

**Young Adulterer**

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Cover design by Amit Paul

I've had panic attacks before, but this one was different. It wasn't a rush so much as a dread, the bear stalking me rather than the semi that squashes your ass on the road. It had a PHD in manipulation, nursing mild irritations to full-blown worries. It wasn't the dizzying call that your grandfather's in the hospital (*not that I've got any left to fret over*), but an anonymous text saying everyone thinks your shirt looks stupid. You've already made your rounds and everyone who's crossed your path has seen it. Even *if* you had an alternate wardrobe to change into, they'd know you were faking it. The packaging might be fresh, but the contents are the same. You're still the dope in the stupid shirt, too proud to punch out early and too ashamed to own it. Have I been so awry this whole time? Were everyone else's baby bottles spiked with the red pill I had just taken? Was I the product of some placebo effect, a mind taken out to thaw after it had already gone rotten? Whatever the case, I felt *too late*.

That's not to say the effect was purely mental. It was just—more elaborate. This wasn't the jock who wants to punish me; this was his coach, more interested in technique than merely bowling me over. He wanted to put me out for the season. It was the Hannibal Lecter to life's Ghostfaces. The intent was to kill me, but first I must *suffer*. My feet were pounding a tattoo in the hardwood floor here at my desk. My heart was beating to some obscure time signature that would feel at place in a prog song. Its cage was cracked inward, ribs threatening to shank it from all angles. My right eyelid had been fluttering since I woke. This was, by all accounts, a motherfucker.

I think what triggered this episode was an email I had opened earlier today, an invitation to my first high school reunion. Five years, damn, that went by fast. Now I know where Bowie was coming from. I'm hardly out of college—at least, that's what I keep telling myself. That's just one presidential term with change. What are we supposed to catch up on, exactly? Nobody's bald yet. Everyone with child was already showing when we walked the stage. Some grandparents slipped into the past tense; some kids bought rings and decided to play house. Good for them, but let's see if wifey's still on your arm at the ten year. It's just a sorry excuse for the former jocks to detail how their *Porky's* lives in high school transitioned into *Animal House* college days while the rest of us compare Bachelor's degrees. It's a doctor's follow-up before the medicine's kicked-in. Oh, boy. Let's all dress ourselves up real nice so we can look the lies of success we're selling. You can count me out, man. Still, I'm flattered they invited me at all. Can't believe anybody'd remember me, fondly, anyhow.

God, I haven't written like this since college, but I couldn't lay stagnant next to Carly another hour while she tends to minor woes in her sleep. They nip at her, easy fixes like which vest looks cutest on the dachshund her dream-self owns. She kicks them away in her slumber. My anxieties are more of the cancerous variety. I

usually keep my hospice in the fridge for nights like this, but I felt that referring to booze as “hospice” was a red flag for early onset alcoholism, so I put an end to that. *(Plus, what’s the point of me buying when my brother keeps the fridge stocked with his own supply? That’s simple economics.)* Maybe I’ve been approaching things all wrong, lately. Clearly, chasing my troubles away with a bottle in hand isn’t doing the trick. I just wake up slightly hung-over to find them waiting on my doorstep, sure as the Sunday paper. *(Perhaps one of those corny “GO AWAY” mats would be worth investing in?)* Maybe instead of marinating them in liquor, I should have been reaching down my throat to puke it all out. All I needed was a good purge, a confession.

My favorite perk of working as a front-end cashier is that you meet all types. I think everyone has seen a stranger who looks interesting, attractive, or just cool. *(Unless I’m just some sorta creep, a possibility I’ve yet to rule out.)* Of course, you never approach them, because that breaks every rule of social conduct Generation Awkward has established, especially if you’re a socially-stunted individual such as myself. Working with the public, you’re given the benefit of occasionally indulging in those curiosities. Heck, you even find out that some people are much more interesting than they might appear. Nothing’s cooler than being proven wrong about someone when you judge them too harshly. I quickly learned, after being forced to confront my social anxieties head-on, that most people are *decent*. After a while, you even learn how to bring out the decency in people who aren’t as quick to offer it. It’s a performance art. Sure, you need to keep the line moving, but you also need to entertain your audience. You’re a self-directing actor. You must become a character, cautious not to slip back into reality. You’ll develop a fandom of those who will seek out your line, even if it means waiting a bit longer. You’ll also probably deal with some hecklers, who have real clever quips about you being an example of why minimum wage doesn’t need raised. Obviously, your managers are the critics.

You’re encouraged to take an interest in your customers, but to only offer consideration as a rental. Out of sight and out of mind is the credo of the successful cashier. The conversation is just another transaction. You’re the store clerk NPC in the role-playing game of business. Screw that. I refuse to play by their rules, man. To me, no one is just a customer and I’m more than just a cashier. Each person that comes through my line has his or her own life and thoughts. For all I know, I could be the only person that’s nice to them all day. I know I’ve had plenty where the extent of my communication began and ended with customers. It isn’t about good service; it’s about being a fuckin’ human in this corporate machine. Kindness is the ultimate form of rebellion in this impersonal world. Yeah, you’ll have those who value detachment and treat you like a prostitute trying to kiss ‘em on the lips. To them, humanity is about as advantageous as a case of herpes. It’s a risk you take in putting yourself out there, but I swear to God it pays off.

There was this girl that came through my line, back when I first started on the job. She had purple hair and always wore a band hoodie with tour dates on the back. I’m not into the group, but I feigned interest and asked when she saw them. *(She apparently didn’t; the shirt was gifted from a friend who had.)* She was a sweet girl,

bashful, but cute. She raised an arm to pull some hair behind her ear and the sleeve fell just enough for me to see the scars on her wrist. Whatever she was trying to uproot must have been planted deep. Mates, it looked like someone was trying to hack the thing off. She caught me noticing this and we finished the transaction in silence. I never saw her again, but I think about her every night.

If it wasn't for taking advantage of my privileges as a cashier, I might not've met Carly. She was some girl unlucky enough to come through my line. I put a blank slip of receipt paper and a pen on the check stand. Understandably, she asked what the deal was.

"I was hoping for an autograph, is all," I said.

"-Why?"

"You *are* Carly Rae Jepsen, right?"

"Isn't she, like, thirty?"

"Yeah, but she looks about sixteen."

"So, you're saying I look like a teenager."

"I'll put it this way, if you were buying cigarettes, I'd card you." *Smooth, I know.* She took the pen and scribbled something after paying. It said to work on my technique, and below it was a phone number. Normally, I wouldn't recommend sexually harassing customers on the clock, but I'd just gotten my liberal arts degree and was damn sure employers in my field would be lining up on my doorstep. (*I'm still waiting to meet those horny singles in my area, too.*) One year later and here I am, without a single interview. (*The fact that I've yet to apply is beside the point. Why waste precious time applying for jobs I know I'll never get?*) She still comes through my line, and I pretend like I give a fuck about the rules against checking significant others out before tossing in a free pack of gum or mineral water. Then, we go out for my lunch break.

Today, I switched things up. We went to the same restaurant, of course. I'm not born again or something. Sal's Bar & Grille is the place to be and my break comes just in time for happy hour. Sure, it's a hole in the wall, but it's got character. My boy, George, was pretty impressed when I ordered a veggie burger rather than my typical dozen wings. Been trying to cut calories, ya know?

"This your doing, Princess?" he asked Carly, who was tapping away on her phone, probably another Instant Manifesto re: the coworkers she spends all day bitching about but refuses to turn in. George's always called her the Princess of Sal's, I think because she's the only fuckable girl who's willing to be seen here in daylight hours. Whatever, it's all in good humor.

"You think I could talk him outta your wings? I'd better see you in church, 'cause this is the work of God." She actually bothered to look up from her screen for that one.

"Does God want me to turn your beer to water before I bring it out, too?"

“Bro, I’m on the clock. I’ve got a reputation to uphold; showing up sober would let a lotta people down.”

“*My man*. And will the royalty be expecting her usual tonight?”

“You know it.” Her eyes remained fixed on their feed.

George fucked off to fix our meals.

“How were classes today?” O.K., so as a dude nearly two years out of school, asking my sophomore girlfriend about classes makes me feel like a pedo. I worry that she’s too young for me, but I’m also very immature for my age. It all works out. We’ve talked about the age difference before, but she isn’t fazed by it. In fact, it’s the one thing her father and I can agree on, though I think he’s less perturbed by my years than what I’ve done with them. For my last birthday, she screen-printed me a t-shirt in her art class. It says Last Name Humbert on the front, First Name Humbert on the back. I don’t know if I should be flattered or insulted. Pedophilia aside, Humbert *was* a well-read dude. Anyhow, I asked her how classes went. Shit, sorry.

Shoulders bounced in apathy. She brushed a thin shock of hair from her eyes to better see the screen. Facebook must have been cranking out that real.

George silently placed our drinks before us and withdrew back to the kitchen. I downed half my mug and punctuated the drink with a belch.

“Must you?” She addressed me like a dog who messed on the carpet.

“Yeah, actually, today I must. I’ve been really stressed today; you have no idea.”

“I was talking about the burp, but what’s up?” She set her phone on the table, face-up, obviously. It ain’t much, but I’ll take it. A handie’s still affection.

“I got an email about my high school reunion the other day.”

“If you’re that embarrassed, I can stay home. Just leave some food in my bowl.”

“You’re just saying that to get out of hanging with a bunch of old folk like me trying to rekindle what you haven’t yet lost. Have some sympathy. So, *as I was saying*, what’s bothering me is that I haven’t seen these people in five years, now.”

“That’s why it’s called a five-year reunion.”

“C’mon, this is real talk. I’m not the same person I was then. What am I supposed to say? I work retail at twenty-three. The only suits I own are from thrift shops. Do you know what people I graduated with post about on Facebook? They post about internships in other states, other *countries*. They have real colleges listed as their education, ones that require IQs higher than the double digits to pass, photos with real friends, the kind with IQs in the *triple* digits. Kids I shared a classroom with now have their own classrooms! How am I supposed to show my face when I’ve got *that* to compete with?”

“This might come as a shock to you, but attendance isn’t mandatory. Your high school diploma won’t expire if you don’t check in with people you chose not to keep up with. It’s just a nice thing for people who want to go. It’s not the Olympics of showboating.”

“First of all, I disagree. Also, it’s not just about that. I parted on *seriously* bad terms with these people. I’m practically the Mike Love of my graduating class. I’m not even sure I didn’t just receive the invite as the result of some freak glitch in the Do Not Mail list. If they can see who I am now, maybe it can make up for the dude I was back then.”

“Are you even trying to prove something to the world? Or just yourself? You shouldn’t worry about what people you haven’t seen in years think. What’s their approval to you? They don’t cast a vote to make you an official good guy. So, their parents happened to buy a house in the same arbitrary vicinity as yours. You grew up together and moved on. Shit happens. That’s life.”

“Maybe I have some terminal illness that’ll become malignant and kill me by the reunion. I can be some candle-lit portrait people exchange fond-yet-vague memories over.”

“You’re right, that’d be awesome.” Her phone buzzed on the table. She picked it up like it was set to detonate if left unattended.

“We’ll see how easy it is for you to crack in about three years. I’m tellin’ you, this shit is *heavy*. In fact, I’m glad you can’t relate. Enjoy your ignorance while you can.” I got nothin’ for that one, not even an annoyed sigh. She was too busy nursing her phone. I doubt she even heard me.

It must be nice to have all the answers in life and to question nothing. Two years into a Psych program and she’s got a map of the labyrinthine mind. What? I’m supposed to stop caring about the people I’ve known my whole life just because I’m not literally forced to spend six hours for five days a week in a building with them? I’m just a stupid English, B.A., but even I know that’s some kinda sociopathy. Shit, she’s the one who should be working retail.

Even though I clocked out at 8:57, I didn’t find my way home until nearly midnight. After spending a shift under fluorescent bulbs, it’s hard not to give in to the moon’s seductions. I feel confused under the wire mother of artificial lights. Things seem so complicated and my stomach flips itself into knots. The breath of the Earth is medicine to my lungs. Bathing under the moon loosens my insides, refines my vision. All life’s convoluted stressors unravel beneath the stars. The cavity inside my chest is filled with something resembling optimism. Finally, I started to get a little spooked. The clock was about to strike midnight, turning every pedestrian into a delinquent and filling every alley with the potential for danger. I quietly scampered homeward, breaking into a full jog once the house was in view.

The smell of the apartment as I stepped in the door was dank enough to make you question Obama’s nationality. Neighbors looking out their window could

probably see smoke curling out the door like the tentacles of some Lovecraftian Hentai monster. The place was foggier than a Horror movie set. This was more than any hotbox; the place was being *fumigated* with pot. My brother, Matt was crumpled up like the corpse of a gunshot victim on the sofa, trying to watch some political televangelist on the TV. His arm was wrapped around a calico cat by the name of Tammy. If there's any truth to the secondhand high myth, she was probably living out the feline equivalent to the last half hour of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

"Mom'd freak out if she knew you were walking home at this time of night," he said to me. The glass of his eyes looked shattered, split into shards by a network of red lines.

"You think she'd freak if she knew about the reefer madness going on in this apartment?" I slung the jacket off my shoulders and tossed it towards the far corner of the room, just missing Matt's head. Somehow, he had maintained enough of his senses to duck in time.

"I dunno. Maybe we can tell her that after I tell her who hasn't paid rent the last three months."

"What do I care? She's not my landlord. Plus, you're, like, my patron. All the classic artists had one."

"Yeah, but the classic artists made, you know, classic art, not blog posts about ex-girlfriends." He stroked the back of Tammy's neck, prompting her to arch her spine and leap off the couch. She found a more comfortable position for herself wedged between the entertainment stand and the wall behind it.

"Well, maybe tonight I'll switch it up and write a blog post about stoner brothers." I intercepted his vision of the host beckoning his crowd like a musical conductor encourages a crescendo as I waded through smoky curtains to my bedroom door across the room. This is, like, none of my business, but I spotted a pair of yellow panties on the floor near Matt's bed as I passed the open door of his room. *Nice*.

"Don't forget to mention how the stoner brother pays to *house your ass!*" he called from the couch, more than likely too crippled to follow me and continue the banter.

See, the thing Matt forgot to mention was that I'm doing him the favor by staying. Was he factually wrong in claiming that I live here rent-free? No. We decided to move in together so that I could afford to pay off my college tuition, and I uphold my end of that agreement. I just don't go out of my way to do anything more. The opportunity for jobs that offer full-time or higher pay are available, but that's not worth bargaining my freedom over. As of right now, I work twenty hours a week. There are plenty of people in greater need of work. Really, I'm doing my part in the economy by not taking any more hours than necessary. Think about it. The more hours I work, the less are available to the needy. If everyone adapted to this philosophy, unemployment could go extinct. Plus, Matt ain't hurting for money. He took some welding class in high school that landed him a job making twice my hourly rate. For all we know, I'm protecting him by keeping him close enough to the poverty line that he can't afford

anything harder than grass. His problem is that he's got too much money and nobody to spend it on. The truth is, I think he'd be disappointed if I left. I pay my keep in companionship. I might drink all his beer, but I'm the only person who keeps him from drinking alone.

What he said about the blog posts, *that* was uncalled for. He's still salty over some things I wrote years back that he took out of context. Just because I wrote about a character's relationship with his mentally-inept brother doesn't mean I was writing about my own relationship with *my* brother that I just so happen to commonly refer to as mentally-inept. As an artist, you start to realize that very few people are willing to account for a limited imagination. Our minds are anchored to the bed of reality, you know? No matter how hard we pull, we can't just detach ourselves and float down the stream of consciousness. Even in dreams, the mind is incapable of inventing new faces, so it borrows from those seen in waking life. I don't find writing any different. The ego of some people can be insufferable, trying to find a piece of themselves in everything.

I came home with the intention to write, but closing the door of my isolation tank, I find temptation waiting for me in the writhing sheets of my bed. The skin of my neck tightens at my possibilities. I have so much guilt about my own sexuality you'd think I was Catholic, or gay, or a gay Catholic. If I jerk off before I write, I'll never get around to writing, instead spending my night chasing the porn of Valhalla, that perfect money shot, across the horizon and into sunrise. If I write before rubbing one out, I'll rush my words so that I can get to jacking. Like all creative minds, I'm a sex addict. What separates me from the pack is that I ain't gettin' any. Perhaps that's the fine line between genius and madness, 'cause I'm clearly lacking the former. Backwards as it sounds, I look forward to days without Carly, so that I can finally get some quality palm time in. Don't get me wrong, when we're at it, Carly fucks like she owes me money. It's just that trying to turn her on is like asking her to come in to work on her day off. She'd rather lay in bed, cuddling like cherubs. I'm a fucking teddy bear with the aspirations of a dildo. It's normal to be sexually repressed as a single dude. If you feel that way in a relationship, you've got a serious problem.

I flush that idea out of my mind. I spent three hours lamenting my sex life on the walk home. Now, I'm on borrowed time. I might be off the clock, but I've still got a job to do. I'm working to support myself enough to write, and yet I can never muster up the confidence to get down to it. It's like spending all your money buying drinks for a girl at the bar and being too shy to ask her out. The responsibility I hold myself to as a writer has manifested into some odd guilt complex about not being productive enough, and that only compounds my performance anxiety. Unlike most writers seem to have, I'm not insecure in my ideas. It's more the opposite, that I fear my ideas are too good, and I'm insufficient to fulfill them. I feel like God's filling me with this beautiful music, but I'm an instrument out of tune. I've got stories in me that could put other authors into nooses—sex scenes people could autoerotic asphyxiate to—I could literally *wipe* out my competition, a genocide of prospective authors in my name, if only I manned the fuck up and set them to paper. I'm a father unfit to raise the stories properly. I've left the flowerbed of my ideas unwatered and I don't know whether to uproot all my wilting projects or to try nursing them back to health.



Take my current project, for example. A work of satire titled *Bald & Beautiful*. I've been outlining it since Obama was campaigning to defend his title as president from Mitt Romney. It's all about our conceptions of beauty and the double-standards that come with them. I'm just gonna give my own outline the 'ole Copy/Paste for ya and make it easier on us both:

The story begins on the date of Guy Kahn's birth. The first act of the book traces his life all the way through adulthood, defining each stage of his upbringing through an association with his hair. His childhood would be related to bowl cuts and Pomade would be the mascot of his rebellious teenage years. During college, he adopts a more "mature" aesthetic, with hair cropped more closely to his dome that continues to whither and recede as he progresses through his twenties.

*This Darwinian scale comes to a climax when he is right at the middle of his life, now fully bald, consoling his teenaged daughter who has just been diagnosed with cancer. Not only is she scared for her emerging mortality, but also of the fact that she will begin losing her own hair. So, being the loving father that he is, and being an active member in the community (or something, I haven't worked all the details out yet), he organizes a "Bald & Beautiful" parade, with her as the star of the event. Being a normal teenager, she's nervous, but complies to make her father happy. The story goes viral after making the local news and lands Guy on various talk shows, building him up to a celebrity status. Men and women alike begin shaving their heads in solidarity, but it doesn't end there. Protesters begin demanding that Barbie dolls are made in the likeness of male pattern baldness. Bald men and women become a recognized minority and a full head of hair becomes a sign of privilege. (Think of how every celebrity well past his forties keeps his. Now look around you, or just think of the distinguished gentlemen in your life. Notice anything?) Guy himself becomes further removed from his family the more active he becomes involved in activism, only to be brought back for his daughter's passing at the end of the novel.*

The idea's hot-to-trot. Problem is, it's outta my league. Some things are just too pure for this world, I tell ya.

Some of the professors back at school warned my classes about writers' fatigue, but it seems more to me like a paralysis. I'm a literary benchwarmer, unfit to play with the team, an injured stag waiting for the bullet. I can live with being a fuck-up as a lover, as a family member, maybe even as a person, but to fail as an artist? That shit hurts on an existential level.

I don't believe in purpose, but I'm a firm believer in inclination. I see attractive girls every day, and sometimes I wonder about them. Would we get along? What kind of movies does she watch? How does she fuck? What would our lives be like, together? I think that, in one way or another, such quantum romances are something we're all guilty of. That doesn't mean we act upon every hormonal whim that crosses our paths, but if we *never* followed such urges, we'd be nothing but miserable virgins. To me, a life without writing is worse than a life without pussy. My advice for aspiring artists is this: *Envy the unambitious, those who can come home from work, sink into a couch, and happily slip into tomorrow without complaints, unhaunted by fantasies of creation. (And if you can see yourself becoming one such*

*person, allow it to happen, for your own sake.)*

The plus side to having a bedroom small as my own is that everything is within arm's reach. I've trained myself to open the window with one hand and snag my smokes from the desk with the other. I hop into bed and put this talent to use. I fish the lighter from beneath my pillow and spark myself up. It's one of those metallic lighters that look fancy to lower-class people such as myself. I toss it out of sight, and notice a chip in the paint near where it struck the wall. I'd typically have cursed or thrown a minor tantrum, but I had already initiated chill time, so I laid back down and closed my eyes. I never used to smoke, promised my grandmother on her deathbed that I wouldn't. I held true to that, too, until I started hanging around a girl who smoked Menthols. I picked up the habit after she split. After somewhat of a phase, I trained myself to only smoke when I'm lonely. Somehow, I still manage to go through a pack a week.

I knew I should be writing, but I was struck by another ambition, one more revolting than the act of stuffing my hand down my pants until they're stained. *I should look everybody up from high school.* I know I told Carly all about the various mountains they've climbed and dragons they've slain, but honestly, I don't have a fuckin' clue what they've been up to for the past five years. I don't consider what I said a lie in the sense that there's no evidence indicating they *aren't* out there, taking the world by storm. That's just my personal theory, but one no weaker in faith than the average Christian's. Of course, they all unfriended me long ago, and I never made the effort to come crawling back. I didn't want to know the reality of what they went on to do. I wasn't prepared to meet my worst fear, that they went on to live idyllic, Snap-worthy lives and it was I who held them back, all along, but tonight, I felt like I could take it. On second thought, I may as well save the reveals for the big night.

Maybe secondhand high from marijuana is real, despite what every pothead I've ever met has insisted, because I could feel the munchies coming on. I navigate the thin strip of carpet visible between empty cans and dirty laundry to the door. Apparently, I wasn't the only one craving fourth meal, because Matt had amputated himself from the couch and was perched upon the counter, spooning a bowl of ice-cream. I don't know how I could be related to this person or when the paradigm of our upbringing took the turn in his favor. The whole concept of our relation has been a mystery to me for years, now, a shitty episode of *The Twilight Zone* I'm forced to live out every day. The family had all but written him off as a fast food lifer before he found a niche for himself above the poverty line while my college rhetoric proved to be all theory without execution. The jaw he shoveled rocky road into, as he does every night, looks fit to crack walnuts, whereas my chin is sinking like California into the fleshy ocean of my neck. The stout bristles of his beard are thick in rank and are better kempt than Gatsby's yard, and yet the pubic hair festering across my face is weedy and uneven. His hairline runs straight across his forehead, while my skull is performing some awkward striptease with my hairline, not quite ready to bear it all, but spreading like two legs beyond the modesty of a widow's peak. In our five years' difference in age, I could pass for his father.

"You should'a watched that show with me. It was a good episode."

“No, thanks. I don’t need to watch some show to scoff at people who think differently than I do or to feel smarter than everybody else.”

“No, you just need to get up in the morning.”

I opened the fridge, but we were all condiments and no substance, unless I was interested in a rotten vegetable sandwich. What kind of artist can work on an empty stomach? I was starting to doubt Matt’s commitment to patronage... “So, I requested off so I can go to my high school reunion.”

“You’re that old, huh?”

A nerve must have pinched while I was leaning into the fridge, because it inflamed as I stood straight. I arched over, massaging it with my non-smoking hand. “My back hurts so much you’d think I’m sexually active.”

“Maybe you can spend some of that rent money you’ve been laundering on a nice cane to take with you to your reunion, grandpa. If you have any left over, you can spend it on Viagra.”

“If I come home and find a cane in my bedroom tomorrow, I’m beating you over the head with it.”

“Bro, I spend enough money on you without wasting it on gag gifts.”

We spent the night talking in the cramped kitchen until sunlight splashed through the window. I felt like Nosferatu, pierced to my mortality by it as a choir of birds heralded my death. Realizing the error of our ways and accepting the eminence of our encroaching work days, we shied away to bed. Mom always said that if we didn’t have anyone else in the world, Matt and I would always have each other. If she knew how right she was, she’d probably freak.

I’m a twenty-three-year-old man and can hardly dress myself. I can pick crumpled-up articles of clothing up off the floor and throw them on as well as anybody, but the laws enforced by fashion police are braille to me. Style is an equation I can’t solve for. Did everyone else’s parents sit them down after high school and explain all the unwritten rules of fashion? Is there an annual magazine of all acceptable clothing that I forgot to subscribe to? Were we emailed after graduation explaining how to dress as the owner of a high school diploma? (*Seriously, this is a possibility I’ve considered. I never check my God damn email.*) At some point, I tripped over the thin line between the age it’s considered acceptable to wear graphic t shirts and the era of flannel and collars. I always get compliments on whatever movie I’m repping on the front of my shirt, but I never cease to feel condescended to, like “Oh, you’re wearing *that*? That’s cute.” I’m a walking advertisement. I never wore clothing with visible branding, and yet I allow myself to advertise for my interests. Scorsese ain’t gettin’ paid for my *Taxi Driver* shirt, so who is? Just another clothing company making assembly lines out of foreign children.

So, here I am staring at a wall of semi-formal shirts as though it’s a memorial

for veterans of war. The fact that I'm standing here at all is a strike to the ego, considering I just clocked out five minutes ago as an employee, yet here I am, entering stage right in the guise of a dopey customer. I'm just waiting for one of my bosses to intercept my train of thought and inform me that "The bras are this way," or some other endlessly witty dig. My attention keeps diverting to the reflecting security camera hanging from the ceiling. (*It's one of those semi-circular ones that look like it's made from the same liquid as a Terminator.*) See, that's one of the things they never tell you about narcissism. It's not always about getting high on the fumes of your own shit. Sometimes, it's just an obsession with oneself, an insecurity, even. I hate the image of myself, but can't help but look at it in every reflection I cross. *How bad does my hair look? Does it look as thin as it feels when I'm washing it in the shower? Does the beard cover my lack of chin?*

Like all great problems, it begins with denial. *This damn dryer is shrinking all my clothes. They must be getting caught on something in there, because they keep tearing. I only look larger because they're tighter, which is because they shrunk in the dryer. It's an optical illusion.* Sometimes, it proceeds to damage control. *I've gained weight, but not that much. There are chrome-domes walking around who are my age; my hair line isn't that high. It's just a phase I'm going through, a two-year phase.* The truth is, I feel awful and I know it. I'm ashamed of myself, and yet I distract myself from my guilt by indulging in the same decadence that put me in this state. You know that cliché about girls eating ice cream after a bad break-up? I feel like I'm getting dumped by my former self every day of my life and the only thing qualified to fill the void in me is junk food. The worst part is that I can't even remember the last time I enjoyed eating. I'm only eating for survival, but this false sustenance will be the death of me. I just—I have these fears that I'm going to clock in for work and an hour into my shift, I'll realize I'm starving, but can't eat on the clock, so I'm stuck there like a castaway. Nothing is worse for hunger than boredom. This leads me to the question of what size to buy, should I ever decide what false impression of style I should pursue. Do I play it safe and get a Large to hide the curvatures I've built in the last five years? Or do I feign confidence in a Medium? After all, this is for my *high school reunion*. It'll be the first time any of these people will have seen me in half a decade. This is my comeback.

God, I remember at Grandpa's funeral last year, there were teenagers, pimply-faced kids dressed nicer than me. They looked so comfortable in their skins, as though they knew exactly what they wanted in life and were on course to get it. Fuck them and their bow ties. Matt was crying so hard I thought he might choke to death on his tears. I don't blame the kid. With dad's whole side out of state, his only surviving family was Mom and myself.

I don't know what I was thinking, bringing Carly. We'd only been going out for a few weeks at this point, but she counseled me through the whole ordeal. Even though she never met my grandfather, she was such a supporting player in the event of his death to me that it felt rude *not* to invite her. She was as nervous about what to wear as I feel today. (*Bear in mind that she was not only attending a funeral, but also meeting my family for the first time.*) That's what I like about her the most. The girl has no art to her life. Some people are so composed, they're dressed up to sell you

some impression of a person. With Carly, what you see is what you get. It's almost funny, that with the gentrification of hipster culture, it's become popular to dress as obtuse as she does, but there isn't an ounce of irony or self-awareness in her. I don't think anyone that mattered could even get a decent look at her through the tears that night.

I managed to remain stoic through the duration of the service and maintained whatever bullshit dignity seemed important back then. I socialized and cracked jokes with those in attendance, but the closer we came to leaving, the shakier my performance became. It was almost easy. Nothing about that day felt like it could be real, and I didn't have to deal with it like one does real issues. This was just a shitty dream. It wasn't until Carly, Matt, my mother, and I paid our last respects that reality blindsided me. I was looking down into this coffin, and inside was my grandfather. It was no body, not a corpse like in the movies. It was a human being, and this human being had raised me alongside my parents and often stepped in when they were struggling. He practically financed my college education and taught me how to be a man. It was he who showed me how to change the tire on a car, or how to use a riding mower. He would no longer be home when I drove by. It would be someone else, a stranger. If I called his number, it would be disconnected. Worse yet, if I called it from my cell phone at that exact moment, it would just ring and ring ad infinitum. To this day, I have a voice mail on his phone that I can listen to, so that I'll never have to risk forgetting what his voice sounded like.

All these things were racing through my mind, and all of a sudden, I realized *this is how it ends*. This is the last time I'm going to see my grandfather. I just lost it. My defenses were lowered and I hadn't the strength to fight the tears back. I raced out to the parlor, now empty as the extended family and friends of friends had already went back to their unaffected lives. It was hard not to hold that against them. They could see death, they could sympathize with our loss, but they couldn't *feel* it. They wouldn't have to wake up with the fact of it every day of their lives from that day forward.

I was too self-involved to hear the footsteps, so when Carly hugged me, I was shocked and frightened in that primitive way when one feels endangered. She wrapped her arms around my waist tight enough to successfully perform the Heimlich maneuver. I could feel her tiny form trembling against me. Odder yet, I could hear her sobbing. Here she was, crying at the funeral of a man she had never met, because she saw what his death meant to *me*. I don't know how long we stood in that spot. Time has this odd way of standing still when you're short-circuited like that. Eventually, we wore ourselves out, and we were still cradling each other. I rock and back forth sometimes. I can't help it, and I'm not even aware until I'm in the swing of it. Apparently, this was one of those times, because Carly asked if I was trying to dance with her.

"Sure," I said, somehow managing to smile. She took a step to the side, and then another step, taking one of my hands into her own and placing the other on her side. I followed suit, especially since I never learned how to dance. I even went to the prom once, spent the whole dang thing seated at the table. I took a girl named Ione

that year. We went as friends, but it felt like a step forward towards our seemingly-inevitable relationship. After a few hours on the sideline, she took me by the hand, practically dragging me to into the crowd. An EDM rendition of “Graduation” by Vitamin C was playing. I felt like one of the cattle, waiting for the slaughter of graduation, with backs pressing up against mine, stray elbows bumping into my ribs. She writhed and tousled her hair like a model, but my limbs were locked into place. I was the Tin Man without his lube.

“*What’s wrong!?*” she shouted over the music.

“I can’t stand this music!” I said, which was partially true, in the sense that the song playing *was* hot trash. I neglected to mention at any point prior to this moment that I was about as qualified for the dance floor as I was to tour the Yukon.

“Neither can I! I’m just trying to have a good time!” It took me years to truly understand what she meant by that. Coaxing Carly into acknowledging me in that desperate boyfriend way takes me back to that prom and places me into Ione’s shoes. (*Well, she left her shoes under the table, but you feel me.*) Life is the dance of fools, but at the end of the day, your options are dance or die. Sure, if you want to be a douche and get technical about it, you’ll die either way, but you can live on the outskirts of society, watching the others with a derision to disguise your own latent insecurity or say fuck it and have a good time. We spent the rest of the night at the table, watching the cycle of slow dance ballads and fist-pumping bangers like a time lapse of night and day. She was probably bored out of her mind, but the fact that she touched my hand at all meant the world to me.

“Thank God everybody else left, or else we’d look like a couple of assholes,” I said to Carly, remembering where we were. She nearly doubled-over with laughter, spraying phlegmy spit in aerial nets like Spider-Man’s web slings.

We followed Mom and Matt from the funeral home back to Grandpa’s house to spend one last night like we used to as kids. He owned the estate since before my mother was born, and it was a third home to me as a child. The four of us spent the night talking at the table, until around two when Mom went back to the living room to cocoon herself in blankets and catch some rest—which was not coming easy at that point in time. Carly and I slipped into the guestroom while Matt was lighting up outside. We sat down on the bed and were talking about some mundane shit, anything to look past the elephant in the room. Something came over me, some carnal drive that demanded I screw the pain away, that I fuck to forget the week I’d just endured. I started kissing her. She kissed me back, but not like I wanted. Her lips were hardened, pressed together like they were stamping an envelope with lipstick or kissing a child’s forehead. I tried biting her lower lip to kick her into ignition and she pulled away from me.

“Please,” she asked me. “I don’t feel comfortable with that right now. It feels disrespectful to do anything in this bed. I feel like your grandfather’s watching us or something.”

“Yeah,” I said, suddenly aware of myself. “You’re right.” Sure, I felt rejected, but more so I felt deeply *ashamed* of myself. What’s wrong with me, that I would even

try to do such a thing on a night like this? I probably looked like an idiot, a real pervert. When she drove home that night, about three hours later, I was certain I'd blown my chances with her. I went from a cool guy with a degree and a car to a psycho, a creep. Yet, I woke the next morning to a text message punctuated with a smiley face.

Anyways, that was the last time I had to get dressed up for anything.

It was another lunch break at Sal's. I'd describe the location to you, but why bother? It's a backdrop, a matte painting in the snapshot we pose for every day, eating the same prop foods at the same table. If we took one photo each time we visited, we could fill a daily calendar.

"Carly," I spoke, seemingly into the abyss. "Carly?"

There must have been a lag in her, because she took a full minute before looking up from her phone. "What?"

"Am I a failure?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I said. Am I a failure?"

"No, of course not, sweetie. You've got a college degree, a job, you're not even living at home. Why would you even think that?"

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure a retarded person is capable of doing all those things. I guess what I'm getting at is, are you embarrassed to be with me? Am I a loser?"

"No more than the rest of us. Our whole generation's kinda screwed. Just getting by is about the best you can be doing. You're just being too hard on yourself."

"Well, let me rephrase it: Do you think that *other people think* I'm a loser? As in, people who aren't currently dating me?"

