U.S. Route 9

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U.S. Route 9

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

By
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Route 9, Artist’s Rendering
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MOM: So you take a green apple and you just cut slices-

RENEE: Uh huh.

MOM: -leaving the skin on-

RENEE: Uh huh.

MOM: -spread one side of each with peanut butter, and then you take, like, the little mini marshmallows-

RENEE: Uh huh.

MOM: -and those are the teeth, and all you have are lips-

RENEE: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MOM: -with teeth in them. And I just thought it was funny looking, cute. And taste-wise, you know, fine. So yeah, that was fun. And the next one I tried- what the heck was the next one?

What was it? Uh...I'm not gonna remember what it was. Another silly little something like that.

And the third one I tried was pretzel sticks- pretzel rods-

RENEE: Uh huh.

MOM: And you take a piece of cheese, and you cut fringe into the cheese, and you wrap it around the bottom of the pretzel stick, so it looks like a witch's broom-
RENEE: Ohhhhh.

MOM: I tried.

EMILY: Sounds complicated.

My mother and her youngest sister Renee see each other two or three times a year, and yet all they're talking about are Halloween-themed snacks. We’re in my mom’s car, having just left the Culinary Institute of America. I can’t blame them for having their minds on food after our visit, even if I’d hoped to overhear something meatier between rarely reunited siblings. But to my ears, trained on the conversation from the backseat, these don’t even sound like recipes so much as instructions for elaborate crafts. Good Housekeeping and Martha Stewart Living crank out dozens of such projects in every holiday issue, encouraging the preparation of dishes that are equal parts ambitious and disgusting: cut a slit into a narrow strip of bread and fashion a slice of red bell pepper into an isosceles triangle. Carefully insert the pepper into the bread, using a dab of peanut butter, if necessary, to prop up the pepper and cement the structure — a witches hat. For extra fun, draw a decorative ribbon around the brim of the hat using ketchup.

Or, pile mayonnaise onto a paper plate until its form approximates a ghost's. Position two chocolate chips as eyes (but raisins may be substituted if you're trying to cut calories.) If the ghost refuses to hold its shape, mix in a teaspoonful of peanut butter. Peanut butter is the indispensable mortar in recipes like this, and prevents the entire architecture from crumbling.
When you're making a recipe that was designed to be photographed for a women's magazine rather than eaten, coming away with something that can be described as “fine,” “taste-wise” is about the best you can hope for.

My mom and I have always clashed a little in the kitchen. While I spend a solid half-hour trawling through food blogs for the absolute highest rated paella recipe, she trusts that the Campbell's Soup Corporation has her best interests at heart when it prints casserole recipes on the backs of its labels. If you've ever wondered about who actually uses the sponsored recipes they print in coupon circulars, come to our kitchen and see what’s pinned to the fridge with grease-spattered magnets: nine times out of ten, a recipe for “Spicy Mexican Pasta Salad” or “Oriental Lasagna.” In this foodie era of locally sourced, thoughtfully fused, guilt assuaging cuisine, these recipes seem medieval and, though as a lifelong northeasterner I have no basis for thinking this but inborn snobbery, hopelessly midwestern.

But my mom grew up around here too. Unless I'm missing a few key chapters, she has never so much as visited the midwest. So perhaps coupon-cuisine is a sensibility shared by any semi-rural area isolated from what could be termed a “restaurant scene” and with a population that skews older. Many of the soup-can, pasta-box, sugar-bag recipes are at least as old as I am; I can remember reading the same recipes as a child that are still stuck to labels today. I wouldn't be surprised if some were much older, considering how often they sound like something Betty Draper might bring to a potluck. Chocolate chip cookies and roast chicken may be timeless, but
as soon as you introduce tinned fruit or gelatin into meat dishes you’ve begun to date yourself to somewhere around the middle of the last century.

Food packagers of the 1950’s, having grown to meet the needs of the American army during the second World War, had a high stake in persuading the public to accept culinary shortcuts during peacetime: canned, pre-packaged, and frozen foods. These innovations were not always embraced with open arms, and the food industry began a campaign of advertising and persuasion targeting the American housewife. Companies brought in psychologists to determine how best to convince American women that convenience and efficiency ought to trump traditional home cooking. Despite this onslaught of marketing, homemakers rejected plenty of convenience foods, even as others were embraced. Many of the products that caught on can still be purchased today, while some have faded into well-deserved obscurity: canned vegetables are popular enough to line whole aisles of supermarkets, but you’d be hard-pressed to find a canned hamburger.

The rising popularity of packaged foods wasn’t the only effect World War II had on how people ate. Postwar meals tended to be hearty and heavy, a balm to stomachs that had grown used to food rationing. This love of comfort food was balanced by a new interest in “exotic” cuisine, carried home by soldiers returning from foreign service. How else might a farm boy from Iowa, raised on his mother’s cooking, have acquired a taste for Italian or Chinese?

Decades later, in pockets of the country certain postwar food trends live on: the clumsy incorporation of Americanized ethnic foods, the promise that dinner will be on the table in under
thirty minutes and five steps, and the encouragement to crumble in some potato chips or top it off with marshmallows. The current foodie obsession with presentation is an easy source of mockery, but caring about how your food looks long predates Instagram. For sheer visual impact, it’s tough to beat the aesthetics of 1950's party dishes. The quivering mounds of cottage cheese and canned fruit, the glisten of an enthusiastically glazed ham dotted with whole cloves, all the rings and towers and logs trembling in anticipation of the guests. The finished spread ends up looking like some elaborate sand castle. There's a fun artsiness to the idea of arranging cocktail shrimp or mandarin oranges in a mold, and a wonderful vanity to suspending them there in gelatin or aspic for preservation, as if they'd been frozen in amber. The following recipe from Betty Crocker’s Picture Cookbook displays, I feel, midcentury food’s gift for the lost art of showmanship. The dish sounds impressive, in the true sense of the word.

*Jellied Chicken (or Other Meat)*

**Ingredients**
- Cook a 4 lb. chicken in boiling water with 2 onions, 1½ tbsp. salt and a handful of celery tops. Simmer gently for about 2 hours. Cut meat in small pieces. There should be 3 to 4 cups of cut-up meat. Strain the liquid and boil rapidly until reduced to about 2¾ cupfuls. Now take:
  - 2 tbsp. gelatin
  - 4 tbsp. cold water
  - 2 cups hot broth, chicken (veal, beef or lamb)
  - 3 to 4 cups coarsely cut-up cooked meat
  - 1 tsp. salt

**Preparation Instructions**
1. Soak gelatin in cold water, then add to the hot broth, stirring to dissolve completely. Let mixture cool until it begins to thicken. Then add cut-up cooked meat and salt.
2. Pour into an oiled bread loaf pan (3½ by 8½ inches across the bottom and 2½ inches deep). Chill until "set".

3. Unmold and serve on a platter garnished with parsley bouquets, radish roses, tomato wedges, and lettuce, endive or watercress. This makes 8 to 10 servings.

**If You Wish To Make The Loaf Look More Decorative**

First place in the bottom of the oiled mold slices of hard cooked eggs, slices of stuffed olives and strips of pimiento arranged like real flowers. Cover with a little of the gelatin broth mixture. Allow this to become set - to hold the decorations in place - before adding the gelatin-meat mixture.

When she's not adhering to a holiday theme, my mom doesn't go as far as all that. For her, food is the last chore that needs doing after getting home from work and before finally having a couple hours to relax. Make something the boys will eat, serve yourself first because they're going to take the rest, offer some to your daughter even if you know she's just going to turn up her nose and cook herself something else, something with arugula or cilantro, those zippy green leaves. My mom has told me more than once that she had no idea what cilantro was until I started demanding it from the store. She isn't one of the unlucky people genetically predisposed to find the herb soapy tasting, but she still doesn't like it. She self-describes her tastes as “bland” and “vanilla” without a trace of shame and for this I feel a certain envy. I spent too many years pretending I didn't love McDonald's.

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Today, you could drive cross-country and eat the exact same meal in every state you pass through. It’s not hard to mistake a northeastern dinner for a midwestern one, but this gastronomical uniformity is relatively new. For the bulk of American history, people have eaten
what was around them, a limitation that differed from state to state, person to person. This limiting factor changed as the country did. The Interstate highway system, one of World War II’s deepest footprints, brought everything closer together. Cross-regional cultural pollination became easier, as the country adapted to meet the needs of long-distance travelers through the boom in automobile production and concurrent rise of motels and fast food. Also simplified by the Interstate was the shipping of foods from the place they were grown to another, a process aided by advances in refrigeration and freezing. Taken together, these shifts would transform the food landscape of pre-war America. Perhaps sensing the standardization that was soon to come, the Works Progress Administration once played the role of unlikely archivist in an attempt to document how people ate in America when this was still largely determined by geography.

One of the WPA’s Depression-era job-creating initiatives was the Federal Writers’ Project, which between 1935 and 1939 employed 6,600 individuals of wildly varying skill. Some, such as John Steinbeck, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston, are still widely read and celebrated today. Far more were secretaries, calligraphers and teachers, workers who had never published a word. Despite this, the FWP’s first major project, a series of state-by-state guidebooks, was an unexpected hit. The *American Guide Series* combined lessons on state history and culture with photographs and suggestions for driving tours. Included in the New York “Guide to the Empire State” is a drive down the Route 9 of 1940, complete with colorful folkloric tangents. “East from Saratoga Springs on State 9P to SARATOGA LAKE, 3.7 m, a popular summer resort. The Mohawk believed that the lake reflected their god’s peaceful mind
and that anyone crossing it would be drowned if he uttered a single sound. A white woman, to prove the superstition false, shouted while being taken across in a canoe, and nothing happened. The Indians brought her to shore and explained, “The Great Spirit is merciful. He knows that a white woman cannot hold her tongue.” It is comforting to learn that amidst the vast transformation of the New York landscape in the past 75 years, some things have stayed the same.

When the limits of the American Guide Series had been exhausted, focus was turned to a new project, a nationwide study of traditional food culture broken down by region, to be called *America Eats*. The book was never completed, due to a dwindling pool of FWP writers in a steadily improving economy, and finally the advent of World War II. Some seventy years later, writer Mark Kurlansky happened across the raw manuscript in the Library of Congress, still disorganized, messy, littered with mistakes. From hundreds of pages of copy, he selected not the most technically competent pieces, but the most interesting and diverse, and compiled them into *The Food of a Younger Land*.

The uneven distribution of FWP talent means that some states and regions are better represented than others. It was sad to see that there was no piece devoted specifically to the eating habits of Connecticut residents, a fact that further convinces me I was raised in a culture vacuum. I've lived and eaten in Connecticut my whole life, but have never once thought, *I'm eating Connecticut food*. I’m not sure this is a phenomenon unique to my home state, though. The food of the northeast more or less blends together in my mind, outside of a handful of
fetishistically local specialities. Vermont has its maple syrup and cheddar cheese and Maine its lobster and blueberries. State-specific products like these are clung to in a sea of sameness, elevated to the status of mascots.

My family used to go to Maine for about a week every summer, staying in a different vacation rental each time. Decorated with the tourist in mind, these houses never failed to contain dozens of lobsters. They lurked behind every cupboard and inside each drawer in the form of potholders, mugs, utensils, and dish towels. When we bought a squirming bag of lobsters as a once-a-year treat, we lowered them into a pot of boiling water before the beady, lifeless eyes of hordes of their fellows, and served them with little dishes of melted butter atop lobster traps “cleverly” reimagined as coffee tables. I also recall from these trips an enormous blue dome of a building called “Wild Blueberry Land,” which pedaled the eponymous fruit in every format imaginable, right down to making the store itself as similar to a blueberry as architecturally possible. Sights such as these assure the visitor, you're here, you're far from home, this isn't your ordinary life. The extent to which they reflect the actual eating habits of locals is, to put it generously, questionable.

It seems difficult these days for any one state to truly lay claim to a specific food. The Big E, also called the Eastern States Exposition, is a state fair put on jointly each year by all six states in New England. One of the Big E’s most well-known attractions is the Avenue of States, a row of New England statehouse replicas containing exhibits and vendors purportedly representing the best each state has to offer. When I visited the fair earlier this year, this prospect
excited me even more than the butter sculpting and pig racing contests on offer. Finally, someone could explain to me with some authority what it meant to be from Connecticut, what I had to be proud of, and how my fate might have been different if I’d been born a little further to the north, south, east or west, across state lines.

I was disappointed then, to find that the buildings might as well have been consolidated into a single hall, so negligible was their diversity. As I walked through each, craving local culture, I found building after building of cheddar cheese and maple candy and seafood. The most notable differences were those that seemed comically unintentional: Connecticut's building was the cleanest and ritziest, while Rhode Island's was the smallest and dullest. As far as true local pride goes, none of the food vendors could beat the Vermont statehouse's racks of tie-dyed t-shirts imploring visitors to Feel the Bern.

Judging from the America Eats manuscripts, an Avenue of States from the twenties or thirties would have been a far more colorful affair. Rabbit stew would have been served up in Rhode Island, and visitors to the Maine exposition might have been offered “squirrel, wild duck, coon, and a small, resilient segment of bear.” Or a mug of “hot buttered rum,” which is exactly what it sounds like. The sections on Vermont reveal a whole world of individualized tastes and preferences. Vermonters “[never took] very kindly to salad” and cooked even their lettuce in a buttered pan. They favored simple, hearty meals and seem to have pickled everything: lemons, pumpkins, and in one of my favorite of the book’s recipes, butternuts.
Pickled Butternuts

Butternuts should be gathered last week of June. Pour over them a very strong salt and water brine and let the nuts lie in it for 12 days. Drain them and pour over them cold cider vinegar which has been boiled with some mustard seed, horseradish, cloves, allspice, and peppercorns. Cover tightly and keep for a year before serving.

