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Ecce Homo: Fully Loaded

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Bard College

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Ecce Homo: Fully Loaded

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

by
Wyatt Bertz

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2013

Acknowledgements:

Thank you, Mother, Father, and Tamsen. There is nobody better than you three.

Thank you, Susan Rogers, my dedicated academic advisor, for your patience, for enduring all that boring crap I submitted before I began this piece on the eve of April 20th. Thank you for nurturing my words, especially after we realized that I'd made a mistake and should've just been a music major.

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“I was amazed that I was able to write... that summer in Steinbach! It was only thanks to the long interruption that had been forced on me, after which the waters gushed forth, as they do from any obstructed pipe.”

– *Gustav Mahler on the composition of Symphony No. 2 in C Minor*
(“*Resurrection*”) (1888-94)

“All moral codes were abandoned. A wave of vice, pornography and prostitution enveloped the country. The streets became ravines of manslaughter and cocaine traffic, marked by steel rods and bloody, broken chair legs. *Je m’ens fous* – at last, I’m going to have a good time – was the motto.”

– *George Grosz on Paris’s glory years*

This work is purely fictional. You may think you recognize characters, events, or places – you may even find yourself asking if you don’t, in fact, partake in much of the same buffoonery as the characters on the following pages – but, be assured, all is a fabrication.

This work is *certified Adderall-free*. No “study drugs,” prescription or otherwise, were consumed by the author during the creation of this work.¹

Please direct business inquiries, PayPal donations, and petty grievances to wyattbertz@gmail.com.

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¹ This statement has not been evaluated by the FDA, as resources were insufficient, but remains true.

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I: Skipping Class

I am late for class. *Again*. Fuck.

Four years ago, I came to a little school on the Hudson River because I was hell-bent on getting a well-rounded education. Missing a *single precious minute* of it makes me want to chew my own hand off out of self-hatred. To make up for my complete

negligence, I have no choice but to speed recklessly on my way to campus. Triple-digit cruise control. It's not a big deal – the speeding. I know how to drive fast.

As I walk to my car, it occurs to me that I've already used most of the classic excuses – family emergency, domestic pet emergency, minor car accident, kraken attack, disgusting and extremely-contagious illness, bad hair day – so I start formulating a new explanation. Maybe something involving my car breaking down and me running through the woods:

“Yes, Professor, I was sure I'd probably miss the first hour of class, and yes, I was and am not wearing shoes, but I didn't at all mind vaulting all those felled trees and stepping out of the way of the garter snakes, which, contrary to common belief, hide beneath the leaves *not* because their skin is very sensitive to the sun, but because they are waiting to maim. Or kill. No, to tell you the truth, Professor, they only do this when in large groups, or when offended by the stickers on hikers' Nalgenes.² I'm alive, though, and grateful I could catch the last ten minutes of the lecture... yes, of course, I'll be sure to get the notes from somebody.”

Will he buy it? *Why the woods?* There's only one vicious road between town and campus, and on it, cyclists and runners are mowed down mainly by Subarus, so I think plausibility is in my favor. I'll linger after he dismisses class, cut in front of all the students waiting to ask pertinent questions about assignments, and conclude my explanation *really loud* so everybody knows that *I* am the most dedicated learner in the class. “Besides,” I'll add, “if attending this Academy has taught me anything, it's that being on time is *not* the politeness of the kings, but rather, a virtue of the bored.”

I feel bad about blaming my car, though. I'm nuts for cars, and treat mine so well that it wouldn't dare leave me stranded. Its name is Rainbow Fish – it looks black, but if you get your nose close enough to the body to take a good whiff (as I often do when I'm being punctual and bored), you might find yourself mesmerized by the shimmering majesty of ruby and emerald-colored flecks – millions, maybe billions, of them – beneath the clearcoat. *I* sure am. Though, to be honest, I don't think anybody else has ever noticed.

The day is marvelous. It's one of the first fair spring days, warm enough to entice the Hudson Valley's classic cars (there are many; the area has been affluent since the Vanderbilts used their wealth to erect the world's first bouncy castle, in nearby Hyde Park, at the turn of the century) to emerge from carriage-house hibernation. First order of business after hopping into Rainbow Fish: punch the traction control button so I can get the rear tires loose, kick up some gravel and Pollock the roads with skidmarks. Shift to first. *Ka-chunk!* Oh, the joy of driving a stick-shift machine! I zoom off feeling hopeful.

The only intersection in my small town occurs about a half-mile from a two-lane highway where I plan to speed like a black football star-and-sometimes-actor driving a white Bronco in '94. At the four-way stop, I rev the engine and drop the clutch for a rubber-roasting launch.

² Fitzsimmons, Morris. “Hiker's Death, Latest in String of *Thamnophis* Attacks, Baffles Herpetologists.” *Annals of Colubridae Research* 29.2 (2012): 46-48. Print.

Everything halts rather suddenly when I almost t-bone an old car painted tweetybird.

Even though *I'm* the one who has to mash my brakes to avoid the fluorescent clunker, which is still trying to commit to first gear as it creeps out to block my path, it's the *other* driver who decides to elevate a near-miss, for which *he is to blame*, into a territory battle. He's acting like I just pissed all over his wife and now he's got to defend his piss-soaked turf. He leaves his car in the *middle* of the intersection – it's as if there's a big marshmallow peep³ just *sitting* there, right in the *middle of where four roads meet*. Peep-commander starts waving his outstretched arms up and down more frantically than the autistic child I knew who wanted very badly to learn how to fly. He addresses me:

“Dude! *Dude!* Dude! *Do you see* what that *is?* *Do you know* what the *fuck* that *is?*”

Now the arm-waving is directed at his own car. Is this an enthusiastic invitation to ram into it? To dock my car's nose firmly in his drivers'-side-door? I'm thinking, *come on, dude, calm down. I need to go learn!* When other peoples' words try my temper, I think of the compassion treatise my wise Polish Grandmother shared with me:

“Wyatt, u catch more bees with honey.”

That's what her text message said. She'd been trying to lure the little plesiomorphic⁴ tribesmen with secretions from groundhogs' scent glands all those years, but given the great expense of the humane anal extraction – the Golombeks ran a cruelty-free farm before it was a hip thing to do – the apiculture could barely cover the farm's cable bill, and the beekeeper equipment was eventually sold off to the biology department of a nearby community college. By the time my grandmother realized what the secret was, it was too late to get the sting-proof suits back, but she still texted me her revelation, spelling “you” with a single letter, “u.” She may have had the bees all wrong, but like I said, she was pretty hip.

So, pissed as I am, I know I'll only be asking for *more* trouble if I take the remaining vial of Grandma's humanely-extracted gland secretions out of the inner breast pocket of my blazer and squirt Peep Commander right between the eyes. It might stun him temporarily, but then what would I do once he started singing all of Rolf's parts from *The Sound of Music*? At least, this is the reaction detailed by the most commonly-accepted scientific study of the side-effects,⁵ but in my experience, the victim more commonly chooses a number from *A Chorus Line* or *Spiderman: Turn Off the Dark*, and, obviously, I don't have the time to listen to anybody sing the Green Goblin's “A Freak Like Me Needs Company” ever again.

³Or so you might think if you forgot to wear your glasses. But, if you can read this, you don't need glasses in the first place.

⁴ A taxon that pays homage to ancestors. *Apis* does this by lighting small candles in a special comb in the hive.

⁵ For further reading, see Schwartzberg et al. “Effects of *Marmota Monax* Endocrine Secretion when administered, with force, to *Homo sapien*.” *Rhode Island Bureau of Rodent Research* 10.2 (2007) via Little, Brown. Print.

Aiming to be just as hardworking, but not so misguided, as my Polish grandmother, I lay some verbal honey on the guy:

“Man, I *really* love your car! That’s a... P-o-o... *po-orsche*, yeah?”

I say it like I don’t, but *really* want to, know what the fuck it is. His arm-waving slows to a gentle flap and his shoulders relax, unclenching themselves from his earlobes.

“Yeah! Fucking *right* it’s a *Porsche*.”

He walks over to my window with a gorilla swagger, as if the intersection that his car occupies is, in fact, named after *him* and not Clyde Stubblefield, the late-19th century paint-thinner tycoon who founded this town. Stubblefield Square, with its large marble statue of the industrialist eating at his breakfast-nook, dominates the center of Tivoli. He named the town after his first wife, but couldn’t even bring himself to drive through it after the wench left him, in a cruel twist of irony, for Benjamin Moore. Stubblefield had to take the longer, scenic route to avoid the town bearing his name, and was subsequently inspired to found the Hudson Valley School of Landscape Painting. History continued to beat upon the man, however, and after he died of a broken heart, his distant cousin Frederick Church claimed all credit for the school and its artists.

Porsche guy brings his face close enough to my window for me to notice that the gingery soul patch beneath his quivering lower lip is no precise accident. He asks,

“And what do *you* know about it? Do you have *any* idea what you’re *fucking with*?”

Because I know *damn well* what I’m *fucking with*, I have no choice but to let this guy totally *fucking have it*. No more honey. I begin,

“Looks to me like a Porsche 911, a short-wheelbase model, so it must’ve been built before ’69. Of course, we all know the paint code, it’s a period Stuttgart classic – *canary yellow!*”

Porsches came only in Popsicle colors back then: tangerine, lime green, lemon, raspberry, blue raspberry. Why have the festive, mouth-watering colors gone extinct, you ask? An internal memo from the era, recently uncovered by WikiLeaks, signed by director of Porsche Leipzig GmbH design, Ferdinand “Butzi” Porsche, reads, *Die Hippies essen jene Scheiße auf!* Which translates to, *The hippies are eating that shit up!* Today, Porsches, like most modern cars, are either black or white or maybe dark blue, because in this economy, who has time to take acid? Plus, bright car colors have been proven to distract people from responding to all their fucking e-mails.

I continue,

“And I can tell you that the engine underneath that pretty little *canary yellow* body is hanging *behind* the rear axle, giving the car a *very* desirable 48-52 front-rear weight distribution. *Obviously*, that engine is *air-cooled*.”

The air-cooled thing is a feature of old Porsche and Volkswagen motors that gives their owners some sort of moral high ground – like, even though the rest of the world

switched to water-cooling before Elvis stopped missing meals, being “air-cooled” is a quality of great merit on par with exclusive use of local-grown produce.

“And it appears you’ve added a ducktail spoiler to the engine lid.”

The 911’s design is kind of a sideways-teardrop shape, with a gentle, flat slope from the roof to rear bumper. As the model evolved, owners could switch out the smooth lid for a variety of winged ones. The most well-known is the “whaletail” of the ‘80s, which is indeed so cetacean that a fellow named Ahab suffered a nervous breakdown, and was later committed to an institution, after seeing a white one whizz by him on I-95. The “ducktail,” however, is just a little tuft of metal, discrete and tasteful. I add,

“The *Fuchs!* The chrome is chipping!”

Fuchs are classic chrome-on-black wheels. You see ‘em all the time on old Porsches. Have you ever seen Outback Steakhouse’s *Bloomin’ Onion*, or eaten one and lived to tell the tale? Imagine an aerial view of this with only five onion “petals,” each covered in chrome instead of breadcrumbs, set within a matte-black dish, and there you have *Fuchs*. I conclude,

“And, for Gods’ sake, the car needs a good wash! Do you store it in a shed with swine?”

The owner turns away from me and does an angsty little pace while catching his breath, then whips around to sneer, “Kid, kid – who the *fuck* do you think *you* are?” Froth spews emetically from his little red mouth as he rips into me, “That’s no *911*, kid. You got the last number *dead wrong*. You’re *looking* at a Porsche *912!*”

Even though it’s an instance of classic misidentification, the guy is just too proud to let me get away with it. Now I see that he is even more of a Porsche-purist-pedant than myself. As for the difference in numbers, the two cars – 911 and 912 – were visually identical, but the 912 was slower and inexpensive, making it more appealing to people both poor and old. Perhaps he can sense that I’m onto this, because he puffs up his chest and says,

“Yeah, maybe it’s a little slower, but my 912 weighs three-hundred-seventeen pounds less than a 911, so it handles better through tight corners. Do you know what *that* means, kid? That means it *better embodies the true essence of a sports car.*”

He can’t be serious! Why should *I* give a *fuck*? I’m in such disbelief that I have to whip my iPhone out of its holster and conduct some quick research. *Tap tap tap tap tap*. I am thwarted by my Wiki-mobile app, which confirms faultless math on the part of the Porsche-pedant.

I’ve dealt with some total boobs in traffic altercations before, but I’m only a minute and a half into this one and I get the sense there is something especially obscene

going on. Who *is* this unbearable homunculus, and how can he find time to memorize curb weights when, again, there's all those *fucking e-mails*⁶ that need responses?

He's dressed nicely enough. A tweed cap, brown and herringbone-patterned, shadows his small, close-together eyes and his nose, which is red and porous as a strawberry. The cap sucks. I think hat-wearing should be left to women; they are naturally better at it. If a guy is going to wear one, it should serve *some* sort of utility – like, if you're ice-fishing in Greenland in January, something with alpaca-lined earflaps is completely acceptable, or, if you're an on-duty school bus driver, I could see why you might need one of those hard-hats that holds two cans of beer. But mostly, I think hats for men have been ruined by a few notorious individuals and various pathetic stereotypes: cowboy hats have been out since John Wayne Gacy; feathered fedoras work only for the *Hair Club for Men* member who's memorized a night's worth of ez-cheese pickup lines; red or bright-orange beanies are hip if you want to blend in with urban hipsters. At least this guy's tweed cap has a sort of old-timey, friendly feel to it, as if to say, *Hey, can you imagine how tough things were for folks during the Great Depression? But what great hats they wore.*

He's also got an old-looking watch, a flannel jacket with suede elbow pads, light-blue jeans and brown chukka boots. He has a subtle, but sufficiently wet, lisp. He is tall, maybe in his mid-forties, and I notice that his jeans have been covered in some of the same peculiar-looking mud as his car. In the light, which is mirrored with the strength of a dozen suns by a labyrinth of Porsche windshields,⁷ the mud is dark-green and mushy-looking, like clumps of wet seaweed.

In response to his tedious weight explanation, I say, “Your math may be accurate, but how could you dirty up such a precious vehicle?” I cast a sad glance at the Porsche, which can't help but smile back at me, as its bumper and round headlights give it the expression of the happiest, dumbest duck you've ever seen.

“Well, you see,” he responds, “I've got a *couple*... different vehicles, and each occupies its own *niche* in my life. I use *this* old thing *mainly* for retrieving eggs from the ostrich pen at my farm.”