"Currently? You got any prospects I should know about?" She raised an eyebrow suspiciously. I don't know how she trained her muscles to do that. She makes it seem so easy, but I think it's a talent worthy of the freak show.

"Not yet, but I'll keep my eyes open. I'm just nervous about the reunion, again. It's coming up and I don't want to look like some kinda fuck-up. I mean, I know I'm a fuck-up; I just don't want to *look* like one."

She sighed. "Why do you have to always compare yourself with others? This is your life, not theirs. If they don't approve of it, then it doesn't matter. What's so God damn special about these people?"

"I just—I used to be really close to some of them and I know I fucked things up. I don't even care if we keep in touch; I just don't want things to end on a sour note. It doesn't feel right to me and I hate knowing that some people associate me with

such negativity. When you do something bad, you should just apologize for it. I was too stubborn to, back then, and I feel like now's my opportunity to make things right."

"This is high school we're talking about. People do crummy things to each other all the time; that's what kids do. What could you have possibly done that was so awful?"

"You know, to some people, I can say. Guys that got with girls after they broke up with me, so I felt the need to, like, harass them. Or girls that broke up with me, and then got with some other guy after a fair amount of time that I felt the need to harass. You know, some people, you just have fallings out with. I know what you mean; I don't even really care about them. I feel bad, because their shittiness was no excuse for me to act like such a tool, but I can live with that. It's the people that I don't know how I pissed off that bother me. We never fell out; we just slipped away, and then they blocked me on social media and I don't get what's so awful about me that they had to do that."

"Maybe it's 'cause you're such a dork that needs others' approval?"

"Maybe it's 'cause my girlfriend's a bully that scared them off?"

"You just gotta move on, man." I hate when she calls me "man." It makes me feel like I've been friendzoned in my own relationship. Dudes know where I'm comin' from. "People grow apart. It's probably nothing, or if they do, they just think of you as that stinky guy they went to school with." She picked her phone back up from the table and began tapping up some new tome.

"I don't know how you can be so dismissive. You can't just forget about somebody when you've seen the real them. You get so close that you'll always share *something* together, even if it's just memories. I mean, how can you spend every day with somebody for years and then just stop giving a fuck about them? That's inhumane, I think. They're not just posts you can scroll up from in the newsfeed of your life until they're so far down you can't find them again."

"God *dammit!* Why is everyone so hung-up on the fact that I use my phone? I have a social life, one in the present."

*A social media life*, I was going to say, before deciding it wasn't clever enough to start a fight over. You've gotta pick your battles, and all that crap.

We sat in silence until George came with our plates. Because they use paper plates at Sal's, the sauce was practically bleeding through the bottom of mine.

"Greens for the queen, and wings for her king," he said, placing the respective meals before us.

"Since when did I become the queen?"

"Ever since I realized that there's no ingredient in salad that rhymes with 'princess.' Congratulations and my condolences."

The steam was rising into my nostrils like in the cartoons. I wasn't sure if I



should be turned on or disgusted with myself, but I was feeling a little of both. “George, did you go to your five-year reunion?”

“No. My school didn’t have one. We had a ten year.”

“Well, did you go to that?”

“What makes you think I’ve been out for ten years?”

“Your bald spot.” That was Carly, who was fast away on her latest digital manifesto.

“*Jesus Christ*, Carly! That’s not something you can just say to a man.”

George patted me on the back. “Ah, that’s O.K. I’m impressed she looked up from her phone long enough to notice. Plus, babes actually dig it. I tell them it’s good luck if they rub it. No need to go hitting her tonight, not for my sake, at least.”

“Well, with all the rubbing you have to do when you go home alone every night, I’m glad women are at least willing to do *that* for you.”

“Hey, now. I can live with bald jokes, but that’s my life, you’re talkin’ about.”

“I’m sorry, man. You know that if I ruled the world, I’d give you first dibs on every single mother that drinks her child support away here.”

“And I appreciate that.” He turned to walk away.

“Hey, hey! Wait!”

He spun on his heels. “Right, the ranch for the celery. Sorry, my man.”

“No, not that. The ten-year reunion—did you go to it?”

“Yeah, I did, actually.”

“And? How was it?”

“I’ll put it this way: It was the only time I ever *regretted* calling off work.”

“Damn, that bad?”

He tilted his head, spreading his lips in contemplation. “I don’t know if I’d say *bad*, just pointless, man. It was all the same people up to the same bullshit. They kept in the same cliques and with Facebook, there wasn’t much to catch up on. Everything we talked about I already knew; it’s all online, these days.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“Glad to be of service to you.” He turned away once more.

“Wait!”

He hung his head in frustration; I could tell he was biting his tongue.

“Could you get me a ranch for this celery?”

“Yeah, yeah, but I *expect* a tip from you guys, today.”

“We always tip—when you earn it.” He was already halfway across the bar and my voice was too weak to reach him. I slouched back into the silence of our meal, where Carly was blindly forking her salad. I guess to her, it was brain food to fuel her texting or whatever the fuck she was wasting her time on. “You’re probably right. I doubt it’d even be worth going to.”

“I know.”

What they don’t tell you about depression is that it makes an honest relationship practically impossible. From the beginning, it was always a paramour of mine, a forbidden interest alongside the likes of porn and scraping the lint out of my belly button before climbing into the shower.

What’s odd is that I remember the exact time and day that my depression occurred to me. The day was Thanksgiving, 2009, and I was lying in the bed of my grandparents’ guest room. I told myself that I came in to do homework, but I think I was looking to just be alone. Something inside of me *clicked*, like I was rearranging all the thoughts in my brain and discovered it hidden behind more pleasant thoughts, something that’s always been there, something I’d always had and knew of, but couldn’t locate. I felt a great weight imposing itself upon my chest, like a heavy cat had perched itself upon it, and the lips of a void spreading in the pit of my stomach. Its breath was cold and chilled the blood in my veins. As conversations carried on, spilling into the room from behind the cracks in the door, I turned this revelation over in my head, asking myself questions that I would today recognize on an online depression survey. *Do you often feel fatigued or tired?* Yes. *Do I want to die?* No, but I don’t want to be alive. The more I came to understand the condition of my affliction, the more symptoms I collected. *(I eventually did find depression surveys online and began to take pride in how comprehensive of a typical case of depression I had.)* Even then, I knew that not only something was wrong with me, but that it was *my own fault*. I was to blame for these feelings, and I should be ashamed of them. They were naughty, potentially a punishable offense, if my parents found out, so I held them like a nerd holds textbooks—close to my heart. *(Damn. I should probably stop listening to so much rap while I write.)*

It didn’t take long for the weight to become too much for me. I was always a stubborn kid, too proud to ask for help, but I was also a pussy. I knew that I couldn’t keep the act up, and others had begun commenting on it. My appetite had dwindled, and I force-fed myself every meal at my parents’ insistence. I’d lost my humor as well as my interests. There was a time when I could read a book a night, but I had begun to prefer staring at the ceiling for hours on end, or taking walks alone. My parents knew that *something* was up. They just didn’t know what.

Dad was watching some sports talk show when I crept down the stairs into the living room. I remember it was a Saturday morning. I vowed to talk to him Friday night, but it took the whole evening and most of the next morning to build up the confidence to do so. He was wearing jeans and a beater, inexplicably without any top at all, and I just then realized how late it was for me to be wearing my pajamas.

“Hey, what’s up?” he beckoned me the rest of the way downstairs.

I shrugged. “Not much. Just homework.”

“Any plans today?”

“No, I don’t think so.” I took a seat on the sofa placed across the room from the loveseat he was lounging in. “Hey, Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I talk to you about something?”

“Of course. What’s going on?” He sat erect, suddenly more alert to the conversation.

“I haven’t been feeling well, lately—”

“We’ve noticed.”

“And I think I need to talk to someone.”

“What-what’s wrong? Are you sick? That why you haven’t been eating?” I noticed his speech quickening.

Knowing my nervous ticks, I was probably gnawing at the inside of my lower lip by this point in the conversation. “No, I think I might be depressed.”

“Why? Is something wrong here, something that I can do?”

“No, I just don’t feel *right*.”

“I’m sorry.” He practically cut me off. “I know I could be a better father.” He pushed a deep breath out. His eyes were glassy, fit to water. “In fact, I’m probably a failure as a father. But I can—”

“Dad—”

“I can start coming home from work earlier, I can—”

“Dad, it’s—”

“—spend more time with you, get out of the house instead of staying in and watching movies all the time—”

“It’s about a girl, Dad.” This was, of course, a lie, but sometimes I wonder. Thirteen is a little young to start knockin’ boots, but it’d probably have kept my mind off things like the inevitability of death and the existence of God.

“Oh!” His face lit up, like a child being informed that they could pick something out from the store to take home. Hope spread across his cheeks. *I’ve got this*, he was probably telling himself. He went on to tell me about his first experience with love and heartbreak, and while that might have helped shape me as a boyfriend, it didn’t do much for my sullenness.

I attempted a similar conversation when I went to my mother’s house that

weekend. She turned it around on me. “Don’t your father and I provide you homes to live in? Don’t we feed you?” In retrospect, I think she was only trying to protect her own ego, much like my father before her. At the time, I thought she was simply evil. That week, I heard my father on the phone with her. “Yeah, he talked to me about that, too...No, it’s nothing to worry about...said he’s having girl trouble...”

So, I did what most high school boys do when it comes to topics you can’t discuss with your parents and took it to the locker room. Believe it or not, I wasn’t much of a jock. In fact, I was such the antithesis of a jock that I changed in the locker room’s lone shitter stall, too embarrassed of my body to present it in its naked form before my peers. Whereas the seniors were carving out abs, I was sculpting curves. Anyhow, my friend, Trevor used to wait for me to finish changing before we’d walk to our third period math class together. I approached him with the subject on one of these walks.

“Consider yourself lucky you didn’t get stuck in counseling, man. Shit’s a rip-off.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. My folks used to make me go, but they couldn’t afford it. It was just some old dude who doesn’t know anything about kids. He has lots of books on them, but he wasn’t much of a talker. The thought of going back’s enough to give somebody depression; that’s probably how they lock you in.”

“Damn, I never knew that. It makes sense, though. It always looks boring in the movies when people talk to their counselors. What do you think about Mr. Skinnard?” (*This was the name of our school counselor.*)

“I talk to him sometimes before home room, seems like a cool guy.”

“Maybe I’ll talk to him, then. What do you do, now that you’re out of counseling?”

“I don’t really need to go. I just used to get stressed-out over spilt milk. My older brother started letting me smoke some of his pot when I come home from school and I haven’t had any problems since.”

“Huh.” I might have played it off cool, but I was astounded to have found another alien posing as a normal high school student, not only someone with feelings like my own, but who has managed to cope with them. Trevor would go on to become my crutch, the person I talked to about girl problems (*the real ones, that is*) and my deeper feelings. He was a fellow veteran; we were in the trenches together. We didn’t want to be there, but we wouldn’t rather be there with anybody else. I think that’s why it stings so much getting dropped like I was. Sometimes I wonder if that same openness that kept us together became what pushed him away.

I stopped by Skinnard’s office after my final class that day. He was just throwing his coat on, another minute and he’d have been out the door. I felt like a Poindexter blocking the school quarterback’s locker standing in front of his doorway. One wrong move and he’d plow right through me.

“What’s going on, sir?” Skinnard had a way of addressing students he didn’t know personally by formal titles, such as sir or ma’am. Our theory is that this was a result of his time in the military. You always knew if he had your name down, because he’d call you Mr. or Mrs. Surname. To him, I was a sir.

“Yeah, I was wondering if you could help me with something—”

“Well, c’mon, man. Let’s hear it. I can’t help you if I don’t know what you need!” To this day, I don’t know if he was trying to encourage me or get me out of his way. Regardless, I unspooled myself for him, telling him everything, the feelings of isolation, of being stupid, and not knowing what to do with myself.

“Hey, hold up, pal! I’m just a school counselor; I make class schedules. I can listen to what you have to say, but I’m not qualified to tell you what to do about it.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Are you seeing a counselor right now?”

“Yeah,” I lied, suddenly afraid that he might call my parents if I wasn’t careful. I felt his door frame pinching tighter into my side.

“You don’t ever think about hurting yourself or anything like that? You’re not a cutter or something, are you?”

“N-no, sir.”

“Alright, good.” He grabbed a folder off his desk and began making way towards me. He put his hand on my shoulder. “High school’s rough, man. You take it easy.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I started backing out of his doorway.

“What’s your name, son?”

I told him.

“Well, have a good night, Mr. Thompson.”

“Y-you, too!”

With that last-ditch effort squandered, I decided that depression was a luxury I couldn’t afford. I convinced myself that maybe the problem wasn’t with me, but with the world. There was a reason girls were put off by my existential musings when we went out on dates and why I was growing hermetic with age: everyone else was in denial. I had found some universal truth at a young age that the others hadn’t yet caught up to. They were afraid of me because they knew I was right all along, that I was smarter than the rest of them. It wasn’t until college, when I was provided with on-campus counseling that I was told a more objective truth. *I was OCD.* It seemed an impossibility at the time. How could my problems amount to nothing more than the same people who get their panties in a bunch over being unorganized? Shit, all you’d need to disprove that is take a look at my bedroom floor.

I gave voice to my dispute and was handed a brochure to read over. (*For*

*some reason, they refer to them as "literature."*) For the first time in nearly a decade, I made sense to myself. It was all there, right in front of me, a direct transcript of my neurosis. Theological sense of doom? *Check.* Fear of the unavoidable? *Check.* Constant repetition in habit and thought? *Check.* I was put on some meds, which helped for a while, but soon depressed me more than they helped. My moods are like the high you get from drugs. I used to have periods where I'd just be happy for weeks on end, have ambitions and fulfill them. I could do anything, aside from maybe sitting still. Then, I'd come crashing down, unable to get up in the morning, let alone set out on any tasks. If I could finally surmount my lethargy, it'd be too late for me to get anything done, anyway. The older I got, the shorter my highs would last, and the longer I'd remain bedridden with depression. The highs didn't come often enough, and when they did, they never lasted long enough. The medication ended them altogether, leaving me in a constant downswing. So, I dropped them cold-turkey and never looked back.

I didn't tell Carly about my issues when we first met; I probably didn't have to. She'd silently nurse me back to sanity on nights she slept over and try to distract me from my anxieties. Looking back on it, she was pretty damn patient with our relationship. Despite what Woody Allen flicks might tell you, chicks don't dig the neurotic type. I had to learn that one firsthand. (*That cliché they tell you about being "fun" is probably the safer course of action. If you want to be the kinda guy who gets girls, act like the kind of guy who gets girls.*) Even Carly has her limits. For instance, if I talk about my hesitant death wish, she asks me not to discuss such things with her. What kind of pep talk is that? Don't *talk* about it. Forget how you feel, never mind the reality of it, just don't bring it up in conversation. Keep that shit to yourself. It's just like my parents; she cares more about her ego than she does relieving me of my pain. They just don't want to feel guilty when they lower me into the ground, twenty-seven and ripe for this journal to become some overrated opus. If the only restriction is speaking of it, would it be preferable to express it visually? Create an art installation of our living room of me dangling from a rope, maybe? Or make a painting with my lifeblood? Shit, man, I don't want to sound coo-coo. I don't want to hurt myself or anything like that. I'm too much of a pussy; I *hate* pain. I just don't want to be alive. If I could, I'd blink out of existence, sign off on the endless monologue in my head and peace out, slip forevermore into the night and gracefully shit the bed. Because I can't, I drone on in my less-than-ambivalent existence. Life hurts, but I'd have to imagine that slitting your wrists hurts worse.

That's another thing. Sometimes, while we're in the car, Carly'll ask me if I'm happy. What does *that* mean? Am I allowed to answer honestly? Of course, I'm miserable, but that's none of her business. What the fuck is *happiness*? It's just something to believe in, a pot of gold at the end of this rainbow we call life. Happiness is just another higher power, like God, or in this case, love. Because I do not believe in God, I don't believe in love, and I don't see a difference in believing in love or happiness, so I put my faith in none of the above. That doesn't stop me from telling Carly I love her, and in my own biological way, I do. I don't think our souls will be dancing in the cosmos once our bodies become compost. I don't think there's a grand design that mapped the universe out in a way that we could only be happy with each

other. Most of the time, I like being with her. She's nice enough, but I can't vouch that it's better than the infinite other possibilities out there. I'm dependent on her, and that's the best I can do. I think Carly is aware of my romantic nihilism. I'd go even further to say that she's threatened by it. Just like she'd prefer to live in denial of my disillusionment with life, she needs the affirmation of I love yous to convince her that I, too, kneel in the temple of love. Meanwhile, there's only one good reason to get on one's knees, if you ask me...

It was for these reasons that I RSVPd for my reunion today, stag. Carly doesn't need to know; she wouldn't understand, even if she did. What's the harm in it? It's not like I'm cheating on her.

I walked into the house with nothing more on my mind than retreating into my bedroom, putting an album on worth lighting up to, and fading into oblivion. It wasn't what I would call a *bad* day at work, but I was nonetheless spent at the end of my shift. There was just one catch: This would be the last chance I had to let Matt know my trip home was on the DL before Carly would be over the next night. *Alright, just let him know what he needs to know and get it over with*, I coached myself as I inserted my key into the doorknob. *We can spend the rest of the night in solitude after that, but whatever you do, don't make yourself look suspicious.* (Do people normally think to themselves in the second person, sometimes as "we," as though they're talking to a friend? Hopefully that won't make me look like any more of a maniac than the rest of this shit.) I turned the key and swung the door open.

My target was on the floor, bent over in the position one does as they are about to fellate a partner that is lying down. He appeared to be tinkering with the wires in the entertainment stand below the TV. His hoodie was pulled up, revealing a bit of plumber's crack and—

"Woah!" was the sound of my body jumping out of its skin. "I didn't see anything!" Just barely visible above the waist of his jeans was a pair of woman's underwear, the same pair I had spotted on his floor a few weeks prior.

He hit his head off the entertainment stand. "Fuck!" He said, rubbing the point where skull met wood. "You didn't see wha—oh." He pulled himself together, raising to meet me at eye level.

"So, is there some woman walking around town in your boxers right now or does she just like you wearing hers?"

"No, it's not like that."

"It's fine by me. I'm not gonna kink-shame you. Sometimes, I think it's healthy to think outside the bed, so to speak. I mean, *that*, I wouldn't be caught dead with, but I get it. You won't hear any judgment from me."

"No, you don't understand. These aren't *women's* underwear; they're mine."

"What?" I felt myself squinting. "What are you, transgender?"

“Not specifically. Gender’s a spectrum, you know. I’m somewhere in the gray area.”

“No, I don’t. Are there fifty shapes of cock before one gets to cunt? How is gender a spectrum? There’s *male* and *female*. I can maybe see a lady wanting to be a dude. It has its perks. Now, a *man* wanting to be a *woman*? That’s crazy talk. What would anybody get outta that?”

“Fifty Shades of Dick, that’s a book title. Maybe it could be your next, another autobiography. The cover could be a self-portrait in different colors like the Warhol—”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. First off, you know that I only write fiction. Second, I don’t care what kinda underwear you’re into. It ain’t my business. Personally, I’d rather not know at all.”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly *posing* for you.”

“I just don’t understand, is all. I need some clarification.”

“I’m not asking you to understand. I just need you to accept it.”

Now, that sounded like selfishness to me. I don’t get to understand it, yet I’m expected to approve of it? That’s a bad deal, but I let it pass on the account of him being my brother and all. “I’m just twisting your testes...*sis*?”

“Don’t call me that. Also, please don’t tell Mom about *this*.”

“Lucky for you, I like to keep things above the belt when it comes to the moms. You know, this all reminds me, I need you to keep a little secret for me. It’s nothing *much*. I just—well, *you* know how women are. Carly doesn’t quite *understand* why I want to go to my high school reunion, so she doesn’t need to know. Unlike your brother here, she isn’t so accepting of what she can’t understand. I’m sure you can sympathize with how that makes me feel.”

“So, what? You don’t want me telling her that you’re going to your high school reunion?”

“Well, that’s not how I put it, but that’s exactly what I want you to do. It’d just make my life that much easier if I didn’t have to answer for it.”

“Alright. ‘S not like I planned on telling her. Believe it or not, your life isn’t that interesting to me. I’ve got other things to talk about.”

“Like the cost of lingerie?”

“The shtick’s already gotten old.”

“You have my sympathies. *Anyhow*, I’ve got some business of my own to attend to. Working real hard on the new book, ya know.”

“Alright, go jack off or whatever it is you do in there. See ya.” He shook his head as he got back down on hand and knee. I thought I heard him mutter “What a fuckin’ weirdo” under his breath.



I felt like a God damned salesman standing on my mother's porch. Worse yet, a salesman pushing a real scam. *For just regular, variable payments over the course of your remaining life, you can have my half-hearted love and wavering devotion.* I had to convince her that this frumpy mess on her doorstep was a son worth pushing out, a child that deserved to suck the milk from her nipples, the best product of two decades' worth of sculpting and providing for. Maybe it was just the clothes. A gray collared dress shirt and a purple tie is too formal for my taste, but I felt it was appropriate for the occasion. It was proper, but nothing much. Tonight would be my comeback tour, and I had to show the world my new face. I had uprooted myself and braved the world, all the better for it. I wasn't the shell of a boy they once knew; I've shed that skin to become someone worth reflecting on, someone they could smile at and tell their children "I went to high school with that guy." If I'm no salesman, I'm a god damned liar, and therefore might as well be one.

I rang the doorbell three times to no avail. I was scrolling through those who committed to attending the reunion online, so at first the delay was appreciated. I could've stood there 'till nightfall if my backpack didn't ignite a familiar glowing pain that sent me back to walks to and from class. Eventually, I found Mom's contact in my phone and gave her a ring, trying to bottle my impatience.

"Hello!?" Her voice was colored with static and—*something else*. It was hard to make out what the commotion was on the other side. Wind, maybe?

"Hey, are you home?"

"Yeah! Are you on your way!?" She was shouting. The pitch of her voice pierced my eardrums.

"I'm at the door!" I found myself shouting back at her, as though raising my voice could compensate for the quality of the call.

"Oh!" There was a pause, nothing but the rush of static. "Why don't you come in!? I'm in the shower right now! I'll be out in a minute!"

Oh, Christ. I should have guessed. I turned the knob and the door gave way to the living room. "Don't you ever lock this thing? What if someone was to break in?"

"Who would break in!? This is a safe neighborhood! I'm gonna hang up now; I'll be out in a minute!"

"People probably said the same thing about—" The conversation died with a click. "the town Jeffrey Dahmer was from," I said to myself. The walls of the living room were a soft brown, now. Last I was here, they were still off-white. The light reflected off it in a way that emulated the sepia tone. The floor was still hardwood, but there was now a burgundy rug placed between the sofa and flat screen television mounted upon the wall. I could hear water splashing upon the bathtub from across the house and decided that I might as drop my shit off while Mom was preoccupied. My old bedroom was down the hall to the left, right across from Trey's old room.

Walking in was like opening the door of a time machine set for 2012. Mom had changed nothing. She had swept, and apparently wiped my down dressers, but everything else was untouched. If I threw my backpack onto the bed, would it the mattress cough up dust? Rather than trying my luck, I slouched it onto the floor and propped it up against the wall. Posters for bands I grew out of in college still decorated the wall, inviting me to tours that have been over for half a decade. Some of the groups are no longer active. The walls underneath were a soft blue. Mom practically begged me to let her paint it some other color, probably the same brown coating the living room, now that I think of it. I guess she decided against taking the decision into her own hands once I graduated and left town. Maybe it reminds her of me, in which case, I wouldn't blame her if she did paint over it. If I was her, I'd double-coat that shit. In the corner of the room was a desktop computer on a thin black stand. Funny how the altar of my youth appeared before me now as a relic from the past, something obsolete and yet unfit for the trash. I wrote my first book on that antique.

I took the moment to open the closet doors and browse through my old wardrobe. It was a task I'd been meaning to do for too long. It was also a labor that proved fruitless. Everything was polo, musty, or just too *teenaged*. If this was a scrapbook, each article of clothing would be the kind of photo that makes you want to turn the page in embarrassment. The sad part is, I don't think I could fit into these clothes even if I wanted to.

"Carly had to work?" a voice emerged behind me. It was unmistakably my mother's, but it took a second after my shock had worn off to recognize it. Twenty-three years old and I'm still freaking out when my mom walks into my room unannounced. At least this time I wasn't trying to masturbate. Her face was still flushed from the hot water. It seemed plumper, more sunken-in than I remember it. Time had carved lines into her forehead her bangs, which were pinned back, would typically cover. I remember her scouring in the mirror for stray grays when I was a child. Now, her undyed roots were uniform and dull. She just looked *worn down*, no longer a mother, but someone beyond child-rearing age, over the hill. Damn, I'm not the only one growing up. "Umm, yeah, yeah."

"Matt, too?"

I nodded. "Everyone's working. Thank God they gave me off today. They kinda owed it to me; I never request personal days." I just call in sick.

"That's too bad. We'll have to all get together sometime soon. You know, I could see you marrying that girl."

"Matt?"

"No, you smartass. Carly."

"Oh." What I wanted to say was that with the platonic nature of our relationship, she might as well be another sister, or half-brother, or whatever it is I should refer to Matt as from this point forth. I grimaced at the thought of a celibate marriage to the likes of her. "I wouldn't plan on it, Mom."

"Why not? You've been together two years, now. She'll soon be out of

school. You planning on waiting ‘till you’re my age?”

“No, I just—I have my doubts.”

“About Carly?”

“Yeah. I like her, and I don’t want to not be with her, but I can’t see myself sticking with her, either.”

Her face sank. She almost looked like she was restraining tears. “What’s wrong? Are you fighting?”

“No, we’re not fighting. We aren’t talking at all, actually. That’s the problem. I feel like I might as well be alone when we’re out together. It’s miserable. Even when we go out on dates, she never looks up from her phone. It’s embarrassing. I feel like I’m talking to myself all the time.”

“Well, you have to keep in mind that she’s still in school. She might just have a lot on her mind. Have you tried talking with her about this?”

I rolled a lie on my tongue, before swallowing it back. “No, I haven’t.”

“Maybe you should. Even if you can’t work something out, it’s better to be honest with her. If you don’t want to be with her, it’s not fair to waste her time, either.”

“You’re right.”

“You know, I should be defending you from girls, not the other way around. If you want my expertise, though, the two of you are better off getting married, take it from a lonely old woman.”

“Yeah, what about you? Shouldn’t you be worrying about your own love life?”

“My love life is over. If I meet someone, it’ll be a miracle.”

“C’mon. Dad’s still on the market, you know?”

“Matt said he was seeing someone, some younger girl.”

“They ain’t married. He’s a dog without a collar, might as well be a stray when he’s out of the house.”

Her face straightened. “In any case, no. I’m not trying to upset you or say anything negative about your father, but I’ve wasted enough years on that man.”

“It’s fine, Mom. I know the feeling.”

“I’m through with men. You know what I’d prefer?”

“Retirement?”

“Oh, God. With how this job is working me, I won’t live long enough to see it. I want some grandbabies!”

“Jesus, Mom! What’s wrong with you? I can’t even *afford* to reproduce.”

Shit, I never considered that until it came out of my mouth, but I literally cannot finance reproduction. Good of a cop-out as it might be, it's a depressing thought.

"I'm not saying to get working on it when you come home tomorrow. I just think you're at an age where you need to start thinking about your future, what you want in life. There *is* a world outside of retail."

*My future?* The thought of that made my cock and balls shrivel up like they were dipped in a cup of ice water. "Hey, I'm only twenty-three. I don't know why everybody seems to think I'm bound for the nursing home in a few years. I just got out of college and need to take some time off. That's normal. Lots of people do it. I'm still young!"

"You are, too young to know how short that time lasts where you have time to consider your options."

"Well, I'm here for my high school reunion. Today all I have to think about is my past."

"Fair enough. What time is that?"

"Seven to ten."

"Three hours too long, if you ask me. I tried going to mine and it was the worst thing. I might as well have stepped back in time; it was all the same cliques keeping to themselves. Never went back and I don't regret it for a second. I'm surprised you'd want to go. You really hated those people."

"I did. I'm not really sure why I'm going. I feel guilty about how things were back then, and I think a part of me hopes that I can somehow make up for it if I go. It's probably stupid, but I feel like I should at least go."

"Yeah, if you feel like you need to go, then you should. Worst case scenario, you're in for a good reminder why you don't keep up with those people, anyways."

"If nothing else, it's at a bar."

"Oh, no." She dragged each syllable out, descending operatically in tone. "You're not going to the bar and driving back home. I can drive you."

"Mom, I don't even drink. I might have one beer when I show up, just to be polite."

"Just *call me*, if you need a ride."

"Yeah, sure," I said, dismissively. "Don't stay up waiting for it, though. It's not gonna happen."

"Of course I'm going to wait for you. You might be a grown man, but you're still my baby. I won't be able to sleep until I see you've made it home safe. Plus, you can tell me about how it went."

Fuck. Now I feel like the time-traveler. "Yeah, that'd be nice."

It seems like every church put out of business is bought out by a bar, and vice-versa, in some struggle between purity and indulgence. In a small town like this, where the locals are bored enough to spend their weekends at either/or, it can feel like king of the hill. I don't know when or how this tradition started, all that I know is that when I left home for college five years back, this was God's house. My mother and I were among its worshipers, way back when. We never attended regularly, but we showed up when it counted: the holidays, weddings, hardships so enduring we felt we had no choice but to meet God on his own turf. I was baptized in this joint. My mother seemed disgusted when I told her where the place was. Before I left the nest for good, I would've shaken my head to express my pretend disappointment in the world. I'm old enough now to know I'm nobody fit to judge.

Funny how little this place has changed from its holy days. The small stage at the far end remains virtually untouched from when the bands were composed of trendy Christian teenagers (if there ever was such a thing) rather than aging bar rockers. *(The instrumentations were lifted from such reputable acts as Bush, Creed, and The Offspring, with lyrics adapted to the surroundings. I don't know who that stint was meant to appeal to, the children, their parents, or the band itself. All I knew is that it found some slight success: I thanked God that I wasn't up there on stage with them.)* Perhaps in some sort of bitter parody, but more realistically, a matter of budgeting, the stained-glass windows remained, giving patrons the rare opportunity to sloppily make out under the supervision of the Virgin Mary. Of course, the pews were removed in favor of traditional booth seating bordering the wide dance area. Along the wall opposite of the stage, where the microphone stood alone, was a bar, dotted with stools.

It was here that I sat, slouched over the bar as if my spine was made in the likeness of a candy cane, nursing my drink. Or, rather, it was nursing me back to my characteristic optimism. Why not? It's not like my straight edge old self was a hit with this crowd. Maybe the jovial lush I've become will prove more favorable? Anyways, sobriety is to eat the salad of life without dressing. Who could judge me for wanting a little liquid confidence before facing up to those who have haunted me since the minute we walked off the stage at graduation? *The elation that came with tossing our caps in the air was depressed sooner than they floated down to the floor, and there I've remained, waiting for this day.* Also, I was trying to drink off some bad juju I picked up back at the supermarket. It's just a little protective potion, to ward off the bad vibes I've been resonating on. The bartender was no witchdoctor, but he had a tribal tattoo, and that's gotta count for something.

This is something they don't always tell you about living with OCD, or at least something nobody bothered to warn me of: Your brain is hardwired to superstition. You know all that black cat, don't walk under the ladder, broken mirror crap? Those are just the textbook examples. If your mind is drunk off its own chemicals like mine is, you journey far off the beaten path of traditional symbolism. Everything becomes a symptom of something. Every time I enter a new relationship, I cut myself off from beating it, cold turkey. Unless I'm armed with the spiritual PPE of a washcloth, my

Johnson ain't getting no love from me. Make no mistake, I make sure my chicken's choked more often than I brush my teeth. (I need that pill first thing in the morning and last thing before bed, or else my whole day is thrown off. If I let my juices sit inside me, I feel agitated, wired all day, like its boiling inside of me.) I've just concocted this terrible stigma that the moment I love myself, the relationship is doomed to fail. This notion was conceived when my first girlfriend broke up with me the night after I discovered the power that was in the palm of my hand for the first time. (*I hit the market a little early, when it came to dating.*) And that's only the tip of the iceberg, one of the most rational phobias I've invented. The more I've picked up on since my diagnosis, the more arbitrary they've seemed. If I leave more than one light on in the house, I feel like something bad will happen and prevent me from returning. If I don't wear the same two pairs of socks to work, I'll run a greater risk of getting fired. If I don't peel the skin off grapes before tossing them in my mouth, I'm condemned to choke. Anything and everything is a signifier for some metaphysical undoing I'm doomed to or the antidote for such destinies. My mind operates like Saussure on crack. Fortunately for me, alcohol is pretty universal in its alleviation; one shot cures all, two and I forget all about it.

Tonight's omen should be a little easier to decipher than other casual synesthesias. After changing into my outfit bought for the night, I realized that a belt was less a luxury than it was necessity, despite my first impression trying them on. No big deal. In fact, it was somewhat of a relief to get the fuck outta Mom's house while the going was good. Catching up was nice and all, but the place is depressing. There's no way around it. At this point in the night, I was still in high spirits. The world outside that snapshot of my upbringing was mine for the taking. I swung by the local Shop Shop Shop, because God is a motherfucker, to buy a pinch for my waist. (*Am I too young to glance covetously at the girdles in the As Seen on TV section?*) I passed, but picked up a soda in the cooler nearby as an excuse for lingering in the aisle, feeling like a child peeking into the 18+ section of a video store. I checked out my items as well as the cashier who rang me up. (How come my branch doesn't stock cute cashiers?) I swerved out of the lane and saw a lady pushing a buggy my direction. My gut twisted in that familiar "I know that person" fashion, but I couldn't put a name to the face. She couldn't have gone to school with me...Was she a friend of my mother's? Our carts were nearly perpendicular when her name rang in my head: Sherri. She was Trevor's mom.

"Hey!" I said, slowing to a stop beside her.

"Hey, you." She said coolly. Here's the thing: Sherri got herself knocked-up when she was, like, sixteen, so naturally she looks younger than most other moms, because she is. The catch is, she looks like she hasn't aged a day since shitting him out. She could still pass for a high schooler, freshman in college, at least, if not for the shallow worry lines the years since I've last seen her have cut into her face. What I'm getting at here, is that she was, and always will be, my definition of a MILF. "How you been?"

"Great! I'm just back in the town for the day. I actually might run into your son later. I'm on my way to the reunion."

“Oh? Well, you guys enjoy yourselves,” she said, breaking free of our conversation. And that was all. No questions about my college education, what job I’ve landed myself, whether or not I’ve collected any rugrats of my own. Just hi and bye. This woman watched me since I was in the Junior High; she’s been a witness to my ever-undulating bildungsroman and she doesn’t even care that I’ve grown out of Green Day and into Velvet Underground. Put me in her position and I’d have a million questions. That motherfucker wouldn’t even make it to the reunion by time I was finished with his ass. How can someone be so ambivalent, so uncaring towards a life she’s watched develop for a decade?

