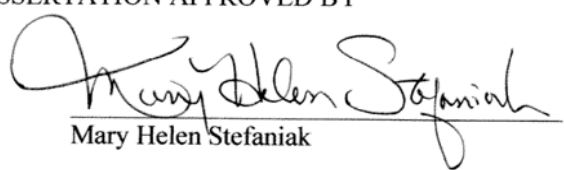

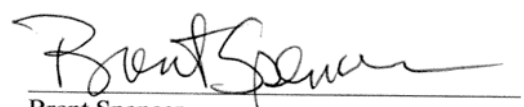


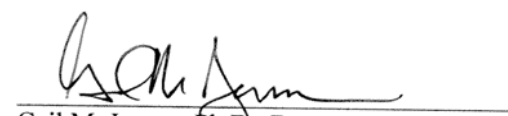
THESIS/DISSERTATION APPROVED BY

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HIGHER THAN GOD

B

S.R. SEGRIST

A NOVEL IN STORIES

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the Creighton University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English

Omaha, NE
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Abstract for Higher than God by S.R. Segrist

Higher than God is a collection of twelve pieces of fiction in a variety of formats such as modern short story prose, the memoir, the epistolary, poetry, and more experimental forms such as the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure story and stream-of-consciousness writings. The works were written with the format of a concept album in mind where each individual piece of fiction is like a song which can be enjoyed on its own, but when read in order, reveals motifs, thematic echoes, and greater emotional resonance for the reader, similar to the effect a well-sequenced album would have on a musical aficionado. The protagonist of the “novel” is a young, white, male named Travis Steve. All the pieces attempt to reveal different aspects of his emotional/spiritual development or lack thereof through focusing on his turbulent emotional life which results from his various relationships and his experimentation with sex and substances. The work also relies heavily upon a myriad range of pop-cultural references, primarily rock n’ roll music, video game culture, and Hollywood movies. The end result is a totality of intra-textual meaning, as well as a bittersweet portrait and psychological examination of the protagonist.

Table of Contents

The Fraud 6

Freshman Year: A Choose-Your-Own Misadventure 29

Sarah Bentworth's Blank Book 56

Irving Bartholomew Long 83

Vyctoria Waddell 125

What Moves the Body 145

Imelda Marcos and the 12 Dancing Princesses 157

You and I, We Will Rise 178

The Original of the Species 182

A Letter to Travis 197

Coming to Light 199

Higher than God 223

The Fraud

Travis Steve's mind was made up before he hit the snooze button for the third time.

That's it—I'm sick.

It was 9:15 AM (early for Travis) and he was most definitely not physically ill. While it was originally his intention to wake up early on that Tuesday to get a head-start on his first (and what would be the only) draft of a short story due that night, Travis knew in his heart that he just wasn't creative in the morning. To make matters worse, he had to work a lunch shift at the Olive Garden. He was supposed to be there at 10:00 to refill salt and pepper shakers, a reliable chore for making him feel he was wasting his life. Even if business was slow and he got off early, he would still only have four hours to start and finish the story.

Travis fumbled for his phone and dialed his employer. Fortunately, the lingering effects of sleep resulted in very relaxed vocal chords, lending a gruffness and extra bass-y timbre to his voice. He fancied himself an actor with prodigious vocal manipulation talent, so when Mike the Culinary Manager picked up, he transformed his voice into a raspy goulash of pitiful squeaks and coughs.

Experience had taught Travis it was usually best to keep a lie short and sweet; liars tend to over-explain, to hem and haw, to say too much, to butcher the porky, to excessively elaborate until their believability erodes away into suspicious territory.

“Hey Mike...this is Travis...I'm scheduled to be in at 10:00, but I'm sick.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Weren't you sick last Tuesday?”

“Yeah. I thought I had it beat, but it came back...with a vengeance.”

Travis cringed a little bit, wondering if perhaps his humorous attempt at a *Die Hard* reference worked against him. He could hear the sounds of cooks firing up the grills in the background.

“Okay. Feel better, bud.”

Travis snapped his phone shut and kicked his feet up, sending his comforter into the air like tossed pizza dough. He always felt a wave of release following the interminable suspense of a lie-in-progress.

He thought: *This is the feeling criminals must get when they pull off a heist, a score, a con.*

He had just bought himself an additional three and a half hours to conceptualize, compose, and revise a five-page literary masterpiece sure to dazzle and impress his peers and professor.

He reset his alarm clock and went back to sleep.

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Two hours later, Travis was still asleep, but not soundly; he was nightmaring about English 250—Advanced Fiction Writing (although the inclusion of the word “advanced” in the title seemed somewhat Orwellian.) In this freakish dream, it was always Tuesday night and he was locked for an eternity inside a windowless classroom, poorly lit by fluorescent bulbs, with sixteen or so other students all in a circle of desks, circulating manuscripts for peer revision. Some of their heads would be disproportionately larger than their bodies, like Charlie Brown’s. Some were dressed all in black. Some had misshapen folds of fat protruding from tight spandex outfits, their sausage fingers barely able to turn pages. Giant melting clocks adorned the walls and every thirty seconds, the professor, Dr. Harold Leibowitz, a short, balding man with gold-

rimmed glasses and a Freudian beard would yell “Switch!” and the students would pass whatever they were reading to the left before feverishly diving into the next hackneyed, contrived text. The only problem was that Travis didn’t have his manuscript, so people kept lining up at his cramped, little desk, tapping their feet in annoyance, waiting for him to produce what could not be produced: a story of his own.

C’mon Travis, they’d demand in unison, before taking turns with their spiteful epithets.

It’s so easy for you to criticize our stories. You think you can do better, huh?

Why don’t you show us?

Yeah, why don’t you show us, you pretentious little bitch.

Show us. Show us. Show us.

They yanked Travis from his desk, and Dr. Leibowitz made him stand before the class.

Travis, you will fail this class unless you show us your story, he said in his squeaky voice.

Silence filled the room as Travis stood awkwardly in front of the chalkboard.

Well? The professor motioned the universal sign for “Get on with it” with his hand.

“Uh...uh...my story’s right here...” Travis fumbled with his zipper.

The chants began again: *Show us! Show us! Show us!*

Travis pulled down his pants and underwear; his groin was merely a blank, airbrushed region of smooth flesh, like a nude Ken doll.

“Gah!”

Travis woke with a start, sat up and tried to rouse himself. It was 11:36. He had less than seven hours.

I've really got to finish this, if for nothing else than the ability to get a good night's sleep.

It was true his sleep was often punctuated with nightmares. Recurring themes of Humiliation, Personal Failure, and Impotence were the primary colors of his dream palette. What had happened to the time this semester? Travis had fully intended to commit to writing a page a day, but he hated everything he wrote and deleted it after he was done. Over the last few weeks, when he wasn't in class or waiting tables, he watched movies for inspiration, but then he just felt bad when he'd write something and it'd just sound like De Niro or Pacino.

He ran downstairs and dropped a Pop-Tart into the toaster, booted up his laptop, and made a trip to the bathroom. A mirror hung above the toilet, so Travis had several opportunities a day to ponder his reflection whilst emptying his bladder. Staring at himself in the mirror, he scanned his face for some kind of revelation, the way a scorned lover searches the eyes of a philandering spouse for explanations that never come.

He must have searched for too long, because the scent of a burning pastry brought him out of his distraction.

While consuming his charred breakfast, he performed his regular routine of checking his e-mail and various news sites at the kitchen table. He realized this was stalling, but he was a creature of habit: only after visiting each and every music, movie, comic, and video game website he frequented could he satisfy his media-hungry brain and he could feel he was in that elusive and transitory place where there was nothing left to do but get to work.

Get to work! Travis thought in his most urgent inner pep-talk voice, the same voice heard in inspirational sports films when the coach/mentor's words resound encouragingly within the athlete's mind.

He opened his word processor and stared at the white page. The blinking cursor taunted him, dared him to press keys.

You could just revise one of your old stories no one in the class's read, but damn, you already did that for your first submission earlier this semester. You don't want to have taken this entire class and not have written a single new story, do you? You need some inspiration, man. Why don't you check out the newspaper?

Travis went to the porch and retrieved the paper.

As he flipped through it, he thought: *The Beatles got their inspiration for "Eleanor Rigby" from reading a story in the newspaper. If it worked for them, it should work for you, right?*

All he found was tax levies, debate over Senate appropriations bills, and more death in the Middle East. Travis was at a terrible loss. After struggling with the crossword puzzle for a few minutes, he threw the newspaper on the floor.

Maybe I should smoke-up. Nah, that's too risky. Instead of unleashing the creativity, I might get loopy and write something too stream-of-consciousness like the last time. I can just imagine someone wanting to ask, "Did you write this when you were stoned?" I'd have to admit, "Yeah, I was high at the time." Maybe I just need to clear my head. Find my center. Get in the zone.

Travis got up from the table and went to the living room to meditate.

After several minutes of trying to count his breaths and tap into his unconscious mind, he realized he just couldn't let go. The pressure was too much.

The time was now 12:39.

Travis began to freak out. He stomped about the living room, alternating between biting his nails and snapping his fingers compulsively, as if doing so could magically conjure inspiration.

He needed this class to graduate in the spring. His spring semester was already registered for a full course load of required classes, so it wasn't as if he could take the class over again. It wasn't offered in the summer either. To make matters worse, he was on academic probation and anything less than 'C' would get him kicked out of the university entirely.

Fuckfuckfuck. WhatamIgonnado? WhatamIgonnado?

At 12:43, to relieve the stress, Travis returned to his bedroom and began to masturbate. He looked around the room for inspiration and found an issue of *Captain Konor, Intergalactic Space-Man*. With one hand in his pajama pants and the other flipping through the brightly-colored pages, he settled on a defiant depiction of Shana-Lan, the Nuclear-Powered Woman, her red hair billowing in a cosmic wind, her breasts as big as her head, and undulating waves of energy emanating from her levitating body. He imagined Shana-Lan going down on him. Alas, despite much vigorous stimulation, he was only at half-mast. He thought it was because he had imagined this particular act with a sci-fi comic book character so many times that it had lost its erotic currency. In actuality, it was because the two of them were limited in what they could hypothetically do together on account of the fact that Shana-Lan had a miniature nuclear reactor where her hips should be, so Travis substituted Cindy, a girl from class who he'd wanted to jump on since the beginning of the school year, and at 12:45, in a wave of ecstasy and sweet release, the answer to Travis's problems came at the exact same time he did.

When he looked down, he discovered that some of his ejaculate had missed the sheets and landed on a pile of comic books at the foot of the bed. Travis cursed and began looking for

some discarded piece of clothing to wipe up the mess. Most of it had landed on Issue #245 of *Captain Konor*. Travis wiped the issue off with a dirty sock and began flipping through the pages. *Man, this is one of my favorite issues.*

He couldn't help but be sucked into "Severance Package". It was one of Travis's favorite Captain Konor stories, which was strange since Captain Konor wasn't really featured in this particular issue. The plot involved an alien mob boss known as Mr. Naxx who becomes extremely dissatisfied when one of his smuggler's ships is intercepted by Captain Konor and calls Mr. Smitz, his underling in charge of the operation, and orders him to come to his office in the middle of the night. Mr. Smitz says goodbye to his wife and kids and goes to meet his fate. This is the price one pays for failure, for disappointing the boss man. The severance package is that his head is to be severed from his body. In an effort to save his own life, Mr. Smitz decides at the last minute to try to take out his boss by shooting him with his laser gun, but despite hitting Naxx several times, the effort proves futile and he is handily terminated, crushed to death by Naxx's enormous hands. The issue ends with Naxx ordering the executions of Mr. Smitz's family.

Travis liked the story because it showed how a good action (Captain Konor using his intergalactic band of heroes to stop an illegal smuggling operation) could result in heinous consequences (the death of "innocents", the Smitz family).

See, why can't I write a nice, simple story like this? Travis asked himself. *Nice three-part structure, compelling human interest (even though it features extra-terrestrials) and a strong theme about the conflict of duty versus self-preservation. Man, it's sad how so few people will ever read this story because it's a comic...hey, wait a minute...*

He raced down the stairs with the stained comic book in his hand, full of renewed energy.

Travis placed Issue #245 next to the laptop and turned to the first page, which showed Mr. Smitz being woken by a communicator box in a darkened bed chamber, the call no employee of a criminal mastermind wants to get in the middle of the night. He began typing. With great economy, he described in prose what the little boxes of colorful art depicted and transferred the text from the speech bubbles into quotes.

One thing he had to change was the setting; he knew Dr. Leibowitz hated sci-fi and fantasy stories, so he decided to make it a mob morality tale, set in the heart of some unnamed metropolis, the seedy backdrop to any number of film noir tales. Naxx became Nash. Smitz became Smith. The communicator box became a telephone. Mr. Smitz's spaceship became a black '57 Chevy. Most of the dialogue stayed the same.

The average comic book is twenty-two pages, and Travis figured it was taking him about ten to fifteen minutes to translate each page into prose, so it looked like he would finish his "adaptation" around 5:30. This would give him enough time to give the story a quick once-over, make any corrections, shower, print off a master copy, and hurry to the University Copy Center to make eighteen copies for everyone in the class.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

At 5:47 PM, about halfway through his plagiaristic flurry, Travis's conscience piped up by questioning the wisdom of his actions. Unfortunately, Travis's conscience was still stuck in the Pre-conventional Stage of Morality, because instead of thinking: *I'm a plagiarist, scum of the earth*, he was thinking: *Holy shit, what if I get caught?*

Travis stopped typing and felt a sinking in his stomach as he realized someone else in the class might be a Captain Konor fan. Failing a class was one thing, but being expelled for plagiarism was an entirely different matter.

Travis looked at the clock.

He made a few self-justifications:

It's too late now to try something else.

There are thousands of comic books; what are the chances someone in this class has read this one?

Didn't Shakespeare rip off other people's stories?

His first self-justification was undoubtedly correct; it was definitely too late to do something else.

It was almost 6:00. He had never typed so much in such a short amount of time before. He didn't have time to proofread or shower. He pressed PRINT and dashed out the door with his nine-page master copy.

Despite speeding ten miles over the limit and parking in the Dean of Admissions' spot, Travis knew he was going to be late. At 6:15 PM, he rushed up the steps of the Student Union and entered the print shop only to find that all of the copiers had OUT-OF-SERVICE signs.

Damn, he thought. I was hoping to charge these copies to my student account.

He figured the next closest place he could make copies was Kinko's. He decided it would take too long to drive off-campus and find a parking space downtown, so he began sprinting.

When he arrived at Kinko's, the time was 6:30. The workshop would begin getting underway. Even in his rush, he noticed the attractive copy center associate working behind the counter. She resembled a taller Natalie Portman with bad posture and a tad too much eye shadow for a copy-center job.

Wow. She's hot, he thought.

He feverishly began copying and stapling all nine pages. The collation took longer than he had anticipated because he really didn't know how to use the Xerox machines. He took his copy card to the counter and handed the "associate" his debit card. He noticed her name was Michelle.

"Hey," he said. "How's it goin'?"

"Fine," she said while swiping his card, without looking up.

Travis rapped his knuckles on the counter. "So...is this a cool job?"

She shrugged half-heartedly. "Meh."

"Oh, that's too bad."

Man, I'm totally blowing this, he thought. A change in approach?

"By any chance were you named after the Beatles song?"

She glanced up from the computer screen register briefly. "What?"

"Were you named after 'Michelle' by the Beatles?"

She pursed her lips in an unimpressed way before responding with: "Nope."

Travis's mind was too busy trying to continue the conversation to pick up on the reality that Michelle's exclusive communication in monosyllables was not a good sign.

"What about the Guns n' Roses' song?"

"Sir, I'm sorry, but it's saying your card is declined."

The sinking feeling returned. "What? No way."

"Do you have an alternate form of payment?" she asked, handing him back his card.

"No...uh...I don't have any cash on me."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to come back if you want these copies."

“Listen, I’m late right now to my final workshop, and if I don’t have these stories to share, I’m going to fail this class.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but—”

“Isn’t there something I can do? You know, leave my driver’s license or something? Listen, I’m begging you. My class started half an hour ago.”

She repeated, “I’m sorry, sir, but—”

“You know what? Forget this!” Travis grabbed the pile of photocopies and bolted for the door.

“Hey! Stop!” she called after him.

“I’ll be back with some cash later!” he yelled back. As he ran through the door, the only two thoughts on his mind were a) he hoped he could find someone to loan him the nineteen bucks after class, and b) he had no chance with Michelle.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sweating and panting, Travis darted down the stairs of Mulligan Hall and entered the basement classroom at 7:12 PM. It looked like the class had finished reading Cindy’s story and was in the middle of discussing its (alleged) merits. Dr. Leibowitz didn’t say anything when Travis stumbled in, but the look on his face said, “Typical.”

Travis apologized and took a seat. He concentrated on getting his breath back and slowing down his heartbeat while trying to get a grip on what the discussion was about. A student handed him a copy of Cindy’s story; the title was “Why I Am a Lesbian.”

Damn, what a shame, was all Travis could think. He tried comforting himself by remembering that the class was ostensibly about the writing of fiction. *Maybe she’s not really a carpet-muncher, but, then again, all my fiction is thinly-veiled autobiography. Hmm.* He couldn’t

really participate in the discussion because he hadn't read the story, but before he could give it a skim, it was time to read the next student's. Travis really hated this format for the creative writing workshop. Half of class was spent just reading the student manuscripts. It seemed Leibowitz had designed the course so it would have the bare minimum of encroachment on his own writing time outside of class. There were times Travis imagined Leibowitz getting ready for class, standing in front of a full-length mirror while putting on his little tweed jacket and his square-cut tie, and muttering what he really thought about the rising tide of mediocrity that passed for college-level fiction.

Dan distributed a story called "The Gatekeeper to Hell." It was pretty derivative of Lovecraft, Barker, and Poe, but Travis really couldn't focus on reading the horror story; he could only stare at the eighteen copies of "Severance Package", his latest and greatest creation on his desk. Time seemed to be moving at an excruciatingly slow pace. Travis just wanted it all to be over.

Finally, at 8:15, the time came for Travis to distribute his manuscript. He walked around the circle of desks and handed one to each person. He felt a little woozy, as he realized there was no turning back now. He handed the last copy to Dr. Leibowitz. They exchanged nods and Travis returned to his seat.

Dr. Leibowitz addressed him, "Travis, would you like to share any introductory remarks or direct our attention to any particular aspect of your story?"

Travis shook his head and said, "I'm just going to let the writin' do the talkin'."

"Fair enough."

So everyone began reading, except for Travis.

There's nothing quite like the sound of turning pages, combined with delayed snorts and chuckles of laughter. If a sound engineer were to mike the room, the recording would sound like John Cage's experimental performance of *The Nervous Symphony of Imminent Discovery*.

Travis eyed the room, looking for some look of recognition, a furrowed brow or scrunched face from any one of them, an expression that said, "Hey, wait a minute. I've read this before..."

Travis's gaze settled on an overweight kid named Jaycee. In this particular situation, Jaycee, the fat, freckled redhead in a Green Lantern shirt with potato-chip stains and mesh shorts displaying pasty, ginger-haired legs the size of caveman clubs, was the exact opposite of Travis's ideal reader. He thought, *How could I have forgotten the class's only fanboy? Shit, I bet he has a complete run of Captain Konor. He probably lives at home with his parents and has read Issue 245 a dozen times.*

His fears weren't enough to keep him from eyeing up the legs of Cindy, the slender brunette sitting next to Jaycee. All semester he had been hoping to ask her out. He didn't like her writing very much, but he figured he wouldn't be reading her stories when she was in his bed.

Oh god, what if she has some boyfriend who was totally into comic books and she read some of his collection to understand him better? Or what if she has older brothers who read Captain Konor and to fit in, she spent Saturday afternoons going through their long-boxes while other girls were discussing their periods and the Spice Girls? Tom-boys can really disguise themselves once they come to college. So often they're ugly ducklings who blossom into gorgeous birds. Fuck.

Travis was even nervous that Dr. Leibowitz was a closet comic-book aficionado, deeply ashamed of his predilection for four-color funny books, pulse-pounding pulp adventures, and the

modern mythology of spectacular super-heroics. *I bet he loved this stuff growing up but his overbearing father scolded him for it and expected him to read “serious” literature. Once he got to college, he put away childish things and began reading Derrida instead of Ditko. Damn it, I should have just used one of my older stories. This was a huge mistake.*

One by one, everyone finished reading the last page, the page with the climax: the violent strangulation of Mr. Smith, caught in the massive hands of Mr. Nash.

Travis’s eyes darted around the room, still hunting for reactions.

There were a few hushed responses. Travis heard someone whisper “sweet.” Cindy smiled at Travis and gave him a thumbs-up sign; he smiled back.

He glanced at Dr. Leibowitz and was surprised to see him with a large grin on his small face.

He said, “It looks like everyone’s finished reading this story, the last one we will all read for the semester. Who’d like to share their thoughts about Travis’s story?”

Hands shot up all around the room; Travis wasn’t sure who to call on first.

“Uh, Dan...”

“Dude, this is the coolest story I’ve read all year. I love mafia stories, but usually they’re all cliché, but this one wasn’t that way. This was frickin’ sweet.”

“Thanks,” was all Travis could say. *Hey, this feels kind of good.* Travis called on another raised hand belonging to John.

John began his comment the way most students in creative writing workshops began their comments: “First off, I really liked your story. It was cool. It’s different from your other story.

Yeah, I really liked it.”

Travis wanted to say, “Thanks, John. I’m happy you liked the story, but your comments really don’t give me any idea of what to work on for future improvements,” but he stopped after “Thanks, John.”

Travis noticed Cindy’s finely tanned hand in the air. He called on her.

She motioned with her hand as if she was going to make a point, but then paused and looked up briefly at the ceiling to collect her thoughts.

“Don’t get me wrong, I liked your story, but I was confused by the part with Mrs. Smith. No offense, but she seemed a little...I don’t know...cardboard. You set up this potentially amazing dramatic scene where they’re in the kitchen and he’s basically telling her she’s never going to see him again, and all she can do is shed a tear and say ‘I love you’? It’s obvious she’s not happy about the situation, but she just doesn’t seem to really be reacting the way most loving spouses would. I’m just thinking her reaction to the situation isn’t very realistic, so what I’m saying is that you might want to consider adding more dialogue to this scene, ratchet up the tension, you know.”

Travis nodded. “Thanks, Cindy. I’ll do that.”

This first criticism of his story caused a knee-jerk reaction in Travis’s mind and one word flared up: *Bitch*.

Before Travis could dwell on what she said, he noticed Jaycee’s hand was up.

That sinking feeling returned.

Travis called on him.

“Yeah. Well, like everyone else, I liked the story. It reminded me a lot of this comic books series I used to read...”

Oh, shit...

“...called Captain Konor. Have you ever read it?”

Travis shook his head. “Never heard of it before.”

“Oh, okay. You should check it out sometime. It’s really cool. It’s sci-fi, not like this mobster story. It’s probably a coincidence, but some of the names are similar. Like there’s this bad guy named Mr. Naxx and I noticed there’s a time in your story when Mr. Smith calls Mr. Nash Mr. Naxx.”

A few other students nodded and said they had noticed the difference in spelling as well.

Travis had been in such a rush to finish typing the story he had overlooked changing some of the proper names.

Travis hoped he wasn’t visibly gulping. “Really? Where?”

Jaycee began flipping through the manuscript and then stuck his pudgy pointer finger halfway down one of the pages. “Here on page six.”

Travis laughed and said, “I’ll admit, I’m not the world’s best typist. It must be a typo. I’ll have to check out that series sometime. I’m glad you liked the story, Jaycee.”

Jaycee nodded and said no more.

It was almost 9:00.

Dr. Leibowitz clapped his hands together and said, “I suppose it’s time for my closing comments. Travis, I just have to say that this is a remarkably well-written story. I can tell you really worked hard on this one, digging deep. I know I’ve said all semester there’s always room for improvement, but I’m at a loss right now of what to tell you. I would love to read more stories involving this Mr. Nash villain. He has such a vivid presence, a sense of gravitas to him! I would take Cindy’s comments into consideration though and try to develop Mrs. Smith more. The male characters do seem more three-dimensional than her, so that’s something to work on in

revision. Good job, Travis. Everyone, let's give tonight's writers a big hand of applause for the work they've done. ”

The sound of the clapping seemed thunderous to Travis's ears. A kind of cognitive dissonance resonated within Travis's heart. Getting this kind of response was supposed to make him feel like a success, and he showed this by smiling, a smile he couldn't humbly erase, but something nagged him inside, longing to be resolved, like a diminished chord at the end of a jazz tune.

Maybe, he thought, this is the feeling criminals get when they pull off a heist, a score, a con.

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One week later, it was Tuesday morning of finals week and Travis was standing in the cold behind the Olive Garden, two hours before opening, waiting for someone to open the service door. The heavy metallic door swung open and Mike, the diminutive troll of Culinary Science, smirked at Travis with his toothy grin and beady eyes. “Travis! We missed ya, ol' buddy, ol' pal.”

Travis nodded and stepped out of the cold. He noticed Mike's starch-white chef jacket was already spattered with marinara and garlic butter. Mike slapped Travis on the back as he walked by. “You're looking fit as a fiddle, my man. Ready to rock?”

Travis suppressed a cringe. He hated how corporate culture had co-opted rock n' roll slang to somehow make money-grubbing, up-selling, profit-maximizing seem like a rebellious act. This annoying trend was one of the thousand paper-cuts which accompanied employment in food service.

After two hours of filling salt and pepper shakers and wiping down every table-top and seat with a warm dishrag, the lunch rush began, first as a trickle of diners, then a deluge of middle-aged and senior-citizen waddlers, the balloon-hipped women clutching their purses, the men with bellies hanging inches over their belts. Travis sometimes imagined these people, after gorging themselves on breadsticks and Zuppa Toscana, going home and trying to have a post-Olive Garden fuck, but being unable to get their genitalia to touch, they would then both die naked and fat from simultaneous cardiac arrest. It seemed like Karma for poor tippers.

Waiting on these people hand and foot, with so much mock politeness and joy for forty-five minutes to an hour for just a few dollars was not the ideal job for someone undergoing an existential crisis of conscience. It made Travis want to explode every time he had to return for the third, the fourth, the fifth time with more breadsticks, more salad, more soup, more sugary soda.

Don't these people know they're killing themselves? he frequently asked himself during many shifts, but on that particular Tuesday he followed it with: *They may be fat, boring, and stupid, but at least they're not rip-off writers.*

It was times like these when the idea of ever being able to make a living as a writer seemed so far away, Travis would get despondent and imagine himself being thirty, forty, fifty years old and still working for tips, still story-less. After his shift was over, he went home and felt so depleted, he just wanted to take a nap until it was time for class, but sleep had not gotten any easier since he turned in the story. The nightmares had not stopped; they had only changed their particular neuroses-inducing line of attack. Instead of Humiliation, Personal Failure, and Impotence as the dominant themes, Fear of Exposure, Guilt, and Physical Disfiguration took center stage. In his dreams, Travis would be at a large public event, such as a book-signing, and

someone would emerge from the crowd, waving a rolled-up copy of Captain Konor #245 and begin screaming with a musical lilt: “You *thief!* You *phoney!* You *faker!* You *fraud!*”

Sometimes the entire crowd would shout/scream-along and a DJ would roll a mobile turntable unit out of the back of a van and club beats would start pounding and it would turn into a repetitive dance-hall jam from Hell. Sometimes the person who started the chant would be Dr. Leibowitz. Sometimes it would be a fellow student in the class who had really liked the story. Sometimes it was Craig Murtha, the actual author of “Severance Package.” One night it was even Travis’s ex-girlfriend Margrit, who often indicated in no unsubtle way that she thought he was all talk when it came to his writing. She used to say, “You know, Travis...you’re always talking about your ideas for stories, but you never actually write them. Why is that?”

The worst nightmare was one that started off the best: Travis actually scored with Cindy, but just after the climax, she pushed him off and began laughing at him. In between fits of gleeful laughter, she pointed at him and said: “I’m just like you, Travis. I fake it.”

Travis felt awful that afternoon, waiting around for class. He surfed the internet, read some comics, watched cartoons, tried to masturbate, but his mind kept returning to what he had done. He thought about confessing, but was too scared of the consequences. In his mind, the best course of action was: *Wait it out. Get the grade. Graduate. Move on. Pray that you’re never found out. Never do it again.*

He even thought he could absolve himself somehow of his sins if he could only write his own story, but whenever he sat down at his computer, nothing came. He would type a few sentences and then realize how pathetic and unoriginal it was and just close the document without saving.

He felt restless. Around four o'clock, he counted up his tip money (\$35.70) and drove downtown to the Kinko's. *At least this is something I can do*, he thought. He whistled a stupid tune as he walked through the glass vestibule. He half-expected Michelle to point a damning finger at him, scream "That's him! He's back!" and then sic the Kinko's Hounds of Fury upon him, but she wasn't working. Travis approached the counter and a goateed man with baggy eyes approached him.

"Yes, can I help you?"

Travis wanted to reply, "I'm beyond help," but instead said, "Well, this is kind of embarrassing, but about a week ago, I was in here, and there was a little, uh, mix-up with my debit card, and I—"

"Oh," the clerk said. "You're this guy."

Before Travis could say "huh" the clerk removed a piece of paper which was taped to the back of the display monitor. It was a photocopy of several black and white security camera shots, all remarkably high in resolution and from different angles, a series of images sequentially transformed into a one-page wordless comic book of his crime. Travis studied it. His favorite was the one which was from above and behind the cash register showing Travis grabbing the copies right before he dashed out of the store. In the foreground, it showed the back half of Michelle, her ass looking exquisitely tight and symmetrical in her work jeans. His face was contorted, his mouth in a scowl. It must have been right at the moment he yelled "Forget this!" Travis thought he looked a bit like Lee Harvey Oswald getting shot.

Great, Travis thought. *Just what I needed.*

Travis issued a pathetic laugh and said, "Yeah, that's me. I'm just here to pay what I owe."

He gave the clerk nineteen dollars, apologized for the incident, and went home and, with a very specific fantasy involving the Kinko's counter and a bent-over and ecstatic Michelle, succeeded in masturbating.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Later on, after playing some old-school Nintendo games for a while, he realized it was almost time for class, but he didn't feel like going. He couldn't stand the idea of seeing any of his classmates or the professor again, so he e-mailed Dr. Leibowitz to explain he wasn't feeling all that well, and that he was bummed out that he would miss the final class meeting. Really he was happy he wasn't wasting his evening on this "last opportunity" for the class to get together to eat snacks and read excerpts of their work to the others who had no interest in anyone's writing but their own. Travis wondered briefly if he and Cindy would have any classes together next semester. He hoped so.

There was a ding from his laptop speakers and Travis was surprised by the speedy response from Dr. Leibowitz. Only one minute had passed from when he had clicked SEND. *Man, the professor must live in front of his laptop*, he thought. The message said: "Travis. Get to feeling better. We'll miss you. Just drop your final portfolio by my office before 3 PM on Friday. -Dr. L."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

At a quarter till three on Friday, Travis cast a furtive look down the long hallway of Mulligan Hall. The place was deserted, which suited Travis just fine; he only wanted to drop the portfolio off and be done with it. He clutched his binder and made his way down the corridor, walking silently toward the faculty offices. Dr. Leibowitz's office door was open, but he was not within.

Thank Christ. I'll just set it on his desk and be on my—

“Oh, Travis, there you are.” Dr. Leibowitz had snuck up behind Travis, and this startled him so much, he dropped his binder. “I was beginning to think you weren’t going to make it. Are you feeling better?”

“Oh, yes,” he replied while bending down to pick up the binder, anything to avoid eye contact. “Yes, I am, sir.”

“You know, I didn’t want to say this in front of the entire class last week, but I must say that of all the students, your writing has improved the most this semester. No offense, but your first story was quite...well, I don’t want to say ‘amateur-ish’...but that’s really the best word to describe it, but your latest story...whew!”

Dr. Leibowitz made a motion with his hand that was half karate-chop, half military salute.

Travis wanted to break down and just yell, “There’s a reason you liked it! It’s because I didn’t write it!” but all he could say was “thank you.”

The doctor continued: “In fact, your story is the best student-penned story I’ve read all semester, all year, to tell the truth. I love that strong conflict between duty and self-preservation. It’s so powerful, so universal. Have you considered submitting it to the university’s literary journal?”

“No. No, I haven’t.”

“Well, you should! My wife’s one of the selection editors. With my recommendation, I’m positive it would get in. Just think! Your story would be read by thousands of people across the country. Isn’t that exciting?”

All this time, Travis was inching away from the offices, making his way back to the hallway, to freedom. He nodded while doing this. “Exciting...yes...getting published would be an honor and a privilege, Dr. Leibowitz. I’ll need some time to think about it.”

“Think? *Think?* What’s there to think about?”

“Well, I need to make some revisions. Make it better.”

“That’s good thinking. The best revisers make the best writers, but someday you have to let your work out into the world. In my opinion, it’s ready.”

Travis forced a laugh and said, “I’m glad you think so, sir, but I really have to be going.” Travis faked a cough. “I’ve got a...doctor’s appointment.”

“Well, the submission deadline is the second week in January, so we’ll talk at the beginning of next semester. Have a great winter break!”

As Travis walked out the front doors of Mulligan Hall, he took a deep breath and noticed that the wind seemed to be colder than when he arrived.

My next story is going to be good. Better, even. It’s going to be all mine. And it will be nothing like this one.

Freshman Year: A Choose-Your-Own-Misadventure

1.

You are a white, nineteen year-old freshman male attending a land-grant university in a mountainous state of the American Midwest in the early 21st-century. Your high school girlfriend Rachelle who is now a senior dumped you a week ago via Microsoft Instant Messenger. It is Friday evening, a week before fall break. You have just returned to the Honors Dorm from the dining hall where you deceived yourself that you were eating well, when in fact you merely placed nutritious foodstuffs on your plate, avoided eating them, and threw them in the trash before setting your tray on the conveyor belt to the dishwasher. When it comes down to it, you hate fruits and vegetables; sweets and meats are what you crave.