I balk at recipes that ask for over two hours of my time; I can't imagine spending a year and twelve days waiting for one. But I sincerely hope someone in Vermont is still pickling butternuts. At the time the recipe was transcribed, it had apparently never traveled outside of the state. It would have been near impossible to replicate it in other regions as the recipe doesn't refer to butternut squash, but to a species of walnut that grows mostly in the eastern United States. It was therefore a bit of an inside joke when, during the Civil War, Union soldiers referred to their Confederate adversaries as “butternuts” after their gray uniforms faded to the nuts’ light brown color. Butternut rinds were used to dye homemade clothing a similar shade, creating an association between the color and the inability to afford finer, professionally tailored clothing. Like middle schoolers showing up for class in off-brand jeans, the Confederate soldiers were being taunted for looking poor.

Outside of New England, the culinary traditions of the Younger Land grow yet more distinctive. One writer describes a typical “New York Literary Tea” while emphasizing that “tea is a rarity at these gatherings.” The event seems ripped from some long-forgotten society page, filled with dry martinis and exhausting wit and concentrated snubbing. Neither the food nor the
location much matter, but “one condition is paramount...the place must be jammed. Seemingly no literary tea is successful unless it is crowded enough to make an exchange of intellectual ideas an impossibility.” While the hard working farmers of Vermont participate in annual “sugaring-offs” in pursuit of maple syrup, the literati of Manhattan have their own proud custom: hazing up-and-coming writers. “If the party happens to be given in honor of a new author, he is almost always completely ignored. In fact, there is a tradition among veteran literary tea-goers to put the young author in his place as soon as possible. They accomplish this by pretending vociferously not to know for whom the party is being given.” This sounds perversely delightful, provided you're one of the establishment-set making barbed quips rather than the young author flop sweating into his cocktail.

Another section describes “Foods Along U.S. 1 in Virginia,” a road that was then the major thoroughfare of the Atlantic seaboard. If the reader needs further evidence that the country has changed, Kurlansky adds in an editorial note, she ought to imagine a piece illuminating the food of I-95. The section’s author, Eudora Ramsay Richardson, details the transformation of nine pounds of squirrel into a hearty stew, before finishing on a depressingly prescient note: “If the tourist does not find the Virginian foods along the highway, he should knock at some farmhouse door, register his complaint against American standardization, and be served after a manner that conforms to the ancient rules of hospitality.”

I mourn the loss of the traditions unearthed in America Eats largely because what and how we eat is a crucial part of what shapes our identities. This is still true, even now that eating
local is not a fact of life but a choice you make, provided you can afford fifteen dollar honey from neighborhood bees, and nine dollar pasta sauce from the farm down the road. A friend of mine from Southern California has some sick ideas about pizza, involving whole wheat crust and soy cheese, with toppings like barbecued chicken or kale salad. She is understandably confused when I tell her she has never eaten real pizza, but I can’t help feeling protective of New Haven and New York style pies as one of my only culinary birthrights. It means something to me that the word ‘pizza’ doesn’t conjure in my mind images of Domino’s or Papa John’s. It means something to Chicagoans that their pizza is hearty enough to keep a body warm through bitterly cold winters. It means something to New Yorkers that they can get a slice any time of the day or night, one thin enough to eat standing up or sitting down. These differences matter enough that eating your pizza wrong in public amounts to a political gaffe. Writing for the New York Times, J. David Goodman reports that “two of the remaining three Republican presidential candidates- John Kasich and Donald J. Trump- have been seen eating pizza with a knife and fork….Even the city’s mayor, Bill de Blasio, has tripped over the third rail of local pizza consumption.”

The first time I drove to the south, I was delighted by all the Waffle Houses and Hardee’s along the highway, and photographed them as you would any other landmark. These were chains I had heard about but never laid eyes on, and seeing them for myself confirmed that I really was somewhere new, that this was the furthest I’d ever driven from home. I wonder now if I should have insisted on more, if accepting slightly altered fast food chains as signs of local color did a disservice to both me and my surroundings. We’ve already lost so much in the way of regional
difference since the days of *America Eats*, I might have done well to heed Richmond’s advice, pulling off I-95 and away from Hardee’s, winding down some back-country highway in search of an anachronistic farmhouse, banging on the door until someone comes to greet me, and asking for some turnip greens boiled with freshly smoked bacon, ash cake, and nine pounds of their finest squirrel, please.

At the Culinary Institute of America, my mom wants to try something new. She and I are standing on line at the Apple Pie Bakery and Cafe, one of five public restaurants staffed by the Hyde Park school’s students. Hyde Park, New York is best known for being FDR’s hometown and the location of his presidential museum and library, but judging by the number of backs ahead of us in line, the busy gift shop in the lobby, and the regular passing of tour groups, the CIA is itself a competitive tourist draw.

Roth Hall, the school’s main building, is an imposing red-brick manor with tall white columns at its entrance. It stands behind a graceful apron of a pavilion where visitors can lean on the balcony and enjoy views of the Hudson’s west bank. Roth Hall was once a Jesuit novitiate called St-Andrew-on-Hudson, and the cafe where we’re soon to dine once held the chapel. If we walked to the building’s north end, we’d find what used to be the seminary’s dining hall, where meals were spent listening to novices take turns reading aloud from Scripture, in Latin, while a priest with a buzzer sat ready to correct pronunciation mistakes. I imagine that few diners could focus on the food being served. When the CIA purchased the building in 1970, the rooms where
novices studied and prayed were given over to a more earthly worship. Now, it’s impossible to focus on anything but food. On campus, every banner is printed with a whisk or knife and the streets are named things like “Parsley Place” and “Basil Square.” Visible from Roth Hall’s pavilion is a large cut-out silhouette of a be-toqed chef propped on the rooftop of the next building over, a helpful reminder should you suddenly forget where you are.

In line, a tall young woman with a lively, unplaceable accent and a blue chef’s coat offers us little discs of bittersweet chocolate as we wait. And paper print-out menus— the Cafe is the more casual of two restaurants on campus that don’t require reservations, but it is casual in the sense that you can get your cranberry apple granita to-go in a plastic cup. The quality of the food does not seem to have suffered an ounce. I have declined to eat breakfast in preparation, and as I read the menu my stomach clutches at the sight of so many words I love: pesto, aioli, ginger, truffle, prosciutto, focaccia. My mom is tempted, characteristically, by all the n-apostrophe foods: mac n’ cheese, fish n’ chips, heightened versions of foods she could make herself, or get anywhere. But that’s not what she wants today. She wants something she would never think to make, couldn't get anywhere but here. What she wants, it is decided as we crawl almost to the restaurant's doorway, is beef bourguignon.

Originally hailing from the Burgandy region of France, beef bourguignon was a peasant dish designed to tenderize low quality cuts of meat. The nobles eventually caught on, as they are wont to do, and the dish became haute cuisine. I don't mention the fact that beef bourguignon is
not dissimilar from beef stew, a dish my mom is certainly familiar with. I do make sure to say it aloud several times so she'll know approximately how to pronounce it when we order.

We're here to meet two of my mom's sisters: Judy, who still lives upstate, and Renee, the transplanted Californian in town for one of her semi-annual visits. Also joining us is my cousin Stephanie, Judy's daughter, who just bought a house near her mom’s place. They managed to beat us here by an hour, meaning they have already walked through the grounds, ordered, and eaten most of their food by the time we park. Apparently this is not a cause for consternation, in spite of the rarity of our visits and the brevity of our time together. Our lateness is expected, and accepted as a genetic fact, the “Charland way.” On the occasions I do see my relatives, this term gets thrown around a lot, usually in conjunction with ill-fated RV expeditions or sloppy airport pickups. I don't figure into these memories, and spend my time trying to play catch-up, to get in on the joke. Despite my own chronic disorganization, I have trouble seeing myself as the inheritor of the “Charland way” because I have only recently learned of its existence.

Even if we were expected to be on time, it’s unlikely we'd catch much heat for our tardiness. My mother's side of the family is undemonstrative to the extreme. The family crest might read “It is what it is” or “Oh, well” or some other shrug of rural stoicism. I remember a certain amount of spoiling when I was younger and visited more frequently, cookies before dinner, trips to ice cream parlors, offers of hand-me-down toys my cousins had grown out of. As I got older and visited more rarely, the well of affection grew drier. My arrival was greeted with the enthusiasm you'd pay to a mailman delivering a letter you've been anticipating, one whose
contents contain no news either good or bad. Oh, you're here. Most of my information about extended family came from TV or friends' anecdotes and my experiences didn't measure up. Shouldn't someone be exclaiming at how large and dazzling I had become? Shouldn't everyone be insinuating that I was, or would soon become, a heartbreaker, while I pretended I don't love the attention? Visits to my dad's family, though no less stressful, have a healthy streak of sentimentalism. One of my aunts, her eyes ablaze, will tell me that my grandfather would have been proud of me for studying writing, and by the end of the night everyone will be wine-weeping over a photo album.

When my mom and I have finally ordered, we join the others and their mostly empty plates in the dining area. I receive three tart hugs. My mom tries to apologize for the time, saying, “Sorry, you know-”

Judy says, “Yeah, yeah.”

“How was the drive?” my mom asks.

“Not bad. You know.”

She knows.

The food arrives quickly. For me, a slender baguette split down the middle and stuffed with slivers of well-marbled prosciutto, arugula doused with balsamic and olive oil, and thick slices of fresh mozzarella seeming to melt without heat into the bread. On the side, a tangle of delicate salad greens, peaking like sea spray above the rim of their bowl. My mom’s beef bourguignon is humbler, a shallow white dish filled with hunks of meat and carrot and onion
rising from a rich brown sauce. A single flowery mushroom, some strain I’ve never seen before, pokes out from the liquid like a lace cuff through a sleeve. I prod at my salad but don’t start eating, watching as she takes her first bite, hoping she loves it.

She does. “It’s delicious,” she says, a word she never uses unless she really means it. When she’d take a bite of one of my juvenile kitchen experiments, I’d be met with “Very tasty!” or even just “It’s interesting.” But delicious is delicious and I relax into the meal, tearing through my sandwich and listening to the summary of Renee’s visit up to this point. There was some confusion over flight delays, but Judy ended up getting to the airport at just the right time. Very un-Charland. Since then, it seems the pair have been going from house to house and restaurant to restaurant getting fed to excess.

Judy starts listing everything they ate: “Well on Thursday night we went over to Jimmy’s and they made a meatloaf, and you know, roasted potatoes. And we had a salad. And for dessert there was one of those cookie platters, you know, that Stephanie had left over from her work party. And the next morning we all went to the diner, and I got this big, big, omelette, and that came with potatoes and toast, and so we were too full to eat lunch, but then for dinner we went over to Peter and Maria’s and they had cooked a big meal, pasta and sausage and meatballs. And then what did we do the next day? I think the next day we got Mexican.”

After lunch, the plan was for everyone to come back to Connecticut to visit my family’s new apartment. I watch as it crumbles due to the usual factors: time, traffic, no one wanting to drive at night, the Charland way. Next time, then. Whenever that may be. If my mom is
disappointed, having undoubtedly spent all morning cleaning the still-chaotic apartment, she doesn't show it. Renee rides with us back up 9 to Bard, where my mom is dropping me off, so they'll have at least a little extra time to catch up. I'm eager to eavesdrop, having long suspected that Renee could have been my favorite aunt if I'd seen more of her growing up. She works in the HR department of a travel company, and has been all over the world. One of my prized possessions growing up was a necklace she brought me back from Africa, a string of wooden beads and carved animal figures. Several comments she makes on the drive seem to confirm my belief in her coolness, like when she starts talking about the cave paintings she saw in France and the Werner Herzog film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. Or when, upon passing some unfortunate soul dancing on the curb outside a Dairy Queen, dressed as a vanilla ice cream cone, she snarks “What's your job?”

By and large though, my mom and her sister spend more time talking about recipes than their lives and careers or, as I had hoped for most fervently, stories of shared childhood and adolescence. It’s easy to judge from the backseat, but what do I envision my brothers and I chatting about when we're grown up, flung far, and sporadically reunited? The latest prestige television and good burgers we've eaten recently. If we're lucky, my older brother and I can fight about politics and social justice while my younger brother watches gleefully like we're playing table tennis, switching sides minute by minute but contributing none of his own ideas.

I could jump into the front seat conversation at any moment, steer it toward the revelations I thought I wanted, but something snares my tongue. My curiosity about my family’s
history has always been tempered, dominated even, by reluctance and a hard-to-pin-down fear. I’ve never probed too far into my family’s past, worried that I’d stumble onto something I couldn’t get loose from. A lot more than lateness and poor organization can run in a family. I already know about the alcoholism on my father’s side, the heart disease on my mother’s. And beyond even the sterile prescriptions of genetics, families have a way of passing along legacies that ought to remain the stuff of lore: intergenerational rhythms of luck, cycles of bad behavior, fatal flaws, mean streaks, prophecies, curses. The past makes us superstitious about the future, patterns of events emerge in retrospect that we’d never have noticed as they happened. In so far as I wear my family ties loosely, in so far as I feel no strong bond with my home state, I can be self-determined. But I would be lying if I said all that rootlessness can’t create its own breed of identity crisis.

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It’s Easter Sunday, but I don’t know that when I wake up. I’ve been on spring break for a week, and it only takes half that time for me to lose track of what day it is. School breaks dissolve my calendar into an idle blur, whole days spent without getting dressed or leaving the house, eating scrambled eggs for every meal, sitting down in front of the TV in the morning and not getting up until evening, dazed from seven solid hours of the Home and Garden Network. These shows, filled as they are with major purchasing decisions and extreme renovations, ought to be motivational, but when watched in excess the effect is dulled. Chip and Joanna Gaines, the faultlessly upbeat husband-and-wife hosts at the center of Fixer Upper, can smash their way into
as many open floor plans as they want and I will remain slothlike on the couch, drinking my
dad’s French Roast and thinking, *that looks hard*.