This offense was a strike to the ego, but it left a more damaging impression upon the silly putty inside my head. *This is foreshadowing*, my mind’s narrator warned me. *You should pack up now and leave with whatever shred of dignity high school left you to cover your loins with. You’ll embarrass yourself. Worse, you’ll embarrass everybody else in attendance hoping to catch up on old times and make new memories. It’d be a shame if they even let you in.* This monologue compounded like a cancerous cell multiplying until it was all I could hear. I noticed my fingers were twitching. My knees loosened and I couldn’t seem to lock them back into place, so I made a walker of my cart. I tried coaching myself inside the safe space of my car, the germ of doubt had multiplied to numbers I alone could not oppose. I knew the only cure was to sanitize. *Just one drink*, I promised myself.

“You there, man!?” A wrecking ball of a baritone burst through the wall of my memories, rocking me back into the present. I looked up from the rim of my glass to see the beast of a man seated next to me. This guy wouldn’t have looked any more like a construction worker if he was hard-hatted. He had a wiry beard and a leathery tan. Whiskers continued down his neck, and seemed to spread down to his arms, which were thickly-matted in fur.

“Jack Harris”, I said. It was verbal confirmation to myself as much as it was an acknowledgment of his presence, as if to test whether the sound of his name fit the image of his face. I couldn’t stand this guy in high school. He was among the jocks’ biggest stereotypes, an all around brutish motherfucker. He used to aim for the girl’s crotches and faces when we played dodgeball. He and his friends competed to see who could make the most cry in one game. Once, he tagged me in the sack and I flipped out. Rather than recoiling in agony as a sane person might do, I converted the pain into energy. I scooped a ball up off the floor, hit him point blank in the side of the face with it, and kicked him as he was falling into the ground. Rather than the sobs of terror I craved, he only fed my rage with a fit of laughter. I was removed from the class and left in the principal’s office for the rest of the class. Only detention I’ve ever gotten, and my God was it worth it, even if he was mocking my weak throw in homeroom the next morning. And here he is, in competition with myself for my attention at some bar six years later. And boy, have those years been hard on him. Never has my time outside of high school felt so apparent.

“How’s it been, buddy?” He rocked me with a meaty hand on my shoulder. It was embarrassing how powerful his grip felt. Any harder and I could’ve fallen off my stool...or was that the alcohol?

“Good, good. What’ve you been up to?”

“Aww, man. Same old shit. I don’t even know if it’s on a different day anymore.” The bartender was finally done flirting with the girls seated at the far end of the bar and Jack scooped at the air to beckon him over. “Tommy boy! When you gonna zip up and help your paying customers.”

Tommy boy, the kind of bartender more fit for a Heineken commercial than a real life bar, revealed his upper teeth in a wry grin. “I hear ya, Jack.”

“Get my buddy, here, another Pabst, even if it is official drink of the fags!”

I put my hand up like a crossing guard. “No, no thanks. I’m good.”

“C’mon,” he insisted. “For old times sakes.”

“You might have to brush me up, but we never had old times, Jack.”

“Exactly! So let’s make up for that now! Drinks on me!”

I shrugged. “It’d be a sin to turn that down.” The bartender placed a chilled bottle in front of me and a glass shot before Jack. He raised his shot in the air and I obliged him by tapping it gently with the neck of my bottle.

“To the past!” he announced. The way he said it made it seem more like our destination than our origin. Whichever the case, I repeated it like a voice lead in prayer. He downed his shot and by the time it reunited with the bar, my bottle was half-emptied. He turned to me, looking somehow soberer than he had only a moment ago. He almost appeared before me as a child again, vulnerable to my judgment. “You ever walk into a bar and just buy drinks for everyone?”

I shook my head. “These days, I can hardly afford my own.”

“You *need* to.” He raised his eyebrows to emphasize the importance of this. “It’s the only way to survive in this world. Bosses, bills, bitches. They’ll suck ya dry. Sometimes, you just need to say ‘Fuck it’ and let loose. It’s the only freedom we have, it feels like.”

I contemplated the throat of the bottle before downing the last of its contents. Maybe I was listening to the booze, but he was making some sense. I might not be so altruistic in my fuck-it-all, but I could see where he was coming from.

The music on the radio kicked in. Carrie Underwood, in case I was about to start enjoying myself. My first instinct was to vomit right there across the bar, but I was nearly buzzed and held my liquor dear. “This music, man...Just kill me,” I pleaded.

He laughed, although my plea was in earnest, and flung his head back to down another shot that had magically appeared in front of him. “S not so bad!” I looked down and saw a fresh beer that had spawned in front of me, like an item in an old video game that reappears once you leave the room. “If your taste is so much better, why don’t you share it with the rest of us? Jukebox’s by the restrooms.” He twitched his head to throw my attention towards the neon sign reading **SQUATS ‘N SQUIRTS**. “Ya always were a fuckin’ know it all with that shit, acting like everyone



else was a moron 'cause they didn't like what you did." He struck me with a slap to the shoulder as I backed off my stool. "I'm just fuckin' with ya, man!" The blow itself didn't hurt, but I felt it resonate through my whole body. The entire room seemed to quake. I might've stumbled into the bag before I even knew it. *That's O.K.*, I reassured myself. *We'll just go sober up on the john.* Nothin' clears the mind like a meditative dump.

The place wasn't crowded, but the school of wavy bodies dizzied me. Girls who barely looked legal to date, let alone find in an establishment like this were making rash attempts at going wild as dudes my father's age spectated with their friends in flannel uniform. Shit, some of them checking out one that might have been the father of another. What a world we live in. The Fremdschämen was churning my stomach, so I focused on the prize. Onward, I marched to the jukebox bordered in neon tubes. It wasn't the classic juke I've courted in the dive bars back home, but a futuristic digital canvas hung upon the wall. I allowed it I found myself tapping out a search with one finger of my free hand, because apparently I had carried my beer along with the other. It advertised a library in the thousands, but I knew there was only one right choice before I even peeled my ass from that stool. Sadly, their database was not familiar with "Gory Daus by Btuce Springfield." Damn...The silver lining, however, was that it had a replacement it could account for. "Glory Days," by one Bruce Springsteen. I added it to the queue and sloppily swung into the door marked for "Squirts," which I assumed to be my stop.

I found myself alone in a long, narrow hallway lined with sinks to my left and urinals to my right. Further down were stalls, but according to my noodling legs, they were unobtainable. I wobbled towards the nearest urinal and propping myself up with one hand on the wall as though it was a holy relic. The release of fluid came, but before I could enjoy it, I felt the horror of warmth spreading into my boxers and down my thighs. Fuck. I set my bottle on top of the urinal to unzip myself before continuing my piss. The damage was done, but it didn't seem noticeable to anyone but me. Fortunately, the lighting outside was on the dim side. I grabbed my bottle by the neck and drained it into my mouth like a fountain above me. *In one end, out the other.* Nothing is more satisfying than a drink while you leak. Next thing I knew, the solid item in my hands had vanished, its disappearance punctuated with the crash of shattering glass. "What the fuck" I asked no one in particular, and then "Shit!" I recoiled, spraying the rest of my urine across the floor. Large shards of glass collected in the bowl of the urinal, only a few had leapt onto the floor. Good thing I was alone in there. I hustled out without washing my hands.

By the time I returned to the bar, my song was halfway through its second verse. "Ya fall in?" Jack said.

"You could say that."

"Anyhow, what'd you pick? Or didn't the machine know as much as you do?" I pointed to the ceiling. "Damn good song!" He slammed the butt of his fist onto the bar counter and repeated himself.

"That's why he's The Boss."

“This song *speaks to me*, like, on a deep level, man. ‘The Glory Days,’ don’t I know how that feels...” He trailed off, falling ass first into his own nostalgia. *I deserve this*. This is what I get for even tempting this relic. That’s the kind of risk-taking that gets you into danger. Might as well pull a Ouija board out in a rickety old house, you know, just to see if it’s haunted.

The song came to its close, but it was not succeeded by the opening notes/chords of “Dancing in the Dark” like I was anticipating in my mind. Instead, we’re treated to fucking Seether. With it came the window of opportunity, Ione and Trevor, walking side-by-side through the entrance. They didn’t look a day older, although Trevor had accomplished a full beard. Good for him. I don’t know if it was drunken confidence, sober resignation, or the desperation to get away from this dork, but whatever it was that propelled me to approach them was enough to succeed a cumulative five years of anxiety about doing so.

“Hey!” I heard myself say as their faces drew nearer. I could tell that I was coming across a little tipsy. I felt my body swaying back and forth like a top pushed off center and ready to tip.

“Oh, fuck,” Trevor said. “It’s Wes.” By the way it rolled off his tongue, you’d have thought that my name was the vulgarity in that statement. Ione recoiled away from me, momentarily grabbing hold of Trevor’s arm as though she had spotted a rat on the floor. She seemed embarrassed by this and corrected her posture, taking a small step away from me and towards the exit. On her face was a look of shock and worry, as though she was watching a car flipped upside-down and burning off the side of the road. Not exactly the reaction I was hoping for, but I can work with it.

“Guys, I just wanted to—” Something came alive inside my stomach. I had become pregnant with something terrible and it was ready to be birthed, orally. My cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk’s and I pawed at my stomach as though to grab the manifestation and hold it down. My eyes felt like they were about to pop out of their sockets as fumes tasting of secondhand liquor poured into my mouth. Believe it or not, I don’t drink myself sick often. I’m more of a guy who likes to warm up to a nice buzz before cocooning myself in some blankets and passing out for the next twelve hours, so when I do reach the point of no return, I don’t take it lightly.

Trevor let out a deep sigh. I couldn’t tell if it was from relief that the contents of my stomach weren’t evacuated all over the floor and his shoes or in frustration towards my unsavory introduction.

“Fuck, I’m sorry. Sometimes, you know how it is. Booze won’t go down without a good fight.” They didn’t look entertained or even sympathetic, so I stopped myself. “Alright, I know what you’re thinking. Yes, I’m a little drunk.”

“Clearly,” Ione deadpanned, as she once did in our flirtatious arguments. The playful endearment I used to expect in her voice was not present.

“Well, shit. This isn’t how I wanted this to happen. Look, I can leave you alone, or leave, or whatever, I just needed to say that I’m sorry. I know there’s nothing I can ever say or do to make up for the person that I was, and clearly I’m not some

kinda paragon of virtue now, but I've really been trying looking at myself, like, the person that I am, and trying to make that person better. I don't have any excuses, but I never meant to hurt you guys or anybody else in the way I acted. I was just stupid and selfish; I only saw how my actions affected me, and that was wrong. I don't expect you guys to want to spend the night making it up to each other or anything like that, but I just wanted you to know that I realize now the way things ended wasn't right and that I never took proper responsibility for the way that I was, so, I'm sorry."

Trevor just turned his head away. Ione took a small step forward, emboldened by the sensitivity in my speech. What she now knew was that the rodent at her feet was more afraid of her than she was of it. I couldn't distinguish if her face was warming up to me kindly or if I had only continued stoking the embers of her impatience.

"You know, I've waited five years *praying* for this moment to come, just so that I could tell you to fuck back off, but now that you're in front of me, I don't even want to. You're too pathetic to insult. Somehow, you've managed to rob me of even that small bit of satisfaction." She shook her head. "No. Apology unaccepted." Her part said, she marched off, with Trevor tagging behind. He couldn't even bring himself to look at me.

I felt my heart sink into my stomach, which was fit to erupt. I never felt so alone in a room full of people, and that's another of the few things I excel at. I knew there was nothing for me there. Why did I even come? I had no right to show my face, ruining everyone's night. My mission was a lost cause. It takes one to know one and I was qualified to spot them a mile away. The fact that this had blindsided me was a real testament to my arrogance. I hung my head in shame and shambled towards the exit in the straightest line I could manage. I felt someone shake me by the shoulder and yell "Hey, man! How you been!?" over the music. I don't know if I responded at all. I don't know that I care whether I did or not. Their face was just another flashing image in this slideshow from my past. I remember promising myself that I'd drive straight home and throw my old yearbooks into Mom's fireplace, but by the time I made it to the car, I knew I was in no shape to drive. Fishing into my endless pockets for the keys, I felt another lurch in my gut. This one caught me blind while I was lost in thought. I hurled all over the driver side window and down the door, including the handle. I didn't even hesitate to grab it with my bare hand once it was unlocked, I was so desperate to withdraw from the public eye. *Fuck, man.* I thought, now seated in the car with one foot still planted on the asphalt. Of all the potential outcomes to this night I had anticipated, reality proved itself crueler than the worst of them. Shit, even the one where some repressed nerd enacts a belated school shooting would have been more merciful than that. I went full kamikaze, and I knew it. Worse yet, I lived to remember the tale. Then, the thought struck me that Trevor and Ione might have went *together*. I leaned my head out the door for another retch.

It feels dishonest to claim that I *came to* behind the wheel, my car sunken into a ditch off the side of the road, because I was never wholly checked out. I find it hard to believe that there was any lapse in time between the moment of impact and my

*coming to.* It's just that there seemed to be a full stop between the moment I lost control of my car and finding myself in the ditch. It was as though one chapter in my life had ended and this was the beginning of another, so to speak.

The first thing I did, of course, was batter my palms upon the steering wheel and run through a list of every curse word known to man. (*I might've even discovered one or two previously unfounded.*) As I'm sure you can gather, this was intended to vent my frustration, but it also proved to me that I seemed to be in functioning condition. Perhaps the alcohol had numbed me from any pain I should be experiencing, acting as one of Mario's mushrooms. If that was the case, I was definitely back to my mini-self. Any former tipsiness was shaken out of me. Then it hit me. I done fucked-up. I was drinking and driving, and I got myself into an accident. At this realization, I threw the door open, falling into the wet grass. I scrambled to my feet and threw all my weight against the hood of the car. It felt like a climactic movie scene, where the hero wants something to happen so bad that he surmounts the odds and does the thing he has to...except for the fact that the car didn't budge. I gave it another shot, and thought I may have dislocated my arm giving it a third go. At this point, I sucked in my pride and called my mother. Fortunately, I was familiar with the location. I was only a few minutes from her house.

In the time it took her to show, I rooted around my glove compartment for my trusty stick of gum, you know, the one any alchie keeps in the event of a pulling-over. By the time she hopped out of her SUV, still in her pajamas, I was confident that my mouth had been successfully perfumed with spearmint. She didn't make any comment, so I couldn't have stunk too bad.

"Are you O.K.?" she said, running her hands all over my arms as though she was airport security.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just stuck." *Reader, please don't mistake that for a shitty attempt at symbolism.*

She looked at my car, behind me. "I see that. Let's get to it, then, before anybody sees me out here, lookin' like this." We each took one side of the hood, putting all our weight into it. Although we managed to get the wheels turning some, we couldn't seem to keep our momentum up long enough to push it up the hill. I was tempted to make a Sisyphus joke, but let the opportunity slide. I didn't have the breath to explain the comparison to her.

A few sets of headlights passed us by, but it wouldn't be my luck if the one to stop and help was anybody but a cop. He was a short, tubby man complete with cliché cop mustache. It's almost like they do it on purpose. I'd bet the fucker even had a box of donuts waiting for him in the passenger's seat.

"How you guys doin'?" He shouted over the wind, blinding us with his flashlight.

"Been better!" I replied. No sense in lying to a cop in the rare chance you don't need to, I thought to myself.

"I was just driving this one home from the bar and made a wrong turn," my

mom said I looked at her, trying to conceal my shock. “Might’ve been better off letting *him* drive.”

“I don’t know about that,” the pig responded. “I’m gonna go back in the car and get my wench. Then we’ll get you two back on the road.” He returned with a hook and cable set that was something I definitely could *not* fuck with. I stood back as he tethered it to our vehicles and let my mother operate my car as he pulled it out of the ditch. We thanked the cop and waited for him to drive out of eyeshot.

“Are you going to be alright to get this the rest of the way home?” Mom asked me once he was gone.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I didn’t even have anything to—”

“I’m not an idiot, Wesley. Don’t bullshit me.” she snapped. “Why didn’t you call? You know I would’ve picked you up and we could have avoided...*this*.”

I scratched the back of my head. “I dunno. I was just embarrassed. Things didn’t exactly go my way at the reunion and I didn’t want to bother you.”

“That’s no excuse. We should be *thankful* that this is the worst that happened. Who knows what trouble you’d be in if you ran into somebody else. You could’ve really hurt someone.”

I knew she was right, so I kept quiet, fixing my gaze on her cheek so that I wouldn’t have to look her in the eyes. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“You can come to me for anything. You don’t need to be ashamed or embarrassed. I only get upset because I love you.”

“I know.”

She sighed. “Let’s get home before anybody else sees us out here.”

I had a good time with Carly today. I can’t recall the last time I’ve said that to anyone. For the first time in forever, we felt like a couple, not just two people next to each other. At one point, it might have been us against the world, but somewhere down the line, the world had come between us. We used to be able to cruise down any topic for hours, but lately, every turn has been into a dead-end. Trying to hold conversation was like navigating a channel of dead ends, until today. It’s like she looked up from her phone and noticed there was a person sitting across from her, someone capable of healthy communication beyond the pleasantries of small talk (not to give myself too much credit).

My grandmother passed away of lung cancer when I was still tumbling through my teenage years, a process that spent upwards of eight weeks undressing her of her mortal coil. The last day I could speak with her, she had regained energy we hadn’t seen in her in weeks. Of course, there was no hope for survival, but the time we had left with her appeared to be wavering in favor of a few days more. That night, she woke us all with a shrill gasp shortly before three in the morning. By the time we had

arrived at her bedside from our makeshift camp in the living room, she was comatose. She escaped us three days later without another word. Shortly after her passing I told my father about her final flash of promise before the immediate decline. He explained to me that it isn't an altogether uncommon phenomenon, to have one last hurrah before slipping into the night eternal. He called it a "day of grace;" it sounded more to me like a false hope. Whether my time with Carly was either, or the birth of a new era in our lives together, only time will tell.

My favorite thing about today was that it consisted of absolutely nothing. It was a Netflix in bed morning and a long conversation that served as the epilogue to our night. (*Carly's resolution proved to be more final than mine, as I woke up an hour later and decided to write this in my insomnia.*) Of course, before clocking out, I tried to initiate a little hanky-panky, but this was her time of the month (*of all weeks to rekindle interest in each other*). So, I let her suck me until she felt better about herself for ragging out. (*The fact that she didn't even pretend to like hip-hop should have been telling that she was either a member of the Ku Klux Klan, or that she couldn't give head. Guess which one I got stuck with.*) That's O.K., though. Tonight, I wasn't in need of that kinda stimulation.

**Female readers, if there are any, mind this:** *Porn might be entertainment for us dudes, but you ladies should treat it like education.*

What elevated this from a typical night spent out together is that I didn't have to feel so alone. Nothing can smother you in a relationship faster than loneliness. I could sense another person in the room with me, that I could reach out and touch, that would be willing to listen to at least half of what I say. We found a rhythm in our conversation I hadn't felt in ages, maintained a volley rather than merely feeding each other false serves. I remembered that, oh yeah, once upon a time we had chemistry. We got along and had conversations, the kind relationships are built on. Days like today remind me that even if we never grew to love each other, we maybe could have. Maybe we still can.

After my scene at the reunion, I didn't know if I could bounce back. I had never come so close to touching hopelessness, so ready to swing back at the world, nor had I ever been so paranoid. I was certain there would be more posts on Facebook about me, or that word would somehow leak back to Carly about the event. Somehow, the stars aligned and she remains impossibly oblivious to my infidelity. I wrote the damage to my car off as the result of black ice, a crisis avoided rather than the result of my own stupidity. Although Mom gave me a good talking to when we got home that night, she agreed not to breathe a word of it to Carly, or anybody else for that matter. Considering the legalities of our switcheroo, it was probably in both of our interests.

Driving home that morning, I branded myself God-forsaken. I could feel my hand burning, unwashed of its original sin by the spring of forgiveness, its tap dried-up before my turn. The germ of it multiplying in an orgy of errors that was my life. What the fuck was wrong with me? What lead me down this path I was on? Was I simply born to fail? Or did I get here simply by making the wrong decisions? In that moment, I felt condemned to forever covet my own past, unforgiven and shackled to my sins. Tonight, I realized that I was not imprisoned, but rather set free by Ione's refusal of

my apology. For the first time in over half a decade, I was given the chance to reevaluate myself and my past. Maybe I'm not *all* bad, only human. Certainly, I was no worse a person than she is. The errors of my follies couldn't be any less excusable than her deliberations. In an odd way, I was almost thankful that I wasn't given a chance for redemption. This was all an important lesson to me about the permanence of my actions and that I needed to treat those in my life properly while they're still around at all.

That's why when I saw the message from Ione as I was checking my inbox, I almost didn't bother to read it. Almost.

My heart stopped when I saw her face next to the notification. I probably looked like I saw a ghost at the bar when I checked my phone and shot up to dismiss myself from the table. I know I felt like I did. Something that I tried to bury and lay to rest in my mind had returned, like some yellowed corpse woken from its eternal slumber. After the numbness of initial shock settled in, I was splashed in the face with a bucket full of paranoia. Why would she even *want* to contact me? Certainly, it couldn't be anything good. Was she somehow privy to my DD accident and blackmailing me for money? Did she see Carly as my "official" girlfriend and decide to inform her, should I refuse to comply? The possibilities were endless and the horrors were bottomless enough to warrant a story by Lovecraft. I was in for a terror of cosmic proportions.

I stowed myself away in the private cell of the bathroom, sitting on the toilet seat with my pants on, unsure what Pandora's box I might be opening if I clicked on the message, what tragedy I might be inviting into the life I had seemingly slouched back into. As I tapped on the inbox icon, I noticed my finger was shaking. My heart felt fit to burst out of my chest like the Kool-Aid man in some overused *Family Guy* joke. I closed my eyes and sent a prayer to God that was roughly the length of a tweet. Upon opening them, I devoured the text like a pig at its sty.

*Shit, man. Why'd you have to go and do something actually mature for once? Better yet, why did you have to go about it in the least presentable, most immature way possible? I was quite content to go about the rest of my life with you filed in the "Douchebag" compartment in my memory bank. While I don't appreciate the execution, I remember you well enough to guess something like that couldn't have been easy for you. I just wanted to say that I'm sorry for how I reacted. It was selfish and embarrassing. (I'm sure you know how that feels.) I just didn't know what to say. You really put us on the spot back there. Actually, I did know what I was saying. It was what I've rehearsed in my mind for years and never thought I'd actually get the chance to say out loud. Obviously, the image I had in my mind wasn't exactly how things worked out. It can be easy to forget everything but the bad qualities about somebody when they're not around, especially when things don't end on a great note. I think I let myself become the person I thought of you as for a minute. Anyways, I hope life has treated you well and that you can accept my apology for my reaction to your apology for treating me how I treated you as you gave it.*

The second message:

PS: Unless you didn't actually mean anything you said that night. I know how guys can get when they're smashed.

The third:

PSS: If you don't know anything I'm talking about, you made a fool of yourself at our high school reunion and apologized to Trevor and I basically for being you.

To quote the message itself, "shit." Now, what was I supposed to do with *that*? I was almost disappointed by the honesty of it, and the fact that it wasn't a direct threat to my life or citizenship. At least before, the mystery of where we stood was a closed case. This opens it up for further investigation, should I care to pursue it. And I *really* didn't want to, but like any red-blooded human being, I was too damn curious to make nothing of the opportunity. I had to say *something*, but what? I couldn't come off too eager to hear from her, like I'd been fantasizing about her since the day we parted ways or something creepy, but it would be wrong to downplay its importance to me. I saw a green light next to her profile picture, indicating that she was online right now. Does that mean that she knows I read her messages? Then, a wicked thought struck me: I could ghost her, carry on with my life as though the message or its inspiration had never happened. As much as I dug the malevolence in such an idea, it would only be to shy away from my responsibility to the feelings that got me here in the first place. I got a second chance in this life after I flubbed my second chance in hers. Maybe I should call that fair. Whatever I chose to do, this wasn't the time or place to go about it. I wasn't about to write, edit, and submit a thoughtful reply about my conflicting emotions surrounding the whole thing while sitting on a public john. And then I did.

For once, Carly and I are equals in our relationship. We're the perfect image of millennial romance, tapping away on our phones as though nobody was sitting in front of us at all. I was glad not to be feel so alone, even if my only comfort was virtual, and Carly seemed thankful not to be burdened with any responsibility towards affecting me. I had gone and found myself a new babysitter; she was off-duty. George noticed this shift in our paradigm, commenting "How sweet, the two of you are finally spending time together," standing above our table with a hand on each of our shoulders as though he was the median of our relationship. I dismissed his hand like dirt off my shoulder.

"George, if you lay another hand on me or my girl ever again, I swear to God I will kill myself, and that is a threat."

"You mean you'll kill *me*?" He was smirking as though he pulled one over on me.

"Nope," I countered without looking up from the screen. "The point of a threat is to take something of value away from somebody."



“Oh, ho ho. Very funny.” George stood upright from his arch between us. “You find that one on your timeline or did you have it written in your notes app?”

“Just take our order, you fuck.”

“Alright,” he tilted his head in compliance. “What meals will the star couple of Sal’s be sharing tonight with their phones?”

“You know what we want, you weenie.”

Carly leaned her head around her phone as though it was fixed in position. “Weenie?”

“He doesn’t deserve my good insults.”

“Naw, you need to save your best lines for your phone, where you can save them and look at them at night before stroking yourself to sleep,” George started backing away from the table towards the kitchen. “Shit, for all I know, you weenies are texting each other.”

The phone buzzed in my hand to herald the arrival of a new text message. “We are now:)” from the contact **Carly**. I raised my eyebrows at the Carly before me with a wry smile before returning to my communication with, as anybody with a basic sense of narrative structure could have assumed, Ione.

There was never an intention to keep a correspondence, speaking on my own behalf. As most conversations begin, one thing just kinda led to another. Our apologies led to inquiring about the state of each other’s lives, which begged for clarification on the finer details therein. It wasn’t long before we found ourselves resuming the same banter we had discontinued years back. It was all in good fun. In fact, it felt like we were skirting around the obvious topics of who we’re currently banging or anything beyond the platonic.

And yet, something about it feels shameful. Aside from the circumstances of our reconnection, there’s no reason to hide any of it from Carly. You’d think she would be proud of me for finally having set past mistakes aside. Sure, she might have some jealousy, and understandably so, but sometimes a little jealousy is good in a relationship. It’s a good reminder to value your partner, because if you’re not, others are sizing him or her up. I’m sure Carly isn’t just texting her girls when we’re at the table. I get it. Of all the issues in our relationship, trust isn’t one, at least on my end. I think what makes me so uncomfortable about our chatlog is that I *look forward to it*. I can’t say that about the mundanities Carly and I exchange. I feel like a God damn high schooler again, anxiously waiting to see how she’ll counter me in text, never mind the fact that it’s the result of the same person.

Shit, I don’t know what I’m hyping myself up for. It’s just a temporary distraction from the boredom of my life. It’s not like we’ll still be talking in a week, realistically speaking. Can’t be long before we run out of things to say and realize that, aside from having grown up in the same general area, we don’t have all that much in common. I’ve gotten back in touch some faces from the past before, and it always goes the same way. Slowly, it becomes more and more obvious why you never kept in touch

in the first place, and eventually one or both of you accepts this fact by ceasing conversation. It's not rude or negative; it's just a healthy step forward in life. I can't be faulted just for *texting* someone outside of my relationship, can I?

I can definitely be judged for agreeing to meet with them in person, though. I know, I know. "One thing led to another" is the cheater's mantra, but it doesn't make it any less true. There's a reason why some things become cliches. We were just talking about how strange it is to live a car ride away from where we grew up, and Ione mentioned how she'd love to drive up and visit one weekend, but she'd feel weird without anyone there to meet up with (her parents moved out of state once she graduated college). So, I offered to make the trip, myself, and we could revisit the past together. Even as I typed it, I knew I was stepping outside of my boundaries. My heart was beating to the rhythm of a thrash song as I awaited her reply, or for communication to cease entirely. It was that million dollar moment, where you go double or nothin', because how many chances does one get in life to be on a real life TV game show? I couldn't decipher it to be good news or bad when she replied that it sounded like a plan. (*That used to be our phrase, when a date was set. "It's a plan."*) She followed it up with, "Let's agree to lay off the booze, though. I like to party, but you go a lil hard for me ;)".

My heart clogged my throat the entire ride back home. It didn't sink back into the safety of its chest until we were sitting across from each other at Roman Holiday, a diner within walking distance from my mother's house. I kept scanning the room for signs of her or anyone else that might recognize me; the waitress probably thought I was having some schizophrenic episode. I sat facing the entrance, and each time the door opened, I felt my heart skip a beat. When the face passing through the doorway finally met my expectations, she was veiled by a hood, heavy with water. An older gentleman whose family had entered just before she came held the door for her. I don't think she noticed splashing him in the face when she pulled the hood down.

I didn't know what to expect when she sat down. Was this whole thing an elaborate hoax to set me up for another ass-reaming? Was she going to be partially brain-dead from the blow to the head that caused her to ever message me in the first place? Whatever I was anticipating, I felt pleasantly without.

"Hey," she said, brushing a wet tendril from her visage. Her fingers were painted a deep purple. A musical note was tattooed upon her index finger. The softness in her voice and uncertainty in which she said it told me everything I needed to know. This was simply not the same woman I saw at the reunion, that millennial Madonna performing for a crowd of familiar faces. This was a human being, with insecurities and a million thoughts as complex as my own, many of which probably dedicated to wondering what the fuck she was thinking when she decided to actually show up.

And then a thought struck me: *What am I doing here?* What could I expect to gain from this secret rendezvous? If I was hoping for sex, would I reach out and take it, should the opportunity be presented to me? The thought that such a possibility

could exist suddenly felt presumptuous and stupid, some male power fantasy I've concocted in my pathetic isolation, not to mention *forward*. We haven't spoken in five years, how would I even know if we'd have much to talk about? Texting is one thing, but real life communication can be much more complicated. If my time with Carly's taught me anything, that's gotta be it. What do I say, after hello? What could I talk about? I couldn't stop watching the rain across the window to my left. A shock of thunder bellowed out.

"Of all days to storm..." Nothing safer to open with than the weather, right?

"Oh, God! There was some cretin on the road and I nearly spun out trying to swerve around it. I'm still shaking." She reached a trembling hand out in demonstration.

I was stuck on cretin. "You mean, like, a gremlin or something?"

"Worse. It might've been a possum. I'm not sure. I thought it was some stray cat that wandered out onto the road, but when I stopped, it looked more like a monster."

"Maybe it was God trying to tell you something."

"Maybe." She arched an eyebrow.

Radio silence.

I was the one to break it. "It feels so weird being here after all these years. I mean, I was here the summer after my freshman year of college, but it feels so *archaic* now, like a museum exhibit."

"They've made sure to preserve it like one. I bet they still have the same used tampon on the floor of the lady's bathroom." She leaned in closer, whispering, "The same people still work here. They haven't even bothered to age."

"It's like that show, *Nightmare Cafe*." She looked confused. "It feels like *The Twilight Zone*, I mean."

She nodded her head, with both eyebrows raised as though that second comparison had wowed her. "*Yeah*." She leaned the rest of the way back into her booth.

The waitress came out and asked if we would be having our usuals, which we both consented to. She used to serve us on a weekly basis, back when we used to spend our nights here with homework that never got finished. I can't believe that she remembered after all this time.

"Funny, neither of us even looked at the menus."

"Actually, I pretended to read mine for a few minutes while I was waiting, you know, so I wouldn't look weird sitting here by myself."

"Why would that be weird? People eat alone all the time."

"That might have been the only thing I learned in college."

“How was your Uni, by the way?”

“Fuck.” I exhaled. “That’s a loaded question. On one hand, going to college was the worst decision of my life, and on the other, I don’t regret it.”

“Really? Ryan and Theresa seemed to really like it over there.” Ryan graduated the same year we did, and Theresa walked the stage the next year. He got a job in his field and was vacationing in Italy, last I saw on Facebook, and she’s in a graduate program to become a doctor.

“I think I just went into the wrong field.”

“English?”

“Yeah. I think I cared too much about the subject on a personal level, and that wasn’t always appreciated. You know, you’re kinda supposed to just sit back and take the information in; professors don’t care much for competition.”

“I can’t imagine why.” She shook her head, laughing. “That’s so like you, to go into a class like you know more than the teacher.”

“See, that’s the thing!” I could feel an energy pulsing through me. The conversation was taking off and I could coast on its natural waves, at least for now. “It wasn’t a matter of objective information, so much as presenting subjective opinions as though they were facts. It was all indoctrination to get mold the student body into some totalitarian army to invade the world with. If you said one little thing that didn’t match their views, your grades would show it...” I could tell by the look on her face that I was getting ahead of myself. Either she didn’t believe me, or wasn’t interested. “What about you? What were your teachers like?”

“They seemed chill. I didn’t stick around long enough to get to know them.” There was no telling from her voice if this was a sore subject.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“No, it’s fine. It was my choice. I spent a year up there, but when I went home for the summer, I just felt *better*. I had friends at school, partied on the weekends, typical stuff, but I didn’t feel like I was getting anything out of it. Why go to school for creative writing? What can college professors teach you that the most successful authors can’t? Plus, we have the Internet to cover any blind spots in that curriculum. Then, after a while, I just realized my well was dry. The ideas stopped coming and I realized that I don’t have any story worth telling. I just ignored that voice in my head for a while, and kept trying to force material out, but it was all shit. When I finally said to myself, ‘Hey, maybe I’m just not cut out for this.’ I didn’t feel sad or let down; I felt *relief*. Now, when I think about writing, I don’t wish I was racking my brain to invent some realistic but interesting name for a character or how to make a plot seem in any way logical. I just feel grateful to be done with that shit, no offense.”

“Offense taken! You were a great writer. I’d never have said it then, but I was jealous at how good you were. That’s not just a loss of your interest, but a loss to the readers everywhere, maybe even the literary canon!”

Ione shrugged, flattening her lips. “Their loss.”

“So, what are you doing now?”

The waitress sat our coffees down and assured us that our meals were on the way, and that it’s so nice to see us back around.

“It sounds strange saying it now, but actually, in a salon. I always wanted to learn how to cut hair, and when I shelved writing for good, I figured I might as well try that out. I’m kinda between jobs right now, though. I was training to work in a tattoo parlor for a while.”

I pointed at the side of my index finger with its doppelganger. “Did you do—this, yourself?”