This is plausible enough; it's March, so there's still a month left in *Struthio camelus*'s mating season. The *unlikely* part of what he's just told me is that *he* is the one doing the “retrieving,” in light of the landmark 2008 Dutchess County legislature that deemed ostrich eggs, on account of their intense aphrodisiac properties, a Class-IV controlled substance.⁸ Sexologists specializing in *Struthio* were invited to conduct a taste-trial at Hyde Park's Culinary Institute of America, and though the results have yet to be published by *Cosmo*, preliminary findings suggest that the eggs of *Struthio camelus* indeed possess about eleven times the aphrodisiacity of raw oysters. Word leaked when a

⁶ See the case of the Beleaguered Academic. Their industry is the only one in America that permits its members to say, “Sorry I didn't get around to _____, I just had so many e-mails,” and still retain their jobs.

⁷ In this way, it has an uncanny resemblance to Jay Gatsby's Rolls-Royce

⁸ New York State. Dutchess County Department of Health. *Holomon vs. Weems*. Hearings 19th Cong. Tivoli Town Hall, 2008.

chef who forgot his hairnet in the kitchen went to retrieve it and overheard the distinguished panelists, who were raiding the fridge, discussing the quality of their copulation. Since then, the Hudson Valley has been so awash with egg-trafficking-related criminal activity that state troopers no longer have time to eat lunch.

The Porsche-driving carbuncle would *only* reveal his line of work if he were in possession of a County-issued ostrich egg permit. Obtaining the permit is a notoriously difficult process: to avoid a \$15 fine, the documents must be laminated within one week (seven days) of issuance and, once so rigidized, enable private entities to trade up to \$3500 worth (monthly) of embryonic matter from the order *Struthioniformes*. This excludes cassowaries, whose embryos have been shown to cause birth defects in domestic pets by proximity alone.⁹

I am starstruck. I have never actually come face-to-face with somebody who holds this prized piece of bureaucratic ingenuity. “No way! How long have you been licensed, and which one of this county’s many Napoleonic small-town-mayors did you have to kiss up to in order to *get* something like that?” I ask.

“Please, kid! I know, *personally*, almost *every* small-town mayor between here and the Adirondacks. I was on my way to deliver this morning’s bounty to a restaurant up the road when you almost *lost me my fucking load!*” He throws his arms in the direction of the town’s only upscale eatery, a place called Pan-Zur. I often wonder if this is a chic spelling of the piece of heavy, WWII-era German artillery.¹⁰ The restaurant’s owner claims not, but again, in this economy, who can be certain?

Ignoring the unfortunate hyphenated nature of the place’s name, I *did* try its ostrich-egg-garnished steak-frites not more than one week ago, and the egg consistency was quite satisfactory. Many fine-diners are afraid to try the delicacy, deterred by a warning that the FDA requires be typed in CapsLock on all menus of properly-licensed restaurants: “CALL YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU EXPERIENCE AN ERECTION LASTING LONGER THAN SIX HOURS.” Don’t the patrons know this is physically impossible, nothing more than a marketing ploy dreamt up by the suppliers?

And could Porsche guy *really* be Pan-Zur’s source? I’d pestered the waitstaff to get the name of the supplier, but people ‘round these parts are living in a state of fear and seldom open their mouths unless there’s complaining to be done. Rarely can one find reliable information about the eggs, or a personal dealer who’s ever on time.

Hooded middlemen on street corners are usually as close as anybody can get to the incubation operations. These ciphers are easily identified by their puffy white basketball sneakers and identically-colored sweatshirt/sweatpant combos (typically gray or navy blue). Be warned: eggs sold on the street are almost always “cut.” The middleman injects a syringe through any one of the teardrop-shaped pores in the eggshell, sucks out most of the powerful golden yolk, and replaces it with any number of nasty or benign cutting agents, the most popular being store-brand yolk from Hannaford.

⁹ Cavanaugh, Sally-Ann. “Household Pets Pay for Owners’ Gluttony.” *PETA’s Most Wanted*. 1 Nov 2009: 34-35. Print.

¹⁰ The *Panzer* tank, or *Panzerkampfwagen*

The eggs *are* a common topping at local pizzerias, but the pizzerias are not permitted to prepare them any other way than hard-boiling – the steam kills the yolk’s active agents. Not even for cash bribes can you get them fried or scrambled. The pizzerias were granted the hard-boil clause after aggressive lobbying on the part of the delivery-boys prompted an amendment to the county’s *Holomon vs. Weems* ruling. The Exotic Zygote Agreement of 2009 was drafted by the county legislature and signed by the Columbraro family, which controls the pizza racket on the east side of the Hudson River, and the Covello family, whose territory lies on the west side. The families once lived together in the same dark room, but a schism occurred after a local magazine called *Chronogram* started publishing scathing reviews of their chain restaurant, Don’s Gourmet, and no members of The Family could agree on which ingredient – sauce or cheese – to use less of. Vinny Columbraro, The Family’s *capo di tutti capi*, retained the rights to the name after a drawn-out, small-town court battle.

Now I’m out of my car, circling the Porsche, paying little attention to the long line of angry motorists stuck behind us.

“Let me see the goods,” I say.

Remember, the Porsche’s engine is located in the rear, meaning the space where golf clubs and dead bodies go in *normal* cars is found in front of the Porsche’s windshield. The tweedy egg-slinging cowboy unfastens the tan leather buckles that secure the hood and props open the long yellow panel. The hollow space between the car’s pontoon fenders is occupied by a tantalizing array of specimen jars. They are stacked stadium-seating-style, rows closest to the front bumper sitting low, nosebleeds up by the windshield. The eggs within the jars are sized golfball to *pamplermousse*, their colors variations on spotless ivory. They fall into two categories: *sativa*, the teardrop-pored variant, which can create cerebral stimulation, and *indica*, the round-pored variant, which is more likely to leave users stuck to the couch.

“So, what are the best strains?” I ask. “Let me get a whiff.”

“Oh, my *pleasure*,” Porsche guy says, reaching for a mason jar containing a softball-sized egg. “I didn’t spend all of the rainy season¹¹ incubating these just to keep their *genetic superiority* to myself!” He unscrews the tin lid, swirls the goo with his index finger, and thrusts the jar towards my nose. I lean down, take a sharp inhale. The first notes of the odor are pleasant and earthy, like hay or fresh-cut grass; then there’s a faint rubbery stench, like the bicycle aisle at Wal-Mart; the experience concludes with a reeking musk. I don’t think I’ve smelled such a potent specimen, and my legs tingle as I draw my nose away from the mouth of the jar.

“*Incredible*,” I whisper, impressed. “What do you call it?”

“*Ron Jeremy*,” he says, smirking. “So, seems like you know your cars *and* your eggs pretty well, kid!”

“Yes, of course. Two of the finest pleasures in my life, I reckon.”

¹¹ The time of year when monks retreat to the forest. They travel in packs and roto-till the fields with their bare toes, leaving fertile soil for egg-incubation

“Well! You’re lucky you caught me with my *Porsche!* I usually use my old Benz wagon to transport the goods, but it’s getting detailed right now. My dog threw up in it. I think there must’ve been some cassowary residue on some jars I bought on eBay.”

I just now notice the fluffy golden retriever, sitting upright in one of the Porsche’s houndstooth-cloth seats, licking the car’s vinyl dashboard.

“Yup,” he continues, unprompted, “That’s my Abby. Was getting coffee one morning at a Stewart’s¹² filling station and a woman came in, said she had *nine puppies* in her van... couldn’t resist taking one right on the spot.” The dog opens its mouth and deep-throats the tall shift lever.

“Is she insecure?” I ask. “I don’t think it’s the cassowaries. I think she has an eating disorder.”

“Don’t worry,” he tells me. “She’s seeing a specialist over at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck.” The round black gear knob, covered in mucus, looks like it has just been given birth to. “But look, let’s move these cars out of the street.” By this point the people stuck behind us seem to have admitted defeat, and are reclining backwards in their seats.

“Actually, let’s just leave ‘em here,” he says. Apparently, we also share the penchant for parking wherever we damn well please. This move I learned from Steve Jobs. He is probably *not* best remembered for bringing the turtleneck back from the closet it’d been hiding in since before the Brothers Gibb converted to falsetto, but more for his refusal to accept a CEO-designated parking space, preferring instead to spread his Mercedes diagonally across the “blue spaces” at Apple Headquarters. The Porsche driver continues,

“Kid, I think you’ve got what it takes to roll with me. What do you say to a coffee?” I suppose class can wait, so I follow the enigmatic fellow a block up the road to a café across the street from the *Panzerkampfwagen* restaurant.

The café is a hip spot. Kombucha is brewed on site; there’s a constant indie soundtrack that plays, sensitively, inside. We are greeted by the waitress, Marcella, a dreadlocked granola-y type who I suspect might have one of the sticker-laden Nalgenes known to provoke the garter snakes. She’s such a sweetie, though. The customers much prefer when she’s working the counter to the young gay couple that owns the place. Marcella makes all kinds of mistakes, which are always in the customer’s favor, when ringing up orders, while the male lovers are usually too busy bickering over how much flaxseed ought to go in the scones.

“Hel-lo, boys!” she says, blowing on a mug of yerba mate, which looks like pond scum. She is uppity as ever when addressing my new friend: “*Lawrence!* You back *already?* What can I do for ya?”

¹² The most family-friendly of all the local convenience stores. Mountain Brew Beer Ice, their in-house beer, costs 2.99 a six-pack. What could be friendlier? Even the kids can afford it! Have you tried it? Every batch tastes different; go now!

“*You* know,” he tells her, somewhat sinisterly. And, looking at me, “Don’t worry. I *got* this,” the emphasis curiously on the *how* instead of the *what*. “Let’s sit outside.”

We seat ourselves at a round metal table, whose wobble Lawrence fixes by taking off one of his boots, removing a hockey puck from underneath a *Dr. Scholl’s* insert, and placing it under the table’s short leg. Am I really going to miss an *academic lesson* to consort with a man whose height is a lie?

“I’m gonna cut to the chase here, Lawrence, cause I’m missing a class that, when factored into my yearly tuition, has put me out about \$1200 since we started talking. So I want you to tell me something. *Do you supply the pizzerias?* Do you work for Vinny Columbraro and *The Family?*”

“*Shhhh!*” He replies. Marcella has just arrived to set frothy, delicious-looking cappuccinos in front of us. But when Lawrence looks down at his, he makes another face like he’s just smelled piss – the deep-yellow, just-woke-up kind. I raise my own cup to my mouth, but its trajectory is disrupted by Lawrence’s open palm. The cup flies from my hands and the ceramic shatters against the “Today’s Specials” chalkboard.

“*No!*” he cries. “Wait! *Marcella!*”

She turns on her heels just as we are hit by her patchouli-scented wake.

“These little spoons – they’re mismatched!”

Marcella cocks her head like a dog that can’t figure out the right thing to say. “Send them back!” Lawrence snaps, looking skyward and shaking his head slowly. Marcella, meekly, collects Lawrence’s cup and the shards of mine. One frazzled dreadlock-end skims the froth on his cup; Lawrence, rapping his fingers against the metal table, still peering haughtily upwards, does not notice.

When she leaves, Lawrence leans across the table and says, “You *got* to keep quiet about that *egg shit*. What makes you think *you* know anything about what goes on with *The Family?*” Hastily, he adds, “Look, as far as the eggs go, it’s something I do on the side, and I *only* do business with restaurants that have at *least* a four-and-a-half star Yelp rating.”

“I thought the Columbraros had their hands all over *every* restaurant that deals with the eggs,” I say. “And if that’s not true, what’s to stop them from signing up for a bunch of fake e-mail addresses so they can maintain multiple Yelp accounts and throw the reviews to direct patronage in *their* favor?”

“Kid, kid,” he says, “you don’t have a clue what you’re talking about. After living in that one dark room for all those years, Vinny Columbraro is a complete luddite. He doesn’t even *own* a computer, and the iron-eyed old stalwart sure won’t hear any techno-babble from the little Columbraros. Besides, ever since he bought them each an iPhone 5 for Christmas, they’ve been too busy Instagramming pictures of cats and food to get involved in the racket.”

“The cats I understand, but I just *hate* it when people use social media to share their meals with you,” I say. Lawrence nods in agreement.

“What about Vito Covello?” I ask, trying to keep my voice down as college students start gathering around us. The campus shuttle stop, the county’s largest beanbag chair, is adjacent to the café. “I hear that the river’s west side is getting hit harder by global warming than us here on the east bank, and you know what happens to the ostriches when they get UCB overexposure.”

“I know,” Lawrence says, “They start crashing Rotary luncheons. But listen. Covello’s *out*. The feds have been monitoring him since he took the Albany exit of I-87 through the EZ-pass lane without an EZ-pass transponder. Last week, a neighbor tipped him off that he (this neighbor) had seen federal agents transferring some files from a computer in the Covello household to a little flash drive. Next thing you know, Covello’s on his way down to Rikers with the feds. Nobody knows what the charges are, but sales of anti-wiretap software are through the roof, because everybody wants to protect their Skype calls. There are two important lessons we can take away from this: keep all your loose change in your car, and *always* remember to empty the recycling bin.” Neither of us quite has anything useful to say after all of this, so we sit in silence while the news sinks in.

By now a crowd of twenty or thirty kids has assembled on and around the large beanbag chair. There’s a lot of hipsters: artsy, skinny, irony-loving. My college is comprised mostly of them. They are harmless, occasionally very talented, too easy to laugh at. A pair of them stand between our table and the car.

One hipster is wearing thick-framed glasses, a neon *Games of the XXXIIIrd Olympiad, Los Angeles California, 1994* sweater, skinny eggplant-violet jeans, and a pair of turquoise Reebok “kicks” that I recognize from an obscure ‘80s movie. The movie, *Bouncin’ on tha Streetz*, is a hipster favorite (this criteria requires the movie be one of two things: very obscure or made by Godard). It features a young Will Smith as a pick-up basketball player trying to make it in Miami. Smith’s character, O’Shawn “Sticky Fingers” Purdie, gives up the gangland hoop career after a string of double-dribble violations, but still manages to settle his enormous drug debt by patenting a mechanism that gives ordinary white people the ability to perceive rhythm.¹³ In response to the terrible reviews, Smith found and ate most of the existing reels, but the hipsters will swear to you that *Bouncin’*, not *Hitch*, was the defining moment of his career.

This first hipster removes a Moleskin notebook from a briefcase, and I overhear him say, “I’m finding it hard to believe that Hemingway wrote *A Moveable Feast* in one of these. I can’t *imagine* there’s *any* other journal so ergonomically bereft. My quill is always sliding off the pages and pricking me in the stomach.”