Longer tenures at home require that I eventually resume being a contributing member of
the household, but I’ve grown accustomed to a grace period of at least a week. So I am doubly
surprised when I pad into the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee and find a note from my mom:

Hi Honey,

Please prep ham, scalloped potatoes, asparagus, green beans. I’ll be home around
one.
And make bunny cake! (Just need one round, rest can be cupcakes)
Happy Easter.

Love,
Mom

Pardon?

My family hasn’t celebrated Easter since my little brother reached adolescence. For that
matter, we don’t really celebrate any holidays anymore. My parents were fairly gung-ho about
special occasions when we were all kids, buying unwieldy Christmas trees from Stew Leonard’s
and making sure we woke up to the sight of three overstuffed baskets, one green, one pink, and
one blue, on the kitchen table Easter morning. My brothers and I took part by finding new ways
to pervert all manner of festive traditions. We’d take turns hiding Easter eggs around the house
and yard, choosing locations so obscure that rounds of heated questioning ensued, along with the
kind of psychological warfare normally reserved for interrogation rooms. On one memorable
Christmas, my brothers placed my gift inside a lockbox, which was itself sealed in layers of duct
tape and zip ties. Even when I’d broken through to the box, I had to decode a series of clues to
locate the key, which turned up in a vent. Trembling with excitement, I turned the key in the lock
and opened the box to find it was empty. I was then informed that my true gift had been the
experience of trying to get the box open, and wasn’t that better than some lousy bauble?

Post-childhood, our celebrations diminished year by year, something which used to
sadden me deeply but that I have since gotten used to. I’m perfectly content, if not exactly
thrilled, to treat birthdays and holidays as ordinary weekdays and weekends, spent parked in
front of the television, eating scrambled eggs.

But now there’s a 12 pound ham in the fridge, and I’ve been assigned to it.

I scoop it out, carry it against my hip like a misshapen baby, plop it on the counter. The
supermarket has gift-wrapped it in shiny gold foil, and I peel away its layers to reveal a thick
plastic bag vacuum sealed around the ham. I dispense with this with a pair of kitchen scissors
and the meat is unveiled at last in its considerable and awful splendor. I’ve cooked roasts, steaks,
Thanksgiving turkeys, buffalo burgers, and squid, but have somehow made it twenty one years
without tackling a ham. It looks like a plump traffic cone lying on its side, a fleshy, satisfying
pink with fatty patches of white. The skin is a deep, rough-textured mahogany.

When I wrestle it into a baking dish it looks comically oversized, a Great Dane who
thinks he’s a lap dog, so I switch it into the major-leagues roasting pan we have heretofore used
only for turkeys. I learn from reading the packaging that this thing is already pre-cooked, so all I
have to do is score the skin in preparation for glazing it later, a tip I withdraw from the shadowy and immense vault of Food Network knowledge in my brain. Quarter-inch slits wrapping around the ham in a diamond-cut pattern will allow the glaze to moisten and flavor the meat more deeply. This is the point when I could press cloves into the center of each diamond to further impart flavor, but a survey of our spice rack reveals we don’t have any whole cloves. No matter, into the oven. 325 degrees, for about ten minutes a pound.

About that glaze - a little gold foil packet of it has been provided to me in the ham’s packaging, but the powdery texture I can discern from the outside turns me off. So too, though I’m no stranger to the artificial, does the long list of hyper-syllabic ingredients. I set to Googling glaze recipes and find one that feels appropriately old-school: brown sugar, mustard, apple cider vinegar, and a whole can of Coca-Cola. By some Easter miracle, we have all the ingredients on hand. I pour everything into a saucepan and boil it, about twenty minutes, until it’s dark and syrupy, and sticky as honey. I leave it cooling on the stovetop for when it’s time to glaze the ham.

Throughout these processes, I’ve been fretting over the requested scalloped potatoes. They’ll take a long time to bake, and probably want a higher temperature than the ham does. Worse, the gargantuan roasting pan and prodigious height of the ham are dominating most of the room in the oven. As I’m slicing potatoes and onions into a thousand slender discs, I decide to cheat. I simmer the slices in cream, chicken broth, garlic, rosemary, and thyme until I can pierce the potatoes easily with a fork. I pour the mixture into the baking dish I rejected earlier, and
shred half a brick of sharp Vermont cheddar overtop. Now all I have to do is broil the dish to brown the cheese once the ham is out of the oven, a process that will take no more than five minutes.

The vegetables are nothing to worry about. The green beans I’ll saute with butter, garlic, and lemon and the asparagus I’ll throw under the broiler along with the potatoes. A drizzle of balsamic vinegar, reduced on the stove, and some goat cheese crumbles left over from last night’s dinner will do to dress the stalks. By the time the ham is done resting (I have no idea whether you rest ham, but I’ve yet to find a meat that takes badly to it) all the sides should be done. Which only leaves the question, how in hell does one make a bunny cake?

I wander over to my brother in search of answers—has Mom mentioned anything to him about this bunny cake business?

“Oh. Yeah, I think it’s something her mom used to make for Easter. It’s a whole thing.”

I see.

Well if my mother wants a bunny cake on Easter, particularly for sentimental reasons, I’d rob a thousand supermarkets to see it done. Her personal requests are so few, and her small sacrifices so many, that when I do manage to figure out something she wants, it absolutely has to happen. My concern is that I’ll screw up the cake. I’m not much of a baker, and it seems like my mom has something specific in mind, something she remembers from her childhood. This means I’ll have to get the details just right. I return to my loyal prep cook Google and type in “bunny
cake” but the images that return are too varied to be helpful. In the grand tradition of cat-skinning, there is clearly more than one way to bake a rabbit.

I’m still puzzling over this when my mom calls me from work (of course she’s working on Easter) to say she’ll be coming home soon. Should she pick anything up from the store? Stop and Shop might be open today, at least in the morning.

I tell her we’re all set, that dinner will be almost ready by the time she gets here, but that I may need a bit of guidance in the matter of the cake.

“I’m just not sure exactly what you’re thinking of.”

“Oh. Well, it looks like a bunny.”

When my mom arrives, I’m engaged in glazing the ham. During the last twenty minutes of cooking, you raise the oven’s temperature to 425 and brush on more glaze about every ten minutes. I carry on until my saucepan is empty, wait a few more minutes for everything to caramelize, and declare it done. Once everything comes out of the oven, I call in my family to ooh and ahh. My mother is the most obliging, and in return I let her carve the ham, telling her it seems like a matriarchal thing to do.

“Well it’s already sliced, pretty much. They pre-slice them.”

Yet more I didn’t know about ham until today.

Nonetheless, my mom accepts our largest carving knife when I press it into her hands, and separates the meat into thick, round slabs, wide as platters. We all line our plates and pile on the sides, and wander into the living room to eat. Our new apartment lacks, among other things, a
dining room. I try a bite of everything and am largely satisfied. The potatoes are rich without being heavy, the green beans flavorful and still with a bite. The asparagus is a little gritty, but not inedibly so. And the ham seems exactly right for Easter dinner, tender inside with a sweet, tangy exterior, sticky and crispy, tasting familiar though I’ve never made it before. Everything’s good, yet still I cannot resist engaging in my favorite mealtime activity: pressuring each of my family members individually to compliment my food at length. Again, my mom’s reaction is the most satisfying.

“Everything was delicious.”

After the traditional period of lying about and stomach-clutching, I return to the kitchen with my mom in tow. She’s still doing a baffling job explaining the vagaries of bunny cake-making. I try to assemble from the details she gives me a cohesive image of the final product: the frosting is extremely glossy, and is to be covered in shredded coconut. The cupcakes she mentioned in her note are spares, the only cake that makes it into the bunny is one 8-inch round. Spatial relations have always been a weak point for me, and I simply can’t understand how a single round, flat cake becomes what she assures me is a three-dimensional rabbit.

“I’m sure I made it for you when you were little.”

Maybe so, but I don’t recall it. This is decidedly a product of her childhood, not mine.

The variety of cake is not one of the things that matters to the recipe, so we choose chocolate, spiked at the last minute with a teaspoon of coconut extract to match the eventual topping. The cakes bake quickly, one round pan of batter and nine remainder cupcakes, and soon
we’re tipping them onto a pair of wire cooling racks. I’m impatient enough to see how it all comes together to slide the racks into the freezer so the cake will cool faster. In the meantime, my mom shows me how to make the frosting. It’s unlike any I’ve made before, neither a traditional vanilla frosting nor a buttercream. It calls for egg whites and, to my amazement, corn syrup, and ten minutes of beating. My mom and I pass the hand mixer back and forth until shiny white peaks form, and both our arms are tired. It’s the strangest thing, the frosting stretches like melted candy and is, as promised, as glossy as paint.

My mom takes the racks out of the freezer and puts the round cake on a platter. She cuts it in half, layers the pieces, sticking them together with a layer of strawberry jam. When she turns the whole thing so the cut side is facing down, I finally get it.

“Oh.”

“You see?”

Not fully, not yet, but then she cuts a notch about two thirds of the way through the cake, separating the head from the body, and the rabbit springs to life. Suddenly, I’m giddy. Can we give him a tail? And paws?

“Only you would think of that,” my mom tells me.

I unwrap a cupcake and attach it to the back of the cake, rounded side out, with a dab of jam. I chop two more in half, and arrange the pieces two to a side. Not quite right.

“Now it looks like a car.”
She’s right, and I take away the front paws. This looks better. Let’s assume the front legs are tucked away beneath the body, and only the larger rear legs are visible.

We pile frosting onto a spatula and begin swirling it on, wrapping the chocolate brown body in clouds of white fur.

A layer of coconut, shaken on by the handful, adds a lush pile of fluff.

The ears, which apparently needn’t be edible, we construct with printer paper.

Three jelly beans for the eyes and nose, two black licorice, one watermelon pink.

Done.

Something in me melts as soon as the cake is complete, and I banish my brothers and their forks from the kitchen until I’m done photographing our bunny from every angle. My mom is delighted.

“Isn’t it cute?”

It is cute, possibly one of the cutest things I’ve ever seen. In fact, it’s so cute it really doesn’t matter how it tastes.

It’s only a bonus that, once I’ve forced myself to actually cut into our bunny, it isn’t half bad: the coconut extract we added to the batter is subtle and mild; the jam moistens the surrounding cake and adds a note of freshness; the frosting tastes like vanilla taffy. Taken all together in a single bite, the cake is as sugary as a whole candy store, the kind of sweet that sticks to you, but not necessarily in a bad way.
Fluffy Boiled Icing

1 C sugar
1/3 C water
1 T light corn syrup
1/2 t salt
2 egg whites
1 t vanilla

Combine sugar, water, corn syrup and salt in saucepan; stir until well blended. Boil until 238-242° on candy thermometer - Soft ball stage.

In large bowl, beat egg whites in mixer until stiff. Pour hot syrup over them while beating. Continue until very fluffy. Add vanilla.
To make a Bunny Cake

Use a round layer cake - cut in half. Put halves together with jam. Place upright on cut edge on tray. Cut out a notch to form head - round the edges. Frost and sprinkle with coconut.

Cut out ears from paper, use jelly beans for eyes and nose.
1. I exit the subway on 79th Street and struggle for a moment to orient myself, despite my announcements of late that I really “know my way around” the city, the ultimate bragging rights for a kid from Connecticut. My dad is here to give me a ride back to school, easy to spot in his midlife-crisis red Hyundai Elantra. When he starts driving, I begin taping the conversation, holding my phone aloft so it can record more clearly. I won't repeat my mistake from the Poughkeepsie Dunkin' Donuts, 16 minutes of mumble and hiss punctuated by the occasional audible “fuckin’”—It seems no one in the Poughkeepsie Dunkin' Donuts was having a very good day. Myself included, for that matter; I was in the Poughkeepsie Dunkin' Donuts.

DAD: The majority of the intersections in Seattle don't have lights or stop signs.

2. My dad grew up in Seattle and recently returned for the first time in decades, spending a week showing my mom the famous sites of his youth, which apparently included both the expected (his childhood home) and the unexpected but, to me at least, unsurprising (“the bridge I was going over when I first heard 'Abbey Road.'”) While both parties undoubtedly enjoyed the trip, I have my suspicions as to who enjoyed it more.

EMILY: Really?
D: Yeah, the majority. I'm not talking about major intersections, but I'm saying city streets, one after another after another, don't have stop signs—

E: It's just people figuring it out?

D: People stop, and wait, and go. And—just think of that!

E: I know, I can't imagine that.

D: It's like, cooperation as opposed to competition. They could never—here? They'd have multiple pile-ups in one second! Right? Cause everyone's like, out of my way. If they give something for free to someone, they're gonna, you know, abuse it. That's New York.

3. When discussing New York, my dad has a tendency to slip into character, specifically Streetwise 70's Cabbie: “Watch out the Big Apple don't take a bite outta you”; [CHUCKLING] “Greatest city in the world, baby!” My attempts to tell him that New York is actually one of the more courteous major cities, a “fact” I believe I gleaned from a Reader's Digest “study” around a decade back, have fallen on deaf ears. By his own admission, my dad has never really gotten New York, and no matter how much time he spends there, can't fall in love with it.

D: It's really something. I mean, [in Seattle] they have a lot of rotaries now. You know, you kind of go around like this into the intersection, but, very few stop signs. So. Anyway. Blowing the Seattle horn.
4. Since his return to the inferior northeast, my dad has made it his mission to persuade at least one of his children to move to Seattle, and ideally all three of us. To my brothers, he emphasizes the booming tech industry and availability of jobs. To me, he talks up the presence of “cool, young people” and above all, the coffee. He may overestimate my fondness for cool, young people, but the spoils of his trip—half a dozen small-batch Starbucks Reserve espresso blends in little black paper bags—were persuasive. He spent a good part of every morning after his return tinkering with his espresso machine, then thrusting demitasse cups of steaming liquid under my nose to sniff and sample. One taste of the good stuff, he undoubtedly hoped, and I'd be hooked on the Emerald City.