She laughed way I knew shot spit all over the table, even if I couldn’t see it with my own eyes. “Are you kidding me? No way! That was my mentor, who I’ve now outgrown. He’s also kind of my ex.” She seemed ashamed to reveal this information. I couldn’t interpret whether it was in sympathy to our own history or the genuine (*and understandable*) chagrin of dating a tattoo artist.

“You like some coffee with your creamer or do you prefer to drink it straight?”

I was in the middle of pouring my third plastic tub into the small coffee cup in front of me. What once was black coffee had turned beige. “Where I’m from, they called that gentrification.”

She erupted with laughter. “Fuck you!”

“So, how do you like tattooing people?”

“You know, it’s really nice. It’s relaxing. I mean, it’s nerve-wrecking to know that you’re responsible for something that will be on somebody forever. I thought work at the salon would prepare me for it, but that’s like having training wheels on in comparison. After a while, I built up some confidence, and it’s rewarding, to see people so happy with your work.”

“Do your Johns ever gross you out? Have you ever had to tattoo some fat guy’s tit or anything?”

She tilted her head. “My Johns? You mean my *customers*? Jesus, I thought we were past calling each other names!” I was smiling, but I couldn’t help it. Her pupils floated upwards, no doubt reclaiming some indexed image of somebody she’d serviced in the past. “I’ve had a few scrubby people, stoners who get high too often to properly shower and some skanky kids getting tramp stamps for their eighteenth birthdays, but nothing too repulsive.”

“You know what’d weird me out the most about it? Having to do what someone else told me to. That’d be like writing for commission—”

“It’s called homework.”

“Yeah, but tattoos are supposed to be *art*. How do you create genuine art within the limitations of what someone asks you to do?”

“Well, it’s not that kind of art. Sometimes you’ll get somebody who comes in and wants you to give it your own personal flair, but other times, people want a design replicated. It’s a paycheck. I don’t see why you’re so hung up on the fuckin’ tattoos. It’s not like your books are flying off the shelves.”

“Uhh, fuck. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it; I was just curious.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just a little edgy tonight.”

“*You’re* feeling edgy? Can you imagine how I felt coming here? That was polite compared to the last conversation we had.” I forced an awkward hiccup-laugh hybrid to let her know this was meant in jest.

“I was talking about my near-death behind the wheel.” Fuck. I could feel a vein in my head pulsing, I was wound so tight. Was I the first living person to step on two consecutive mines? Her face softened. “But thank you for showing. I really thought you’d hate me after the night of the reunion.”

“I thought I would, too, but as it turns, out, I’m not much of a hater, these days.”

“Bullshit. We may not’ve talked for a few years, but I know you.”

“Apparently not as well as you think. I’ve somehow managed to grow up, *just a little*. I think hate is a cancer It kills you. I think the best way to live is by loving everyone.”

She scoffed. “Everyone?”

“That’s what I said,” feeling less certain of myself by the word.

“Even our waitress?”

“*Definitely* our waitress,” I said, thinking of the skin hanging from her forearms as she served us our coffees.

“Well, you know what that means, then.” Her voice picked up. I felt that she had shifted the paradigm of our conversation in her favor, even if I didn’t yet know how.

I asked what she meant.

“If you love someone, then you have to tell them.”

“Well, I mean, you can’t just go tell *every*—Alright, I will.”

“You wouldn’t. After all these years and you’re still a liar.”

“Naw, I never lied to you. I might’ve been wrong a few times, but I was always honest. I’ll prove it to you.”

Our conversation carried on, until the waitress returned with our plates. As

she set them down, I looked up into the eyes of her sunken face, bleached with age, and said “Thanks, I love you.” I tried to roll it off my tongue naturally, but the words felt misshapen in this context, clunky. *Just read any two sentences from this journal out loud and you’ll see what I mean.*

Her immediate reaction was a cackle that filled the room, the same laugh that would often find its way onto the floor from the kitchen, where she would chat with her coworkers. My ears nearly rang from the cacophony. “Alrighty, then! I guess I love you, too.” She put a hand on my shoulder for a moment before taking her leave. As she passed through the kitchen door, I heard her repeat to herself, “I love you!” and chuckle at the memory.

By this point, Ione hadn’t yet recovered from her own fit of hysterics. I began to wonder if she’d get ahold of herself to eat before the food went cold. “You absolute madman, you did it.” She broke through a metronome of giggles.

“Of course I did, just like I said.”

“You got lucky,” she said, regaining composure. “She was an easy target.” An easy target she might have been, but I tipped her with a twenty nonetheless. “I do *not* look forward to driving home,” she said, zipping her jacket back up. From the looks of it, it was probably still damp on the inside. The thing looked like it was pulled straight outta the wash.

“Tell me about it. I’ve got two hours on the road, maybe three if I want to live.”

“*What!?* You can’t do that! Doesn’t your mom live in town?”

I weighed that option in my head. Was my safety really worth another night spent back home? “She’s out of town, and I don’t have keys anymore.”

“Shit, man. It’s not much, but if you want, you can wait out the storm at my place.”

“You sure?” I wasn’t sure that *I* was comfortable with that, but I couldn’t restrain the blood from flowing at the thought of it. Why couldn’t this have been propositioned earlier, like, when I wasn’t standing up for the world to see?

She bounced a shoulder in apathy. “I’d rather wake up to your ass on my couch than your name in the paper.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it. I’ll just follow you back, then?” Before we journeyed into the showers of the night, I checked my phone. I had one text, Carly. “Just saw a storms headed our way. b careful. Love you!”

The Thomas Foster apartment complex must have been installed during my term as a college student, because it certainly wasn’t here back when I was. The area was a nice middle ground between the projects and an upper-class cul-de-sac where the doctors’ children roamed and learned how to turn their noses upward. Of course, the

view left much to be desired, being that I could hardly see a yard in front of me. The fact that I made it at all was a pleasant surprise. After a while, I began to doubt whether I was even following the right set of taillights or if Ione had lost me in the night. The clusters of homes resembled townhouses, and the interior of Room 209, where Ione resided fulfilled that promise. The kitchen where we entered was a bit claustrophobic, but everything seemed in order. The knives were neatly stabbed into their holder block and the sink's collection of soiled dishes was minimal and without odor. After kicking our shoes off upon a mat, we walked into the living room, where I realized how embarrassingly *adult* this place was, compared to the rat's nest Matt and I shared. To me, this foreign landscape felt both decadent and refined. The tan carpet was immaculate. The trash can back in the kitchen had no companions stuffed to gluttony and left waiting on the floor for a late retirement at the street block. The modest collection of movies and books neatly lined their respective stands along the left wall. A burgundy sofa was to the right of the doorway which I blocked as Ione was up the stairs along the right wall, changing into something dry. A flat screen television hung from the wall before me.

"You want a beer or something?" Ione said, rattling her moist hair as she descended into view. She was now wearing matching rubber duck PJs.

That sounded suspicious to me, and then I wondered if it was normal to interpret such an innocuous, generous, wonderful question as some kind of red flag. I considered reminding her of that text she sent about avoiding such indulgences, but who am I to block a Rolling Rock? "Sure!" I tried to suppress my face from looking like a child's when he unwraps just what he had been wishing for on a Christmas morning.

"Take a seat," she said, turning lightly past me. "The furniture ain't for decoration." She smelled *soft*, milky, even? It felt both artificial and yet just right.

I surveyed my options. There was the couch, to my immediate right, and a purple beanbag chair in the far-right corner. Would I be out of line to take up the couch? In all my travels, I've yet to find a beanbag chair worth sitting in. Ahh, fuck it. Her offer didn't come with instructions.

"Or maybe not," Ione poked her head around the corner. "I don't know how well I can trust you with this." She shook tall can in her left hand.

"It's one of the few responsibilities I'm capable of handling." She now stood directly before me, dangling the bottle in my face. I plucked it from her hand.

"Not so sure about that," she replied, falling onto the cushion next to me. The whole sofa rocked a little on impact. I felt like a bulbous toad sitting next to her tiny figure. She was never a large girl, but I don't remember her ever being this small before.

"Oh, *that*." I shrunk deeper into myself. "That was a moment of weakness. I'm really more of a social drinker."

"You're much better off without, socially speaking." She cracked the can open, taking a swig.



“I was just nervous, about—you know. Thought a few drinks could take the edge off. I didn’t piss myself, by the way.”

“*What!?*” She said this before swallowing her mouth’s contents, spraying a little on her chin.

“At the reunion, I spilled some drank on my lap and I was worried some people might’ve thought it was piss.”

She raised her eyebrow at me, again. I wasn’t sure how to translate the expression on her face. Even when we spent every day together, I struggled to vibe with her in that way. She was just a tough book to crack, always keeping herself withdrawn, but revealing just enough to let you know that there was *something* beyond your privileges. I used to think of her as a house with locked doors. I knew my limitations and which rooms I was permitted to enter, but was left no clue as to the whereabouts of the missing keys. Nor had I any idea about what was so precious that she must keep locked away from the world, or more importantly, from me.

The can was numbing my hands, so I set it between my legs, unopened. I wasn’t quite settled in enough to drink just yet. Ione retracted her legs up onto the couch, sliding to make room to lie next to me. Her feet were mere inches away from my thighs, toes painted a flaking red. She always had managed to weasel her way out of footwear, even at restaurants or at school. Outside of walking, she was never to be seen with shoes on. It was just one of those odd quirks of Ione’s I never got around to unraveling, another locked door without a key.

“I read your books.” She downed the last of her beer and tossed it aside without bothering to check where it landed. “The ones you have online.”

I felt my face flush. Divine intervention alone prevented my bowels from doing the same. “Oh.” What else could I say? There was no pleasure or warmth in her tone. The words were delivered like a threat. “Thanks.” I decided it was time to crack my own beer open; I might need it.

“No, thank you. I’ve always wanted to be written about.”

“I wasn’t writing about you. Those books were fiction; they’re satire,” I croaked, washing the chagrin down with half my can.

“Yeah, it *says* it’s fake, but it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what you were writing about. I don’t know where ‘Mia’ came from, but I don’t bother to see why you changed that when you kept every other detail of my life intact.” Her voice escalated with each syllable. She was picking up momentum. “I mean, Jesus. It was just so obvious. Everything was in there. You might as well have just made my nudes the covers.”

“You never sent any.” The joke didn’t hit, but it didn’t quite miss, either. It felt like she telepathically swatted it away, mid-air. “I get how you could feel that way, but I really never intended to write about you or anything that happened between us. Were there parallels? Yeah, probably, but art reflects life in all kinds of ways. Sometimes, in ways I don’t always notice, myself. I wasn’t *trying* to write anything that

was recognizable or about you. I guess my imagination's just a little more limited than I thought."

"I'd say." She no longer seemed excited about the topic, more resigned to the reality of it that had already set in, long ago, whenever it was she set eyes to my words of years past.

"So, how'd you know that I wrote any of that?"

"Well, the details obviously gave you away. Not to mention that you blew up everybody's timelines spamming it. Nobody's *that* enthusiastic about a book some other unknown asshole puts on his blog."

"True." My eyes drifted from my lap, where they had fixed since this radical and unexpected shift in topic and tone of conversation, to her feet and up her legs. I was looking her into her green eyes. "What'd you think of them, besides the obvious?"

"You know what I said about writing earlier? How when I look back on it, I just think 'Thank God that phase of my life is over?' That's how I felt about you when I saw what you'd been writing. It was so disgusting, so disappointing, so...*you* that I couldn't even be mad, as badly as I wanted to. It was just too damn pathetic." *Her repetition of that last bit from her lecture at the reunion made me wonder if it was a sign of my consistency or her aptitude for recycling material.*

"I just spent a lot of time bitter and insecure about everything. I felt like I'm one of those people who has an expiration date, when it comes to friendships. Like, people could put up with me for a few months or a year, but no matter what, they'd always end up leaving me. Honestly, I never knew what I did so wrong; all I knew was that, whatever it was, I kept doing it, because every friendship, every relationship seemed to end the same way. My fears about the person I was seeped into the person I was becoming, and I guess into my writing, too."

"There are the ones who get away, and the ones you get away from."

"And I'm one of the ones you got away from?"

"So I thought."

I laughed. "Is that supposed to be a silver lining?"

"I don't know." Finally, her voice had returned to its natural cadence. "That one's up to you."

"See, that's one of those responsibilities I don't know if I can be trusted with."

"One step at a time." She drew her feet in closer to her body. "For now, tell me what you're doing here."

I felt like I was a suspect on *To Catch a Predator*. Did she take me home just to grill me? Was this some bizarre psychological test? "I'm just hangin' out." At least on the show, that one always worked.

“Don’t be a dork. What is your endgame? Why did you want to meet up?”

“I don’t know.” It was the truth. “I’ve been asking myself that same question all night.”

“What about your girlfriend?” I must have looked shocked at the mention of Carly, because she chased this question before I had the chance to get ahold of it. “Yeah, I know about her. I can use Facebook. I also know that it’s awful convenient that you’ve yet to mention her once in any of our conversations. Does she know that you’re here?”

“No,” I said, feeling like I wouldn’t be staying for very long. “We don’t really talk anymore. I mean, it’s not like that—”

“Wes, I don’t give a shit about your relationship. I’m not going to go rat you out. That’s your business. I just feel like I have the right to know what’s going on.”

“If I knew, I’d tell you. Maybe I thought I could get some clarity from this, in some bullshit way. Sometimes, I feel like we’re on the verge of a break-up, and other days things have been perfectly fine. I honestly think it’s only a matter of time.” I said this to her, but I was confessing it to myself.

“Been there, done that. I just got out of a three year shitstorm. Turns out, the single life isn’t so scary. I kinda like it.” She rolled her body forward, so that she was now on all fours, her head mere inches from mine. “Did you come here thinking that you were going to fuck me?”

I didn’t know how to reply to that, but I also didn’t give myself the chance to consider my options. I burst out laughing, be it from shock or stress. She must not have taken this to offense, because she soon joined me in my fit. She supported her head on my shoulder, trembling with giggles. “That sounded much better in my head,” she said, struggling for breath. “My boyfriend always got mad at me, because I can’t talk dirty.”

“The only time I talk dirty is when it’s about food,” I managed before the hiccups began. This only enabled our laughter. She fell backwards and somehow, I came down with her. As our cacophony gave way to a fade out resolution, I realized her hand on my arm. I only had a split second to brace myself for the fact that she was leaning in to place his lips onto mine. They were dry, but moistened with the repetition of our mouths opening to and closing upon each other, inviting our tongues in. She tugged on the hair at my nape and sighed. My fingers found their place between hers.

She broke away from me. “Don’t ever fucking write about this.”

I’ve never eaten a pomegranate before in my life. This is important because the second short story I turned in for my advanced creative writing class in college was rooted in Grecian symbolism. Characters walked around eating pomegranates as though they were apples and I had no idea anything was awry until this was underlined

and a note reading “*this is not how you eat a pom*” was tethered to it by a red line. The only thing I knew about pomegranates was their role in the raping of Persephone. I couldn’t account for the taste, smell, or even the process of eating one; I still can’t. All I knew was that they are a deep red, information I gathered from a coupon I saw in the newspaper years ago.

You see, my art has always been rooted in the experiences my life has lacked. There’s a popular quote about living your life modestly and being extravagant in your art. I suppose I’m a reluctant follower of that philosophy, even if not by choice. I began writing as a child when I wasn’t allowed to see the R-rated movies I would covet in the rental store my family used to visit. This was back when the covers were originally painted by hand and before the digital revolution. I would beg and fight to take just one of them home, but my efforts were fruitless. During my worst fits, I had to be practically dragged out of the store, promising that I could be content with a PG-13 rated movie. To cope with these losses, I would make short stories out of the images teased on the box art. It was a funny experience once I was finally permitted to take these forbidden fruits home and compared them to my expectations.

My point is, a habit was formed. I became a rebel, spitting in the face of writing what I know. I am a secondhand artist, a perpetrator of clichés, Xeroxing the copies of innovators’ imitators. My stories are too deeply indebted to fiction and too far removed from practical life. There’s no truth in them for readers to relate to. The best characters can feel as alive on the page as the person in the bookstore who sold the book to you, sometimes more. Mine are as shallow as my life has been sheltered. I did not venture out of my dorm at college to get drunk or mack on ladies whose names I couldn’t promise to remember. I’ve rarely given myself the opportunity to leave my bedroom, let alone the country. My resume has more negative space than a high schooler’s. As someone who has lived the life of a faithless saint, I am unqualified to write about life. My glass isn’t half-empty; it was never filled at all. Good art reflects life. Mine merely reflects better art.

At this moment in time, however, I was balls-deep in an experience for the books. It wasn’t a comprehensive porno fuck warming up on the kitchen counter, parading into the shower, and eventually toward the bedroom for the inevitable climax on her face. We fucked the way one cries against his or her will. We fucked in the way one takes a shit. This was a need to be fulfilled, a duty. Foreplay was a luxury our libidos could not afford. Our lips hardly touched after the obligatory missionary make-out was out of the way, nor did we attempt any conversation. All motion or efforts besides the most basic locomotion felt frivolous, in poor taste for the event. It’d be like wearing a suit to a parent-teacher conference. That’s not to say it was a negative or apathetic experience. I was quite enjoying myself. My fantasies of Ione’s face squirming in pleasure beneath me were finally consummated, even if a little more pained at first than I had hoped for. That’s just a reality of the bone, though. You don’t just slip the whole thing in on the first try. That’s movie stuff. Usually, the whole length of it isn’t in until a basic rhythm has already been established.

After a while of missionary sex, we disconnected and regrouped so that I could hit it from behind, at her request. I almost felt like the suggestion was made to

avoid any further eye contact, but I was just happy to be there, in this unlit room I never quite got a good look at. I think this worked out for both of us. I felt like a Spartan behind her, and even though half my arousal was in fulfilling a promise I made to myself long ago, the anonymity did tickle my imagination. She wasn't just one that got away. In this moment, she was all of them. Every girl that had rejected me, or that seemed too good to even bother attempting a conversation with was now on my dick. Each pump cut a jagged line into my teenage wrists when I never wanted to see another morning. She was the pomegranate that I was eating, hopefully the right way, whatever that is. I couldn't help but smile as this thought ran laps in my mind. I grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled it back. This seemed to pain her, and not in the kinky way, so I bent over and began massaging her breasts. I picked up the pace, and soon my cock was blowing like a trumpet at the, well, first coming in this case. (*It's been a pretty serious problem for me, lately.*)

"What the fuck!?" Ione shouted, shooting herself off me like a rocket propelled by my jizz. She hit her head on the wall with a loud thud.

"Oh, shit! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Despite my apologies, I continued to spray over her feet and the sheets between them.

"What the fuck happened to being the 'master of pulling out?'" She said, rubbing her temple just below the roots of her widow's peak.

"Well, I thought I would be. Things seem easier than they actually are in my head sometimes."

"Oh my God, you *fucking idiot!*" She said, racing out of the room and into the bathroom across the hall. I could see her roll toilet paper around her hand and wiping herself, hunched over like a dog dropping a turd. Without another word, she tore the comforter off from the bed, threw her body down, and gave herself climax next to me. Her stimulation was fast and agitated, far from the sensual image men expect of a woman pleasuring herself. "I don't even know what the fuck I was thinking. *Clearly*, this was a terrible idea."

I repositioned myself from my upright stance to laying on my side. "Well, I for one don't regret it." She turned towards me. I couldn't tell if I was sliding off the hook or pushing it in deeper. "It was the first time I felt at the right time in years, if that makes sense. My mind wasn't all over the world or wishing I was somewhere else. I was just—" I karate-chopped the palm of my open hand. "—in it." Her eyebrows jumped up before returning to their neutral position. "I don't really do things all that often. I just make regrets and build on them with more regrets until I'm rolling around in this ball pit of things I wish didn't happen. I know something regrettable when I see one, because anything else looks freakish to me. So, trust me when I say, this was a fucking *anomaly*."

Her lips curved into a smile. "Well, I don't doubt your expertise." I brushed a curl of hair from her forehead. "Yeah, we fucked, but you'd better cut that shit out right now."

I rolled over, hoping to feel the warmth of her breasts pressing against my

back as her arms slipped around me. I was met with only silence. On the nightstand beside me was a lamp and a framed picture of Ione with a man. They looked like they were at the zoo or some sort of a park and he was kissing her cheek. He had a soul patch and an earring. His hair was spiked like a kid from some Mountain Dew commercial in the nineties. Not gonna lie, he looked like a fuckin' douche.

"You know why I think I was so hostile, the night of the reunion?"

"Huh?"

"I was just hoping to be through with it all. I always thought it'd be cool to tell you what a fucko you are, but I think what I really wanted was to just keep out of it. It was such a relief, getting away from you. I felt like I was seeing the world with a fresh set of eyes again, the way I used to before I met you. I felt like I had escaped from some kind of cult."

"Gee, thanks."

"I just feel like you have this subtle dominance that you exert on people. You're like one of those psychic vampires people talk about."

"I get it. I'm an asshole. We've gone over this already; I don't need to hear about it anymore." My voice wavered in this statement. My eyes felt fit to burst with tears and I didn't know why.

"No, I'm saying this for your own good. I think you spend so much energy trying to convince people of who you are because you're uncertain of yourself, and it just leaves everybody exhausted. You need someone around you who enables you in thinking you're already the person you never believed you could be, which prevents you from actually *becoming* that person. Why'd you want to apologize to me in the first place?"

"I guess I wanted to let you know I've changed."

"Right! But if you had actually changed, you wouldn't be here right now. You'd be living your own life, but you had to convince *me* that you had changed. You couldn't accept your maturity as a person without my approval of it."

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

"Hey," she pushed me playfully, a little too hard. I nearly slipped right off the mattress. I tried to recover myself without letting this on, but it was too late. She was already giggling. "Even if I don't think you're the person you want me to believe you are, I don't think you're nearly as rotten as the guy you see in yourself."

"I really *am* sorry, though, and am trying to change. I acted like childish in school, but fuck, I *was* a kid. I never saw how my actions affected anyone but me. Far as I was concerned, I always had my reasons. Sometimes, when you've got morals, you think it gives you the excuse to act without any."

"Are you describing your high school angst or the nature of terrorism?"

"Both. I'm a psychological terrorist."

“If you say so.”

Another silence, infertile and awkward. I weighed each thought running through my mind, but they each felt misshapen and worthless. “So, what was Trevor’s deal? I never even knew we had beef. We just kinda stopped talking one day.”

“I think he was just embarrassed. You were pretty trashed, mate.”

“Oh.” Such a simple solution to what in my mind seemed like a complex dilemma. “Did you guys go—together?”

“What!?! No way! We just pulled in at the same time. We caught up for a little while and went our separate ways. He was just my buddy for the night.”

“Is that what I am? Your buddy for the night?”

“Yes—but in a different context. A *way* different context.”

“I’ll take what I can get. How was the reunion, by the way?”

“You know, I was expecting it to be pretty lame, but, actually, it was nice.”

I felt like a man shipwrecked and washed ashore when I returned home to Carly. I was a changed man, a survivor. I could hardly handle a casual night at home, let alone the adventure I had embarked on. I didn’t go kissing her in the way they plant kisses into the soil in the movies. Actually, I was a little touchy and shell-shocked for a while. I kept my distance from Carly, trying to avoid anything physical without looking as though I was avoiding her in any way. I mean, if she kissed me, I’d kiss back, but I wasn’t prepared to initiate anything. Something about a physical reunion would cement my role as a cheater in this relationship. Before, I could excuse my affair with promises of a break-up, but at this point, I just didn’t have it in me. I felt beat, exhausted. I needed to recoup and gather some motivation before any more significant confrontations. Neglectful as Carly can be, nobody can deny her perception. That must be something she picked up in those pretentious psych classes she’s taking, that or she’s just a natural. (*It wouldn’t be very feminist of me to deny a woman her inclinations, now would it?*) I pinned the blame on some mystery illness or seasonal allergy that I couldn’t identify and pretty much got off the hook, but I knew sooner or later that I’d have to move on or settle back in. Carly was the type of girl to compensate when our chemistry was out of whack. Whenever I’m no longer the one giving it my all, she puts 110% into it. My newfound celibacy lasted roughly one night before she broke me in. My second cherry wasn’t even given a chance to properly ripen. And it felt...the same. Her lips felt no different pressed against my own. She didn’t taste the strange on my cock or find any cliched scratch marks running down my back. It was just another instance of having sex, like any other. With that bridge crossed, it’s all been downhill.

When I was cheated on in the past, I often wondered how they could live with themselves, not to be consumed by guilt. The truth is, it isn’t hard. My life is untransformed by the experience. I’m still sitting on the same couch with the same girl.

Yeah, I was inside of another woman during the term of our civil union, but it felt no different than having been with any of the girls before Carly. I was with them when I was with them, but presently, I was there with her. In fact, I felt more present without the mental distractions. As embarrassingly simple as it might sound, I think this all boiled down to a bad case of the grass not being any greener on the other side. Carly and I had our problems, but we were comfortable around each other. So what if the excitement's worn off? There are other things in life, like security, honesty, trust. This whole misunderstanding felt like an affirmation of our relationship rather than a discredit to it. We had weathered the storm, even if she was passed-out in the backseat. Our love had stood the test.

Really, it's criminal how easy I made out. I had a rough week of anxiety, the dread that Ione would go rogue and blackmail me, or shoot Carly a revealing message, but that all went away as I settled back into the groove of life. It never takes long for the minor distractions of work, home life, and social demands (what few I have) to catch up with you, and this was no exception.

As for my own interaction with Ione, it was kept to a minimum. The next morning was the first time I've woken up from a one-night stand, and it's pretty much every bit as awkward as you'd expect it to be. There was no cuddling as the sun began to pour in through the window or continued sexual shenanigans. It was something much closer to a horror movie than a porno. I felt like I woke up next to a body, drenched not in my own sweat, but somebody else's blood. I felt trapped, like a SWAT team was waiting just out the door to arrest me on charges of human indecency that I could not dispute. I think I might have been shaking, because Ione came to soon after. She offered breakfast, but I couldn't stick around a minute longer than necessary. I booked my ass outta there. I wasn't sure that was the right idea, I didn't even know if that's what I wanted to do. All I knew was that I didn't have the nerves for anything else. It was fight or flight, and I didn't have any combative strength in me. I also think she was somewhat eager to be rid of me. Conversation as I gathered my clothes from her floor was strained, mundane. It felt how it did when we first met at the diner again, two strangers who were unsure what the fuck we were doing. Inside my car, I took a minute to catch my breath. I noticed my knuckles were turning white from gripping the steering wheel, and then that I was hyperventilating. I probably looked like a psychopath to any stereotypically nosy neighbor watching through the shutters of their window.

I wasn't sure that night whether to message or block her from my social media profiles. When I finally decided just to block her and put an end to it, I was notified that she had already texted me, two hours earlier. "Hey, about last night...I had a good time and it was great catching up, but I think we should just leave it as a one-time thing. Like, fuck, dude. I think we're both in weird places right now and don't need to be adding any more complications to the equation, you know? I don't know what I expected to happen, but idk if that was the smartest decision from either of us." I replied that I agree, and that I hoped to keep in touch. As the days went by, I felt a disconnect in our messages. She took longer to reply and had less to say. I found myself responding even later and briefer. We shared the awkward tension of an estranged couple trying to keep up contact as "just friends." My heart skipped a beat



every time her name popped up in my inbox. I felt like each message had the potential to carry some threat to the state of my life, some guilt-fueled confession to Carly, or any contrived twist that would come back to haunt me. So, I stopped replying, and I found that she didn't bother to text twice. Done was done was us. We each had our own lives. They intersected once, and maybe that was a mistake, but for once, I didn't feel the need to keep making it. I might've opened a can of worms in the process, but it was closure enough for me to say "Fuck it" and move on.

I knew that something was wrong when I felt my phone buzz long enough to indicate that it was a call being received and not just a text message. Someone had died. Matt got into some drug-related problem. The NSA was calling to ask a few questions about my recent search history. I felt a gorge swell in my throat and my tongue struggled to find lubrication inside my mouth. I still had another ten minutes on the clock, though, and couldn't afford to sneak a peek to check the deets. I couldn't risk the heart attack, so I resolved to ignore it until I was safe in my bedroom. My thin reputation at work couldn't withstand a public meltdown. I struggled to keep what remained of my composure before clocking out, although I was not nearly as chatty with my final customers as I pride myself in. I'm a little hazy on this, but I think I broke out of a power walk into a jog at some point on my way home. Fortunately, I was hidden by the night (*and a hood veiling my features—I maintain that the best way to avoid being robbed is to dress as though you're on the prowl to rob somebody else*). I knew that I could have ended the misery prematurely, but the matter was as good as cursed. My goal to ignore the phone until I had crossed the threshold of my home had become a part of my individual superstition. If I broke my promise, I could very well doom myself.

In the safety of my room, with the windows closed, the blinds drawn, and the door shut (*I even have this cute little "DO NOT DISTURB" sign that I hung up, which probably makes it look like I'm whacking it, but whatever it takes to get some God damn privacy, right?*), the vibes of a ritual well done were resonating within me. I fished the phone from my pocket and clicked it on. My stomach turned when I saw the notifications nailed to my lock screen. I dropped my phone and felt my stomach's contents fighting their way back up in revolt. One call from Ione forty-five minutes ago and a text sent half an hour ago reading "Pls call me back ASAP. This is important." It was an act of mercy that the phone fell face-down onto the carpet. I hesitated to retrieve it, as though the touch might burn my hands. As I did, I noticed my fingers trembling. I felt every ounce of the phone in my hand. Each beat my heart made was hammered into my skull as I tapped the phone to call her back. I prayed to God that she wouldn't answer, but the line could hardly pronounce one whole ring before her voice came through.

"Hullo?" She sounded stuffed up, as if she was suffering from allergies. It is August, after all, I told myself.

"Hey," I could hear my own voice wavering.

"A-are you able to talk right now?" Circumstantially, yes. Mentally, probably

not. “You might want to sit down.” I noticed that I was pacing, practically in the circumference of a dog chasing its own tail, with all the space this room affords me.

“What’s wrong? Everything alright?” I knew it was a stupid question before the words escaped my lips, but what else was I to say?

I don’t recall what happened next, entirely. I remember hearing a loud buzzing inside my skull, like the monotone of the tinnitus that has rung in my ears since I was a child. All the colors in my sight became mud, the once solid objects melting like a Dali painting, and then Picasso, then Jackson Pollock before it was lights out. I felt my body, numb to all pain, hit the floor. I could hear Ione on the other end of the phone, a million miles away, and soon I heard the door fly open. I was worried that it had splintered into a million pieces and that I’d now have to coordinate jerking off without being walked in on without my door, or even worse, having to beat my meat in the bathroom like some kind of animal. I felt something hit my head and my brother was yelling profanities. He started talking to someone else in the room, though I didn’t know of anybody else who might be home. I felt the sting of palms on my cheeks as my vision recalibrated.

“Did I pass out?” I heard myself say. I swam through the murky air into an upright position.

“Like a bitch.”

“Dag...Now I know how you feel every Saturday night.”

“Yeah, well, at least I don’t go getting people knocked-up.”

“Oh. Shit.” For a blissful second, I had the fleeting concept that the night preceding this moment was but a nightmare. “How did you know that?”

“You screamed ‘You’re pregnant!?’ before bitching out. It was almost like a soap-opera, but entertaining. Also, I picked up the phone when I heard someone was still on the line. Baby Mama asked if you were O.K. and filled me in.” He held a hand out to assist me in standing. I swung from his arm like Tarzan on a vine into bed. “Doesn’t sound like Carly,” he whispered, handing me the phone.

“Hey?” I felt like Bill Pullman in *Lost Highway*.

“Are you—” She interrupted herself with a snuffle. “—Alright?”

“Yeah, I think I’m fine. Feeling a little fucked in the ass, but—Hey, can I call you back in a minute?” Before she could answer, I was out cold again, with visions of myself swinging like a pendulum over some pastoral garden. When I came back to, the phone was nowhere to be seen. A part of me didn’t want to find this link to the Hell that I was plummeting headfirst into, but another part of me was desperate to try and steer this train my way before it wrecks. I found it between my bed and the wall, nearly skinning my hand from the iron bed frame pressing against it. Before long, I was back on the line with Ione.

“Alright, sorry about that.” I was able to speak now, but every nerve in my body felt electric. My voice was shaking from the energy.

“It’s O.K. Are you alright? You sound really—bad.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be fine. Look, umm, what—what are we gonna do about this?”

“I mean, I’m pregnant.”

“Yeah, but is it, like, don’t think I’m some kind of a jerk for asking this, but is it *mine*?”

“Yes, the child is ours.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I think I’d know.” She sounded instigated.

“So, there was no one else? *Nobody*?”

“You’re the only one.”

“But you said you just got out of a relationship. What about that guy?”

“That part of our relationship was done a long time ago. Jesus fucking Christ. I didn’t call to get interrogated over this. I just wanted to let you know that I am pregnant with a baby and that you’re the father.”

The words sounded like a life sentence. “So, what are we gonna do?”

“I don’t believe in abortions, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Oh, so you’re all for gay pride walks and acting like some hipster fucking vegan, but killing one baby hardly the size of an insect is where you draw the line!?”

“I’m *pro-choice*. My choice is to have the baby. I can’t go through with an abortion. I just—can’t.”

“*Fuuuck*. This has ta be some kinda mix-up. You don’t get pregnant from having unprotected sex one time. Is this payback for something I did in high school? I mean, I thought we were both over tha—”

“You know what, if you’re going to act like this, then just don’t fucking worry about it. I’ll take care of it, myself.” The line went dead.

Needless to say, I didn’t get much sleep that night. After the effects of my initial shock wore off (*shaking and crying like I was a fucking baby, myself*), I just couldn’t settle my brainwaves down to a steady tide. I was about to face my sentence, might as well have been put to death. I prayed, which is something I never do, that something will come up. It was just a mistake and her period would start, she’d rethink her stance on the abortion, her pregnancy would be interrupted by some minor car accident. I didn’t care what came up, so long as it didn’t involve me driving back to town and punching her in the gut. I felt like I had been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. What was I going to say to Carly? My relationship with her felt so inconsequential compared to the responsibility of a living fucking creature. I don’t know how I could excuse myself, or if I should at all. Maybe I could just end things

now and never look back, never have to face what I've done to her. What was I thinking? Fuck. Why would I ever have gotten back in touch with Ione? If nothing else, why didn't I think to bring a God damn rubber?

"Holy shit, you look awful," Matt said from the doorway. He was leaning against the frame with one hand above his head, gripping it. He looked like he was about to start crying, himself.

"From you, I'd take that as a compliment."

"Alright." He removed himself from the door and stepped back. "Fuck it. I don't have to deal with this."

"I'm sorry!" I called out to him. "I'm just all fucked-up right now."

