at bars, because that’s exactly what she was doing. Someone please stare back at me, so I know I’m real, God—that I exist.

And Helen locked eyes with this guy who was playing darts on the other side of the room, and he smiled and came up to her, and asked for her name, and whispered in her ear: *is*

*that dude with the fucked up nose your guy?* And she said yeah, sort of, I'm Helen—why don't you sit anyway? They're talking about American football, and I don't much like American football. He introduced himself as Marcus, and said he worked in insurance. Geico insurance. "You're gorgeous by the way," he said, and she thought, well, he's sort of cute himself. I mean, he seems young, maybe early to mid twenties, but he's cute. The buzz cut is cute. The earrings are cute. And props for approaching a taken woman. That's ballsy. And Leo sort of nudged her with his elbow and gave her a clumsy wink as if to say she's got the greenlight, here. So they chatted about their lives, the way strangers do, and Leo was throwing back shots like no tomorrow, talking about his fantasy football team. And Marcus rested his palm on Helen's thigh and it looked like he might just go for a kiss or something—*ballsy*. And Helen wasn't opposed by any means, hell, she encouraged it.

But then Leo asked Marcus if he wanted a shot, that he was buying; anything he wants, truly, also do you like football by chance? And Marcus said yeah, I'm a diehard Bears fan, myself. And they got talking about the NFL then, and Helen was in the middle of it, as they were both downing shots and yelling over the shitty music about football stuff, and sort of spitting in her face, too, on accident. And Marcus told Leo that his wife was beautiful, by the way, and Leo said yeah, I know, I'm a lucky fucking guy, would you like to bed her?

"Yes, I would," said Marcus. So they hailed a cab together, all three of them, at like 9:30 pm, on a dark, moody Sunday. Leo asked that Marcus make out with Helen in the backseat while he watched. And after long, intense, passionate kisses that Helen did not particularly fancy, the two guys would talk about stocks and trading and bitcoin and NFTs and that sort of thing. Helen

told them both that she was glad they were hitting it off so well, and that she'd like to just relax for a second, please.

Once they got back to the apartment, Marcus and Leo, who were both pretty wasted, got completely undressed, and Helen sat there on the couch with her arms crossed, sober as all hell. "Marcus," said Leo. "Go to her. Do whatever you want." And he rounded the couch and kissed Helen on the cheek, and gave her a tender embrace, telling her she was a lovely, lovely woman. "And Helen, I want you to forsake me. Fuck this man in front of me. Forsake me, darling Helen." And Marcus got closer, with his arms out and his eyes made of fire and—

She walked away. Didn't walk out. Walked away.