E: Do you miss coming up in here?

D: Coming here?

E: Yeah.

D: Not really.

5. My dad worked as a chauffeur for Rudy's Limousine Company until 2014, a job that required him to drive to the city nearly every day. Given that city driving ranks among my greatest nightmares, I cannot blame him for his lingering distaste for New York. The hours were bad too, nocturnal and erratic, meaning I saw him little when he was working. On a handful of occasions, scheduling friction required that he pick me up from school in his limo, a leathery
black jewel of a Lincoln, and he'd insist I ride in the backseat so I could feel like one of his wealthy clients.

E: No? Not at all?

D: No—well...no. I really don't. I mean, I did it so long. It doesn't—there was a long period when I was doing it where I found it really exciting.

E: Yeah.

D: I mean, every time. You know, no matter how many times, it was always exciting, always.

And I suppose I'd have to kind of dig into myself to find that place again. It's not immediately stimulating to me anymore.

E: Yeah...

D: Is it to you?

E: Not like it was, actually, when I was younger.

D: I remember when you first came to New York, you were gaga for a long time.

6. The first time I saw New York was from my dad's backseat, albeit a temperamental Volvo rather than a company limo. I was ten and remember little from the trip: the marquees for musicals in Times Square, having a pair of safety scissors confiscated from my bag at the Empire State Building's security checkpoint, a mediocre pizza. Mostly I was impressed by the maximized use of vertical space, which felt like the introduction of a whole new dimension. No
matter how far back I craned my head, seat belt cutting into my neck, here were buildings whose
tops I couldn’t see. This perspective on the city, from the backseat of a car, is one I've
experienced only a handful of times since, and other ways of getting around have diminished it
in my eyes. Lurching from lane to lane, passing too quickly by a thousand things that might have
been interesting, with the buildings nearly pressing against your windows and your driver
jabbing at the horn, it is easy for New York to seem hostile and unmanageable, the way my dad
sees it. Maybe if he ditched the car and tried the sidewalks for a while, his feelings might change
for the better. Then again, he's still a very fast walker.

E: I mean, yeah—

D: You were so into it. [Laughs]

E: I'd never seen anything like it. And then for a long time, every single trip to New York was an
event. Now I don't know, I mean, I still like coming here, but it’s not the same like, wonder that
it once was I guess. But—

D: When did it stop being that way?

E: I don't know. Maybe— after college. I mean, in high school-

D: After being in college.

E: Yeah, after being in college. In college, there's, you know, just generally more to do.

D: You're more on your own.
E: Yeah. So it isn't the same thrill to, you know, go to the city and be able to get around by myself.

7. Considering how hopeless I was with public transit in high school, even more so than now, this is an off-the-mark assessment of what “the thrill” was. The thrill was in putting on an outfit I wouldn't have worn to school, in escaping all forms of adult supervision, in the nervous exhilaration of exiting Grand Central with no plan for the night. And, crucially, these trips to New York gave me and my friends a means of asserting our identities. We spent our weekends here, going to cheap eighteen-and-over concerts from the time we were fourteen, so we must have been several shades hipper than our classmates navigating the Danbury Fair Mall. This is an attitude I've since come to regret. I'll have the rest of my life to sit in bars listening to jazz, but I never went to a real high school party.

D: Yeah. So, you had said earlier that you don't still feel the same way about living here as you used to.

E: Yeah, I mean, I don't really think that I want to. But it feels like that's what you have to do after you graduate college. At least if you're doing what I'm doing. If you're, you know, a liberal arts grad with a creative writing degree.

D: It is the place of opportunity.
E: On Monday nights, all the writing majors get together, and we'll often have guest speakers from like, MFA programs or we'll have people who work in publishing houses, or we'll have literary agents, to kinda give us an idea of what we're in for, talk about what field they're in. And all the publishing and lit agency people say that if you want to be in those fields, you have to be in New York. Like there's really no other place that you can do that, because it’s all centered here. So. There's that. Everyone I know will be moving here, or around here.

D: And I imagine that the location of that would be...Brooklyn?

E: Probably have to be.

D: I mean, Brooklyn's not affordable anymore either. Relative to what it used to be. But there are places...

E: I'd never really been to Bushwick before.

8. I'd stayed the night before at my friend Phoebe’s sublet in Bushwick. It was discomfiting to see how similar her roommates, all of whom are pushing thirty, were to my college classmates. They wore the same high-rise Levi’s and polyester jackets, drank from the same cheap plastic dishware and glass jars, decorated with the same unframed posters and neglected potted plants. They stayed up too late smoking and dancing, all their friends crammed into the tiny kitchen for a clothing-swap party, everyone trying on each other’s sequined blouses and platform shoes. Worn out and irritable from a long day of walking, I listened to them through the wall of my friend’s room and wondered, *when does adulthood kick in?*
D: What's it like?

E: Um. It's not as gentrified, so I think it's still relatively affordable.

D: Is it run down?

E: No, not terribly.

D: What's the demographic?

E: I don’t think it’s as white as other parts of Brooklyn have become. I think there's more young white kids moving in, because that's what happens, but...

D: Is it, like, more black, more Latino, more Asian...

E: I don't know. It's very residential, so there weren't a lot of people out and about. It's very quiet, you know?

D: Is it?

E: Yeah, it feels more like Queens kind of. It practically is in Queens ‘cause she's very far out.

And there were, you know, a couple corner grocery type places, a couple places to get coffee, but there really isn't anywhere to go in her neighborhood. It’s just, you know, people’s homes, so it’s quiet, there aren’t a ton of people, there's not a lot of foot traffic.

D: Did you find it pleasant?

E: Yeah. Um, I mean, I didn’t find it unpleasant. I wasn’t like, oh what a beautiful neighborhood!

It’s not like— I mean, ideally I’d want somewhere that did have a little more going on, because otherwise why bother living in the city?
9. More importantly, my crippling liberal guilt forbids me from moving to a gentrifying neighborhood.

D: Yeah, yeah, obviously you'd like to be in Williams—

E: No, not Williamsburg! [Laughs]

D: Not Williamsburg?

E: No, that's too much.

D: Too trendy?

E: Yeah.

D: Or, uh, Brooklyn Heights? That's more like—

E: That's like families, and rich—

D: It’s also like the Upper East Side, I mean in terms of wealth. Very expensive, a very hot area.

So um, what was I gonna say? Huh. Do you have any ideas of who you might want to live with?

E: No, um...my friend Becca needs a roommate for next year. She's at Columbia, doing this joint program Bard has with them. So she does three years at— [phone rings] Oh, that's you. I think it's Mom. Yeah. Hello? Yeah, hi. I'm good, how are you? Yup, that is true. And you're talking to me. Awww. Well, we’re on the road. And I think—

D: We're on the Henry Hudson Parkway.
E: Your husband says we're on the Henry Hudson Parkway. Um, and he uh, talked to uncle Brian who said that he worked on a house, um, in Tarrytown, so I think we're going there to look at that.

10. My uncle is a seasoned traveller, having been to every state in the country at least once. When my dad told him about my survey of Route 9 the other day, apparently he got very excited, both because the idea appealed to his wanderlust and because he has a personal connection to the road. He’s a contractor and did a lot of work on a house right on 9 a few years ago. We’re headed there now. My dad and I had talked about doing some sightseeing on the way back to school, but hadn’t formulated a specific plan. As soon as I got into the car today, he suggested we go see the house in Tarrytown. On the phone now, my mom asks me if there’s any historical significance to the structure, whether it has a famous occupant, if anything exciting happened there. No, no, and no. It’s just a house. But it seems to matter to my dad that we go.

E: No. No. Yes. Uh-huh! Yeah, I guess. Yeah. I don't know. Um, no, I'm kind of planning on doing that over spring break if I can use your car. Yeah, that'd be good, Dad mentioned that. Uh-huh. Ok yeah, that sounds good. Alright.

D: Oh, tell Mom—

E: Oh, one second—

D: Ask Mom to remind me that I have a phone appointment tomorrow morning.
11. My dad requires constant reminders for day-to-day obligations: which bills need to get paid, what he needs to pick up from the store. This while being able to quote the liner notes for obscure albums from decades ago or name every member of a band’s lineup at a moment’s notice. I’m the same way, which means that A. we should never be allowed to run errands without a third party, and B. things get a bit heated if we try to watch Jeopardy! together.

E: Dad says that you need to remind him that he has a phone appointment tomorrow morning.

Yeah. Tomorrow morning. What time?

D: I think its like 9:45.


D: Look at the Hudson.

E: I know, wow.

D: You know, that neighborhood down there, I've always admired that house.

E: Is that someone's house?

D: Well, it’s probably townhouses. I remember talking to Sara's mom, Diane Mazzullo, about that.
12. Sara Mazzullo was my best friend from the ages of seven to fourteen. I haven’t spoken to her in five years, but my parents still like to ask about her. I’ve never been forthcoming with them when it comes to my personal life, so when they do receive some piece of information about it, they’re loathe to let it go.

D: You know, she grew up not from here, she grew up in the very northern tip of Manhattan, right where we just were, but inland, called Inwood.

E: Inwood. What’s that like?

D: Well, she said it was kind of tenements where she grew up, I don't think it was super fancy. I don't think there's anywhere in the city that's super dangerous now, but I don't think it's great. I mean, Washington Heights is— is it the Bronx or is it Manhattan? I think it's Manhattan. That's near Inwood. That's still a pretty sketchy place. Always was. Actually, isn't that where West Side Story takes place?

E: Is it?

D: Maybe, I can't remember. But anyway, Inwood is— if you look at a map of Manhattan, you'll see Inwood's like the northernmost neighborhood. It borders, uh, is it the Harlem River that goes into the Hudson? I think so. You know, cause Manhattan’s an island, so you've got the East River that goes out towards, ultimately towards Long Island, and then the Harlem River branches off that and goes north on the East Side of Manhattan, and then hooks around the very tip of Manhattan, and joins up with the Hudson. And then of course the Hudson goes all the way down
around the Battery and joins up with New York Harbor, which goes out eventually past the Verrazano out to the ocean. The whole thing is really quite impressive. When I went on that bike tour, you know the five borough bike tour, I still have a picture of me standing on the top of the Verrazano—because they close off one side of the Verrazano so all the cyclists can go over—and I have a picture of me standing on the Verrazano, looking out on New York Harbor. It's really—

E: Cool.

D: Yeah, it was very cool. It's unbelievably cold up there, it's like being on top of a mountain.

So, Becca—she's in a joint program?

E: Oh yeah, she did three years at Bard and she majored in Lit, and then she does two years at Columbia and she's studying environmental engineering. So she's gonna graduate with degrees from Bard and Columbia in five years, which is pretty cool.

D: Environmental engineering. Wow. What kind of work would she be doing with that?

E: Well, she's into the eco-friendly stuff, so something with green technology would definitely interest her. And she just got this internship which seems really cool. It's this lab and they're working on finding new ways of dealing with dead bodies in New York City, because soon there's gonna be no room to bury people.

13. I had never once thought about this until Becca told me about her internship—how much space the dead take up. 144 people die in New York every day, 51,854 in a year. Their
apartments become available, but they still have to go somewhere. Accommodations must be made. DeathLab, the program my friend is working with, is trying to change the nature of those accommodations and break down some of the barriers between the living and the dead. Instead of being relegated to cordoned-off cemeteries, mortality would become an integrated part of active public space. Death makes me as uncomfortable as anyone, but I like the idea of it being less lonely. The only thing more frightening than dying is dying alone.

D: So what 's the—

E: It's really interesting looking. Bodies would go in these suspended pods kind of attached to a bridge, like the underside, the infrastructure of the bridge—

D: Whoa.

E: Made of biodegradable materials. And it would be walkable, so people could go—

D: Like, the major bridges?

E: I don't know if it's attached to the bridge, or— its hard to tell from the pictures. They have pictures online of what it would look like. But it's walkable, there's a path and it looks though, like they're suspended from the underside of bridges, yeah. And it's these white pods, and they would glow from the natural gases that would be emitted from a decaying body. And then once the body is fully decayed, the light would go out. The glowing would stop. And so that's when you would know that the person was gone, and you could—
D: Put another one in? How long would it take? I mean, is there a process by which they accelerate the decomposition?

E: I don't know, maybe.

D: Because I would think that's gonna fill up too.

E: What do you mean?

D: Well, these are pods—

E: The pods are biodegradable, I think.

D: So then they'd have to put another pod in. So instead of caskets people would have pods?

E: Yeah.

D: Or does the casket go in the pod? That's a lot of money.

E: I don't know exactly, I don't have all the details. But it would be much friendlier to the environment, it's all self-sustaining. And the project, it's kind of interdisciplinary. They've got environmental engineers, but then they also have urban design people, and then they have like, grief psychologists, 'cause there's also that whole aspect of thinking about how people grieve their loved ones.

14. I’ve never cared about what will be done with my remains after I die, but this attitude is informed by my youth, and by the fact that I’ve never lost anyone I was really close with. I don’t know what it’s like to grieve someone. My mom is characteristically unsentimental about her own mortality, and has been telling me since I was a little girl that she has no interest in ever
being kept on life support, and wants to be cremated. My dad has never in my recollection informed me of his final wishes, but something tells me he’d want a little more pomp and circumstance. Not that I’ve thought about it much, not that I can.

E: I don't know, the whole thing sounds very interesting.

D: Yeah, yeah, it's very interesting! Wow. You know, that reminds me, if you think about this stuff you know that it’s possible to address most major environmental problems through innovation. I think. I'll tell you one that I heard about, and the thought of it is really stunning. It's a way to generate electricity by having the grid that cars go on, meaning what we're riding on right now, being something where electricity is generated by the tires going over it. I mean, electricity— I don't know anything about it, but you know what I'm saying, that would generate it, because it's friction right? Can you imagine all the electricity that could be generated, with all that energy from all those cars driving? The theory is that that could take care of all our energy needs.