The second hipster has a mullet whose party end spills out from underneath a red beanie. He replies, “Don’t be so dense. You think Eliot could’ve written *The Waste Land* if he’d used a freaking *Mead*? God forbid! But, whoa, check *that* out.” He’s pointing at the Porsche.

“What is it?” asks the first hipster. I think it is the pursuit of irony that makes so many hipster males, overly-educated as they may be, talk like valley girls: “Wat ez et?”

¹³ See Steve Martin, *The Jerk* (1979)

“I don’t know,” says the friend. “Looks pretty postmodern, though.”

“Are you sure it isn’t metamodern?” says the first, reaching.

“Hm. Well, what would Kant say?” asks the second, completely unaware that metamodernity was developed 200 years after the death of Kant, a man whose theories of tidal currents and lifelong refusal to journey more than ten miles outside his hometown of Königsburg made him a minor attraction at the local *zirkus*.

“Hey, assholes,” Lawrence calls, “Kant would beat the *shit* out of you guys if he heard how completely fucking *stupid* you sound, and in between blows, he’d tell you how that *Porsche* expresses the indeterminate relationship between *imagination* and *reason!*”

The intellectual weenies look petrified, like somebody has just explained, in such a way that makes them understand, *for the very first time*, the concept of income tax. *Shit*, they’ll say to each other later, wondering how their worlds could’ve been turned upside down so suddenly. *We totally didn’t see this coming.*

When he receives no response, Lawrence throws his hands up in the air and says, “What, do I need to *spell it out for you?* That means it’s *sublime!*”

I notice that Lawrence has an uncanny ability to bring out the meekness in people. The hipsters scamper up the steps of the campus shuttle bus; Marcella sets down new cappuccinos – this time with matching spoons – and runs away.

“Wow,” I say. “I’ve written a lot of papers about Kant’s theories of the universe. But when you put it that way, I think I finally get it. After all, you can only learn so much from Wikipedia, especially when the end of their fiscal year coincides with the end of my semester and Jimmy Wales’s face is at the top of *every single article*, nickel-and-diming me for PayPal contributions. It’s like, God, I can’t even Wiki-plagiarize without feeling like I’m doing something *wrong.*”

“I know the feeling exactly,” Lawrence says. “Every time we don’t click the “donate” button, they get a little closer to becoming an *evil for-profit corporation!*”

“Exactly!” I say, so as to agree with the thick sarcasm he applies to “*evil for-profit corporation.*”

“What does “1PERCENT mean?” I ask, nodding at his license plate.

“*That’s* just a playful jab, you know, at people earning less than \$343,927 annually,” he says. “Because, get this: those *slackers* make up *99% of the country’s income distribution!*”

“You’re kidding! How do they *live?*”

“I don’t know,” he says. “It’s like they think there’s an endless supply of food stamps and soup kitchens in this country.”

“But there may very well be,” I say. “Some recent grads of my college were sitting around one day, smoking a joint and wondering, *What should we do?* Suddenly they realized they were outraged by New York City’s new health legislature, which – ”

“Hold it. *Garçon!*” Lawrence calls through the window. He’s finished his cappuccino and wants another. “*I’m a girl,*” Marcella reminds him, gently, when she brings the second cup outside.

“As I was saying,” I continue, “The law now prohibits non-profit food banks from serving *any* food that Mayor Bloomberg thinks is ‘ethnic,’¹⁴¹⁵ and the grads founded a program to create their *own* ethnic kitchens. I think they started with wokkeries.

“Unless they’re breaking the new law, wouldn’t that make them... *for profit?*” Lawrence asks.

“You know, the more I think about it, the less sense it makes to me,” I say. “They might’ve just been trying to tell us that they ordered Chinese food once. I really can’t remember; it was part of a *Life After the Liberal Arts* seminar put on by the Admissions Department and the Career Development Office. Plus, the microphone they were speaking into didn’t seem to be turned on, as factoring new batteries into the budget was totally out of the question.”

I finish my first cappuccino. Lawrence immediately grabs *his* first cup, which Marcella forgot to bus, and dumps its remaining centimeter of liquid into mine. A gift? In response to the tale of the possible entrepreneurs, Lawrence growls.

“Don’t they have *any* idea *why* Bloomberg did that? Let me tell you something: these days, they teach you at a *very early age* not to abandon old air-conditioners and refrigerators, because over many years their cooling units emit chlorofluorocarbons – ”

“I know,” I say, trying to interrupt. “CFCs. Freon. And don’t forget the polar stratospheric clouds.” I don’t need Lawrence to connect the dots for me. I know everything he’s about to tell me, but still, he pushes on, and I have to sit there and listen to him tout the same snoozefest that the science teachers have been giving us since high school:

“And everybody knows that, because ethnic food is often so spicy, it requires a great deal more air-conditioning energy to keep the kitchen staff from sweating into the curry. *Ip-so fac-to*, this speeds the wear and tear on the cooling parts – ”

I yawn. Abby shoots me a glance from the car: her big brown eyes say *I know. He just doesn’t stop.*

“ – and *everybody* knows how hard it is to dispose of an old air-conditioner or refrigerator in this economy.”

¹⁴ Melnick, Meredith. “New York City Soda Ban Health Fallout: Bloomberg’s Legislature Struck Down, Now What?” *The Huffington Post* 12th March 2013: D1-D3. Print.

¹⁵ Snellermann, Maurice. “Bloomberg Bounces Back with ‘Picky Eater’ Laws.” *The Huffington Post* 13th March 2013. D1-D4. Print.

This, I know from experience, is true. The paperwork can take weeks, and not one person who has called the *NYC A/C and Fridge Disposal Cust. Serv. Dept.* to check on the status of their request has been able to endure the hold music, selections from “Ring in the Holidays with David Lee Roth and Kenny G.,”¹⁶ long enough to find out if human beings exist on the other side, or if the support has in fact been outsourced to robots in India.

I finish Lawrence’s thought as if reciting from memory what I’ve been reading in my textbooks all these years. “So, put the two together and you realize that most ethnic restaurants have to dispose of their expired cooling systems frequently and unlawfully, this because their only employees are illegal immigrants who are scared of going through the disposal motions, *so*, we end up with all these rogue air-conditioners and refrigerators dumped secretly into swamps and ditches, and they’re spewing out the CFCs, which float up to the ozone layer, where the chlorine just goes to town and *eats*.” I stop to draw breath; keeping up with my tablemate is an aerobic exercise. Then, as if reciting directly from one of the many research papers I’ve written about the subject, I finish, “In conclusion, ethnic food, however delicious, indirectly contributes to the demise of our race. The man that the media calls ‘The Soft Drink Tyrant’ aims to slow this process by limiting ‘ethnic’ food consumption to the upper classes.”

“Yes!” Lawrence says, riled up. “And you know what, *that* – that story you just told about the recent grads – *that* is a perfect example of the complete *ignorance* of the liberal youth. They go out there with these *big* dreams about solving *big* problems, always trying to help the *little guy*. And what happens? They give a couple *little people* full stomachs; meanwhile, the ocean’s temperatures are *skyrocketing!*”

“Lawrence, believe me, I raised my hand during the question-and-answer section to tell them what a huge mistake they were making, but they’d have none of it. They only called on people who asked stupid questions.”

“I remember what college was like,” Lawrence says. “I went to *the* little school on the river, and I had to deal with the same shit back then. What dunce said that ‘there’s no such thing as stupid questions?’ Some excuse!”

I am unsure what he means, and ask, “Which school and which river was that?”

“Look, if you need to ask, you don’t know,” he snaps. “Maybe if *your* school wasn’t just *giving out* degrees, the kids might *actually* find themselves forced to learn something useful. Like how to approach climate change from a molecular level. I’m talking about the kids who spend science class daydreaming about a world where *everybody* has health care. Maybe then, those grads would’ve realized that Bloomberg wasn’t just trying to ‘dish one out’ to the minorities, but that he drafted those A/C disposal laws in the *interest of the environment*. I mean, come on, everybody knows the man’s as ‘gung-ho for green’ as Al Gore and Michael Moore combined.”

The thought of this creature makes me shudder and drop my mug.

¹⁶ Roxx, Charmaine. “Get Ready for the Best Christmas EverrrreeeaughOWOWOWOW!” *DLR Fan Club Monthly Newsletter* 1st November 2012: 30-32. Print.

“And you know,” Lawrence continues, not noticing that I’ve created a scene by burning my ankles, “That’s the only reason he even *voted* for Obama.” Are we really going to go here? Does this really have to happen *right here*? Abby raises a paw and scratches the windshield. *I wish I could help, but I don’t how to work the windows*, she seems to say.

“Seriously!” says Lawrence in response to nobody’s skepticism. “Bloomberg wasn’t even *going* to vote. Then Sandy hit, and Obama, *as usual*, promised everybody everything. Now we know that Barry’s nothing but talk, but Bloomberg sure ate it up. For all we know, the Mayor’s endorsement might’ve swayed the state’s voters and lost us the election.”

“That may be so,” I say. “But probably not. Remember when his opponent said, ‘I’m not in this race to slow the rise of the oceans. If the coasts go underwater, there’s plenty of room for us all in Utah’?¹⁷ I think *that’s* where *that* race ended.”

“Whose side are you *on*?” Lawrence asks, leaning in uncomfortably close. His breath is damp on my face and smells like soil.

“Hey, don’t get me wrong,” I say. “I always vote for the man with the more pronounced necktie dimple.”

I notice that Lawrence’s old watch is a pre-war Breguet. If you ask him about it, he’ll tell you that this makes it worth “more than most peoples’ souls.” Lawrence demonstrates unusually strong feelings about material goods – he complains to me about how, these days, you don’t need the looks, charm, gourmet foods empire, and driving prowess¹⁸ of Paul Newman to get a signature Rolex. “Just a couple years ago,” Lawrence moans, “the company negotiated with Melissa Joan Hart to license a watch ‘to commemorate the unprecedented 8-year run of *Sabrina*.’ At least, this is what the Rolex press release claimed.¹⁹ If you crunched the numbers at the time, you’d have realized the company was desperate for endorsement deals after losing a disgraced Tiger Woods to Calvinism.²⁰ The point is, Rolexes are *not* classy.”

I nod, and he *still* manages to interrupt:

“And I’ll bet you didn’t know about the Breguet’s rich literary tradition! Get this – the novels of Tolstoy,²¹ Balzac,²² Dumas,²³ Pushkin,²⁴ and Bumpkin²⁵ all feature

¹⁷Bracken, Vernal Independence. “Mitt at Home.” *Mormons on Parade* 1st June 2012: 60-66. Print.

¹⁸ Grebanier, Santa. “Newman, 70, Pilots Corvette to IMSA Class Win at Daytona 24.” *Hemmings Motor News* 1st January 1996: 11-12. Print.

¹⁹ Witgündshire, Scott B. “Luxury Watch Giant Bounces Back, Welcomes Teenage Witch.” *Robb Report*, 1 January 2010: 24. Print

²⁰ Butkiss, Chad. “Tiger Talks: How Reformation Can Improve Your Long Game.” *Golf Digest* 3rd December 2009: 50-54. Print.

²¹ Dr. Lorrain, *War and Peace*

²² Eugene, *Le Pere Goriot*

²³ Viscount Albert de Morcerf, *The Count of Monte Cristo*

²⁴ Eugene Onegin, *Eugene Onegin*

characters who've got one of *these*," he says, rapping his index finger on the crystal. Of course, I *do* already know this. I study literature. My survey may be limited to Wikipedia, but still – I'm always searching for literary heroes who are not only sensitive and complex, but also have great taste in accessories. These types we can *all* identify with.

Lawrence doesn't have bad taste, and he clearly has the means to get most anything he wants. But I can't imagine he has *that* many friends, and I wonder if his problem may be that unfortunate case of he-who-tries-too-hard.

Another campus shuttle scoops up the next load of hipsters and drives off. Left alone, Lawrence and I can quit the utter nonsense and resume business.

"Look, Lawrence," I say, "I'm no fool. The movement of the stock market may be a mystery to all of us, but I know the classic car market, and a short-wheelbase Porsche 912 ain't cheap these days. I *also* know Dr. Lorrain had to write a lot of illegal Oxycodone prescriptions to afford *his* Breguet –"

"What are you trying to say?" Lawrence asks, sitting upright.

"I'm *saying* that I don't know what *your* front is, but I think you're bullshitting me about what's going with The Family. Ever since *Holomon vs. Weems*, you've been struggling to make ends meet. I can *see* it in the dirt up in your fingernails." He looks offended and hides his hands under the table. "You so *desperately* want to belong to part of the game, Lawrence. You want to be raking in the dough. Up to your neck in ostrich shit. So don't give me crap about only supplying restaurants with this or that Yelp rating; we both know there's not enough four-and-a-half star establishments this side of Albany to cover the cost of keeping *that* on the road," I say, pointing at the Porsche, "in addition to whatever you're paying Abby's eating therapist." The nervous golden retriever is digging a hole in the Porsche's passenger seat.

Lawrence's hands start shaking. He raises his empty cup to his lips – a nervous reflex? – and takes a sip of air before dropping it. We both wince as it clatters unhappily against the little saucer and catches on fire.

"What is it with you, kid?" Lawrence asks. "You think you're hot shit with everything you know about cars and the egg-trade, huh?"

I'm no Falstaff.²⁶ I drop the bomb:

"Here's what I think, Lawrence. I can tell that being a one-percenter is really important to you. If we team up *right now*, we might really have a shot at making some headway on this egg-trafficking scene. You've got the birds, and you seem like you've got the incubation figured out, too. And you wouldn't believe how many connections I have through my college – we got eggs coming in from *all over*, everywhere from the nearby towns to the west coast. I think that, on our own, we'd do just fine, but together, we could be rich men. But, if you *do* want to do this alone, I'm just saying, you might find yourself coming up shy of \$343,927 on your next tax return."

²⁵ Cletus, *Cookin' Varmints on the Grill*

²⁶ compulsive plastic-eater from Shakespearian times

Lawrence doesn't break my gaze, but Abby the golden retriever can smell his fear at the prospect of becoming part of the same group of people who once Occupied Wall Street, and she stops digging to bark at us.

"Are you in?" I ask.

"Get in the car," he says. "Throw the dog in the backseat. Let's fucking go."

II: Let's Go Trafficking

Now we're driving down the vicious two-lane highway. Lawrence is gripping the thin rim of the Porsche's steering wheel so tight that his knuckles are turning gray.