His head poked back in the doorway; the rest of him followed. "What's going on with you?"

"You remember my high school reunion?"

"The one you didn't want me talking to Carly about?"

"Yeah." The reminder felt like a thorn in my heart. "That one. I kind of met up with a girl I used to go to school with and, as you know, she is with child."

"You didn't use a condom?"

"No."

"Did she forget to take her birth control?"

"I really don't know. I didn't ask."

"You don't know if she forgot to take her birth control, or you didn't think to ask if she's *on* birth control?"

"She's an adult lady, Matt. I figured that she could be responsible for her own reproductive crippling."

"Well, apparently she isn't any more of an adult than you are. Jesus Christ, why would you have unprotected sex on a one night stand?"

"C'mon, it's not like people get pregnant from one bone. That's pretty much a myth."

"You're right. I don't know what I was thinking—except that it *fucking did happen* and it happened to you because you're stupid enough to think that. So, what now? Do you need money for an abortion or something?"

"I think I'm gonna need some tranquilizers and a coat hanger."

"For real?" My expression was constant. "She's *keeping it*? Of all people we went to school with, you had to go and knock up a God damn puritan?"

"I don't know that she's keeping it, exactly, but she hasn't agreed to have an abortion yet." I was chiseling the snot dried to my upper lip with fingernails.

“That’s fucked. Did you sleep with a student from special-ed classes or something?”

“I have a feeling she’s asking herself the same question right now.”

“Well, I’ll give that to her. Does Carly know?”

“Uhh, no. That’s going to be a little complicated.”

He started crying, no exaggeration, full-on *sobbing*. I haven’t seen him cry since I was in my single digits.

“Hey, what’s the deal? How’s that s’posed to make me feel any better about all this?”

“I’m not trying to make you feel better, you fucking moron,” he croaked through tearful hiccups.

“Well, you still don’t need to be crying. This is loco.”

“What’s she going to do? She doesn’t need this.”

“That’s very considerate of you, but it’s my problem. I’m just gonna have to work it out is all.”

He walked with his head hung to the foot of my bed, where he sat. “You’re a fucking asshole, you know that.”

“I’ve caught on.”

“You can’t keep doing this to everyone. Someday, I’m gonna be dead and nobody else will want to put up with you.”

“Actually, I’m the older sibling...unless you take the transgender suicide rates into account, then I suppose...”

“I can’t have a kid hanging around here, bro.” He was sobering up, his voice regaining its natural tenor, though strained. “You can’t have a little baby around all this dank.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Seriously, you’ve gotta get your shit together. You can’t even *afford* to have a kid on what you’re making right now.”

“I’ll get on it. I think I can still talk Ione out of carrying our abortion to term, but I should probably start on that anyways.”

He shot upright, like an animal that had just heard a gunshot. “You got *Ione* knocked-up!?”

“Long time coming, right?”

“Oh, *Jesus*. I knew that voice was familiar. Oh my God, that’s grody.”

“C’mon, she’s a real proper lady.”

“She sounds like a class act.”

“She’d probably be fully supportive of you indoctrinating our child at a young age to become transwhatever.”

“That’s not funny.” He stood back up and walked to the door. He turned back, preparing to say something, and then just shook his head as he disappeared into the hall.

The rest of my night was just tossing, turning, trying to think of anything else but the situation at hand. I eventually settled down, reading web comics until sunrise. I called off for my opening shift that morning. There was no sense in my being there. I’d just make a fool of myself to the shopping public and hyperventilate in the bathroom. Nothing enables my anxiety worse than a day at work. Best case scenario, I fall asleep at the register to make up for my deprivation the night before.

I tried going on a walk, but anxiety was on my ass. I felt like a gerbil on a wheel, stuck inside this cage, and for some reason, being outdoors only made me feel more trapped. I knew there was no chance of prying the bars open to force my way out. My only option was to bury myself in the bedding. I started drinking soon as I got back home and didn’t stop until after I can remember.

Bob’s worked for Shop Shop Shop for a decade, so I’ve heard. He’s always been a chill dude. I don’t know if he’d pass the Turing Test, but what manager could? If I had to put my trust in the hands of any superior, it’d be him. The guy had potential, keyword: *had*. The truth was, Bob in his current state wasn’t much more than a husk of a man, an empty shell. I’ve heard him talking to other employees about movies and he knew his shit, so I looked him up on Facebook. Scrolling through his profile pictures, you see the story of a man with a dream deferred, told in reverse. Five years ago, he was a young man holding a camera with toned arms, tagged in a photo uploaded by some fancy film school. Over the next half-decade of pictures, he loses not only the form of his body, but the light in his eyes as well. The orbs in his sockets appear burned out, their rims permanently bruised. Whenever he used to work day shift, he’d eat two of those cheap microwavable burritos, the foot-long ones. He’s probably put on fifty pounds since I first laid eyes on him. He was tapping his employee numbers into the time card machine when I approached him, like a bully coming to his victim’s locker for lunch money. Or better yet, a freckled nerd coming to ask the cheerleading captain to the Sadie Hawkins dance.

“Hey,” I said. In an effort to display confidence, I think I might’ve shouted this.

“What’s up?”

“I was wondering about becoming full-time.”

“The only department hiring right now is overnight.”

“I saw that, on the corkboard. That’s why I came to you.”

“Yeah, man. I’ll see what I can do. Umm,” He scratched his eye with a stiff index finger. “You should probably talk to your manager about the transfer, in the meantime.”

“Tom? He’s a cunt; he won’t do anything.”

“Well, you’ve already got the overnight jargon down. What makes you wanna go full-time?”

“Umm, I’m looking for my own place, actually.” No way was I about to tell anyone about my true predicament. If it reaches the wrong set of ears, I was good as fucked. I had already put off telling Carly long enough; matters couldn’t get any better if somebody beat me to the punchline. “I just feel like it’s time to grow up, ya know?”

“Good luck. This place is Never-fucking-everland.” He shrugged. “It does rob you of your youth, so there is that.”

“I think I was born without youth,” He was smiling, but only politely. All of a sudden I felt insecure in what I had said, so I added, “Some funky-ass mental condition.”

“Alright, well, I’d better hit the floor before Big Brother notices my tardiness. I’ll see what I can do about getting you on the team.”

I was too confused by Ione’s new relationship advertised on Facebook to form any emotions out of it, so I called her in the hopes that she could provide me with some rationalizations to dispute.

The phone rang three times before she picked up. “Hello.” She sounded irritated to hear from me. I suppose that I might be, too.

“Hey, so, I was just calling to see if you planned on having your first date *at the abortion clinic*.” I knew I got her where it hurts with that one. It was hard not to audibly laugh into my phone, but I managed to keep it together with only a villainous smile. If I remember correctly, I physically patted myself on the back after I said it.

“Oh, Jesus fuck. Hang on a second...” I heard her distorted voice say something to somebody. A moment later, she returned on the line. “Why are you calling me?” Wind blew through the microphone.

“What!?! Can you speak a little louder!?” I yelled into my speaker. “It sounds windy outside, maybe you should go back in, unless you don’t want whoever you’re with to hear.”

“I’m hanging up now. I don’t need this—”

“Oh, c’mon! I was just—” I was too late, is what I was. She had already disconnected. I immediately dialed her back.

“Alright, listen up!” I didn’t know if I was about to get lectured or hyped up for some hot new beat. Her voice was fragile, on the verge of breaking. “I’m sure this

is a blast for you, but I can't handle your bullshit right now!" I could hear her breathing through the phone. "I can talk for a little bit. Just don't waste my time."

"That's not one of my strong suits."

"Well, get working on it."

"If my time is budgeted, then I should probably preface any dialogue you might cut short by supporting my argument for abortion with the risk of fetal alcohol syndrome."

"Nice try, but I haven't had a drink since...conception." I could tell it was awkward coming out of her mouth as it was to hear. It sounded the way a turd that hangs halfway out your ass but won't pinch off feels.

"You just proved my own point. We were both drinking the night of. So, before it even *entered* your body, that little sperm was buzzed. Then it entered your keg of a uterus—"

"Are you literally retarded?" Judging from the tone of her voice, she was at least mildly amused by this.

"Would you have asked that question to someone you thought legitimately was?"

"That's not funny," but she was laughing. "And, this isn't exactly *your* problem, anyways."

"Yes, I'm sorry, but this very much *is* my problem. I shot that problem right between your legs."

"Seriously, Wes. I've got this. I'm not asking for any help or for you to be involved in any way. You can keep on living your life like it never even happened."

"See? I bet you're glad I brought that fetal alcohol shit up. Turned you right around on that one."

"No. I'm seeing somebody—"

"Yeah, what is *that dude's* problem? Is he some kind of sex pervert who's into pregnant chicks? I mean, really. You should be worried; I'm worried for you. I feel out of place even bringing this up, because you should be the one asking yourself these sorta questions from now on. If you're going to be a mother, you need to learn to *protect*. You can't have a child around that kinda sicko."

"I've been seeing Brendan for years. Remember Psycho Ex?"

"Oh, Jesus, the *tattoo dealer*?"

"Yeah." She inhaled deeply. "That one."

"What, so, like, he's *down* with all this? I don't get—"

"Listen, I'm kind of glad you called. Maybe I wouldn't have picked up if things were different, but I need you to keep things between us about our little secret—"



just for right now.”

“Oh my God.

“What?”

“You’re evil.” It now dawned on me, no explanation necessary, what was afoot. “You’re not going to tell him. You’re gonna let him think it’s his kid. You want him to take care of it like it’s his own until it’s grown up to be an eighteen year old bitch just like you were...you’ll probably tell him the truth on her eighteenth birthday! I know what’s up. Don’t think I’ve never listened to Kanye!”

“Does *Carly* know!?”

The silence lasted long enough for me to check the phone to make sure she hadn’t hung up on me.

“O.K.,” I finally said. “Things are a little complicated right now for both of us. Just, please, be honest with him. I can’t just go and cuckold some dude, even if he does spike his hair like he’s in some old Tony Hawk game.”

“How did you know about—”

“I saw the picture on your nightstand.” This sounded creepier than intended. “For real, please, keep me in the loop. I don’t want to be your enemy on this. I know I’m an asshole and a fuck-up, some kinda fucked-up asshole, but I want to work with you on this thing. I’m already looking into better jobs so I can help financially.” This was the truth. I had been browsing job postings online every night after work for hours. It can actually be relaxing if you put on some Funkadelic and smoke a blunt or two while you look. I was already scheduled to start my new full-time position at Shop Shop that Friday.

“I appreciate that, except this isn’t a *thing*. It’s a child.”

“Yeah. You’re right. I just need you to know that I’m working on things.”

“*Yeah*, like I haven’t heard that one before.” She added, “I’m kidding,” after an uncomfortable hiatus in our speech.

“I got that,” I said, but was already calculating just how right she was.

“Hey! Yeah, I’m about done, anyways,” I vaguely heard Ione tell someone. “Alright, Mom, I’ve gotta get going now! Love you.” She clicked the phone off.

“Love you, too.” It had been nighttime for hours, but I just then felt the darkness creeping in.

“Are you familiar with rotation?” Bob asked me, standing before the arena which I was to perform for him every night, from this night forth.

“You mean, like puff-puff-pass?” I mimed taking a drag from a meaty blunt.

He gave me a *seriously, come on, now look*. If he was wearing glasses, he’d

probably have let them slide further down the bridge of his nose to properly condescend to me. “Product rotation. Keep the old up front or on top, and the new shit goes to the bottom.”

“No, but it sounds easy enough.”

“It will be the bane of your fucking existence. Eventually, it *will* drive you mad. You’re going to have dreams about it when you fall asleep in the morning. There’s nothing wrong with that; it’s just how things work around here. Some overnight workers get attitude, or think that they’re the only people busting their asses, but we don’t need any more of that shit. They could be suckin’ brews in lawn chairs out front and you shouldn’t care, you know why?”

I did not know why, so I pretended to choke on the coffee I was sipping.

“Because it’s my job to worry about them. You won’t get paid any more for working harder than them. Your motivation is not making me pull you to the back and ream your ass out, which would be uncomfortable for both of us.”

“Sounds good!” I have this terrible habit of overexerting my voice when I’m new on a job to show motivation, which succeeds only in conveying that I’ve yet to complete puberty.

“You know how to claims shit, right? Like, rotten fruit and that?”

“Yeah.” As cashiers, we would be responsible for whatever unsatisfactory items were brought through our lanes.

“Cool.” We shared a moment of taking in the visual splendor that was the produce floor. A large section of the shopping area with products stacked into large pyramids. In their current state, they were torn down and dilapidated. Aside from being the visual equivalent of the taste of lettuce, it looked like it’d take me roughly a year to restock this place. “You smoke, dude?”

“Is that a requirement for the job?”

“That’s up for you to decide. Just let me know before you take a smoke break. Better yet, just come find me. I’ll probably be in the patio.” Said-patio is where the smokers congregated to exchange cigarettes and bond in the shortening of their lives. “Anyhow, this is your problem, now. Let me know if you need anything.” And with that, he was gone, leaving me alone to my work.

Apples, oranges, and other fruit were stored in a cooler at the back end of the store, beyond customer access. I began by pulling two boxes of each brand and variety. Rotation was no challenge, so much as it was an inconvenience. Sometimes, pyramids would just decide to crumble, as though the place was haunted with an invisible shopper playing Jenga with our products. It was a time-consuming and slow process. My day felt twice the length of my normal hours, without customers or fellow cashiers to confide in. Only the monotone of the store playlist, which was itself in a rotation of sorts, was there to keep me company. I felt like an outcast, and soon became victim to the quicksand of my thoughts. Before I knew it, I was unaware that I was even

performing any tasks. I had somehow achieved reaching a state of boredom so thick that it served as a partition between my mental and physical selves. Although my journey into morning was uphill, it passed without much pain or discomfort. If nothing else, it probably adequately prepared me for my century in Purgatory before serving my sentence in Hell. That didn't change the fact that I wanted to hug and kiss everyone I saw walk through the entrance as I was nearing dismissal from my shift. On the worst of days, going home felt like a relief; on this night, it was an achievement.

Except, the floor wasn't yet complete. I talked to Bob about this before clocking out. He reminded me of my responsibility to the morning crew to make sure the floor was customer ready before shrugging and letting me go home, anyways. He said I might as well use the excuse of being new to the job while I had it.

"So, you talked to Carly yet?" Matt asked while applying his lipstick. It was a deep red. I couldn't take my eyes off his legs, not because they aroused me, but because his hair was poking through the fishnet stockings around them.

"What's your deal?" I reached across the mattress to pet Tammy, who took this as her cue to leap off the mattress and sprint to the furthest region of the house. "Are there, like, pronouns you want me to use, or can I only write your name using the colors of the LGBT flag, or something?"

"Your pronouns don't define me." He pursed his lips at the mirror.

"Seriously. I probably won't call you by whatever new names you fancy, but I'm curious to know."  
"Seriously, I don't care."

"Well, have you thought about alternative names?"

"No, I really haven't. Have you? Like, do you prefer *daddy* or *papa*?"

"I get the feeling your avoiding my questions..."

"I get the feeling your questions are excuses to avoid mine."

"Well, let's A some Qs. We can go eye for eye. I'll even let you go first."

He glanced at me from his seat at the wooden vanity in his bedroom with eyes lined in black. "When are you going to come clean about this?"

"Oh, no." I shifted my weight on his mattress to release what was supposed to be a silent fart. "I meant that I'll let you answer first."

"What do you want me to answer?"

"Have you ever considered using another name? Hypothetically speaking."

"No, I haven't. In my mind, I'm still Matt. I'm your brother, with the same body. I know this me is a work in progress...I think I've always struggled with these feelings that I was uncomfortable as a boy, like men's clothes were never a proper fit. I've just decided to end that struggle. Well, for now, I'm at least committed to taking

vacations from it on the weekend. Eventually, I hope to express myself physically how I've always felt emotionally. My struggle is with the rest of the world." I can tell he enjoyed opening up about the subject, because he carried on long after I had tuned out.

"So, do you plan on, like, getting an operation done or taking some kinda hormones or any of that shit?"

He turned from the mirror to look at me. "I don't know. It was never an option before. This has always been more of a fashion thing to me. Never really considered the *physical* part in that way...I'd really have to come out if I did...Hold the fuck up, this is *your* turn."

I shrugged.

"When do you plan on talking to Mom?"

"Soon as you do. We can double team her—with information?"

"You're setting me up again, answering my questions with yours."

"O.K., so, I can't talk to Mom about this yet. It's too soon."

"Because...?"

"I need to talk with Carly yet. I don't want more people to know than those who absolutely *have* to before I talk with her. If she found out through somebody else, she'd kill me."

"Alright, so, two questions."

"Fair enough."

"I wasn't asking your approval, but anyways, when is it that you plan on talking to Carly, again?"

I bobbed my head to the left and right as I weighed my options. "It's a delicate matter. I need to find the right time. I can't do it in public."

"Why not here, then?"

"I don't want to keep you up all night, arguing." That was good. It made it seem like my procrastination was in his best interest.

"As much as I love eavesdropping on your nonversations, I can't argue with that. You are, however, in luck, because I will be gone all next weekend."

"Bullshit. You never leave the house."

"I'm going to a con. I've been planning it with some guys at work for months, now."

"I still think you're just pressuring me, but is it some kinda *sex* convention?"

"Not so fast. You've still yet to answer *my* second question."

“Alright, shoot.”

“Do you really think it matters *how* she finds out? Let’s be real for a minute, here. You’re fucked either way. Your best bet is to just tell her over the phone where she can’t spill any of your blood on my carpet.”

“I don’t know. I feel like it’s more respectful to just tell her in person, but I don’t see honor in any approach.”

“It’s an atheist convention. Bill Nye’s gonna be there.”

“You know I’m going to look this up soon as I get my hands on something WiFi-able.”

“I don’t care. Find out about my gay fuckfest reservations if you’re so desperate.”

“Oh, so you’re gay?”

“It’s 2016,” he said. “Nobody’s *just* straight or gay.” I didn’t know what he meant by this, but I chose not to probe any further before my own sexuality was put to the test. “You gonna tell Dad?”

Now, that, I hadn’t considered. Not because I have some problem with my father. In the holiday or rare days when we do talk, we get along. It’s just that he’s not around anymore. He moved out of state during my sophomore year at college. I’ve only seen him twice since. Phone calls are bimonthly at best. He could prove to be a test audience before I try performing for the real critics. “Yeah, but that’s kind of a whatever thing. So, how did you do this before I knew about it?”

“What? My make-up?”

I nodded.

“Well, I wasn’t waiting around on *your* permission. Just, whenever I went out, I’d take a few minutes outside of wherever I was at to put some on with the rearview mirror.”

“That’s kind sad. Why didn’t you ever just tell me?”

“Hold up. It’s your turn now. How come you don’t ever talk about your cartoonish levels of depression?”

“Well, I guess that as a family, we just kinda suck at communication.” It seemed that I had not only solved for his question, but my own as well. “Hey, you wanna smoke up?”

“Are you taking your turn with that question?”

“Fuck it.”

“Just grab some from my stash.”

I hopped off his mattress onto my feet with a heavy thud and walked to his wardrobe. I pulled the third drawer from the top open, his sweater and sock drawer (*I*

*don't see the connection, either.*), where a gray plush wolf was housed. I unzipped him from the back, where his battery pack was once lodged, and fished a sandwich baggy full of green shavings from inside of him. “Do you know how pissed Grandma would be if she were alive to see what’s become of the very first doll she ever gave you? This is sacrilege. I feel guilty when I smoke your shit because of it. It’s one thing to be a degenerate, but disrespecting the dead, *that’s* shameful.”

“Maybe you’d feel better if you didn’t go snooping in my room to see where I hide my hash.”

My face went numb as it clicked that I forgot to ask where he stores his green. I’d often wondered if he was suspicious of my petty thefts, especially after that time I smoked his whole stash and replaced it with oregano. Suddenly, I was no longer in the mood to sit in here and vibe out. I spun on my heels and headed for my room, punctuating my departure with the slam of my door.

“No kidding, he really isn’t here,” Carly said as we spilled through the doorway into the living room, her arm around my waist. The lights and television were off and the air was unperfumed by his dankness. “I think this is a relationship first for us.”

“You sure you feel comfortable here without adult supervision?” I could taste the alcohol fuming from my throat like steam rising from the sauna of my belly. I might have drunk a little too much that night. I had been promising myself that it was the night I would spill my guts to Carly. Plus, it was lady’s night, so drinks were half-off if I let her pay. I just needed some motivation in the way that people with chemical imbalances need their medication.

“We’re adults,” Carly cooed. She kissed the bottom of my ear.

“Speak for yourself, kiddo.”

“Don’t call me kiddo, mister.” I wasn’t sure if she was attempting to initiate some kinky form of dirty talk, but I didn’t want to say anything that might prick the ears of whatever NSA agents happened to be listening through our phone mics, so I let it slide. I was already calculating for the seventeen millionth time how to coordinate the impending announcement, strategically speaking. “You know, it’s sexy to see you so motivated.”

“What?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.” She grabbed me by the face and laid a sloppy wet kiss on my lips. I pulled my hair and she bit my bottom lip as we parted. She grabbed my hand and led me to my bedroom, letting herself fall backwards into my bed, probably a little less majestically than she had planned, and I crawled over her. We tore each other’s clothes off, greeting every bit of each other’s naked bodies to the open air with our mouths. We transitioned into a fuck wordlessly, the way that only couples who have been with each other long enough to communicate using only body language can. Our union wasn’t long, but it was efficient. I knew every nook and

cranny inside her by heart, and she knew just how to steer me. I fell into her as we climaxed and we kissed desperately. I wrapped my arms around her (*with her assistance, of course. With the weight of both our bodies against the mattress, that shit wouldn't otherwise be possible.*) and pressed her tight against me, trying to invent a way for us to somehow be physically closer. When I lifted myself in an awkward push-up above her, still connected at the sex, I noticed that her eyes were shimmering as they contained me.

"I have to tell you something," I said before unsheathing myself from her body. I dropped onto my side to her left.

She rolled my way, smiling like the evils of the world were foreign to her. "So do I."

"You first."

"It's not important."

"Whatever it is, I'd *really* rather hear it first." I said, thinking that it would not likely survive the bomb I was about to drop on her.

"Umm...O.K. It's not all that much. I just wanted to say that I'm sorry for the way I've been lately."

"What?"

"Well, I know I haven't been the best girlfriend. I didn't notice or think about it before, but seeing you turn yourself around really got me thinking about the way I've been."

"Yeah, what is with that, exactly? I don't know where this 'motivation' thing is coming from."

"Oh, c'mon." She said it as though I was merely being humble and knew better. I didn't. "You've been writing again, you lost some weight, and now you've got a full-time job."

I mean, I've been writing *this*. I suppose there's a chance that she might've woken up a few times she's stayed over and seen me at the desk. Had I lost weight? I couldn't tell. I'd certainly skipped a few meals. Dread has a way of stifling the appetite.

"It just made me realize how depressing and self-absorbed I've been, and that I need to cut it out. You know how school can suck the life outta you. You're supposed to give one hundred percent in everything you do, right? So, how are relationships any different? It's not fair to only give you some thirty percent of me when you're doing your best to give me a full dose of you. I know it's been a problem for too long, and so I just wanted to say I'm sorry, and that I'm gonna work to make it better."

*Very funny, God, I remember thinking. Fuck you.* "Nobody's perfect," I said, pulling her in for another embrace. I couldn't bear to look into her gleaming eyes. They were too powerful for me; I would crumble beneath them. I could feel a single

tear streaming down my cheeks from each eye, followed by another, and another. It was too late, I knew. Her gaze had pierced through me. She had sprung a leak in me. Once she tried to disengage from me, I held her closer. I couldn't let her see me like this.

"Wes?" She kissed a piece of my face she could reach. "Honey, what's wrong?"

"It's—it's just been a tough time for me." I couldn't bring myself to the truth. It was all over for me and I knew it.

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry!" She was now gripping me tighter. I kissed her bony shoulder. I wanted so badly to absolve myself of this guilt, but unless I managed to deliver my confession via osmosis, I knew it wasn't gonna happen. Of course, we eventually released each other. Not long after, she was asleep, but I don't remember catching a wink that night. My sleep schedule had already acclimated to that of the overnight worker's, but I knew the cause of my insomnia wasn't so simple. Because I couldn't bring myself to tell her, I set down to write this.

As someone with the deadly combination of OCD/anxiety, it doesn't take much to push me over the edge into a fit of paranoiac fantasies and hyperventilation. A text from Ione asking for my whereabouts did just that. I took the time from raising pyramids of citrus to reply that I was at work and unavailable to talk, a response succeeded by three phone calls. I could feel my legs growing weak and my equilibrium growing elastic, so I found Bob at the smoking patio. He was chatting up some girls who prepare meat for the daytime deli crew when I cut in to ask if I could take a break.

"That's on you, man, but we *really* need the floor to look perfect for morning crew, with the holidays coming up and all. I'm not telling you what to do, but we could seriously use as much of your help as possible." I took that as a no and banished myself back to my domain of lettuce and berries. The laughter of the girls at a comment stated beyond my earshot haunted me as I made my exit. Before I could make it back to the shelf I was preparing, my phone was already abuzz. I turned my phone off to avoid the agitation. Even though I couldn't receive or respond to her comments, I felt like I was having a thousand conversations with her in my head between that moment and twenty minutes later, when Bob approached me to say that some crazy outside was asking for me.

"Well, don't let them in," I said, fearing some former customer with a vendetta and a knife.

"I ain't lettin' fuckin' nobody in," Bob replied. "But the spook won't go away and says it's some kinda emergency."

"Tell them I'm off, or better yet, tell them I'm dead, then they won't come back." Yeah, I pulled that line from *An American Werewolf in London*. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.



“Eh, you might be dead by the end of the night. I know if my girlfriend showed up at this time, I’d be heading out the back door and never lookin’ back.”

*Girlfriend?* What in the fuck was Carly doing here at this hour? She was supposed to be out studying with friends. My immediate fear was that she had found me out. It only came after the pang of horror that I considered there could have been a real emergency, a death in the family, she had locked herself out, or forgot the Netflix password. I broke away from Bob to make my death march to the entrance. I felt the dread slouch off me, like clothes I was thinning out of. I was good as naked to the cold resignation to my fate, until I saw that the person standing outside the glass door was not Carly at all, but some hooded figure that appeared much smaller in scale. I could not make out any facial features behind the fogged glass. This was my *Don’t Look Now* ending. I surprised myself by swinging the door open to welcome my fate, greeting my potential executioner without hesitation. Perhaps I had known that it would be better to be put out of my misery than to live wracked with such guilt.

“Why isn’t your phone on? I tried calling, like, a hundred times to tell you I was out here.” The voice was bulbous and cracking, but unmistakably Ione’s.

“Jesus Christ, Ione, what the fuck are you doing here?” I blurted out, in astonishment as much as in anger.

“Can I just come in? It’s freezing out here.” Despite her jacket lined with what certainly must have been faux-fur, her arms were wrapped tight around her torso. I could see that she was shivering.

“I can’t do that. My boss’ll kill me.” It felt terrible to hear my voice saying those words out loud. I might not’ve liked the facts of the matter, but this *was* the person I was going to have to call the mother of my child for the rest of my life.

“Wes, please. I feel like I’m gonna be sick.”

I opened the door for her entrance, and suddenly felt like I was the one about to vomit. This was one of the fancier Shop Shop Shop locations, with the coffee bar and Pizza Hut inside. I led her to a table in this section to talk, my eyes surveying the area around us like security cameras for spies.

“What’s the deal? Do you not want me here?”

“Ione, this is fucking *insane*. Think about what you’re doing here. I am at work, and you showed up, practically without notice. I haven’t taken a break in weeks and my boss doesn’t seem too happy about me having visitors, either. I’m not trying to be a dick, but this is an intrusion.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to bother you; I just don’t know what I’m going to do —” Her thin voice burst into a sob and tears began rolling down her red cheeks. I could tell this wasn’t the first time she had cried tonight, and then it dawned on me. *She lost the baby*. What else could it be, so urgent that we would have to discuss it in person? This whole thing was a misfire, an empty threat on the behalf of God Himself. We were off the hook with a slap on the wrist. “I talked to Brendan tonight —” She paused to snifle. “And he just left.” With this, she lost all composure, bursting

into a fit of sobs. She let her head fall onto the table.

“Hey, c’mon.” I said without thinking. I was apparently acting on pure male instinct to remedy the situation, which, as any honest man will tell you, is a crude material to base the art of comfort. I reached out and placed my hand on her shoulder, giving it a few soft pumps. Once it became clear that her bubbling frustration was not going to pass soon without immediate intervention, I got up from my seat across from her and placed myself in the chair next to her. I wrapped an arm around her and ran a hand through her hair, still wet with rain. I looked up to see Bob strolling past. He raised his eyebrows to me in a manner I could not decipher as being either sympathetic or irritated. “C’mon, please stop crying.” I encouraged her to peel her face from the table’s surface with the hand that was previously occupied with her hair as its brother massaged her shoulder.

“I probably look like a meth head.” She croaked, looking at me with leaking bloodshot eyes.

“No,” I lied, grabbing a paper towel from the dispenser at the center of the table to wipe the puddle of spit she had left upon it. “You know, some people, they get ugly when they cry. Other people just think they’re ugly when they cry. It’s very selfish and you shouldn’t insult me by feigning that kind of humility.”

“God, you’re the worst. Those fucking big words just make you sound like a tool.” This apparently took the last of her strength, for she collapsed into me, crying into my shirt. She grabbed a knot of it in her hand, yanking it tight around my neck and I felt her drool leaking through its material.

“Well, you might be right on that, but you’re no bag lady. Trust me, it was my job to act polite to those creatures for years and they wish they looked like you at our age.”

She curled up against me, resting her head in the nook between my neck and shoulder. “We really fucked up this time, Wes.” Her voice was weak, but no longer fractured.

“I know.” I pulled her in closer to me.

“I mean, God. We’re one of *those people*, having kids and shit. People are going to look at us and use us as visual evidence for reasons to stay on the pill.”

“Even worse, this guy’s gonna be the product of a drunken hook-up.”

“*This guy?*” She repeated with a soft smile. I felt like she was melting in my arms. “What makes you think it’s going to be a boy?”

“A baker knows what’s in his own batter. I’m full testosterone between the legs.”

“So that’s where it all went?” She said, grabbing me by the groin and biting into my shirt without removing her head from its position.

“I’m sorry, Ione. I really am. I never wanted to fuck your life up or fill you

with baby. I was just—being me, I guess, not thinking about the consequences.”

“Please, don’t be sorry. What we have here, this child isn’t a mistake. It might be a surprise to us, but this is all a part of God’s plan...his crazy, fucked-up plan.”

“God?” I looked down at her.

“Huh?”

“Didn’t know you two were familiar is all.”

She shrugged. “We’re friends of friends. Brendan’s Catholic, *so*, you know.”

“You ain’t missing out on much. I’m not fond of the guy. He’s always screwing with my life to accommodate His own plans, never returns my calls, generally acts like a dick.”

This remark wasn’t met with the humor I was striving for, but the silence was anything but awkward. We just felt—*together*, without having to share a word. In this moment, we were components of each other.

“So, for real, you’re O.K. with this?” I said. It almost felt like a sin to speak out in our moment of silence.

“I’m fucking horrified. I’ve never been so afraid of anything in my life, like, I’d almost feel better if you just gave me terminal AIDs.”

“Actually, I’ve been meaning to tell you—”

“I feel sick in the morning when I wake up. I feel like I’m getting a twenty-four hour titty-twister, and I know I’m acting like a psychopath.”

“No, judging from your actions tonight, I’d say you check out as a perfectly sane human being. I mean, my coworkers may not agree, but—”

“Please, Wes. Shut the fuck up. I also feel so *lucky* for this to’ve happened. For the first time in my life, I feel a purpose in my bones, to raise this child, and to raise it properly. It sounds so stupid. I don’t even know it’s a boy or a girl and it’s hardly even been a month, but I love this child. Yeah, it would be a lot more convenient if Brendan was the one to have put it in me—”

“Actually, the feeling’s mutual, so none taken.”

“—But I also feel like what we shared that night was a miracle. Like, I don’t believe in God, not in the way some people do, but how else do you explain everything we’ve been through? It’s ridiculous, but it also feels *right*.”

“You know, if it was a movie, I’d say this is all contrived storytelling and impossible coincidences. Being that this is real life, it seems like you’ve just got a case of bad luck, in the form of me.”

“Do you have *any* positivity on this?”

I sighed. “Every time I think about it, my stomach does a barrel-roll. I feel like I’m living in fear, and that I’ve really gone and fucked things up this time. I know

it's selfish, and it's wrong, and it's probably all a symptom of my anxiety. I mean, I can't imagine how it would feel to know that my parents were dreading me, or that they ever didn't want me to exist. I try to hype myself up for this, to try to find something to look forward to, but I'm just not there yet."

"Is it alright if I ask you something?"

"Of course." I drew her hand to my lips and planted a kiss on it.

She withdrew her hand and straightened herself into an independent seated position. "How did your girlfriend react to this? Like, I know this is going to sound like another crazy person thing, but I creeped on your Facebook and you two are still 'in a relationship.'"

My eyes fell to her chest with shame, and then towards the table so that she didn't mistake my guilt for an opportunity to perv out. "I—I haven't told her yet. Things are really complicated between us right now and I don't know how to tell her something so, well, I'm just having a very hard time with this."

"Wes, what the fuck?" Her voice had found its spine, her tone charged with venom. "You *need* to talk with her. Do you know how much worse you're going to make it if you keep putting this off?"

"Yeah. It's awful, I know. I'm just waiting for the right time."

"Like when? At the kid's fourth birthday? Jesus—oh my *Gawd*. Can you take responsibility for *anything*?"

"Hey, you just talked to your guy tonight, O.K.? I'm not putting this off; I'm just preparing myself to go about it in the best way possible."

"Ugh, you can *suck my shit* in the best way possible, you fucking—child!"

"You know what, *what is your problem*? You come here, at my *job*, at two in the morning. I take a break I'm not even allowed to have so I can calm your crying ass down, and you act like this!"

"No, I get it. I see exactly what's going on. What right do I have to come and barge in on your perfect fucking life? Clearly, you don't want me to be any part of it. Do you think I don't notice you looking around to make sure nobody's watching, like I'm that great of an embarrassment to you? Well, I'm sorry that you fucked me and didn't even bother to pull out on time. If you don't want to be a father to this child, just be a fucking man and own up to it. I don't need you to help raise this kid. You just go with your girlfriend and we won't bother you."

"Hey, don't talk like that! Just, no! That is bullshit, and female manipulation of what I'm trying to say and you know it!"