E: Wow.

D: Yeah, yeah. But— well, I was gonna say, what about self-driving cars, but they'll still be—

E: (laughs) They'll still be on the road.

D: They'll still be on the road, yeah. Self-driving cars are now considered not far in the future.

E: Well aren't they already making them?

D: They are.
E: (laughing) I wouldn't want— that's no good. I hate that idea. Why would you want that?

D: I like driving.

E: I like driving.

15. Aren’t women supposed to turn into their mothers as they age? All the traits I found most perplexing when I was younger— his preference for baby boomer country and folk, his obsession with real estate— are now mine. I’ve stolen half his record collection, *Ladies of the Canyon, Sweetheart of the Rodeo, Blonde on Blonde*…. And when we drive by a nice property I ask, “How much do you think *that* place went for?”

D: And I'm not sure I like that idea, because it's all based on technology and computers. And the questions now are like, how do we address when there's a computer failure and there's no one in the driver's seat? Could be catastrophic.

E: And like someone could, you know, if someone could hack into that system...

D: Hacking, yeah!

E: That would be horrible.

D: What about if you have a whole highway full of self driving cars, and someone hacks, you'd just have mass destruction.

D + E: [reading screen at toll booth] Did that say “call EZ pass?”

D: I have an EZ pass.
E: That’s weird.

E: Do you have to reload it or something? How does it work?

D: I don’t think so. Oh, you know what?

E: I mean if you were using it for that trip, then...

D: Eh, I’m not sure it needs to be replenished. Maybe they…maybe the payment method isn’t valid.

16. I'd like this put on our family crest, I think. “Maybe the Payment Method isn’t Valid.”

E: So where are we now?

D: We are on New York Thruway, route 87

E: Uh huh.

D: We’re going to get on 287, that’s, you know 287 runs between uh, I-95 on the New York-Connecticut line, that’s where it begins, which is in Port Chester, Rye, and goes west to the Tappan Zee Bridge. And Route 9, and actually 287, you know, 87 is the New York Thruway, 287 crosses it and it, actually no, wait. It’s like 87 goes like this, it goes over the Tappan Zee Bridge and 87 continues north up towards Albany and north of that, and 287 hooks and goes down into New Jersey. So just east of the Hudson River there’s an exit for Route 9, in Tarrytown. That’s where we’re going. And there’s a lot of other towns, you know, there's towns all the way up. Tarrytown, Brian was talking about it, it’s very historic. He said that the center of
Tarrytown is really nice. He said there’s a concert and entertainment venue, music hall, that has a lot of big name acts. It's right off the main drag. But you know, the Legend of Sleepy Hollow, that's in Tarrytown.

E: Oh yeah, yeah. That comes up a lot if you research Route 9.

D: Yeah. Well, he said it used to be called North Tarrytown, but now it’s called Sleepy Hollow.

E: Uh huh. Did they rename it because of like, the popularity of that story?

D: Yeah, I think they might have. [pause] You been watching any TV?

E: Nothing lately.

D: I discovered a new show in the past week or two that I’m really into. There’s three seasons so far and I believe it’s been approved for a fourth, but that will be the last. It’s called Banshee.

E: Oh, I think I’ve heard of that.

D: [reading exit signs] Is it this one? Yeah.

E: Sleepy Hollow, Tarrytown.

D: The premise is there’s this guy, an ex con. He just gets out of prison, and he ends up being the sheriff of this town called Banshee. And the reason he goes to Banshee is because, you know, he was a thief and he got caught, but his former lover got away with it. He took the rap, so she got away. They were lovers, and now she’s married and has two kids. She’s married to the...I think the District Attorney [laughs]. And so he shows up, and she’s just like “What are you doing here?” And they're still lovers in a way, but she’s trying to get rid of him. And he’s saying, “I’m
never leaving.” It’s like that. And, it’s outrageous, because he becomes the sheriff but he runs things like a criminal. (laughs) He doesn’t play by any rules at all.

17. How could he? Prestige television dramas don’t get written about people who follow rules. Narcissists, philanderers, psychos, and screw-ups, yes. Madmen and murderers, clearly. It’s fun to watch them do the things we’d never do ourselves, to pretend maybe we would under the right set of circumstances. If you’ve led a more ordinary, obedient life, your paths to legacy are fewer. You can tell your story for yourself to whoever will listen, or you can have children and hope that they’ll tell it for you.

D: Anyway, it’s totally compelling.

E: I think I could get into that.

D: So, I don’t know if we’re in Tarrytown now. He told me, one of these houses...wait, we might have...huh. Let me...you know what?

E: You think we went by it?

D: Yeah, we may have gone north of it. I'm gonna have to pull over. Oh no, this is it. He said it’s three houses north of Benedict. That’s it right there.

E: Oh! That one?

D: No, um, it’s the third or fourth house, the...ok. It might be that one right there.

E: This one?
D: No.

E: Or maybe that one?

D: Um, I think I can park here. It’s, wait a minute. Oh, no he was wrong about that. He said there’s a big church and it's the house just before it.

E: Oh. Well, I don’t see a church yet. Oh there, that spire.

D: Yeah, straight ahead. So, he was wrong. He said three houses north of Benedict, but it’s more than that.

E: Well maybe they built more houses since he was here.

D: Maybe.

E: When was this?

D: Uh, he was working here...I don’t know about last summer, but the summer before. Not just during the summer but in the winter too. He was coming over here all the time...ok, he said there was a consignment store.

E: Oh! “Pretty Funny Vintage.”

D: That’s it. And he said it’s next to that.

E: Oh, I see.

D: So it’s the brown one.

E: That one?

D: Yeah! That’s it. I think? Yeah.

E: Hm. Looks nice!
D: Yeah, he did a lot of the work on the roof, and that overhang there, and on the upper, you know, he replaced a lot of those clock works.

E: Yeah, it definitely looks like it's recently had worked done, you know? Compared to some of the other ones.

D: Yeah, he said they repainted it.

E: It looks recently painted.

D: It’s a nice looking house, it’s interesting.

E: It is, yeah. There’s stained glass on the windows there, see?

D: Yeah, yeah. He told me it’s a very unusual looking house. I said, “what style?” And he said, “I can’t really say.”

E: Yeah, I don’t really know what style you’d call it.

D: Yeah, it’s not a colonial, it's not, you know...he said it's built like, I don’t know what he said, like in the 1920’s or ‘30s maybe?

E: Yeah, looks like it. I don’t really know a ton about the architecture of private homes. I don’t even know what you’d call, you know, between those two windows, that piece in the middle.

D: That? Yeah, yeah.

E: It looks just decorative.

D: That’s a relief of some kind. You know, grandfather’s house had that. In fact, he discovered it in the very center of the upper floor. There were two shutters that were right there. Almost like,
closed shutters. And he was up there painting, and he discovered them and opened them up, and they had this whole relief thing.

E: Oh, that’s cool!

D: Yeah, so he kind of refinshed it, and brought it out.

E: Nice.

D: Yeah. Yeah. Alright, so, that’s it.
Nicole doesn’t drink coffee. When she needs a boost, she orders her hot chocolate with one shot of espresso. It’s my fault we had to stop at Starbucks before we’ve even begun, at ten in the morning and my caffeine withdrawal already kicking in: a heavy, pressing headache; a dense fog in the brain; trembling fingers. While we’re here, we run into Trader Joe’s next door to gather provisions for the nine hour drive ahead. Danbury, CT to Montreal, off to a late start. Again, my fault— I’m car-cursed. Mine broke down, then my dad’s, then my mom’s, then my best friend’s. Nicole’s car, which we’d planned to use for our trip, has become my latest victim, so we began our day at Enterprise. We are now the proud co-renters of a Chevy Sonic. I can tell Nicole thinks I might crash it.

Clif Bars

100 miles in the Adirondacks. 100 miles of forest protected under Article XIV of the New York State Constitution, designated as “forever wild.” It’s good we stopped for gas and snacks before we entered, because there’s no place to do so here. Route 9 is a two-lane road throughout the Adirondack Park, and passing another car is rare enough to be a talking point. There are plenty of human settlements sprinkled through the trees, but they seem to have gone a bit wild themselves. Without neighbors to complain about the accumulation of junk, front lawns
become ramshackle sculpture gardens. Old cars are left to decompose like roadkill, plastic chairs and children’s toys bleach white in the sun, and unidentifiable hunks of metal rust to a burnt tetanus-red. There are no markets or restaurants to speak of, but we pass several “family prayer camps” built high atop hills, away from prying eyes. From what we can see, these sites have a lot of large-scale wooden recreation equipment and rough hewn crosses. I ask Nicole if she’s seen *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, about a young woman’s escape from a sinister cult. “I think they might have filmed it here,” I tell her.

The wilderness seems to breed a certain individualism in the people who inhabit it, a lack of concern for the social mores others approach as law. It is a specific kind of person who desires a life this far off the grid, and who sees company and resources as fine trade-offs for autonomy.

Nicole is thoroughly spooked by the isolation, but I’ve got a fantasy going, where I buy a piece of land, adopt five dogs, take up banjo, and let my hair grow to my knees.

Margherita Pizza and St. Ambroise Pale Ale

The Air B&B we booked is in what many have referred to as “the hipster capital of Canada,” Montreal’s Mile End. The neighborhood is cool as promised when we arrive, so very cool that there’s not a single parking space within a mile of our apartment. We circle the block twelve times, first with me in the driver’s seat, then Nicole, after we put the Sonic in park at a stop light and swap. She’s better at city driving, and parallel parking, and not almost pulling into oncoming traffic in a car that isn’t ours. We finally find a space, and spend several minutes
staring slack-jawed at the nearest parking-regulations sign. These are confusing enough in English—no parking any time, except Wednesday between 11 and 11, violators will be towed—and in a foreign language they become completely incomprehensible. I harness all my high school French and deem our parking legal, and we go looking for dinner and much-needed drinks.

“Deux, s’il vous plaît,” I attempt, to the impossibly chic waitress at the trendy pizza restaurant we’ve chosen. My heart is racing. My accent is terrible.

She reads me in an instant, feline eyes flicking up and down. American. “Right this way,” she says. As we sit down, my pathological need to get along with wait staff kicks in.

“I love your nail polish, by the way.”

She grins.

Bagels from St. Viateur

Montreal-style bagels are softer and sweeter than New York bagels, the latter because they get boiled in honey water before being baked. They’re smaller too, with a ropier look and a larger hole in the center. This is a good excuse to buy not one, but two for breakfast: cinnamon raisin and “all-dressed,” which is what we call “everything” in the states. They’re still hot when the man behind the counter stuffs them into a paper bag for me, no butter, no cream cheese, and I hug them close when we step outside. It snowed all night and the temperature is around 4 celsius.
Poutine

The national dish of Quebec, french fries topped with gravy and cheese curds, starts to make a lot of sense after you’ve walked around all day in a snowstorm.

“You guys sure picked a shitty weekend to come,” a young couple at the metro told us kindly as they helped with the ticket machine. I’m sure Montreal is beautiful in the summer, but it looks wonderful in the snow too. White powder illuminates the delicate architecture of Old Montreal’s churches and lines the cracks of the cobblestones in the slanted streets. Still, I’m grateful for a respite from the cold as we thaw out in what seems to be the T.G.I. Friday’s of poutineries. The plastic menus have a lot of exclamation points, and the drink specials are “fun.” We inhale our food and talk about the museum exhibit we’ve just seen, about vice and scandal in Montreal in the 20’s and 30’s. You’d never know it from the European-style charm of the place, but Montreal was once a hotbed of drink and drug, prostitution, violence, and organized crime. One memorable room of the exhibit displayed a rumpled bed beside a number of vintage pamphlets warning soldiers about the risk of V.D.

“SHE MAY LOOK CLEAN, BUT…”

Four Glasses of Red Wine

Nicole and I have been friends since high school, but have different enough temperaments that our relationship has yet to grow predictable. At a bar back in Mile End, we discuss the results of a personality assessment that has recently spread through our circle of
friends like mono. It’s called the “enneagram test,” and sorts individuals into one of nine categories based on how they respond to a series of seemingly-vague questions. Anyone who has taken a personality quiz or read their horoscope is familiar with the way results get worded to apply to the largest-possible swath of people. Confirmation bias dictates that we grab onto the parts that speak to us and disregard the rest. But the enneagram, we have all decided, is spooky in its accuracy. To people unfamiliar with the test, which is to say everyone, it probably sounds like we’ve all gotten involved in scientology. “Listen to me, I’m being such a four right now,” one of us will say, or we’ll interrupt a thought to note “—but that’s a total six thing.” Nicole and I are deep into an analysis of how her type, The Loyalist, contrasts with mine, The Individualist, when a man at the next table interrupts, speaking too quickly for me to translate and tapping a martini glass with a few olives at the bottom. I can’t work out whether he’s offering to buy us a drink, or asking if we want his discarded olives.

“Non merci,” in any case.

Large Coffee, Donuts, Hash Browns

I cause a bit of a hiccup crossing back into the country when the border control gentleman asks me who rented the car we’re driving.

“Oh, me, technically.”

He stops inspecting our passports and looks up. “What does technically mean?”
I babble an explanation about how the rental is on my card and under my name, but we’re both listed as drivers on the rental agreement. He nods slowly and asks us to pop the trunk. None of the cars ahead of us got this treatment.

Back in the country, our trunk free of contraband, we stop at the first Dunkin’ Donuts we see. I feel the beginnings of a headache. The promotional card I try to pay with won’t scan at the register, and the cashier flips it over to read the fine print. The manager wanders over to help.

“It says it’s valid in the northeast,” the cashier says, confused. “See? Northeast.”