Now you are sitting in your dorm room, a broom-closet of a domicile. You share this space with Ty, a Jerry Seinfeld-looking engineering major who is as bland as processed cheese. He seems to have an ocular moisturizing problem because he blinks so frequently, you'd think some mad scientist replaced his eyelids with hummingbird's wings. Ty is not around because he leaves every Friday around four to visit *his* high school girlfriend in his microscopic hometown. *Jealous!* When thinking about the Roommate Characteristics Preference Selection card which you filled out during registration, you regret checking the box indicating that you prefer a roommate who intends to use the living space for studying instead of socializing. How were you to know that general education classes would require so little in the way of actual studying time?

You are wondering what you will do with your weekend when your friend Sven, a geology major who wants to be the first man on Mars, pops his head in and tells you there is a party near campus that will start in a few hours.

Do you join him for the party or do you stay in and download songs on Napster?

If you go to the party, turn to page 8.

If you stay in and download songs, turn to page 14.

2.

You say you're *fine* to drive and that it's *your car* and that's *that*. Sven shrugs and gets in the car. You start the engine and blast the radio. The Cars are rocking it. You've never heard them sound like this before. "I love this song," Sven says.

You agree that it is the bomb. You even think the singer is saying "I needed somebody for weed" instead of "I needed someone to bleed."

You get to McDonald's and suddenly a Sausage McMuffin with Egg sounds awesome. You ask thru the speaker if they're serving breakfast yet.

A crackly voice responds, "Not until 5 AM, sir."

You swing your head in what seems to be slow-motion, taking time to admire the way your bangs sway in the act, and look at the clock. It is 2:13. You *seriously* consider just pulling over into a parking stall and waiting until then, but Sven slaps you on the bicep and says, "Yo, man. Order."

You get a 20-piece McNugget meal, Super-sized with a Coke. Sven gets the same. As you pull out of the parking lot, you kinda miss the declined exit and hop the curb onto the street with a thud. You worry a cop might have seen this and be on to you. On the way back, you imagine every light in the rearview mirror is a flashing red and blue light, but then you just imagine they're red and blue shells from Super Mario Kart. They're coming to get ya!

You make it back to the Honors House and stumble in through the front door into the foyer. You and Sven are in a heated debate about which Zelda is the best in the franchise. He's pulling hard for *Ocarina of Time*, but you won't hear any of it; *A Link to the Past* will always be the best. You decide to chill in the commons area which has a few sofas and a television. It's just off of the foyer. You guys zone out watching reruns of *Twin Peaks* on Bravo and eat your food. Sven can't believe he's never seen this show before. You can't either. You eventually fall asleep on the couch, dreaming of the December 1990 issue of *Playboy* featuring Sherilynn Fenn. You see Audrey Horne kiss you on the lips and it seems that the loveseat you are stretched out on is closing in at both ends like a vice, and you think it feels kind of nice, kinda like the furniture is embracing you in its padded, cloth-covered armrests. You sleep better than you've ever slept before, which—considering your lazy ass—is saying a lot.

The End!

3.

You say you're "down with the green," an expression you've heard fans of the Dave Matthews Band say before. You follow Annie and her group of friends (sans the snooty one) through the crowded kitchen, past a keg of beer and its attendant keg-standers, through the backdoor onto a little cement patio. There is a little fire-pit providing some much-needed warmth as the temperature outdoors has dropped considerably since the evening began. Annie opens her purse and retrieves a small maroon container which has a zipper. She smiles as she unzips the container and removes a blue and green glass pipe and hands it to her fat friend. "There's still some left in it," she says this as she removes a small baggie. "But I'm going to add a bit more."

You nod and feign nonchalance as if this process is as routine as seeing someone make a sandwich. You watch her put some of the marijuana in a chrome-colored cylinder and then give a few twists as if it were a peppercorn grinder. She then opens it up and puts the powdery weed in the bowl of the pipe and takes out a purple Bic lighter. They each take turns lighting it and passing it around. It eventually makes its way to you and you do your best at trying to make it look like you've done this before, but a spy you are not. Annie laughs and says you need to put your finger over the carb to make sure smoke gets into the chamber. You shrug this off and claim you're just used to smoking joints. Annie says you're not inhaling and you realize you've never consciously inhaled smoke in your life, not even a cigarette behind the middle school gym.

Annie tells you to breathe in what you're smoking and not just hold the smoke in the back of your throat. You take her advice and begin coughing uncontrollably. Your eyes begin to water. She gives you a congratulatory pat on the back and says, "That's the spirit. My dad always said you gotta cough if you wanna get off."

You smile and pass the pipe around. At first, you're not sure if it's having any effect, but you begin to feel somewhat elated, almost as if you're levitating. No, that's not it. Acne, Michelin, and Annie are shrinking before your eyes as if they had just drunk the "Drink Me" bottle in *Alice in Wonderland*. You feel like a giant and begin laughing. Your mouth feels incredibly dry and you finish the rest of your Sprite and begin telling the girls how amazing the effervescence feels on your tongue, as if there were little pixies dancing on your taste-buds.

You are as high as a kite.

Turn to page 23.

4.

You decide you need a tasty beverage with your snack, so you put your dollar bill in the machine and press the gray A4 button for Lays Potato Chips. Nothing happens. You press the button again and you realize the red light is on which indicates that you must use correct change. You curse the machine and press the refund button to get your dollar bill back, but it won't come out of the bill sucker-upper thingee. You press the button repeatedly but nothing happens. You cuss again and slam your fist against the panel and instantly regret it as sparklers of pain light up your knuckles and wrist.

Now you only have a quarter. What good is that going to do you?

You return to your room, dejected, but still looking forward to hearing some new music.

Turn to page 7.

5.

You don't shave. Instead, while waiting for your hair to dry, you spend the extra five minutes searching for new music on Napster. An online music critic recently recommended some new Scottish band whose singer "knew his way around a good melody" and "sounded a bit too much like a certain singer from Athens, Georgia for his own good." You start downloading some of the recommended tracks and begin getting dressed. Since you aren't clean-shaven, you figure you better dress up at least a little. After all, you don't know what kind of party this is going to be. You put on a pair of pinstripe khaki pants and a button-up vintage chenille shirt. You like to think your fancy clothes will contrast nicely with your stubble. Any girl who isn't down with the scruff, isn't likely to be woman enough for you.

When it's time, you meet Sven in the lobby. He is dressed like he is always dressed: wearing sandy brown cargo pants and an X-files T-shirt. The print is of a grainy picture depicting a flying saucer above a forest. Super-imposed in blocky white letters it says: I want to believe. Sven gives you a high five. "All right, my man! It's party time!"

You exit the Honors house and are greeted with the cool autumn evening air. It's supposed to snow before Halloween. You think of how all the trick-or-treaters dressed as ghosts will be lost in the blankness of the blizzard. Sven doesn't have a car so you get in yours and head to the party. Along the way, you stop at a gas station so Sven can pick up some *bebidas*. You politely decline because, truth be told, you don't drink, but tonight you kinda feel like getting drunk, to see what it's about, to maybe drink her off your mind, but you just ask him to get you a Coke. "S'allright, dude. It's not about what you drink; it's about who you drink with."

He returns after a few minutes with two 6-packs of Budweiser and your soft drink. In a few minutes, you are at a large wooden house with white chipping paint. Held aloft in the overgrown grass, beer cans and empty cigarette packs sway in the breeze. You can hear the chattering party buzz and bass-heavy beats before you enter the house. Electronic "doof-doof" music is playing on the stereo. People are everywhere. Sven sees someone he knows and splits. You are on your own. You are one of the youngest people here. You see an attractive brunette with short hair and a green party dress on, sipping a glass of wine near the door to the kitchen.

Do you approach her and make conversation?

If you talk to her, turn to page 17.

If you don't talk to her, turn to page 22.

6.

You kiss her and she kisses back. She smiles at you. Things escalate quickly. You begin rolling around on the bed, pressing against each other. Through the heavy petting, you wonder how big you feel through your pants. You think about the times you've had a canker sore on the inside of your cheek and how when your tongue presses against it, it just feels huge, but when you later open your mouth to look in the mirror, it doesn't seem hardly that big at all. You wonder if it's the same way for girls during dry humping.

Annie quickly takes control and rolls on top of you and removes your shirt and then discards her green dress. She sits astride you and you're admiring the curvature of her belly and the black strapless bra which is propping up her softball-sized breasts. "Ooh, chest hair," she coos. "I didn't figure you for the kind of guy who'd have chest hair."

Before you can even fully process her ridiculous assumption, she is attacking you with mouth and hands. In the parlance of sexual lingo, she is a scratcher. She's particularly fond of tweaking and tearing at your nipples. After a while, she sits up and you are both panting and sweating. She eyes you hungrily and you think of a Duran Duran song. She smiles and says, "Do you wanna?"

You're a bit taken aback. Things have never progressed this quickly before. You stammer for a moment and then ask about protection. She laughs and shakes her head. You assume she's on birth control, but the words "pregnancy" and "herpes" both flash in your mind; if she's willing to give it up this quickly, this easily, what potential evils lurk inside? Before you can complete the risk-benefit analysis, you are distracted by her lunging at your face. She bites the lobe of your right ear and whispers through hot breathing, "I want you to fuck me."

Do you fuck her or not fuck her?

If you fuck her, turn to page 11.

If you don't fuck her, turn to page 16.

7.

You return to your room, still pissed off that you are as empty-handed and empty-stomached as when you left on your quest, but your computer is fully booted and you open the Napster browser. An online music critic recently recommended some new Scottish band whose singer “sounded a bit too much like a certain singer from Athens, Georgia for his own good” but still “knew his way around a good, anthemic chorus.” You love anthemic choruses. You sometimes wish songs were an endless stream of anthemic choruses. Life, too.

You select the few tracks the critic recommended and are surprised at how slow they are downloading, considering you are using a T1 high-speed connection. You check the file-sharer status and see that only one person in the world is currently sharing these songs. His or her name is *edinburger*. You figure he or she must be from the band’s home country. While the songs are downloading you play some Daft Punk and “One More Time” blasts through your crappy little computer speakers. Their repeated claims that they’re going to celebrate life strike you as contrapuntal to your current emotional state. You feel twinges of loneliness and longing. You decide to open MSN Messenger and see who is online. It’s Friday night, so you’re not expecting anybody really worth talking to, just the normal shut-ins and social rejects, but you are shocked to see Rachelle’s name in the Online list.

Your heart rate shoots up a few beats. What is she doing online on Friday night at almost ten PM? Maybe she’s lonely too. Maybe her little sister accidentally opened the chat program with the login information. You wonder how she’s doing. Is she thinking about you tonight? Or is she just checking her e-mail before that skateboard guy Seth gets off work? You imagine them in the back of her car and your stomach would make Gorgon green with envy. You don’t want to be pathetic and start a conversation with her, but you also want to give off the air of being above it, past it, over it, beyond it, any preposition really which indicates you are a strong, independent manly man who doesn’t need her anyhow and maybe in a Zen kinda way you can do this by being confident enough to strike up a chat with her.

Do you initiate an instant message chat with your ex-girlfriend Rachelle?

If you start a chat, turn to page 10.

If you log out of MSN Messenger, turn to page 15.

8.

Sven says “all right!” and slaps the dorm door simultaneously. He says he will meet you for the party in the foyer of the dorm in two hours. He needs to go finish his NASA documentary; you need to shower. The Honors Dorm was once a sorority house, but lost its chapter after it turned out the co-eds were using the facility as a do-it-yourself brothel. You found this out the first night you plopped your head on your pillow and found an inscription in the built-in wooden shelf above your bed. It read: “If you can read this, you’re being fucked by Brandi.” It appeared to have been carved by pocketknife. You ended up covering it with a Spider-Woman mini-poster.

As you get your flip-flops, bathrobe and toiletries together, you briefly wonder about unverifiable, unquantifiable things: how many people have slept in this room? How many different sexual acts occurred within these four walls? How many have you fantasized about? (It is probably possible to estimate this last one since you have only lived in this room for seven weeks, but how discrete are fantasies numerically? If—mid-fantasy—you swap someone else in, does that count as one or two fantasies?)

You enter the men’s bathroom and communal shower area and see that no one is currently there, thank God. You’ve never enjoyed being naked in front of the same sex. You think it has something to do with some kind of anxiety of showering at the YMCA as a young Tae-kwon-do student and getting a panoramic plethora of grown-up penises, all grotesque and monstrous in the eyes of you, a pre-pubescent youngster. You tried not to stare, but it was like trying to avoid [insert unavoidable event/object here].

After drying off you look in the main bathroom mirror and see two days of stubble on your rosy face. You want to look sharp for the prospective ladies, but you also hate shaving, the futile, repetitive act which results in cuts, razor burn, and wasted time, knowing it will all be back in a brief while. You despise this choice. All those productions and adaptations of Hamlet showing a clean-faced prince were bullshit; in reality, the Danish prince would be a ringer for a member of ZZ Top.

To shave or not to shave?

If you shave, turn to page 12.

If you don’t shave, turn to page 5.

9.

You take the sleeping pills and you are out like a white guy stealing third, or like Rosie and Ellen, if you will. You dream of a chance encounter with Rachelle in a Barnes & Noble where she surprises you in the Erotica section. You blush and try to hide the Kama Sutra book in your red hand. As awkward as this dream is, it's not nearly as unpleasant as the fate which awaits you in the waking world.

The sleeping pills work too well and when Josh (the golf course management major who lives in the room below you) attempts to set the mood for his latest "hole-in-one" with some incense candles, some of the of the girl's product-laden hair catches fire and she starts screaming. Before Josh can smother the fire, it spreads to his Bob Marley tapestry and then the rest of the room. The smoke alarms start going crazy and, theoretically, this should trigger the automatic sprinklers, but there is some electrical problem, they fail to start, and you are engulfed in flames.

Your last dream is of a little white-haired witch with a wheelbarrow cackling by a tiny door in a dark basement. A wrongful death suit against the university over negligent sprinkler maintenance nets your family a cool six figures, but that is little consolation to your char-grilled carcass.

The End!

10.

You write:

Hey Rachelle. What's up? *(This seems casual enough.)*

oh hey hows it goin?

All right. I'm just chilling. Listening to music. *(This is true, but it sounds lame to you.)*

cool *(You think one-word responses are a bad sign, but maybe she's just being guarded.)*

Yeah, but I'm just about to go meet up with Sven. We're going to a party. *(You lie!)*

cool. me too *(Monosyllables are starting to worry you.)*

Oh yeah?

yeah seth's having some people over. *(Your overactive imagination is kicking in. You imagine a teenage orgy with Rachelle as the central hub.)*

Before you can think of a response, she writes:

hey i have to go. i hope you have a good night. *(What?!? So soon?!?)*

Hey... *(You're stalling. You're not sure what to write next.)*

yeah? *(This comes after a long pause.)*

Do you think that maybe you'd have some time later this weekend to talk? *(You sound so pathetic, so desperate.)*

about what? *(If she doesn't know by now, there is no hope. You try to back pedal.)*

There is a long pause. You tap the side of your keyboard rhythmically.

sure *(oh how you hate the emptiness of that word!)*

She adds: i have to go now. my ride is here. goodnight.

And like that she's gone and you are super pissed at yourself for putting your vulnerable self out there like that. You shut down your computer and pace back and forth.

Turn to page 19.

11.

You decide to live in the moment. She strips down to nothing and you delight in the soft glow of her flesh. She takes off your pants and throws them on the floor. She doesn't bother with your socks but she rubs the front of your boxers and then pulls them down. She makes a face of surprise and says, "Ooh, you're big." You don't believe her but you'll take the compliment. You lean in to kiss her, but she pushes you back on the bed and straddles you. She reaches her hand down and guides you in. At first it's great, but you keep slipping out because you're not as hard as you'd like to be. For some reason, you keep thinking about Rachelle. Is she straddling Seth right now like Annie is straddling you?

Annie whispers, "Fuck me harder" and something inside you triggers, a moment of no-going back, and you make a strangled gurgle as you blow your load.

Total elapsed time: one minute and forty-seven seconds.

Annie stops her pumping and steadies herself with one hand on your chest. She brushes her hair back with her free hand before getting off you. She lies down next to you but doesn't say anything for awhile. Eventually she turns to you and says, "Was that your first time?"

Your heart sinks because this is confirmation that she is really disappointed with your performance. You say no.

"Really?" she asks.

Again, you say no, but you don't think she believe you.

You try to apologize, but she just puts a finger to your lips and says, "These things happen; it's okay." She gets up and begins to gets dressed. You follow suit and before you know it, you're both back downstairs in the thick of the party. You don't really know what to say and all attempts at conversation are awkward. You quickly get the impression that she doesn't want anything to do with you right now, so you say goodnight and head home, feeling dejected, but not as dejected as you feel on Monday afternoon when you're sitting in your big biopsychology lecture class and hear a giggle from the seat behind you. You turn and there are Snooty and Michelin. Snooty leans in and, with a tone of knowingness, whispers, "We're so sorry to hear you had to make Friday an *early* night!" You are so shocked and horrified at this that you are unable to pay attention for the rest of class. You begin to think those abstinence people were right.

The End!

12.

Sure enough, your Mach-3 Turbo cuts your face up like the Barber of Fleet Street. You curse the razor, the societal value of clean-shaven facial skin, and your poor decision-making. The only thing you fail to curse is your deficient grooming skills. You rip pieces of tissue paper and apply so many to the wounds, you begin to look like an aborted painting by Miro. You return to your room and begin getting dressed. Since you are so clean-shaven, albeit bloodily, you decide it's okay to dress casually. After all, you don't know what kind of party this is going to be. You pick out red Converse All-Stars, blue jeans, and an Iron Man T-shirt. You like to think your rogue-ish good looks will make up for any flak you get from people who don't like comic books. You like to think it will make you stand out as a unique snowflake in a world drowning in Abercrombie & Fitch.

When it is time, you meet Sven in the lobby. He is dressed like he is always dressed: wearing sandy brown cargo pants and an X-files shirt. The print depicts a nude Mulder and Scully in bed in a tender embrace, the crumpled pink sheets covering just enough flesh. Mulder gazes into the camera and his look seems to say, "This is what you want, America." Sven slaps you on the back and says, "All right, dude. Let's make like Freud and shrink!"

You exit the Honors house and are greeted with the cool autumn evening air. Sven doesn't have a car, so you take yours and head to the party. Along the way, you stop at a gas station to pick up some beverages and he asks if he should pick anything up for you. You decline. Truth be told, you don't drink. You were a goody two-shoes in high school and you are afraid of being drunk. You ask for a Coke. "Teetotalin' tonight, eh? That's all right, man."

He returns after a few minutes with two 6-packs of Corona and your soft drink. In a few minutes, you are at a large foursquare-style house with white chipping paint. Held aloft in the overgrown grass, beer cans and empty cigarette packs sway in the breeze. You can hear the chattering party buzz and bassy beats before you enter the house. Electronic "doof-doof" music is playing on the stereo. People are everywhere. Sven sees someone he knows and splits. You are on your own. You are one of the youngest people here. You see an attractive brunette with short hair and a green party dress on, sipping a glass of wine near the door to the kitchen.

Do you approach her and make conversation?

If you talk to her, turn to page 17.

If you don't talk to her, turn to page 22.

13.

You say no thank you, but that you're curious about it and—in a candid moment of honesty—admit that you've never tried marijuana before. Annie points at your empty hand and says, "Well, would you like something to drink then?" With how you're feeling right now, you just say yes. She asks you to follow her into the kitchen through the crowded mess. You're surprised that her friends don't join you. There is a keg in the corner and some girl is being held upside down by two athletic scholarships. She is wearing a skirt which is now looking like a blown-out umbrella, exposing her pasty white legs and panties to everyone at the party. You feel a bit sheepish. Annie pulls out a bottle of pink wine from the fridge and pours you a plastic cup.

She says, "Sorry we don't have anything fancier." You say it's okay and sip it. You're surprised at how sweet it is. You're used to the dry communion wine from church. You ask her if it's her favorite wine. "Oh, this," she laughs. "This is just some cheap white zin I get from working at the restaurant. The boss orders it wholesale and then sells it at cost to his employees. Cheap wine to begin with and I get it even cheaper."

You're about to take another sip when some ruffian with a headband comes barreling through the kitchen and knocks your elbow. You spill a bit of the wine. The guy apologizes, but you're still feeling a bit claustrophobic, plus it's really loud with the music and all the chatter. You have to really strain to hear Annie's voice. You ask if there's a better place to talk.

"Sure!" She grabs the bottle of wine and you follow her upstairs where she takes you into a bedroom. You aren't expecting this, which she evidently picks up on. "Don't worry, this is my room." It's pretty sparsely furnished. There's a double-twin bed with a white comforter in the corner by the window. A small bookshelf has a variety of textbooks with USED university bookstore stickers on the spines. Some prints of lily pads and flowers decorate the walls. She sits on the bed and motions for you to sit down with her. You sit and drink your wine. You can hear the bassy thump of the kick drum through the floor, the party chatter is a dull roar. You and Annie talk about movies and—it could be your imagination—but she is sitting pretty close and it seems that you could kiss her and she would respond positively.

Do you kiss her or play it cool?

If you kiss her, turn to page 6.

If you play it cool, turn to page 18.

14.

You decide to stay in and download songs on Napster. Normally, a friend and fellow dormmate would express disappointment or chide you for your anti-social behavior, but Sven is a groovy, understanding dude who knows about alone-time. He once went on a two-week vision quest in the Mojave Desert and claims to have seen God and the entire deep structure of the universe, though you think his malnourished state might have played a role in these “visions.”

You boot up your computer and realize it’s going to take a while. You check your change jar and realize you only have a quarter and a dollar bill, potentially enough for a snack and a drink. You leave your room and go to the vending area of the dorm. As you walk down the brown-carpeted hallway, you realize the white cinderblock walls are unbearably depressing. Why have you never noticed this before? You have only been at college for seven weeks; it is too soon for the newness of the experience to fade into familiar contempt. Perhaps the effects of your breakup with your high-school sweetheart are beginning to arise. Though you think Ty’s frequent sojourns home make him miss out on the college experience, there are twinges of jealousy in your heart: he’s getting some and you’re not. It reminds you of a forwarded e-mail of silly sayings: “Sex is like air. It’s only important if you’re not getting any.”

You are now in the vending machine area. There is a snack dispenser and a Pepsi machine. You prefer Coke and, for the life of you, you can’t figure out how Pepsi has done such a good market cornering exclusive deals with college campuses.

You are having difficult deciding what to get. A bag of Lays Potato Chips is \$.50 which would leave you \$.75 for a Pepsi, but you are craving chocolate for some reason and a Whatchamacallit is \$.75. You love Whatchamacallits, but if you got that, you wouldn’t have enough for a pop and then you’d be left with the drinking fountain to wash the chocolaty goodness down.

Do you get the Lays Potato Chips and the Pepsi or the Whatchamacallit?

If you get the Lays Potato Chips and the Pepsi, turn to page 4.

If you get the Whatchamacallit, turn to page 25.

15.

You close the window, thinking that you've made the right move. Maybe she saw your name online and was just about to initiate a chat with you, but just as she's about to click your name, you've already logged off, thus filling her with a sense of longing and regret. You think of Madonna's "Like a Prayer" and you substitute in a word or two on the chorus: "When you click my name/it's like a little prayer/I'm here online/I want to take you there..." But then your mind goes into What-if Overdrive. What if you're blowing your chance at patching things up? It's only been a week, but how long is the window of opportunity at second chances. Maybe she's still online. You decide to log back in and you find she is now offline.

This stirs up feelings of restlessness and anxiety. You imagine her sucking Seth off in the basement of her parents' house. You realize this is bad to think, but it's a hard visual to remove. You need to distract your mind. You look at the download status on Napster and find the first song which has completed. It's called "Let me sleep (next to the mirror)." The critic is right. The singer does sound like a lower-toned Michael Stipe, but the band doesn't mess around. There is an introductory riff and with a blast, the full band hits it hard, the verse melody leads to a pre-chorus which leads to an anthemic chorus (!) and then a post-chorus where it all breaks down to just a piano and the singer saying: "But I'm sure that you'll be fine/Ten more years of this/it will nearly be time/I'm sure you'll be fine/But it can't take ten more years..."

These words fill you with both hope and dread. You comfort yourself somewhat knowing Rachelle is missing the boat and being stupid, but you feel down and you're not sure how you're going to get out of your funk. It does feel like it'll take ten years, but that's a dumb thought and you know it. You just want to feel something else right now. You suddenly feel like going to that party and meeting a new girl, someone just to make out with and feel like more of a man, but this makes you feel sad. There's a part of you that just wants to go to sleep, but it's still so early, and you're such a night-owl, you're not sure you can fall asleep. Fortunately, the student health physician wrote you a prescription for a sleeping aid when you were freaking out over Latin drills and not able to sleep.

Do you go to the party or take some sleeping pills?

If you go to the party, turn to page 19.

If you take some sleeping pills, turn to page 9.

16.

You do want to have sex with her, but you're just not ready yet, but you think if you give it some time, you might change your mind. You definitely don't want to leave right now, so you decide to please her in another way. You take her by the hand and have her lay down on the bed. You remove her panties and begin to finger her. Annie is only the third girl you've ever touched like this. She moans loudly, louder than Rachelle or your first girlfriend. It really turns you on. You're glad that you're not having sex right now because you're sure you'd have blown your load by now. She moans with each thrust of your fingers and she starts to scream as you increase your pace. Her hands are stroking you all over and with one hand on your groin and one hand around your neck, she starts begging you to fuck her. Over and over again: Fuck me. Fuck me. She is so wet and you want it so badly and you're about to say fuck it and take the plunge, but you look down at your hand and see it is covered in blood. You pull it away and tell her that she's bleeding. She looks down at your hand, all the color drains from her face. She makes a horrific expression and grabs the closest piece of clothing she can find—her panties—and puts them between her legs. She throws on her dress and runs out of the bedroom. You see her run into the bathroom across the hall. This has never happened to you before. You know how embarrassed she must be to have her period on your hands. You're really glad you didn't go down on her. She comes back a few minutes later and it is obvious she has been crying. She lies down on the bed and turns away from you, facing the window. You put a hand on her shoulder to comfort her and say it's all right and that having a period unexpectedly could happen to anyone. She starts sobbing and says you don't understand. She turns over to face you with reddened eyes and says, "I didn't get my period. I just miscarried."

Do you stay the night to comfort Annie to show her how you're a strong, supportive man, or do you get the hell out of there as fast as you can?

If you stay the night, turn to page 26.

If you get the hell out of there as fast as you can, turn to page 20.

17.

As you make your way through the throng of bodies to strike up a conversation, you do some split-second sizing up of the situation. The girl you are attracted to is standing with three other females who aren't as attractive as her. One's face has been savagely assaulted with acne, another would make the Michelin Man feel thin, and the other would be decent if she didn't have such a snooty look on her puss. These three are probably used to getting passed over at parties weekend after weekend, so you decide to not be so obvious in your aim. Now that you are closer, you realize the object of your affection resembles a slightly pudgy Audrey Tautou, the French actress who portrayed the *uber*-cute Amelie in um, *Amelie*. She carries her weight well.

You introduce yourself and say that you used to work in the film industry. The skeptical one, the one with the acne, interrupts you and asks what you specifically used to do. You tell them you used to work for Blockbuster Video. This gets some chuckles out of some of them, most importantly the Amelie-ish gal; the snooty one keeps her arms crossed, a body language tell of indignant disdain. You are undeterred by this. You explain that while working in the video rental industry, you became fascinated with people's preferences of favorite movies. You ask them to each share their favorites. The results: Acne: *Titanic*. Michelin: *Varsity Blues*. Snooty: *Clueless*. The one you like says it's too difficult to pick just one. You agree and ask her if she's ever seen *Amelie*. She says no but that she hears from people all the time that she looks like the titular star. You say it's the best movie she's never seen. She laughs and says she's wanted to watch it, but heard it has subtitles and she can't stand watching movies where she has to "read."

This breaks your heart a little, but you're an optimistic guy.

She takes a sip of wine. Her glass is now empty. "My name's Annie. So, now it's your turn. What's your favorite movie, movie expert guy?"

You say *Fight Club*. None have seen it, but they all coo and say how sexy Brad Pitt is.

It is at this point when Annie says she and her friends are going to go out back and smoke a little green. She invites you along. You think for a moment. You are a graduate of the D.A.R.E. program and you have never smoked marijuana before.

Do you smoke some ganja with Annie and her friends?

If you smoke up, turn to page 3.

If you decline, turn to page 13.

18.

You decide to play it cool and less than two minutes later, when you're in the middle of discussing how Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* is criminally underrated compared to *The Sixth Sense*, Annie takes matters into her own hands. She sets her glass down and hops on your lap, straddling you on the bed, her green party dress hiked up to mid-thigh. She puts both hands behind your head and pulls you in for a kiss. She kisses hard. She bites and tugs on your lower lip. You've never been kissed like this before. You kiss back.

You are making out with a girl you met just fifteen minutes ago. Could it really be this easy? You feel like a character in a movie.

Before you know it, you're rolling around her bed and dry-humping to the beat of the music coming through the floorboards. She only stops briefly to remove your shirt. Though you're insecure about your upper-body build, she seems to like what she sees when she says, "I like a man with chest hair."

She then steps off the bed and you prop yourself up on your elbows and look at her, standing there with her disheveled hair. In one fluid motion she pulls her dress over her head and lets it drop to the floor. You now see why they're called party dresses. She is standing before you wearing only a matching white pair of panties and strapless bra. The bra soon goes to keep the dress company. You admire her cute, pudgy shape. She is a bit heavier than Rachelle, but this means her breasts are bigger as well, each one about the size of a Magic 8-Ball. She stands with one hand on her hip and asks, "Do you like what you see?"

You nod.

"Good," she says. "Because I want you to fuck me."

Do you fuck her or not fuck her?

If you fuck her, turn to page 11.

If you don't fuck her, turn to page 16.

19.

You feel the magnetic call of the party, of communion. Fuck Rachelle. She made her decision. Why were you being so weak? What were you thinking? You could sit in your prison cell of a dorm room for ten, twenty years and not a single female would ever set foot in here. Why should you suffer? It's time for you to make your own fate. You put on Weezer's "The Good Life." You get out of your pajamas and throw on a red T-shirt and blue jeans. You sing along: "I wanna go back, I wanna go back, and I don't even know how I got off the track, it's time I got back to the goooooood life..."

You take a look at yourself in the mirror and realize your hair is a bit disheveled and you could probably stand to shave, but it's too late for that. You have to get out and be with the people. You grab your jacket and car keys and bound down the steps to the foyer and out the front door. The evening has gotten considerably chillier, but you don't mind. You're just happy to be outside and in motion. You get in your little white compact car and drive to the party.

There are so many cars parked in the neighborhood, you have to park a few blocks away, but it's pretty easy to tell where the party is. You walk up the uneven sidewalk and find a large house with white chipping paint. You can hear the chattering party buzz and bassy beats before you enter the house. Electronic "doof-doof" music is playing on the stereo. (Just say this phrase over and over and you'll have an idea of what it sounds like.) Not only are you one of the youngest people here, you're the only person here without a drink. You were a teetotaler in high school and feel a bit out of your element here. The music is way too loud to discuss *The Phantom Menace* with anyone. Your newfound enthusiasm for party life is beginning to ebb. You decide to try dancing to the music, but you find yourself glancing around the throbbing mob of bodies to find a familiar face. Sven isn't anywhere to be found. You don't recognize anyone, but you *do* see an attractive brunette near the door to the kitchen. She has short hair and a green party dress on, sipping a glass of wine. You have the impulse to go talk to her, but you also just got here. There's a part of you that also wants to hang back and play it cool.

Do you talk to the cute girl or hang back and play it cool?

If you talk to her, turn to page 17.

If you hang back and play it cool, turn to page 22.

20.

You quickly get dressed and hem and haw as you try to find the words to say you're going to beat it. She has already turned to face the wall again and the waterworks are starting. Her sobs would normally move you to feelings of sympathy, but under the circumstances you are just too freaked out. You say bye and close the door behind you. As you go down the stairs you feel shell-shocked as you see the mass of people dancing to the electronica music and all you can think about is how if a hack director made a film of this moment in your life right now, they would have the camera follow you all the way down past the throbbing bodies and have the camera shake unsteadily to parallel your shaken emotional core, plus there would be no soundtrack until you got all the way to your car and started the engine. If the director and soundtrack editor were feeling cheeky, they might have "Let It Bleed" play when the radio turns on.

You are more shaken than you think and on the drive back, you end up running a red light and crashing into a mini-van. No one is hurt, but the driver, a 40-year-old fat guy with a Rockies cap and bad teeth, is very belligerent to you. He calls you a "goddamn spoiled college kid" and screams that you were probably doing text messages when you should have been paying attention to the fucking road. When the police arrive, they get both your statements, but they breathalyze you and—to your shock—that white zin put you over the legal limit. The cops also find one of Sven's 6-packs in your back seat; he must have left it there thinking you were going to head to another party. You are charged with DUI, MIP, RD, and RE involving a vehicle. At your hearing, you feel like they're handing you a bad assortment of Scrabble tiles.

These legal strikes against you result in you losing your academic scholarship through the Honors program, and at the end of the semester you have to move out of the Honors House back into your parents' basement in your hometown. This makes for the worst Christmas ever and on New Year's Eve you find out that Rachelle is indeed boinking Seth.

The End!

21.