"Relax, man," I say. "Just tell me what you know, and don't give me any crap about Covello going through the EZ-pass lane without a transponder. I mean, who *hasn't* tried that, at least *once*, if only for the cheap thrills?"

The Porsche's little air-cooled engine whines louder behind us as the speedometer's green needle drifts clockwise. "What are you, a fucking cop?" Lawrence asks. "*Who do you work for?*"

"Calm down, man. Don't be ridiculous. I'm just a student. And everybody I go to school with is trying to figure out where the eggs are coming from and where they're going. Hell, every semester a couple kids get kicked out for keeping them in lockboxes underneath their beds. The *real* stupid ones even keep 'em in plastic baggies in their desk drawers. In fact, the *Princeton Review* just ranked our school as second in the nation for egg consumption, behind Cornell, and now the school is in such danger of not being taken seriously as an 'institution of higher learning,' or, as their official motto states, 'a place to think,' that they're using brute force to curb the egg-consumption-image. Yesterday, a friend was eating a bacon-egg-and-cheese for breakfast, and the Dean of Students, fearing that my friend had smuggled a fried ostrich egg between the bagel halves, slapped it right out of his hands."

"Fuck," Lawrence says. "That's unbelievable. You're not kidding around. What the hell *is* this so-called academy?"

"Bard College."

"Oh, I see. But isn't that supposed to be the new Brown?"

"Very funny. Didn't I tell you to cut the crap?"

"I couldn't resist," he says, laughing. "I've never seen a more far-fetched piece of journalism in my life.²⁷ All that press about 'non-Ivy forest fairies too cool for Yale, too socially savvy for Harvard' – What a bunch of baloney. You *must* know that Harvard is the *definitive* 'little school on the river.'"

²⁷ Taibbi, Matt. "Is Bard the New Brown?" *Town and Country* 1 April 2012: 137-141. Print.

“I should’ve known. But, can you believe this – some of the people I go to school with took that article *very seriously!*”

“Yikes,” Lawrence says, raising his eyebrows. “In all seriousness, though, one of my neighbors put up the donation for the roof on your new performing arts center.” Lawrence must live in a fine neighborhood, because the Frank Gehry-designed roof cost three hundred million dollars. Still, the building, touted as “world class” by all the College’s glossy promo materials, looks like some joker took a bunch of bedsheets, cast them in stainless steel, and gave them to children to build a fort with. Since its completion, the string players in the Conservatory have quarreled endlessly over who must play second viola for the orchestra, because the roof always leaks on that person.

“Wow!” I don’t want to steal his thunder, so I decide not to tell him that his neighbor purchased a leaky roof.

“What’s it like there?” he asks.

“First of all, you have to be off-the-SAT-grid-brilliant to be accepted, so everybody is either manic-depressive or an insufferable conversationalist. And I’m the only person at the school with even a *remote* interest in cars. Take a right here.” Lawrence yanks the wheel and the little Porsche shoots up a hill like a yellow skee-ball.

I’m taking us to meet my friend Beaucephelus. Beau fronts as a professional monster truck driver, but, like most people in the Hudson Valley, earns substantial undeclared income from doing odd jobs for the Columbraros. “*Squash ‘em,*” they tell Beau, and out he goes in his big truck. If Lawrence and I want to get a leg up on the egg-trade – and, with specimens like those beneath his hood, I really think he has what it takes – I suspect Beaucephelus can help us out.

“My buddy Beau’s house is up the road. We’re gonna talk business with him.”

“Who is this guy? Can we trust him?”

“Of course. I met the guy at the drive-in premier of *Lincoln*. I was like, who is this joker blocking the screen with his monster truck? I got out of my car and climbed up to his cab, which is a good twenty feet off the ground, to give him a piece of my mind. But I was struck by what an incredible view he had, like, you won’t believe how Spielberg’s shots *really* come to life if viewed from the right altitude. Beau invited me to join him to watch the rest of the movie. What kind of guy, if not one of integrity, goes to watch Honest Abe pace back and forth and speak softly for three hours?”

“Good point,” Lawrence says. The Porsche’s tail breaks loose around a sharp curve and skitters over macadam, taking out a garden gnome that ventured too close to the road. The car’s suspension is stiff. Miniature craters in the asphalt are experienced as sharp jolts that start at the seat of the pants and rattle the spine. I imagine the *Fuchs* spinning furiously like little chrome pinwheels. Abby drools in the backseat.

“Take a right at the blue truck,” I tell Lawrence, pointing at a big, rust-scabbed Mack crew-cab on the side of the road. We turn, drive through a half-mile or so of graveled, densely weeping-willowed driveway, and emerge at the clearing where Beau

built his farmhouse and adjacent monster truck laboratory. He's sitting on the porch, wearing home-cut jean shorts, big muddy Timberlands, an "Edelbrock Carbs" cap with a moose antler glued to the bill, and no shirt. He sets his banjo down upon a yoga mat. Beau is a damn fine, and entirely self-taught, banjoist – he learned by listening to the "dueling banjos" scene in *Deliverance*²⁸ over and over again while sleeping until one day he woke up with the inbred kid's finger-picking patterns all figured out. He greets us with typical, sparkling cheer,

"Ay! Ay, guys! What's up? Great ta *see* ya! C'mon up! Y'all look ya need some beers!"

Beau is in his mid-thirties, but attributes his youthful energy to the 16th position of Bikram Yoga, *Bhujangasana*, or the cobra pose. His health has become increasingly holistic since a monster truck accident claimed his stomach; he doesn't even eat meat. His eyes are bright and his hair is golden. He's missing one finger on his left hand. Like Lawrence, he has a little soul-patch thing going on beneath his lower lip.

Lawrence, I can tell, is a little uncomfortable by the redneckiness of the place. He walks on his tiptoes and looks around uneasily, as if a black bear might pop out of the woods and take a swipe at him. Maybe he's never palled around with any of upstate New York's intellectual rednecks, because Beau's place is hardly out of the ordinary. There's a row of gleaming monster trucks to the right of the house. Their wheels are big as hay bales, tires black and shiny. Their bodies are masterpieces, airbrushed to reference themes from Beau's favorite artists: one has a sort of Monet's *Water Lilies*-type thing going on, one features Escher's mind-bending staircases, one has assorted panels from Beau's favorite comic, *The Far Side*. He's a crackpot, but genius, mechanic. He steals axles for his trucks from school buses, sometimes while they're in motion and full of children, and he's designed the engines to run on any beverage whose ABV is higher than 12%. With all the recent hype about the magical powers of Kombucha, he's been trying to design a unit that can combust that as well, but the vinegary stuff is hard to find – the hipsters down it by the keg.

Behind the trucks there's a cache of tractors, front-loaders, Bobcats, ATVs, motorcycles, and a big yellow excavator. Beau's property covers about forty acres, and he uses the excavator to dig ponds for fun. He's dug *so* many ponds that the National Association for Remote-Control Boat Racing rents his property out for their annual tournament (on Beau's condition that they keep out of the koi ponds, because if any of the oriental fish are scraped by the miniature propellers, they get incredibly itchy and, being fish, have no arms with which to itch themselves, and thus swim around in misery for the rest of their days). For three days each year, Beau's place is overrun with middle-aged male hobbyists, all hoping to take home the coveted "National Remote-Control Boat Racing Champion" trophy, which includes a hermit crab, a nine-volt battery and a \$30 gift certificate to Red Lobster.

Beau's farmhouse has the charm of being asymmetrical everywhere. Every window is a different size and no angles are quite right, no lines quite parallel. I look over at Lawrence, who's kind of teetering around while trying to avoid stepping on all the

²⁸ See Billy Reden's performance in *Deliverance* (1972)

loose chickens. His gaze goes from the foul to the porch, where Beau's peg-legged cat, Tommy, is clicking around, then to the "I <3 BLUEGRASS" sticker on the fender of one of the tractors. His expression is similar to that of the hipsters he scared off earlier.

"Yes, let's drink!" I say. "We've got business to discuss."

Beau leads us to the barn behind the sagging house, opens the trapdoor in the center of its floor, and we follow him into the basement.

We stand around in the darkness for a second, and when Beau gets the lights, Lawrence goes, "Oh my God. Oh my God!"

I think the peg-legged cat is the best feature of Beau's property, but there's no denying that the underground beer chamber is more impressive. It's a room about twenty feet by twenty feet, the kind of thing that men see in Super Bowl commercials and dream about for weeks after. Every wall, from floor to ceiling, is shelves of beer bottles. Each shelf has a fluorescent backlight that gives the bottles, arranged in perfect soldierlike formation, a heavenly glow. Beau, the consummate redneck, only drinks the American-made *King of Beers* – Budweiser, sometimes Bud Light, but never Bud Light Lime. Lawrence strikes me as more of a "bierdo" – probably a fan of microbrews, Belgian imports, coffee stouts, extra pale ales and whatnot – still, I hope he appreciates Beau's attention to presentation.

"Yup," Beau says, beaming proudly. "Finished buildin' 'er just last winter. Go ahead, take your pick, ain't nothin' different 'bout one bottle than any of the others!"

We grab several, and sit down on a futon in the center of the room.

"So, what brings you boys out to the ranch?" Beau asks.

"Here's the thing, Beau," I say. "Lawrence and I just met. But don't worry, he's cool. He's got a car full of ostrich eggs out there."

"Ya don't *say!*" Beau says, nodding thoughtfully and combing his soul patch down with a thumbnail. "That purty lil' Porsche of yours, she's packin' a load *as we speak?*"

"That's right," Lawrence says, raising his Budweiser to his mouth, tapping it against his teeth a couple times. He's nervous.

"So here's what I'm thinking, Beau," I say, leaning in. "Lawrence has got some of the best specimens I've seen in a while. Better than anything coming in from the West Coast or even New Zealand. I mean, these must be some *really* happy ostriches. Their smell is divine, and I reckon they'll taste even better. Lawrence's business took a hit after *Holomon vs. Weems*, and I've got a decade's worth of student loan debt ahead of me, so we're both looking for a way to make a buck."

"Go on," Beau says, cracking a second beer.

“And you still owe me a favor. That time I fed the koi while you were on tour with the USHRA, remember?”²⁹

“Well, I s’pose I do, don’t I.”

“So here’s what we need. For starters, we all know that you can’t survive solely on monster truck income in this economy.” Everybody nods in agreement to this sad truth. “And if I had to guess, I’d say that you’re working pretty closely with Vinny Columbraro these days. Lawrence and I want to know more about his control over local egg-trafficking... but we don’t really know where to even *start* looking.”

“I see, I see,” Beau says. “You’s just hold yourselves right there one *second*.”

He gets up and raps his fingers against one bottle of Bud in some complex polyrhythmic pattern. There’s a sound of an electric motor spooling up, *rrrrrrrrrrrrrr*, and then the wall starts rotating.

Lawrence gasps.

When it’s turned 180 degrees, we’re staring at a whiteboard covered in mostly unintelligible dry-erase scribbles. There are formulas, dates, Italian-looking names, like *Magnetti* and *Fagioli*, and pictures of members of The Family held up by *Friends*-themed magnets. There’s Vinny Columbraro, held in place by Jennifer Aniston. There’s Vito Covello’s ugly mug, stuck under Joey’s chin.

“Been trackin’ their movements for some time now. Been tryin’ to anticipate the changes in their daily specials. I’m just *sick* of gettin’ bad surprises – walkin’ into the rackets after a tough crush job, just hopin’ I can catch my breath over a slice of red-pepper-pesto-n’-chives pizza, only to find out they ain’t *got* the chives this week, they only got *scallions*.” I give a sympathetic nod. “Now, y’see *this*?” Beau asks, directing the red bead of a laser pointer to the board’s bottom-right corner.

There’s a date with some notes scrawled beneath it. It reads:

MARCH 20. BIG GAME DINNER

“Beau, what is that?”

“It ain’t no pizza party, that’s for darn sure,” Beau says. “All the hunters in the Valley, they’ll be spendin’ the winter either on blinds out on the river shootin’ duck, or trampin’ through the woods, killin’ pheasants, elk, goose, turkeys, wabbits, venison, rattlesnakes, and varmints. An’ every year they get together near the end of the season to make a big ol’ buffet at the town hall up the road. Couple hundred of ‘em, maybe. They got some live music, coupla raffles to support the Scouts, the whole *shebang*. Best damn turkey chili in the tri-state area, let me tell ya!” He laughs. “Anyhow, point here is, you can count on them Covellos and Columbraros bein’ there, scoutin’ out new pizza toppings. I reckon that dinner is a *hot spot* for the kinda backroom business you might be lookin’ for, what with all them *ostrich eggs* that you two been goin’ on about.”

²⁹ United States Hot Rod Association, presiding body of all redneck motorsports

“That sounds really delicious,” Lawrence says. Indeed, I’m getting pretty hungry just thinking about it. “But what are we supposed to do?”

“Well,” Beau begins, “Tell ya the truth, I don’t know how much I can be of much assistance here. *I* never go. I’m a vegetarian, you know.”

“Really?” Lawrence asks, surprised. “But... *why?*”

Beau gives him an abbreviated version of the heartbreaking story:

“Now now, it ain’t ‘cause I’m tryin’ to save the animals or anythin’, but I lost the ability to digest red meat after a bad truck wreck. Went end over end tryin’ to jump a blimp in flight down at the county fair.” Beau takes a long pull from his beer bottle, shutting his eyes tight as the memory passes through him. “Woulda been the first guy to have dunnit. I was gonna make the Guinness books. But look, here’s what I’m gonna suggest you boys do. You go to that big game dinner and you keep a *real* low profile. That town hall, it’s gonna be crawlin’ with goons doin’ Vinny’s biddin’. But you dress yourselves like a coupla no-good, fence-paintin’, garden-mulchin’ hacks, and you gonna blend in *just fine*. You go on up there and you just ask around, see what you can dig up. If you play it cool, you’ll meet somebody who’ll point you in the right direction.”

III: A Blithewood Conversation

As we pull out of Beau’s driveway, Lawrence turns to me and says,

“I don’t know. *I just don’t know.*”

“Don’t *say* shit like that!” I tell him. “You sound like some hapless boob who just graduated college with a liberal arts degree, whose ball-busting aunts and uncles are now asking him that awful, oft-heard question: *what will you do with your life?*”

“I mean... it’s just... look,” Lawrence says. “I got job security with the five-star restaurants. Do you even *know* what The Family does to people who meddle with their affairs, or offend their cultural tastes?”