“Yeah,” says her manager, inspecting it. “But it doesn’t say north.”
I. Save the Bayville Dinosaur!

The Jersey Shore tourist season is imminent but hasn't yet begun, and the beach towns that hug Route 9 as it travels down the coast have a vulnerable, hopeful look to them. Unlike true resort towns, which turn ghostly in the off season, these sleepy, unpretentious communities seem built to sustain life year round. Even with many of the restaurants and gift shops closed until summer, residents can pick up a prescription at CVS or get groceries at Wawa. After the demihibernation of the winter, there are now signs that the tourist trade machine is creaking slowly back to life. Surrounded by still-shuttered businesses listing the days they'll return, a storefront displays a large poster reading “YES WE'RE OPEN!!” Roadside ice cream stands, all pastel and picnic tables, serve the season's first customers, families with young children who can't wait another moment to indulge in a coil of vanilla soft serve wrapped in rainbow sprinkles.

It’s mid-April, and the day too shows hints of the summer revelry that will soon seize the landscape. The morning’s clouds have all but vanished, revealing a postcard-blue sky and a sun working to mellow the chill lingering in the air. This will be the shore's last chance to yawn before the roads fill with minivans and the streets crawl with flip-flopped vacationers. Tourists made 95 million visits to New Jersey in 2015, and the state's coast accounts for a significant portion of those trips. But for now, traffic here is nearly nonexistent and the few pedestrians on
this or that Main Street have a local mein. They walk looking straight ahead, dressed casually, in clothing that seems drawn from a familiar closet rather than a carefully curated suitcase. If vacation offers the traveler the chance to escape into a new identity, the residents I see on passing sidewalks appear wholly themselves, old men in flannel shirts drinking coffee from paper cups, contractors in hooded sweatshirts and faded denim. I can't say the same for myself. I get off on passing for a local, and every place I visit receives a different version of myself. Unfortunately, local style can be slippery to grasp for an outsider, a lesson I learned the hard way when I wore a Pepto-pink floral shift dress to visit friends in the Hamptons and acquired a collection of stares from the young women of the town, who were dressed not as patrician grandmothers at country clubs, but in denim shorts and flip flops. But then, it’s possible I didn’t learn my lesson well enough. This morning found me picking through my dresser, wondering, what does a Jersey girl wear? I settled finally on tight jeans, a tomato-red top and hoop earrings. My hair resisted, as ever, my attempts to enlarge it.

Shockingly, I’ve yet to spy her, this mythical Jersey girl whose style I've bitten. In fact, it’s becoming apparent I've come with a number of wrongheaded ideas about New Jersey. Until today I’ve only ever passed through on my way to other places, an experience that makes a particularly unflattering impression. The state appears uniquely hostile from its major highways, a smog-choked skyline of smokestacks, water towers, and telephone wires. In the right mood, I can enjoy the valleys of industrial equipment and processing plants for the strange way they turn the landscape mechanical without looking quite like civilization. It’s like being dropped into the
middle of a video game or a dystopian movie. But then I’ll hit the hour’s fourth toll and my
capacity for goodwill shrinks. And then I’ll have to stop for gas and remember I can’t pump my
own, a ban dating back to 1949, and it all but vanishes. I understand full-service gas stations are
good providers of jobs, but sitting in the car watching someone perform a task I could easily do
myself always makes me feel like a brat. At least these hallmarks of New Jersey highways help
differentiate the state from any number of others you might pass through on the interstate. In my
experience, they also serve as useful tools for building camaraderie on road trips. When your
friend in the passenger seat is bitching about the traffic as if it’s your fault, when your younger
brother won’t stop howling for McDonalds’s, when no one can agree on a radio station and the
car is somehow both too hot and too cold, just wait until you hit New Jersey and let it be your
punching bag. Soon, everyone in the car will unite against a common enemy.

In some parts of the state, Route 9 is a major thoroughfare, but here in Ocean County it
slims to two lanes passing Italian delis, small businesses, and sections of forest. It’s a windy day,
and on the side of the road, sand blows across the sidewalks and builds up in the cracks. This is
one of the only natural hints at how close to the coast I am, along with a faint note of salt in the
air. There are other signs indicating my proximity to the ocean, these ones manmade and
advertising boat repair and “seashell gifts,” but this is not the Jersey Shore I was expecting. I’d
harbored fears of orange-tinted narcissists, strip mall strip clubs, tropical-themed bars with
inflatable palm trees out front. I have MTV’s Jersey Shore to blame for these preconceptions, a
show I’ve never even seen. The late-aughts reality phenomenon so thoroughly drenched popular
culture in its particular breed of grime that years later, I can recall the castmember monikers “JWoww,” “Snooki,” and “The Situation,” while barely remembering how fractions work. I’m hardly alone in resenting Jersey Shore’s predominance; Governor Christie himself feared the show would give viewers the wrong idea about his home state, going so far as to call the cast “a bunch of New Yorkers.”

I shouldn’t be so surprised not to have stumbled into an episode of Jersey Shore (perhaps number 57, “The Meatball Stands Alone.”) Not only is it too early in the season for the influx of partiers to begin in earnest, the area depicted in the show is further east, on the Barnegat Peninsula. Here on the mainland, the sleaze is contained, manageable, charming rather than overwhelming. There are enough cheap psychics to predict your future years down the line, and liquor stores sufficient to drown your pain should you dislike what they foresee.

Roadside kitsch, an endangered art form in many parts of the country, is alive and well. A monumental concrete bottle of champagne, much faded in the sun, is available for lease as advertising space. Further down the road, the owner of a large estate has decided to decorate the high, salmon-pink walls surrounding his property with an eye-popping array of technicolor statues. Jesus and an archangel stand guard beside an immense Transformer. A family of dinosaurs prowls atop the gate. Presiding over the rest of the statuary is a replica of the Statue of Liberty, her presence reinforcing the message painted onto the stucco walls in red, white and blue: “GOD BLESS AMERICA!!!” Also scrawled across the fence, this time in black lettering and employing a somewhat ominous ellipsis: “We are responsible for our own children….”
None of this compares to the figure that ranks among the most famous of New Jersey’s roadside attractions, the Bayville Dinosaur. The Dinosaur, named Virginia in a town-wide vote, is a 12-foot tall statue of a brontosaurus whose residence on Route 9 dates to the 1930’s. I’m not aware of her exact whereabouts, so when I suddenly glimpse her great white body in passing, I nearly drive off the road. Virginia has been the victim of several decapitations during traffic accidents over the years, and I now have to wonder whether she bore any responsibility for distracting the motorists who careened into her. She’s a sight to behold, even now, when she’s clearly seen better days.

When I pull over to get a better look, I discover that what I had assumed was a coat of white paint is actually shrink wrap; Virginia has been wrapped like a mummy, head to tail, in a plastic barrier. Her tail appears to sink into the wall of the now-vacant store behind her, suggesting that the two structures are somehow anchored together. He who leases the storefront acquires a decades old brontosaurus; I can’t imagine why the lot remains unoccupied. Past owners of the space have included a taxidermist and a paint store, and Virginia has undergone a number of makeovers for advertising and promotional purposes. Her current blank-slate appearance is due to her lack of a dedicated owner, while also acting as a protective measure until she can be restored. A bright orange sign posted beside her lists a P.O. box where citizens can “donate to the dinosaur fund.” This may sound like a low-level scam, but I don’t doubt the existence of a fund for the dinosaur’s preservation; Virginia is a much-loved figure in the community. Someone has drawn a simple cartoon face over the shrink wrap, giving Virginia a
friendly, welcoming demeanor. On her head, someone has perched a wide-brimmed straw hat festooned with a crown of flowers.

She looks awfully sweet, and she’s such a tough old broad I can’t help but root for her. If I had discretionary money to spend on such matters, I’d happily throw a few dollars Virginia’s way. Before I get back in my car, I give her a pat on her trunk-like leg and wish her luck.
II. The Jar on the Hill

In the town of Tuckerton, 25 miles south of Bayville, I stop at a retro burger restaurant for food and directions. It’s four in the afternoon but I’m too hungry to wait for an actual meal time, and more importantly, I’m a little lost. Or at least as lost as one can be while largely following the course of a single road. I’ve been wanting to see the Pine Barrens, a region of forested coastal plain covering 22% of New Jersey’s land area. The vastness of the Pinelands should have made it easy for me to find, but the fact that the territory is spread throughout seven counties and numerous parks and reserves has already gotten me into trouble once. I thought it would be sufficient to type “Pine Barrens” into my GPS and it seemed to agree, giving me directions that led me to a more heavily wooded stretch of road. I became suspicious when my surroundings changed to affluent-looking suburbia, and progressed to baffled when the device told me my destination was approaching on the right. I looked over to see a white sign embossed with gold script: “Pine Barrens Golf Range.”

I was attracted to this restaurant mostly for its orange and white striped awning; striped awnings draw me like a pig to a trough. I only see after I park that it’s a drive-in. A middle aged woman in a polo shirt and jean shorts comes out to greet me, menu in hand.

“Here to eat?”

“Oh, um, are there tables inside?”
I’ve been in the car all day and would welcome the chance to stretch my legs. I’m also ignorant about drive-in etiquette and would spend the entire meal worrying about whether a larger-than-usual tip was necessary, given that I’d made my server walk outside so many times.

She nods and beckons me in, and the restaurant’s interior is revealed to be campier than Cry Baby. There’s a checkerboard floor in the same garish tangerine-cream as the awning, an inoperational record player, and shiny plastic busts of Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean set atop the ice cream cooler. The radio plays a parade of oldies, but no recognizable hits. Every song sounds familiar at first, but then turns out not to be. All the ingredients are there (the guitar licks, the doo-wops and da-doo-ron-rons, a lot of yelping about “my baby, she’s just alright with me”) but something’s missing. Possibly licensing permission.

I notice the restaurant’s name for the first time, Stewart’s. Is this the same Stewart’s as the upstate New York Stewart’s, with their apple cider donuts and chocolate milk? When given a choice between multiple gas stations, I was raised to believe the one attached to a Stewart’s was the only acceptable selection. They serve ice cream too, and boast a certain throwback charm; perhaps this is an over-the-top mutation of the Stewart’s I know and love, the stage-four to the convenience store’s stage-one. But when I ask my waitress if the two are affiliated, she merely fixes me with a stern look.

“No.”

Well if they didn’t want to be asked, perhaps they shouldn’t have chosen the same name as another food chain, and for that matter nearly identical logos. Maybe they once were
affiliated and there was a schism. Maybe the New Jersey Stewart’s and the New York Stewart’s are locked in a Hatfield’s and McCoy’s-style feud going back generations. Blood, perhaps, has been spilled on both sides. The Pine Barrens possess a rich mythology of paranormal oddity and criminal lore. I’ve heard their untamed forests and swamps have long been a popular dumping ground for the corpses of mobsters and innocents caught up in Mafia warfare. Perhaps the Stewart family too knows where the trees are thick enough, the waters deep enough, that no one will find you for months.

I am reminded of why I stopped in the first place, and I ask my waitress, Carol, about how I could best get to see some of the Pine Barrens around here. She plunks down my towering mug of cola, puts her hands on her hips, tries to get me to name a more specific destination, soon comes to the not-unfair conclusion that I’m either a moron or a troublemaker. At last she suggests the Edwin B. Forsythe Wildlife Refuge, a protected area of marshland and pine forest mere minutes away. I thank her and copy down the directions in my phone, knowing otherwise I’ll forget them in the time it takes Bizarro-Chuck Berry on the radio to finish singing about Jimmy B. Badde. The last thing I’d want to do is wind up back here for another round of guidance, Carol’s eyebrows receding further and further into her perm as I try to explain how I’ve managed to get so turned around.

In spite of her impatience with me, I can’t help but like Carol. She reminds me of a lot of the older women I’ve worked in restaurants with, gruff but not unkind. I always seemed to get along better with them than I did with the people my own age, the other students working for the
summer, counting the days until they could hang up their aprons and get back to their lectures, or in my case, intimate workshops on writing the natural world. I think we’re all a little less critical about people who aren’t our direct peers. Monica, a ruthlessly efficient server of nineteen with a long blonde braid and an *oh-honey* smile, could smell the lingering high-school-nerd on me, while all older Pam saw was another twenty-something twit who was slightly afraid of her, enough to bus her tables without being asked. Karen was softer, almost motherly, and fond of asking whether I had a boyfriend every day as we rolled silverware, offering her gentle pity when the answer remained no. I could see me and Carol having a good thing going if I were in the trenches alongside her, but she clearly doesn’t agree: when she delivers my meal, it comes with a side of potato salad, rather than the sweet potato fries I’d asked for as a substitution. I point this out in a comically apologetic voice and Carol leans on the table to better glare at me.

“Do you want me to go talk to the kitchen?”

“No! No, this is great. Thank you!”

While not great, the potato salad is pleasantly mediocre, and the shrimp po-boy I’ve ordered is exactly the monstrosity I’d hoped it would be— an enormous buoy of a roll, bread dry and puffy, packed with battered and fried shrimp doused in spicy mayonnaise. The smattering of cole slaw that acts as their bedding is the meal’s only gesture towards a vegetable.

As I eat and drink, I watch the only other patrons in the room, a family of four who arrived as I waited for my food. It’s a father with two girls and a boy, the same amount of siblings as my family but with the genders reversed. I have to doubt that my brothers and I ever
looked this wholesome. The girls, whose ages I would put at around seven and thirteen, wear sweatshirts from school athletic teams, and have the tan-legged, ponytailed manner of enthusiastic participants. My brothers never played sports, and I only joined the middle school soccer team to hang around my friends. Either I was absent on the day the rules were explained or they assumed we’d all been born knowing them, but never for one moment did I have any idea what I was doing on that field. When the people adjacent to me ran in any direction, I followed at a slightly slower pace as if tethered by a long leash. I only broke rank to get out of the ball’s path when it looked as if it might be headed my way. If this family has anything in common with my own, it’s that they appear to have shunted their vacation a few weeks out of season, when the rates go way down.