You have no idea who you are, how you got here, where you are, when you are, what is happening, what has happened, what is going to happen. You try hard to think. You look around and everywhere seems to be flat, utter blankness, an endless field of white, but before you can get your bearings, you feel a strange pushing sensation followed by a strong pulling. A force is pushing you steadily in one direction, but every few seconds you feel as if you are being pulled down as well, not necessarily down a hole or well or something like that, but rather like you're being pulled down a staircase one step at a time, but after each tug downward, it is as if there is a gust of wind which pushes you back to where you began, only on a lower level. You have no idea why this is happening and no matter how much you try, you find yourself being pushed steadily to the right, then dashed back to the left, and ever downward. You decide to give in to the forces and use the time in motion to think rather than fight the reflexive impulse to be still. A thought pops in your head: You want off this Merry-Go-Round. This begs the question: Is this a Merry-Go-Round? You decide it is not for there is no carnival music, no children, no muggy summer day, and most of all, this experience is not circular, yet it produces a similar nausea from motion sickness. You could be anywhere else, but you are not. You are here. You don't know how long you've been in this process, but it feels like ages, yet somehow you know it's been seconds. You look back and up and you see new black shapes hovering above you, each one a monolithic monument, frozen in air, some close together, some a little farther apart, but all are unmoving, unwavering. You squint to look far above. It is difficult to see at such a distance, but at the top and to the left, you see that you came first. What came before you? Before you there was nothing. Wait, that's not quite right. You look again. At the very top you see a two and a one and a little dot. You don't know how you know but you know that you know. The two became one and then there was a little dot. After the little dot came all of this, albeit not much right now, but it is a start. You then do what you're never supposed to do in adventure or disaster films where the characters are stuck in a precarious predicament of great height: you look down and see a darkness past the horizon. It is not a solid darkness, but is constantly shifting as if the universe's biggest painter is painting in broad brushstrokes. You know that soon you will be at this edge and subject to the painter's brushstroke. Your heart is filled with terror because you realize you cannot stop what is coming. Your end is drawing nigh and you shake knowing that when this is all over, all that will be left of you is these dark shapes hanging in the white sky.

22.

You wait for a while, but by the time you've changed your mind and mustered up the courage to talk to her, she's disappeared. You meander from room to room, looking for her, but to no avail. You feel like finding some other female at the party to talk to, but when you walk near them, they glance at you only long enough to see you're someone they know and they quickly rescind their gaze. You hate being a man whom no one looks twice at. The music starts to give you a headache. You go out on the porch but all the guys out there only want to talk about football and shotgunning beers. You are having a horrible time at the party and start to miss Rachelle. Every girl seems unapproachable. Jim Morrison's voice in your mind: "Women seem wicked, when you're unwanted..."

You just got there, but really, you just feel like going back to the dorm and going to sleep. You leave the party and walk back to your car, but find you've locked your keys inside. You curse your luck. This just isn't your night, son. You decide to hoof it home. You can call a locksmith tomorrow. The night has gotten considerably colder and you wish you had brought something heavier than your jacket. On the way home, your mind turns sinister. You are a loser. What is your problem? Why are interactions with women so difficult for you?

You eventually get back to the Honors House. No one is there or awake. You go to your room, fall on the thin twin mattress and try to masturbate, thinking of that time you and Rachelle were in the back of her car out on that dusty country road, but it just makes you sad and you can't get it up and you cry yourself to sleep.

The End!

23.

The first thought you have is *now I know what the big deal is about!* quickly followed by *why haven't I done this before?* The girls are all giggling and you are talking a mile-a-millisecond and it seems that every thought you utter comes out before you've thought it and you can't stop thinking what you're thinking and oh my god that Coke was awesome What else is there to drink? and damn, it got cold really quick Let's go back inside and see what's going on with that PAR-TAY! and here you are, there's a throbbing energy to the entire space The music is louder now and you feel the beat resonating in your thoracic cavity One of the only cavities that's good to have Something your old high school anatomy and phys teacher used to say Everywhere you look everyone is looking so good and before you know it you're going through the cabinets of the kitchen looking for something to eat The cupboards are empty and you really need food There's a box of saltines on the counter You start eating them and you begin to wonder how sailors subsist on crackers but just as you begin thinking about Ishmael and the White Whale you find yourself unable to chew anymore There is a mirror on the wall and you stick your tongue out All the saltine crumbs are cracked and stuck to the top of your tongue and they look like a dusty road in India You open the fridge and just find beer and so you drink one of those You hope the owner doesn't mind or notice You'll blame it on that other guy. You decide to walk around and Hello! you say to a pretty girl who walks by You walk out of the kitchen and into the main room where people are dancing and Holy shit! There's a fireplace and it's on...not on, but it has like a fire in it. There is a fire in this house! You go to warm your ass and you feel like Jiminy Cricket at Geppetto's Some girls laugh and point at you but you say You know what!?!? If 80 percent of your body heat escapes through your head, 80 percent is absorbed through your ass! And don't you think it's neat that fireplaces used to serve two functions Y'know, for heating food and heating humans, but eventually they evolved and split into two separate heating devices, the furnace and the oven Lotta houses don't even have a fireplace It's obsolete which is why it's so charming God, you wish everyone at the party could make S'mores right now You realize you are unbearably hungry. You would eat cardboard but are afraid it would stick to your tongue like the saltines when in stumbles Sven and he says it's time to go and you say we just got here but he says it's been five hours and if you want to see the argument between a drunk Sven and a high you, turn to page 27.

24.

You don't trust yourself in this newfound state of perception, so you toss your keys to Sven. On the road to McDonald's, he runs a red light and you get T-boned by a semi-truck. (Your side, too.) You both die. Sven never makes it to Mars and your parents never recover from their grief.

The End!

25.

You decide chocolate is the way to go, so you put your dollar in the machine and press the gray B7 button to indicate your preference for a Whatchamacallit candy bar. There is a whirring sound and the little spirally thing begins to rotate. You see the candy bar inch closer to the precipice, but then, like Marlowe gazing into the heart of darkness, it hesitates. You can't believe it. You say a naughty word and then push the front of the machine gently. The candy bar stands as erect and immovable as Kubrick's monolith. You cuss again and grab the sides of the machine and try to rock the machine back and forth. Perhaps if you tilt it like a cheating pinball player, you'll get the chocolaty goodness. This is all to no avail. The candy bar will not budge. You slam your fist against the panel and instantly regret it as white hot lava penetrates your knuckles and down your wrist. To make matters worse, the machine didn't even give you your twenty-five cents in change.

Now you only have a quarter. What good is that going to do you?

You return to your room, dejected, but still looking forward to hearing some new music.

Turn to page 7.

26.

You decide to stay the night with Annie, to comfort her however you can, but she mostly just sobs and sobs until she falls asleep to the drone of the party chatter and the bassy pulse of the dance music downstairs. You put your boxers on and lie in bed next to her, keeping a good foot away from her. You are still quietly freaking out and wouldn't be able to fall asleep with all the noise even in better circumstances. Instead, you wait it out, lying with your hands crossed on your belly, staring at the ceiling until after several hours the party eventually dies in a slow *perdendo* and you fall asleep.

In the morning, when Annie rolls over and sees you, she is definitely surprised, but she just gets up and goes to the bathroom. She is in there for a long time and you have to pee, so you get up and walk to the bathroom. You hesitate before gingerly rapping your knuckles on the door and ask if she's okay.

There is a pause before you hear a raspy version of Annie's voice, "Please. Just go."

You're a little miffed by this dismissal, and after you stayed the night too, but you don't have really have anything to say to this, so you just get your clothes and quietly exit the house, making sure to avoid the broken beer bottles and sticky alcohol patches on the hardwood floor. God's flashlight almost blinds you when you step outside and when you shield your eyes with your hand, you see there is still blood caked under your nails. You say fuck it and piss on the bush in front of her house before driving back to the Honors House where you go to sleep for a long time.

Throughout the rest of your undergraduate years, you occasionally run into Annie on campus and at parties. Your eyes always catch each other for a brief second, go wide, and then you both reflexively look away. Years later, at milder parties, you frequently relate this frightening tale during a Grossest Sex Stories competition (and sometimes win). One time, a pre-med student calls you out on the story and says that miscarriages are "excruciatingly painful traumas which almost always result in emergency hospitals" and that "there was no way this unfortunate girl would be able to just go back to sleep. She was pry just got her period early." This doctor-to-be also suggests, as an alternative hypothesis, that one of your fingernails was the likely culprit.

The End!

27.

It is after one AM and you and Sven are two of the only people left in the main area of the house. Some passed-out skinny guy with gray hair is on the couch. The fireplace still has some smoldering ashes. Spilled beer makes slick and sticky patches on the hardwood floor.

Sven says, “Yo...my man...if we hurry we can make the late-night drive-thru at Burger King and get us some onion rings...some Whoppers...some...”

You say fuck that. McNuggets sound better right now. Mick. Nug. Ettz. You say it like that, hoping the three syllables will sound more persuasive.

Sven leans in and sniffs. “Man, are you high?”

You repeat: Mick. Nug. Ettz. C’mon.

“Dude, you’re high!”

You point out that he’s drunk and that McDonald’s is clearly the better choice.

Sven scratches his head.

“But like, BK is on the way back to the house, man...”

You point out that this is America...and in *America*...Mickey D’s...is on the way back to everyone’s house.

He raises his pointer finger in the air as if to indicate “true dat” but just closes one eye and sticks his tongue on his right incisor. He looks crafty. This is his thinking face.

“How about...” Dramatic pause. “We go to both!”

Yay!

You both walk outside and to the car where he asks for the keys. He says he’s fine to drive. You’re not sure if you’re still high, but the car looks like its headlights are eyes and its happy to see you. Like Herbie.

Do you let Sven drive or do you drive?

If you drive, turn to page 2.

If you let Sven drive, turn to page 24.

Sarah Bentworth's Blank Book

This is weird. I just got home for Christmas a week ago, right after my finals. I think I bombed my final in Advanced Biology. I guess forensic pathology may not be for me. Oh well. Anyhow, I just got home from last-minute Christmas shopping with my sister and there's this parcel waiting for me on my bed. I say parcel but really it's just a taped-up brown paper bag folded over twice and half of it's covered with postage stamps. I unwrap it and find this thing called The Blank Book, a hardback journal from *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Every page has blank lines to write on and every two pages or so has a quote from the books.

It was from Travis. We broke up almost three months ago and he still sent me a Christmas gift. It came with a little Post-it note saying that he "knew how much I enjoy Lemony Snicket" and how he hoped I had a wonderful Christmas with my family." I opened it to the first page and saw this quote:

"The sad truth is that the truth is sad."

This just made me think about my relationship with Travis, but I didn't cry or anything emotional like that. It's just that something about receiving this gift really irks me. Travis knows I love these books because he was the one who introduced them to me. As I write this in my bedroom, a room Travis and I spent so much time in last summer, I look at my little wooden bookshelf by my bed and see my set of Lemony Snicket books. After I borrowed the first one and devoured it in an afternoon, he bought all of them for me. The idea of ever reading these books again is so unappealing. I don't know, I just don't feel like myself. I didn't just lose him. It's like I also lost a part of myself. Maybe I'm making too much of a deal about it. There are a lot of reasons for why I'm feeling the way I'm feeling right now. For some reason last night at the candlelight service, I started bawling right during the opening chords of "Hark! the Herald

Angels Sing.” Uncontrollably. I don’t understand. I mean, I should be happy. This is my first Christmas back home after leaving for college and all my siblings are here. Maybe it’s because I’ve started worrying that this is my last Christmas with my dad. He has an artificial pump in his heart and he’s been in and out of the hospital recently. He has to have the battery replaced every five years, but the doctors are worried about whether he’ll be able to survive the process again. Right now I feel like calling Travis and telling him all about my family crisis, but then I get mad at myself. I feel like this is just one of his manipulative little gifts. I’m so mad at him right now. Mad that he sent me this, and mad at myself for being mad about it.

Hmm. Everyone else is taking their post-Christmas dinner nap. I didn’t eat much because my stomach’s been bothering me lately. I think I’m becoming lactose intolerant.

Maybe if I can fill each of these pages with a passage about Travis that’s somehow related to all these quotes, I can exorcise him from my memory. The last year went by so fast, I didn’t even really have time to reflect or record what was going on. This’ll be a nice way to start the new year. Here goes.

“First impressions are often entirely wrong.”

I met Travis last spring when I was competing at State Speech. My best friend Amy and I were in a duet, a condensed version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. We’d read the play and seen the film so many times, we never even rehearsed. We just improvised the lines and every performance was effectively a new cutting. God, I’m glad a judge never asked to see our scripts because we would have been screwed!

Travis happened to be staying at the same hotel as our small speech team. He told me he was friends with a high school coach from another team and was there to help out with the event.

We met while swimming in the pool. I found out he was from Unadee, which is about twenty miles from Morrill, my hometown. He was a junior from UW, which is where I was considering applying to. I asked him about his major and his answer was kind of vague. Something called psycholinguistics, which now that I write that down on paper, it just looks like “crazy words.”

He first impressed me because he knew what my name meant (“princess”), but he asked whether or not I spelled it with an ‘h.’ Then he started talking about how my spelling was Old Testament style for after the Covenant with God where Abram became Abraham and Sara became Sarah. I said it was a shame that Abram got a cool upgrade while my name just got an extra letter and stayed the same. I’ll never forget his smile and how I laughed when he said that “Saraham” sounded like a brand of processed pork, while Sara(h) was pretty just the way it was.

It all seems so cheesy, but I just remember him being so charming and easy to talk to about anything. I liked that he wasn’t like the boys my own age who were always ogling my breasts. He looked me in the eye the whole time. I can’t remember whose idea it was, but after the pool area was closed for the night, we made plans to change and meet at my room. I was sharing this room with another teammate, but she was asleep most of the time Travis was in there. We ended up staying up all night talking about our favorite bands, movies we liked, and somehow we got to the tickling and pillow-fighting stage. Though throughout all of this, there seemed to be a certain kind of restraint in Travis. Sometimes we would be in an embrace, and it almost was like, no, it was just like those moments in the movies where the young lovers-to-be end up in each other’s arms and it’s obvious that the boy wants to kiss her, and it’s obvious the girl wants to be kissed, and the audience wants them to kiss because they seem so perfect together and then!...they let go.

Honestly, that was enough for me because I was just two months away from graduating

and this was the closest I had ever been to a boy. It's not that boys my own age weren't into me, but I was never into them; they were always so immature, while Travis seemed so grown-up, even though he was only three years older than me. Anyhow, the sun started to come up and I realized I would have to start getting ready for competition. Travis asked for my number, said he'd call me, and went back to his hotel room. I was exhausted from staying up so late, but once we got to the speech competition, an adrenaline rush fueled me for most of the day. Red Bull helped too. In between rounds of competition, Amy asked for all the details. She's been dating the same guy off and on since she was a sophomore, so she was happy for me. Around 2:00 we found out we had broken into the finals round and we geared up for the championship round.

Imagine my surprise when Amy and I show up and find that Travis was on the judges' panel with some grandma-looking lady and a bearded guy who had judged us harshly in previous competitions. I like to think I was a professional, but this was really unnerving. Normally I can stay very focused during competition, but I found myself distracted by wondering what Travis thought of our performance and worried about how biased he might be. Was he going to be objective? Could he *be* objective after what happened between us last night? I was nervous and flubbed a few lines, but Amy covered well. It wasn't our best performance, but I think we did all right.

After the round was over, I couldn't find Travis anywhere. We just had to wait a few hours until the big awards assembly when we'd find out how we did. When the time finally came to announce the winners in Duet Acting, my anticipation was at a fever pitch. I think I was delirious from sleep deprivation and performance exhaustion. One by one, losing duos were announced and it seemed that we had clinched the championship, but when the presenter read our names after 2nd place, my heart sank. We had come so close! My first thought was that my

irresponsible actions of staying up too late the night before had cost us the championship, or that I was acting awkward in front of Travis and the other judges just chalked it up to a bad performance. It still burns me up that we lost to that idiotic duo's rendition of *James and the Giant Peach*.

Before we headed home, our team stopped at Subway to eat, and we got the judges' sheets back. The grandma loved us and marked us 2nd. She thought we were "cute and energetic, but our performance was lacking in depth." The bearded judge was our harshest critic. He called our entire performance a "twelve minute shtick of rapid-fire back n' forth dialogue punctuated with awkward pauses." Looking back on it now, I can see how he was right. Travis ranked us as number one and had nothing but glowing praise for us, but I wasn't sure how to take this. Did he really think we were the best or was he just trying to help us?

I didn't have his number so there was no way for me to ask him. It was several days before he called and asked me out.

"Shyness is a curious thing, because, like quicksand, it can strike people at any time, and also, like quicksand, it usually makes its victims look down."

So we had our first date. He drove in from town on a Saturday afternoon from Laramie, which is more than two hours away. He introduced himself to my parents and they took to him right away. It's probably because they were starting to get worried I would never find a boy to be interested in me. I swear sometimes they think I'm a lesbian; it's not my fault all the boys at school are substandard morons. As we drove to Unadee, I mentioned how much my parents seemed to like him and he just laughed and said, "Moms love me."

He took me to the mall on the edge of town and to a restaurant called The Sports Zone. Not exactly the place I expected him to take me or the kind of place I'd normally choose. He said he used to work there as a server in high school. They sat us in a booth out in an elevated, open area that extended into the mall. It was a little noisy. Instead of hearing the classic rock music blaring over the sports bar speakers, we heard elevator jazz music and soccer moms screaming at their little children who were about to dive into the fountain in the middle of the mall. . He said the servers call this section B.F.E. I asked him what they meant and he just laughed, blushed, and changed the subject. After a minute, I got it. I remember feeling kind of stupid for some reason.

Acronyms.

Anyhow, I had to ask him about what he thought when he realized he would have to judge us. He shrugged and said it was no big thing. I didn't believe him and pressed him further, but he said he really thought we were the best duo there that day. I eventually just took him at his word.

After dinner, we went back to his place and I thought I was going to meet his parents, but they were out of town seeing his brother compete in some athletic event. Tennis, I think. We watched the movie *American Beauty* which I thought was pretty funny, but a little disturbing. Not exactly what I'd consider a first date film. What started to bug me is Travis just sat next to me on the couch like we were friends. I kept thinking he was going to hold my hand, but he didn't. After the movie was over, he asked if I wanted to sit in the hot-tub. I said I didn't have a swimsuit, but he said I could use his sister's. This was a little strange, but I was excited. Surely this would be when he would take the first step and kiss me, but instead he just sat across from me in the bubbling water. I still wonder why he was being so shy. Couldn't he tell that I wanted him to kiss me?

We eventually dried off and got dressed and on the drive back, we just talked about the music he was playing in his car. He had made a mix CD of original and cover versions of songs I'd never heard before. He told me about his theory that most people prefer the first version of something they experience. To test this theory out, he played me a version of a song by one band and then another version and he then asked me which I liked better. I often did like the first version, but I told him it's hard to speculate on which I would have liked if the order had been switched.

We eventually got back to my house and there was this nervous pause. He then put his arms out for a hug and I leaned across the center console and hugged him back. I swore this was when he was going to kiss me.

He didn't.

I remember thinking to myself as he backed out of the driveway, "Oh god, what if he's gay?"

"The worst surroundings in the world can be tolerated if the people in them are interesting and kind."

Despite all the movies, romance novels, and games of Carmen San Diego I played growing up, it wasn't until I was thirteen years-old and I spent two weeks one July with my cousin in Seattle that I realized how small and depressing my hometown (population 987) is, even with all its "rural charm." For instance, my graduating class was dubbed the Dumb Class. Of the fifty freshman, only twenty-four ended up graduating. People just seemed to be more interested in getting drunk and screwing in the back of pick-up trucks than getting out of that town. I love my parents and I am glad that I grew up here, but I was SOOOOO ready to get out

of Morrill, Nebraska. Looking back on it, I realize that dating Travis was probably one of the reasons that time went so fast. Those two months before graduation were exhilarating. One Thursday in April, I just skipped school and drove to Laramie to surprise him. I guess you could call that our second date. We had been e-mailing back and forth and I couldn't stop thinking about him. Travis just made me feel more grown-up, like I was escaping small-town minds, small-town culture. Laramie was twenty-six times the population of Morrill, if you included the 6,000 undergraduate students and the 4,000 graduate students. I know it seems silly, but proportionately this seemed like such a big step up in the world. Where do kids in NY or LA go when they want to expand their world?

Europe, I guess.

Travis was so surprised when I was waiting at his dorm that afternoon. He took me on a tour of the town and said there was a concert at the student union. He said if it wasn't for the university bringing entertainment for the students, this town would have no live music. He took me to dinner at a bar and grill called The Library. All the menu items were literary themed. I had the Romeo Beef and Julienne Pepper sandwich. At the concert, Travis held my hand in the dark and I remember how his hand was dry, but mine was so sweaty. The band was playing a surf-rock version of "Pretty Woman." Travis leaned over and whispered in my ear, "This one's about you."

After the concert, we got some ice cream at a snack shack and walked back to his dorm. It was already late and I knew my parents would just assume I was hanging out with Amy, so I knew I had to get back, but I didn't want to go. When we were outside his dorm, Travis told me to hold on and he ran inside and came back with a burned CD in a sleeve. He told me he had made me a mix CD that he was planning to mail to me, but that he wanted me to have some

driving music on my way back. I just thought this was great! I couldn't contain myself and I just had to spring up on my tiptoes and kiss Travis on the lips. He blushed and looked around for a moment before hugging me and kissing me back. We said goodnight and he said he'd visit me soon.

I still have that CD. It was pretty U2-heavy. I have to admit, I'm not really a U2 fan. Bono annoys me and I don't know why, but I really liked the song "In a Little While." It seemed that Travis was trying to communicate with me through the lyrics when Bono sang, "In a little while, surely you'll be mine. In a little while, I'll be there. In a little while, this hurt will hurt no more, I'll be home, love..." When I e-mailed him and told him how much I liked that song, he wrote back and told me it "shoulda been a single."

As it always is with the beginning of relationships, everything was perfect even though we were hours apart from each other. He e-mailed me every day, and he would drive to see me on the weekends. He got me sweet little gifts like crime graphic novels and action figures. I never thought I'd ever get gifts like these from a boy 'cause it's a little nerdy, but also pretty endearing. The long-distance relationship worked to our benefit because the time apart only made us long for the time when we could be together. In high school, I saw other couples' relationships founder because the couples were able to spend every waking moment together in class, extra-curricular activities, and any other time they could eke out of their hectic schedules. Looking back now, I can see that things went downhill for Travis and me when we ended up close enough together to fall into the routines I just listed, but I'm getting ahead of myself because this happened much later.

"A new experience can be extremely pleasurable, or extremely irritating, or somewhere in between, and you never know until you try it out."

Over the next couple weeks, Travis made frequent trips back to Unadee and we'd spend as much of the weekend together as we possibly could. That first kiss just seemed to be the crack in the dam that unleashed all sorts of desire. There was an escalation from long make-out sessions to heavy-petting to rubbing against each other through our clothes. Each new stage made me want IT even more. It seemed that this was so amazing and wonderful, the sense of discovery, that it felt like I was the first person on earth to ever feel that way. I've since realized from talking with the other girls in my dorm that these steps and feelings are pretty normal, but somehow that doesn't diminish the thrill of it all.

At the beginning of fall semester, my psychology class had a guest speaker who gave a presentation on the neural-chemical science of what happens when you fall in love. Afterwards, I got to ask the scientist if knowing all the science behind the dopamine and serotonin and stuff made it so falling in love wasn't exciting and her response was great: She said that just because she knew all the ingredients and steps it takes to make a chocolate-chip cookie doesn't make it any less pleasurable to eat.

I must admit that as Travis and I began to get more and more physical, I was unsure about what to do, so it seemed that I was always asking Amy for advice. She had been having sex since she was fifteen. Amy asked me how big Travis was and I said I didn't know, but that he felt really hard through his jeans. Amy had an on-again/off-again relationship with Billy, this guy who was about six years older than us. She had told me numerous times about how big his penis (thirteen inches!) was and how she always felt like she was being harpooned. I said that I didn't think Travis was that big.

When I finally got to see it last spring, it was a few weeks before graduation. We were in the back of his parents' Yukon. We often drove out on some country road and parked the car

near an irrigation canal. While making out, Travis placed my hand on his crotch and whispered, “You can touch it if you want.”

This was so exciting for me. Every one of my friends at school had already experienced touching their boyfriends and everyone seemed to be either amazed or incredibly disappointed their first time actually getting to see and hold a penis. I unzipped his pants and rubbed him through his boxers for a moment before slipping the elastic band down. He definitely wasn’t thirteen inches and I’m glad! I remember touching it lightly and how it was about as big around as my tennis racket handle. I enjoyed squeezing it and seeing Travis jump a little in the leather seat. We put all the rear seats down and climbed in back. Travis had blankets and pillows there and I gave my first blowjob.

Besides not lasting a long time, what I remember most is how it wasn’t my gag reflex which I had to suppress, but the urge to bite down on it. It was like someone sticking a medium-sized hotdog in your mouth and not being able to do anything about it!

All in all, my senior year was shaping up to be great: I got second in State Speech, I had a great boyfriend, I was going to get out of “Middle of Nowhere,” Nebraska, go to college and study forensic science. (Yeah, right. Like that’s gonna happen now!) I also got a lead role in the school play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I was Puck. The week before production was one of the most intense weeks of my life as I balanced school, working with my mom at K-Mart, and play rehearsals. Sometimes I got so busy I just skipped meals. Travis drove down to see our production on a Saturday night. After the play, we went back to his house. His parents were out of town (they always seemed to be out of town!) and we had made plans for me to stay the night with him. This was to be our big night, the night when IT happened.

He broke out the champagne he had procured to celebrate. As we lay in his bed, we talked about the future. I would be graduating in one week, and Travis was thinking about transferring schools from UW to UNL. He spouted some quasi-romantic babble about wanting to follow in the footsteps of his father, but I knew the real reason he was considering the move was to be with me at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

At this point, I had not yet taken off my stage makeup. I told him I was going to go take a shower to get the blue dye out of my hair (Puck's image called for a bit of the Mystique-look, you know, from the *X-men* movie.) While in the shower, I heard the door to the bathroom open. I could see Travis's long, slender body through the steam. He brushed aside the shower curtain. I didn't protest, and he didn't say anything as he slid next to me in the shower. We kissed, letting the hot water run between our bodies.

I just knew it was going to be beautiful and perfect, but just as we were about to finally do it, I fainted.

When I awoke, I was on Travis's bed and there was a warm hand-towel on my face. Travis was trying to stop the bleeding. Apparently right before I had fainted, I stumbled out of the shower and slipped on the tile floor. I did a tailspin and on the way down my nose caught on a shower hook. It healed okay, but if a person looks for it they will find a short scar on the inside rim of my left nostril. My doctor later told me my blood sugar had been very low from skipping meals and high levels of stress related to my school, work, and play schedules. You see, my mother is diabetic and there had been fears of me also having the condition, fears which were now confirmed.

I was going to graduate in a week and I was still a virgin.

“Just because you don’t understand it doesn’t mean it isn’t so.”

We decided to try again a week later. It was the night before graduation and we were in the basement at my house. My parents were asleep and we started *The Wedding Singer*, but were making out before the opening titles were over. Travis whispered that he wanted me and I said I wanted him too. There was a guest bedroom which used to be my older brother’s, so we rushed in there and undressed.

It all happened so quickly, but I can remember everything, that feeling of something being unlocked for the very first time when he slid inside. It was different than the times he had used his fingers. It felt so good with him on top of me, I just grabbed his hips and pulled him in and out. He seemed to be holding back, but I wanted it faster and harder than he was giving it to me. Before I knew it, he came and it was over and I remember feeling a little disappointed at first. It’s like movies had made me think there would be fireworks and a symphony to accompany what I was feeling, but instead there was just rhythmic sounds of skin slapping, kissing sounds, and Adam Sandler dialogue in the background.

Even though my first time wasn’t exactly what I thought it was going to be, I knew we were falling in love. Travis did plenty of romantic things over the next couple of months. He finished his semester at UW and moved back in with his parents. He got a serving job at the Sports Zone again and sometimes he’d surprise me after work by throwing pebbles on my window and when I’d go there, he would be standing there with an acoustic guitar, playing songs like “Can’t Help Falling in Love.” Travis doesn’t really have a good singing voice, but it was sweet just the same.

God, I don't know what I was thinking. We were both so young, me especially, and we just got caught up in each other. I know why I was initially attracted to Travis, but I really don't understand why I fell in love with him so quickly. I guess it's like ancient people not understanding how gravity works, but still finding themselves affected by it. I guess that neural psychologist explained some of the science of attraction, but I can't help feeling that there was something else happening between us, something we couldn't explain.

“There is nothing particularly wrong with salmon, of course, but like caramel candy, strawberry yogurt, and liquid carpet cleaner, if you eat too much of it you are not going to enjoy your meal.”

Another class I took my first semester in college was a required Literature of Western Civilization class. As I read this most recent quote about the salmon, I remembered how we got to read some of William Blake's poetry and there was this line that goes like this: “You never know what is enough until you know what's more than enough.” I think that pretty much sums up what started to go wrong between me and Travis. Last summer just flew by! When I wasn't working at K-Mart with my mom, Travis and I were together, watching movies and making love wherever we thought we wouldn't get caught. We were hanging out *every* day. Amy pointed this out to me and said that even she and Billy didn't spend every day together. Amy and I had a fight about how little time we were spending together. One night, I cancelled plans with Travis so that Amy and I could go shopping and he got all hurt by it. I told him that I would see him the next night, but he got all defensive and asked if something was wrong. I said nothing was wrong and that I just wanted to spend time with my best friend because Amy and I were both going to be

leaving soon for school in different states. We didn't know if we'd ever even live in the same town again.

This seemed to calm him down a little bit, but it just made me start wondering what Travis expected from me. It's like he saw this line, this progression of events where he just expected us to be spending more and more time together. It wasn't clear to me until we broke up how entrenched in each other's lives we had become. I mean, sometimes he'd come to my house while I was doing my nails and he'd do my laundry, or sometimes I would come home from work and he'd already be there, sitting at the kitchen table talking to my mom about shoes or something. I thought it was sweet at the time, but now I'm a little creeped out by it.

“Bad circumstances have a way of ruining things that would otherwise be pleasant.”

Oh, man. This quote reminds me of a hot August night. It was about two weeks before both Travis and I were going to move to Lincoln to go to school together. I was excited just thinking about living a few blocks away from him on campus rather than twenty miles away. It was late that night when Travis came over to my house after he finished working at the restaurant.

We were in the basement watching *Eyes Wide Shut*, but not really watching it, if you know what I mean. I thought it was a little boring, so we began to fast-forward to the sexy parts. I was a little weirded-out at first by the orgy scenes, but as Travis and I started making out, I began to wonder what it would be like to be stimulated by more than one person at a time, to have two men in me. I found myself peeking sideways at the TV screen and I thought I looked a little like Nicole Kidman on the cover of the rental box. Travis slid his hands inside my

sweatpants and started to finger me, but I was already plenty wet before that. I began stroking him through his jeans (which didn't stay on long!). I just tore his pants down around his ankles and straddled him. We let the movie keep playing to cover our noises, but Travis didn't last long, probably only about a minute. While he was still inside, he hunched over and whispered something that sounded like "sorry" and I just held him for a while. He said if we waited until the end of the movie, he'd be able to get hard again and he did!

By this time, it was almost one o'clock and I had to work in the morning. Travis asked if he could tuck me in and help with my nightly ritual of rubbing baby oil on my skin. We kept the light off. The moonlight was shining through the curtains of my bay window. It was like a scene from one of my romance novels where everything's perfect and the moon and the stars seem to be shining just for the lovers. Halfway through the massage, Travis told me he was hard again and he wanted me.

I thought it was risky because my parents' bedroom was just across the hallway, but my dad was sleeping heavily because of his heart medication and my mom was exhausted after a double-shift at K-mart, so I couldn't say no. He took me from behind and after our two previous times together, as he pounded me, I really thought I was going to come, but then I heard the door to my bedroom open. The orange light from the hallway filled the room and all we could see was the silhouette of my mother in her housecoat. Oh god, I don't think I've ever been more ashamed in my entire life. Travis had leapt off me and was crouched on the opposite side of my bed. I tried to cover myself with the sheet. I think that's how Adam and Eve must have felt, just two sinners in the garden.

All my mom said was, "Travis, I think it's time you left."

That was the last time we had sex at my house. I kept thinking my mom would have a talk with me the next day, but she never brought it up again. What must it be like to see your youngest child fucking her boyfriend in your own home? I felt awful and guilty and couldn't look her in the eyes the next few days. One morning before church, my dad mentioned how he hadn't seen Travis around for a while, but he said it like it was a good thing.

I was so looking forward to being in Lincoln, where we wouldn't have to have to worry about parents interrupting or fogging up the windows in the back of our cars.

“Normally it is not polite to go into somebody's room without knocking, but you can make an exception if the person is dead, or pretending to be dead.”

Oh, God. This quote brings back a memory I'm not particularly fond of. Because Travis was my first, I wanted to try everything with him, sexual acts I'd read about in books, experimentations I had heard my friends do. For example, Becki Masters, this girl I graduated with, was dating this wrestler named Mike. Now Becki's petite, much smaller than me, and Mike is a lot bulkier than Travis, but this one time last spring, Becki told us at lunch about how, during sex, Mike liked to pick her up and carry her around the house, slamming her up against the walls sometimes. Once, they both had the “munchies” after smoking marijuana, so while they were screwing, he carried her into the kitchen and started cooking Pillsbury Toaster Strudels. (Talk about multi-tasking!)

I don't know if I believe this next part, but Becki told us Mike set her down on the counter, took the strudel out of the toaster and held it in his hand while she sucked him off until he came on the pastry. He then mixed in some of the sugar frosting from the packet and had her

eat it. When Becki told us this, we were all a little grossed-out, but she told us it wasn't that bad. Just a little salty.