I’ve heard stories – just enough to know I can’t stomach much more. The last guy they caught, an unfortunate fellow named Rosenkrantz, needed a place to pull over – just for a second – to check if his most recent Facebook post had gotten any likes or comments since he’d last looked at it, which, according to the police timeline, was about two miles before at a Stewart’s. Rosenkrantz chose the wrong pizza place for a Facebook fix. *Don’s Gourmet* subscribes to HBO Go (so they can have unlimited access to Sopranos reruns), which is known to interfere with the 4G network. As you can imagine, Rosenkrantz experienced especially slow mobile web browsing. Young Lorenzo Columbraro was doing some late-night inventory in an upstairs office, saw the headlights sitting in his parking lot and, thinking they might belong to a *topo puzzone*, went out to investigate. When he saw that the Facebook post in question proclaimed Ringo to be the best Beatle, Lorenzo went into a fury and screamed, “*Ti ammazzo, pompinara!*” This is the last thing Rosenkrantz remembers. The M.E. concluded that he was made to juggle tennis balls until his hands bled.

“I really have no clue about what happens to those who mess with The Family,” I lie. I try not to wince when I say, “But, really, how bad could it be?”

“You should *see* the last guy!” Lawrence says. “Let me tell you, thanks to those Columbraros, *he* can’t see *shit* anymore. They strapped him to a desk, put a copy of *Ecce Homo* in front of his face, and wouldn’t release him until till he could understand and explain the *whole thing* to them. Not the Kaufmann translation, but Nietzsche’s *original manuscripts*. The guy didn’t even know how to *read German*. They say he didn’t make it through the preface before going blind.”

Alarming, yes, but I know that I’ve amassed more than enough Wikipedia knowledge to fake it in a situation like that. The tennis balls, on the other hand, would present a problem.

“Look,” I say, “Let’s go somewhere and just... *talk* about this. If I had to assess where *we* are *at* right now, I’d say we haven’t got a damn *clue* what we’re doing or, for that matter, why we’re *doing it*.”

“Very astute,” Lawrence replies. “Why *are* we here right now?”

“Let’s go to the Bard campus,” I suggest. “There’s a couple nice spots on the river. We could sit down and, hopefully, come up with some answers.”

“Yes,” Lawrence says. “We’ll see if it really *is* a ‘place to think’ after all!”

A Bimini twist tightens in my stomach. Bard is *not* a good place to think. There are too many hideous sculptures that distract the mind. I think the graduate students, an inconsiderate bunch, are to blame for this – from what I can tell, they find the nearest empty lawn, erect things that look like bunless hot dogs with antennae, then just leave them lying around.

When we pull into campus, Lawrence is explaining something terribly boring about the international debt crisis. *The President this, the President that*. Give me a break, guy. I interrupt him,

“Look! Look at that over there!”

On a roadside path, two professors are engaged in a vicious tenure battle. Tenure is decided by a brawl that can happen at any place at any time, so long as it is on campus and witnessed by at least one of the serial librarians. It is granted to whomever can remove his opponent’s tweed jacket first. If it is discovered that a professor has sewn additional buttons onto their tweed jacket, they are disqualified, and if they are not wearing a tweed jacket, they are not eligible for tenure in the first place.

“My god,” Lawrence says, shaking his head with pity as one of the men knocks off the other’s spectacles and claws at his eyeballs. “Academics have it so tough.”

“I know,” I say. Now they are on the ground, and the one without glasses kneels atop his opponent’s torso, which is stained with blue ink from a pen ruptured in the breast pocket. No-glasses attempts to pummel Ink-stain, but can’t land a punch to save his job and keeps hitting the dirt. “Can you believe how uncomfortable it must be in those

jackets? The material is notoriously itchy,” I lament. Then I realize that Ink-stain is the professor of my next class, which I plan to skip, and I say, “Speed up a little bit. It’s just too stressful to watch.”

“At least they aren’t wearing polyester,” Lawrence says. It’s kind of a relief to hear him look on the bright side of things.

The little Porsche turns lots of heads on our cruise through Bard’s mile-long central artery.

“Die, yuppie scum!” screams a naked, paint-covered girl sitting cross-legged in a pile of leaves. Other skinnyboy hipsters nod, perhaps in approval. They are too cool for us to perceive their motives. A few kids point, and when we stop at a crosswalk, an Asian girl carrying a violin case takes an especially long time to walk across the street for no apparent reason.

“Fuck!” Lawrence says, pounding a fist against the thin metal rim of the steering wheel as we sit there, wondering if she will ever reach the other side or just keep walking more and more diagonally.

“Have you ever read any Thich Nhat Hanh?” I ask him. “*The stoplight is your friend, reminding you to pause and come back to yourself.*”³⁰ As I come back to myself, I remember that I’m riding in a bright-yellow Porsche, complete with a “1PERCENT” license plate, and I am doing this in a place where I can hardly walk to my *Finance & Investments* class without being harassed by the seven members of the “Occupy Bard” movement. “*Death to the corporations! Tax the rich! Give us your spare change! We are the 99%!.*” I think they target me because they know that I am a fat cat on the Virtual Stock Exchange.³¹ They could exploit the volatility of penny stocks, too, if they’d just take a break from their intense brainstorm sessions, which is where they come up with all those trenchant slogans.

“Turn up the music,” I say to Lawrence. “I don’t want anybody to miss us.” We’re listening to some of Notorious B.I.G.’s deeper cuts. I’m more of a jazz guy, but the Brooklyn-born rapper’s flow has rhythm like Tony Williams.³²

I direct us to Blithewood Manor, a magnificent Greek Revival home designed by McKim, Mead & White, a firm that is perhaps best remembered for partner Stanford White’s fraud indictment. Supposedly, the prominent architect had been growing his mustache his entire career, but on a late-June evening in 1906, an eccentric millionaire reached across the white tablecloth at a New York City social event and gave one of the mustache’s curled ends a good tug. It peeled right off, exposing White’s career-long use of weak adhesive. At first the reaction of the guests was one of good cheer, as elaborate party tricks were common among the City’s high society.³³ But when they realized that

³⁰ Hanh, Thich Nhat. *You Are Here*. New York: Shambala, 2010. Print.

³¹ Agustin, Salamone. “Penny-Stock King Gets, But Never Gives.” *Bard Free Press* November 19th 2011: 8. Print.

³² Jazz-fusion legend favored by Miles Davis, who spoke of him, as if gargling pebbles, “Yeeeeee, *dat* fuggin’ nigga on them *drums.*”

³³ I ripped this straight from Wikipedia

the man who embodied the “American Renaissance” had been drawing all this time with a smooth upper lip, hysteria ensued. Hearst’s newspapers would call the court case “The Trial of the Century,”³⁴ though the article would prove to be little more than yellow journalism. Fiasco notwithstanding, Blithewood is very pretty, perched atop a vast lawn that rolls down to river bluffs. It’s the best place on campus to go for a stroll and try to figure out *what it all really means*, or just take mushrooms and strip naked.

We park next to a bunch of kids in a silver Audi. They are smoking a joint as thick as a soda can. At least, I *assume* they’re kids. The only thing visible through the cloud of smoke is the glowing ember, so for all I know it may very well be the jazz professors, Zigaboo, Bugalu, and Mulatu,³⁵ though they are less likely to afford the long Audi than students’ wealthy parents. Kids or professors, they’re almost certainly skipping a class.

“There’s a classic Bard scene for you,” I tell Lawrence, who goes, “*Peewwwww!*”

We walk down the lawn, past assorted bongo circles, past kids laying down reading philosophy texts and poetry collections, past one girl who’s buried her head in the dirt as a performance-art demonstration. Something to do with oppression, I think. Or sustainability. Can she breathe? Or is her life’s breath in harmony with the campus dirt? And are these the right questions to ask, or am I missing the point, as I so often do with these kinds of pieces? I can’t find an artist statement nearby and decide not to care.

“The future of America,” Lawrence says bitterly, shaking his head. “How much does it cost to go here?”

I admit that we are north of 60k a year.

“Unbelievable. *Just* what we need – a bunch of starving artists heaping onto the nation’s student loan debt!”

“Easy, there,” I say. “Though that particular type of debt is second only to mortgage debt, you’ve got to get your facts straight before you start pointing fingers. You think the kids who’ve taken out loans are the ones you see over there, playing naked in the garden fountain? *Think again*. The kind of behavior you’re seeing on this lawn is symptomatic of kids whose parents are insanely wealthy.”

“What?” he asks, following the graceful arc of a frisbee with his eyes. “How does that work?”

“I’m still trying to pinpoint it, but from what I gather, the nudity is either a natural evolution of entitlement or a revolt against the material luxury they’ve been surrounded by.”

“I see,” Lawrence says, now watching a kid breathe fire. I tried to do this freshman year, but realized I was not cut out for the circus when I kept swallowing the

³⁴ Thornton Bigsby, Lord Wellington. “Manhattan Elite Distraught over Mustache Mishap.” *The New York Journal* July 3rd, 1906: 2. Print.

³⁵ See the music of Zigaboo Modeliste, Marvin Bugalu Smith, Mulatu Astatke

kerosene. I add, “The kids who had to take out loans or apply for financial aid, on the other hand, you’re more likely to find them in the library or the gym – playing on sports teams, applying for post-grad scholarships, studying for the Series 7, whatever.”

“That’s no excuse, not for *this*,” Lawrence says, pointing down at a girl who’s locked herself in a dog cage to raise animal-rights awareness. The girl barks at him and he jumps back. “Look,” he says, adjusting his tweed cap, “this is the kind of shit that I just can’t *stand*. And to think that you’ve been surrounded by these people for the last four years of your life! How do *you* feel about it?”

I tell him that there have been difficult moments over the past four years. “It’s easy to walk around campus and think, ‘fuck this kid,’ you know? Like, fuck that kid over there wearing clothes that I think are stupid. Fuck this kid who loves to hear the sound of his own voice in class. Fuck this kid who’s throwing up on my shoes at the party. Fuck this kid who just took the last piece of General Gao’s chicken from the dining hall, leaving me, a carnivore, with nothing but the tempeh scramble.”

“Some of that does sound pretty bad,” Lawrence says. “Tempeh scramble? What do they think you are, bunnies?”

“Don’t even get me going about the food,” I say. “What I mean is... it’s *too* easy to think in... ‘that way.’ The way of the hater. Like, what am I trying to do, make myself feel better about my *own* insecurities? To endow my own observations in class with more meaning by secretly discrediting everything that everybody else says, before I open my own mouth?”

“Go on,” Lawrence says, confusing my conflicted feelings with outright disdain. “Really let ‘em have it!”

“To be honest, Lawrence, I’m trying this new thing where I practice compassion. Sort of this Buddhist thing. I look at the guy who, despite having taken the time to apply some blush, mascara and slip into a nice summer dress, hasn’t shaved in a week. This man I behold, and I say to myself, ‘In past lifetimes, he was both my mother, my father, and my child, so I smile at him and wish that he be light, happy, and free.’” We walk past a group of girls spread over blankets. They’re conducting some pleasant-sounding jam session with ukuleles and acoustic guitars, all wearing multicolored Lennon-type sunglasses and funky vintage dresses.

Lawrence halts and scrunches up his face at what I’ve said, and does not see the beautiful hippies who sit outside one of the high stucco walls of the Italianate garden to our left. Again, that expression of just-smelt-morning-piss. He interrupts the tranquility: “Cut the *shit*, man! Don’t tell me that actually *works!*”

“What do you think I am, a Bodhisattva?”³⁶ I ask. “Of course it doesn’t work. The words I hear kids use in class make me want to lunge at them with the heaviest Webster’s I can find and beat them upside the head. Every time I hear one of my fellow ‘men’

³⁶ in Buddhism, an enlightened being who generates *bodhicitta*, a wish for the happiness of all sentient beings, by briskly rubbing the Buddha’s enormous earlobes.

preaching feminist theory, it's all I can do to keep myself from reaching over and tearing his balls off."

"Now I think you're taking it too far," Lawrence says. "These kids you're talking about can't *possibly* have testicles."

"Lawrence, what I'm trying to say is that I've got this major internal battle where I try *not* to judge peoples' interests in relation to my own *different* ones. I yuk about this stuff – everything you see here on this lawn – with my friends, but then when I'm alone at night trying to fall asleep, I get the I-should-chew-my-hand-off feeling of shame and guilt."

"Jesus, kid," Lawrence says. "Maybe all the literature you've read is just making you hate yourself."

We start walking again. Now we are well past the mansion, nearing the inlet to the short wooded path that will take us to the bluffs. "It's *just so damn easy to complain* in a place like this!" I say, surveying the beauty and wondering how I can even bother with such pathetic thoughts in a setting that rivals any pastoral tableau by Constable, if not in acreage, then certainly in bucolic tranquility.³⁷ "There's a pity culture here. You're invited to complain, and if you're not complaining and are instead earning constant praise or pursuing *fame* or *immortality* or something like that, you're on the wrong track. I guess I'm kind of afraid that, by putting all these other people down, blaming my lack of productivity on the overwhelming amount of e-mails in my inbox, that I'll keep accumulating all of this toxic sludge of human misery and be doomed to carry it within me for the rest of my life. Truth is, sometimes it feels impossible to even *smile* here."

"You need to get your head out of your ass and concentrate on what *you* need to do," Lawrence says. "Let other peoples' dreams be *their own*. Here's what I think," Lawrence begins, but it's my turn to interrupt.

"It's like, this feeling of being so *different*, you know? Like being in outer space, looking at the Earth, knowing it's there and full of people, but having no way of knowing what those people are doing. And I get that. It's the plight of the human being to be singled out, even though there are billions of us. I look around at my peers, I see them doing their performance art and reading their philosophy books, and that's so the norm here that it rubs off on you... like if you can't give in to the intellectual preening, you're doing something *wrong*." I look up the trunk of a towering honey locust tree and am reminded of this time last year, when a dear friend, a music student with perfect pitch, made owl cries – *coo! coo coo! cooooooblublublublublub!* – until a screech owl, about the size of a sub sandwich, flew over and perched a couple feet above our heads. "I even started questioning my love of cars, like, *is it weird that I'm into cars?* Because everybody I talked to would say, 'Cars? Ew! Do you know what they're doing to the environment?' Then I tried to write my senior thesis about the love of cars... from the standpoint that cars are a bizarre thing to love."

"Wow," Lawrence says. "They *really* got to you."

³⁷ Allen, Woody. "Udder Madness." *The New Yorker* 18th January 2010: 50-51. Print.

“I know.”

“What were you *thinking*? Cars are great!”

“I know!”