"You know, Wes, back when we were kids, I thought I really loved you. Do you think I wasn't hurt by the way you treated me like I was a convenience? Do you think you're the only one who has any feelings? You fucking *destroyed me* and it took me years until I was able to get myself back together. Before I met Brendan, I didn't

think I was good enough for *anyone*, because of you! And then, you think you can come back, take the one thing from me you hadn't gotten already, and pull that shit *again!* Well, you can *FUCK OFF.*" She pushed me with both hands, nearly spilling me from my seat onto the floor, as she got up to storm out. I tried to block the sound of the glass door sliding shut behind her by slamming my own head on the table where her saliva had now dried. At the point when it felt like any eavesdroppers had probably dispersed, I picked my head back up and found Bob, once again in position at the patio, to apologize.

"Man, I don't give a fuck. Normally, I'd let you fuck her if you wiped your dog water off the floor, but tonight we just don't have the time for this shit. The store opens in three hours and the floor looks like Hiroshima. There are gonna be a lot of pissed off people if you don't get your ass back on the floor and start working." I promised to stay however late it took to establish the floor. The girls he was entertaining heckled me as I sulked back to my lowly position.

The phone rang four times before Dad picked up. I had almost give up hope and disconnected. I'm not sure if it would have been a disappointment or a relief.

"Hey, buddy, what's up?" He sounded weary. If his voice hadn't taken this gravelly dip in the past few years, I'd have thought I woke him from a nap.

"Not much, how are you?" I was rooting around the glove compartment inside my car for one of those ketchup packets I had stuffed there a few weeks ago when I drove through McDonalds. Bills, paperwork, and napkins, but no luck.

"Oh, I'm doin' alright. We just got back from the casino."

"Was there a race today?" Were horse races a daily event? I had no clue how these functions operated. I can't even follow basic poker, let alone the semi-pro (*read: novice with an ego*) forms of gambling my father was in on.

"Yeah, yeah, there was. We were just stopping by to see some friends, actually. Hey, you want to say hello to Jen?" Jennifer is the woman he met online roughly two minutes after his second wife said she was ready to divorce. He moved in with her so fast the papers probably had to be mailed to *her* address.

"Um, sure." It wasn't exactly worth going out of my way for, but anything to put off the conversation I was about to have.

"Hey, Wesley!" Jennifer chimed in, her tone an octave or three too high for any human being's voice.

I said hello through a mouth full of cheeseburger and we exchanged brief how ya beens before returning the phone to my father. I could tell the greeting was as uncomfortable for her as it was me.

"So, what's been new with you?"

"Well, that's part of the reason I've been meaning to call." I waited for some

prompt or acknowledgment to conceal this information to him, but was left wanting. “I guess I’m having a kid.” The words stumbled out of my mouth like a group of bar toads shuffling into their cab at the end of a long night. I herded them out before they could embarrass me any more than necessary.

“Oh,” he said, following a moment of silence. “That’s awesome, bud. Congratulations.” I had to give him credit for managing to convey enthusiasm without breaking his monotone. “With that girl you’ve been seeing?”

“Oh, Carly? No, it’s not with her.”

“Not with anybody I’d know, then, I suppose.”

“Well, maybe. Do you remember Ione, from high school?”

“That girl who used to come over with you on the weekends?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Wow, that’s, um, that’s really something. I mean, I’m happy for you. I just feel like I jumped into a cold shower.”

“I know the feeling.” If it was anything like the chills I got, it wasn’t a good one. “That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about. I mean, I wanted to call, anyways, and let you know, but I’m in a strange kind of predicament.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, Carly and I are still kind of together, and she doesn’t know about the baby right now. I’ve known for a little while, but I don’t really know how to tell her.”

“That is...a pretty big problem. So, you were with Izzy while you were still dating Carly?”

“Ione,” I amended, choosing to forego the snarky immaculate conception comeback I had formulated in my head. “And, yeah. Pretty much.”

“How long have you known?”

“I dunno. I mean, right now she’s about two months or so in, so quite a while. Probably a lot longer than I should’ve taken to talk to anybody. It’s just such a weird thing. I don’t know how to approach it.”

“Does your mother know yet?” That’s just like one of my parents, to get the scoop on who’s leading the custody battle, still waging all these years after my legal adulthood. I doubt he was even listening to anything else I had said. *Jesus, would I grow to be like this in another few years?*

“Well, no. I thought I should talk to Carly before anyone else, so she wouldn’t find out from somebody else or see the wrong Facebook post.”

“You know, Wes, the best way to be in a situation like this is to just go about it honestly.” That was great, coming from him. Lies he had feed to me as a child of my mother’s character were running through my mind like a news station ticker. “I have

no idea what you're feeling right now, but I've gotten myself into more than a few troubles, back when I was your age. I'd always try to weasel out of them or place the blame on somebody else, but people respect you the most when you just tell them the truth. She might be really upset." He was right about that. "But at least she'll know you respected her enough to be up front about it."

"Thanks. That's what I've been thinking, too. I think I just wanted to hear somebody else say it," so I could blame them instead of myself after I had totally blown my only long-lasting adult relationship in the name of honesty. I had tried being honest with Ione, and look where it got us. If this follows suit, I could be raising two children by the start of next year. That'd be some shit...

"So, when's the baby due? Jenn and I could try and come up and see you around then."

"Oh, jeeze. I hadn't even thought about due dates yet. I'm still wrapping my head around the pregnancy."

"You'll still be wrapping your head around it when she gets her college degree. Better get used to it now while you're ahead."

"Oh, hey, my break's about over, here at work, so I gotta get going." I sucked on each of my fingers, wrapping my lips around each of them with equal delight like a pornstar trying to incite bukkake.

"O.K. Well, it was nice talking with you. Thanks for calling."

"Yeah. I'll try to keep up more often. My schedule's just been crazy, lately. They haven't taken me off these six day stretches yet." I had worked one six day stretch in my history at Shop Shop Shop and it was followed by three consecutive days off, but that knowledge wouldn't affect his life any.

"Hey, I love you, and I'm very proud of you. You'll be a great parent, no thanks to the bad example I set for you."

"Sometimes it helps as much to see something done the wrong way." This was met with no response. To make sure I didn't set him off in tears on the other end of the line or something ridiculous, I followed it up with "I'm just kidding. I love you, too, Dad." He hung up before I could say goodbye.

"What do you wanna do now?" Carly said over the outro theme to Full House. I couldn't tell you what the episode's plot was if a gun was held to my head. This was it, I had promised myself, for the last time. I couldn't put it off any longer; Carly needed to know. My procrastination of days-cum-weeks was now winding down to hours, and then minutes. I feared this moment worse than death (*I'd been secretly hoping for a fatal hit and run on my walks home for weeks, now.*), but I couldn't live with this poisonous information any longer. It was a tumor inside of me that would need to be uprooted, lest it end me.

"You don't have any plans tonight, do you?"

“No,” Carly giggled. “I’m free, all night, why?” She appeared to believe I was about to suggest some ambitious course of action for how we should down our night together.

“Well, there’s just something that I really need to tell you.”

“O.K.” She was looking me in the eyes, the smile on her face matured into a strained expression of concern. “What’s wrong?”

I felt my cheeks moisten with teardrops before I even noticed my loss of vision. The thought crossed my mind that I was about to pass out again and then the world came back into focus. “Do you—do you remember how I said I wasn’t going to my class reunion?”

“Yeah,” she bobbed her head up and down softly, like one who is silently grooving in public. Her voice was timid, as though she was speaking to a small animal.

“Well, when I told you that I wasn’t going to go, it wasn’t exactly the truth.”

“Wes, that’s O.K. I’m not going to stop you from going to your high school reunion. I just wish you would’ve told me the truth before, so I could’ve come with you.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Was it because of what I made fun of you about your age?” Great, now her voice was cracking. She was withering up before I even gave her my poison. “I just didn’t like seeing you so stressed out about it is all, honey.” She pulled me towards her, held me against her chest, and planted a moist kiss on my forehead. She was wrapping knots of my hair around her fingers, massaging my scalp.

“No, it’s not that.” I knew I was leaking drool onto her shirt, just as Ione had done to me. “I met up with some people, and that girl I used to see, Ione was there.” She didn’t need to know all the filthy details. All writers take narrative license with their stories. It’s not lying, I thought. *It’s streamlining.*

“Wesley,” She positioned me back upright. I could see her face smeared with the pained look of a disappointed child. “What are you telling me?” Her voice was thick with mucus.

“I don’t know how” was all I could muster before erupting into sobs, the painful kind that lurch your entire body. I could taste the salt of snot leaking into my mouth, but I was in too much pain to mind.

“Wesley, what are you saying!?” She was now yelling, her voice weak but desperate. “What happened!?”

“We—she’s pregnant.” The words felt barbed in my throat. I lost sight of the world. “I dunno. It’s just—we did things and I don’t know what’s happening anymore. I’m so fucked up. I think I’m just broken and ruining everybody’s life.” I felt the bed shift as her weight was removed from it. I forced myself onto my feet before I could even see. They trembled beneath me. I focused hard enough to see Carly still at the



doorway, watching me. I couldn't tell if she was worried for me or afraid of me.

"Please," I took a few laborious paces her direction. I began to raise my arms to offer an embrace.

"No, no no no." She was backing away from me, her steps light with the caution of an animal deciding whether it would be possible to flee. Her face was bubbling.

"Please. I need—" I knew my voice was rising and falling without rhythm or stability. Presentation was no longer a concern. I needed to let her know of my dependence upon her. I took another step forward, feeling like I was walking on stilts.

She took off, spun on her heels and sprinted out of sight before I could even think to give chase. I heard the front door sock the wall with its knob after being thrown open. I was worried that it had punched a hole into the wall, but I was too weak to leave my position in flux between the bed and doorway of my bedroom. I lowered myself to the floor and curled into a fetal position, where I lay like a bird with clipped wings until sleep washed over me. When I woke and made my way to the living room, the cold night air was carrying in through the door, still open from Carly's departure. The wall beside it was decorated with a dimple roughly the circumference of a baseball. I closed the door and beat a tattoo above the original indentation the size of my forehead.

I hadn't set foot in Rachel's Salon since I was a child, back when my mother used to drag me, practically kicking and screaming, to get my bimonthly buzz cut. Most kids look forward to stupid shit when they're turning sixteen—being able to drive a car, getting a legal job—I was holding out for creative license over my own hair. Of course, that led to a few years of awkward styles until I settled into my current moptop, but at least they were my own damn mistakes. Like Morrison once said, "Some of the worst mistakes of my life have been haircuts." The truth is, the women here at Rachel's just never knew how to cut men's hair. They could shave it or cut it with a bowl for guidance, but that's about it. Anything more sophisticated than a military fade was beyond them. If Ione worked at anywhere else, I wouldn't have made the trip back home just to get my hair butchered. I'm an idiot, but I'm no sadist.

The salon was one of the smallest I'd seen. It looked like your prototypical barber shop on the inside, with wooden flooring, three or four stools at each end of the room, and mirrors forever gazing into each other. In the "waiting room," which was an unmirrored space of roughly three yards, there were three plastic seats to the left, and a desk to the right, at this time unmanned. I could see two people tending to clients on the cutting room floor. The one who was not Ione came back to help me. She looked perplexed when I requested Ione's service without an appointment. She said that it would be a while. That's alright. I didn't mind waiting. So, I sat down in one of the waiting room chairs and got to waiting. I remember there being a coffee table with stray magazines, *Vogue* for mothers and *Highlights* for the brats. (*They must've assumed the fathers were all bald and too small a demographic to cater towards...or just flat-out illiterate. Shit, in this town, they were probably right.*) Perhaps they gave it

up when smart phones came to town. I flicked down my timeline for about an hour before the same lady I had spoken to earlier came to inform me that Ione would still be a while and offered to groom me instead. I told her I was going to remain chaste, and then made a joke about Odysseus' wife, Penelope, that she probably didn't pick up on. Ione came back to get me, with little enthusiasm, about twenty minutes later.

"Busy day, huh?" I said as she threw an apron around my head.

"A girl can't take a break?"

"Break for an hour and a half when you've got a customer waiting? What kind of business is this?"

She sighed. "What are you doing here?"

I felt my hair dampen as she sprayed me down with the kind of bottle you'd use to punish a cat. "Now, how come this is perfectly normal for you to show up at my job—around three in the morning, need I remind you—but somehow, me doing it is an outrage?"

"O.K." She set the bottle down. "What's up?"

"Well, I just came by to tell you—"

"Wait, wait, wait! What am I doing? How do you want your hair cut?"

"Just take an inch off or something. You're the expert."

"Do you want my professional opinion?"

"Is it a *gentle* professional opinion?"

"You're about at that point where you should just shave it off."

"Jesus fuck!" I felt my stomach drop, probably weighed down with all that disappointment my heart was leaking into it. "Um, O.K., let's just take a half-inch off, then."

"Anyways..." She unsheathed a pair of scissors and began measuring my hair and making her adjustments.

"As *I was saying*, I just stopped by to let you know that I talked with Carly." The image of her backing away from me like a frightened child flashed onto the canvas of my mind. I felt a knot in my chest. "She knows everything."

"I'm happy for you."

"That's it? You're happy for me? That's all you've got?"

"Do you want an award?" She was now standing in front of me. She pulled my bangs out straight between her fingers and cut the remainder off. "I thought you were all about that coming clean shit."

"I feel like there was some kind of pun about douching or being a douche in that...No?" Apparently not. "What I'm trying to tell you is that I've put a lot of thought

into this, like, a lot. Enough to drive a man crazy, one that wasn't crazy before, that is. I want to be involved with this child. Maybe this all started out as a mistake, but it's also an *opportunity*. I mean, we have a real chance to do good, here. Why not make the best out of this, ya know?"

"Yeah, that's one way to look at it."

"O.K., what's your fucking problem? First, you're mad because I'm not enthusiastic enough, now what is it? Am I looking *too much* forward to this?"

"No. On one hand, you're right. This is an opportunity to make good. On the other, it's also a responsibility, a serious one. This isn't a fucking job at a grocery store. We're talking about a *human life*."

"You don't think I'm ready for this, do you?"

She scoffed. "I don't think *either of us* are ready for this."

"Well, you're absolutely one hundred percent cor-fucking-rect. I have no idea what I'm doing. I can't even figure out how to work *other people's* babies, but starting today, I'm going to prepare myself as much as humanly possible to raise this child. I'm going to parent the fuck outta this kid. I'm gonna raise him so right that he'll be the only high schooler *without* daddy issues. The other kids won't be able to stand his ass. And he won't need 'em, anyhow, because he can come home and watch some movies with *his father*."

"That's great. I'm gonna hold you to that one."

"I've *even* begun thinking of some names."

"Really, now?" For the first time in our conversation, Ione's voice rose from its sarcastic monotone. She at least found *this* notion worth entertaining.

"If it's a boy, which he will be, I'm thinking Benjamin, Pierre, or Woody."

She let out a cackle. "*Woody!*? What kinda kid do you plan on raising? *Pierre?*"

"Well, you're part French..."

"I'll think about that one. The answer is no, but I'll think about it, when I need a good laugh. How about if I pop out a little girl? Then what?"

I shrugged beneath my apron, which was gathering a larger collection of hair clippings by the minute. "I mean, it's nothing special, but I was kinda thinking Abigail."

"*Abigail?*" I bet she was smiling. "I like that."

I looked up at Ione, who was leaning over behind me.

"Oh, no! Watch out!" Her voice climaxed as though she had spotted a rat.

"Sorry! Sorry!"

“Just don’t do that to a hairdresser. Being responsible for somebody’s hair is stressful enough without sudden movements.”

“Well, there’s another reason I wanted to swing by and talk in person. I was thinking, that maybe it would be best for the Woodrow if he could grow up with a nuclear family, ya know, give him some normal family dysfunction. Like, what I’m saying is—”

“Wes, are you trying to ask me out?”

I took a big gulp and confirmed this like a child making a confessing guilt in the principal’s office.

“It’s only been about eight years since the last time, but I know how you get all worked up about it.” She ruffled my hair, which felt both patronizing and comforting at the same time. “Brendan and I managed to talk things out. We’re not exactly *together*, but I really think we can make things work, ya know?” I could see her looking at me in the mirror. On her face was an expression of genuine remorse. “I’m sorry. I think we’re just doomed to be forever complicated.”

“That literal cuckold.”

“What!?” She took a step back, as though from a wild animal that had just bared its teeth. “I ought’a smack you, boy.”

“I was kidding. Some motherfuckers just have it lucky.”

She groaned. “Wes, I don’t even want to *talk* about this right now. Cuckold, really? What are you, fourteen? Do you have any idea how understanding he’s been with all—*this*? I mean, it’s perfectly reasonable if he just chose to never speak with me again. He’s willing to raise *another man’s child* for me.”

“Yeah, that’s where the cuckold part comes in...”

“Well, anyways, we’re going down to have an ultrasound Tuesday. I don’t suppose you’d be interested.”

“*Not interested?* I’m living for that shit. Of course I’ll be there.”

She spun me in front of the mirror. I looked the same. Maybe a little rougher around the edges, but nothing I wouldn’t grow into. “And? How’d I do?”

“You killed it.”

“You mean I killed *you*?”

“You do every time.”

“When you fantasize about it as often as I do, it just comes natural...”

“Umm, can I see it from the back?” I was uncertain of what I was asking for, but it’s better to have a moment of pain than to look back in regret. She snagged a handheld mirror off the counter and held it at an angle I could see. My crown seemed to extend a little longer than it should, but nothing I couldn’t live with. Worse comes

to worse, I'll just wear a kippah until the Rogaine kicks in. I probably have *some* Jew in me...

“Looking for your future?”

“Was it the heavy breathing that gave me away?”

“It's more common than you'd think. I wouldn't look too deep into it.” She undressed me of the apron and I hopped off the stool. She walked me back to the desk in the lobby and swiped my card. “Alright,” she said. “You're all set.” I didn't know whether I should hug her or offer her a hand to shake, so I handed her a twenty. “Was this for our little tryst?”

“Don't sell yourself short. You were worth *at least* ten bucks more than that in the sack, considering how drunk you were.”

“You know, in some circles that's considered rape.”

I felt my face flush. “I mean, we were *both*—”

She repeated herself, this time more slowly.

“Are you for real or—” I was frantically searching the room for any set of ears that might have overheard. Was my head still damp from being sprayed down or had sweat already begun to form?

She slapped me on the shoulder. “I'm just fucking with you, ya dork.”

“Let's not joke like that. You're gonna give me a heart attack before this kid's even born.”

“See you Tuesday, Wes.”

I shuffled out of the room like a dog shamed into its kennel.

On my way to the clinic, which was roughly an hour-long drive for me, it struck me that we never coordinated any kind of arrangement. Would we meet in the waiting room? What if Ione was called in early, due to some cancellation or something? Would she describe me to the secretary so that she could fill me in? What adjectives would she use to describe me? This worry was compounded with the fear that I hadn't RSVP'd to the event at all. Not to mention the fact that I was about twenty minutes late. Bob wouldn't let me off the leash until two hours after my shift ended, that mother fuck. Fortunately, Ione was standing outside the entrance, talking to some tall guy. That was just like her to make friends with some strange guy at the doctor's office. You know, as a former cashier, I've had my way with a few customers (no pun intended), but I never could get on socially as she does.

I felt heat of the sun like an ultraviolet lamp right above me when I stepped out of the car. Ever since I had adjusted to midnights, it was as if I had developed an allergic reaction to the daytime. My clothes clung to me like a loose second skin, shoddily glued on with my own perspiration.

“How’s it goin’?” I said, once I was within earshot.

“Fine.” Ione said without a hint of emotion. “I just—ugh.” She shook her head, flashing jazz hands in frustration. “I don’t even want to get into it.”

“She had a few classes with the secretary,” the tall man next to her filled me in. “I’m Brendan, by the way.” So he was. Not only was he the same man as in the framed photograph on Ione’s bedstand, but in person, he was *hot*. His jaw looked fit to break shackles with; the Adam’s apple beneath it jutted out prominently. His dark, spiky hair looked like it had another ten years, easy, before it would begin its retirement process. I hate to rave about the competition, but that nightstand photo did him no favors.

I noticed that he was holding a hand out for my shaking. How long had that been there? I spat a wad at his palm. It landed on the thumb, oozing down its bridge. For a whole moment, he just kept his hand out there, like the image didn’t register in his mind. After a beat or two had passed, he recoiled, rubbing the defaced palm against the thigh of his pants like a cat in heat.

“Wes, you *piece of shit!* What the fuck is wrong with you?” Ione screamed.

“What’s wrong with *me!*? You set me up!”

“Are you—how did I set you up? What wrongdoing have I suffered you?”

“You made *no mention* of anybody else, let alone Dr. Cuck, here.”

“You know, I wasn’t exactly thrilled to hear you’d be tagging along, either,” Brendan chimed in, still inspecting his hand for any remaining traces of my DNA.

“I asked if you would come with *us*. Us, plural. I know you can’t write for shit, but I didn’t think a little context was too much for you to handle.”

“I thought you were talking about yourself and the baby...”

She opened her mouth to protest, and then sighed. We all took a step to the side to let a young couple through. “Are you retarded?”

“I feel like we’ve already had this discussion.”

“You make me feel like I’m stuck in a time loop. It’s the same bullshit, every time.”

“And I feel like we should be getting inside. It’s about eleven—” He looked at me and leaned in. “*Are you drunk?*”

“I’m just a little buzzed, you know, for the energy.” He didn’t seem to catch my drift, so I added, “I work overnights.”

Brendan sighed and shook his head. “Wow, Ione. You really know how to pick ‘em. This is a real treat.”

Ione rubbed his back, apologizing to him. She said something along the lines of taking him to the ER to have him checked for rabies, you know, in case my spit had

seeped into any open wounds. She turned towards me. “Can you go?”

“Yeah, I’ll just be in the waiting room. If they call, I’ll come get—”

“No. We don’t need you burning the place down. Go home. Go behind a bush, puke, and when you’ve sobered up, go home. Jesus *Christ*, Wes. You think this is an acceptable way to act when you’re having a kid?”

“First of all, I’m just relishing the opportunities for failure while I still can. It’s called a *purge*, I think. All the kids are doing it. Secondly, I will *not* be leaving. That’s just what you’d like, isn’t it? We’re here for the ultrasound of *my heir* and I have every right to be in that room.”

“You know what, Ione, let’s just all go inside,” Brendan said, exasperated and resolute. “We can just forget about this and *move on*.” He pointed at my chest. “But if you try that crap again, I swear I’ll have you on the ground in a second. My dad’s a cop and don’t think he never showed me how—” His eyes looked fit to blow out, he was staring at me with such intensity. I thought I could see his pupils shaking.

“Alright,” I said, offering my own hand as a peace offering. He looked down at it, seemed to entertain the idea of repeating my offense, but chose instead to grip it like a stress ball. He looked me in the eyes as he pumped my hand a few times, as though to say, *This is how a man does it*.

The waiting room was of course claustrophobic and the wait a proper rehearsal for my intermission between life and damnation. Ione was given a clipboard with documents to fill out. I was distracted during this time by the screeching of brothers untamed. Apparently, their mother, hardly thirty, was making a trio of them. What joy. I vowed to never let my kids act like this in public, if I ever make it to a second. Eventually, a door to the left of the receptionist’s office opened and Ione’s name was announced. We followed her following the nurse, an attractive African American woman who looked our age. After establishing Ione in the room, she said the doctor would be with us shortly. I couldn’t take my eyes off the ultrasound machine, a desktop computer set-up on wheels. It had a board of knobs and buttons arranged on a board in the shape of an artist’s pallet. The thing looked like a background prop out of some cheap Sci-Fi movie.

“So, you guys talk about any names?” I broke the ice.

“Muhammad,” Brendan, seated next to me, nodded.

“Shut up,” Ione laughed from her reclined position on the examination table. “He thinks I’ve got a fighter inside me.”

“You know, I just don’t think the political climate is right to be popping out any Muhammads,” I said. “Maybe if you two have one of your own...”

“Yeah, Muhammad and Wilson,” she scoffed.

“Woody,” I corrected her.

“How do you like Jordan?” Brendan said, rejoining the dialogue.

“Don’t really follow sports...”

The pupils of his eyes floated upwards, behind the lids, as though he was given a lethal dose of *fremdschämen*. “The name.”

I shrugged. “It’s a compromise.” For some odd reason, this was involuntarily said in falsetto. “A starting point.”

Two knocks preceded the door opening back up. The doctor, a woman in Eeyore scrubs with straw blonde hair made sure she was in the correct room, and then asked how we were doing. We answered amicably, and she asked Ione to roll her shirt up. Ione arched her shoulders to slide the shirt up just below her ribs, so that the doctor could lube her up with jelly she warned would be a little chilly.

“So, if you don’t mind my asking, which one of you is the father?” the doctor said, facing toward the male direction.

“We both are, actually.” I chimed in, before Brendan had the chance to. “It was a joint effort.” I could see Ione rolling her eyes. Brendan was audibly swallowing his shame next to me. The doctor merely smiled and resumed her work.

She took what appeared to be the electronic equivalent of the handheld vacuum hose nozzle and pressed it to Ione’s stomach, rolling it from side to side. An image appeared on the monitor behind her. It looked like it had been filmed in the 1930s, but sure enough, there was the shape of a tiny human-to-be. Ione’s lips were spread in a smile, her eyes glistening.

“I’m sorry!” She coughed, and began hiccupping tearfully. Brendan got up and crouched down at her level, holding her hand and massaging it with his thumb. He was grinning from ear to ear. He could hardly hold his smile down long enough to plant a kiss on her cheek.

“Do you want to know the baby’s sex?” The doctor asked them. They nodded. I saw Ione squeeze Brendan’s hand. “You’re going to have a baby girl.” The couple curled up closer to one another. They were both laughing. I couldn’t tell, but it appeared that Brendan was now joining in on the tears. The doctor glanced my way and I pulled my tight lips into what might have passed for a smile. It felt like my face was being spread by fishhooks in my mouth. I felt drugged, as though my arms and legs were merely filled with sand, incapable of sensation. I was stranded, an unwelcome viewer of this private moment. It dawned on me that this was not my child at all, but theirs. I was only a donor, a catalyst at best, a means to this end in their relationship. Once the prickly feeling in my legs subsided, I excused myself to the bathroom, and did not return.

They say that the mind is a prison. I would argue that it can also be a vacation. On this night, nearly a month after Ione’s ultrasound, I found myself in a mental bliss. I felt a fireball burning in my chest, the kind that tickles your tonsils and inspires punks with secondhand guitars to write anthems. I could feel myself burning up, so full with kinetic energy that I worried my body couldn’t take the heat. Is this



how spontaneous combustion happens? Not in a terrifying spark, but an eruption of ecstasy? Whatever end this hysteria might bring, I was prepared to find out. I was ready to see this high to the end. I felt higher than any bottle could take me. I could talk A-list actresses into bed and punch athletes through the walls. I knew how it felt to be Rocky Balboa at the top of those iconic stairs, the man who had just scratched off the winning lottery ticket. I felt so damn good, I didn't even mind the fact that I was at work. My body might have been occupying work space, functioning as it is expected to by my superiors, but my head was in the clouds. Wondrous thoughts rose through the stock of my spine and blossomed in my head. The inside of my skull felt like the Sistine fuckin' Chapel. I was having conversations with myself that ought to have been transcribed and studied for centuries to come. The man I was, in that moment, would make Hemingway look like John Green. I wasn't even human, but some evolved bullet-proof creature with a mind running at twice the normal speed. I felt like I had downed a gallon of diesel and copped a nostril-full of the coke they serve on golden platters at Hollywood events. Former flames and friends unforgotten no longer haunted my conscious. They were washed-out faces in a scrapbook unread. I found the spell to cast them away, and it was "me me me." Most importantly, and for the first time in my life, I felt *fit to live*. Whatever life put on the plate in front of me, I could swallow. I could break down rocks in this stomach of mine. This fatherhood thang was suddenly a non-issue. I wasn't just going to handle it; I was going to be father of the year every year 'till my baby girl turns eighteen. I was ready to double-down, pick up extra shifts to save up for a generous college fund, give her a life so proper the only thing she'll be lacking are daddy issues, all without missing a single volleyball game, or choral concert, or whatever it is that she grows up to do. Whatever she'd need, I would give her, because I'm the fucking man.

And then, I choked. The airway in my throat clenched snapped shut. I wheezed, and doubled-over, trying to regain my breath. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach after a full meal. The world turned black and white, or rather, darker and less dark shades of gray. Suddenly, nothing felt very possible at all, not even the capability to exist in this moment. I regained my breaths in short gasps, but the wind knocked out of me would not return. I had courted confidence for only a moment, a brief pocket of time less than an hour, and already, I had blown it. Just as my feet were lifting off the ground, I faceplanted, and I could feel the dirt in my mouth. I could feel doubt sinking its teeth into my throat, each tooth another anxiety. All at once, the truth came crashing down upon me. *I have no friends. I spent four years and forty thousand dollars on a college degree that landed me in a position that doesn't require a GED. Soon, I'll be a bald, fat old man with the emotional maturity of a teenager. I was an intrusion upon Ione and Brendans' relationship, and a threat to the development of what is rightfully their child. A girl wouldn't make it to fifteen under my guidance before ending her life.* I knew that if they pinched any tighter, my flesh would tear into ribbons and it would all be over for me. I could see myself tumbling into the inky depths of this beast's throat, landing in some remote hole that light could never find. This wasn't fight or flight, this was run for your life. I had to get the fuck out of this grocery store, out of the 1950s-era pop songs played from crummy speakers and fluorescent lighting. I needed fresh air, the grace of the moon to bask in. I needed a drink.

Yet, I couldn't will my body into locomotion. That Olympian lightning bolt that had shot me into overdrive had also fried my system. The smoker's lounge, where Bob would certainly be chatting up the ladies of overnight, seemed a million miles away. I was a man stranded in the desert, too weak to claw myself another foot forward. As my breathing regulated, I compelled my body to his position.

"Bob," I was out of breath. I was worried the hair-netted girls would find me a lunatic in this state. I wasn't so sure that I *wasn't* one.

"Yeah?" He seemed irritated to have been distracted from his nightly routine.

"I need to get outta here, there's something wrong with me."

"I can see that. I'll even tell you what's wrong: You're supposed to be in your department, prepping the floor to open."

"No, seriously. I think I've gotta go to the hospital or something." My heart was punching through my chest. Each pulse reverberated throughout my body like the thunderous vibrations of those first drum hits at a concert. "I think I'm having a heart attack."

"Listen," He was calmer now, speaking in his professional-but-also-your-friend tone. "I don't want to be here anymore than you do. I've been here since five this afternoon. This is a sixty-hour week for me. Thing is, we open in five hours, and it looks like a bomb went off in produce. We're going to let a lot of people down if they come in and nothing's worked."

"Man, *please*. I feel like my body's tearing itself apart."

"I can't *prevent* you from going to the hospital if you feel you need to, but we're gonna have to call the hotline, then wait for someone to come in and give you a lift *to* the hospital. We can't have you drinking in your state—especially not if you're under the influence."

*God damnit*. He had me there. If I went to the hospital now, they'd see that I was getting crunk on the clock. This much felt inevitable. "Can I just go home?"

"You're bartering a lot of money we're going to miss out on if that floor's not stocked, Wes. You said you wanted to work overnight, and that has a lot of responsibility—"

"You know what they call people who are forced to build pyramids against their will? *Fucking slaves*." The words flew out of mouth. I only realized them as the tall blond holding a mug of coffee giggled. She muted herself with a hand and busied herself with walking away to begin some pretend errand.

Bob looked as though I slapped him right across the face. Once the shock of my words faded, he regained composure and said, soberly, "I'm going to forget that you just said that, but keep in mind that it's only because we're so short-staffed here."

"No, you keep in mind that you're so short-handed because most people have enough dignity to quit this shithole!" I heard shovel sink into soil as I began to dig

my own grave, but at least I was cashing out on my own terms.

“Well, you know where the door is. Nobody’s keeping you here. Just don’t expect to show up tomorrow acting like this didn’t happen. We don’t need some wino stinkin’ this place up, anyhow.”

And so, I walked. Setting my foot onto the grass of the island between parking lot and street felt like how Columbus must’ve felt as he set foot on America for the first time. The night air tasted of freedom. I knew that as soon as I would get home, the anxiety of joblessness would sink in, so I figured emptying the trusty flask in my breast pocket would be the best ticket to ride this lightning. I nearly fell through the front door, a little more than tipsy, and headed straight for the fridge. With a twelve-pack of IP beers held to my chest like a baby, I sank into bed. I began to drink, and drink, and drink.

I woke up to the sound of glass clanking against more glass. My first thought was that I had been hit by a truck and was lying, paralyzed, on the street. That would certainly explain the throbbing in my head. I looked around myself to find that I was swimming in liquor. I was surrounded by bottles and cans like balls in a ball pit. I couldn’t distinguish how many were from last night and how many from nights prior. I have a nasty tendency to simply leave garbage in bed once I’m done with it. I found a can, room temperature, but heavy with the weight of a liquid party, and popped its tab. Only, I didn’t feel like partying. The vibes had subsided, the music was no longer playing, and I felt like the last man on the dance floor, too sore to bust any more moves. I drank because I no longer had any reason not to. It was simply easier to drink than any alternative. I no longer even needed to call off from work in my best groggy voice. Before long, rest washed back over me.

I didn’t wake until six the next morning. Suddenly, my liquid paradise felt more like a prison. I felt disgusted with myself, with my life. The cluttered atmosphere in the room was suffocating me. I grabbed a trash bag from beneath the kitchen counter, one of the black hefty ones, and tossed everything I had into it, no matter how full or empty the bottles might have been. The bag was about halfway full, but its contents still managed to tear straight through the bottom as I lifted it by its bunny ears. I reclaimed my sacrifice to the gods of sobriety, this time, double-bagging them. I felt triumphant tossing my booze, my greatest vice into the garbage can still waiting at the end of the street from garbage day (*which, holy shit, was three days ago, already!*). It might as well have been Medusa’s head, or Rocky’s...stinky apartment? The satisfaction felt greater than any height liquor could possibly raise me to. I was so proud that I announced my new-found ambition to Matt, who was watching his nightly pundit indoctrination.

“Oh,” he replied without breaking contact with the television. “Good for you.”

“Wait, hold up! What do you mean, ‘good for me?’”

“Nothing.” His shoulders bounced. “I just think it’s good for you. You’ve

been going pretty hard on the booze for the last...three years.”

“Jesus, you make it sound like I’m some kind of *alcoholic*.”

“Well, I’m not really one to state the obvious, but...”

“Oh, my *God*. I am *not* an alcoholic. I’m—”

“Dionysian, I know. You don’t have to remind me every time you’re feeling a little insecure about what is clearly alcoholism. Call it whatever you want, but it doesn’t change the facts of the matter.”

“Now, that’s just Apollonian of you—and hypocritical, coming from a tranny.”