I told Travis about this and he laughed and asked if I wanted to try this. I told him no. For one thing, Travis isn't strong enough to carry me, and for another, now that I had been diagnosed with diabetes, I can't handle the sugar.

But there were plenty of other things we tried that summer. Travis eventually "took" me in his parents' hot-tub. We made love out in the woods by my parents' house after my family reunion. For the 4th of July, he brought one of those digital cameras and because we didn't have to worry about the film getting developed, we took all kinds of naughty pictures of each other. We also experimented with hand-cuffs, duct-tape, scarves, mirrors. (The mirrors might have been my favorite: looking at ourselves grunting and pushing and pulling each other) but the one thing we did that this quote made me think of was when we were "breaking in" Travis's dorm room. He had a single, so we never had to worry about getting caught or planning our sexual adventures around a roommate's schedule. We decided to start role-playing.

This one time, I pretended to be a Hispanic hotel maid. (I took two years of *español* in high school). The scenario was that while cleaning the hotel room, I would find a dead body and, after much freaking-out, have sex with it. Travis had props ready for me when I showed up: a feather-duster, a white apron, and rubber gloves. I waited in the hallway of his dorm and, I must admit, I felt a little sexy when other boys in the hallway noticed me standing there with my cleaning supplies. They probably suspected what was going on because of my costume, and even if they didn't, I was still turned on. I waited a while and then knocked on the door and said "Housekeeping." When I entered the room and saw him lying naked on the bed, I pretended to be embarrassed that I had stumbled in on a sleeping, naked man. "Lo siento, señor!" I said, but

when there was no response, I tip-toed to the bed. I inquired, “Senor?” and poked him in the side a few times and then I let out a little scream, “Dios mio! Un cuerpo muerto!” I pretended to be shocked and flustered. This was all so silly and ridiculous, I don’t know how Travis didn’t crack up. He was really good at playing a corpse! I then got curious and started brushing his hard penis with the feather duster. I remember saying “Ai yi yi, un salchicha y juevos grandes!” I then stripped down to just the rubber gloves and apron and got on top of him and fucked him. While I rode him, he remained perfectly still, but about halfway through, he began to make groaning noises like a zombie, and in a flash, he came to life, sat up suddenly and wrapped both his hands around the back of my neck and he kissed me. HARD.

And then without warning, he turned me over and began fucking me harder and more furiously than he ever fucked me before. He pushed my face into the pillow, and I was glad he did this because I was screaming so loudly, I knew everyone on that dorm floor had to have heard me. That was the first (and last) time I ever came during intercourse. I was speechless. We both just lay there sweating, trying to catch our breath. Finally, I said “estás vivo!” and we both laughed.

We had evidently worked up quite an appetite and we decided to get dressed and go to McDonald’s. When Travis started the car, the radio began playing The Rolling Stones “Start Me Up” right when Mick Jagger sings, “You make a dead man come...” This cracked us up.

Y’know, I’ve changed my mind. I like this memory.

“The world is a harum-scarum place.”

Living in Lincoln was so exciting! After my first week of school, where I had at least two hours between each class, I began to wonder how I ever put up with going to school for eight

hours a day. The roommate they paired me with wasn't much fun; when she wasn't at class, she mostly just sat in front of her computer and played some online fantasy game called *EverQuest*. I hardly saw her though because I was always over at Travis's.

I practically lived in Travis's dorm room. We spent every free minute together. He set aside half of his closet space for me and there was a drawer in his dresser he labeled "Sarah's Stuff" with cut-out letters taped to it.

Then 9/11 happened and I just clung to him more because of all the uncertainty. God, it seems like such a long time ago, but it was only a few months back when my mom woke me up that Tuesday morning. She was sobbing and told me to turn on the TV. I expected to see some CNN News coverage of a prairie fire sweeping across the plains, engulfing my hometown, but instead I just saw black smoke coming from the World Trade Center and hearing my mother repeat how we were at war.

I was so glad to have Travis to hold me that day. There was a part of me that felt like the world was ending, that more and more planes were going to keep crashing into buildings. We skipped all our classes and walked down to the student union to see coverage of the events. We could have just stayed in, but we wanted to get out and see that there were still other people alive. What I remember most was making love that night and knocking over the stack of Lemony Snicket books on Travis's nightstand. He had been reading me a chapter or two from each one every night before we went to sleep. They fell to the floor and we paused in our love-making and he looked me in the eye and said, "Well, that was...unfortunate." I just started laughing and then he started laughing and we held each other all night. We took comfort knowing that even if the world was ending, we were unified through our bodies.

“Whenever you are examining someone else’s belongings, you are bound to learn many interesting things about the person of which you were not previously aware.”

About a month later, we decided to go to this formal dance that the multicultural student organization was having. Travis hadn’t been able to go to my prom because he was studying for finals, but he wanted to make it up to me by having us both get dressed up.

It was Friday night and I was going to meet him at his dorm room, pretty much ready to go. Any you know what? That bum was asleep and not ready at all!

He came to the door all groggy and in his pajamas. He said he was sorry and that he’d get ready right away. I fumed for a bit, but said I’d wait. He needed to shave, but for a little bit it looked like he was seriously considering going all scruffy. He got his toiletries and went to the men’s bathroom to use the communal showers. I got bored, so I decided to boot up his laptop. I checked my account balance online to see if my parents had made a deposit. They hadn’t and I then decided to check my e-mail, but when I went to the Hotmail website, it logged in automatically to Travis’s account. I wasn’t trying to snoop or anything, but there was this message from someone named Nicole. It’s just that as my eye scanned the page, the subject line caught my eye. It just said: “PLEASE delete the photos.” It was marked “read.”

Curiosity got the better of me, and I’m glad it did. I clicked on the message and figured out that it was from one of Travis’s ex-girlfriends who was asking if he had deleted some photos. There seemed to be a lot of anxiety about them still existing. This was apparently her second e-mail asking him to delete them and it mentioned that he hadn’t replied to the first one. I searched the hard drive with the term “Nicole” and found a folder filled with sex photos, many of them in the same positions as the ones Travis and I had taken just last summer, pictures of her going down on him, pictures of him doing her from behind, pictures of her riding him. Even as I write

this now, there's a sinking in my gut and my hand is shaking, making these letters warbly. I was so stunned, seeing photos of some other girl who looked stoned out of her mind on top of Travis, with him inside her, while she smiled down at him with her droopy breasts and big thicket of pubic hair. I couldn't stop myself and I began searching his e-mail folders and found he had been e-mailing Nicole and that they had only broken up back in February, just a month or two before Travis and I had met. I began to question how little I actually knew about Travis, what kind of person he was. Had I just been a rebound to him?

"It doesn't take courage to kill someone. It takes a severe lack of moral stamina."

I ran out of space on the previous entry, so I turned the page and found that quote. Ha. That's a nice coincidence. I still remember the way my nails dug into my palms from how hard I was clenching my fists. I knew I couldn't see him in that frame of mind without wanting to kill him, so I quickly found a photo, the most pathetic one I could find (a shot of that sloppy Nicole sitting on his face, her bush making it look like Travis had a scraggly moustache, her belly folds and hanging tits big and pale) and made it fill the entire computer screen. I took out my lip gloss and with Burt's Bees Pucker Berry, wrote "Asshole" on the screen.

I then ran back to my dorm and cried. My roommate wasn't there, thank God. My cell phone kept ringing and I eventually just put it on silent. I remember feeling homesick. I just wanted to be in my old bedroom and have my family back and I wished I had never met Travis. I tried calling Amy but she didn't answer. I remember thinking all kinds of thoughts that night, how I wished I hadn't been curious or how I wish Travis had deleted those photos or that I had stayed and chewed him out or that I would have kicked him in the balls or something to make him feel the way I was feeling. I wanted to call my parents but I didn't feel like I could really tell

them what was going on, and in the back of my mind, I thought maybe Travis and I would be able to get past this and then what would it be like at family dinners? When Travis asked for someone to politely pass the potatoes, would they imagine his hand holding a camera during sex?

I remember checking my cell phone and seeing that Travis had stopped calling. He had called fifteen times and left six messages but I didn't want to listen to them. No way.

But then there was a knock on my door and Travis was there. I lived in an all-girls residence hall, so I don't know how he got in, but he looked so distraught, so pale. I told him I didn't really want to speak to him and that he should go, but he begged me to just listen to him for five minutes. He kept saying how much he loved me and that he had meant to delete those photos, that he had now deleted them and that Nicole meant nothing to him now, and that he only wanted me to give him a second chance. I told him I needed him to leave and that I needed some time to think. He just stood there though, looking like a hurt puppy before my words began to sink in. He nodded his head and said he would give me all the time and space I needed and it looked like he wanted to hug me, but then he finally left saying that he loved me.

After he shut the door, I just cried and cried. All my feelings of rage and hatred gave way to sadness. Back in his dorm room, if I had had a gun instead of a tube of lip gloss, I seriously think I might have shot him, but now all I wanted was for the hurt to go away. All I remember from the rest of that night was crying myself to sleep.

The next day I slept in. I had a lot of homework to do, like studying for my Advanced Biology midterm, but I was still in such a state of shock, I just slept-in and couldn't get out of bed. When I finally did get out of bed, I felt broken. Everything I saw just made me think of those photographs. I couldn't focus on anything. When I finally decided to venture out to the cafeteria for dinner, I found a vase filled with a dozen white roses sitting outside my door. There

was an index card pinned to it that said just said “I’m sorry. I love you. Travis.” Why does something as cliché and simple as twelve stupid plants in a piece of glass filled with water affect the way women feel? I mean, I was still hurt and mad as hell and felt like stabbing him, but it was like flowers softened the blade somehow. Who was the first guy who fucked things up and decided to try to smooth things over with white roses? Did it work then? Why did it work on me that day back in October? I began to think that maybe I had over-reacted.

It’s not like Travis had cheated on me. Sure, he had made me feel like what we did together was less special, but he hadn’t meant to do it. I began to blame myself for the entire mess. The night before, he had told me that he never loved Nicole and that he would never make me feel that way again.

I set the roses in my room and locked up and made my way across campus to his dorm. I didn’t change clothes, get cleaned up, or anything. I just wore my sweater and sweatpants and flip-flops. My feet were chilly, but I didn’t care. I walked up to his dorm room and knocked. He was super surprised to see me and I just walked in and hugged him. I told him to hold me, that I forgave him, and that I was hungry.

He ordered pizza and we spent the rest of the night cuddling, listening to music, and watching movies.

“Morning is one of the best times for thinking. When one has just woken up, but hasn’t yet gotten out of bed, it is a perfect time to look up at the ceiling, consider one’s life, and wonder what the future will hold.”

I woke up before Travis that Sunday morning. The sun was shining through the windows and I could remember looking at all the dust particles floating in a beam of light. It was almost

fall break and I was wondering why—in the several months he'd lived there—Travis hadn't decorated more. I guess we spent so much time rolling around in the dark there that I never really noticed how bare the walls were. The building that his dorm was in used to be the campus infirmary. People probably died in that room. I looked over at Travis. He was lying on his side with his face turned away from me. I remember the way his back rose up and down with his breaths. It reminded me of the way the white little circle on my laptop flutters on and off, like it's alive. I remember looking at the sprinkling of acne on his back and the couple dozen back hairs which I sometimes tweezed out for him. I rubbed my hand down his back and hugged his naked body. I reached my hand down around his waist and felt around lightly for him. Travis was always a heavy sleeper, so I began to stroke him and he got hard and rolled over on his back. I think he was half asleep when I put him in my mouth. I felt his hands running through my hair and I looked up and he was smiling at me, his hair all spiked up with bedhead cowlicks and fluffy patches of static. He motioned for me to come up and kiss him. The mixture of morning breath with the musk of his penis would normally have grossed me out, but it didn't that day. That scent was *my* scent. On that morning, I was the only person in the world who got to taste Travis that way. I thought about all the other couples in the world doing what we were doing on that Sunday morning. Did any of them know it would be their last time together? If they did, would they have still done it, knowing what they were going to do?

After we kissed and embraced for a while, Travis rolled me over and started going down on me. He started off gingerly, but then he began using too much force. His head felt like a very insistent bowling ball that had landed between my legs and was trying to get back in the womb. I wasn't feeling it, and I had Travis sit on the edge of the bed. I got on top and he began fondling my tits as I rode him. We didn't say anything. We didn't even moan or grunt. The only sound

was the squeak of his bed frame. It didn't last long and when he came inside me, he said he loved me. I don't know why but I had already decided I was going to break up with him, yet I still said I loved him too.

“One of the most troublesome things in life is that what you do or do not want has very little to do with what does or does not happen.”

It was just a few days later, almost fall break, and I got a call from my mom telling me my dad was back in the hospital and she wanted to know if I would come home to see him. The thought of my dad possibly dying triggered something in me. I knew in my heart that Travis wasn't the man for me. When I tried to imagine us getting old together, I couldn't do it. I just kept imagining Travis having sex with Nicole or some other floozy. My psych professor had just assigned articles on fidelity and commitment in human relationships and how adultery happens in 50% of marriages, which is scary because it means if you're not the one cheating, then the other person likely is. When I read that, I knew I would never cheat on Travis, but I began to think he would cheat on me someday. I realize I was scared to break up with Travis because I was in a new place and hadn't really gotten to know anyone else because I spent all my time with him. I didn't mind because things were so wonderful and then, suddenly, they weren't.

Travis ruined everything that was good about our relationship and I'm still upset at him for being so careless, for not being who he led me to believe he was. For fall break, we had this trip planned to go to Chicago and see *Phantom of the Opera* and the Museum of Contemporary Art. It was planned before the sex photos incident. We had Amtrak tickets and everything planned, but I just couldn't do it. My Friday classes were all cancelled, so that Thursday night before fall break, I went to Travis's and told him that I didn't want to date him anymore and that

I was going home to see my dad. He was shocked at first and after a while started begging me to just go with him to Chicago. That really pissed me off. My dad was maybe on his deathbed and Travis was still trying to get me to go on vacation with him, as if all the distractions that the Windy City offered could close up the divide which had grown between us.

Ack. I'm sick of writing about this. There are plenty of other blank spaces and quotes in this little book, but I'm done. My head hurts. My hand hurts. Christmas is almost over and I'm sick of thinking about how things went so wrong so fast. We'll see if all this writing worked at exorcising him from my mind. Maybe I'll throw this stupid book in the fireplace and watch it burn. What was he thinking, sending me this in the first place? Maybe I'll send him an e-mail saying thanks for it, but that'll be it. I never want to see him or think about him again. Oh, my sister just popped her head in and asked if I want to have some wine and watch *Home Alone*. We watch it every Christmas, so I'm totally down for that, although it makes me a little sad because I just remembered that Travis was going to take me to the suburb in Chicago to see the house where they filmed the movie. Huh. I just realized I don't know whether Travis ever ended up going to Chicago without me. Maybe he took some other girl. She can have him.

Irving Bartholomew Long

When we got to school that chilly, gray morning, they had all us 6th-graders meet in the commons with boys on one side and girls on the other. As we streamed in, some office ladies gave each of us an index card with a number on it. I got a '3.' Big pieces of construction paper with numbers were taped all around the brick wall. All of our teachers were standing about, making sure there was no rough-housing or horseplay or "grab-ass" (that's what Mr. Fehler the gym teacher called it!) The principal Mrs. Gritzfeld was also standing there with a yellow yardstick. It didn't look like she was going to measure anything, but instead the way she held it, tapping one end in her open palm, it looked like she was going to smack someone. I was sitting by myself and just listening to all the chatter. Then Mrs. Gritzfeld said, "If you can hear my voice, clap once."

A few students clapped.

"If you can hear my voice clap twice."

Most of us clapped twice and within seconds all the chattering of one hundred students stopped.

Mrs. Gritzfeld nodded and said, "Thank you, children. Now many of you might remember in elementary school when your teacher and the school nurse talked to you about puberty and all the changes you are going to go through. Today we are doing something similar. Look at your number."

We all did.

"Find the teacher who has your number and go with them to their classroom."

There was all kinds of commotion as some ran, some walked, and some lingered before finding their teacher.

I grabbed my backpack and trudged over to the big number 3. I was happy to see that Mr. Boxer, my science teacher, was standing there. He was dressed kind of like he was always dressed, with a tucked-in striped polo and a poofy tuft of sandy-brown chest hair escaping from the collar. His tight white shorts revealed really hairy legs. He wore big white socks and white sneakers. He was the girl's tennis coach at the high school and often dressed like he was about to play doubles. He was a little stocky guy. After parent-teacher conferences, I had heard my dad tell my mom that Mr. Boxer looked like "a fruity Irish brick-layer." I didn't know what this meant, but I liked bananas, so I figured maybe my dad thought Mr. Boxer looked like a piece of fruit. After seeing *Mrs. Doubtfire*, I thought he kind of looked like Robin Williams with a rounder face and a smaller nose.

Mr. Boxer patted me on the back and said, "Good morning, Mr. Steve."

He usually called students by their last names, unless he thought we were behaving like "silly elementary children" and then he used our first names.

"You don't have anything to worry about. This is going to be educational," he said. I just nodded and waited for the rest of the kids with 3's to arrive. When we were all together, Mr. Boxer clapped his hands twice in this kind of girlish way and said, "Gentlemen, walk this way."

We know he meant to follow him, but a few boys snickered because Mr. Boxer walked like a woman with one hand on his hip and the other one swinging rigidly back and forth, like he was polishing an oak table. Several mimicked his walking style as we went up the stairs and down the hallway.

When we got to the classroom, we found the desks had been rearranged in a long rectangle so everyone was facing the middle. At the far end of the rectangle was a table with a

shoebox and an office chair. Behind that was a big television on a cart. Without our regular assigned seats and the girls, we didn't know what to do, so we just stood there.

“Just pick a desk and sit down,” he said, fanning with both hands as if he was shooing us away. “Chop chop. We need to get started. There is much to talk about today.”

I picked a desk at the far corner, next to a kid named Irving Long. He was pretty quiet and I figured no one would notice me if I was sitting next to him. Irving was the only black student in the entire school, but I guess he wasn't *completely* black. I think his dad was Chinese or something and his mom was black. I had seen her walking with him at parent-teacher conferences. She looked a lot older than other moms, kinda frumpy. She had a huge white smile and a big flat nose. I remember thinking it was his grandma. He looked African, but instead of having an afro like Fat Albert, his hair was smooth, straight and black. He parted it right down the middle and the parted hair in front curved around his oval eyes like someone in a ninja movie. He was skinnier than me, so his Mossimo shirt and Bugle Boy jeans were all baggy. It was like someone had dressed a stick figure with a fat man's clothes. Irving didn't have a lot of friends at school because he had just moved here at the beginning of the year, but I wasn't sure where from.

As I sat down, I noticed each desk had two slips of white paper on it.

Mr. Boxer didn't sit down but instead marched around the room slowly, quieting the students by tapping lightly on their shoulders if they were goofing off or chuckling.

“Gentleman,” he said in a really serious tone of voice. “Today we are going to talk about sex.”

Just the mentioning of this three-letter word caused an outpouring of laughter, but Mr. Boxer put a stop to that with his invisible laser-beam-like stare. You didn't want to ever have

him look at you like that. Mr. Boxer never ever raised his voice, but this made it seem like he was always just seconds away from flying off the handle.

“I realize this is something you’re not used to talking about, not in school anyway. Maybe some of you aren’t grown-up enough to handle talking about this. Perhaps you would like to go back to elementary school or sit in the hallway while the mature, grown-up students and I discuss important, grown-up things.”

I glanced around the room and saw that most of my peers were trying to keep it together, keep it inside. It was worse than the church giggles where you just want to laugh during a sermon or the Christmas Eve candlelight service. I looked at Scottie Gee’s face. His cheeks were flushed red from how hard his mouth muscles were pushing his lips together. Time seemed to be moving very slowly, slower than normal school time, and that’s pretty slow!

“There now, that’s better,” he said with his hands placed behind his back like a general addressing his troops. “What I want you to do is to think about anything you don’t know about sex, puberty, the body. Anything at all. Something you’ve maybe been curious about or something you’ve heard about, but aren’t sure if it’s true. On each slip of paper, I want you to write a question about something you want me to discuss with the class. Don’t worry. You don’t have to put your names on them, so it’s all anonymous, no one will know who asked which question.”

He then walked to the table and took the shoebox from the table. It had a slit cut in the top so it looked like a piggy bank. “We’re going to put all the questions in here and then I’ll read them one by one and we’ll have a nice, mature discussion. Now think of your questions.”

There was a flurry of activity as all the boys started whispering to each other or unzipping backpacks to get out writing utensils. I took out my magenta Bic mechanical pencil (0.7 MM!) and tried to think what I should ask.

After a minute of just sitting there and listening to the sounds of pens and pencils scratching on the desks, I wrote “What will happen if I play with myself too much?” on the first slip.

I tried really hard to think of a second one, but couldn’t think of anything to ask so when Mr. Boxer circled the rectangle of desks slowly holding the shoebox to each of, I had no choice but to fold them both up. I dropped mine in without looking up or making eye contact with Mr. B. I instantly regretted the stupid, stupid question I had asked. My palms were getting sweaty and it seemed like I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. I imagined my question being asked and knew that everyone would know it was me who asked it and I would get made fun of it at recess every day after lunch. They’d call me Travis the Monkey Spanker just like we called Buddy Smith “Bud the Pud Whacker” after he was caught masturbating in the boys locker room before gym class. Why oh why didn’t I change my handwriting? Mr. Boxer was going to recognize it for sure!

I just stared down at my desk and waited for my fate. I felt like Sean Penn on death row. My parents had recently rented *Dead Man Walking* and let me watch it with them as long as I promised I wouldn’t repeat any of the grown-up language.

After what seemed like a hundred shop classes, a thousand groundings, a million family car trips, Mr. Boxer had picked up all the slips and was back at his seat.

The room was completely silent. Not a single student dared to shift in his seat. There was none of the normal squeaks or coughs.

The first sound was Mr. Boxer popping the cardboard lid off the shoebox and the rustle of forty-four folded paper slips brushing against each other as Mr. Boxer pulled the first one out.

I just knew my question was going to get picked first. I just knew it.

I glanced about the room. Everyone's eyes were open wide. Were they all as freaked out as me?

Mr. Boxer opened the slip, his beady eyes focused on it and he kept his face perfectly still.

In a very low and calm voice he said, "I'm going to read each question and then say what I can about it. If any of you have a question about something I say, just raise your hand and we'll discuss it."

Mr. Boxer set the first slip of the paper down like it was an antique teacup before saying, "When I get a boner, is there actually a bone inside me that pushes out?"

We all knew we were supposed to be "mature" and "grown-up" about this discussion, but there was no way any of us could keep from laughing.

Mr. Boxer waited a moment before raising his hand to quiet us.

"Remember what I said earlier, gentlemen. I realize much of this seems humorous, but we need to remain calm and respectful. How would it make you feel if, when we got to a question you wrote, everyone in the room laughed?"

Johnathan Meehan, this runty kid with asthma and blotchy skin, raised his hand unnecessarily.

"Yes, Johnathan?"

"It...it'd make us feel...bad?"

Mr. Boxer nodded. “That’s right, Mr. Meehan. Now, let’s continue.” He picked up the piece of paper and looked at it again.

“The answer to your question is ‘no.’ It may *feel* like there is something firm and hard like a bone, but it is actually just blood filling up a tube, like a water balloon.”

I briefly wondered if my penis could be so filled with so much blood that it could pop like a balloon. That would suck.

“Next question,” he said, taking another slip from the box.

Anticipation again.

“Is it okay to look at pictures of naked people?”

It seemed for a moment that there was going to be another burst of laughter, but we kept it together. I guess we were all eager to learn.

Mr. Boxer leaned back in his chair. “The human body, gentlemen, is a beautiful thing. Humans are the only species which wears clothes. If you think about it, wearing clothes is unnatural, but the rules and guidelines of civilization aren’t really about what’s natural, but what works best for that society, and in our society, people often get pleasure from looking at photos or paintings or movies where there is nudity, but there are also people who think it is wrong, so if you are worried, it would be best to ask people you respect, like your parents, your pastor, priest, or other religious figure. Talk with them about it.”

Yeah, right. Like we were ever going to do that!

A hand belonging to Scottie Gee went up. Mr. B called on him.

“Um, a while ago, I...I was looking in the garage and I found a box with magazines in it...”

Every single boy in that class was on the edge of his seat, wondering where this was going. Scottie sounded like he was confessing to breaking a window with a baseball.

“I think they were my dad’s. And when I looked at them, they made me feel all funny inside....”

Then he started crying.

Mr. B got up slowly, got a Kleenex from his desk, gave it to Scottie and said, “There, there, it’s all right. It’s all right.” He then turned to us all and said, “You can see, gentlemen, why it is so important that we have talks like these, because it is very serious the effects sex can have on a person.”

Serious? What else was going to happen to us? Was someone in the class going to go crazy? Spontaneously combust?

Mr. B patted Scottie on the shoulder. “Scottie, the first time I saw pictures of a person naked, I wasn’t sure what to think. I thought I was looking at an alien creature with a human head! But I eventually learned there was nothing to fear.”

Mr. B returned to his seat.

“Next question,” As he started to read it, it was like my eye zoomed in on Mr. B’s little mouth and I could see each turn of his lips and the way his tongue hit his teeth and it was all in slow motion.

“What will...”

Please oh please let it be someone else’s question!

“...happen if...”

Say something else, Mr. B! Say “...if I wet the bed the rest of my life!” Anything but my question!

“...I play...”

Tetris naked! Basketball with a boner! Spin the Bottle!

“...with myself too much?”

Well, that was it. Everyone would clearly be able to hear my heart pounding away like the marching band’s bass drum and see my red ears that felt like they were on fire, but instead they all laughed out loud. I was worried everyone would notice I was the only one not laughing, so I laughed as well to camouflage my shame.

Even after order was restored, my heart was still pumping furiously. I wondered if I was having a heart attack.

Mr. Boxer put one finger to his lips, not to shush us, but like he was thinking and pointing up his nostril at the same time.

“Well, to answer this question I have to ask a question. How much is too much?”

He paused and the room was silent. No one wanted to venture a guess.

Mr. B, continued, “Masturbation, or ‘playing with yourself’, feels good. It’s natural. If sex felt bad, no one would ever do it and the human race would die out.”

This seemed to make a lot of sense.

“So, my advice is this: if it starts to hurt or there’s blood in your semen, stop, take a break for a day or two and try again. If there’s still a problem, talk to your doctor.”

I was listening so attentively to each and every word, I think it might have been the first time in my life I knew in my heart that I didn’t need to take notes to remember something a teacher told me.

After that, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was glad I hadn’t asked a second question. Now I could just listen and learn.

The next question was “Is it okay to touch another boy’s penis?”

The hyena howls of laughter were louder than any previous explosions. Even I couldn’t help myself. I saw Scottie, tears freshly wiped from his eyes, slap Tony Chicarelli and go, “Oh my god! What gaywad wrote that question? I bet it was you! Tony *Fag-arelli!*”

This made for even more laughter. I turned to laugh and slap Irving playfully, but I noticed he was the only boy in the room not laughing. He just looked all stone-faced and sad like a statue. With his darker skin, it was tough to tell if he was blushing or not, but I think he was. Mr. Boxer seemed to teleport across the room and was by Scottie’s desk in an instant with an administrator pass in hand. (It was really just a wood ruler with the word “Pass” written in Sharpie on the side.)

I don’t think I’ve ever heard Mr. Boxer sound more serious in his life. “Scottie, those comments are hurtful, disrespectful, and absolutely inappropriate. Go see Principal Gritzfeld right now, young man.”

Scottie shook his head and chuckled as he went out the door, muttering, “Whatever you say, Mr. B.” He slammed the door behind him. It was weird how one minute Scottie could be so emotional and then turn around and be all Laffy Taffy, but I beginning to think this was not going to be a normal day.

Mr. B returned to his seat and no one said anything. It seemed like he was thinking for a long time, trying to think of what to say. Finally, he said, “Gentlemen...it is natural to be curious about your own bodies and other’s bodies. In our culture, though, some people think it is wrong for boys to be interested in boys’ bodies and girls to be interested in girls’ bodies. It’s not for me to say what is and isn’t okay, but what I can say is it is important that whatever happens between two people is done with respect and agreement on how it is going to happen.”

We weren't sure what this meant exactly, but it wasn't like anyone was really going to ask for clarification. After that, there were brief flare-ups, but no major laugh attacks, which is impressive because some of the other questions were:

Why do men have nipples?

Is it normal to be attracted to a video game character?

How big will I get? (Mr. B's response: "In what way?")

After all the questions were asked, Mr. Boxer spun on his office chair and put a tape in the VCR "Okay, gentlemen. We're now going to watch a brief video about the act of sexual intercourse and how impregnation works."

The eyes of every boy in the classroom popped wide open. Were we actually going to get to see a video of people having sex? Just the thought of it gave me a woody and I had to squirm in my seat to adjust myself.

Mr. Boxer pressed PLAY and—then to our disappointment—it was some National Geographic video about wildlife in Africa. Images of grazing elephants on some African savannah appeared while some bass-y British voice narrated: "Mating season is extremely important for elephants because it is short and females are only able to conceive for a few days each year. The gestation period, the time that it takes for an elephant fetus to develop, is the longest on earth: twenty-two months."

I think, for the first time in seven years of education, every 6th-grade mind was thinking the same thing: why are in the world are we watching this?

The narration continued, "She will detach herself from the herd. The scent of the female elephant in heat attracts the male and she also uses audible signals to attract the male. As the

female can usually outrun the male, she does not have to mate with every male that approaches her.”

I looked around the room and could see that pretty much every other boy had the same look on their face as mine. Mouth hanging slightly open and our eyebrows scrunched together and eyes fixed on the screen. I looked at Mr. Boxer to see how he was reacting, but he was just sitting still with his chin slightly up, like he was at the back of an opera hall and trying to hear the fat lady sing.

I looked back at the screen and thought about Belinda Dredlen, the girl every boy in school had had a crush on since kindergarten, and how she would hardly ever dance with anyone at the school dances. Belinda Dredlen, my first crush, my first fantasy. I had been enthralled with her since she danced ballet in the first-grade talent show, twirling about in a powder blue tutu. Belinda, with her cute blondish-brown hair that was cut short like Hayley Mills in *The Parent Trap*. Belinda. Even when she got braces, her smile became more radiant, like her teeth were replaced with diamonds. In fifth-grade, Belinda was the first girl to get contacts and when I saw her on the playground, her blue eyes stood out even more because the skin around them was paler from a glasses-shaped tan line. “The male initiates the courtship and the female ignores him for several minutes. He then stops and starts again. Elephants display a range of affectionate interactions, such as nuzzling, trunk intertwining, and placing their trunks in each other's mouths. The female elephant is not passive in the ritual and uses the same techniques as the male.”

Then we saw something I knew I would never forget: the guy elephant got behind the girl elephant and put his front legs on her back and underneath we saw the elephant's penis, slowly swinging between the girl elephant's back legs, like a giant gray cannon. Then we saw it go in the girl elephant's behind and he started humping her while the narrator's voice calmly spoke:

“After about half an hour of courtship, the male mounts the female and after a brief flurry of activity, plants his seed in her.”

The guy elephant got off the girl elephant and started walking away. Mr. Boxer pushed STOP on the remote and said, “That’s one way in which other mammals reproduce. It’s a little more complicated with humans, but that’s how essentially how it works. Are there any questions?”

We were all too shell-shocked to ask anything. What the hell? Why did we have to see that? We already knew that stuff! Not about elephants, I mean, but about how *it* works. This was weird.

Mr. Boxer clapped his hands together. “All right, gentlemen. I hope this was an educational and beneficial time for you. Please feel free to ask further questions in the future and speak with your parents or guardians. It is now time for you to go to your homeroom. Your homeroom teacher will tell you the schedule for the rest of the day.”

When I stood up to walk out, I felt all woozy. As we all shuffled out of the classroom, I saw that Irving was lingering behind. He just looked at the floor and held his backpack in both hands. Mr. Boxer called to me, “Travis, would you close the door on your way out please?”

As I made my way through the crowded hallway, jostling through all the boys who were pushing and shoving each other, I wondered what Mr. Boxer and Irving were going to talk about.

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The rest of the morning was actually kind of normal, which made the first two hours spent in Mr. Boxer’s class even stranger, like a dream that had never happened. I guess the big difference is that I couldn’t really focus on my pre-algebra—not that I ever really could—because instead of seeing vectors, I kept seeing giant elephant dicks.

At lunch I went to the basement cafeteria. People always asked why I was so skinny and I had two words for them: “cafeteria food.” It was all just so bland and disgusting. Usually, I’d just get a chocolate milk, a brownie, tater tots, and sometimes a banana. I looked around the poorly-lit cafeteria with its fold-down tables. Because of the compressed schedule, there were more students in there than normal, so it was extra loud and extra crowded.

I noticed Irving was sitting by himself at one of the extra tables that the custodians sometimes brought in to help with the overflow. He looked so lonely there, I just had to go sit by him and keep him company.

“Hey, is anyone sitting here?”

He looked up from his green slop and shook his head.

I sat down and began opening the ketchup packets for my tots. I wasn’t sure what to talk about, but I figured everyone was still thinking about the sex ed, so I said, “That was kinda weird this morning, huh?”

He shrugged and said, “Yeah.”

“You know what my favorite question was? The one about thinking video-game characters are hot. Do you think it’s weird to be attracted to video-game characters?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“I mean, I like Zelda. There’s something about her pointy ears that’s really hot. Chun-Li’s pretty good too. Did you know if you pause the game while she’s in the middle of a roundhouse kick, you can see her panties between that slit in her dress?”

Irving just chewed his food for a bit before saying, “You know what I heard? The girls got to watch a different video.”

“What?” This was news to me. “I thought all that elephant sex was weird.”