I finish eating and leave an overlarge tip for Carol in the hopes that she will retroactively decide that she likes me. To her credit, her directions are note-perfect, and I find the right turnoff for the wildlife refuge without incident. I creep down a back road for about a mile before reaching a little gatehouse, painted the shade of cocoa-powder brown preferred by forest rangers, national parks, and campgrounds. No one is manning it today, so I drive on until I reach a kiosk with maps, informational brochures, and a sign explaining that anyone continuing past this point must pay the admission fee. This is done, apparently, on the honor system. You fold up five dollars in a little yellow envelope provided to you and drop it through a slit into a collections box. You then receive a permit which you must display on your person or in your car for the
duration of your visit. Where you display it depends on what you’re here to do. There are hiking trails, which tempts me, but I decide on the self-guided driving tour for its novelty.

I begin driving, and am presented almost immediately with a staggering vista. The landscape is so flat that I can see for miles, a panoramic camouflage pattern of dry and wet land glinting a harvest gold in the afternoon sun. The Wildlife Refuge protects and maintains 47,000 acres of coastal habitat, primarily for use by migratory birds. The salt and freshwater marshes around me lie in well-travelled flight paths, and their continuing existence is key to the survival of a diverse number of species. Here, birds can eat, drink, bathe, and rest, and have only the minor inconvenience of gawking humans to contend with. The landscape’s most visible concession to human visitors is the boardwalk in front of me, slender planks painted a light gray and allowing those who want a closer look to walk out onto the water to watch the birds.

There’s a small oval of dirt where I can park my car to explore before continuing on, and I step outside to inhale a wallop of salt and grass. It’s nearly intoxicating, and I wobble slightly up the steps to the boardwalk, which juts out further than I could see from the car. As I walk on, reading the inscribed names of the donors who made the walkway’s construction possible (including one “Sassy,” a Golden Retriever) my attention is drawn to an odd geometric squiggle on the horizon line. From where I’m standing, this is the only interruption to the view’s extraordinary flatness. I almost resent it for the way it draws the eye, when the level topography of the land ought to democratize my vision. Nonetheless, when I spy a pair of binoculars
mounted to the boardwalk’s rails, the jagged line on the horizon is the first place I steer them. I turn the knobs until the image focuses. And, there. A city.

Atlantic City.

The whole time I’ve been in New Jersey, I’ve been trying not to drive straight to Atlantic City. The place holds a weird fascination for me. Even in high school, when there would have been nothing there for me, I was always threatening to make the trip. For my eighteenth birthday, my nineteenth birthday, any number of spring breaks, I floated the bait. No one ever bit with much interest, and reasonably so—a trip to Atlantic City is hardly the stuff of teenage dreams. Cancun, absolutely, Miami, yes, even Key West, but Atlantic City was where people’s creepy uncles went. I had no good reason for my desire to visit, having never done a speck of research. It was the idea of the place that I loved, the visions it put in my head: tacky glamour, faded glory, an unapologetic yet somehow genteel sleaze. I was drawn to the notion of hedonism, but in practice my generation’s diversions offended my sensibilities. I didn’t want teen nights at Tuxedo Junction, the only dance club nearby and a well-known incubator of underage drinking and police raids. I wanted con artists and speakeasies and gin and lemonade. I wanted it to be a scandal when I permitted a strange man to ride the Ferris Wheel with me.

After a time I largely forgot about Atlantic City, and it only returned to my consciousness through news articles reporting on its current troubles. The city is on the verge of bankruptcy, and Chris Christie’s prominence on the national stage of late has only shone a brighter light on the issues affecting his home state. This had been on the periphery of my mind as I planned my
trip to New Jersey, and it’s true that I’ve been winding steadily closer to Atlantic City all day.

But I guess I’ve been reluctant to do anything that might threaten the fantasy version of it I hold in my head. And conversely, I’ve wanted to derail my assumptions against New Jersey as a state. Yes, it can smell questionable from the highway, and no, having to drop my parents off at the Newark airport recently didn’t exactly help, but the state has done nothing to me that earns being written off in its entirety. I can’t think of a better place to chase away my biases than right here.

The driving tour is eight miles long, and leads visitors on a scenic loop through the refuge. Numbered road markers correspond to a list of facts in the brochure, so drivers can stop at points of interest and learn more about what they’re seeing. Past the boardwalk and the dirt lot I’ve just left, the road narrows to a single strip, surrounded by water on either side. If I avoid looking down, it isn’t too hard to pretend I’m some vehicular Jesus. I learn from the pamphlet I grabbed from the kiosk that I’m driving on a manmade sandbar, which was originally constructed for the laying of railroad tracks. It’s just wide enough for one car to pass another if it’s driver wishes, for some reason, to go faster. The posted speed limit is fifteen miles per hour but I’m barely going a third of that; there’s too much to see. This place looks like a luxury resort town for birds: ample opportunities for drinking and dining, a diverse but uniformly handsome crowd. I’ve been listening to a local station, 105.7, The Hawk, Classic Rock for the Jersey Shore, but I turn it down to avoid spooking the actual fowl outside my window. A glossy ibis, leggy and sleek, struts through the shallows, striking poses every time she dives for a fish. A handsome pair of black ducks takes their little flock for a swim, the ducklings bobbing like they’ve only just
started swimming lessons at the Y. A single enormous goose peers about obsequiously, some wealthy dowager with an opinion about everyone. A peregrine falcon swoops over the beach, chest puffed out, showing off the size of his wingspan.

The landscape has the appearance of an unspoiled paradise, a corner of the world untouched by man, but this is far from the truth. A point of emphasis in the brochure is the incredible amount of human work that goes into maintaining the refuge. The water to the left of the sandbar is fresh, and that to the right is salt, and the flow between the two is regulated closely through manmade assages. The introduction of fresh water into an area that is naturally saltwater is entirely a human intervention intended to provide habitat for as many diverse species as possible. Water levels are documented and adjusted as needed, drawn down in the springtime to maximize plant growth and re-flooded in the fall. The more I read, the more I see the landscape around me not as a marvel, or a miracle, but a work. A work of engineering, clearly, but there is also something artful in it: the careful molding of the sand and mud, the choreography of the water’s movement, the blocking given to the birds to move this or that way according to the needs of their species, the aesthetic beauty of the final scene.

At the same time, it cannot be ignored that none of this would have been necessary in the first place without human development. All this work, all those donation dollars, all these triumphs of scientific understanding, to restore an ecosystem that was operating fine before we got here. It’s this I’m reminded of when a Jeep’s worth of aviator sunglasses and buzz cuts zooms past me at well over fifteen miles an hour. I can’t understand why anyone would pay for
the privilege of being here if they didn’t want to observe their surroundings; did they get lost looking for birds they could shoot at? Then again, maybe I’m too generous in assuming they paid. I’m happy to have no one behind me, though, and put my car in park when I come to an observation tower. I climb four flights of rickety stairs, and marvel again at how much variety can be contained in one view: the scrubby marsh grasses, sturdy little plants capable of having their roots submerged in saltwater while baking in the sun; the brackish freshwater pools sunken into wide plains of mud; the forests back on the mainland, frazzled pines and shaggy bushes; the deep ocean water in the opposite direction, stretching south to... Atlantic City.

I can’t resist another peek, and this time the mounted binoculars are already directed straight at the swath of buildings without my having to adjust them, as if the last person here before me had the same idea, or the same temperament. I think some people are drawn to the natural and some are drawn to the manmade. The former visit new cities and walk until they find a park, collect leaves and seashells as souvenirs on vacations, look past the buildings and see the mountain ranges behind. They are only inside until they can get outside; they feel their lives take place there.

I love the outdoors, but I have never been oriented this way. I look at Hudson River School paintings of spectacular wilderness and zoom in on the sole human figure, who was only placed there to show scale. When I come across decomposing trash on hiking trails, I find myself trying to figure out what it was. I go to the beach and read all the text on the signage before settling in to watch the waves. One of my favorite poems, Frank O’Hara’s “Meditations in an
Emergency,” contains a passage to this effect: “I can’t even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there’s a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life. It is more important to affirm the least sincere; the clouds get enough attention as it is and even they continue to pass.” In my copy, this is underlined with a heavy hand.

I wish I could look at the birds without seeing the buildings behind them, but through my eyes, Atlantic City’s presence frames everything else. *This was here before that*, but it doesn’t seem to matter. Wallace Stevens places a simple glass jar upon a hill in “Anecdote of a Jar” and the entire landscape changes: “It made the slovenly wilderness/Surround that hill./The wilderness rose up to it,/And sprawled around, no longer wild...It took dominion everywhere.” The Wildlife Refuge is far from being true wilderness, is itself largely man-made, but through its more obvious artificiality the city takes dominion. For me at least, nature surrounds it, and not the other way around.
After curving through more marsh, the sandbar deposits me back onto the mainland. The dirt road doesn’t get any wider, though, as I crawl past meadows, ponds and trees. My brochure asks me to take note of a recently razed area, adopting a slightly defensive tone to explain that periodically cutting back growth actually contributes to wildlife diversity. As the water caters to migratory birds, the ecosystem here will attract rabbits, butterflies, and deer.

The final portion of the driving tour lands me in the long-anticipated Pine Barrens, bushy and tangled, the slim-trunked trees somehow more delicate looking than I’m used to. Or perhaps that’s just my new knowledge of how much work goes into the creation of a place like
this. Ecosystems left alone will not necessarily work themselves out, and that vulnerability only
adds to my wonder at the life flourishing just outside my car. This seems to be one of the tenets
that guardian institutions like this thrive on: that there is an inherent beauty in rarity, that it must
be cherished, and that the rarest thing is to be the most protected of all. I don’t disagree with any
of this, but as I exit the grounds of the refuge I already have my sights set on a new landscape. I
pull onto the road heading south, off to affirm the least sincere.

III: Maybe Everything That Dies...

Possibly I’ve been reading too much lately about Atlantic City’s hard luck, its financial
woes and casino closures, its long history of vice and corruption, because everything I pass as I
get closer to the city seems to signal doom. The Bayview Motel, a single-story blue structure that
may have recently had some charm, looks like it’s been bombed. The windows are boarded up,
the lot is filled with rubble and rusted pipe, and every surface is tagged with graffiti. A series of
city signs listing each area’s attractions includes two signs that have been scrubbed of all text.
Marina, Uptown, white rectangle, white rectangle, Downbeach. On one, I can just make out the
remnants of the word “Midtown,” and I’m left to conclude that the entire district has vanished.
The Atlantic City Expressway is flanked by billboards at regular and frequent intervals, and
seeing them lined up two-by-two like that makes them look like they’re expecting a flood.
They’re already on stilts, to raise them above the soggy coastal plain on either side of the road,
and some of the stilts are already submerged in water. One of the first billboards I see says
“DECLARE BANKRUPTCY NOW,” a message targeting individuals rather than the city itself, but still a questionable welcome to new visitors. Many of the billboards are out of use, some listing a phone number to “ADVERTISE HERE,” others simply more white rectangles, hanging against the sky like sharp-edged clouds. Just when I think things can’t get any worse, I see a mangled rabbit lying dead on the shoulder. The sun is beginning to set, and as if on cue, The Hawk begins blaring “Don’t Fear the Reaper.” Did I tell my mother I loved her before I left?

I think there’s an old saying about this—the visitor with only doom and gloom in her mind sees every artifact along the Atlantic City Expressway as apocalyptic. It is worth noting that most of the other billboards undercut the drama, and feature messages more in line with the image the city wants to sell: “25,000 Dollar Slot Tournament, Trump Taj Mahal”; “GoldenNuggetCasino.com, Got a little game in you?”; “Affordable Family Fun, Left Lane, Jolly Roger Marina”; “The Wild Wild West Casino at Bally’s, $3 Beers, $4 Shots, $5 Table Games, Live Entertainment Every Weekend!”; “Whitesnake, The Greatest Hits Tour, July 1”; a rum ad with women laughing on a beach; a vodka ad with women laughing at a bar. These soon grow monotonous, especially to someone not here to drink or gamble, and I’m left without diversion to wrestle with my sense of unease. All I can do is watch the city get closer and wonder at the nakedness of its expanse, at the gaping holes in the skyline between each monumental casino.

As soon as I enter its borders, the road splits. Welcome, which casino was it you wanted to go to? Harrah’s, Borgata, and the Golden Nugget are this way. Keep straight for Caesars,
Bally’s, Resorts, Tropicana, and the Trump Taj Mahal. The roads twist into pretzels to guide cars into one or another resort complex, then splinter further as visitors are presented with an extensive menu of options: valet parking, self parking, hotel parking, casino parking, spa parking, nightclub parking, restaurant parking. But which restaurant? Every casino is required by law to have at least five, of diverse enough character that the guest may forget he has not actually left the building in a week. Invariably, there will be: a celebrity-chef steakhouse with a wannabe-mafioso clientele and serving sizes in the half to whole cow range; a “high-end” Italian restaurant appropriate for a romantic night out, so long as your idea of romance is pretending you’re not eating at a gussied-up Olive Garden for double the price; an all-night burger joint where losers salve their monetary wounds with cheap beer and chicken wings, and a breakfast spot where the same individuals can receive an IV-drip of coffee, the antidote to last night’s medicine. Lastly, a “lounge” peddling 10 dollar cocktails and bar food, served by young women in miniskirts who, if you tip well enough, will do a half-convincing job pretending they don’t hate you. The room will be kept dark at all hours of the day and cold as an icebox year round. Without strong presence of mind, a person could get quite addled, coming in for just one drink between games and emerging from the fog two years later with only vague memories of his past life. *There was a tall building I went to every day at the same time, wearing a suit, and...a little boy. What was it he called me? Daddy?*

Having no desire to get lost in the complex infrastructure of a resort property, I stay on the main road going straight. My surroundings calm. Suddenly there are no restaurants, no shops,
no buildings of more than three stories, only houses. Some are new constructions, crisp, beige
condo complexes sprawling across multiple blocks, while others look older, faded, frayed.
Hovering over all of them are the high-rise casinos on the other end of the island, the ones that
reign over Atlantic City’s iconic boardwalk. I’m headed in that direction now, and I turn right
when I hit the most built-up thoroughfare, Pacific Avenue.