“A tranny with a full-time job that pays the bills to this apartment.”

“Yeah...” I scratched my head. “Speaking of which...”

“You lost your job. Heard all about it.”

“What!?! How?”

“I dunno if this was during the ‘blackout’ phase of your binge the other night and you just don’t remember it, but I read the Facebook posts on it.”

“*Mine?*”

“All thirteen.”

“That’s odd. I didn’t get any notifications about anyone commenting or liking any of them...”

“That’s because you read like a crazy person.”

“Whatever, *Mattilda*. I just thought I’d let you know, because I might’ve gotten a little *too* Dionysian lately, and I could use some of your Apollonian help.” I threw him the keys to my car.

“You really that opposed to driving sober?”

“If I can’t drive to the liquor store, and there’s nothing in the house, then I won’t have much of a choice but to sober up. Just, don’t trust me with these for a while, O.K.? You can decide when to give them back to me.”

“Yeah, sure thing, bro.”

“This might go nowhere, but I feel like I have to give it a real try. I mean, I can’t think only about myself anymore, you know? I might be a fuck-up, but that doesn’t give me the right to go and ruin somebody’s childhood. I don’t want to be like—you know who.”

He looked away from the television screen at me. “Never thought I’d get to say these words, but I think you’re making the right choice.”

Normally, I would reply with some snarky sentiment such as “I don’t make choices; I only make mistakes,” but there was a sincerity in the moment that I felt the

need to uphold. So, I set off, to embark on sobriety!

The first thing I realized about drinking was that I drank to reward myself. If I kicked ass at work or was riding the high on some good vibes, I had to keep the positivity going with some a that juice. Except, I also drank as a penance for the times I feel wronged or down on my luck. For instance, if I had a bad day at work, or was feeling depressed. So, if I drink whether I'm rewarding or refunding myself, what's the difference? I believe this is what the professionals call self-medication. I don't think it's nearly so technical, at least in my case. Everyone has their comfort food, and for me, I never felt that alcohol was any different. To combat this, I overhydrated, to the point where I wouldn't want *anything* to drink. Thank God I never tried this back in my cashiering days, because I was rushing to the bathroom every twenty minutes. Aside from being so full of piss there isn't room for any more liquid in me, I thought of this as a means to purify my body from all the poison I've been ingesting these past few years.

One healthy habit led to another, because I also started to get out of the house more. Being trapped inside without a buzz made me aware of the painful silence between our walls. Whether I blasted music or threw a movie on for background noise, there was this dreadful tension in the air. When this became too much, I would just get the fuck outta the house and stroll around the block until I either wore my frustrations out or no longer felt the urge.

On one such trip, I noticed a hairy fellow tagging along, a plump gray cat with no collar. I knelt down and began snapping my fingers to beckon him over. I don't have much luck with strays, but there must have been some psychic connection, because he ran right up to me, rubbing his head against my kneecap. As he was using my body to pleasure himself, I took the opportunity to scoop him up into my arms and book it for the house (*which was roughly two blocks away*) like any self-respecting abductor might. The cat was apparently not up for the bumpy ride. It protested the whole trip, whining as though I was squeezing it too tight. (*In hindsight, I actually might have been.*) I returned home with an arm glowing red with fresh nicks.

"Look what I picked up on my way back home," I announced, flashing my wiggly bounty.

"Oh, God. Please tell me it isn't *that*," Matt, ever the couch potato, said.

"That's right! A sponsor." I released the furious, mewling cat from my arms onto the floor. It sprinted off to some remote corner of the living room as I bent down to give it a pat on the head.

"We're not keeping it."

"We have to. I already named him." As Matt failed to prompt me into extrapolating, I went ahead and said "Tictac...It's because he keeps my breath clean. It's a sobriety thing

He shrugged. "Not much of a cat name."

"Well, Matt isn't much of a lady name, but I can live with it."

"Just so long as you make mention of it every conversation we have."

"Exactly! So, do you wanna be the one to show Tammy to her new boyfriend or should I?"

"Even if I *did* approve of arranged marriage, I wouldn't want that thing getting with Tammy. She's a house cat...He probably has *cat STDs* from some alley intercourse."

"Well, that's awfully dismissive." I sighed. "Do you know how many girls have turned me down for the same reasons?"

"I can think of one who probably wishes that she had."

Despite the best of my efforts, I cracked a smile. He got me there.

It was Matt's turn to sigh. (*In bro, this is a means to express that we are getting real with each other, but that we don't want to get too vulnerable.*) "Alright, if it makes you feel better, you can keep the thing. Just make sure it gets fixed before we have any grandkittens crawling around."

"The appointment's already been made!"

He leaned forward. "Really?"

"No."

So, here's what they don't tell you about cutting the liquor: You're gonna stink. I don't mean a little bit. I smelled like a fucking *corpse*. Once again, thank God I wasn't working with the public during this period. I started taking longer, more frequent showers; I used a stick of deodorant a day; I sprayed myself down with so much cologne you'd think I just stepped out of a high school locker room. (*O.K., so, one or three of those examples might have been slightly exaggerated, but my point remains...*)

The worst part about all of this, and the true root of my alcoholism (*if you ask me*), is that I had no way to mute the internal monologue playing through my head. While inebriated, I could just hone in on the now. Sober-minded, I was forced to confront all my anxieties, my sorriest thoughts given voice, and I was helpless but to pay attendance to their terrible lectures. They felt like mosquitos swarming me, taking their turns to swoop in and draw blood. My mind was running in overdrive, and at the end of my days, it seemed to have fried-out. Wrestling all those demons took a lot outta me.

Matt must've seen the toll they had taken on me. After about two weeks, he told me to get my insurance cards and to be ready to leave in an hour, we were going to the doctor.

"Jumping right into the sex-change operation?" I said, looking up from a

graduate school application on the computer.

“No, for you, retard.”

“I don’t have any appointments. I don’t even see a doctor!”

“Well, you will now.”

“What, did you make an appointment?”

“You bet, Sherlock.”

“O.K., first of all, that is an incredibly strange thing for a person—even a degenerate like you—to say. Second off, does Mom know about this?”

“Do you want her to?”

I shook my head. “Why, why are you doing this?”

“Because no girl should have to grow up with a suicide risk daddy. Let’s get a move on, so we can grab coffee on the way.”

Couldn’t argue with that logic, so I set the laptop aside and got to it. By the time we were admitted back to the doctor’s office, our coffees had been drained and their cups left to dry in the lobby trash bin. For the first time in years, I was weighed (*as if that alone wasn’t embarrassing enough, a Caucasian, but still attractive young nurse was responsible for recording my measurements*), inspected with a stethoscope, and asked about my habits. I told the doctor that I was not a drinker. Matt gave me a side-glance, but did not object.

When the doctor asked what I was in for, I began with my earliest memory of lying in bed at night, unable to sleep, feeling that something was missing from me, something critical and tangible within my body that I could not identify or locate, only that I knew it was supposed to have been there and yet was not. I traced from that moment on to the events recorded in this log, concluding on my divorce from alcohol. Sometimes Matt would chime in to provide secondhand information and observations he’s made over the years as my brother. Hearing him describe my life from his perspective brought a strange new reality to my affliction. This was not just something I had imagined, but something others have sensed about me all my life. For somebody like me, I think that’s the closest thing to the confirmation of God’s existence, the notion that this isn’t all just in my head. The doctor listened, for the most part allowing us to fill him in as we felt fit. Rarely, he would ask for more clarification or the specifics of my symptoms. Finally, he gave me a diagnosis and a prescription to take out the door.

I woke to the thud of a boot smacking me square in the ass.

“Thanks a lot asshole.”

I peeled my face from the dampness of my pillow to find Matt standing in my doorway. “What now?”

“Can you go one day without getting something pregnant?”

Less than fifty-percent coherent, I had to pull deep for an answer on that one. Aside from one notable exception, I couldn't think of a single day that I *did* manage to impregnate something. "I think I've got somewhat of a good track record with that one."

"Come look at Tammy."

Like a shoddily-oiled tin-man, I forced my rusty limbs to follow Matt's lead. Our girl, Tammy was huddled in a corner, breathing heavily. If she was once the feline equivalent of a sports car, I had to admit, she had transformed into a minivan. "Aww, Jesus."

"Whatever happened to getting your stray fixed?"

"I'm going to, I just have anxiety about phone transactions."

Matt groaned. "You just call and make an appointment. There's nothing to get nervous about. You don't have to make phone sex."

"I know *that*. If it was rational, they'd call it an anxiety *order*." I bent down to inspect Tammy's build more closely. Sure, she was a little wide around the waist, but I've caught her binging from her food dish more often than usual lately. "Maybe she's just getting fat—or she's constipated."

The cat leaned her head forward as though she was about to blow kitty chunks as her stomach pulsed like a sack full of snakes. To me, it looked like she was about to mutate into *The Thing*.

I turned to look at Matt, who was already looking judgmentally at me. "I'm not gonna lie. *That* was pretty weird."

"Speaking of weird, don't you have your own baby-mama you should be looking after? When's the last time you've even spoke to her?"

"That's the thing about mixing depression with anxiety. You have a built-in excuse for avoiding everything scary about life."

"How far along is she?"

I deemed it best not to answer. The truth was, I didn't know. "Alright, I screwed up. Again. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get your cat pregnant. I really don't know how it happened."

In truth, I had a good idea of not only how, but *when* conception occurred. Tictac's been chasing Tammy all around the house for the past few weeks. I'd caught him plenty a time mounting her with his teeth plunged into her neck like a vampire from one of those erotic books Carly used to read. At night, I was locking him in my room with me not just as a means of birth control, but to give Tammy some downtime from the constant threat of sexual assault. Problem is, he'd screech and howl with no regard to anyone else in the room who might be trying to catch some shut eye. The vagrant was using the cat blues against me. The sound of his claws dragging against the surface of the door as he begs for the gods of cat love to set him free are enough to set



a lad insane. So, I *might* have gotten a little lax about segregation on a night or two. Sure, Tammy needed her break, but it's not like I didn't deserve any, myself.

"Hey, man. What's done is done. Shit sucks, but we're gonna be grandparents whether we like it or not. Let's just hope the kittens look more like mom than dad so we won't have to pay to get rid of 'em."

I gave an amen to that as I retreated to my bedroom. Sitting on my bed, as though to test me, was none other than Tictac.

"What's up? Where we goin'?" I asked, once I had looked up from my phone.

"You and me are going shopping."

"I'm really not in the mood to live out your fantasy of a dressing room montage right now."

"You do realize that you're having a kid, right?"

"What about it?"

"Wouldn't it be better if the kid had some clothes to wear when she comes over?" I recognized that he had just considered the possibility of having this child over at his place, but chose not to question it. Instead, I hopped into my shoes and followed him out the door.

Rather than turning left at the end of our street, as one usually would when heading towards the local mall, Matt went right. "Hey, what's the deal?" I said, jumping up only to be restrained by my seatbelt.

"Your prize of little girl clothes awaits you, young grasshopper, but only if you can first succeed in one final challenge." He drove confidently ahead.

"Please don't call me young grasshopper. It sounds like bad movie dialogue."

"Huh. Good thing this isn't a movie, then."

"Well? What is it?"

"What's the what?"

"My final challenge."

"Oh, you'll see." I crossed my arms, doing something that I feel too old to admit was the adult equivalent of pouting as I looked out the side window. I didn't know where we were headed until I felt a familiar rumbling as we slid into the stony parking lot of Sal's Bar & Grille.

"Man, this is the last place I wanna be right now." The tinted windows labeled with gawdy yellow decals stood before me like Kubrick's monolith.

"And that is exactly why this is the place you need to be."

“A dude like me coming back to a place like this is like the final girl of a slasher movie coming back to camp next year. It’s just asking for trouble.” I knew that if I set foot in there, salad would not suffice. Water would not be able to fill the yearning in my belly.

“You’re overcomplicating this,” Matt said, opening his door to climb out of the car. “Ya don’t ask for trouble. You ask for a water.”

Following him to the door, I recounted my hesitations to eat healthy, the paranoia that no meal could be sealed without a hearty helping of grease to plug my arteries. In that brief moment I savored the relief I felt when not only did my soup and salad lunches fill me up more properly than oily burgers, but the feeling of cleanliness they instilled in me. I took a deep gulp as Matt threw the door open, and stepped inside.

The place was dank with nicotine. A light fog hovered above the tables like this was a horror movie graveyard. I suppose for some patrons, it might as well be. It was a busy day for Sal’s, at least for this hour. A small crowd was gathered in the far corner of the bar, right by the dartboard. A family was dining at a table across the room from them. We took our seats at a table in the middle of the floor. It was a thin, wooden one, the kind that wobbled if you rested the weight of your elbows on it. So far as I know, it’s the only gimp table in the establishment and no matter how hard I try to avoid it, I always wind up right back at it. We each grabbed a laminated paper menu from between the paper towels and condiment bottles. I immediately began scouring my copy for any meal that sounded like it came in under 2,000 calories.

“Shapin’ up for the rebound, ‘eh?” a voice shook me out of my meditations. I looked up to see my mate, George, same as he ever was. He held a meaty hand across the table. During my trance, he had placed two tall glasses of ice water before us.

“Shapin’ up to shape up.” I accepted the gesture, giving him a shake that was intended to be both firm and unaggressive. “How you been?”

“Oh, you know. Same old, same old. How’ve things been since the split, man? I was real sorry to hear about that shit.”

“Hey, what can ya do? I told her it was me or the phone.”

George chuckled. “Now, that ain’t what I heard, but whatever floats your boat, kid.” He looked down at Matt, whose shoulder his elbow was practically touching. “Pardon the manners. Name’s George.”

“Matt.” He nodded and accepted the handshake thrust his way.

Looking back at me, George said, “I think it was a good idea, gettin’ rid of the beard.”

My hands drew to my face to make sure that the stubble I’d been tugging on all day was still present before I got the reference. “No, it’s not...we’re brothers.”

He arched an eyebrow suspiciously. “Sure, I can dig that. The resemblance

is *uncanny*.” He nudged Matt on the shoulder with his elbow. “So, what’ll it be?”

I gazed down at the menu before me one last time, desperate to find some worthy candidate I had previously overlooked. “Fuck it,” I told myself, and everyone else within earshot. “I’ll have the chicken salad.”

“Interested in any of our IPAs on special?”

I raised my glass of water. “I’ll be fine.” By the time the glass was placed back on the table and George was taking Matt’s order, I had just about bitten a hole through the bottom of my lip.

“So, Kubla Kahn living up to the memories?” Matt said once George was out of earshot.

I coughed into my sleeve before answering him. The smoke was burning me up. My eyes were melting in their sockets and my throat felt like I’d taken a deep hit of campfire smoke. The palms of my hands were slimy from whatever grease remained on the tabletop, which had clearly not been properly wiped in days. “Not gonna lie, this place has a smell about it that I don’t care for,” I said.

“You came home smelling this way every day for the last year.”

I took a closer look at the specimens across the floor from us, those congregating at the bar. They were laughing. Of the five, there were two females and both were hanging all over their male friends, being passed from one to another like toddlers at a family gathering. The men wore smiles on their faces and laughed, but I don’t think they found the ladies to be all that funny. To me, it looked like desperation, the fleeting hope that maybe this night would be another spark of that glory that burned-out years before. They might not have been ready to admit it, but judging from the lines on their faces, I think it’s safe to say the fun times was over for them. Maybe I was projecting, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that only months ago, this was what people saw when they looked at me.

Before long George returned with our meals. I poked at my salad with a fork, occasionally dabbing the corners of my lips with a swathed-up paper towel as Matt tore into his chicken tenders. After paying the tab, Matt asked my verdict.

“Maybe I’m becoming a homebody, but I could’ve made better.”

“You sure you don’t want a drink for the road?”

I shook my head. “You don’t really think I’m falling for *that*, do you?”

“Hey, I said this was your final test, not your hardest. Consider it a victory lap.”

“Yeah, like when Jesus rode through Hell after being crucified.”

“If that’s how you choose to look at it. Anyhow, let’s get the fuck out of here before one of us gets lung cancer.”

Our destination, a children’s clothing store inside of a mall twenty minutes

down the highway did not result in the coming of age movie montage I was picturing, but rather, something much grittier. Imagine two adult men shopping to dress a newborn daughter for the first time. There was a brief period of scratching our heads and staring at the racks before an employee caught on to our confusion and guided us through the process. We left with seven outfits. To be quite honest, I don't think either of us paid much attention to the designs or specifics. So long as it'd cover her up, the purpose was served. Plus, it's not like she wouldn't grow out of it by the time she could crawl, right? As we were checking out, I reached towards my ass for my wallet.

"I got this," Matt said, flashing his debit card like as though it were an ace playing card.

"C'mon, that's not cool," I said, trying to save face in front of the cashier. No adult likes being paid for. Well, no adult likes *getting caught* being paid for.

"Consider this your lollipop for behaving yourself today." The card was swiped and we departed.

While Mattie drove, I was emcee, using an aux cord to amp up the songs on my phone. I was trying to decide whether to play "Walk on the Wild Side" by Lou Reed or "Rebel Rebel" by David Bowie when a ringing came over the Bluetooth. It was our mother.

"Hey, how are you doing today?" She said through the car's speakers, her voice like that of an omnipresent god over the ecosystem of the car.

"I'm doing fine, just out with the bro."

"Oh!" She sounded pleasantly surprised by this, probably because it implied we were actually spending time together. "What trouble are you two into tonight?"

"Just—shopping." Matt looked over at me. I shook my head, telepathically screaming at him not to make any mention of children.

"Find any good deals?"

"Um, yeah, we picked out a few new outfits. Nothing special."

The conversation carried on as we made our way back home. I was soon tuned-out, picturing how the day might've gone, had I given proper notice of our family's upcoming addition. Rather than our ambivalence towards the clothing, she would fawn over each item, as though they would last a lifetime. I suppose that with all the pictures the poor girl will have taken in them, they might as well. I could picture Mom in the car, now, telling us what a nice day it was to spend with her children, and how excited she was to become a grandmother, the one thing she'd been asking for since I graduated college. The circumstances might not have been the most favorable, but I'm sure she'd be able to look past that. I was almost tempted to come clean right over the Bluetooth in the car, but the mere thought of it alone filled my mouth with cotton. Time was dwindling, and if I didn't act soon, Mom might not find out about it 'till the girl's in high school.

Once their conversation had ended, we had just enough time for one song to close out our night. I chose “The Bewlay Brothers.”

“Hullo?”

“Wes!?” a voice screeched through the speaker of my phone. It was unmistakably my mother’s.

“This is him speaking.”

“Are you not up yet?”

I swung my feet off the mattress, planting them on the ground. The carpet felt itchier than usual this morning. “I’m still on the midnight schedule.” While I might not have been working any midnight shifts (*or any shifts at all for that matter, having been unemployed for some months now*), this statement was not entirely untrue when it came to my sleep schedule.

“So, what’s this I hear about you being a father?”

It felt as though I wrapped my lips around the hose of a vacuum. Never had I felt the blood rush from my face so quickly. At once I felt numb to everything yet at a state of heightened senses. The moment of truth had finally come and I had nothing to rely on but my own survival instincts. A thousand scenes played out in my head in a cinematic collage of my mother finding a post on Facebook, of her being informed by some deep throat in the supermarket, of Ione showing up on her doorstep at a moment of weakness and spilling her guts for some reason beyond my comprehension.

Knowing that any false move could lead to my undoing, I spoke carefully. “What are you talking about?”

“The kittens! Haven’t you seen them yet?”

The grandkittens. The word flashed in my mind like a neon sign from Heaven...or whatever it is they use to deliver holy messages up there. I swallowed a thick gorge and it was as though I was detoxed of all paranoia. Suddenly I was planted back into reality and I saw my bedroom take shape around me. “No.” I scratched the top of my head, trying to determine whether it was natural for my nails to cut straight through the hair into the scalp as easily as they did or if this was a sign of imminent balding. “What, are you here or something?”

“No, Wes. Oh, my God, just go check on the kittens!” I shambled from my bedroom to the kitchen, where we had a large suitcase opened up to house Tammy during her maternity. Before I could even see them, I heard a chorus of squeaks announcing the arrival of life. All I could think was, this is gonna get annoying real fast. “Well, how many are there?” Peering into the luggage, which was now stained in some fluids I didn’t even want identified, I counted five, six...

“Seven kittens,” I breathed into the speaker, as though I was staring down

into the pit of Hell itself and describing the sights held within. My God, does she even have enough nipples to feed them all? If not, is that a guaranteed starvation for the runt of the litter? Nature is a bitch. Although, watching the fam shovel at Tammy's belly and sucking from her red stringy nipples, I had a feeling that everything would work out. They each certainly seemed to be getting their share. Tammy, lying on her side to display herself like a hairy buffet was purring as she was fed upon. One of her paws was fully extended, resting on the brim of the suitcase. I reached out and gave her a light high five.

My mother was laughing on the other end. "Seven kittens? What are you gonna do with them all?"

"I dunno. I was hoping to give 'em away, but if all else fails, we do have garbage disposal."

"Oh, don't joke like that! They're just babies. When we get off the phone, you're gonna have to send me some pictures!"

"Trust me, they ain't much to look at." In truth, they weren't. If I saw them without the context of their mother, I'd have a hard time differentiating them from the common rodent. It's not that they weren't cute, it's just that they were also ugly.

"Oh, lighten up! Ya know, it could be a lot worse. You could have a baby of your own crawling around." Was she taunting me? Did she know more than she was letting on and was now tormenting me out of spite for my negligence? My first impulse was to scream these things into the phone, but I swallowed the urge.

"Hey, Mom...There is something I need to tell you."

"What's that, hon?" Her voice was now sober, fully immersed in the precipice of our conversation.

"You do now you're getting a kitten, right?"

The line went dead.

I'd always envisioned tattoo parlors to look like bars in common with a bar. Walking into the Wittol tattoo shop was like a slap to the face of my expectations. First, the place looked more like a coffee shop or some parlor you'd expect a douche with an acoustic guitar to be playing in. The air was pure of the ever-present cigarette smoke I had braced myself for, and there was no bearded, balding biker repping Orange County. In fact, there was only one guy behind the counter, and unfortunately for me, it was Brendan.

He looked shocked to see me, as though I had infiltrated his private world. I would expect to see somebody like me in a place like this, either. "What's up?" He said, playing his cool.

"Is Ione on break?" I asked, cutting to the chase. This wasn't to be rude, although I'm sure it came across that way. I just felt awkward, remembering the last

time we were in the same room.

“No. She’s been on maternity leave here for a while,” he said, shutting the notebook he had been hunched over. “Which you would know if you’d been around the past few months.”

“Yeah, I’ve been putting in some me time. That’s actually what I came around for.”

He raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Did you think to let *her* know this?”

“Well, no. We just kind of drop in on each other; it’s our thing.”

“Are there any instances of you ‘dropping in on each other’ that I should know about?” This statement was delivered with a humorous tone, but felt venomous in my ears.

“Aside from the obvious? No.” My gaze was caught by the pictures of tattoos along the walls. Many seemed complex, as though they’d have taken years to complete.

“See anything you like?”

“Me?” I laughed, nervously. “No, I’m not really the tattoo kinda guy—no offense.”

“It takes all types.”

“It’s kinda funny, I did consider getting one, when I first walked in here. I thought it’d be kind of a funny prank to have Ione tattoo me, like, as some testament to my dedication to the contents of her stomach.”

“Oh, yeah? Like, what? A tattoo of a baby drinking from a whiskey bottle with a nipple at the end?”

“Holy shit, I wish!” I spat. “Mine was pretty lame. It was just one of those cliché tattoos of the baby’s name.”

“That sounds cool to me.”

“What!?! No. I mean, you’ve probably got an appointment coming in or something.”

“No, lucky for you, business has been at an all-time low lately.”

“No, really. It was a dumb idea.”

“Alright.” I didn’t want the tattoo and he knew it. “I just thought it was a good way to show your dedication as a parent. I mean, after you ran out of the ultrasound, things didn’t look so promising. That was *how many* months ago, now?”

I sighed, probably a little *too* theatrically. If I had my trusty flask on me, I’d have taken a swig. “God dammit. I know this is a trap, but why not? You only get to knock a girl up after your high school reunion once in this life...”

His face lit up. I could see that he was trying to stifle his anticipation. “This how you do business around here? You just guilt your Johns into this shit?”

He looked confused at the statement. “Just you. In fact, we’ll make this on the house. We’ll call it a passion project.”

“Let’s not. That makes it sound like we’re about to fuck. I don’t know about you, but I’ve seen that episode of X-Files where Scully is, like, having an orgasm ‘cause some guy’s tattooing her, and I for one am *not* down for that.”

“O.K., I might have gotten that reference, but I’m just gonna go ahead and delete that little image from my mind.”

I shrugged. “Well, so long as you know where I’m coming from...That wasn’t a pun.”

He opened the notebook back up to a page marked with a yellow tab, the kind with tape that nerds would use to navigate textbooks in college. “Take a look at some of these, tell me what you like.” Inside were different pieces of calligraphy, all constructed using the word *font*. I have to confess, his range was admirable. He had stencils of elegant italicizations, letters made of flame that would look at home on the side of a motorcycle, and other kinds that weren’t Comic Sans. I chose one in a handwritten style. He nodded. “Nice choice. A little feminine, but there’s nothing wrong with that.”

What would be a masculine choice of font for my daughter’s name? Letters made out of buildings with a monster truck jumping over them? “Hey, man. Gender’s a spectrum.” He ignored this comment.

He looked up at me. “Now, what name do you have in mind?”

“Abigail.” He looked skeptical. “What, didn’t you and Ione talk about this?”

“Have *you* talked with her about this?”

“Well, yeah. Duh. She’ll get it when she sees.”

“If you say so, man.”

“Where’s this thing goin’?”

I blushed, throwing up an unshapely giggle. “Oh, man. I don’t think we should go there.”

He was smiling in the way perverts probably watch girls undress through binoculars. There was a fire in his eyes. “C’mon, where did you want to get a tattoo? What, was it, like, on your *penis* or something?”

“I thought it’d be funny to—just to get a tramp stamp. It was a joke, but it seems stupid now.”

We were now laughing together. “I think it’s brilliant.” As our giggling simmered, he said. “Alright, we’re gonna make this happen.” He walked over to a leather seat, almost like the examination table Ione was laid out on last time we had



spoken, and tilted his head to indicate that I should occupy it.

I scoffed, shaking my head, and then walked over to, lying myself belly-down. “Should I roll up my shirt?”

“Just enough that I can do my thing.” I complied as he walked away to fetch his instruments. Jesus, he’s going to see my spare tire. He’s going to be touching that part of my body. He might have to stretch my chub out in order to get the tattoo right. I didn’t know what would be more embarrassing, revealing the tattoo or the process of receiving it. “You ready for this?” Brendan whispered into my left ear from behind.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I said. The only thing I was ready to do was get the fuck outta there. This was the kind of indulgent behavior I would expect from my drunk self. With my new-found sobriety, I was without excuse for such idiocy. My skin crawled as I heard the tattoo gun buzz to life. It sounded to me like a Taser, and this thing was going to be stabbing ink into my body. I screamed the moment I felt its cold tip press into my flesh.

“Hey, relax.” Brendan chuckled. “That was my finger.”

“Why do you feel so—*condomy?*?”

“It’s called latex, which is what I’m wearing. We here at Wittol’s are professionals, and by we, I mean *me*.”

“Oh. So, should I expect pain?”

“More than a cat licking you, but probably less than getting shot.”

The true sensation was probably somewhere in-between, but then again, I’ve never been shot. (*Considering my personality, this is one of my greater accomplishments in life.*) I had to consciously uncringe my facial muscles and ease into the closest state I could find to relaxation as the needle pressed on. “So, you ever have to work with your boss?”

“*My boss?* I am the boss, here.”

“No shit?”

“I am Wittol. When I turned eighteen, my parents gave me the option to go to college or start my own business. Didn’t matter to them, just that I didn’t end up a cart pusher somewhere. I couldn’t think of anything I’d care to study, so here I am.”

“So, you’re self-taught?”

“Well, kind of. I had a friend who taught me the ways, way back. Did my first tattoo when I was fifteen. I’d show you, but I got it covered up by a pro, since no one wants to live their life permanently marked with the Stussy logo on their forearm. I mean, I’m certified, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess that makes sense. I take it you were the one to mark up Ione’s finger?”

“Yeah, we were just kinda drunk and fooling around. I’m surprised it turned

out looking like anything at all, I was so wasted.”

“So, how’d you guys meet, if it wasn’t at college?”

“Uhh, I do piercings, as well as tattoos, and she was a regular customer.”

“What, were you giving her a titty ring and she liked the way you fondled her?”

“No. Her ears, but I’d bet I could talk her into that sometime...”

“Don’t you fuckin’ dare, man. No daughter of mine is going to suck on metal just to get her milk.”

“That’s kinda fucked-up to think about...”

“Yeah, we’re gonna be dads.”

“Thanks for that.” His saying this struck me odd, then it dawned on me that he was probably being sarcastic.

“Oh.” I laughed nervously. “Shit! I didn’t make you fuck up or anything, did I?”

“I don’t think you could fuck this up. This here is my masterpiece. When you die, I’m going to take this and have it framed.”

A beat passed where the only noise in the room was the electric monotone of the needle.

“Hey, um, I’m sorry about the ultrasound. I mean, I wasn’t trying to be a dick to you.”

“No worries. It was an effortless performance.”

“I wasn’t sure how to act, so I just acted out. I didn’t—it’s not personal, but I’m a little weirded-out by the whole *you* factor. I felt like a third-wheel, or like my sperm was an undocumented immigrant and her body was—”

“Yeah, alright. I get it. Man, I don’t give a shit about you. It’s not personal, but I don’t know you. You wanna talk about being a third-wheel, I’m the odd man out going to my own girlfriend’s ultrasound.” He sighed. “Really, that doesn’t matter. I’m committed to being with Ione, and as a part of that, I’m committed to doing what’s best for this child. I think it’s safe to say that we’re two *very* different people, but I don’t think it’s too far-fetched to say that we just want to make the best out of this *fucked-up* situation. We’re playing for the same team, ya know?”

I nodded. “We’ve even played on the same field, if you know what I mean.” Either he didn’t, or he wasn’t willing to humor it. “Sorry, had to.”

“All I’m saying is that if you’re going to be there, just *be there*. ‘Cause what you’re doing now, it ain’t working.”

“Yeah,” was all I had to say. “I know.”

“Hey, you don’t have any plans tonight, do you?”

“No, I’m kinda between jobs.” It’s not like the circumstances were any of *his* business. “I’ve got nothin’ but time on my hands.”

“I’d like you to come over, then. We could have dinner, you, Ione, and me.”

“You sure? I mean, I’ve kinda been avoiding her.”

“Ya don’t say.”

“Not that I want to, but when we were at the ultrasound, I felt like I’d come between you guys.”

“Come between us? This is gonna sound like something you would say, but you came between her legs! What’s done is done, but it’s too late now. You’re *with* us.”

“Is this your roundabout way of inviting me over to a threeway?” I wasn’t going to include poor baby Abbie in any of our sexual misconduct. Far as I was concerned, Ione’s body was a temple, and guys like me don’t exactly fit in at church.

“Keep it up and it’ll be an invitation to a beheading, yo—”

“Mine,” I said, overlapping him. “Yeah, I’ll be there, with balls and whistles.”

I followed Brendan’s truck about a quarter mile into the woods before it occurred to me that he might be leading me out to my death. This was a fate I accepted. Really, any sort of relief from the awkward cartoon grandma driving position I had assumed, bent forward over the steering wheel to avoid any contact between the seat and my lower-back, was a welcome thought. Eventually, a home that did not appear to be a torture shack welcomed us to our destination. The building was porched, complete with a swing to the right of the door. (On second thought, it was starting to resemble the cabin from *The Evil Dead*.) I spotted a fireplace to the side and a formation of rocks fit for both squatting upon to roast marshmallows and sacrificing my unborn child to the gods of cuckoldry. Crippling as child-support might be towards my finances, I hoped it was not for the latter.

“So, you live with your parents?” I said, stepping into the muddy driveway. Some trees were still bearded with snow, and odd piles of it remained on the ground. May had yet to cast away the bad tidings of February.

“No, this place used to be my pap’s—my grandfather’s. He came up here to hunt with his buddies sometimes. I’ve been renting it for about a year, now.”

“What about you? You hunt?”

He shrugged. “When I was a kid. Ione’s not too fond of the whole ‘killing’ thing.”

“So I’ve noticed,” I muttered under my breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I followed him inside to the mudroom, where we removed our shoes. We passed through a second door into a living room, where Ione was curled up beneath a woven quilt in a rocking chair by the fireplace. A flat screen on the wall was playing a movie I’ve never seen before.

“Brought you sumthin’ home,” Brendan announced. He stooped down to give her a hug.

“Take it back,” she said. She grabbed the remote on her lap and shut the TV off. “Long time, no see,” she said my way.

“Lucky you,” I replied. This felt insufficient, so I told her that I had been in spleen.

“Spleen?” she repeated. “You know what, I don’t even want to know.”

“No, this isn’t a sexy thing! It’s an old word for depression. The Cave of Spleen was a thing from *Rape of the Lock*.”

“Fascinating.” Judging by the way she said this, I take it that she in fact did not find my expertise on the subject to be fascinating at all. “So, what are you doing here?”

Brendan, who had been bent down, encouraging the fire in its pit with the poker before throwing another log on top, turned around. “This how you talk to paying customers, woman?”

“*Nuh-uh*,” she inspected me. “No way.”

“Well, I didn’t pay...”

“Where? Show me.” She sat up some. I could see, even beneath the quilt, that she had sized-up considerably.

“I dunno. I’m all bandaged up and kind of sensitive on the issue right now...”

“Let the man heal. We can check it out in a few hours, after dinner,” Brendan chimed back in.

“Oh, no. You’re staying for dinner?” Ione said.

“Yeah, speaking of which, what *is* for dinner?”

We had some kind of vegetarian hamburgers made out of beans on buns made out of something called quinoa. It was rather tasteless and odd. I fear that growing up on such a diet could put my daughter at risk of depression at a very young age, but I was a guest and held my tongue. We ate at a table in the same room Ione had been watching TV in. After the dishes were retired to the sink and the fridge was stocked with leftovers, we sat in the furniture around the fireplace. Conversation was light, but came painlessly. As we were about to sit down, Ione asked if I wanted to feel the baby kick. Her stomach had swollen to an abominable size. It frightened me to be

in her proximity, as though the child could burst out of her stomach like a cannonball, shooting out in whatever direction her balloonish gut was facing.

“A-Are you sure?” I asked, hoping for the offer to be retracted.

“Yeah, go ahead.” She rubbed a circle across her maternity top, I guess to show me that it was O.K. or something. Like, I knew *how* to do it; it’s not like I needed a demonstration...