“The video the girls got to see had human sex, with tiny cameras inside the woman. They got to see the sex from the inside and see the egg get fertilized.”

“No way!” I said, spitting out bits of half-chewed tater-tots on my tray. I wiped my mouth with a napkin. I don’t know why this talk about the other video turned me on, but it did. I shifted in my seat at the table. It seemed like every fifteen minutes I was aroused and having to adjust myself without anyone noticing. “That’s messed up!”

“Yeah,” was all he said.

“Why didn’t we get to see that?”

“Well,” Irving said before scooping some runny mashed potatoes in his mouth. “It’s not as if we proved ourselves to be mature young students this morning.”

It’s not as if we proved ourselves... Who talks like that? I thought. The few times I had heard Irv speak in class, it seemed like he was older than us or like a professor in an Indiana Jones movie or something. I figured this was a good time to change the subject.

“Hey, who do you think asked that question about the video game characters?”

“I don’t know,” Irving said.

“I bet it was Scottie Gee. He told me once he jerked off to the jumping cheerleader from *Tecmo Super Bowl*.”

“I don’t know that game,” Irving said.

I couldn’t believe this. “What? Are you crazy? It’s just, like, the greatest football game ever!”

He shook his head while chewing his food. He chewed really slowly, like he was thinking about every bite. “My mom doesn’t let me play video games.”

“Whoa...that sucks.”

A mom that doesn't let her son play video games is like a...like a...well, it was so terrible, I can't think of anything that bad.

Irving's face brightened a little bit. "She bought me a computer though. Actually, it was my stepdad. My mom convinced him that it would help me with school, but I think he did it so I would like him."

"Oh, cool," was all I could say. All my friends' parents were still married. I'd never spoken to someone with divorced or remarried parents before. I had no idea what that would be like, to have a stepdad. We were pretty much done with our meals by this point, so we both got up to take our trays to the crabby dishwasher lady and then go outside for whatever was left of recess. The stupid lunch lines were always so long and the lunch ladies so slow that it never felt like we had any time to play afterwards.

We walked outside and I instantly wished I had brought my jacket. The sun was shining, but it was still a chilly March day. Irving and I walked over by the basketball courts and just watched the other kids run around and play Horse. I looked over at Irving. He was slouching, but I couldn't tell if it was because of his heavy backpack or just bad posture. My parents told me to always stand up straight so I wouldn't get "skull-ee-oh-sis."

"Do you wanna play basketball?" he asked.

"Nah," I said. "I don't like playing it for real."

His mouth dropped a little in surprise. "Really? You're like the tallest kid in 6th grade? I thought you'd be awesome at basketball."

"Yeah, a lot of people think that, but actually, I suck."

We didn't say anything for a little bit. We just stood there on the grass looking at the other kids running around. The bell rang and we needed to start lining up by the big doors.

“Really, I like playing *NBA Jam* the most. It’s my favorite sports game for the Super Nintendo.”

“I’ve never played it,” he said.

“Man, that’s crazy,” I said, but I instantly regretted it because he looked a little hurt. I don’t think his mom knew how much a lack of video games made her son a weirdo. “Say, I have a bunch of allowance money saved up. I was going to go to Game Force and buy the new tournament edition after school today. Do you wanna come over after school and we’ll try it out together?”

Irving’s eyes lit up at this suggestion. “I just gotta check with my mom. I’ll use the office phone to see if it’s all right.”

“Sweet,” I said. “I get tired of always playing the computer. It cheats all the time.”

I gave him my number and said I’d maybe see him later.

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After school, I rode my bike to the mall and paid fifty bucks for the game. It took me weeks to save up that much, mostly because I kept spending allowance money on comic books. If I saw something like *Spider-man* or *X-men* on the wire spinner racks at Bailey’s Town & Country Market or Copperfield Books, it was nearly impossible for me not to drop two bucks on one issue or splurge and pick up another. Usually, before I knew it, all my allowance money was gone, but I always felt okay whenever I’d walk into my bedroom and I’d see my nice, neat stack of comics in the corner. It got bigger every week.

I sped home as fast as I could and raced upstairs to my room and plugged the gray plastic cartridge into the console and powered it on. I picked my favorite team (The Bulls!) and started a new season. I was about three games in and on fire when the phone rang and my mom yelled at

me from downstairs. I paused the game and went down to the kitchen to get the cordless phone. My mom was making her usual Friday night meatloaf.

“Yo,” I said.

There was just wheezy breathing on the other line. I just listened for a moment before thinking to say, “Hello?”

I heard a sucking sound and then Irving’s voice. “Sorry...I just needed to use my inhaler.”

“Oh, that’s okay, dude. Did you want to come over? I started playing the game. It’s fricking sweet.”

There was a pause and then Irving said, “My mom says I have to stay in because of my allergies, but that I can have a friend over.”

I glanced over at the screen and heard the energetic 16-bit synthesizer music calling me back to the competition, to the court. It was Friday and I really just felt like playing video games.

“I don’t know,” I said. “What would we do?”

“I have some computer games,” he said.

“Do you have any sweet games?”

“Hold on a minute,” I heard footsteps and then Irving started whispering into the phone, “My mom gave me money to go buy educational games last week. I told her I was buying *Oregon Trail*, but...”

There was another pause and I was really wanting to get back to the game and dunk on John Stockton’s head, but then Irving said, “I bought...*Doom*.”

This was like the moment in the movies where all the music stops and the actors pause for a while and it’s silent so that the audience knows something important has just been said.

Doom.

The world's first 3D sci-fi action-adventure shoot-'em-up game.

DOOM.

A game so awesomely violent, neither Sega or Nintendo would release it.

DOOM!!!

A game I had never played.

“No way,” was all I could say. I so wanted to play that game, right there, right then. I carried the cordless phone over to my little combination TV-VCR unit and looked at the glowing image of Scottie Pippen stuck in mid-flight, his arm holding the ball fully extended toward the hoop. I wanted to play that lone marine on Mars fighting a demonic horde with fists, chainsaws, shotguns, and other sweet weapons. Everything I had read in my video game magazines told me I would never be the same. I *had* to play that game.

“When can I come over?”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Normally, eating my mom's meatloaf was a guaranteed highlight of Friday evening, but that night I couldn't eat it fast enough. I just slathered the ketchup on and shoveled it in.

“C'mon, Mom! I gotta get to Irving's!” She wasn't done eating, but I didn't want to waste time, so I ran to the closet and got her coat and purse and stood by her chair.

“Travis,” she said while setting down her fork, all slowly like it was landing on the moon landing or something. “You're being rude. Sit down and wait patiently for me to finish.”

I stomped my feet and plopped down in the chair. Gah, moms just don't understand.

After an eternity, she drove me in the family mini-van to Irving's house. It was a tall brick house with white trim and a bunch of pine trees all around it. They actually only lived, like, nine blocks from us. My mom parked the car and walked up the steps with me.

"Mom, you don't have to come along," I said.

"Hush," was all she said.

We rang the door bell and stood there for a little bit. Above the door knocker was some brass plaque with an Oriental symbol. I bet it said "Welcome" or something like that in Japanese. When the door opened, I saw Mrs. Long, but because the porch light was so bright, she kind of blended in with the darkness, so all I could see was her big smile and eyes. It made her look like that cat from Alice in Wonderland. She opened the door and I saw she was wearing a navy blue dress. She smiled and said in a really loud voice, "Why, hello! I'm Charlotte Long! And you must be Travis's mother!"

My mom shook her hand and said, "That's right. Louise Steve. Thank you so much for having him over."

Mrs. Long looked down at me and grinned. "Travis...I've heard so much about you."

Why did people always say that when they meet someone, like they do in the movies? What did that even mean? And what could she have heard? Irving and I had barely spoken before that day. I just said, "pleased to meet you, ma'am" and shook her hand. It was the first time I had ever touched a black person. Her hand felt dry and kind of rough, like the sandpaper we used in shop class.

She gestured for me to come into the house and I did. My mom told her to just call when I needed to be picked up. The entry-way was kind of dark. A tall brass lamp was turned on low, but the light flickered and I realized the top of the lamp was actually this big metal bowl filled

with candles. I saw a set of stairs and Irving standing by the railing. He was wearing a baggy T-shirt and sweat pants now. “Hey Irving,” I said.

“Hey,” he said back.

Their house looked like no house I had ever been in before. On the outside, it looked like the other houses on the block, but the inside was a mix of African and oriental things. There were leopard-skin rugs and carpets with oriental designs, voodoo-looking wooden statues and dragon paintings, hand-woven baskets filled with fruit on tables and Chinese scrolls on the wall. It was like someone couldn’t decide what continent they were on. It was weird but cool.

Mrs. Long walked by me, but really it seemed like she glided. For an older lady, she moved really smoothly. She was in the dining room by a big red and brown African mask that was on the wall. It looked like the kind savages with spears would wear. “Can I get you anything to drink, Travis?”

“Do you have Mountain Dew?”

“Oh, no,” she said. “We don’t drink sugary soda in this house. We have grape juice, green tea, Perrier, and carrot juice.”

I glanced at Irving for some reason. Normally I would have thought something like “No pop? Seriously?” but I just wanted to play *Doom*, so I said water would be good.

“One water, coming right up!” she said with a chuckle.

She returned and gave me a big wine glass of water with one ice cube floating in it.

I said thanks and Irving said, “Hey Travis, you wanna go play *Oregon Trail*?”

“Yeah!” The way I said “yeah” made me feel like a liar, like I was so excited to play a settler in a covered-wagon, trying desperately to survive on the harsh prairie, armed only with one rifle and one hundred bullets.

“Have fun, boys,” Mrs. Long said.

Irving dashed up the stairs and I followed him. The hardwood floors creaked with each step as I went down the hallway. When I got to Irving’s room, I found the most grown-up-looking room I had ever seen: the bed was made, the walls were completely bare except for a few framed photographs, and there was nothing on the floor. (You can’t even tell the color of carpet in my room from all the clothes, action figures, and video game magazines.) The few pieces of furniture—the bed, the dresser, nightstand, and computer desk—were all neatly arranged in the square room with lots of space between them.

“Wow,” I said. “Your room is really...clean.”

Irving shut the door and walked over to the computer desk and sat down in one of the two office chairs, the comfy kind with arm rests, adjustable seats, and wheels. He turned on the computer speakers and said, “The sound in this game is awesome, but I have to keep it down or my mom will find out.”

I sat down and was so excited. It seemed like the computer booting-up was taking forever. I knew it was a single-player game, so I thought I would have to wait for him to die like I normally do at my cousins before I’d get a chance to play, but Irving scooted over in his chair and gestured toward the monitor and said, “Try it.”

It was awesome how real it all seemed. I mean, the Super Nintendo had good graphics, but nothing like that! It was like being dropped into a hellish nightmare with only a pistol to defend yourself. I had never actually been scared from a video game before. I went around a corner and jumped in my seat when a big-toothed demon jumped at me and started gnawing on my face. I yelled and Irving shushed me. I apologized and said I would keep quiet. While I played, we talked about the different weapons and how awesome the lighting effects were. I

didn't even realize that an hour had slipped by. I turned to Irv and said, "Don't you want to play?"

He shook his head. "I like to watch. And plus, I can play anytime. You can borrow the software and install it, if you like."

"My family doesn't have a computer," I said before shooting a wraith in the face with a quick shotgun blast. "You know, maybe we could share though. I feel bad y'know, just coming over and playing your computer game. What if I steer and you shoot?"

This worked out well except that I was terrible at steering the character and Irving would get freaked out and just start unloading clips and wasting too much ammo, so we'd have to fight demons with our fists. Sometimes we'd get ambushed by a pack of demons who tried to outflank us and we'd see blood fly across the screen as we got attacked from all sides. We'd scream and I'd try to run away while Irving would shoot and shoot and shoot.

"Hey Irv, if you keep wasting so much ammo, I'm going to start calling you Trigger-Happy."

He laughed and said, "I wouldn't have to waste so much ammo if you didn't run around like a blind man!"

"Blind man. Yeah, right," I chuckled. "That sounds like a super-hero team: Blind-Man and Trigger-Happy!"

Suddenly there was a light knocking on the bedroom door and we heard Irving's mom. "Irving, please turn that noise down! I'm trying to read downstairs and the noise from your game is distracting me."

"Yes, Mom," Irv said and I saw him blush as he turned down the computer speakers. This was too good to mess up. We had to keep this game a secret.

“Your middle name’s Bartholomew?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I call you Irv Bart?”

Irving looked at me like I was crazy and said, “No, that sounds...gay.”

We both laughed at this and then went back to playing the game, the two of us huddled around the keyboard with our skinny fingers tapping the keys rapidly.

“Were you named after anyone?”

“Yeah...hey, there’s a MediPak,” he said stabbing the monitor with his finger. “My biological dad was a famous symphony conductor in New York and Irving Berlin was his favorite modern composer.”

“What about Bartholomew?”

“He’s my mom’s favorite apostle.”

“What’s an apostle?”

“Like one of Jesus’s friends.”

“Oh,” was all I said. I was named after my dad and I began wondering why my middle name was Rothchild, but then I got distracted by all the monsters attacking us, so we both got really focused on the game. We kept playing and we worked extra hard not to scream when things got intense. I don’t even know how long we were playing, running through pits of radioactive sludge and escaping hairy situations by jumping off buildings, but we were both startled when Irv’s mom knocked on the door again and said it was bed-time and that it was time for me to go home.

Neither of us wanted to quit playing. We were only on level eight and we were on a roll! Irv persuaded his mom to let me stay the night. I called my mom and I think I woke her up, so

she was happy she didn't have to come back over to get me. Irving let me borrow some pajama pants that were way too short on me, but still comfy. His mom said she was going to bed and that he shouldn't stay up too late because he had to help her with her garden in the morning. I was glad my mom didn't garden. I hated outdoorsy stuff.

About an hour later, we were on level eleven when something went wrong with the computer and the screen froze in the middle of a rocket-launcher blast.

"No way!" we both said at that same time. We were almost done with that level too. "This sucks," I said.

While Irving restarted the computer, I got up to stretch and walk around a bit. My legs were stiff from sitting for so long, and tensing them up when things got hairy.

"This isn't good," he said when the game came back. "We didn't hit SAVE after any of those levels so we have to start over."

"Aww, man," I said, rubbing my hands together. They were sore from pressing the keyboard so hard. "Do you wanna start over?"

"How about we watch a movie instead? We have a bunch of movies in the basement."

"Uh...okay," I said. We tiptoed downstairs and went through the kitchen which had a big spice rack and more weird oriental and African art. Two gazelle horns were mounted on the wall to hold what looked like silk dish towels. Where did they buy all this stuff? Probably not at Target.

We then went down a flight of stairs by the back door to the basement. Their house was huge! The basement wasn't decorated like the upstairs. It looked like it was from the '70s or something. The carpet was all orange and shaggy. The walls had fake wood paneling and there

was just a worn-out brown couch, a coffee table, a big TV on an entertainment center stand, and a little shelf of tapes on it.

I walked up to the shelf and saw it just had Disney movies and grown-up movies with boring titles like *Remains of the Day*, *Terms of Endearment*, and *Driving Miss Daisy*. I asked, “What are we gonna watch?”

“Do you like *Beauty and the Beast*?” He said while turning on the TV.

“Belle’s pretty hot, but I like Jasmine better. Or Ariel, but I don’t know. I’ve seen all those. Don’t you have any action movies like *Die Hard* or *Predator* or something?”

Irving shook his head and looked down, like he was embarrassed. I never knew what he was going to be sensitive about. “Hey, man, *Beauty and the Beast* is okay with me.”

“Well...maybe we could...” he started to say before trailing off. He looked really nervous.

“What is it, dude?”

He just stood there for a minute and I was starting to get impatient when he looked up at me and said, “My stepfather has some porno videos we could watch.”

Hearing these words had the same effect on me as if Irving had told me that there was buried pirate treasure in his backyard.

“No way...” was all I could say. I had never seen porno video before. I had seen Playboys (they never really showed...well, you know!) and Penthouse showed naked people *almost* having sex, but not really. This was shaping up to be one of the coolest days ever. “Where are they?”

He pointed upstairs. “In my stepfather’s shoe closet. He keeps them in a duffle-bag.”

“But your parents are sleeping in there.”

“Yeah, but he’s traveling for work and my mom’s a heavy sleeper. I can sneak in and get them. I do it all the time.”

“Totally, dude! That’d be frickin’ awesome!”

Irving told me to wait downstairs and he’d be back in a minute. I plopped down on the couch and tried using the remote to see what was on TV, but they didn’t have cable, so I just stood there and looked at the snowy screen. I had been getting a little sleepy, but now I was wide awake, filled with so much anticipation, I could hardly sit still on the couch. I waited and waited and after what seemed a really long time, I heard Irving stomp down the stairs, breathing heavily, his inhaler in one hand and a black duffle-bag in the other.

“Man, what took you so long?”

“I started to get nervous and wasn’t able to breathe, so I had to stop for this,” he said while taking a puff on the inhaler. He sat down on the floor by the VCR and unzipped the duffle-bag.

I leapt up from my seat and got on my knees next to him. “What does he have?”

I looked inside the bag and there were at least thirty or forty tapes. They didn’t have any sleeves or cases. Irving grabbed a couple and set them out on the carpet. I read the titles:

Cum-Dumpster Divers.

Tit or Treat.

Schindler’s Fist.

Abnormal Whoremoaning.

Big Sluts 4.

I was blown away. “Where did your dad get all these?”

Irving grabbed a tape from inside the bag and shoved it in the VCR. “Before we moved here from Las Vegas, my stepfather rented about fifty tapes from a porn shop and then he just left town with them all.”

“How do you know that?”

Irving fished around in the duffle-bag and pulled out a crumpled piece of yellow paper. “Here’s the rental receipt.”

“Whoa,” I whispered.

Irving’s stepdad was brilliant.

“Which one are we gonna watch?”

“This one’s pretty good,” Irving said.

We both just sat there cross-legged a few feet in front of the screen and waited for the movie to start. The first shot showed a woman with poofy blonde hair driving a convertible by a bunch of palm trees on a sunny afternoon. There was some funk music and in big block letters it said *Fuck Buddies 5*. The woman parked in front of a brick apartment complex. Then there was a shot of her ascending a stairwell. She was wearing a white tank-top and tight blue jeans. She entered an apartment without knocking or ringing the doorbell or anything. Then we saw her opening a bathroom door and she found a hairy man with a mustache standing in a shower with the curtain pulled open. He smiled at her and kept rubbing soap on his pecs. I was so hard at this point, I wanted to start rubbing myself through my pajama pants, but Irv was sitting right next to me.

The guy and girl on screen didn’t seem that surprised to see each other, so I figured they knew each other, but it also didn’t seem like they had planned on seeing each other. I was trying to figure this all out. I wasn’t expecting the woman to strip so fast. I thought they would at least

talk for a minute or that she'd do a striptease or something. It was weird that she wasn't wearing any underwear or that he didn't say anything like, "Oh hi, Cindi!" Then she began sucking the man's dick. They made loud, sloppy sounds I had never heard before. They switched positions a few times and my eyes got really dry because I was so focused on seeing how the man's penis disappeared inside the woman with each thrust that I forgot to blink. After a few minutes he pulled out and she put him back in her mouth until he pulled out again and he came on her face and she smiled as his semen ran down her cheeks and mixed with the water.

All I wanted to do was masturbate, but I thought that would be weird.

Suddenly, another scene started, but this one had two guys and one girl. I couldn't believe that there wasn't any other stuff to the story, no real dialogue or plot. I glanced to my left and realized Irving wasn't sitting next to me on the floor anymore. I had gotten so absorbed by the awesomeness on the screen that I hadn't noticed him move. I turned around and saw Irving sitting back on the couch with his eyes closed and one hand down his sweatpants, rubbing himself.

"What are you doin', dude!" just came out of me.

His eyes popped open and he yanked his hand out. "Sorry," he said. Earlier that day I had been unsure if he was blushing, but now I knew for sure he was red in the face. He looked so embarrassed, I got embarrassed and couldn't look at him and I just turned around to look at the screen and saw the two guys having sex with the one girl, one was doing her in the mouth and the other was doing her in the behind.

"It's okay," I said.

Without turning around, I heard him ask in a real quiet voice, "You won't tell anyone we did this will you?"

“Nah,” I said. “Never.”

“Thanks,” he whispered.

For a while, neither of us said anything and just watched the sex on the screen. I was still amazingly hard. Last year I had started reading some romance novels of my mom’s and I now understood what “aching in my loins” felt like. I wanted to jump in that screen and be one of the guys to pound that woman on the hood of the convertible, like the elephant in the sex ed video. I imagined the faces of almost every girl from my school, cycling through my mind. I imagined them making the moaning sounds the woman on the screen made. Mostly, I imagined Belinda Dredlen and me on top of a nicer convertible, like my uncle’s black Corvette.

“Hey, is there a bathroom down here?”

“Over there,” he said pointing with his free hand.

I got up, went to the bathroom, and imagined that I was one of the two guys on the screen.

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The next morning, my mom picked me up around nine.

“You look exhausted,” she said as she opened the passenger-side door for me.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling like she somehow knew what Irv and I had been doing. “We...uh, stayed up late watching movies.”

“Well, it’s time to pay the piper, kiddo, ‘cause I need your help in the garage today.”

The rest of the weekend was just helping out my mom around the house, playing video games and re-living the scenes from *Fuck Buddies 5* in my mind, sneaking away to my bedroom or bathroom whenever I felt the urge. Before last night, I only had an idea about how sex worked, but now I had sounds and visual motions to help my imagination. It was glorious.

Monday morning, I found Irving in the commons before school. I invited him over after school so he could learn how to play *NBA Jam*. He came over and, truth be told, he wasn't very good, but I knew it was his first time, so I tried to go easy on him, only getting on fire once a period. After we got tired of that, we sat around and read comic books. He had never read one before because his mom didn't approve for some reason. When I asked why, he just said, "She thinks they're sinful."

Weird.

Anyhow, I loaned him my favorite *Iron Man* and *X-men* comics and told him to read them in secret and not to bend the pages.

When it was time for him to go home, I asked him if he could maybe bring one of his dad's tapes the next time he came over to hang out. He said he was worried his dad would notice one was missing, but that I could spend the night the next weekend and we could play *Doom* again until his parents went to sleep.

This was awesome, but it made the wait until Friday really long.

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That next weekend, I had dinner with him and both of his parents. His stepdad, Mr. Long was a really short Chinese guy with a beach ball-sized belly. I was about a foot taller than him. His fingernails and palms were dirty with engine grease because he was a truck driver and mechanic. He laughed really loudly and I had to try hard not to laugh when he spoke with his accent. He shook my hand very firmly. "Tlavis, we ah so grad you ah Irving's fliend."

Over a weird meal of tea tofu, chilled cantaloupe soup, and lemon vinaigrette green bean and yam salad, Mr. Long told me how he had met Irving and his mom ten years ago. Mr. Long had been carrying freight across Nevada's Route 50 when he stopped at a truck-stop outside of

Carson City (“Calson City”) to refuel. While pumping diesel he saw Charlotte and a two-year-old Irving in a smoking ’73 Buick Le Sabre. They were on their way to Chico, California to stay with Charlotte’s sister after her divorce from Irv’s dad in Las Vegas. He apparently was a band leader for one of the casinos and something happened to him, but Mr. Long wasn’t specific as to what. Mr. Long tried to fix the car but it needed too much work and Charlotte didn’t have the money, so instead he offered to give them a ride since it was on his route. Surprisingly, she said yes and on the semi-truck ride, they got to talk talking and she apparently converted to Christianity and fell in love with Mr. Long at the same time. Eventually, they moved to Unadee, Nebraska to become part of some new church I had never heard of that met in a conference room at the Super 8.

Charlotte picked up my plate and empty soup bowl and asked me, “Are you a believer, Travis?”

“Uh...I go to church,” I said.

“That is not the same thing, child,” she said with a smile.

This was weird. All I wanted to do was hang out with Irv, play video games, drink the Mountain Dew I’d smuggled in my backpack, and watch porn. I blushed a bit and glanced over at Irv who was fidgeting in his seat.

Mr. Long smiled at me, with bits of green food stuck in his teeth and said, “You ah always wear-come to come to our church on Sunday morning, Tlavis.”

I nodded and said thanks, but I was itching to play *Doom*. I looked at Irv and he wiped his mouth with a napkin and said, “May we be excused, father?”

“Yes, my son.”

Irving and I went up to his room and booted up the computer. While the program was loading and I looked at the little “thinking” hour glass on the screen, Irv sat down next to me and said, “I’m sorry my parents are so weird.”

“Hey, man, it’s okay,” I said. “I just don’t like going to church.”

“Would you ever want to go to youth group though?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What do you do there?”

“We mostly play games and there’s a youth group band. And there’s girls.”

“Girls, huh? Are they hot or are they dogs?”

“Belinda Dredlen goes there.”

This made me sit up and really take notice.

“When do you go to youth group?”

“Every Wednesday night. Our church rents out the Unadee Recreational Center.”

I said I’d think about it, but I was already planning to go to Target to buy some Clear-a-sil pads and benzoyl peroxide in the hopes of clearing up some zits by Wednesday night. We started playing *Doom* and I asked Irving if he wanted to maybe stay the night at my place the next night. “I’m getting a new game for the Super.”

“What game?”

“It’s called *Act Raiser*. You play a god that needs to protect his people. You sit up in a cloud and control the weather so the peasants’ fields grow and they pray to you and stuff. Also, they get attacked by demons, so sometimes you have to go down to earth and kick butt.”

“You play a god in it?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know, Travis. I think that might be blasphemous.”

“Aww, c’mon, Irv! It’s just a game!”

He didn’t say anything for a while and we just roamed around the fortress looking for demons to waste. Then he said, “Do you have any other games?”

“Uh, I got *SimCity*. There aren’t any gods in *that* game. You’re just the mayor of a town. It’s fun, but not that fast-paced.”

This seemed to be more Irving’s style. We kept playing *Doom* for a while, but I started to lose interest and kept hoping his parents would go to sleep soon so we could get the duffle-bag and sneak downstairs. The next one I wanted to watch was *Star Whores*. It sounded awesome.

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On Monday the fourth quarter started so our elective classes switched around. Irving and I were placed in the same study, so in addition to homeroom, Mr. Boxer’s science class, and P.E., we had a total of four classes together. I started bringing comic books to study hall and Irv and started talking about designing super-heroes based on our *Doom* names.

In homeroom, we came up with the names and their powers. I designed Blind-man. Like Daredevil, he couldn’t physically “see”, but he could see the floating spiritual energy in all things, which meant he wasn’t always running into objects and stuff because they had low spiritual matter. Trigger-Happy was Irv’s character. He was more about the action and he had all these cool guns and if he was calm, he never missed a shot, but the problem with his character was his nervous anger. When he got into a rage like the Hulk or something, he’d just start shooting everyone in sight. I couldn’t draw very well, but Irving was actually pretty good. I would kind of draw stick figures with directions on what else should be on the page and Irv would go to town, especially after we got done with our other homework. Even if we weren’t

done, our teachers normally left us alone. They were too busy trying to keep the rowdy students on task.

“What do you think of this?” He set a piece of white construction paper on my desk. It was a pencil-drawing of Blind-Man (BM, for short) and Trigger-Happy (TH) jumping out of a helicopter. BM’s hands were together like he was meditating and there were waves of energy glowing around him. TH looked sweet, but there were big blank spots where his hands should be. Irv had to draw the guns in later after school, because it was against school policy to draw weapons, so a lot of our action sequences looked weird until the cool stuff was added back in. I liked to be the one to color the drawings. Blood red was my favorite to add.

“It’s pretty sweet,” I said. “But I think we need to start putting some hot chicks in these drawings.”

Irv frowned. “Drawing women is difficult.”

“What’re you talking about?” I grabbed a blank piece of paper and started scribbling. “It’s easy. Just draw it like you were drawing a dude, but change the proportions. See, you make the legs three times longer than the chest. Then you draw the head and give them big, long hair. Then you make each of the boobs as big as the head. Just make sure they look like that and you got it. Oh, and make sure they’re skinny.”

Irv looked down at the sketch I had just scratched out. It looked like a kindergartner had only gotten a glance at Wonder Woman and then had only one minute to draw her.

“Uh, you’ll do better than me, though. That’s just an example.”

Irving smiled at me and nodded. “So, are you coming to youth group with me this Wednesday night?”

“Sure, what do I need to bring?”

“Just your Bible and—”

“My Bible? I don’t think I have a Bible.”

“Really?” He sounded as shocked as I was when I found out his mom didn’t let him play video games. “That’s okay. They have extra ones there. It’s just good to have your own in case you want to make notes or underline things.”

“Wait, is this a Bible study?”

Irv just kept adding pencil strokes to the woman sketch for a moment and then finally said, “Not exactly.”

“Cause I don’t think that’d be a lot of fun,” I said.

He looked up. “But Belinda’ll be there.”

He had me there. I was willing to do anything to see Belinda. Even go to some stupid youth group.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Wednesday came and my mom dropped me off at the Unadee Recreational Center. It was a big metal building with a shiny white basketball court in it, steel bleachers on one side, and really bright fluorescent lights. It was where my Cub Scout group used to have the Pinewood Derbies. I quit going because I hated working for hours designing a car only to get eliminated after the first two races.

A bunch of kids who I didn’t recognize were running around shooting basketballs. I saw Irv standing by some pop machines near the bathrooms, so I walked over to see him. He was holding his Bible.

My first question was, “Where’s Belinda?”

Irv pushed his lips together like he was embarrassed. “She’s normally here by now.”

Later on, it became clear that Belinda wasn't in fact coming to youth group and I got pissed that I had to sit through stupid games involving throwing bean bags back and forth in some kind of race, and then listening to a sermon about the nature of sin. They also broke us up into little groups to see how fast we could memorize Bible verses. I really just wished I could be at home playing video games right then.

Afterwards, while we waited outside in the dark for my mom to pick us up, I said, "Irv, I don't care how much I like Belinda. I don't want to go back there."

He just looked at his feet and he reminded me of how I had seen him go up to talk to Mr. Boxer that one day. I instantly felt bad. I didn't realize how important this was to him.

"Hey man," I said, punching him in the shoulder. "I didn't mean that. Maybe...maybe I can go again some other time. Say, what are you doing this weekend?"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Weeks went by and we made our way through the thirty-seven tapes and eventually had to start re-watching ones I had already seen. I began to keep a little journal at home of every time I masturbated. I would write the day and time, what positions we used, and who I fantasized about it. Usually it was Belinda, but sometimes I put her face on the bodies of the actresses from the video.

The more we watched the videos in that basement, the more I began to get tired of having to go to the bathroom when I wanted to touch myself, so I asked Irving if he would go in another room until I was done. We tried this for a while, but I began to feel a bit rude. It was his house and his dad's videos after all, so we made a deal that we would put one of the couch cushions standing up between us while touched ourselves.

This worked pretty well for a while, but I got creeped out one time when I caught Irving looking at me instead of the TV.

I hit PAUSE and said, “Quit looking at me, dude. Are you gay or something?”

He looked away from me and said, “No. Of course not.”

“Good,” I said.

I hit PLAY and we started again.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Later on next week at school, Irving and I were walking around the basketball courts during lunch and just talking about what kind of villain Blind-man and Trigger Happy could face when Scottie Gee, Tony Chicarelli, and some other boys walked over to us. Scottie held a basketball under one arm and said, “Hey, are you two guys gay lovers or what?”

Irv and I stopped and looked at them.

I was caught off-guard by this and just said, “What? Eww. Gross, dude. We’re not gay.”

Scottie laughed and looked around at his gang. “Whatever. You guys are total butt-pirates.”

Irving didn’t say anything, but just took a step behind me.

Scottie pointed at him and said, “Oh, look, your little girlfriend is hiding behind you.” He started fanning his hands and went, “Ooo! Ooo! So scared!”

“Shut up, Scott.” I was beginning to feel like George McFly at the end of *Back to the Future* and Scottie was my Biff.

“Or what? You’re gonna fuck me up? Why don’t you suck my dick, Travis? Oh wait, you’d probably like that!”

I know in movies when there's a situation like this, there's usually a person who puts a hand on the shoulder of the hero and says something like, "Forget about him, man. He's not worth it," but Irving wasn't that person and I wasn't about to just walk away. I lunged at Scottie and tackled him to the ground. I started wailing on him with my fists. It happened really quick. His friends started trying to help him, but I was able to elbow one of them in the nose and hit Tony in the balls.

Scottie's nose started to bleed and he screamed, "Help! Get this faggot off me!" It felt so good to punch him over and over again, I would've kept hitting him forever until Mr. Fehler came blowing his whistle and pulled me off of him.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Boy, was I in trouble. We all got dragged into Mrs. Gritzfeld's office one by one. Because I was the one who'd "started it" I got suspended for a week from school. My mom was pissed. I was grounded and she locked my Nintendo and comic books in my dad's tool shed. The only fun thing I was allowed to do was talk to Irv on the phone. We tried to write the first issue of Blind-man and Trigger-Happy over the phone, but it was tough because I couldn't see his drawings.

At school, I had to see a counselor to talk about controlling my anger and how, even if somebody said something I didn't like, I shouldn't ever attack them. I thought this was stupid. Why could that fag Scottie Gee say whatever he wanted to to me, but I wasn't allowed to retaliate? What good did that do when Scottie would call me "gaywad" under his breath during P.E. and I told on him to Mr. Fehler and then Scottie just denied it, saying, "He's lying, Mr. Fehler. I didn't say anything to him. He's just saying these things to get me in trouble!"