“Here’s what I think,” Lawrence says. “I get the whole practice-loving-kindness thing, but if you’re walking around, comparing yourself to all these other people whose shit is so far removed from your own... you’re gonna lose sight of *yourself*, man. You think they’re looking at you, wondering if they should put down the Foucault and start reading car magazines?” I think he has a great point. “You need to embrace the fact that you can use *your interests* to represent what all these people are calling the “1%” like it’s some awful thing. It takes guts to be a one-percenter, to stand behind the things that put you in that category! *Anybody* can be part of the 99%! But why would you want to be just like everybody else? You gotta capitalize on the traits that make you *you*. You’re gonna end up filling a niche. It’s *all* about the niche.”

We reach the bluffs and sit at the edge of a bronzed crag. The view of the mighty Hudson is magnificent. I remember eating a handful of acid-laced gummy bears in this very spot. I think I was on my way to class, but when the Ziploc baggie was thrust in front of my nose, what was I supposed to say? *No, I’ll pass on the psychedelics, we’re watching a movie in class today*. Just as the evergreens on the banks started turning into fluorescent manta rays, three things happened at the same time: a supersonic military jet shot out from behind one of the distant purple peaks of the Catskills and drew a thin white contrail across the sky, a sleek Amtrak train thundered by, and some kayakers made it all the way out to the middle of the river only to realize they’d left their paddles ashore. This remarkable convergence made me think, “How beautiful. You must *never* forget this moment. The beauty of the plane, the beauty of the sky, the beauty of the train, the beauty of the mountains, the beauty of the river, the suffering of the kayakers. You will remember this for the rest of your life.” And I did. It came back to me when I was sitting in a dingy little interrogation chamber several floors beneath the College’s science center, right as I started bawling in response to some waifish argyle-socked disciplinarian’s question, “What’s your little sister going to say when she finds out her big brother got kicked out of college in the *very first week* for taking drugs?” Suddenly, the Blithewood nature scene popped into my head, and I said, “Wait, hold on, I’m having a flashback.”

Lawrence says, “You know, when we almost collided at the intersection this morning, it sure was the farthest thought from my mind that we’d end up here... talking about these kinds of things. Seems like this place has a sort of... effect on you, huh?”

“It sure does,” I tell him. “It’s a special place. Weird, liberal, disorganized. You couldn’t have paid me a million bucks to transfer out. Too many well-dressed women.”

“That’s really great, man,” Lawrence says. Then, nervously, he adds,

“Is this what it means to... you know... *bro out*?”

“We’re definitely bro’ing out. But, wait, eh... what do you mean by that?” I don’t know why I ask.

“I mean... I’ve never really *had* any... you know, *bros*, before. I’ve always been kind of a loner. I think I scare people away.”

“Look, Lawrence,” I say, “*This*, this is great. I’m having a nice time. But don’t get all gay on me right now. If you need a therapist, I’ve got plenty of friends who say it’s the best shit ever.”

“Right, right,” he says quickly. “But we *are* bro’ing out. Uh-huh.”

“Yes, Lawrence,” I say. “As far as I’m concerned, we couldn’t be bro’ing out harder if we brought lacrosse sticks to a frat party and gave each other fist-bumps.”

IV: The Big Game Dinner

It’s the eve of the big game dinner. We’ve decided we are willing to risk all forms of torture at the hands of The Family to gather egg-trade intel. Lawrence is supposed to pick me up at 6:00. The date-y aspect makes me kind of queasy. The guy is interesting enough, but after that whole ‘bro’ thing, I’m afraid he’s gonna start asking me if I want to go out and see movies. I just want to figure out what’s going on with the egg-trade, see if there’s any money in it.

Getting the attire right is tricky. I remember what Beau said: “Keep a low profile. Dress yourselves like a coupla no-good, fence-paintin’, garden-mulchin’ hacks.” I’m more of a boat-shoes-and-Nantucket-reds kind of guy. *Look good, feel good*, I always say, and there would be no exception even if I were painting a fence. I have to call friends to borrow ratty jeans, sneakers and a “Poughkeepsie Middle School” sweatshirt. I haven’t shaved in a couple of days.

At 6:00, Lawrence pulls up in his Mercedes wagon, the one that was getting dog vomit cleaned from its carpets on the day we met.

“Are you *kidding*?” I ask when I walk up to the long, silver car. “They’ll know we’re not blue-collar hunters if we pull up in this luxobarge!”

“Give me a break,” Lawrence says. “This thing is practically eight years old now.”

“No, no! No! You can’t even apply for a hunting permit in Dutchess County if you don’t own a big American-made truck covered in mud and confederacy stickers. And you *know* that The Family only sends its goons around in a black Maybach!”

“Man, come on, this is the shittiest car I own!” Lawrence cries. The license plate on this one reads, “CHACHING.” It’s so terrible.

I call him a fool, and he looks hurt, but I guess he can’t help it. Somebody must have raise him this way. “Wait here. I need to make a phone call.”

We arrive to the dinner in one of Beau’s tractors, swapping turns driving and walking next to it, about an hour late. We pull into the parking lot of the Germantown, New York Town Hall, a large, gray warehouse, and drive past the many mud and

confederacy-sticker-covered trucks, when we are confronted by a group of nasty-looking rednecks.

As the tractor's diesel engine clatters down to a popcorn-popping-in-a-tin-can idle, Lawrence whispers, "Look at these guys! I've never seen scragglier neck hair in my *life!*" There are four of them, wearing bandanas and stretched-out sleeveless tanks that show off tree-trunk-thick upper arms, clutching two plastic cups of pale-yellow beer each, and they start closing in on us.

"What do they want? *What do they want!*" Lawrence whispers frantically.

We are surrounded on all sides. The redneck near the front left wheel speaks.

"Nas tractor."

"Yup. *Reaaaaal* nas," says the one near the front right.

"What you boys get there, huh? That a *Kubota*?" says a gravelly voice from behind us.

"Sure ain't no *John Deere!*" says another. All laugh.

Lawrence, shaking, whispers to me, "What the *fuck* are they trying to tell us?"

"Calm down. They're saying we have a *nice tractor*. I got this." I address them.

"You got it right! Kubota M-series. You oughta *see* this baby drag a subsoiler through a field."

Ooooooh, goes the group, and this pleasant thought makes them rock on their heels.

"Lemme ask you sum'in, boy," says one. "'Bout how many square yards o' seed that thang spread'n one hour?"

Lawrence is not one for redneck shoptalk, and he butts in at completely the wrong time.

"You guys know where we can get an *ostrich egg* round here? That gonna be on the menu tonight?" he asks, pointing towards the warehouse. I wince at his awful timing. For all we know, the rednecks could be reporting to Columbraro or Covello.

"Wut?" says one, leaning closer to get a good look at us. "*Wut* didju just say to me, boy?"

"...*Ostrich eggs?*"

"Boy, you listen t'me. I don't mess around with that stuff, yahear? Now, don't you go pokin' around for them here. Not round these parts. We're a bunch of honest-workin', law-abidin' citizens!"

"We ain't askin' fer nunna *that* trouble," says another.

“Hell, I got six kids at home!” says one. “Can’t be messin’ ‘round with *nunna* that stuff!”

“Don’t mind him,” I say hurriedly, “He’s in recovery. Can hardly control the impulses, you know. We’ll just be parking the tractor and getting on with the buffet.”

We putter away and I grab Lawrence by his shirt collar. “Listen to me, and listen carefully. You don’t know what you’re doing. Once we get inside, you just *fill your plate, eat, and shut up*. Let *me* do the talking. You want to end up juggling tennis balls or reading foreign philosophy texts *in their original language?*”

“No, no, God, fucking no,” Lawrence says. “You got it.”

Inside, plastic tables are set up against the walls, covered in plastic sheets, plastic utensils and cardboard plates. A long buffet table stands in the center.

“Look at the *pièce de résistance*,” Lawrence says, referring to a vat of turkey chili big as a Smart car.

“You better not let anybody hear you using the romance languages,” I say.

“Oh, oh, oh! Look at *that!*” he says, pointing to the far wall.

The tables on the far wall are divided according to preferred NASCAR drivers. From left to right, there’s the Richard Petty table, the Earnhardt Sr. table, the Earnhardt Jr. table, the Jeff Gordon table, and the Darrell Waltrip table. The men at the Jeff Gordon table take biscuits, halve them with the plastic knives, butter each half, spoon a glob of turkey chili into the center, and seal the halves back together with gooey cheese. Then they throw them at the Earnhardt Jr. table, which responds by *hoo-ing and ha-ing* as the little biscuits whiz past their heads. I notice there are rules: every time an Earnhardt Jr. fan catches one in mid-air, the Jeff Gordon fan who threw it is required to refill the catcher’s beer.

“Did you see that?” Lawrence asks. “One just splashed right into a guy’s beer cup, and he just *kept drinking like nothing even happened!*”

“I saw the whole damn thing,” I say. “How primitive.”

Over the course of the next hour, I get friendly with a couple guys and try to get some answers about the ostrich eggs. Each time, I begin with an amusing anecdote:

“Man, jus’ last weekend I was shootin’ some skeet, popped the empty cartridge outta the gun, whaddya know, it done fly up and knock m’hat *clean off!*”

“Man, jus’ yesterday, I was drinkin’ a Bud and jus’ fell right off m’tractor. Outta *nowhere*. Took me right ‘bout an hour to get myself out th’ mud, on account of bein’ rip-roarin’ drunk’n wutnot.”

“You see that NASCAR race last weekend? Yup, I was *there*. Got so heated on the last lap, watchin’ Dale Jr. and Junior Johnson swappin’ paint, went’n spilled my

french fries all over the people sittin' in front of me'n the grandstands. Here's the kicker, they just ate 'em right off their shirts!"

One thing leads to another, and I try to bring up the ostrich eggs. I get no leads. They reply:

"Don't know *nuthin'* bout that."

"Already did *my* time for that. Ain't goin' down *that* road again. I'm a daddy now."

"You best shut yer mouth, boy."

After the fourth or fifth failed attempt, I return to our table, where Lawrence is poking at his plate like a bird. I've never eaten food like this and I think it's incredible – steaming aluminum trays full of venison pasta, peppered pheasant, rabbit Parmesan, grilled duck. I have never seen so many different kinds of gravy in my life, and each is delicious.

"I don't know about thith, Lawrenth," I say through a mouthful of beef and beer. "I've asked too many people. We're gonna start attracting heat if we keep this up. Plus, there's something... *funny*... about their accents."

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"Well, it's just... it seems to me like rednecks so stereotypically buffoonish only exist in campy movies. Is this for real? I can't say I've heard such a heavy twang in an upstate New Yorker before."

"I wouldn't know," he says. "But, either way, I can't stand it here. What do you say we get the hell out?"

"I don't want to give up... we haven't learned *shit* about the eggs, and Lord knows we both need the money."

But our hopes have dwindled and we know it. We pack a couple Styrofoam boxes full of leftovers and hit the road.

"We seriously got *nothing*," Lawrence laments as we mount the tractor. "The bagel. The donut. The big 'O.' *Zilch. Bupkis.* And, *once again*, I don't have a *damn* clue what *either* of us are even *doing* here! Doesn't this, and the whole freaking mess that's led up to it, seem just a *little*, I mean even *one tiny fucking bit* preposterous when you –"

"Lawrence, shut up. Do you hear that?"

It's the metallic grating of the tractor's electric starter. *Rr-rr-rr-rr-rr-rr-rr.* I've got the key cranked, but the diesel won't burble over.

"Oh, man. What the fuck is *this*?" Lawrence asks, looking around. "Call your friend to bail us out. This shit is giving me the creeps, man."

In a split second of silence after Lawrence says this, there is a faint *click* sound: we are blinded by Maybach high beams at point blank. *How rude*, I think as I reach down to flick a switch on the Kubota's steering wheel, aiming to return the imposition. Then something cold and slimy is draped over my face and pulled tight by some presence that grunts behind me. The last thing I remember is the smell of prosciutto.

V. The World's Most Unlikely Brawl

When I come to, the first thing I see in my line of sight, the *very first* thing I can make out through a hyperopic fuzz, is Hollandaise-colored linoleum peeling up near a baseboard. In this way, regaining consciousness after being knocked out for the very first time in my life is somewhat underwhelming, though I haven't felt such a headache since I faked a concussion in high school to get out of a physics test, only to find out I still had to take it. My arms have been tied behind my back, bound at the wrists by something rubbery and hoselike, and my feet have been shoved into a single sock. Some wretched creature moans nearby. I try to say,

“Lawrence!”

But realize that my mouth is full of Ritz crackers and has been sealed shut with USPS priority mail tape. To swallow before finding an Evian would result in slow, excruciating asphyxiation. I try to roll over to my fallen companion, but start spinning in place like a rotisserie fowl. They've placed us on a layer of ball bearings.

When the rest of the room comes into focus, I can almost feel the rabbit stew in my stomach start hopping. In one corner there's a bucket of tennis balls. On a miniature desk to its left, a stack of books – whose titles I will be doomed to translate from their original languages – reads like a list of the world's worst dinner topics: Heidegger's *Discourse on Thinking*, Hume's *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principals of Morals*, and Barbara Bush's leviathan 762-page *Barbara*. There are others whose bindings feature similar gold gibberish that I can't make out. Most foreboding, perhaps, are Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination* and Camus's *A Happy Death*.

The room's wallpaper has a leopard-print base underneath a recurring pattern of a lone rose in brilliant bloom. I have only seen wallpaper like this once in my life, in a homemade porno that mistakenly made its way into the copy of *Forrest Gump* that I checked out of a VHS rental shop many moons ago. Even then I was thinking to myself, *Well, it sure would be awkward if I ever ran into these three people down at Video Dimensions, but I'll never see wallpaper this hideous again so long as I live*, and I kept watching at least long enough to become familiar with the pattern. There is a single window about the size of an envelope near the ceiling. A single exposed light bulb dangles from the ceiling, and rage roils my stomach when I notice it's not a CFL. In the corner opposite the tennis ball bucket, there are four accordions stacked neatly atop one another, one Van de Graf generator, two ten-gallon bags of zip-ties, one purple EZ-Bake oven, one weedwhacker, three tubs of white bathtub caulk (but no visible caulk gun), one set of bagpipes, and one caged, hissing possum.

A door creaks open and closes behind me, and a pair of black-leather, gold-buckle Gucci loafers shuffle past me. They brush so close to my nose that I can still smell their

donor cow, even through the overwhelming salty-wheaty Ritz taste that has filled my lungs and head. The loafers make their way to the book-laden desk, Gucci-man pulls out a tiny chair, mounts it backwards, faces us. I strain my neck until I can balance my head on my chin – not so easy as you’d think it might be when there’s a million little greased-up ball bearings waiting to send your nose crashing into the linoleum. The face that comes into focus is neither one of the two red-haired vixens from the raunchy VHS nor their male friend. I should’ve guessed that the second I started thinking *ostrich egg*, I’d be headed straight for a *faccia a faccia* with Vinny Columbraro.