I reached my hand out, but felt as though I was about to pet a wild animal, unsure if it would accept or bite me.

“She’s not exactly an athlete,” Brendan said, seated beside her.

I touched base with her stomach, and *felt it*. Yeah, I jumped a little bit, but I found myself laughing. It was the strangest thing, but butterflies that had been sleeping since my first kiss woke to tickle the insides of my belly. “That’s so cool,” I said, taking my seat across from them.

“So, how’d you two meet?”

“Brendan!” Ione slapped his knee, playfully.

“*What!?* I think I have a right to know.”

“No, it’s a very common thing for a cuckold to ask,” I said.

“What’s your deal with the cuckold business? What are you? Ten?” Ione said.

“It’s a common trope! Shakespeare used it!”

“If Shakespeare ate poop would you do that?”

“I’d give it a second thought.” To Brendan, I said “To answer your question, which *someone* is *clearly* avoiding, we met at a book club.”

“No way,” Brendan said. “That’s so...you,” he said, looking at Ione.

“It’s true,” she confirmed.

“We didn’t talk to each other at all,” I continued.

“Can you blame me?”

“Considering who you were all up on, *Aaron Texter*, I’d say blame is in order.”

“Oh, c’mon. He was a nice guy.”

“He was. He was also the founder of said-book club. Anyways, this was while you were still getting home-schooled. We started talking our senior year of high school, in our biology class.”

“Did you pass that one?”

“He slipped me by, probably on a curve.”

“So, that was it?” Brendan said. “You had a class together?”

“Pretty much,” Ione said.

“Oh, *c’mon*. Gimme *some* credit! There was the prom.”

“I thought not mentioning prom would’ve been cutting you some *slack!*”

“We had a good time!”

“We sat in the corner *the entire* night,” she filled Brendan in.

Well, *I* had a good time. We talked into the night, occasionally one of us boys would rise to feed the fire. Watching them curled up on the couch felt like something that should have triggered jealousy in me, but somehow, I felt happy for them. It’ll be nice for Ione to have the support of somebody else when the kid drops. I felt myself yearning for someone at my side, somebody I could rely on to help me guide this baby through this world that I can hardly navigate. My tattoo had slipped my mind until I threw myself into the driver’s seat of my car. A part of me considered running back in to unveil myself for Ione. *Ahh, well*, I thought, turning my key into the ignition. *There’s always next time...*

Knocking on the door of the home Carly grew up in made me feel like a teenager again, shy, awkward, and prepared for nothing but the worst. I rapped twice and there was no response. I considered the fact that the house might be vacant, but her mother’s car was still parked in the driveway and the upstairs lights were on. I then considered whether the fact that I took notice of these things qualified me as “creepy,” as Carly and her friends would say. Upon my third rapping, the door was softly pulled open by none other than her mother. She was a tall woman who wore her age well, despite the strains of time etched into her face. She looked professional, even at home, with the kind of casual attire only those truly at ease bearing the title “middle-class” would pick out. I could hear hip-hop blaring from the upper-quarters.

“Wesley,” she said. She said it as she did every other time my name passed through her lips, calm and condescending, as though I was a nuisance, but not one she considered getting fussed-up over.

“Hey, I was just in the area, and—”

“No,” she interrupted. “She’s out, on a *date*.” The final word was spoken with resolution, a barb at the end of her sentence to sting me with.

“You sure about that?” I said, snide in the way detectives in the noir movies taunt their suspects, tilt of the head and all. “I just didn’t expect you to be one to rep for the Wu Tang.”

“Oh, *please*. She left her radio on and I haven’t bothered to turn it off. Now, if you don’t get off of my property—”

“*Mother!*” A voice called out from behind her, a voice that I recognized immediately. “Is something wrong?” It always did amuse me the way Carly addressed

her parents, so proper with annunciation. I always teased that she sounded like a kid from a horror movie. Stepford Brat, I used to call her.

“Nothing, dear, just go back up to your room, honey.”

“No, really...” She sounded in a jovial mood, giggling as though they were playing some game. The door widened, and Carly stood beside her mother in front of me. Her face sank as she saw the cruel prank, a steaming bag of shit on her porch. (*Still haven’t shaken that post-alchie stench.*) “What do you want?” No trace of humor survived the sight of me.

“Can we get a little privacy?” I said, in a hushed tone, as though her mother wasn’t standing right there.

She stepped forward, but was intercepted by the touch of her mother, who placed a hand on her shoulder. “You don’t have to go if you don’t feel comfortable.”

“I’m fine, Mom. I’ll just be right here on the porch.”

“O.K.” Judging by the tone in her voice, this was not very O.K. at all. “Just let me know if you need anything.”

Carly shut the door behind her, and we were “alone.” (*Bound in quotation marks because the blinds parted to reveal two eyes watching my every motion.*)

“Alright, I’m giving you the benefit of doubt, here. Don’t waste my time...or my patience.”

“I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry. I’ve been saying that a lot lately, but I tend to fuck a lot of things up.” She scoffed, rolling her eyes. “These past few months, I’ve been trying to make things right that I’ve done wrong before, but it seems like every time I fix one thing, another two things go wrong. I don’t know what’s so wrong with me that I can’t just exist like everyone else. I never intended for you to get hurt and I’d never have lied to you on purpose. I’m just kind of an idiot. I know that doesn’t make it right, and that no promise I make will probably mean a thing to you. It’s just, that things probably didn’t end on the right note for us, and I think this child could be a real second chance. It might not be what we had in mind, but I think we could do a great job raising this thing together.” The longer I rambled the less confident I felt, and the less interpretable the expression on Carly’s face appeared.

“*What is wrong with you?*” she seethed. “You lie to me about going out to your high school reunion, *fuck* some girl you expect me to believe you haven’t seen since high school. For all I know, you’d been planning this, that you’d been hooking up for God knows how long! Even before that, you talked about her like I was supposed to *sympathize* with this break-up you had before me. Were you just boasting? Was it some fucked-up joke you thought you’d play on me?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but she was by that point well ahead of me.

“And now, now you come to my parent’s house to ask me to raise your child!?! You are fucking insane. *You need help.* What makes you think I’d want anything to do with your kid? I’m in *college*, studying to get a career. I have a life of

my own. I'm not going to keep living in the shadow of some girl who almost kissed you when you were fourteen." She stopped to cough it out. Her voice had steadily raised to a scream throughout this monologue. She didn't poke me in the chest or so much as wag a finger, but you might as well imagine her doing so. Me, I like to look back on the event as though she was doing the one hand on her hip, the other wagging me a no-no combo.

"Did you ever stop and think that maybe I wouldn't have felt so desperate for affection if there was any in our relationship. Relationships aren't built on one-word replies and shrugs. When I was with you, I felt *alone*. I'd never felt so damn alone in my life how I did when I was sitting across the table from you and your fucking smartphone."

"Oh, like you gave a shit what I had to say. Nothing I like is good enough for you. My friends are too stupid, so you won't go with me to do things with them. The movies I like aren't good enough. The books I read are for children. You're a fucking snob. *And*, you're a slob, too! You've doubled in size since we met! You've let yourself go. You used to be nice. Your jokes were funny, but now you're just angry all the time. Even if you *were* ready to get back together, I wouldn't feel bad. You don't just get to choose when to be in a relationship."

"That's—that's bologna! You just took what I said, and twisted it around to make it look like I'm the bad guy, so that you can go up in your room and feel all good about yourself. Well, go ahead! It's not like you could hate me any more than I hate myself right now."

"If you really feel sorry, next time before you cheat on whoever it is you wind up with, get a vasectomy."

"Sure thing, soon as you get a sex-drive!"

"You know what, I don't need this." She turned on her heels to retreat into the house. "If you're not out of here in five minutes, I'm calling the cops." Suddenly, it dawned on me that this might be the last time I would ever see her, that *this* would be the final conversation we shared. Although my face was alight with adrenaline, I knew this wasn't where I wanted to leave things, worse off than if I had just let her be.

"Carly," I said, my pitch lowered from a shout back to a murmur.

"My name is Tristan!" She slammed the door behind her.

I was at the doorstep, fumbling to with my keys, as I heard a guttural "*Oh, God*" resonate from our kitchen. It was succeeded by a "Holy mother of fuck."

After dropping my keys and reclaiming them about four times, I rushed in, expecting to find a dusty outline where the fridge once stood and all the cupboards to be emptied onto the floor. Instead, everything was in complete order except for one ball of fluff curled up on the kitchen floor. Its chest was not moving. Tammy was nudging its crippled frame with her nose, whining softly. At once I felt my heart sink



into my gut and the need to sit down. Matt was massaging his temples and I caught myself doing the same.

“How did this *happen?*” Matt said, standing as a tripod with his hand on the kitchen counter.

“It was that *motherfucker!*” I couldn’t feel my face. Tears were welling in the pits of my eyes. Before Matt could beg clarification, I sprinted out of the room to my own. Tictac was on my desk, the bastard, spread out across the keyboard of my laptop, looking at me as though expecting a warm reunion. I marched over and yanked him into my arms, squeezing him so tight against myself that I could feel through his fat to the bones. If I didn’t hear Matt’s footfalls echoing my own into the room, I might’ve grabbed him by the neck and ended him right there. I shoved past Matt, who kept repeating my name as he followed me across the house. Having stormed back and forth throughout the house, I kicked the front door open and tossed the cat onto our porch. I heard his weight falling against the wood as I slammed the door.

“So, what now?” Matt said as we returned to the kitchen.

I tore a few sheets of paper towel from the roll and knelt to collect the body. “We’re going to bury Number Three and make sure nothing happens to the rest of them. Nothing else we can do at this point.”

“I meant with Tictac.”

“He’s on his own. He can take his cat STDs and infanticidal habits elsewhere. If he gets hit by a truck, that’s his problem. Do we have a shovel?” Tammy was mewling at my feet, pressing so tight to my feet I risked crushing her paws with each step.

“You broke it last winter.” Oh, yeah. I remembered the jolt in my hands as I smashed the metal shovelhead across the pavement of our driveway like a guitar at the end of a punk rock show, and my amazement when it flew off the wooden staff. My lesson learned: *don’t try to shovel snow drunk. Just don’t.*

“Just grab the metal spatula, then.” I said, hobbling as I attempted to push the back door open with one foot and keep Tammy at bay with the other.

“What?”

“Just grab it! I’ll buy another in the morning!” I hopped into the dark of night.

Soon as Matt shut the door, I saw Tictac running towards us. The tramp was probably expecting canned food. I resisted the urge to kick him away as Matt scooped a shallow grave out of the soil. I planted the kitten, mummified in generic paper towels, into the ground and scattered dirt above it by hand. (*Of course, Matt was not qualified for this task, as it might dirty his painted nails.*) Matt handed me the spatula so I could press the dirt down above him and to avoid any cannibalism on behalf of its father. The stupid animal just watched, oblivious to the implications of this ritual.

“Any final words you’d like to share?” I asked Matt. He looked at me as

though to determine whether or not this was said in jest. I'm not sure that it wasn't.

"He was a cat."

"He was Number Three." I nodded. "No less than Number One and no greater than Number Seven."

"Do you really have every cat identified by number?" We turned to head back inside.

"Yeah, that's what the numbers are for."

"So, do you know what gender they are?"

"I looked up how to find out and all I could find was something about looking at their assholes. No thanks." I held the door open, not just for Matt to enter, but to prevent Tictac from inviting himself in. "Plus, isn't that for *them* to decide?"

"Oh, piss off! It's not like I'm one of *those* trans people."

"That's right," I sat down on the sofa beside him. "And my gym coach wasn't one of *those* pedophiles."

He threw his head back and let out a deep sigh, as though he was gurgling air. "What a day."

"Tell me about it." I spread my legs out and then folded them back over in a more civilized manner. "Actually, there's something I've been wanting to tell you."

"Who'd you knock up this time?"

"Only the imaginations of potential readers." I sat forward, inspecting his face for any unconscious reactions he might emit. "So, this is currently an idea for a graphic novel, but I could also see it working as a novella or even a movie. It's about this guy who comes home from work to find his wife in bed with another man. He gets so angry he could kill her, except, he doesn't go and grab a gun or anything like that. He just *wills* her out of existence. His entire life changes like he'd never met her. Their kid they had together is also out of the picture. The entire world has folded over to excuse her absence, ya know? It's a superpower that he has, basically. That's it. He goes on in his life, erasing person after person from the pages of his life story and finding that no matter who he gets rid of, all the same problems are still there. He *is* the problem. Instead of having an arch-nemesis, like most superheroes, it's an internal-struggle sorta deal. At the end, he realizes this and chooses to erase himself, thus restoring everyone else's lives to the world." I could discern nothing from his expression. His head was still thrown back, only now, his eyes were closed as well. "How's that sound?"

"It sounds like wishful thinking, bro." His head snapped back into place like the top of a Pez dispenser. "How 'bout instead of trying to erase all your problems and the people that trouble you, you try working *with* them? Yeah, it's a little scary, but that's life, mate." He stood up and headed back towards the hall leading to our bedrooms.

“Hey!”

“With that, I’m off to bed.”

“That’s not how I meant it!”

“Good night!”

I hung my head in rejection. As silence returned to the room, a scratching noise came into the mix. It was the light pounding of paws dragging across a door, begging for entry. “God dammit,” I breathed, taking the time to regret the fact that I was about to pick my stupid ass up and let Tictac back inside. Sure enough, there he was on our porch step, looking up at me like we were the best of buddies. The idiot probably didn’t even remember my outburst from just an hour before, and if he did, he probably couldn’t understand any justification for it. He had destroyed the life of one of his children, but he was just a meaty sack of instincts. As a father, I wasn’t poisoning myself for any better. What was my excuse? Maybe us crummy dads were better off sticking together. I decided to double-down on keeping him locked up in my bedroom at night and when nobody was home. This was punishment for him, protection for the grandkittens, and a reminder for me, that failure is the product of negligence.

The call came at 9:45 on a Sunday night, the first of April.

“Yeah?” I said in the atonal way one speaks after having gone through a long phase of silence.

“It’s happening!” Brendan shouted through my speaker. He seemed to be speaking over Ione, who I could hear moaning in the background. I held the phone away from my ear. “It’s going down *right now!*”

I opened my mouth to make a crack about them calling mid-fuck just to rub it in my face, but decided that it just wasn’t the right time. “Alright, which hospital are you heading to?”

Brendan gave me the hospital’s name and relative location and let me go to focus on the road. I hopped out of bed, stumbling through the laundry littering my floor and through the door, smacking my shoulder on the way out.

“Are you seriously *drunk?*” Matt said, rolling over in his cocoon in bed to face me. “I have to get up—”

“Right now! We gotta go!”

He shot upright. “Oh, shit! Is it happening?”

“No, the drag show’s not ‘till Friday; she’s going into labor. They’re at the hospital now!”

Without bothering to change out of our pajamas, Matt and I threw our shoes on and sprinted out the door like we were fleeing a crime scene. I didn’t realize how

bad I had stung my arm until we were out of the driveway. I had also failed to notice the pace my heart was beating, throbbing, really. It felt like it was pulsing its way up into my throat, constricting my breath. Suddenly, I was breathing as though *I* was the one to give birth.

“Listen, Wes, you need to cut that shit out *right now!*”

“Would if I could!” I gasped.

“Just, man the fuck up for once in your life, O.K.? You’re about to become a father.”

“Should I point out the irony?”

“No need.”

“Hey, um, Matt.”

“Yeah, bro?”

“We need to let Mom know.”

“Alright. You need to use my phone?”

“I can’t—I can’t talk to her right now. I’m too anxious.”

“Mate, I’m driving.”

“*Please.*”

“She doesn’t know, does she?”

“Not yet...”

“Well, it’s a hell of a time to tell her! Jesus *Christ*, Wes. What the *fuck?*”

“C’mon. Just tell her to meet us at the hospital.”

“No way! This is *your* shit, and I am having no part in it. This is unbelievable. How could you not—you’re not gonna call, are you?”

“I asked nicely.”

“God dammit.” He fished the phone out of his pocket, tapped a few times, and held it to his ear. “Hey, Mum...Didn’t wake you, did I? Alright, good. This is gonna sound bizarre, but Wes and I are on our way to the hospital and—yeah, we’re both fine. No, he isn’t hurt. Yes, I’m certain. *We are both perfectly functional, Mom.* I just need you to meet me at North Pointe Hospital. I know it’s not the best area, and I’m *well aware* how far out of the way it is. It ain’t any closer to us. Just—I’ll just have Wes explain once you meet us there. No, he doesn’t want to talk right now. I don’t know, he’s being a sissy. Alright, Mum, I’ve gotta go. I’m driving. O.K. *Loveyougoodbye!*”

“Wasn’t gonna let you hang up?”

“Every answer made for a dozen more questions. Good luck dealing with

that.”

By the time we arrived at the hospital, Mom had called us both. She'd beaten us there by twenty minutes. She stood up to meet us at the door. She, too, was in her pajamas.

“Alright, *what is going on here?* This isn't exactly the place for a family reunion.”

“I can explain.”

“Well?”

“Can—can we talk someplace more private?”

“What? Where do you want to go? We're at a *hospital?*”

“I'll go ask the receptionist,” Matt said, desperate to ease his way out of the conversation.

“What's with the pink hoodie?” Mom asked, pinching his sleeve.

“It's—his girlfriend's, I think. She leaves her clothes over and sometimes I wear this to bed...It's comfy for me.”

“What about the lipstick?” I said. He reflexively scrubbed at his mouth for a second before realizing I was bullshitting him. He marched off towards the receptionist's desk.

“Are you O.K.?” She asked me. “Your eye is twitching.”

“Yeah, I'm just—I do that sometimes, I guess.”

“There's a chapel down the hall on the left side,” Matt said upon returning.

I led Mom that way, feeling like I was walking the Green Mile. “You coming?” I beckoned back to Matt, who remained at his position in the lobby.

“You know what? I think I'm good.” He gave a smug wave and took a seat by the window.

“Wesley David, I want to know right now what we are doing here,” my mother said as I ushered her into the chapel.

“Alright, so, I have a girl...in the maternity ward.”

“*What?*” she spat. “Carly?”

Shit, it's been a long time since we spoke. I must've forgotten to tell her about that whole fiasco. Oh, yeah. I'd been keeping the pregnancy from her this whole time, which is what got me into the fiasco at hand. I shook my head.

“Is this a *joke?* You call me to the hospital at ten o'clock at night *in my pajamas* as I'm laying down for bed, because you—you're telling me there is a girl up there—are you *crying?*”

I nodded. Through my tears, her face looked mosaic. “I’ve been doing that a lot lately.” I felt her arms wrap around me, her warm body pressing against mine without reservation. For a moment, we stood there in silence.

“Wesley, you were born at 8:54 on a Saturday morning. Ever since that day, my world has revolved around you. I am *always* here for you, and I will *always* be by your side. I don’t care if you call to tell me you murdered somebody, all I’d need to know is where to hide the body. I love you, Wes, but I can’t help you unless you let me know how.” She backed away from me, her arms still at my side, and planted a kiss on my forehead.

“Are you mad?”

“I don’t know what the fuck I’m feeling right now, but we’re gonna get through this.” She stopped to laugh. “If there’s a baby up there with your DNA in it, all I know is that I’m going to love it as much as I fell in love with you twenty-three years ago.”

An elderly woman was peering into the chapel from the doorway. She jumped when her gaze met my own. “I am so sorry for your loss,” she said, beginning to shuffle out of this uncomfortable moment.

“Our gain, actually,” I corrected her. “But we might be needing those condolences, anyhow.”

“Oh, my God. You’re gonna put me in a nursing home by the time I’m fifty,” Mom said, coughing up a weak laugh. “We’ve been through a lot, but this takes the cake.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I just couldn’t say anything. I was so *scared*, I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Well, this might be the most memorable way to find out. That’s one way to look at it. I don’t suppose I would know this girl you’ve knocked-up, would I?”

“Actually, do you remember Ione Callito? She used to come around back when I was in school...”

She let out a deep sigh. “Well, not my *first choice*, but I suppose this is your life.”

I looked down at my shoes, uncertain of what to say or do. “Should we let somebody know we’re here? I don’t know how to go about any of this...”

Returning to Matt, we found out that he was already on top of it. A nurse relocated us to a waiting room on the third floor, where Ione was shitting out my heir. The nurse explained that there had been some complications, but did not divulge in the specifics. Ione only “invited” her parents and boyfriend in the room while she delivered, but if we were lucky, we might be able to hear her screams from down the hall. I pretended to browse the Internet on my phone while Matt and Mom talked, but I couldn’t focus on anything. By the time I’d reach the end of a sentence, I couldn’t recall how it began. App games weren’t even mind-numbing enough to placate the

swelling feeling inside of my head.

The word “complications” had put me on edge. What in the fuck did *that* mean? What kind of complications were we talking about, and to what degree of risk? Was Ione’s health in danger? *The child’s?* I don’t know what scared me more, the concept of losing one or both of them, or that this sounded about as promising to me as it did threatening. In my own shitty way, I’d be let off the hook, given a cosmic mulligan from all of this. I couldn’t tell if I was merely having some autistic fit or if I was truly this evil of a human being. All I knew is that I needed some fresh air and *asap*. I excused myself from the waiting room, saying that I was going out for a walk. No, I didn’t want company, but call me if there’s any update. My desperation, my need to fill my lungs with air outside of the suffocating purgatory of this room, might have come across as impatience or arrogance, but I couldn’t afford to give a damn.

After excusing myself, I asked Mom to make sure that if Matt used the restroom, he used the proper one.

“Why?” She asked, laughing.

“If anything, we should be making sure *you* don’t sneak into the wrong bathroom,” Matt retorted. “Don’t want you getting anybody *else* pregnant.”

On the fourth ring, my father’s voice informed me that I had been directed to his voicemail. I clicked back to the lock screen. Why did I think he would pick up? I couldn’t blame him. After all, it *was* eleven at night on a Sunday, and it’s not like I had given any heads up on the due date. Even if I did, we were almost *three weeks* early. Who could possibly have prepared for *that shit?* Yet, I wanted with every fiber of my being to hate him, to call back and leave the most venomous string of words he would ever hear on that God damned voicemail. I needed to. Just to blame something, somebody else for a moment would be enough to make me feel a little better about myself, at least long enough to catch my breath.

At first, I thought I had dropped my phone. My eyes immediately shot to the ground to see where it had fallen, and then the truth hit me like a rock to the back of the head. It had been snatched, and the person who swiped it was still standing to my side.

“You already know what the fuck this is,” a thick-yet-strained voice spat into my ear. I could not determine any race from his voice alone. I prayed to God that he was white. That way if I had to defend myself, it wouldn’t be considered a hate crime. “Take a look at this shank aimed right at your dick so we can start getting this over with.” I felt that my face had lost all color. I couldn’t see anyone else across the street or within the immediate vicinity. Slow enough to feel the skin stretching across the back of my neck, I peered down to acknowledge that there was indeed a fucking shank mere inches away from my manhood.

“Alright,” I heard myself say. I felt like I’d taken too many Ibuprofen. All physical sensation was dulled. “What’s the deal?”

“First off, what’s the combo on this piece a outdated shit?”

“2012,” I mumbled. I snuck a glance at my captor. Thank God, he was white. “It’s the year I first kissed the mother of my child.”

“Uh-huh, real cute.” Through my peripheral vision, I could see that he was nodding. “How old we talkin’?”

“A few minutes, at the most. She’s kinda getting born right now...”

“Yeah, *real funny*.”

“No, for real! Check the text messages. There should be one from my contact, Smegman that says they made it to the delivery room.”

He scrolled through the touch screen, appearing to actually seek this information out. Should I have taken the chance to flee or subdue him? Probably. “Well, no shit. Congratulations, my man. You’re missin’ out on a beautiful thing, bein’ out here with me instead a in there with them, so Imma make this quick and we can get on with it.”

“C’mon, man. Can’t I get some paternity leave from this shit? Gimme an address and I’ll send a raincheck.”

“You got *Illmatic* on here?”

“Of course.” I felt violated that this stranger was scrolling through my personal information, but I also could not deny a compliment to my music library.

“*Enter the Wu-Tang, It Takes a Nation of Millions, Ready to Die*, man, packin’ shit like this, you should be a little more street smart not to come out at this hour. You not from around here or sumthin? Bruh, this ain’t Nineteenth street.”

“That should be apparent. I was getting into my car so that I can go to the hospital and see my daughter...Wait, why? What’s on Nineteenth Street? Do you guys not go there?”

“*Us guys?* The fuck’s that s’posed to mean? You see anybody else out here right now? This is *all me*, baby.” He unleashed a laugh not unlike Spongebob’s neighbor Squidward’s, but if he was high on pot. “Nineteenth Street and east is spoken for by some local hoods, always shootin’ at each other and killin’ anyone else who happens to be in the way. Some real bureaucratic bullshit, if ya ask me! Your wallet...” He held out a hand.

“Man, I’m strapped for cash. Like, *dead broke*. All I got are Visas.”

“Alright, then. Let’s take it to the ATM.”

“What? You want to go inside the fuckin’ hospital, with all the security guards and cameras?”

He nodded towards an ATM embedded in the brick wall of a bank conveniently located across the street. It happened to be a branch from my chain. *Thanks again, God.*



“C’mon, man. This is *ridiculous*.”

“Economy’s tough. You’ve been holding me up. I could’a robbed three other assholes in the time you’ve cost me.”

“I’ve held you up!? You have quite literally held me up!” He did not appear to be in the mood to humor such ironies. “Alright, there is *no way* I’m going to that ATM! You cannot *drag my ass* across that street to give you my money.” I felt pressure on my zipper and made the mistake of looking down. So, we’re at the ATM in a minute, and I’m punching my PIN into the machine. “You don’t want to stand any closer, make sure I’m not shortchanging ya?”

“Motherfucker, you know they’ve got cameras on these things.”

“Oh, so you have no problem taking all my money, but too ashamed to be seen with me?”

“Naw. This is *my* money. It’s my natural right, like Darwin ‘n shit.”

“You read *Darwin*?”

“*Do I read Darwin?* Yes, I read Darwin! *I ain’t no scrub!*”

I handed him a wad of bills, three twenties, all the money left to my name since losing my job at Shop Shop Shop.

“Man, you weren’t kiddin’. You *really are* broke as shit.” In perhaps his most shocking behavior yet, he held a hand out for me to shake. “It was a pleasure doin’ business with ya, though. Like they say, every penny counts.” He smiled, flashing a golden tooth between his front and canines.

“Sure thing. I mean, this fucking sucked, and I’m pretty certain I won’t sleep right for months because of this, but in terms of getting robbed for the first time, this could’a been a lot worse.”

“Yeah...” His voice trailed off. “I’m still gonna have to give you a cut, though. It’s just how this shit goes, shows I’m ‘real’ and all that.”

“*What!?*” I could feel my hands trembling violently at my side. My legs no longer felt solid and I was prepared to crumble in horror.

He let out another nasal guffaw. “I’m just fucking wit’cha! You take it sl—” The man fell to the ground, victim to a karate chop *in the fucking neck*. Before I could even take this in, Matt was pressing a foot down on the man’s head.

“Go inside, tell the receptionist to call security.”

“What about?”

“*Just fucking do it!*”

I obliged him. After I explained the events to the receptionist, she let out an “oh my God” under her breath and phoned the security officer on-duty. In minutes, a grossly obese man in uniform was sprinting out the door to sling cuffs around my

assailant's wrists. I followed at my own pace, still feeling disoriented from the event. We were asked a few brief questions and the money was placed back in my hands. Soon as we were given the go-ahead to GTFO, Matt grabbed me by the shoulder to powerwalk our way into the hospital.

"What the fuck was that!?" I yelled. "How did you—"

"Self-defense classes," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Duh."

"Jesus Christ. You might wear thongs, but you're more of a man than I'll ever be!"

"I don't agree with your terminology, but I get what you're saying...and I appreciate it."

"I'm sorry about that...And I'm sorry I made jokes about your gender!"

"Fuck that. Not being cis doesn't make me a pussy."

"Would you say it makes you badass? Or is that just something else?"

"It doesn't hurt. Would you just shut the fuck up about me for a second? You're about to be a father."

We skipped the waiting room and Matt led me straight to the hospital room Ione had delivered in. Mom was seated in the far corner of the room, opposite of red-faced Ione in her hospital bed. At her side were her parents. I couldn't tell that a day had passed since the last time I'd seen them. Standing right outside the door as we entered was Brendan, holding a newborn child swathed in a thin fleece. He took a step towards me, planted a gentle kiss on the baby's forehead, and passed her into my arms. She weighed less than I expected, and yet I felt the weight of her life in my hands, the responsibility I owed her as one who had brought her into this world. Hair was already thick upon her head. Her face was red, both indistinct from any other newborn and yet unmistakably mine. Somehow, I just felt that this tiny person was a part of me. I knew from the moment I laid eyes on her that she had saved my life, given it purpose. She was my redemption and she had given birth to a new man within me. I snaked a hand around towards her own tiny palms and she wrapped her hand around my index finger. She had quite a grip for somebody the size of a football. I knew I was smiling, and yet I couldn't feel my face. I had the strange feeling that I was being photographed, but didn't dare take my eyes off of her to find out, as though this would be my first and only time to do so. This girl was going to be around for the rest of my life, and longer. *How lucky am I?* I remember thinking. *What could I have done to deserve this?*

"Congratulations, man," Brendan said, patting me on the back.

"Thanks, you, too," I said. Somehow, through this birth, I felt a kinship had been forged between us. Like Brendan had said, we were two veterans of the same cause.

“She was born at 12:31,” Mom informed me. She was smiling, but I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. I turned towards Matt, who was still standing beside me, and handed him the baby. He seemed uncomfortable, taking her into his own hands, but I think he was excited to meet her. There’s something undeniable about a newborn family member.

I walked towards Ione, whose hair was in sweaty ropes sprawled across her pillow. Her face was still wet with perspiration. “How you holdin’ up?” I leaned down for a hug.

“I’m keeping together,” she said in a lofty voice. She did her best to return the embrace, but her form was weak. She summoned a wry smile as we parted. “We did it.”

“Yeah, that’s how you make the babies.”

“*Alright, now!*” a voice bellowed from behind me. I turned to face Keith Callito, Ione’s father. He laughed, shaking my hand.

“Funny running into you here,” I said, trying to match his firm grip.

“How ya been?”

“Around,” I replied. In retrospect, it probably didn’t make much sense, but sometimes the truth just *doesn’t*.

“Mom!” Ione beckoned. “Can you give Wes the papers?”

“Oh, yeah!” Her mother shot up from her seat and handed me a clipboard with a hug. It held the birth certificate for...*Madelyn Thompson?*

“Oh, that’s *real funny*...” I said, turning back towards Ione.

“What?” Her voice was soft.

“*Madelyn?* What happened to Abigail?”

“Umm...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The name we talked about, at the hair salon!”

“Wes, I *really* don’t remember.”

“*You!*” I stabbed a finger toward Brendan. “Why didn’t you say anything!?”

“Well, I figured that was between the two of you.”

“You couldn’t have dropped a hint? Or, I dunno, told me not to get a *tramp stamp* with nobody’s name on it?”

“Tramp stamp?” I heard my mother repeat.

“Well, at Wittol’s, we take customer confidentiality *very* seriously.”

“Well, it’ll be a conversation piece...” I shrugged.

We spent the rest of the night in the maternity ward with Ione and Madelyn.

I didn't want to leave that night at all, but of course, we aren't always given a choice...

### Some Kind of Epilogue

By the time I pulled into Brendan's driveway, which was now Brendan and Ione's driveway, they were both waiting for me on the porch. Ione was bobbing Madelyn on her lap. I stepped out into the warm breeze. The mud had dried into a soft clay. Summer was on its way.

"Either I'm getting older or moms are getting hotter," I said, climbing the wooden porch steps.

"I'm right here, buddy," Brendan said, standing to give me a bro hug.

"Hey, now, you should be *thankful* for this attraction we've got goin' on. Without my superior paternal genes, who knows what this kid could've come out lookin'. Leave it to you two and the girl'd have to grow up with a second head. Speaking of which, *what is up?*" I bent down to scoop Madelyn up into my arms.

"You're lucky you're shockingly good with her, or else I'd have to shoot you. After all, you are on my property."

"*Our* property," Ione corrected him.

"Ew." I said. "You ready to get outta here, little girl? You're probably sick of these icky grown-ups."

"Well, you'll certainly be a change of pace from *that*." She stood up from her chair. "You've got a car seat?" Check. "Diapers?" Yup. "You know that she needs fed, right? As in, putting some milk in a bowl isn't gonna cut it? Speaking of which, you'd better not leave her alone with those cats..."

"Oh my *God*, how being a mother has changed you! Brendan, you can keep this one. Us cool kids are gonna get outta here. We're going to see Grandma and Big Maddie."

"Speaking of which, how've you two held up since that whole mugging thing?"

I shook my head. "Well, Matt seems to think himself a real hero. He's *grateful* that it happened. I wake up screaming sometimes, but for the most part, I manage."

"You know that if you type your PIN number in backwards, the ATM will glitch out and alert the police?"

"No, but that is an incredibly odd factoid for somebody to just know off the top of their head."

"Well, with *Lil Maddie* around," (I was glad to see my nickname for our girl catching on.) "It got me thinking I need to consider these things...just in case."

"You have become absolutely *paranoid*. Next time I pick her up, you'd better not send her over in a tinfoil hat." She just smiled up at me with her beady eyes. It

gave me the urge to plant a kiss on her forehead. Instead, I let the moment pass. “Ione, I’m sorry for ducking out, like I do.”

She shook her head. “Really, it doesn’t matter. You didn’t miss much.”

“Miss much? I hardly even get to see you all fat!”

“Or puking, or acting like a crazy bitch, or staying up all night, crying, because the pain was too much...”

“*You* didn’t have to make late night runs to accommodate bizarre cravings,” Brendan added.

“Point made,” I said. “It’s not just that. I just wanted to let you know that I’m gonna be around, from now on. I’m gonna be there for Madelyn and you...and maybe him, too.” I tilted my head Brendan’s way. “I don’t want to be the kind of father that—the kind of father that I had.” My vision started to shimmer. I felt a bubble rising in my throat; I forced it back down. My voice was threatening to crack, but I held it together. “I just wanted to let you know, that whatever you guys need, I’m gonna be around.”

“Wes, I know you will.” She reached out to touch my arm. “Let’s just take things day by day, figure things out as they come. For now, go home, spend some time with your daughter.” They said their goodbyes to Madelyn and I bid them farewell. I strapped my girl into her car seat and backed out of their driveway slower than I have since my driver’s exam. I found myself talking to Madelyn, in the backseat of the car, letting her adapt to my voice. I did not take my eyes off the road ahead.