I was so glad the school year was almost over. I was looking forward to summer and just sleeping in, playing video games, and watching more videos with Irv. Finally it was the last day of school and my mom said my grounding was over. To celebrate the end of the school year, I could have Irv over to stay the night. My parents had just bought a big RV camper for our family trip to Mount Rushmore. It was parked on the side street next to our house. It was sweet. It had a microwave, a little refrigerator for pop, and TV in it in the back bedroom area. My mom said she would order us a pizza and we could stay in there. I think she just didn't want to have to hear Irv and I yelling when the competition got fierce during *Mortal Kombat*.

Irving was better at fighting games than sports games mostly because you could win cheaply by just pressing random buttons, but I was still the master at the finishing moves. My favorites were the decapitations, but I was beginning to get tired of playing the game. I had begged Irv to bring one of his dad's tapes, but he was still being a wuss about his dad finding out. What were the chances he was going to be in the mood for *Driving Miss Daisy Crazy* on this night of all nights?

As we started a new round, Irv asked me, "How big are you compared to the guys in the videos?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I don't know, man. Some of them seem pretty short, but a lot of them have big muscles."

"No, I mean...down there."

His question weirded me out a bit, but I had sometimes wondered about other boys at school, usually in the boys locker room when we had to shower after P.E. I never showered there though. I preferred to go to fifth period all sweaty rather than be naked in front of anyone else.

“I guess...” I started to say before pausing to focus on a ridiculously sweet combo move, “I’m about as big as any of the guys in the videos.”

“Really?” He sounded surprised.

I shrugged and said, “Yeah.”

We didn’t say anything for a while, but after I kicked Irv’s ass for the fifth or sixth time, I realized I was out of Mountain Dew. “Hey, I’m gonna go get another pop. Do you want one?” I asked.

“That’s all right,” was all he said.

I shrugged and jumped off the bed and went to the fridge at the front of the camper. I looked out the window and it was dark outside now. Fireflies were outside and I could hear cars driving by on the main street in front of our house. They sounded kind of like ocean waves.

When I came back to the bedroom, found that Irv lying on the bed, with his pants and underwear on the floor. His thing was hard, but small, like the length of three little smokies from my grandma’s fondue parties. For being half-black/half-Chinese he was pretty pale down there.

I dropped my can of Mountain Dew and it landed on my foot, spilling green liquid all over the new camper carpet. “What are you doing, dude!”

“Am I as big as you?”

I looked away as fast as I could and just stared at the TV. The screen said FLAWLESS VICTORY. “Just put your clothes back on, man.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him shuffle off the side of the bed. He dressed and just whispered that he was sorry. I told him it was okay, but that I thought we should go back to the house and watch a movie or something.

He nodded. He got his stuff together and was by the side door, waiting for me. I told him I needed to clean up the spilled Mountain Dew but that I'd meet him inside in a bit. After he left, I just stood there for a minute looking at the headless, bloody body on the frozen video screen. I hit the POWER button and went inside.

That was our last sleepover.

Vyctoria Waddell

Nicknaming

It was not until the beginning of middle school, when her breasts began to develop, that Vyctoria Waddell realized how much she liked boys and how much they liked her. The first time she realized there was power in her bosom was when she had turned around in her desk to ask Bobby McFadden for the answers to a social studies worksheet and she found him slack-jawed, staring at her chest. Sure, there were other girls who had sprouted rising mounds upon their chests, but Vyctoria had surpassed them all with the speed and size of a nuclear arms race. Really, in the Breast Development Competition, her pace made it more of a sustained sprint.

This disproportionate amount of interest from her male peers compared to other females in her grade was of the equal-opportunity type. It didn't matter whether the boys were matchsticks or tubs of butter. They all had googly-eyes and chubby responder-rods. Gone were the playful kisses of the playground; Vyctoria became the instigator of bathroom grope sessions and after-school make-out dates. By the end of 8th grade, Vyctoria had touched or been touched by half the boys in her school, thus earning the moniker: Whorey Tori.

Relationships Non-functional

The summer after 8th-grade, she started going to week youth group religiously, primarily because of all the cute boys, but also because it would look bad for her father if she didn't attend. He was the pastor of Community Christian, a non-denominational evangelical church and her mother was the secretary for the church office. While sitting in the church pews following games of dodgeball and Jump the Creek, Tori often found her thoughts turning from scripture to sex, usually during their weekly memorization of Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death." So

she really tried her freshman year to maintain a monogamous relationship when she began dating Travis Steve, a sophomore she'd met at church camp over the summer. Travis was a nice enough guy, tall, and fairly good at Jim Carrey impressions. He had asked her to go get milkshakes one Wednesday night after youth group. She thought it was cute when he asked if she was going to be a counselor at Camp Kitikiwi next summer. She also liked that he had had his own car, a big boat of a Buick, the backseat open and inviting with all its legroom. He was also on the JV basketball team. After basketball practice, she would meet him in his parent's RV which they kept parked in their driveway. She would massage his sore muscles before receiving rough manual treatment that resulted in its own soreness. She desperately wanted Travis to go all the way with her, but he had taken a vow of chastity at a True Love Waits seminar over the summer. Despite this prohibition, they were still less than chaste. Travis was the first person Tori ever let slip his fingers inside her. However, he did not know the first thing about the clitoris. He would kiss her neck and whisper, "True love waits, babe" while fingering her with all the force of a boxer beating a punching bag.

As the basketball season began and the weather cooled, Tori would go to watch Travis at his games and cheer on the home team. At one game in December, just about a week before Christmas break, she went to get a hotdog during halftime. As she squirted ketchup from the dispenser, seeing it glisten as it spread around the taut, cylindrical piece of meat, she couldn't help but wonder how much longer she could hold out.

Just the night before she had been literally on her knees and begging: "Travis, I want my first time to be with you. Please, take my virginity. I want to be dirty. I want to be yours. Please fuck me. Please, Travis. Please."

However, the fortress of his will was impregnable.

After she had given him a particularly short blowjob, Travis caressed her chin, his briefs still around his ankles, and said, “Babe, I want to. You know I do, but sex is designed for marriage. It’ll be awesome if we wait.”

Tori had thought it would be awesome right then, but she just rinsed her mouth out with Mountain Dew and said she’d see him at the game tomorrow.

It was during this moment of remembrance when the star point-guard of the varsity team Trevor Neubaum, a sandy-blond muscular dream of a senior, put his arm around Tori and said, “Hey, Tori. How’s it goin’. You’re Trav’s girl, right??”

She smiled and bit her lower lip. “Well, we’re going out...”

Indeed, by any human perspective of measurement, it would not be much longer.

They made small talk for a little while Tori ate her hotdog. She kept worrying that some of the mustard or ketchup would be on her face, so she wiped with a napkin after every bite. The half-time buzzer rang and Trevor slid his hand around the crook of her elbow, said “come with me” and took her under the wooden bleachers of the gym.

“What about all the kids who play down here?” she asked.

Trevor smiled. “They’re all on the court playing those silly halftime games or watching the drill squad. We’ve got at least ten minutes.” He lifted up her skirt, pulled down her Hello Kitty panties, and said, “Let’s be our own drill squad.”

In spite of the tackiness of the line, which Tori would normally have rolled her eyes at, she blushed and felt a wetness between her legs. Trevor unzipped his pants, reached his hands around her thighs, lifted her in the air, and shoved it in. She felt weightless in the way she had only felt two other times before: 1) when she accepted Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and Savior, and 2) when she went on the Tower of Doom ride at Universal Studios for the first time,

and for a brief second, she and her 6th grade friends floated in the air before a precipitous, but ultimately benign fall brought them back to the ground.

Even with bits of popcorn, candy wrappers, and spilled soft-drinks falling through the cracks of the bleachers above them as people shuffled back to their seats, Tori felt she was finally a woman.

She was hooked.

Flings and Things

Tori quit answering Travis's calls and text messages after that. They didn't share any classes together at school, so it was somewhat easy to avoid him in the hallways, but one day after school the doorbell rang and she found him disheveled and distraught, the first drops of tears clinging to his lower eyelids for dear life. "What's going on, Tori?"

"Nothing," she said. "I just don't want to date you anymore."

"But things were going so well..."

"I know, but..."

He then crossed the threshold to put his arms around her but she took a step back and swung the door so it got between his arms. "No, Travis, I don't think you should come in."

He pushed it back open with his left hand and took a step towards her. "Why are you doing this to me?"

With deliberate emphasis on each syllable she said, "I don't...want...to date you...anymore."

He glared at her, wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve, and said, "I guess all the rumors are true."

“What do you mean?”

“You really are Whorey Tori.”

She had heard these words whispered in the hallways of the middle school, but not in the last seven months since she had begun going to youth group. Hearing them again was like getting slapped in the face by the artificial waves at Sea World. Her cheeks flushed red, she screamed at him to get out, and slammed the door shut before sinking down to the entryway floor to cry. As Travis walked away, she heard him shouting a few words that sounded like *God, burn,* and *hell*.

The next day at school, she resolved to just pretend Travis didn't exist whenever their paths crossed during passing time. Christmas break was about to start, so she figured the two weeks off from school would be good time away from Travis. She wouldn't see him at school or youth group. Plus, Trevor had invited her to a party that the basketball team was having. She told her parents she was staying at a friend's and Trevor picked her up in his maroon Jeep Cherokee. They parked in front of the party house and kept warm in the cramped back seat.

At the party, she got drunk for the first time on Mike's Hard Lemonade. All the furniture had been pushed to one side of the living room to make a dance floor. Some electronic song was thumping on the stereo. It just had one lyric: “I see you baby...shaking that ass...” Tori felt like shaking her ass. She saw Trevor and started making out with him in front of everyone. His hands glided over her body and squeezed her breasts. She found that when her eyes were closed the room began to tilt, so when she opened her eyes she found that she was actually making out with Trenton, the starting forward. He and Trevor were about the same height and had the same sandy-brown haircut. She just had to laugh. She looked around and saw Trevor on the other side of the room. He smiled and raised his beer bottle to her as if he was saying, “You go, girl.”

Before the party was over, she made out with Trenton on the couch downstairs and then had sex with Trevor in the bathroom. She held on for dear life to the towel rack with the Lion King towels as he railed her from behind.

This was the beginning of Tori making the rounds of the basketball team. Trevor just said, “Share and share alike, baby,” and she found she wanted to share. She couldn’t believe the variety that existed among the boys on the team, the scents and textures, and the seemingly arbitrary, disproportionate sizes. Chad Fulbright, the shortest player on the team at five foot two inches—Tori’s exact height—made her feel like her world was splitting open, yet Benjamin Kasher, the six foot seven inch center made her feel like a pencil was being thrown down a mine shaft.

On New Year’s Eve, while at a costume party, Tori tossed her phone to her current boy-toy—Craig or Greg, she couldn’t remember for sure—who was dressed as Uncle Sam. She was dressed as Marilyn Monroe in the iconic white dress. She had brought her dad’s power-fan he used in the garage to the party so she could stand across it and have the dress billow and blow. Craig/Greg and she were in some spare bedroom and she let him take pics of her undressing. For the final pic, she removed the red, white, and blue top hat from him and wore it just slightly at an angle. With one hand covering her breasts and the other pointing straight at the camera lens, she shouted: “Tori wants you!”

When the spring semester began, she used this photo as a calling card. Any boy in school who she texted with the photo was someone she wanted after school, usually in the back of their cars at the park across the street from the high school or sometimes on the loading dock of an abandoned furniture warehouse. The thrill of getting caught was an essential part of the fun for Tori. Half the boys were game for the no-effort access, while the other half were weirded-out.

One of the weirded-out boys was a fellow freshman who happened to be the son of the principal, Mr. Gustanovich. This administrative father regularly searched through his child's call history and inbox, which in turn led to Tori visiting the principal's office. She was sitting in Algebra 1 when the little yellow pass arrived. She thought it was going to be about her truancies which were mostly from class-length rendezvous in and around the school—she liked the handicap restroom best because the door was lockable and it had the metal rails for her to hold on to when things got rough—but when she entered the cramped little office and found her dad sitting in front of Mr. Gustanovich's desk, she knew she was in deep shit.

Mr. Gustanovich told Tori to take a seat next to her dad as he closed the door and shuffled back to his office chair behind the desk. Mr. Gustanovich, or Mr. G, as he pathetically expected the students to call him, was a graying tax accountant-looking guy in a tweed jacket, white dress shirt, and powder-blue tie. He had a moustache like one of the Mario Bros. He leaned back in his chair and with his hands across his midsection, locked his fingers together like he was praying. No one said anything for a while and the only sounds were some birds chirping outside and the drone of a copy machine somewhere in the main office. Mr. G took a deep breath and pressed his lips together like he was a baby in a highchair who didn't want to eat anymore.

Finally he gestured at her dad and said, "Reverend Waddell. I'd like to thank you for taking the time out of your busy workday to come down to the school and speak to Vyctoria with me."

Her father was sitting straight up in his chair, with both his hands resting on his knees, balled up into hairy fists. "Of course," was all he said. Tori had never known her dad to be so brief with his words.

Mr. G looked at Tori and said, “Vyctoria...do you know why you’ve been called to my office today? Why your father is here?”

Tori shook her head.

Mr. G nodded and opened a manila folder. His eyes scanned the pages for a few moments before handing it to her dad. “It’s not just about your grades, which were very, very good at the start of the year, but have since slipped dramatically in the last two quarters. And it’s not just about your attendance.”

He showed her dad another piece of paper, which was just a printout of a list of dates and class periods with asterisks next to them. Tori wished he would hurry up and get to the point.

“Her attendance has gotten extremely spotty. As you can see from the chart, it’s not that she is truant for an entire school day, but instead she is frequently unaccounted for at different times of the day. However, we have an idea of how she has been spending her time.”

This last part made Tori’s heart quicken. She just thought this was going to be about the absences and she’d get off with a warning and a slap on the wrist, but now she wondered where this was going.

Mr. G collected the grade and attendance reports from Reverend Waddell and then opened a drawer in his desk and took out a big Zip-Lock bag filled with cell-phones. He set it down on the desk and asked, “Do you know what these are?”

In a snotty tone, she said, “A buncha cell phones.”

Reverend Waddell shot her a look, but she didn’t care. Mr. G paused and said, “You are correct, young lady. These are a ‘bunch of cell phones.’ Specifically, they are cell phones belonging to...”

Here he stopped to look over a piece of paper.

“...Trenton Wohlers, Benjamin Kasher, Tony Chicarelli, Trevor Neubaum, Chad Fulbright, Johnathan Meehan, and several other students of Unadee High.”

Principal Gustanovich then pulled another folder from the drawer. “I have here a police report detailing the video and picture contents of these phones. It appears that the dates and times of these photos coincide with the same times as Vyctoria’s unexcused absences.”

Vyctoria just stared at the floor in front of the desk. Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see her father dig his nails into his navy blue dress slacks. She had never been so embarrassed in her entire life.

“Now from what I’ve been told, these photos and videos are of an...explicit nature and due to Vyctoria’s age fall under the state’s statutes as being considered child pornography. For legal reasons, I cannot comment on the young men’s situations, but I am sad to say that Vyctoria’s behavior goes against the school code of conduct and that she must also be suspended for a minimum of two weeks.”

As it turns out, this time off from school was good for Tori because overnight she became the most reviled person in the high school. It turns out that the faces of the entire starting lineup of the basketball team were all clearly identifiable in various “action” shots that were found on various cellphones. The most common type of photo was of a naked and doe-eyed Tori gazing up the foreshortened abdomen of whatever boy she was blowing. The most common video showed her riding some boy and bouncing excitedly, her large breasts flopping up and down in rhythm with her gyrations. The boys were kicked off the team and arrested for possession of child pornography, thus dooming the team’s prospect of a state championship.

After this fiasco with the sex photos, Tori was kept on a much shorter leash. She was grounded, but that didn’t stop boys from cutting class and coming over when both her parents

were at work. One day, Mr. and Mrs. Waddell came home from work early and were upset to find their daughter's door locked. Mr. Waddell pounded on the door and demanded to be let in. He pressed his ear against the door and heard hushed and hurried whispers through the door, the sounds of scampering feet, and someone getting dressed. Tori finally opened the door to find a fuming father standing outside, arms crossed, one foot tapping. He found his fifteen-year-old daughter with wild hair, a wrinkled shirt that was inside-out, standing in her Hello Kitty panties behind the door.

“Where is he?” he demanded.

“Where's who?”

Her father pushed the door open and stomped into the room.

“Dad!”

He paid no mind, but went straight for the closet doors. He swung them open and found a cowering boy he didn't know, only half-dressed, still sporting a condom that was now hanging limply, like a deflated birthday balloon two weeks after the party.

“What's your name, son?”

The boy shuddered as if there was a cool breeze and replied, “Scott...Scott Gee, sir.”

“I think you'd better go now, son.”

Scott nodded and began frantically putting on his clothing. As he was about to scamper out the door, Mr. Waddell stopped him with a motion of his hand and said, “Oh, and son, if I ever hear any word about what just happened from anyone, I'll know it was because you opened your filthy little mouth. And if that happens, you will see how a *man* of God can become a *weapon* of God, so...” He made a dismissive motion with his hand. “Run along now and keep your blessed mouth shut.”

After this incident occurred, it was decided it would be best for Tori to be home-schooled and that the church office to be temporarily relocated to the Waddell household.

Under this night-and-day supervision, Tori found that the only action she was going to get was her pulsating, variable-pressure shower head. While in the tub, her mind was a Rolodex of fantasies, constantly cycling from one encounter to the next, sometimes superimposing the face of one boy with the chest of another and the cock of another. Sometimes her baths would last for more than an hour or more, requiring her to empty the tepid water and replacing it with scalding water as her skin became acclimated to the warmth.

One morning, over breakfast, while Tori was spreading a frosting packet on a cherry Toaster Strudel, she heard her mother remark to her father, “Dear, have you noticed how high the water bill has been lately?”

Church Camp

Summer came and the cravings stayed. By this point, Tori was so desperate to just get out of the house, she volunteered for all three sessions at Camp Kitikiwi. The camp had initially been built following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It was a rural army training center for soldiers of the Midwest. Soldiers practiced military maneuvers in the forest and slept in the cabins-*cum*-barracks for six weeks before being shipped over to Europe. Under the Eisenhower administration, many of these training centers were sold to churches and the Boy Scouts of America. Now, children from all over the tri-state area looked forward to three weeks of fun in the sun, theological indoctrination, and gospel music sing-a-longs around the campfire.

Tori had been attending since she was a little girl. Now that she was in high school, she was a den leader and camp counselor. Her parents viewed this as an opportunity to regain her

spiritual footing and change her sinful ways, and to some degree, it did have an effect, although she did miss her shower head. Tori knew her body was telling her *Yes*, though the church was saying *No*, but after many sermons about the nature of sin and eternal damnation, she decided to at least give it the college try. During every prayer session—breakfast, morning chapel, lunch, afternoon chapel, dinner, campfire, and lights-out—she would make variations of this earnest prayer: “Dear Jesus, I don’t want to be like this. Please, take these sinful desires away. I want to be clean. I want to be pure in your eyes. I repent. Please. Please, Jesus. Please.” Despite these heartfelt pleas—she, in fact, really did want to please Jesus—she would wake in the middle of the night to find the wetness, her hand vigorously rubbing underneath her underwear, a thick aroma wafting through the air, and the springs of her bunk bed creaking in the silence, potentially waking any or all of the pre-adolescent girls in her charge.

She would stop, but after determining all the girls were still sound asleep, she would resume her nocturnal activity. After all, she was...so...close. She would arch her back and tighten her buttocks, anything to keep the mattress from squeaking. Sometimes she would turn over, so her pillow would absorb the soft sounds of her moaning, which seemed so loud when compared to the *pianissimo* of the crickets.

One night, during the second summer session, she was breathing heavily following the climax and was waiting for her heartbeat to slow so she could go to sleep when she heard a still, small voice in the darkness say, “What were you doing, Vyctoria?”

Tori flipped over to find the big, wondering eyes of Abigail Lutz, a darling eight-year-old with pigtails with a maddening crush on the youngest Jonas Brother.

“Oh, Abby, you scared me. I...uh...was just having a dream. A bad dream.”

Abigail didn’t move, but said, “What was it about?”

“Oh, it was just a scary nightmare. Go back to sleep, honey.”

“Why were you touching yourself like that?”

Tori’s eyes darted about the cabin to see if any of the other girls were awake and listening to the conversation.

“Like what?”

Abigail leaned in and whispered, “Like you were masturbating.”

Tori bolted straight up and said, “Hey Abby, let’s go for a walk. We can go to the snack shack. I’ve got the key. We’ll get us both something good to eat. Won’t that be fun?”

Abigail looked around at all the bunk beds and the other eight sleeping girls. “Can we bring something back for everyone?”

Abigail’s unselfish concern for her fellow campers warmed Tori’s heart and she nodded.

“Of course, Abby.”

“Hmph,” said Abigail as she crossed her arms. “Then I don’t want to go. It won’t be special then.”

Fears and Trembling

The third and final summer session was when Tori really began to tire of hearing the same sermons repeated verbatim, and the same altar-calls, and the same praise songs. A person can only stomp and clap and sing-along to “The Lion of the Tribe of Judah” before its *accelerando* lost its effect. If it hadn’t been for the arrival of a special someone, Tori was not sure what she would have done. Perhaps she would have begun telling the children that the Bible was all lies and there was no afterlife.

But Adam showed up and it made her believe that there might be a God *after all*.

It was the first of August and the campers would be arriving that evening. The day was to be spent praying, stocking the pantry, praying, sharing inspirational stories, praying, and making sure all the bunk-houses were clean. At breakfast, Tori arrived at the dining hall in her pajamas and Garfield slippers. She was still not fully awake when she sat down at one of the long folding tables, so when her father came by and patted her on the shoulder, she spat out some Cap'n Crunch and milk, half of it landing on her pajama top and half on the table.

Her father gave a hearty chuckle, the kind he often gave after a bad joke during a sermon or when he was the first to land on Boardwalk during the weekly Waddell Family board game night. "Sweetie, there's someone I want you to meet."

She wiped her mouth and turned around in her folding chair to see the first young and sexy man she had seen all summer. Every other counselor or pastor at the camp had either been a strange-looking man with a fanny pack, a weight problem, and a moustache, or a strange-looking woman with the same characteristics. This man was different. His face was completely blemish-free, almost heart-shaped, but with a strong, square chin instead of a point at the bottom. He had thick, brown hair that curled above his eyes, which were so deeply blue Tori thought he might be wearing colored contacts. He wore a white button-up shirt with the top two buttons undone, showing off a golden cross that hung just above a robust growth of chest hair. He wore stylish sandals and loose, tan khakis that made him look like he was vacationing in Venice rather than the Midwest. Tori blushed as she instantly realized what she must look like. She hadn't worn make-up in weeks; there had not been anyone she needed to seduce.

Mr. Waddell patted the young man on the back and said, "Adam, this is my daughter Vyctoria. Vyctoria, this is Adam. He's going to be replacing Jebediah for the evening sermons.

He's a seminary student from the Heartland Bible College. A Heartland man is the best kind of man, in my book."

She shook his hand. "How do you do?"

He smiled and said, "Pleased to meet you. I look forward to sharing God's Word and love with you and all the children in the weeks to come."

She said she also looked forward to it, but Tori didn't really care so much about the God's Word part, but the sharing of love was another story.

The daily routine of the camp began the next day at dawn. Groggy children who had stayed up too late were roused from their slumber and made to say the Pledge of Allegiance while sitting in dew-covered grass. Tori knew the routine of breakfast, morning sermon, morning sports, lunch, afternoon sermon, free time, nap-time, evening sermon, dinner, campfire, lights out so well, she just went on auto-pilot. During the sermons in the musty old chapel which lacked AC, she would sit transfixed and stare at the back of Adam's curly brown hair. He looked like a rock star or a catalog model. She found herself hanging on every word of his sermons, especially the one titled "Between a Man and a Woman: God's Plan for Us." Tori frequently made sure her campers were done with supper first so they could always sit in the front of the church.

Normally, she let the girls in her cabin be a little restless, but she began actively shushing them and stressing to them the importance of the utmost devotion to Pastor Adam's sermons. Abigail Lutz didn't need to be told twice; Adam had already replaced the youngest Jonas brother on her Top Crush List.

By the end of the first week, the well-spring of desire had risen up within Tori. On a daily basis—sometimes twice—she excused herself and went to the bunk-house to relieve herself, but

it was to no avail: when she returned to the group, she found that no imaginary fit of passion could satisfy her desire for Adam.

Finally, the last day of camp arrived and, for Tori, it couldn't have happened soon enough. She was going crazy thinking about Adam all the time and she had had enough of the eight-year-olds and she just wanted to sleep in her own bed and use the internet again and have air conditioning. That evening, a stream of automobiles winded down the country road to the camp and the children put on a variety show for their parents amusement. Some of the middle school boys even played a cheesy version of Green Day's "When I Come Around" but changed the lyrics to be about the Second Coming of Jesus. The refrain then went: "Who knows where you'll be found? When he comes around." It seemed to make all the parents and kids happy as they clapped their hands and sang along.

Afterward, Tori hugged each one of her campers as they left the cabin with their sleeping bags, backpacks, and cross-shaped art projects. When the last one left, Tori changed into her PJs and collapsed on her bunk bed, It had been a long camp session and she wasn't looking forward to the next day's duties of cleaning the campgrounds and packing things up for next year. She was about to begin masturbating for the third time that day, but a quiet knock at the door startled her, just as she was about to slip her hand below the elastic waistband. She assumed it was her father, coming by to say goodnight, but when she heard Adam's voice, she licked her lips and wondered what her hair must look like.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Vyctoria." His silhouette could be seen through the screen door. "May I come in?"

This seemed so surreal to Vyctoria, mostly because her second fantasy session of the day had begun exactly the same way. She hesitated for a moment and said, “Wait, just give me a minute.”

Tori quickly dressed and met him outside.

She walked up to him, with arms crossed. The night was chillier than she had expected. “What’s up?” He looked so dashing in the moonlight, she felt like she was in a dream.

For the first time since she had met Adam, he seemed different, a little sheepish, a little unsure. He seemed unable to make eye contact and he kept tapping one of his sandaled feet in the dirt. From the moment she had met him, he seemed to exude confidence, but now he seemed somewhat vulnerable, like—she flinched at the association—like Travis. He was looking up at the moon as he said, “I..I was just stopping by because this experience at Camp Kitikiwi, my first time here, has been awesome, truly amazing. It...it seemed like such a nice night, I thought you might accompany me on a walk before bedtime. You know, show me the beautiful areas of God’s creation.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes, tonight,” he said with a smile. “The moon is full. The lighting is perfect. Also, this is our last night here, so I figured tonight was the best and last opportunity to see the woods in the moonlight.”

Of course, this sounded marvelous to Tori and they went off into the woods.

They strolled away from the bunkhouses into the wooded area adjacent to the camp. Tori noticed they were heading toward the river where the canoes were tied up. Adam did not say much which allowed Tori’s mind to consider all different kinds of possibilities. She had never been this attracted to someone as old as Adam before, and never to anyone so pure and holy.

Was he planning to make a move on her? This didn't make sense. He had to be close to twenty-three, maybe twenty-four years old. She wasn't even sixteen yet. It wasn't so simple anymore; she used to be able to give a look or say "let's go" and that was it, but now she was unsure of what to do.

They made small talk about their favorite campfire foods and Tori's family history, but upon reaching the river they fell silent and only heard the sounds of the water rushing downstream and the cicadas buzzing in the darkness. They sat down a large oak log, not looking at each other, but just watching the water go by. After a few minutes, Adam said, "Would you like to hear a Bible verse that has been on my mind today?"

Tori said sure, but in her experience, most people who use the word "sure" are just trying to be agreeable rather than sincerely wanting to answer in the affirmative. Mostly, she was just glad they were talking because it distracted her from her thoughts.

"All right, perhaps this is familiar," Adam said before clearing his throat. "It goes like this: 'You have heard that it was said: "Do not commit adultery.'" But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her...'

He paused and crickets chirped.

He added, "That's from the Book of Matthew."

He paused again and the river gurgled.

"Chapter 5, verses—"

"27 and 28, I know," she interrupted. "I've got scripture memorized, too. I am a church camp counselor, after all, but why would you say that to me?"

Adam breathed in and said, "I've given it some thought and my thinking is this: God's teaching in the Bible is clearly that adultery is wrong, but not just adultery, but the lustful

thoughts that precede the act of adultery. The man who looks at a woman and lusts for a woman has already—I want to make sure I emphasize this—*already* committed adultery with her.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “What I am trying to say is that I have desired you from the moment I saw you this morning, and since I have already, *already*, committed the sin merely by desiring you, I see no reason that carrying out the actual expression of that desire would constitute a new sin in God’s eyes. In fact, I have already prayed for forgiveness, and as God’s love knows no bounds, I am forgiven of my sin and ready to love you, fully, deeply, and passionately.”

Tori was speechless. She had heard some pretty ridiculous pick-up lines at the high school parties, but for some reason this one reminded her of Trevor’s “drill squad” line. Tori wanted to roll her eyes, but she was not unpersuaded. Instead, she leaned in and kissed him lightly on the cheek. He kissed her on the mouth and she already felt the wetness returning. He turned so both of his legs were straddling the log and he wrapped his arms around her. She couldn’t stop kissing him. She thought of going home tomorrow night, resuming her home school studies, being stuck at home with her shower head. As their kisses become sloppier and his hands began to explore her body, she began pressing up against him and feeling a firmness she liked. She briefly imagined her father searching the camp for her, or him, or maybe both of them. She wanted to see the look on his face if he came traipsing through the woods and found her fornicating with the evening pastor. She remembered him saying, “A Heartland man is the best kind of man.” She decided she had to find out for herself if this was the indeed the case.

After they finished taking turns at removing clothing, she looked at Adam’s muscular body and knew she was looking at a real man, not some boy from a basketball team. She stood above his thighs, ready to go, ready to descend and connect with his body, when she stopped and

realized they had no protection. Even in the remotest corners of her mind, she hadn't considered the possibility that she would need condoms at church camp. Tori knew it was getting close to her time. She shivered a bit in the cool summer air. Adam noticed this and began rubbing his hands all over her to keep her warm. As he did this, she looked at the way the moonlight reflected on his skin and decided then that there was nothing for them to do but pray.

What Moves the Body

Travis Steve stepped out of the sweltering heat and into the muggy halls of the Horner Science Building. He wasn't sure exactly where he was supposed to find Olivia and her cadaver, but he didn't want to call or text and participate in that annoying social act of getting close to a destination only to then ring the person to confirm the last few steps. It seemed antithetical to the evolutionary nature of man. He was certain this was the right place, for the small liberal arts college only had one scientific center. He was close enough. He would demonstrate his resourcefulness as a bearer of the Y-Chromosome.

First, he had to make a decision. He was in a split-stairwell. There were no signs anywhere. He considered going downstairs, but saw there were no lights on, so he trotted up to the second level. A sign said Chemistry 2nd Floor and Biology 3rd floor, so he made his way upstairs. As he walked past empty, locked classrooms his nose started to tickle from what smelled like disinfectant. It reminded him of a relatively innocent make-out session in the custodial closet back in middle school. Travis still remembered the clang of braces colliding.

He saw a frumpy custodian pushing a mop and bucket and thought about asking her for directions, but he decided against it. Ever since he was a child, Travis assumed janitors wanted to be left alone because they just *had* to be extremely dissatisfied with how their lives had turned out. What did it feel like to clean the toilets, scrub the floors, and empty the trash for an institution of higher learning where everyone who used the facilities was pursuing a better career, better pay, a better life? Travis attempted some figurative shoe-wearing, but he felt a twinge of sadness and quickly thought of something else, such as the burning smell in his nostrils.

I must be getting close, he thought.

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Travis had met Olivia last weekend while he was out on the town with his old drummer buddy Austin. They were already a little drunk when they stopped in at Buzzard Billy's, an Australian cajun-style restaurant downtown. It had that everything-and-the-kitschy-kitchen sink décor of Applebee's, only with the added bonus of painted vultures on the walls and menus, their beaks and talons tearing into ribs, steaks, and chicken wings as if they were carrion. Olivia had been their server. When she first greeted them to get their drink order, it only took seconds for Travis to determine he wanted her. She was dressed all in black which accentuated the blush in her round, pale cheeks. Her brown hair had Uma Thurman bangs in front and was just long enough to cover her ears. Her green eyes seemed ready to eat the world. Travis and Austin had just been out on the town drinking, foolishly talking about how they should get the band back together, but seeing Olivia come to the table triggered something in Travis, something that snapped him into focus. Austin noticed this, and when Olivia went to get their beers, he said, "You like her, don't you?"

Travis just smiled and opened the plastic-covered menu to select an appetizer. It was sticky with stains of BBQ sauce on it.

"Seriously, Trav, do you ever stop chasing pussy?"

Trav lowered the menu a bit and smiled a rogue-ish grin. "I'm going to defer to the wise words of Lieutenant Colonel Frank Slade on this one: the day we stop is the day we die."

Austin leaned back in his chair and said, "Riiiiiiight."

Olivia returned with their beers, twenty-four big ounces of liquid courage. She took out a notepad and pen and asked, "Do you gentlemen know what you want?"

The guys looked at each other and Austin didn't say anything, letting Travis know he should take control of the situation. They had played this game before, where Travis would take point and Austin would be wingman, speaking up at opportune times to make Travis look good.

“What would you recommend, Olivia?”

Olivia's put a hand on her hip and rolled her eyes. “Oh, man. I'm not the person to ask. I'm a vegetarian.”

“Hey, no meat, that's neat.” Travis knew vegetarians were a persecuted minority in the carnivorous Midwest, so he wanted to make sure she knew he was down with the greens, the beans, and other meatless things. He glanced at the menu and deftly made an executive decision. “We'll have the armadillo eggs and jambalaya to start with.”

While feasting on fried cheese-stuffed peppers wrapped in bacon, Travis told Austin about how he always tried to show an interest in something the girl was interested in, so when Olivia came back to get their drink refills, Travis asked her what made her want to be a vegetarian, if it was for political reasons, health reasons, religious reasons.