But Columbraro is not the Casavettes-handsome young crook whose corporate photo, taken when still the CEO of a large bank (come on, who’s going to pretend like they weren’t surprised when we found out that the Mafia engineered most of the financial crisis?),³⁸ is the one most often shown on the evening news. The stress of the egg trade has wizened the crook’s features. His bald dome is splattered with sarcoma;³⁹ his jowls droop and flap about like a lazy hound’s. The pizza seems to have gone straight to his neck, which is wider than his face. He wears crisp, black Armani Exchange tails and a crimson tie with a diamond stud positioned three inches beneath the double-windsor. The stud, they say, is the only artifact investigators found of Columbraro’s wife, who one day failed to show up at Walgreen’s for her Xanax refill. The beleaguered woman, trapped in a loveless marriage, dropped the kids off at soccer practice and was never seen again.⁴⁰

The crook speaks.

“You boys need one of *these?*” he asks, producing two Dasanis from inside his suitcoat, cackling like a wicked witch. Where on *earth* he got the cackle from I do not know, but any fool could notice the shameless Don Corleone ripoff in his speech.

“Vffffrrmmmm!” says Lawrence, more accurately replicating Brando’s classic mouth-stuck-to-a-vacuum-cleaner performance.

Columbraro walks over and, with the immense force and poise of Leonard Bernstein reaching deep, deep down before throwing his hands up to drive the New York Philharmonic to the harrowing climax of Wagner’s *Walküre*, rips the priority mail tape from our mouths. Then he twists the water bottles open and pours them into our mouths. We try desperately, while coughing plumes of Ritz-dust, to catch the clear liquid.

“Don’t miss a drop, boys!” the cretin sneers. I can tell he’s trying to emulate the cold control of Brando, but he cannot shake an amateurish, *cugine*-esque⁴¹ giddiness. “This is the last beverage you’ll *get* in this lifetime! Ha, ha! If *I* were *you*,” he says, drawing out the *I* and *you*, “I’d be licking *every last drop* right off the floor!”

³⁸ Lembeck, Grover. “Move Over, Madoff, There’s a New Supervillain in Town.” *The Wall Street Journal* 26th October 2012: B1+. Print.

³⁹ Mulford Twelge, Osgood. “Mobster Breaks Silence, Exposes Sexuality to Raise Awareness of ‘Silent Killer’ Virus.” *The New York Times* 24th July 1983: C1-C2. Print.

⁴⁰ Reynaud, Madame. “Trials & Tribulations of Mob Wives.” *Town and Country* 1st September 1980: 23-28. Print.

⁴¹ Low-level crime family member passed up for a promotion

Lawrence, ever the elitist, says, “Are you kidding me? Everybody knows this shit is just filtered tap water! And that suit – Armani *Exchange*? What are you, white trash?”

“*Silencio*, prawn!” cries the mobster, delivering Lawrence a loafer-jab right to the kidneys. “And I bet you boys were so *sure* you’d get away with your little scheme!”

“We hardly even *had* a scheme,” I protest, “We barely knew why we came here tonight!”

“Oh, *really*? Driving around town willy-nilly in an old Porsche, dressing up as blue-collar workers, showing up to the big game dinner in a random tractor, all to learn who’s got stake in the *egg game*? You think that’s some just some small, meaningless *thing* that any fool could’ve *dreamt up in his head* in a *couple days*? Ha! You guys have no fucking clue what a big deal this really is.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I say. Because, as I think about it, I realize the idea itself – go for a ride in neat car, talk about what it all really means, tangle with some criminals – might have been kind of half-baked. But what matters, I think, is that we worked very, very hard to execute it, and, unlike everybody else I know, we didn’t even *need* to use “study drugs.”

“And do you *really* think, I mean *really*, that the ‘big game dinner’ is something those Cro-Magnons downstairs could’ve orchestrated?”

Now I realize we must still be in the warehouse, because through heater vents in the linoleum, I can hear whoopin’, hollerin’, and the andante *click click click* of beer keg tap-pumps.

“I’ll let you guys in on a little secret before I show you how the Columbraro family does *EZ-Bake*. *We* are the ones who put on this dinner.”

“So where do those right-wingers downstairs *come* from?” I ask.

“Every year we find a different welfare town in the middle of nowhere, scout out its dumbest rednecks, round ‘em up with lassos, ship ‘em up here in the belly of our trash barge, put ‘em to work in the paint-thinner plants,⁴² and install ‘em in our mobile home park, *Twilight Courts*, ten miles north. This year, at the behest of our location scouts, we chose Wahoo, Nebraska.” Good god – the reach of the Columbraro Empire exceeds that of even the handsiest priests.

“Now, let’s see how clever you *handsome* boys are,” the crook says. “Here’s a riddle. When you give a bunch of rednecks a wild game buffet and a limitless keg supply, what do they do?”

“They chow till the meat’s gone and drink till their eyeballs are floating in Coors,” I say.

“Very good,” he says, eyes twinkling with approval. “They get *wasted*. *Then* what do they do?”

⁴² Stubblefield & Co. continues to be one of the Hudson Valley’s biggest employers

“They drive home,” I say.

“And, when they get there, what are they going to want to do?”

Lawrence knows the answer to this one. “Beat their wives!” he says.

“Well, looks like we’ve got a couple of *Hardy Boys* on our hands!” Columbraro says, slapping his fat palms together, rubbing them briskly. “Can you do the math when there’s *three hundred* of those sunburnt clodhoppers involved, Hardy Boys?” Columbraro is more impressed with himself than an academic with multiple Ivy League degrees. I want, desperately, to puke. “The whole blubbering bunch keep the state police and sheriff’s departments so busy writing up DUIs and aggravated assaults that departments from Briarcliff Manor to Coxsackie are completely swamped.⁴³ With the fuzz busy, we’ve got a good eight hours to run the eggs across county lines.”

“I knew it!” Lawrence says. “I just *knew* those humans down there were too provincial to be from the same county in which I chose to make my home!”

“Clever, clever, little Hardy Boy,” Columbraro says, reaching down to stroke Lawrence’s face. “And can you *believe* it? That’s *all* it takes – *one night* a year gives us enough money to afford *HBO Go* at every single *Don’s Gourmet* location. You think those film-buff Pizza-pedants at *Two Boots* can boast anything like *that* to *their* customers?”

“Not even close,” I say. “Not only do those crackpot-Creole bastards charge *four fucking dollars* for a single slice, but they don’t even let you sit down at the tables if you’re just stopping in for a quick bite!”

“*What?*” the crook bellows, bewildered. “Well, where the hell are you supposed to sit?”

“At the *bar!*” I cry, wishing I could shake my hands in frustration.

“*My god,*” Columbraro says, looking off into the distance as the truth sets in. “And they call themselves a pizzeria. The *nerve* of those pretentious faggots.”

What? Did he just use the f-word?

Though we’re clearly on the same page about what a sham business *Two Boots* is, my world has been turned upside down by this unfortunate twist of events, and I writhe on the ball bearings like an earthworm under a magnifying glass.

“*You won’t get away this, Columbraro!*” I scream. “If I *ever* see the light of day again, and by the tail of Lupercus you better pray that I don’t, I’ll slander *Don’s Gourmet* with such vile Yelp reviews that Yelpers everywhere will get the shits just *reading* what I wrote!”

⁴³ Ramsbottom, Chester. “State Police Prepare for Annual ‘Redneck Roundup.’” *Chronogram* 1st March 2011: 22-23. Print.

“Oh, please! You and your *ingenuo sempliciotto!*” he says, chuckling, content. “*Nobody fucks with Vinny Columbraro and lives to see the light of day!*”

Though the daylight has long since disappeared, the room’s one small window appears to be glowing. It’s a faint, mysterious bluish tinge, and I wonder if my guardian angel has come to receive me. *This is how much you owe me*, she’ll say, sticking me with the bill. Even angels can’t escape debt these days.⁴⁴ Columbraro interrupts my fantasy,

“*Now then! I haven’t tried my new toy yet... you figlios di puttanas will be the lucky first! Ha, ha, ha, ha!*” How did this schnootz manage to rise so high in The Family’s ranks with that cackle? He waddles over to the corner full of unusual torture apparatuses and extracts the EZ-Bake oven box from behind the bagpipes. The possum stops hissing and plays dead.

Is the glow in the window getting brighter? Is my angel getting closer? I wonder what her name will be. Hopefully something nubile and exotic, like Lolita, but something simple, like Félicité,⁴⁵ would do just fine.

Columbraro struggles to extract the EZ-Bake oven from its Styrofoam casing, making a great deal of grating squeaks that send Lawrence and I spinning frantically atop the ball bearings. The glow in the window continues to grow brighter, bluer. I think I hear car doors slamming outside. Have the angels come to take me to heaven in a celestial sports car? Please, God, *please*, let it be something sexy and European. Don’t tell me Heaven has converted to biofuel, too. I want to roll up to the afterlife in style.

Columbraro slides the little oven-trays into their slots and applies the EZ-Bake decals to the appropriate locations. Now I am *sure* that I hear a great deal of commotion downstairs, and as I begin to grasp the fact that I am about to be executed by a Hasbro product, I experience a miniature existential crisis:

No, no, no. Stop kidding yourself. It’s just an auditory hallucination.

– No, no no! You haven’t hallucinated sounds since that freshman-year acid trip!

Okay, perhaps the clanking and clattering is just coming from the kitchen.

– But what about the bongo drums and the... is that... chanting?

I look up at Columbraro, who by now has managed to plug in the oven. The palooka can’t seem to figure out how to set the temperature and is tearing pages from the little instruction booklet in frustration. The noise downstairs has become so much louder and so much more... *insane*... that I realize I *am* hallucinating. Our own room is silent; Columbraro can hear none of it.

But as he bends down to twiddle the knobs on the EZ-Bake, I notice his ears are plugged up by brown hearing aids. Then Lawrence whispers,

⁴⁴ Papageorgiou, Aristonidis. “Celestial Beings Bear Greece’s Burden.” *Fortune* 1 January 2013: 81-95. Print.

⁴⁵ Name of Gustave Flaubert’s podiatrist, eventual protagonist of *A Simple Heart*

“Do you hear that?”

“Yes! Yes!” I reply, just as the bongo drumming really comes into focus. “It’s a *samba!*”

“And the chants!” he says. “What are they saying?”

I say the words as I perceive them. “Eat... plants... not... animals... death... to... meat... eaters... die... kill... you... if... Peter... knew... No, no, wait, if PETA knew... now... kill... you...”

The EZ-Bake oven reaches 420 degrees. *Ding!*

The door behind me is thrust open and slams against the invisible back wall. *Whump!*

A girl in a dress bounds across the room, carrying an acoustic guitar like an Olympic torchbearer. *Her bare feet make no sound.*

Summoning the strength of the Bambino,⁴⁶ she whacks Columbraro upside the head with the guitar. His temple is struck by an edge of the ivory binding just beneath the pickguard. *Crack!*

In an incredible display of showmanship, our heroine flips the guitar around and pile-drives it, headstock-first, into the fatuous suppository’s skull. *Crunch!*

From *Ding!* to *Crunch!* I have about enough time to blink, and when I open my eyes, Columbraro is slumped over the oven, guitar sticking out of his head like a putting flag. Blood squirts from the temple wound and congeals on the oven’s hot surfaces.

“What the fuck! What the fuck! *What the fuck!*” Lawrence, at all times, cannot contain himself. I keep cool and remind both of them,

“Don’t touch the blood! He’s infected!”

“I can’t *believe* they *caught* you guyth tho *quickly!*” says our savior, who I now see is no woman. It’s the guy I was telling Lawrence about – bearded, but still wearing a sundress and plenty of makeup. Never has his flamboyant twang sounded so sweet to my ears. It is such a welcome second act to Columbraro’s weak Brando that I could almost plant a joyous kiss right on the savior’s Revlon-smearred mouth. The glamorous fellow quickly frees our hands and feet, all the while tiptoeing with the lithe of a ballet dancer so as to avoid the ball bearings.

“Caught? So quickly? What?” I ask.

“You *thillieth!* Did you drive ahead of uth?” he asks.

“Ahead of *who?*” Lawrence asks. “And did you just call me *silly?*”

⁴⁶ baby-faced Home Run King

“Oh my *god*, you guyth! What do you mean, *who?* Thtop *joking*, mithter! The *club!*” He flicks his wrist effeminately. “I mean, come *on*, guyth, we’ve *only* been *planning* thith for *thixth monthth* now! You boyth could’ve gotten yourthelveth *killed!*” His lisp isn’t terminal as I’m making it look – admittedly, it was much more subtle, but there’s no easy way to write it. But now I understand, and I exclaim:

“I *knew* that those renegades in the Bard Vegetarian Club were up to something big!” Given the affordability of local produce, I should’ve known that they were saving their enormous budget for some colossal war.

“Thome of uth have been waiting our whole *liveth* to do thith!” our savior says. “Come on, let’th go! The Priutheth are waiting!” And I realize that the heavenly blue glow came from a fleet of Toyota Priuses, the official vehicle of the Club.

Downstairs, I have never seen such a holocaust. Meat-eating rednecks are strewn about the floor like ragdolls, their heads stuck through burst calfskin hides of djembes and congas, their sunburnt backs porcupined with arrows, shot by an expert archer in a gilly suit. *Why would a vegetarian need a gilly suit?* I wonder. Before making any conclusions, I am struck in the cheek by the buttered side of a dinner roll: the Earnhardt Jr. table and Jeff Gordon table have not yet figured out who the real enemy is and, instead of attacking the vegetarians, fight each other. One vegetarian with the world’s biggest soufflé flamethrower roasts the whole bunch of them in a single clean swipe, and again, I contemplate the vagaries of the vegetarian way of life: *Was cooking those rednecks not against the vegetarian creed simply because nobody plans to eat them after the fact?*

I notice plenty of Bard regulars in the ranks of the vegetarians – people that I assumed, for four whole years, were weak and pacifistic, too stoned to put their pipe dreams into action. *They can stage “animal rights awareness” demonstrations all they want, but let’s see them try to arm-wrestle*, I used to think. Now, these Blithewood regulars have summoned inhuman strength, perhaps an effect of being loaded on Kombucha, what with all those “active cultures.” One girl blinds the rednecks by smearing finger paint, usually reserved for the decoration of her body, in their eyes. One skinny fellow recites Wordsworth through a megaphone, causing some of the trailer-park slugs to fall into rapturous trances as they surrender to a new contemplation of beauty. Or laziness: it seems to be the, “For oft, when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood,”⁴⁷ line that sends them into the stupors. Once sufficiently hypnotized, the ultimate Frisbee team closes in and wallops their skulls with plastic Wham-O products. Our glamorous savior prances through the room, suffocating rednecks by sticking baby carrots in all orifices above their necks.