The street names here will be familiar to most visitors, even those coming to the city for
the first time. This is for two reasons. First, Atlantic City was built by ambitious men,
prospectors and investors who saw big things in the resort’s future. It would be Philadelphia’s
playground first, since this was the nearest big city and the first one to receive rail access, but
this would only be the beginning. As it grew and developed, Atlantic City would become the
East Coast’s playground, and finally America’s playground, a destination for people the country
over. It was with this goal in mind that the city was given its grandiose name, and the streets
were christened with the same intentions. The streets running north-south are named after the
states (Texas Avenue, Florida Avenue, Mississippi, Delaware, South Carolina…) and those
running east-west are named after oceans and seas (Atlantic Avenue, Pacific Avenue, Arctic,
Mediterranean, Adriatic…) In invoking locations from all over the country, and indeed all over
the world, the men who built the city hoped to spark a feeling of responsibility in American
citizens. Atlantic City was to be our resort and in some sense we’d be its stewards.
The second reason for Atlantic City’s uncanny familiarity is its connection to the popular board game Monopoly. I became aware of this connection recently, when I spoke to my mother about a trip she and my father made to the city years ago.

“You know, they built it to look like the Monopoly board.”

I had to pause a moment to take this in. They built a city to look like a game?

“I don’t think that’s right, Mom.”

It wasn’t; my mom had it backwards. Monopoly was designed based on Atlantic City, and many of the game’s properties are pulled directly from locations in or near the city. This is much more reasonable, but I almost want it to be true that what I’m driving through is a blown-up version of a board game about destroying your opponents financially and spiritually. This would cause the city to make sense to me in a way it just doesn’t right now. It would excuse the blocky houses, the soaring high-rises plunked down so arbitrarily, the terrain so flat that nothing can be hidden from anything else, the sense that every piece of architecture could be pushed off the board with a sweep of the hand and the game begun anew. I will allow that a toy can be constructed this shoddily, but I expect more from a city.

Along with the boardwalk, a block south of here, Pacific Avenue is the center of tourist activity in Atlantic City. Five of the city’s eight remaining casinos lie on this strip, competing for visitor dollars and my attention through shameless acts of decoration. The Trump Taj Mahal has white and gold elephant statues and enough Orientalist ornamentation, all arched doorways and gilded fluting, to qualify as a hate crime. 1920’s-themed Resorts boasts an Art Deco-on-uppers
facade. Caesars, their name rendered in the triangular font universally favored by Greek diners, features columns topped with men in togas and a prominent statue of four horses galloping. All they need is riders and they’d make an excellent harbinger, and as I stare at them I dare the Hawk to start playing “Bad Moon Rising.” Or “All Along the Watchtower.” Or “Gimme Shelter.”

There are an awful lot of classic rock songs about the apocalypse.

It is impossible to look at these casinos, still lit-up and glittering if a bit shabby, without seeing the neighboring ones that have already shut down. Their husks loom, hollow and sombering, over the entire strip. One, a white and gold structure occupying an entire block, has been scrubbed of every trace of its branding. The lack of signage amidst all this symbolism gives it an eerie look, and trying to see through the mirrored black windows is like peering into a void.
This ought to be prime real estate, but no one is buying. Of the twelve casinos that once operated here, four closed their doors in 2014: the Showboat, the Atlantic Club, Trump Plaza, and, after a mere two years in operation, the 2.4 billion dollar Revel. This last organization was painted as the city’s great white hope, a higher-end facility that would bring the luxury of Las Vegas to the shore. Local leaders were confident it would be a success, even as its largest investor bailed and construction stalled. More lenders were brought in, and Chris Christie offered millions in tax breaks to incentivize its completion. The resultant structure is striking. Its tower is the tallest in the city and the second tallest in the state, and the facade facing the beach is a glimmering silver wave reminiscent of the Guggenheim Bilbao. Ultimately though, Revel was no
more immune to the economic downturn still choking the city than any of the older, dingier casinos that had been Atlantic City mainstays. It has only set itself apart by leaving a more beautiful corpse.

The casinos were supposed to be the city’s salvation, but it hasn’t panned out that way. If you take a wide view of Atlantic City’s history, you could argue that it has been in decline, albeit an interrupted decline, ever since its Prohibition-era heyday. As a site of excess, Atlantic City thrives on scarcity in the rest of the country. Its most prosperous periods have come when it could quench appetites that were not being sated elsewhere. During the Victorian era, the city was an oasis of gleeful vice amidst a desert of stringent morality. During Prohibition, it was a place to drink and gamble without fear of repercussions from corrupt city officials, who themselves made millions off of illegal pursuits. The city fell on hard times when increased automobile and later plane travel gave vacationers their pick of exotic destinations. In 1976, becoming the first place to legalize gambling on the East Coast sparked Atlantic City’s most recent resurgence, but the rapidly increasing number of casinos in neighboring states has caused another backslide. The city has only ever been as successful as it is unique. When competition has been introduced, time and again it has floundered.

Just a block removed from the casinos, the character of the street changes. There are several business offering check cashing and cash for gold, and the hotels look like they rent by the minute. Empty lots and boarded-up shops abound. This is something else my mother mentioned to me about her visit: how obvious it is that very little tourist revenue ends up
benefitting the local economy. This would be true in the best of times, but the recent casino closures have hit residents harder than ever. Thousands of people lost their jobs and the present unemployment rate in Atlantic City is about thirteen percent, one of the highest in the country. Thirty five percent of people live below the poverty line, and many of them do so in the direct shadows of the Trump Taj Mahal or Caesars.

The boardwalk represents my last hope that anything about Atlantic City could live up to the fantasies I had about it in high school. I take a left at the next side street to find somewhere to park and get directions on my phone. I know where the boardwalk is because it wraps around the beach, but I’m not sure how to access it. In Connecticut, we surround our beaches with enough security to fortify the Pentagon. There’s never any public parking within a mile, and if you don’t have a resident sticker on your car, parking in a beach lot will run you up to twenty dollars a day. If my friends and I want to go to the beach, we have to plan it like a heist. We’ll find a nearby house whose occupants seem to be away, park close enough to their driveway that we won’t get ticketed but far enough that no one will call the police, and walk an extra half mile to avoid making eye contact with any gatekeepers as we finally arrive at the shore.

So I’m flummoxed when it seems I’ve turned, by chance, onto a residential street that directly accesses the boardwalk. I can see the stairs leading up to walkway, and the sand beyond that. I’m unused to famous attractions being this easy to get to. Why is there so much parking available? Why didn’t I have to fight for a space? And why, if this is oceanfront property, is the housing in such disrepair? Every house on the block seems held together by glue, paint chipping,
gutters listing. When I park my car and get out, I notice that the sidewalks are crumbling. I walk up the steps, and I’m on the boardwalk. The sun is setting over the beach and the sky is a gorgeous lilac, but this is the only spectacle within view. My confusion deepens. Where are the piers, the arcades, the restaurants? There’s not even anyone here but me. I walk for a little and the scenery doesn’t change, and I have to conclude that I’ve come to the wrong part of the boardwalk. I’m looking for the boardwalk boardwalk, the one with all the stuff on it, the one with people strolling, the one where you can buy saltwater taffy and get pushed around in a wicker stroller like an overgrown baby. The appeal of the boardwalk’s famous “rolling chairs” in a mystery to me, but maybe if I could see them for myself I’d understand. Maybe if I could find the right stretch of boardwalk I’d understand why anyone would want to come here for fun.

I get back in my car and turn onto Pacific, headed back towards all the casinos, dead and alive. I figure I’ll just choose the liveliest looking side street, find a place to park, and return to the boardwalk from there. The problem is that the casinos dominate these side streets, and I don’t want to get sucked into any of their maze-like parking complexes. Before I know it, I’m all the way at the end of main thoroughfare, and all that’s left in front of me is a wasteland of vacant lots. The city zones these areas for gargantuan casinos, but those aren’t getting built right now, so the land sits empty. I can’t make a right turn here and there’s nothing straight ahead, so I take a left. I’m now pointing away from the boardwalk, but I see towers and lights a little ways in the distance and remember the other three casinos at the opposite end of the island. Maybe the boardwalk wraps all the way around the coast and I’ll find more of it over there.
With the glowing facades of Harrah’s, the Borgata, and the Golden Nugget as my North Star, it should be easy to find my way to that side of the island. And indeed, it would be, if I weren’t trying to navigate through an inner-city neighborhood where every street, seemingly, is a dead end. The lights are straight ahead of me, I can see a path to them, but again and again I’m not permitted to take it. I keep having to double back, turn the wrong way so I can turn the right way later, approaching my destination sideways. The major boulevards of Atlantic City do all the work for you if you’re a tourist, feeding you into the adult amusement park of your choosing. You don’t have to go outside for your entire stay if you don’t want to, and if you choose to leave there’s a jitney to shuttle you from casino to casino. The experience of driving on these streets, in this neighborhood, is radically different. I feel like I’m being fenced in at every turn. There are hardly any streetlights. When two young children run in front of my path, its more difficult than it should be to see them. I worry over not having seen a single playground in the city, or a park, or a school, or a public library. For that matter, I didn’t see any buses, hospitals, or police stations. These services do exist, but little attention has been given to their improvement and they’re struggling along with the rest of the city. The Atlantic City police and fire departments recently agreed to work for free for three weeks when the city couldn’t afford to pay them.

I finally make it out to one of the major roads, and it leads, of course, to the three Marina District casinos. The Golden Nugget is gold rush themed, if you can stomach the irony. The Borgata, with its cake-slicer tower lit up with purple stripes, is the most successful in the city, and lacks the exhausted look many of the others have. Harrah’s high-rise is currently alive with
projections many stories high, swirling patterns and neon lights and logos. And then, in huge blocky text, “THURSDAY NIGHT SWIM. THE POOL AFTER DARK.” How exciting this would have sounded to me in high school, and how repellent it sounds now. I can just see it: a cavernous, neon-lit chamber of a pool room, leathery-skinned men watching any women who wander in with hungry eyes, a couple celebrating their half-hour anniversary by making out in the shallow end, a jacuzzi slowly cooking people’s leftover bodily fluids.

I’m still rubbernecking, looking for a way to get closer without actually entering casinoland, when the road abruptly pulls away. In an instant, I’m on my way out, leaving Atlantic City with no warning and no fanfare. The road shows drivers their options, and if they take none of the bait, it dumps them back out again. If I don’t want to gamble, party, or drink, the city has no use for me, nor I for it. I could try to get back in, try to find whatever it was I was looking for, but the very thought of returning makes me feel ill. I’ve been mildly hungover all day, and I wonder if this accounts in any way for my emotional reaction to the city along with my physical one. It’s a state that always brings me to my most moralistic, perhaps because I’m being reminded, viscerally, that sometimes punishment clearly follows sin. This could be what’s happening to Atlantic City, too. It’s always been a place where greed and crime have been punished with a wink and a nod, and where if you do enough bad, they’ll just make you mayor.

Or make an HBO show about you.

But decades of sin have a way of adding up. There’s no denying the city has been visited by its share of plagues lately. The job losses, the crumbling of the great towers, the superstorm,
Sandy. On The Hawk, the traffic reporter announces slowdowns due to a fire raging at “Double Trouble Park” and I’m left to conclude that they’re just pranking me at this point. Or performing an homage to the original “War of the Worlds” broadcast.

And somehow, a New Jersey classic rock station has gone all day without playing one Bruce Springsteen song. It’s bad enough I didn’t make it to Asbury Park today; this at least I can rectify. I plug in my iPod and select *Nebraska*. With the casino lights vanishing behind me, I can’t resist the drama of playing “Atlantic City.” Bleak, but hopeful is a line Bruce Springsteen walks better than any artist I can think of, and this song epitomizes that. The chorus played no small part in the romantic ideas I harbored about Atlantic City in high school: “Everything dies, honey, that’s a fact, but maybe everything that dies someday comes back. Put your makeup on, fix your hair up pretty, and meet me tonight in Atlantic City.” It’s a promise of renewal the city has needed before, and needs again now as state and city leaders duel with rescue packages, unable to agree on the terms the money should come with, who should assume control of the city’s finances, or a path forward for revitalization. Meanwhile, residents wait to hear how their lives will change.

I’ve always been comforted by “Atlantic City’s” message of a future threatened but not extinguished by hardship, its deathless love, its nine lives, the howl in Bruce’s voice proving there’s some fight left in him yet. But now what I’m wondering is, whether some things are just supposed to stay dead. If Atlantic City springs back to life, as it has before for a little while at least, what will be the nature of that life? Work will still be scarce in the off-season, so
unemployment and underemployment will still be a problem. Donald Trump will continue to operate a casino whose theme is “India.” There will still be girls in tight little skirts slinging liquor. People will have fun. This has always been Atlantic City’s sole raison d’etre, from the first time a prospector looked at the wild expanse of Absecon Island and saw something he could make money off of. I want to know whether that man, that minor visionary, would be happy to see what his empire became. Or whether he feels, as I do, that we might all be better off flattening the whole thing and letting the wilderness grow back, or converting it to salt marsh and leaving it to the birds. The narrator of “Atlantic City” is a fighter, and I admire that. But he’s got a dead-end job and debts he can’t pay, the city around him is erupting in violence, and now he’s on the hook to some very bad men. His luck is dead and his love is cold. At what point should he simply leave town?
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