She laughed and said, “I've just never liked the taste of meat. When I was a little girl, I always preferred a PB & J to a turkey sandwich.”

Austin shook his head in shock. “But meat's so good!”

“And now, with the other work I do, I don't think I could ever eat meat.”

This was that opportunity to show interest that Travis was looking for. He leaned forward slightly and asked, “What's your other work?”

In a matter-of-fact, “I cut up dead bodies for a living.”

Both Austin and Travis went whoa. “Should be worried about the meat at this place?”

Olivia smiled and said, “No, sillies. I want to go to medical school, so for my side job, I prep cadavers for the science department at Union College.”

Travis nodded his head the way as if impressed. This intrigued Travis’s morbid curiosity. “That’s pretty fascinating.”

“You can come see me at work sometime if you’re interested.”

Travis said that’d be great and without even asking for her number, she took a spare cardboard coaster from the table and wrote it down and told him to call.

She said, “I’ll go get your boys your check.”

As she went back to the kitchen, Logan made a face that seemed to suggest “Not bad!” Travis made one in reply which seemed to say, “That was kind of easy, right?”

They both tipped more than twenty percent.

As they left the bar to get cheaper drink specials down the street, Austin gave Travis a firm pat on the back and said, “Way to go, buddy. When are you gonna give her a ring?”

Travis just looked down at the coaster in his hands, contemplating how those ten little markings of ink imbued the cardboard with a kind of potential energy, karmic possibility. “I don’t know. We’ll see. I’m supposed to go on a date with that black chick Britney sometime next week.”

Austin was flabbergasted. “Seriously, man. Why don’t you just find one girl and stick with her?”

“Hey, I’ve tried!” Travis laughed.

Austin raised his pointer finger and said, “Remember what Yoda said about trying.”

“Good point,” Travis said. “But there weren’t very many women to choose from on Dagobah now were there?”

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Now, Travis had reached the end of the hall and found a sign that said: KEEP THIS DOOR CLOSED. He pushed it open and a startled Olivia looked up from across the room. She wore a tank-top and mesh shorts. Somehow Travis had expected her to be wearing a white lab coat, but she looked like she was ready to play a round of basketball. The classroom looked like a run-of-the-mill science lab complete with Bunsen burners and black countertops on stout oak cabinets. It appeared the cash-strapped college had not spent any money updating the facilities since the Cold War began. The room easily could have been used for some 1950s period piece film, perhaps some Oscar-bait drama depicting college lovers flirting under the specter of nuclear holocaust. Starring Freddie Prinze Junior and Michelle Williams. Come to think of it, Olivia actually looked like a bustier version of Michelle Williams.

“Hey! How did you find the place?”

“I just followed the scent of formaldehyde.”

Olivia grimaced and said, “You’ll get used to it.”

Travis briefly wondered if he would. He crossed the threshold and got a more pungent whiff of the acrid chemicals used to preserve the body, which lay facedown on a gurney. Travis walked by the chalkboard and pulled up a lab stool, still keeping a few feet away from the gurney. A white sheet draped the body and a towel covered the back of its head. Travis realized—outside of a funeral parlor and its emotional sanitation—he was in a room with a dead body for the first time in his life.

Olivia smiled as she fit a blade into what seemed to be a surgical Exact-o Knife. “You want to see him?”

She lifted the sheet and Travis saw a lanky plank of grey flesh, with the right half of the back cut open, exposing muscle tissue and what seemed to be yellow foam insulation.

“Whoa,” he said. “What’s that stuff?”

“This?” Olivia poked a gloved finger into the yellow stuff. “This is adipose tissue. It’s just body fat. You know, loose connective tissue. This guy has a lot of it.”

Travis nodded. He vaguely remembered the term from anatomy & physiology back in tenth-grade. “So, what are you hoping to accomplish today with this guy?”

Olivia swiveled around to the body and started poking around lightly. “Well, my job is to remove all the skin and excess tissue so that freshman science majors can see the entire muscle structure the first week of the semester.”

“So you have two weeks to get it done.”

She nodded.

Travis gestured at the half-finished back. “How long has it taken you to get this far?”

“Three weeks.” She paused and then frowned. “I know. I’m not sure how I’m going to finish it in time either. I think I’m too much of a perfectionist for this job.”

“You know what they say about perfection, don’t you?”

“What?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.”

It wasn’t the cleverest thing he could say, but it got a half-smile. “Right. Well, I’m going to get to work, but feel free to ask questions at any time.”

Travis watched her grip bits of the yellow tissue with clippers and then make tiny back and forth cuts with the Exact-O scalpel. Sometimes there was a slight filminess to it which made it look like the translucent layer under the breading of fried chicken. It looked like she was

carving up a very large and ugly Thanksgiving turkey. After she successfully cut a piece she threw it in a metal vomit pan that sat on the counter.

“So, how long have you been doing this?” Travis said after a bit.

“This is my eleventh cadaver, but the first one I’m doing entirely on my own.”

“Do you and your fellow cutter-uppers have nicknames for the bodies?”

She shook her head. “My professor in charge of this project would kick a student out of class for a day if he heard us give a nickname to the body.”

“Really? That seems kinda harsh. What kind of info do you get when you start?”

“We don’t know any information about the body other than their age and how they died.”

Travis pointed at the body and said, “So how’d he die?”

“Cancer. Age 62. If we turned him over right now, it’s obvious he had chemotherapy and malignant tumors. You can’t see them right now because he’s on his tummy.”

Travis smiled and said, “Is that the scientific word for it? Tummy?”

Olivia smiled. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

They made small talk for a while and Travis felt a strange unease with the body which was being cut up bit by bit, mostly because the only frame of reference he had with a grotesque dead body such as this one was in zombie horror films where at any moment it would spring to life and attack the hapless protagonist. As Travis watched Olivia work, he felt a prolonged tension over the motionless plank of flesh and his eye tricked him into thinking a muscle would twitch, but really it was just his imagination or Olivia tugging on a flap of skin elsewhere on the body. Travis was trying to think of a way to parlay the small talk to a topic which could perhaps result in another meeting, when the answer came to him: *Movies*.

“Have you ever seen *Eyes Wide Shut*?”

“Uh uh.”

“Man, it’s a great movie. Kubrick’s awesome. There’s this great scene where, don’t worry, I won’t spoil anything because I hate spoilers. Anyhow, there’s this scene where Tom Cruise is in a morgue and seeing the body of a woman he wanted to sleep with. There’s something really sublime about how the angle of the camera and the lighting create this great contrast between life and death, and sex and...and...”

Travis had a brain fart and couldn’t seem to remember what the opposite of sex was. Was it death? He suddenly wondered about the dead man on the gurney. How many lovers had he had in his lifetime? How good had it all been? Did it matter now? If 62-year-old Cancer Victim Man was alive today, would he be attracted to the 20-something student who was presently cutting him away bit by bit?

Travis must have been on pause for a while because he was snapped back to the present moment when Olivia said “And...?”

“Anyhow, it’s a really great movie.”

She went back to her work. “I’ll have to see it sometime.”

Travis’s reflexive thought was to notice that she didn’t say “*We’ll* have to see it sometime,” but then remembered it was early on, so naturally she wouldn’t be thinking about stuff like that yet. She had just met him, after all. If it was going to happen, he’d have to be the one to make the invitation. He’d have to make it happen.

By this point the vomit pan was getting full of tissue.

“Say, what do you do with all the stuff you cut away?”

“Here. I’ll show you.” She got up and carried the pan to a big metal receptacle in the corner of the room. It looked like a bullet-shaped trash can. She opened the top flap and dumped

the tissue in. “We have to store it all here until after the cadaver is done being used by the classes. Sometimes it’s years later. Even with all the chemicals, it doesn’t stay together forever. Then the cadaver and the tissue are cremated, and the ashes are returned to the family.”

“So even when you donate your body to science, you still get it back.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you going to donate your body to science?”

“Absolutely.”

As they walked back to the gurney, Travis thought about what a lovely body Olivia had and wondered if the future cadaver preparer would agree. Or would the ravages of disease and time remove any trace of desirability from Olivia’s remains? Is a corpse merely the shell once Life/Sex has left the body? Are necrophiliacs just futilely attempting to put something back?

Travis paced around the lab while Olivia returned to the cutting. He looked out one of the large windows which showed the open green space of the campus. Though school was not in session, a throng of people were making their way to some other building. The thought entered Travis’s mind that—barring some freak disappearance—each and every one of those people out there were going to someday have to be dealt with, cataloged, cut up, examined, preserved, buried, burnt, or some combination thereof.

He decided to give it another go. “Have you ever seen *The Fountain*?”

“No, but I’ve wanted to.”

“Well, in that film there’s this way of dealing with a body which I consider a variation to just burying it. I think that’s what I want to have happen with me.”

Olivia seemed curious. “What is it?”

Travis was heartened to think that maybe this would be the opening he needed to ask her over to his place sometime to see one of his favorite films.

“Hey, I don’t want to spoil it for you.”

Olivia made an *oh well* face, shrugged, and said, “I guess I’ll just have to watch it with my boyfriend.”

For the average heterosexual male, there’s a certain kind of cabin depressurization which occurs to both the head and the heart when certain sentence combinations involving the words “my” and “boyfriend” are uttered. It’s a quiet, but significant seismic activity within the emotional firmament of a man, not noticeable to outsiders, but enough to chart on the individual man’s Richter scale. Travis couldn’t understand this situation. Ordinarily, attractive women are quick to casually drop the fact they have a boyfriend, much like the archetypal handkerchief which, after falling to the walkway of a busy thoroughfare that bustled with men and women colliding and dashing about, a young man could “pick up” what the young lady had “put down.” Upon getting the hint, he would then politely return the handkerchief and dutifully...walk away. All this time, Travis had assumed Olivia was single because she hadn’t mentioned a man in her life.

Travis decided to do his best to cover his surprise by making a Nice Guy Gesture: “I own it on DVD if you want to borrow it some time.”

Travis didn’t want to reveal that he had, in fact, been interested in Olivia. Feigned Disinterest was the name of the modern dating game. Perhaps the prehistoric one, as well. Cavemen leaning on walls, pretending to be James Dean. *Better to play it cool*, he thought, but he instantly felt a streak of self-loathing and jealousy imagining her watching *The Fountain*, Darren Aronofsky’s triumphant and meditative cinematic exploration on the eternal yearning for

everlasting life, with some schmoe who would probably say, “This story’s weird. I don’t like it. Hugh Jackman should stick to Wolverine movies, but hey, that Rachel whatever-her-name-is is hot.”

Olivia seemed genuinely appreciative. “Hey, thanks, Travis. I might do that sometime.” She took a small spray bottle from the counter and began spraying down the back of the cadaver.

Travis wanted to leave, but was worried that departing so shortly after finding out she had a boyfriend would make his intentions obvious. He began to wonder what he should talk about, but luckily he didn’t have to think for too long because his eyes started to water and his tongue began to sting.

“Is it normal for my eyes to be watering? My tongue feels like I’ve held it to the positive end of a battery.”

Olivia looked up from the shoulder blade she was currently working on. “Oh, you’re probably reacting to the chemicals. Different people react differently. I’m so used to it, it doesn’t affect me anymore, but since this is your first time, maybe. Do you want to get some fresh air?”

Travis thought for a moment. He thought about staying to prove he could easily handle breathing in a few decay-delaying chemicals, but saw an escape opportunity. “Yeah, but I think I’m going to go, though. I have some...stuff to do, but this was really interesting. I’ll never watch a zombie movie the same way again.”

Olivia grinned. “Oh, well, thanks for coming. It gets lonely here in this big old room with just me and this dead guy for hours on end. It’s really nice to have someone to talk to.”

Travis had stood up and was walking towards the door. “Any time. Good luck with finishing the rest of it before the semester starts.”

She made a face of mock disbelief, slack-jawed and eyes popping. “I know! I don’t know how I’m going to have time to finish this.” She laughed and said, “I just can’t cut this guy up fast enough!”

With how Travis was feeling at the moment, the laugh seemed maniacal, insidious, like a serial killer’s laugh.

“See ya around, Olivia.”

Travis walked out the front doors of Horner Hall, took a deep breath and noticed that the air seemed to be even muggier than when he arrived. As he walked to his car, he took out his phone to text Britney to see if she could get together that night. She was his fallback plan and he was ready to fall back. When he started up the car, the radio station was playing Jefferson Airplane’s “Somebody to Love” and Travis just wanted to answer the singer with one word:

Yes.

Imelda Marcos and the Twelve Dancing Princesses

“A girl can never have too many shoes.”

—Levi Badalamenti

While attending the his girlfriend’s family reunion barbecue, Travis Rothchild Steve IV had a thought as to why he never really felt comfortable around the men of Sarah Bentworth’s family. It boiled down to this: daughters are God’s punishment for being a man. Mr. Bentworth, as well as his sons, recognized Travis for what he was: one of them. Vile and depraved, hungry to get inside, lustful from the word *Okay*. Travis had a suspicion they could see right through him. How could they possibly make small talk with young Travis, knowing he was just biding his time until he and Sarah—their sister, his daughter— could slip away together and grope each other throughout the summer night? From the day little Sarah was born, Mr. Bentworth had dreaded the day he knew would come, when he would meet a young man just like his younger self, and this respectable young wolf would be attending family functions such as this barbecue. Over a grill of bratwursts and burgers, Mr. Bentworth shuddered briefly when he momentarily thought of what kind of faces and sounds his little Sarah must make.

Travis got up from the men’s picnic table and walked around the campsite to the women’s table. Sarah and her mother were eating coleslaw and hot dogs with a gaggle of aunts, cousins, and nieces.

Sarah made a come-hither motion with her pointer finger. Travis sat beside her. They had not been dating long, so this big family shindig was his first exposure to her extended family: the uncle with the trucking company, the cousin with the alpaca farm, the aunt who designed shoes out of the alpacas. Sarah wanted everyone to like her first boyfriend so she decided to repeat something she knew would endear him to all the women of the Bentworth clan.

“Mom, the other day I was going through my closets, trying to decide what to take with me to the U. I was getting frustrated and said, ‘I have too many shoes!’ and you know what Travis said?”

The women waited.

Sarah turned towards Travis. “Tell them.”

Travis smiled and said, “A girl can never have too many shoes!”

This made all the women laugh and Travis knew he was in.

A few hours later, after getting a blanket from his car, the two of them wandered off to a remote part of the lake and made love. Afterwards, they collapsed in a sweaty heap and said nothing for a while. They just lay together, letting the summer air cool the sweat. Finally, Sarah initiated Topic #37 of The Post-Coital Hypothetical Question Series, a guidebook they were informally writing after every roll in the hay.

“What do you think the ideal number of children is? How many boys and how many girls.”

Travis thought for a bit. He hadn’t really considered this issue before. He was only a junior in college, after all. She had just graduated high school about a month earlier. He decided to punt.

“I don’t know. What’s yours?”

“I love my brothers, but I’m really glad I have a sister. When you’re growing up and take long car trips, there are things you just can’t talk about with your mom, y’know?”

Travis nodded as if he knew. He assumed she was talking about menstrual cycles.

She continued, “So, I think four is ideal. Every boy should have a brother. And every girl should have a sister. And they should have each other.”

This made sense to Travis; he liked balance. “I feel like my sister missed out somehow by not having a sister in her life. That’s why she’s such a tomboy.”

“What if all your children were girls? Would that bother you?”

Travis couldn’t quite figure out why Sarah was asking these questions, but he had learned to go with the flow. “Not at all.”

“But I thought you wanted a son to carry on your name.”

“Aww, what’s in a name, darlin’?” Travis put on his hickish accent and rolled on top of her, nestling his face in her curly red hair. “If we tried several times for a boy, we could always name the last girl Travisa or something.”

Normally, Travis would be weirded out by the talk of children, especially after only four months of dating, but he thought Sarah was the one, and thus such talk was inevitable, sooner or later.

She laughed and pushed him away playfully. “Travisa?”

“Yeah. Well, why not? Maybe just as a last resort, you know, after trying say, eleven times.”

Sarah snorted. “You think I’m going to push out twelve kids for you?”

Travis straightened up and waited several seconds before responding. “No,” he said in a more somber tone. “You’re going to push out twelve kids for us.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“I cried because I had no shoes, then I met a man who had no feet.”

—Anonymous

According to credible-online-research.com, the average man only sleeps with six women in his lifetime. Taking this factoid into account, Travis figured he should be feeling better about his present situation. If he divided his age by his number of sexual partners, it averaged to one a year. Maybe sex was a seasonal thing, like Christmas. Sex was the gift that kept on giving until one day it didn't, until one day it went away.

Travis tried to put things in perspective. He had a friend who had never even kissed a girl, let alone gotten laid. He had friends who had not been with a woman in five years. What was his deal? Why couldn't he look to the future, to the potential to be with someone even better, even more special than *her*?

Travis made a list of every woman he had ever dated. It looked a little bit like this:

**The Sordid, Sexy, Sad, Stultifying, Sensational, Stressful, & Scandalous
Saga of My Significant Others**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Time of My Life</u>	<u>How it Ended*</u>	<u>Duration</u>	<u>Loved Her</u>	<u>Loved Me</u>
Vyctoria W	10th-grade	She dumped me	4 months	Yes	No
Rachelle M	Freshman Year	She dumped me	9 months	Yes	No
Nicole R	Soph/Junior	Petered out	11 month	No	No
Sarah B	Junior/Senior	Mutual. Kinda.	8 months	Yes	Yes
Laura P	Super-Senior	Mutual. Sorta.	11 months	Yes	Maybe
Margrit A	Unemployed	She dumped me.	Hard to say	Yes	No
Celeste K	Server at the OG	Definitely Mutual	6 months	No	No
Britney N	Blockbuster	I dumped her	2 ½ months	No	Yes
That bitch	Copy Editor	She fucked 8 guys while we were together	19 months	Yes	?

Travis added up all the time he had been in a relationship since he had graduated high school and divided it by the number of months since graduation. He figured out that 69 of his 86 adult months were spent in a relationship, or roughly 80% of the time. The average duration of

one of these relationships was 6.27 months. Most of the remaining time had been spent chasing someone with whom he could erase the past, start over.

At counseling, the shrink asked Travis what benefit he got from doing such a formal accounting of his love life. Travis thought for a while but didn't reply.

Love had left him too worn out.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"I still have my feet on the ground; I just wear better shoes."

—Oprah Winfrey

As first dates go, it was a great success. Truth be told, it wasn't really a date. More of a casual get-together that morphed into a date. Travis met Mary for a drink on a summer night downtown. They ended up dancing at what passed for an electronic dance club in a small Midwestern college town. After they had their fill of dance-hall fog, laser shows, and copter lights, they closed the bar down with their fourth or fifth gin and tonics before stumbling back to her place. She didn't live too far away from the downtown bar scene. She lived alone on a side-street in the kind of neighborhood where landlords don't put any money into fixing up their properties. Car-less college students like Mary would always be willing to live in squalid conditions out of convenience.

Normally, Travis would be a little put-off by the disorganized mess of a living space: cardboard boxes everywhere, filled with books, stuffed animals, and other detritus. There really wasn't much walking space. The garage-sale furniture was covered with clothing, fast-food containers, and papers. A vague, moldy smell permeated the air, but Travis was too drunk to really mind. Mostly, he was just glad he wasn't alone.

That's not to say he didn't like Mary. She wasn't what normal guys would call "hot" but she had a particular allure that is difficult to quantify. Some of it had to do with the fact that she was always smiling. Even when her face was at rest, her lips seemed to curl a bit at the sides. She was a bit on the heavy side, but she carried it well, especially when wearing summer dresses such as the yellow one she had on right now.

Mary was off in the kitchen. Travis could hear cupboards opening and shutting and silverware rattling around. While he waited, his eyes happened to glance through a doorway into Mary's darkened bedroom. He wondered how many other men had slept in there. He turned away and scanned her bookshelf and picked up the first title he didn't recognize. He began thumbing through a book called *Transformations*. It was by some guy named Seamus L. Tigers and it looked like a collection of bizarre fairy-tales. One was called "The Tale of the Two-Headed Boy" and it seemed to be about a boy who woke up one more morning only to have grown a second head overnight. From what Travis could tell, it was a pretty crappy knockoff of Kafka. He only got a page or two into it before Mary came back with a bottle of red wine and a wine-key.

"Um, I'm a little embarrassed about this, but all the glasses are dirty and I'm out of detergent, sooooo....it looks like we're gonna have to share the bottle!" She laughed.

Travis hoped they'd be sharing more than that before too long.

It was such a beautiful night they sat on the steps of the front porch. She kicked off her heels. He opened the bottle. It was some blend of merlot and shiraz he had never heard of before, but it was decent. He let her take the first swig.

"You know," he said. "We could just do what they do in the movies or something and drink it out of your dancing shoes."

Mary scrunched her face up. “Eww, that’s disgusting. Who would ever do that?”

Travis took a drink. “Someone who put a lot of faith in the cleanliness of his date’s feet.”

She took the bottle back. “Feet are gross. I can’t stand touching people’s feet. I get grossed out even by my own.”

“What, like this?” Travis lunged at her feet.

She shrieked and almost spilled the bottle of wine. As a reflex, she tried to get her foot away from Travis and ended up kneeing him in the face. He was too surprised to even make a sound, but groaned a bit as he sat back up.

Mary leaned down to get a look at Travis’s face which he was holding in his hands. “Are you okay? What’d you do that for? Is your nose bleeding? I told you I don’t like people touching my feet!”

Travis looked up at her. “I wasn’t expecting you to kick me in the nose!”

“And I wasn’t expecting you to jump at my feet like that!”

They both laughed and passed the bottle between them.

“Is my nose bleeding?”

She took a look, her face shifting from side to side like an owl’s. “No.”

Travis nodded. “Thank Christ for that. Oww.”

She handed him the bottle and said, “I’m not going to apologize.”

“Fair enough. So, if feet freak you out so much, how do you ever get foot massages?”

She shook her head. “I don’t, but after dancing in those heels tonight, I think I should start.”

“You’ve never had one before?”

“Nope.”

“Well, I’ll give you one. Your first foot massage.”

“I don’t think so.”

“C’mon. I’ll ease you into it.” Travis smiled at her before quoting one of his favorite movies. “I’m the foot fuckin’ master. I got my technique down and everything. I don’t be ticklin’ or nothin’.”

She laughed and looked down at her feet. “I don’t know. I just think feet’re so strange. They’re just these stumps with ten little stumps growing out of them. I usually can’t eat for an hour before or after I clip my toenails. I love that movie too, by the way. I would totally have sex with Tarantino if he asked me.”

Travis never knew how to respond to these kind of declarations, so he did what he always did, which was to not acknowledge the comment.

“So how about it?”

Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was something in the air, maybe it was the vibe of the evening, but Mary agreed, but she wanted to wash her feet in the shower and she made Travis wash his hands. He grabbed a cushion from the seafoam-green couch and used it to kneel on the dusty hardwood floor. When she sat down, her summer dress hiked up her legs a bit, giving Travis a glimpse of her panties before she pulled the dress back down. They were black.

She took a deep breath and finished the bottle. “God, I must be drunk to be letting you do this to me.”

“Relax. I know it’s your first time. I’ll be gentle.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“What becomes of the broken-hearted? They buy shoes.”

—Mimi Pond

Levi: Hey Jody. If you've got a minute can you help me out?

Jody: i'll try. what's up?

Levi: What is it that women love so much about shoes?
Specifically having a lot of them and a variety of types.

Jody: this is from In Her Shoes. it's a bad movie, but i think this is true. when a woman is depressed/feeling fat/just feeling blah she tends to want to shop

Levi: Sounds like common knowledge!

Jody: now, especially when the woman is feeling fat, shopping for clothing is just too depressive

nothing ever fits right, you have to get bigger sizes, it's a nightmare

however, when you're buying shoes, you know your size, for the most part

so in the ways of shoes, it's just finding that great style, not nearly so much judgment or resentment to your body.

that's my take on it

Levi: All right. And if there isn't resentment about body image, doesn't buying a pair of shoes lead you to need a complete outfit to match? And then it's off to the races, er, mall!

Jody: lol not for me! if i can find those perfect shoes, i generally already have thought of outfits with which to wear them, in my closet

but some women are just vain and feel a need to have shoes to match all 12,000 outfits in their overstuffed closet

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“When you’re a gumshoe and you’re workin’ a beat and you got no leads, sometimes you gotta rough some hoodlums up, shake ‘em down for some info, but mostly you gotta keep walkin’. If you stop too long to think, the answer that’s right in fronta yer face will pass ya by and then you’re done.”

–Seamus L. Tigers in
“The Private Eye’s Private Life: A Manual for the Fedora-Loving Man

It was Thursday. I'd fallen asleep at my desk last night and normally I'd have slept until the noonday sun came creeping through my Venetian blinds, but a knock at my door pulled me from my dreams of busty women at Mimi's. I reached for my revolver and then remembered I'd pawned it to make rent. Business had been so slow, I was considering subletting part of the office as studio space for kids from the art school. There was no good reason why a handsome guy like me couldn't model for them. Plus, I figured they'd dig all the shadows that gave this cramped old space that old German expressionism vibe.

The knocking came again and I saw a silhouette through the glass of the front door. It looked like a dame. Maybe I was still dreaming.

I staggered over to the door, reaffixing my suspenders and trying to straighten my mop of hair. I've tried to buy back first impressions in the past, but the asking price was always too high. The dame knocked on the door again, a little more impatient this time, with less space between the knocks.

"Hold your horses, princess."

As I opened the door, she said, "Good sir, how did thou know I were a princess?"

Wow, let me tell you, this was one fair maiden, maybe the fairest I'd ever seen. She had a little jeweled crown on top of her hair which glinted in the early morning sun. It was the color the boys down at the bar would call "flaxen." Her eyes were as green as the backs of my favorite kind of paper. Her lavender dress was fine and modest, but something about her curves made it seem sultry. I was still taking in the landscape when I remembered I should respond.

I gestured towards her scalp. "Ahh, your crown gave you away, honey."

Before I could say more, she glided in like she was on a cloud. She looked around the office before stifling a yawn. "Art thou Parker Goodman?"

“They teach you royal broads how to read or just look pretty?” I was still by the door and pointed at the stenciled letters. “The door says ‘Goodman, Private Investigator.’ If I ain’t him, you’d best call the cops to come arrest me, ‘cause I’m trespassing.”

She shot me a look that’d I could chill my whiskey with. I figured proper introductions hadn’t been made so I said, “Ehh, what’s your name?”

“Princess Augustina.”

“Parker Goodman, P.I.” I extended a hand and she actually shook it. “Say, can I call you Auggie?”

Her lips pursed a bit. “If thou values thy life, thou shall avoid calling me that at all costs. Good sir, it is imperative that we go at once to the castle. My father has need of thy services.”

“The king?” This really was my lucky day.

“Yes, the king.” She sighed a bit. “Based on thy method of thought demonstrated so far, I can see thou will fair no better than the others.”

“Others?”

She brushed past me on her way towards the door. “Let us make haste. My carriage awaits.”

“Hey, wait a minute. I gotta pour myself breakfast first.”

I mixed a quick gin and tonic for my Thermos while she waited by the door. I locked up and we went down the creaking stairs and got in the carriage. I was frisked by the guardsmen which, I’m sad to admit, was pretty much the most action I’ve gotten in months.

As we rode through the town and up the hill to the castle, I realized I knew zilch about this prospective case. I adjusted my collar a bit and asked, “So, what’s the nature of this job your father wants me for?”

She sighed. “He desires to know where we go to during the evening-time when the rest of the castle sleeps.”

I almost thought I didn’t hear her right. “That’s it?”

She gave a coy smile. “And he desires thou to discover why every morning the shoes of my sisters and I are found to be worn through.”

She pointed towards the carriage floor and I saw she had raised her slipper towards me. My first thought was “I’d like to suck on those ankles” before realizing that sure enough, the soles were thinner than the leads on my last case.

“Say, princess,” I said, “I suppose you’re not gonna save us all a lotta time and *tell* me, right?”

She yawned and said, “I suppose it customary to wish good fortune upon they head in this venture.”

I understood what she said, but not why she said it, although I didn’t think too much of it at the time. I was too busy visualizing the paycheck. This job was gonna be a delicious piece of cake.

After a while, we were at the castle.

Augustina went one way and the royal guard escorted me in the opposite direction. No explanation was given, but I went along with it. I had never been to the castle before, so I was trying to keep my chin from dragging on the floor as I saw rooms bigger than my tab at Mimi’s, royal family portraits larger than my landlady, and stonework so fine and durable, I knew my union buddies down at the quarry would be out of work for awhile.

We arrived at a large bed chamber. I looked around a bit, taking in all the details. I wasn’t really sure what I was looking for, but, like hard liquor, it’s in my blood to take in as much as

possible. The room was gigantic, big enough for a shootout *and* a car-chase. There were barred windows that let in the morning light. Twelve beds were arranged in a circular fashion around a giant rug. On every bed except one, a princess was snoring away like a regular royal sawmill. I looked down at the rug and saw there were twelve woven suns, all in a circle. Inside each sun was a name. I quietly followed the path of the suns and read the names to myself:

“Vyctoria...Sarah....Molly....Nicole...Olivia....Britney....Rachelle....Margrit....Mary... Laura...Celeste...” and just as I got to “Augustina” she reappeared in front of me. She had changed into a skimpy, silvery nightgown, and from the way she filled it out, I knew right then and there a guy’d have to be a eunuch to get hired as a royal guard here.

She extended her hand and I realized I was expected to bow or something formal like that. She said in a voice even loftier than before, “Verily, it was a pleasure to have met thou, Parker Goodman. I must now join my sisters in their slumbering.”

She got into bed and was out like a white guy stealing third base. There was definitely no pea under Auggie’s mattress.

A guard grabbed me by the arm, which normally means someone’s soon gonna be grabbing their groin, but I figured poppin’ them a quick one was the wrong move at this point. I was escorted out of the princesses’ chamber and down to the throne room.

I was marched down a long red carpet to where the king was sitting. He was a lot littler than I thought he was gonna be. He sat in his throne and his feet didn’t even touch the ground. He had an old-man potbelly and a white beard. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say, so I didn’t say anything.

He looked down at me for a while before yelling at my escort. “Guard! Who is this insolent fool and why does he not kneel!”

For a pipsqueak, he sure had a set of pipes. The guard shoved me in the shoulder and I knelt down. Nobody respects a private dick anymore.

“Uh, your highness—” I began before I was cut off.

“Thou wilt speak only when thou art asked to speak, ruffian!”

I could see we were off to a great start. It’s rare for me to establish such a wonderful rapport with my clients this early on.

“Thou hast three days and two nights to solve this mystery: why art mine daughters exhausted every morn after the evening-time hast passed? In addition, thou wilt also determine the reasons for their shoes being worn out so. If thou art incapable of solving the mystery, thou wilt be put to death! Art thou clear-minded in thy purpose?”

I looked up just a bit. “Can I speak now?”

“Speak!” He said this with enough force that a bit of spittle sailed through the air and almost hit me in the schnoz.

“Considering the uh, high stakes nature of this case, I wanted to discuss the matter of my fee. Now, I normally have a daily fee plus expenses—”

“Thou wantest to discuss compensation with me, your king! I have spent a fortune—a king’s fortune! my fortune!—on the finest shoes made in this kingdom and every morn I find that mine daughters hath ruined them! If thou art curious as to thy intended compensation, it is this: thou getteth to leaveth this castle with thy life!”

I figured this wasn’t the time to bring up my usual bonus for an expeditious turnaround, so I just nodded.

“All right, your highness. I understand. I’m your man for the job. I’ll uh, get right to work.”

He glared at me and dismissed me with a quick nod.

As the guard escorted me out of the throne room, I tried to think about what I was going to do, when it came to me: I'd try the first thing I always do when on a high-pressure case with no clear solution in sight.

I asked the guard to take me back to the princesses' bedroom chamber. I told him I'd need to do some investigative work alone with the princesses, you know, interview them confidentially, see if their stories check out. He wasn't really game until I slipped him a fiver. I told him I had a special interrogation method and that no matter what sounds he heard to not disturb my process. I closed the big wooden door behind me and went to work.

A couple hours later, I emerged from the chamber, feeling as worn-out as the last all-night bender at Mimi's. I found the guard asleep at his post. I kicked him in the boot and he jolted awake. I told him I needed to see the king. On our stroll there, I sang a little ditty. It was a variation on an oldie: "One little, two little, three little princesses...four little, five little, six little..."

We returned to the throne room. I kneeled and the King greeted me kindly:

"Why art thou in mine presence again!"

"Chill out, Kingy. I just figured you'd wanna know the solution to your little mystery."

"What is this I heareth? Thou hast solved the mystery? So soon?"

"That's right. It seems your daughters don't like being cooped up in this joint all day long, so at night they escape through a secret passageway. It's under your youngest daughter's bed. Seems there's a hopping speakeasy on the other side of town they like to frequent. It's under The Princes' Dry-Cleaning joint. That's where they've been cutting some rugs. Glad I could be of service. See ya later, your highness."

As I attempted to exit stage right, I heard the king ask, “But, how did thou come to discover the solution?”

“Come to discover...?” I turned and faced him with a smile. “I got my ways.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“*Between saying and doing, many a pair of shoes is worn out.*”
—Iris Murdoch

Walter Barbarelli: If you’re just tuning in now, our next guest is Seamus L. Tigers, author of such fine works as *Another Contrived Postmodern Masterpiece* and the short-story “Love and Corporal Punishment” which was later adapted into the motion picture *Punishment*. This is his first interview in over ten years. He’s here today to talk to us about his latest work of fiction, *Transformations*. Seamus, thank you for being here today.

Seamus L. Tigers: Thank you for having me.