The vegetarian offensive is relentless. But there is one tragedy:

In a corner, a pretty girl plays uptempo bebop phrases on an alto saxophone. I assume she is trying to disorient the rednecks by upsetting their country-music sensibilities, but it is a well-known fact that non-Dixieland brass makes the buffoons lose all control. Some of the rednecks hit the deck, clapping their hands over their ears and

⁴⁷ Wordsworth, William. “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.” *William Takes (Another) Walk In The Woods*. 1889: Pilgrim Press.2

moaning, but the girl plays one nauseatingly smooth Kenny G. riff that seems to incense a Hillbilly Hulk, who stomps Hulkishly over to her with bloodlust in his bulging peepers. The little jazz musician closes her eyes and arches her back in the throes of a toe-curling high C, and this is when the monster strikes: her eyes go wide as meatstained sausage-link fingers, nails chalk-yellow with onychomycosis, wrap themselves, slowly, around her delicate throat. The lumbering cretin slams her back against the wall with the abrupt, devastating force of an aneurysm, causing the entire side of the building to buckle, dislodging whole ceiling fans, which spin down and dice up those rednecks still writhing on the floor from the frightening ache of that high C.

The vegetarian offensive, a nimble bunch, avoid the faux-wood blades.

The force of the body-English causes the bronze mouthpiece of the girl's saxophone to lodge itself in her pharynx, and the horn squeaks like a jerky-filled chew toy fought over by a pack of wild hyenas. The Hulk holds her there, his supratrochlear veins bulging like subdermal caterpillars, while an accomplice uses one of the plastic knives to saw her head off.

From jugular to nape, the whole grisly severance is over in about the amount of time it takes Lawrence and I to pour ourselves each a beer for the road. The girl's headless body flops forward, as might a weary pilgrim at base of the Kaaba after a particularly grueling seventeenth-century hajj, and a crimson geyser erupts, with the scope and fury of Pompeii, from the hack-job crater, which looks, with flaming-pink gore and visible cervical vertebrae, *just* like the center of a bone-in Christmas ham. The redneck continues to hold the severed head against the wall, and though the girl's nimble little fingers are no longer wrapped around the brass keys, the instrument remains stuck in place, jutting gruesomely, though effortlessly, as if it weighed not more than a kazoo, from her mouth.

"Mother of God," I say, pouring a splash of my blood-cloudy beer onto the floor to honor the evening's martyr. I'm shocked when I realize that Lawrence is laughing so hard that his own beer, which appears to have been spared from the volcanic bloodspray, sloshes onto our shoes.

"The *fuck*, man?" I ask, and try to explain the profound sadness of the situation to him. "That poor girl was nipped while playing an instrument that any serious musicologist would relegate to the ranks of elevators and supermarkets."

The Halfwit Hulk just now realizes that the girl has expired, and releases his clenched fingers. The bell of the saxophone clanks against the floor; the attached head thumps down in tandem. Lawrence laughs still harder.

"Lawrence!" I say, severely. "Come on! Wasn't that, at *least*, a bit... *gratuitous*? Sloppy? I mean, what is this, *Evil Dead*?"

Lawrence composes himself, his face now red, his eyes watery. He takes a sip of his beer and says, "That was *sublime*. Do you understand, or do you *also* need me to spell it out for you?"

"No, no, I get it – tragedy, comedy; they go hand-in-hand. But – "

“No buts,” Lawrence says. “Let’s leave.”

VI: Aftermath

After Bard’s vegetarian club obliterates the rednecks, inadvertently dismantling the infrastructure of organized crime in the Hudson Valley, things turn out more or less as you’d expect.

First, we get a ride home in one of the Prii. It’s lime-green and covered in bumper stickers. The Club members are understandably hungry after the battle – ostensibly from the exercise, though I suspect some of them harbored closet urges to eat the buffet meat – and the whole fleet stops at a restaurant called Earth Foods Everybody Hold Hands to grub and celebrate. The Club members toast Açai juice over bean-and-lentil burgers and sprouts-and-barley salads, and I figure that their unexpected strength back at the Town Hall was probably much more than just Kombucha. They must’ve also been hopped up on snacks from that trendiest of the dietary groups, “superfoods.” Lawrence and I wait in the backseat of our Prius, hanging our heads between our knees to avoid the jeers of the many passerby offended by the bumper stickers.

“Now what?” Lawrence asks, his voice muffled by his jeans.

“Fuck if I know,” I respond. “I should probably get back to class.”

“Oh, come on! What about all our hopes and dreams? Don’t tell me you’re going to get all practical-minded on me!”

“I thought *you’re* the one who hates liberal idealism. You sound like one of *them*,” I say, referring to the inglorious bastards celebrating inside Earth Foods Everybody Hold Hands. Now I’m feeling truly embittered – I’ve missed a *lot* of class for this escapade, which, as far as I can tell, remains pointless, if not vivid.

“But don’t you *get* it?” Lawrence asks. “Look at their success! Can’t we both admit that some of our judgments and expectations are worth... rethinking, or maybe outright throwing away... after all of *that*?”

I hear knuckles rapping on the window, and a muted voice says, “*Support Local Farms? Fuck you!* I work for *Purdue*, and you damn college kids and your bumper stickers are *fucking* me!”

“Well,” Lawrence continues, “It was *definitely* an adventure. An experience. I’d be the first to tell you I’m a pretty material guy. One-percent and all that. But I probably wouldn’t trade any amount of cash for everything we just witnessed. Still, the thought of writing any figure short of “343,927” on my next income tax return gives me chest pains.” The disgruntled corporate poultryman smacks his palms against the window.

“We could try Amway,” I suggest.

I feel somewhat empty after our travels – that feeling of just having been involved in a great undertaking and wondering, *now what?* I’ll have to begin the search for the next “thing” that will give my life meaning. That, coupled with the Dixie-knife decapitation, makes me feel very alone. I dread leaving my new friend and returning to

the Bard bubble. I dread returning to my apartment, which my girlfriend has probably vandalized with all sorts of groceries and cosmetic products since I left it two weeks ago. *Why didn't you text me back!* She'll demand as I scrub deodorant-stick gel out of the oven. I dread returning to campus, land of the performance-artists and car-indifferent. Lawrence and I exchange numbers. "I'll text *you*," I promise him.

The vegetarians return to man their Priuü. I think of what it must've sounded like when World War II generals fired up their Willys Jeeps before driving to the front, what it must've sounded like when pilots got the big props on their Flying Fortresses chugging before taking off in some glorious, deafening formation, en route to nuking Japan, what it must've sounded like when the Hells' Angels fired up the hogs before riding to Altamont. The sound of twenty-three Priuü is a mostly-silent *whirrrrrrrrrr*.

VII: Back to Class

When I finally show up to class again, I am too exhausted to perform the big chest-heaving "ran-through-woods-because-my-car-broke-down" spectacle. For once, I'm one of the first kids in the room. The big round table in the center of the room scares me, because the kids sitting there might see that I pass the time by drawing cartoons of them. I retreat to a shadowy back corner to find a chair.

"Was there anything due today?" I ask a girl sitting by her lonesome at the table. She looks up at me, startled, shakes her head and quickly resumes tunnel-vision on the neat lines of her notes. *Did I see her at the big game dinner, jumping on a redneck's belly with a pogo stick, or do the students here just have a certain way of looking exactly like one other?* "Thank God," I reply, in no mood to act like a hero. I rub my eyes, slump down in the chair and promptly fall asleep.

The professor wakes me up only after class has been dismissed. As I come to, I experience a small flashback – *Hollandaise-yellow linoleum peeling up near a baseboard* – and give a little yelp. When I realize I've just slept through a lesson, the flashback makes way for that I-could-just-about-chew-my-hand-off feeling of shame.

"Bertz, are you *kidding* me?" says the professor. All the students think very highly of him, but he's always bothered me. Why? *I have no idea*. The inexplicable agitation – which I suspect has everything to do with my own unhappiness – riddles me with guilt as I slouch silently through the lessons, bored and bothered, while everybody else participates with puppy-like enthusiasm. Why am I so jaded? It occurs to me that I've never even made an effort to talk to the guy, fearing he might ask where I've found the facts that he marks "Brilliant!" on my papers. If he doesn't already rely on Wikipedia to understand reality, I cannot help him.

"You've been incognito for two weeks and don't even have the *tact* to stay awake upon your return? The snoring really disrupts the rhythm of the Brecht, you know. You might want to pay attention to these things – the rhythm of writers – you're a percussionist, yes?"

The professor even cares enough to point out one of my hobbies – how did he know? The shame is unbearable. I decide, for what is perhaps the first time in my

academic career, to give this man the truth. No more Wikipedia regurgitation or kraken attack excuses. I spill the beans, and the poor old academic has to listen to me blubber,

“Professor, I’m terribly sorry. Two weeks ago, I started the day by being late, but then almost t-boned an old Porsche, then realized the guy driving it was a licensed ostrich farmer, then we drank some beers in an underground chamber, then we decided to eat dinner with some rednecks, then we almost got cooked in an EZ-Bake oven, then we had to watch vegetarians eat dinner.”

“And, by some *grace of God*, you’ve lived to share your remarkable story with the rest of us! Aren’t *we* so lucky,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, in fact, we *are*. We are *very* lucky to belong to an institution full of valiant people. I only escaped with my life thanks to the Vegetarian Club, who murdered the mobsters that were planning to EZ-Bake me. I know you think I’m bullshitting you, Professor, but you’ll read about it in the next issue of the *Free Press*.”

“*Please*. That publication is so low-brow.”

“Right. Sorry, sir.”

“I’m going to pretend like you *didn’t* just say those utterly *derisory* things to me, and that for the last two weeks you’ve been busy working on your senior thesis, which, as you know, is more important than... *anything*.” The emphasis on the final word chills me to the marrow.

“Yes. Yes, sir.”

“Now, run along. I have some things to take care of.” He buttons his tweed jacket, and I notice one of the serial librarians hovering outside the door in the hallway. Realizing that my professor may be about to face one of the most difficult moments of his academic career, I think for him a silent blessing, gather my notebooks, sling my bookbag over my shoulder, and shuffle out the door. As I’m about to close it behind me, he calls:

“Bertz! One more thing!”

“Yes?”

“Your car.”

“My car, sir?”

“Yes, your car,” he says, pointing out a window at my dear Rainbow Fish, which is about to be towed from the handicapped spot. “Is that... *black sapphire metallic*?”

No way. No way will my professor be the first to notice the sub-clearcoat rainbow glitter that I, and *I alone*, cherish above most things in my life. And no way did he just call it by the *factory designated paint code*, which the Bavarians who built the car

stamped on a little plaque in the engine bay. Right beneath the AIV solenoid valve,⁴⁸ there's this little plaque the size of a matchbox, shiny black with silver lettering: *black sapphire metallic*. I live for these details on cars. I'm so pleasantly surprised at what my professor has just said that I don't even run outside to yell at the tow guy for not using a flatbed truck.⁴⁹ How many times do I have to remind these greasemonkeys that it has to be a *fucking flatbed*? It's not like they haven't towed my car countless times from that very same spot.

“Why... yes... yes, it *is!*”

“Knew it,” he says. “I have one just like it at home.”

“You don't say!”

“Well, it's no six-cylinder like yours out there. Mine's still a series E39, but we're talking M5. You know.” I do know, and he can't be serious. This car is commonly referred to as *The Beast*. It was one of the last truly great automobiles manufactured before the designers started using jellybeans, of various flavors, as inspiration for new models. The latest iteration of the BMW 5-series, factory code F10/F11/F07, was based on Tutti-Frutti. Its predecessor, factory code E60/E61, came from Buttered Popcorn.⁵⁰

“But, professor, I was sure I'd only seen you driving a Honda Insight!” I say. The Insight was one of the most fuel-efficient vehicles of all time, but it was a total flop, as it was a dead ringer for a platypus stuck in the mud.

“Bertz, don't be so *naïve*. I just drive that to and from campus so I don't cause commotion amongst my self-effacing, Volvo-driving colleagues.⁵¹ Do you think they would 'get it' if they saw me prowling campus in some slinky black BMW? Look, keep this between you and me – the man I'm supposed to battle for tenure thinks I'm as much a tweedy, hybrid-driving weiner as the rest of the lit department. He has no idea that I'm about to massage his gums with a curb.” My professor rolls up his sleeves, growing into a new masculinity. “*Now*, if you'll excuse me – I *really* want to get this over with so I can get the hell out of this awful jacket. But what say you and I go for a drive together sometime?”

VIII: What I Learned

I left the room glowing, unable to shake the feeling that I'd learned many things in that moment and the two weeks that preceded it. Still, I couldn't tell you what a single one of those damn things is, not for the life of me, except maybe those that Lawrence

⁴⁸ the part of the car responsible for making the wheels roll from front to back instead of left to right

⁴⁹ The E39 BMW 5 series requires a flatbed so its aluminum frame doesn't buckle when being towed. Bad foresight on the part of BMW, who should've realized that their car ought to be more tow-robust, given the great propensity of BMW drivers for parking like assholes.

⁵⁰ In this context, this is a registered trademark of Jelly-Belly, LLC

⁵¹ Fish, Stanley. “The Unbearable Ugliness of Volvos.” *There's No Such Thing As Free Speech*. New York: Harpers, 1991.

spelled out for me: always keep loose change in your vehicle if you are not an EZ-Pass member, and always empty the recycling bin.

I tried to explain everything to my advisor, who listened patiently, then recommended therapy. “But, before you do that,” she added, “you need to sit down at a desk with your thesis and try to ‘create meaning’ out of all the shit you just went on about.”

So that’s what I’m doing right now. I’m sitting here with one open MacBook, on whose screen is one blank document. On the couch, to my right, there are a couple works, selected from the mountain of overdue library books in a corner of my apartment, that I hope will inspire me. To my left, there are six cans of Mountain Brew Beer Ice.⁵²

I write down the first thing that comes into my head:

Behold the man.

I like it. Is that good enough? Or must I explain what it means?

⁵² \$2.99. I’m *not* kidding.