WB: Now, you’ve been on our show be—

SLT: God, I’m just starting to realize how much the concept of possession is wrapped up in language. *Our* next guest. Thank you for *having* me. *My* girlfriend. *My* boyfriend. Sorry for interrupting, Walter. Please continue.

WB: Er, I suppose you could have said something like “it’s a pleasure to be here.”

SLT: Yes. Quite right.

WB: Now, you’ve been on *The Walter Barbarelli Show* before, but that was a decade ago. Where have you been?

SLT: At home.

WB: (laughs) Writing, I presume.

SLT: That's right. I only slept four hours a night for a decade. The rest of the time I was writing.

WB: Four hours! Wow! And you kept this routine up for a decade?

SLT: Every day.

WB: Now, because this interview is such an event, we took questions from our viewers beforehand. One question has to do with this rigorous routine and time period in your life. Debby from Pocatello, Idaho wrote: "Is it true you skipped your own son's funeral last year because you didn't want to interrupt the work on your novel?"

SLT: That's a pretty personal question, Walter.

WB: Seamus, you know we don't pull any punches on *The Walter Barbarelli Show*. That's why we're number one in the ratings! To tell you the truth, this was the most popular question we received.

SLT: I'll say this much as a response: my book is here, my son is not.

WB: All right. Well, another question we received was "Is it true that while working on this novel, you didn't speak to anyone for three years?" That question comes from Kent in Tampa.

SLT: That is true. You see, the first seven years on this project were a complete waste. I spoke about my ideas to friends, family, fellow writers, my agent, my editor, anyone

who would listen. After the success of *Another Contrived Postmodern Masterpiece*, I was trying to figure out how to do something grander, more epic in scope. Something that would actually live up to all the hype the first novel received. But I discovered that by talking to people about my ideas, I got the satisfaction I needed.

WB: What do you mean by that?

SLT: Walter, all my life I've wanted people to know I'm a creative person, that I think deep thoughts, that the way I see the world is not how others see it. I thought the way to get this message across was through my art, but I realized I didn't have to do all that. Just telling a person my idea gave me satisfaction and feelings of self-worth.

WB: Can you give an example?

SLT: Certainly. Five years ago, I was at a coffee-shop. I saw a beautiful woman reading a novel. I asked her what she was reading and the conversation eventually turned to my job as a writer. She asked what I was working on and I told her my idea about transforming modern hopes and fears into fairy-tales for the 21st-century.

WB: And this impressed her?

SLT: I thought so at the time. Nothing further happened between us, but I went about my day feeling as if I had accomplished something. I didn't write a word for three months.

WB: So your self-imposed silence was a way to prevent yourself from getting that sense of satisfaction?

SLT: Yes. I needed to make it so the only way I could possibly impress someone was by putting my thoughts on the page. Whether or not they're actually impressed is out of my hands, but the work is out there and my publisher is finally breathing a sigh of relief.

WB: (laughs)

SLT: (chuckles quietly to himself)

WB: We have to take a quick break. When we return, Seamus I want to talk with you about the controversy surrounding using the personal lives of your closest friends and family in your fiction. Don't go away, folks. We'll be right back!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“The time has come,” the walrus said, “to talk of many things: Of shoes and ships - and sealing wax - of cabbages and kings”
—Lewis Carroll

After a late dinner, Imelda Remedios Visitacion Romualdez-Marcos decided to do something she had not done since her own four children were young: to read them a story. She summoned her seven grandchildren and asked the eldest grandson, Ferdinand Marcos III to pick a book from the family library to read. He returned with a heavy, leather-bound volume of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

He plopped it in her lap as she sat in the comfy easy chair. She said, “Now, Ferdie, I'm not going to read all of this! Let's see here...”

She scanned the table of contents and selected one she had always liked. She commanded her grandchildren to all sit cross-legged on the hard floor as she read to them.

About halfway through reading “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” Ferdie made a wise-crack: “If Grandma were one of these princesses, she'd never run out of shoes to dance in!”

Imelda slammed the book shut. “That's it. Story's over. Everyone go straight to bed.”

They knew better than to even groan their disappointment. As they got up to leave, Imelda squinted at her eldest grandson and snapped her fingers at him. “Ferdinand Emmanuel Edralin Marcos, the Third. You will wait, young man.”

All nine years of the boy stood bravely and waited for his judgment.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

Imelda set the book down beside her chair. “I hope you realize you didn’t just spoil the evening. Because of your comment, you’ll have no breakfast, lunch, or dinner tomorrow. And you will stay in your bedroom all day. I’ll have one of the servants bring up a bedpan for you. That is all. Now, go.”

Ferdie ran out of the room with tears streaming from his eyes.

Imelda sat for a while before pulling up the recliner, picking up the book, and finishing the story.

That night, she had a dream she broke into the castle and paddled all the princesses for being so disrespectful to their shoes. She lambasted them for their behavior and screamed that they should have just danced barefoot. She then tied them all up with rope and stole their shoes, putting them in a big brown bag. As the guards began to chase her out of the castle, she was joined by her long-lost husband, Ferdinand. He ran ahead and engaged in swordplay with the knights of the castle, easily besting them. He turned back and shouted, “Hurry, Imelda, my love! Hurry to the airfield! We must make our escape, but I swear we will return from Hawaii to vanquish these ungrateful rebels. The People Power Revolution will be put down! I swear it, my love!”

Imelda awoke with a start and found it was morning.

She sighed. After more than twenty years, she still had variations on the nightmare of their forced exile. As always, she was drenched with sweat, her heart was beating fast, and she had a headache.

She decided to do what she always did when she was distressed: she decided to visit her closet.

She walked to her closet door and punched in the security-code. A series of bleeps preceded the *whush* of air that was released from the pneumatic tubes. The titanium doors slid into the ceiling, and she entered the Shoe Chamber. No matter how many times she saw the carousel, she was always impressed by the intricate system of conveyor belts that circled the machine. Every square foot of the conveyor belt held a pair of shoes. At last count, she had two-thousand five-hundred twelve pairs. If she only wore one pair a day, it would take six years and nine months to wear them all. She stepped up to the digital control panel and gave a voice-command:

“Cycle.”

The belts began to move at a steady clip, bringing each pair of high heels, kitten heels, sneaker boots, Chelsea boots, mules, slingbacks, ballet pumps, platforms, moccasins, loafers, clogs, golf shoes, tennis shoes, go-go boots, sandals, open-toes, Chuck Taylors, hip boots, Vans slip-ons, knee-high and thigh-high boots, into view. Her collection was on parade. She clapped and squealed for hours.

You and I, We Will Rise

“The world resolves into a death’s head grin,
Because I walk with pride with a black girlfriend.”

-Art Alexakis

I remember the first time I entered you,
like a missionary in a foreign land.

You took me in your tan and black hands
and took me to your room.

Your roommates were out drinking.
We left the TV on in the other room,
Groucho Marx was cracking wise.

You turned out the lights and
I became a ghost moving across you.

Your peanut-butter and chocolate cupcake breasts
sat atop your basketball belly
when you grinded on top of me.

I let you be on top because
when a white man fucks a black woman,
he’s colonizing her,
putting her under his dominion.

I was never comfortable with this dynamic.
Is that why I let you initiate
everything?
Everything but the end?

I watched the heaving of your midriff,
undulating at me in forceful rhythm.
Someone might think you pregnant.
Your tummy reminded me of the distended bellies
of those starving African children
from those Feed the Hungry commercials

you usually see while snacking on Cheetos and Sprite.

My college roommate Joe
told me black women are the best,
the most passionate lovers
and he should know:

he's from Atlanta
and he's gay.

You did not disappoint.

Afterwards, we cuddled until we fell asleep,
the moonlight through the window making me
your big silver spoon.

It was fall break, so we slept in,
made eggs and burnt toast and hung out in your basement apartment all day.

I noticed you'd checked out a copy of *The Seventh Seal*
from the university library.
Your enthusiasm for the Criterion Collection rivaled my own.
We canoodled on the couch and watched classic Swedish cinema.
It made us want to play chess.

During the game, I began to notice "neutral" tones everywhere:
Your Edward Weston prints lining the walls.
The penguin magnets on your fridge.
Your electric piano in the corner, plastic keys approximating ivory.
My checkerboard Vans.
Your Michael Jackson posters, before and after.
The Oreos we ate.
The ying-yang coffee-table which held the chess board.

What is the whiteness inside of you,
the blackness inside me?

I should have let you win that chess game.

We made love again and later on we went downtown.

We crossed the street, brown hand clasped in Band-Aid pink,
each step we took was to a modern beat,
I asked myself what people would think when they saw us:

How cool am I,
born in this time,
zipping along on my Vespa,
your sweated arms wrapped around my sides,
autumn winds nipping our heels?

No one could think me desperate
with my jungle bunny.

I was your tree-top lover,
hung like a white man.

God, how I loved your chubby cheeks,
deepset eyes of coal,
and your Chesire grin,
but most of all: your hair.

My favorite post-coital collapse gesture
was to dig all my fingers into
that thicket of your 'fro
and feel the firmness,
the resistance,
the coarseness,
and then just...*relax*,
let my piano fingers
hang suspended in those dark hammocks
which grew from your soft scalp.

In a sweaty heap under the covers,
with only our heads exposed, lying face-to-face,
we talked about everything:
 film theory
 skiing
 favorite paintings
 awkward high school experiences
 everything except race.

You told me about a screenplay you were working on.
What would a movie of our brief romance look like?
Who would play me?
Who would play you?

What would life be like if I hadn't run back
to my white stripper girlfriend?

Now you're married to a banker in Wyoming.
the only black woman in Laramie.

I know this because your ex-roommate
is still friends with me on Facebook.
She's tagged in your wedding photos.

Your man looks like a safe guy,
the kind of guy I'd have played guitar with back in college,
the kind of guy who can provide.

What *would* life be like if I hadn't run back
to my white stripper girlfriend?

The Original of the Species

Four dreaded words:

“Travis, come in here.”

Whenever Barry Albion, editor-in-chief of the Star Gazette, uttered these words, it invariably meant Travis Steve’s job as copy editor was in jeopardy. It was almost midnight, near the end of his shift, and Travis only had a few headlines to craft. Travis rubbed his eyes and shut off the computer monitor; experience had taught him it would be a while before he returned to his cubicle. With the paper’s abysmal subscription numbers hovering at pre-Depression numbers, he liked to think he was saving the local fish-wrapper some money. As he stood up, he stretched his back and heard several popping sounds which would make a chiropractor jealous. This sedentary job was affecting his waistline and his bottom line. He trudged down the rows of cubicles. With the exception of the occasional cough and scattershot sound of typed keys, the newsroom was eerily silent. The reporting staff had left for the night. Only a handful of copy editors remained. The newsroom was obnoxiously lit with fluorescents, which combined with the relative quiet, made Travis think of the world’s most illuminated mausoleum, a tomb for a bygone age of print.

He took a deep breath before entering Barry’s office. For being editor-in-chief of a major metropolitan newspaper, the office seemed more a combination of prison cell—six by ten square—and cluttered paper storage facility. Stacks of papers, articles, magazines, and binders covered the desk and shelves. Cardboard boxes filled with who knows what lined the sides of the wall. Framed editions of front pages covering important dates in the paper’s history covered the wall: D-Day. Kennedy. Watergate. Lennon. 9/11. Travis stood just within the door frame and Barry beckoned him with a motion of his hairy hand.

“C’mon. Get in here. Take a seat.”

Travis sat in the chair and attempted to make eye contact with his boss. Barry was a portly man, in his late fifties, mostly bald, but with all the tones of the grayscale represented in his senatorial crown of hair. For some reason, his bushy eyebrows were still pitch black and seemed to press heavily upon two beady eyes which often seemed as if they were on the verge of shooting laser beams. In an older age, Barry would have had the nub of an unlit cigar firmly planted in either side of his big mouth. Travis thought of the last time he sat in this office. It had been two in the morning following an unfortunate pagination incident which had resulted in the printing presses going on standby. Barry had read Travis the riot act.

Travis attempted a conversational gambit: “What’s up, boss?”

Barry sighed and handed Travis a copy of the Arts & Entertainment section of the Star Gazette from a few days ago.

Barry asked, “What do you see?”

Travis scanned the newspaper section and saw an article about airbrushed celebrities by some young buck reporter named Brent who Travis had copy edited. Travis wasn’t sure where this was going, so he just said, “It’s the A & E section from last Friday’s edition.”

Barry just nodded and handed Travis a piece of paper which appeared to be a formal letter from a law firm representing Adobe Systems.

As Travis scanned the document, Barry asked, “Do you know what genericized trademarks are, Travis?”

Travis involuntarily grimaced. It sounded familiar, but he was unsure: “Yeah. It’s when companies...um...have a product and...uh—”

“I’ll just tell you. It’s when the name of a specific brand name product becomes a generic term for any other product that’s like it. You see this?” He pointed toward a tissue-paper dispenser situated atop a stack of paper on the corner of the desk. “This isn’t Kleenex. It’s just some cheap brand my wife buys at Target, but if you started sniffing right now, I’d maybe be a nice guy and say, ‘Travis, would you like a Kleenex?’ and you would appreciate rubbing your snot on the tissue whether it was brand name or the cheaper stuff, right?”

Travis nodded.

Barry reached across the desk and snatched both the paper and the letter from Travis’s hands. “You see in your article where Brent uses the software Photoshop as a verb? Photoshop, a trademarked product from Adobe Systems Incorporated, is, you know, the industry standard of photo-editing software suites. Well, how do you think the folks and shareholders of Adobe Systems Inc. would feel if the product they’ve spent millions of dollars designing wasn’t special in the eyes of the software-buying public because they could just buy any old software bundle to *photoshop* Crazy Aunt Mimi out of the family album?”

Travis opened his mouth to utter some form of defense, but Barry cut him off. “You don’t have to tell me.” Barry crumpled up the newspaper article and threw it at an already overflowing wastebasket. “They wouldn’t like it, which is why just today we received this stunningly well-worded admonition from the offices of Skutney, Benitz, & Waggo on behalf of Adobe Systems Incorporated warning that legal action will be taken against the Star Gazette if further instances of trademark dilution occur.”

Travis thought this was a pretty swift legal response. It was Monday, after all.

Barry leaned back in his seat and cocked his head just a bit towards the back wall of the office, like he was contemplating a water stain on the ceiling. Travis was unsure whether he

should wait or say something at this point. Before he could make up his mind, Barry said, “It’s almost time for copy submission. How much work do you have left?”

“Just a few headlines.”

Barry nodded and got up from his chair. He started examining the top cardboard box from the stack in the corner. He picked up the box and startled Travis by turning it upside down and dumping a pile of papers on the floor. He handed Travis the empty box and said, “Use this to pack up your things. I’ll have Lewis finish your headlines. You’re fired, Travis.”

Travis was shocked, and evidently looked like he was about to cry because the next thing Barry said after picking up the tissue box from the desk was, “Would you like a Kleenex?”

By the time Travis had collected his thoughts and his things (a few style reference guides, photos of his family and friends, his iPod, and some comic books), it was a little after midnight. Fortunately, the Star Gazette was conveniently located smack dab near the downtown bar scene so Travis dumped his dead career casket off at his little Ford Escort and went to the first watering hole he could find, which ended up being Pete’s. A glowing plastic sign in the window stated: Everyone goes to Pete’s.

It was Monday night, so the place was deader than the batteries in a Sega GameGear. Friday or Saturday night, this place was the place to be seen if you were a late twenty-something or thirty-whatever semi-professional. Comfy leather couches were scattered about and underneath large oil paintings of glamorous people. Only a handful of patrons, all male, were haunting the establishment. *Everyone goes to Pete’s*, Travis thought. *But not tonight*. Bland techno music pulsed through the speakers, accentuating the fact that only nine people were

currently drinking the night away. Normally, the lights were dimmed for that trendy metropolitan effect, but the house lights were on, making Travis think the bar was closing early.

He had work to do.

He sat at the end of the bar opposite the guffawing individuals who were absorbed in the touchscreen dollar-eater game console. He didn't recognize the bartender, but she looked nice. As he leafed through the receipts in his wallet, he thought about how it was such bullshit that Brent wasn't the one who was getting fired for using *photoshop* as a verb. He knew the copy editor was the last line of defense for mistakes, but still!

"What can I getcha?"

Travis looked up from his tattered collection of receipts and reflexively closed his wallet and dropped it on the bar. The bartender was—like all the bartenders at Pete's—an attractive, college-age girl, a demographic which seemed increasingly off-limits to Travis, who was now thirty-two. He had difficulty looking her in the eye and just stammered, "Oh, I...uh, a Jack and Coke, please."

"Coming right up."

As she walked away, Travis sighed. He tried to look on the bright side. At least he wouldn't have to skip Tuesday Night Pub Quiz tomorrow, like he had for the last six months. Travis had an incredible yearning to hang out with someone, to have a one-way commiseration session, a mainline of sympathy jabbed straight into his pulmonary vein. He took out his cell phone and began scrolling through his list of contacts, beginning with Aaron. *Someone I know has to be out and about on a Monday night.*

Before he got to Zoe, the bartender was back with his drink.

"That'll be four an' a quarter. You just paying as you go, or you wanna start a tab?"

There was a golly-shucky-darn twang to her speech which made Travis think this gal wasn't from around here. Dressed in a white tube top and denim hip-huggers, she appeared to be a young version of Julia Louis-Dreyfus, but there was some elusive characteristic which was hard to place, something that seemed a little odd.

Travis turned to look at the couch-and-painting area. "I noticed your lights are on. Are you closing soon?"

"Eh. We just do that when there's no door guy or cocktail waitress on the floor. I find havin' the lights on discourages amorous individuals from public displays of affection, if y'know what I mean." She said this with a wink.

"Ah," was all Travis could say. He was a bit surprised by this volunteered information, but made a mental note about lighting conditions in bars, in case he ever decided to be amorous in public.

He handed her a five.

She took it between both hands and gave it a playful tug, making Lincoln's face contort in agony or ecstasy; it was hard to tell the difference sometimes. It seemed for a moment that she was going to walk back to the cash register, but then she said, "You know, you seem like you could use some cheerin' up. You wanna hear a joke?"

Travis nodded.

The bartender put one elbow down on the bar, leaned on it, and smiled. "A horse walks into a bar and the bartender asks, 'Why the long face?' The horse replies, 'My wife is dying of terminal cancer.'"

She was still beaming. Travis's bit his lip slightly and made a silent chuckle. "Yep. That's a regular knee-slapper."

“I know! Isn’t it? It’s an anti-joke. I just think they’re hysterical.” She snapped her fingers and said, “See? You’re already cheered up a bit.”

Travis wasn’t too sure about that, but he nodded anyhow and said thanks.

“Don’t mention it. Makin’ people laugh is what I do best. I used to go to Dub’s Tavern on Monday nights for their comedy workshop and open mic, but then I started workin’ here and I haven’t been in months...”

Travis just kept drinking and listening to her talk about her stand-up comedienne aspirations, her cat, and something else. Travis zoned out for a bit. It felt strange, but refreshing, to not have to carry a conversation. For a brief moment, his heart was filled with a familiar, but long absent sense of hope that maybe he had just met his future wife. He imagined a distant, but inevitable future when grandchildren would thrill to hear about how Grampa Travis had lost his job at something called a “newspaper” and then met Grandma...Grandma...

“...Molly’s my name; makin’ people laugh is my game.”

She put her hand out for a handshake and Travis shook it. He was surprised at how firm her grip was, the way a person would imagine John Wayne’s grip to be.

“Travis.”

“Pleased to meet ya, Travis. Let me know if’n when you need a refill.”

Travis made the universal sign for ‘hold on a minute’ and said, “You know, you don’t sound like you’re from around here.”

Molly scrunched her eyebrows and seemed taken aback. “Excuse me?”

Travis held up his hands in defense. “Oh, no, don’t take that the wrong way...”

“Where do you think I’m from?”

Travis ventured a guess. “Someplace south?”

Molly slapped the counter playfully. “You’d be right, darlin’. Texas. Born and raised.” She glanced back at the other two patrons at the bar, but they seemed content with their video screen entertainment.

“So what brought you here?”

Molly shrugged. “Life.”

Somehow this one-word response, while being nebulous, satisfied Travis’s curiosity. He sipped his drink and watched Molly walk away to the dish bin to wash an assortment of martini glasses and tumblers. Travis was always amazed at how something as simple as meeting a new girl could make all the other problems in his life vanish from his thoughts. In the back of his mind, he had the unshakeable suspicion that a girl with as much vivaciousness as Molly would certainly have to have a boyfriend. Working in an establishment had to bring her in contact with dozens, if not hundreds, of interested suitors, but Molly didn’t strike Travis as a Penelope. Still, whenever he had fears of this sort, he resorted to his personal mantra: “A life lived in fear is a life half lived.”

He finished his drink and she approached him again. “Get you another?”

Travis responded, “I’m good,” Pause. “Say, do you work tomorrow night?”

“Tuesdays are my night off.”

Hope.

“Hey, cool. I’ve been working Tuesday nights for a long time, but I have tomorrow night free and I’ve been wanting to go to the Pub Quiz they have at Cliff’s for awhile. My friends and I used to go all the time.”

Molly smiled. “I love Cliff’s.”

Hoper.

“Would you like to join our team tomorrow night? Winning team doesn’t have to pay their tab!”

Molly’s rolled her eyes up a bit as if she were looking at her calendar on the ceiling before saying, “That sounds like fun. I may not be much help if the categories are history or sports, but if they’re art or music, we’re set. What time?”

“Nine.”

Molly made her hand look like a pistol and made that classic bang motion with her thumb. “I’ll see you there, pardner.”

Hopest.

When Travis stood up from the bar, he felt lighter somehow. He wanted to remain cool and calm, but the urge to put a good bounce in his step was too much for him as he said goodnight and left the bar. *So what if she can tell I’m excited about the prospect? She’ll know I’ve got passion.*

As he left the bar, it started raining but he didn’t care. What was water compared to the human spirit of desire?

On the drive home, his mind was racing with what he would do tomorrow. Normally, he slept in until almost noon and then had three hours before going into work, but now he had all this free time. He looked in the rearview mirror and saw that he was unshaven. He would shave. And do laundry. He’d also clean the house. He planned ahead in case things went well and there was an after-hours at his place. Maybe Molly’d want to watch a movie afterwards. He wondered if she liked westerns. She seemed like the type.

To get to his house, Travis needed to take the interstate from downtown to the suburbs. He lived in the hilly neighborhood subdivision north of town known as the Highlands. It was all barbecues, trampolines, and neighbor kids riding bikes. Travis wondered if his roommates would still be awake. It wasn't a ritual per se, but rather a frequent occasion when one of them would be excited about a prospective love interest and they would have to share the details. Travis chuckled at how his story would have that bad news/good news quality to it.

As he entered the on-ramp, he turned on the radio and heard Ric Ocasek's joyous declaration: "I guess you're just what I needed!"

Moments like these made Travis feel so alive, when the world seemed to synchronize certain elements just for him. He knew it was just coincidence, but it still made him feel special. He glanced at the cardboard box in the passenger seat. *Fuck the Star Gazette. Fuck Barry Albion. Fuck Adobe Systems Incorporated. Life is good.*

He hit a patch of water and tapped the brakes. He heard a slight thumping sound and realized his coffee thermos had rolled forward on the passenger seat mat. He leaned over and picked it up. It's wasn't Thermos brand. He briefly wondered if Thermos L.L.C. was genuinely disappointed that people bought products which emulated Thermos's patented vacuum insulation, a process which created airless spaces so that the effects of heat or cold on inner fluids were virtually minimized. Travis's soul felt like a Thermos. Losing his job wasn't going to slag him down.

He set the thermos in the box of items and when his eyes returned to the road he was greeted by a herd of deer, staring him down. He knew he was supposed to hit the accelerator, but he made the reflexive mistake of swerving to the right. He missed the deer, but by the time he corrected, the Escort had skidded in the rainwater and the little compact car sailed past the

shoulder and off the embankment. Travis braced for impact and the car rolled three times, each revolution bringing more broken glass and bent metal before settling in the muddy grass a few dozen yards from the highway, wheels in the air, headlights eerily piercing the rain-drenched night. The song on the radio kept playing: “I needed someone to bleed...”

Travis had been wearing his seatbelt, but had slammed his head against the driver’s side window. As consciousness drained from him, his last thought before succumbing to darkness was that Molly was going to arrive at Pub Quiz and feel stood up.

As Travis hung suspended in the driver’s seat, blood from the gash on his head dripped down through the broken glass and mixed with the rainwater. In time it would soak into the soil, soil which highway workers had traipsed through when constructing the interstate, soil in which homesteaders had grown crops, soil in which the sweat of railroad workers had fallen, soil that had been crushed by the weight of wagons of pioneers heading for Oregon, soil where native tribes of the Pawnee, Otoe, Sioux, and Ioway all thrived, soil which, if one dug deep enough below the topsoil and subsoil, to the parent rock, the layer of rocks, one would find broken and fossilized skeletons of buffalo and Taag, Travis’s most distant ancestor with a name, who lived approximately 40,000 years ago in the central plains of North America. Taag was a fairly innocuous member of the Hoont band society which resided near the Hills-by-the-River for most of the year before their seasonal migration to warmer climes. The Hoont were comprised of several families or kinship lines which relied upon each other for survival.

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It is the time of the Great Browning and Graying. Soon it will be the Great Chilling and Whitening. Taag does not like this time, when the Bright Circle hides behind the Gray Smoke

and all people in the Hoont will shake and shake until some are still and the ones who are not still will eat the still ones.

The only thing Taag likes about this time is that he does not have to go on the hunt. Because Taag is such a poor hunter, when the time of the Great Chilling is near, he must roam the grassy area for droppings from the Great Beasts. Taag brings these back and keeps the fire alive. One time Taag let the fire die and the other men beat him and threw him in a pile of fresh droppings. Taag now keeps a close eye on the life of the fire.

Taag does not mind because he gets to stay with the women while the men are making the Great Beasts scared and falling off cliffs. Women are nicer than the men and never beat Taag, but whenever he gets too close, they scream and throw rocks at him. Taag does not understand. Taag feels good near them. Why do they not feel good near Taag?

One pretty one called Bakk casts spells on Taag. Taag cannot stop looking at Bakk, but she does not like him. Bakk likes Grott, the best hunter in the Hoont. Taag does not understand why Bakk always touches Grott when he comes back with meat slung over his shoulder and why Bakk sleeps in Grott's tent after a hunt. It was Grott who picked up and threw Taag in the pile of droppings.

Taag thinks Grott is stupid.

Taag thinks Bakk is stupid for touching Grott.

The men leave and Taag is alone at the edge of the camp. This is where the white sticks from the Great Beasts are left. It is a cold day. Taag likes to go there when he is feeling strange. When Taag feels strange he likes to find the biggest white stick he can find and smash other sticks with it or hit rocks into the grassy area, but today he does not feel like smashing sticks or hitting rocks. Taag looks around and finds the head rock of a Great Beast and picks it up. Taag

thinks the head rock looks funny without eyes or fur or skin. Taag turns it around and holds it to Taag's face and looks through the two holes in its front. Taag holds it in front of him and hits it with his hand. It makes a dry sound, but Taag likes it. Taag keeps hitting it and finds pleasure in its sounds. Taag wishes he could hit it with both hands.

Taag has an idea.

Taag takes the head rock back to the camp and finds his old cover made from the fur of the Great Beast. It is not in good shape and bits of hair are stringy. Taag tears pieces of hair from the cover. He ties them together and puts them through the head rock's eye holes and makes a hair circle. Taag puts the hair circle around his neck and the head rock hangs in front of his belly. The dry whiteness is scratchy, but Taag likes it.

Taag begins hitting the head rock with both hands, first at the same time and then at different times. The sound is good. Taag finds he can walk and hit the head rock with both hands. Taag spends hours in the stick yard hitting the head rock.

Soon the Bright Circle is high up and the Great Spirit begins to move through the camp. The women are taking care of children and making new covers from the fur of yesterday's Great Beast. The Great Spirit chills Taag and he moans while hitting the head rock. Taag thinks he sounds like the Great Spirit that chills his skin. Even when the Great Spirit leaves, Taag is making sounds.

Taag wants to share the head rock hitting and the sounding. Taag walks back to the camp and begins hitting the rock and making sounds. The women stop what they are doing and look at Taag. They have never seen Taag like this before. Taag is excited and is moving up and down very fast, jumping from foot to foot. They like the sounds Taag and his head rock make. Those who are standing begin to move back and forth with Taag. When Taag hits fast, they move fast.

When Taag slows down, they sway. This makes Taag happy but what makes him happier is that Bakk is looking at him. Taag realizes he has made magic and now Bakk is under his spell.

Bakk comes up to Taag and rubs his shoulders and arms. Taag keeps hitting the head rock and making sounds. Bakk pulls Taag towards her tent and they go inside. Once inside, Taag stops hitting the head rock and singing and the women of the Hoont hear different sounds of pleasure. Taag makes sure to leave Bakk's tent before the men return with meat.

On the next day and many days after that, Taag does the same thing: Taag watches the fire and waits until the men leave for the daily hunt. Taag then takes his head rock and begins making new mouth sounds and hitting sounds. Bakk seems to have told the other women about what happened between them because the other women of the Hoont are eager to listen to his sounds and to take him to their tents. Taag can't remember a time when he was happier.

But one day, the men come back from the hunt early, hungry and with no meat. Grott is very angry and stomps about the campfire, yelling at the other men for their failure to herd the Great Beasts over the cliff. When Grott calms down, he calls for Bakk, but she does not answer. Grott asks where Bakk is. All the members of the Hoont are silent.

Grott rushes to his tent and finds Bakk and Taag together. Grott is so angry, he yells at Taag. They wrestle, but Taag breaks free and moves to the edge of camp. Grott shows Taag his sharp white stick. Taag is scared. Grott chases Taag towards the Field of the Great Beasts, where the hill leads up to a cliff. Taag does not know where to run, but Grott catches up to him and pushes the sharp white stick into Taag's back. Red water flows from Taag's back. Taag decides

he must fight back, but it is too late. Grott pushes Taag off the cliff to the rocks below where so many other Great Beasts have died.

When Grott returns to the Hoont, he grabs Bakk and takes her to his tent. The sounds are not all of pleasure. Afterwards, Grott smashes Taag's head rock into many pieces. All the women of the Hoont cry. They do not know that by the time of the next Great Browning and Graying, the Hoont will be bigger, for they will have fifteen new little ones who will all grow up to be good with head rocks and mouth sounds.

Travis,

I'm sorry for the way things have gone down, and I'm especially sorry if I seem ungrateful for all that you have done for me. You have helped me through some hard times, and I am deeply appreciative of all that you have done. Yet on the same token, I feel empty when I am with you. Our relationship has been one of superficiality: we pretend to care deeply for the other, but we really don't. I ask you to hold me to feel an artificial sense of care and belonging; you express an artificial sense of concern when I'm upset. On the surface you appear heartfelt, but on the inside, you're really heartless. I suppose we're both to blame. I have guarded myself so cautiously against any real emotion that you are incapable and unwilling to supply. I feel dead when I am with you. I kept looking for traces of sincerity and tenderness within you and have come to be disappointed time and again. This only adds to the void of nothingness that has been our relationship. Yes, these days I am constantly angry and tired, but being angry and tired has forced me to look at my life, at myself, and figure out what it is I want/need versus what I don't want/don't need. I learned two things made me extremely angry: school and you. I look at you and I see the embodiment of many things I despise, hate, distrust, and I began to hate myself for believing that somewhere deep-down in you was a mature, honest, sincere man who I could relate to, connect to, and open up to, someone who would be a true friend. But all I see is an immature, spoiled little boy who desperately needs to grow up. I know I'm not perfect, that I have my own demons, but Travis, you hurt people, recklessly. You're misogynistic, despite all your "Bitch" magazines. I know that this letter is harsh, but I feel you need some insight into what you do to people—if you even care what I have to say. I know you'll forget me and move on. "Start over" as you once put it, as if human emotion were that simple. You're not in touch with your feelings. Perhaps bottled up resentment towards your own mother coupled with

feelings of inadequacy related to your lack of 'sex-appeal' compared to your brother has made you treat and view women the way you do. Or perhaps you're just afraid of feeling something, actually taking responsibility for the emotional well-being of the women you involve yourself with, because you've never had to do anything on your own (and that's *not* a holier-than-thou statement, so don't take it as such.) I'm not psychiatrist, Travis, but I'd say *you're* the one who needs help more than me. I don't believe you're happy with who you are for one second.

-Celeste

P.S. By the way, you *didn't* love Laura or Sarah or Rachelle or Margrit or me or any of those other girls who let you stick your dick in them. Don't even try to fool yourself. If you had, you never would have treated any of us like shit in the first place. I honestly don't think you know what love is.

Coming to Light

In that bittersweet limbo between sleep and wakefulness, Travis dreamt a pixie visited him and sprinkled magic dust that made his pipe-cleaner biceps swell to Schwarzeneggarian-proportions. As the sparkling dust fell upon his frame, a bright, magical sound tickled Travis's ears. It sounded like something from an '80s Nintendo game, when a little elf in a green tunic would defeat a dungeon boss or unlock a treasure chest. Just as his muscles were about to break through his T-shirt, his eyes fluttered open. He looked about the bare walls of his bedroom. He was still the same chimney-sweep he had always been. No man-making faerie was to be found, only a cell phone with a new text.

Unlike Pavlov's Dog, Travis's mouth didn't salivate at the ringing of the cell phone, but his heart rate would increase at the possibility that the call could be from her. This tendency made him Possibility's Bitch. He snatched the phone from the nightstand. He paused and took a breath before flipping it open; there was always this dreadful, momentary anticipation. Was the text from her, the one who once whispered in his ear how much she wanted to have his children?

It wasn't.

It was however from a distant ex-girlfriend, Celeste. Of all Travis's exes, she was the only one he maintained meaningful contact with. Though the relationship—like every other one he'd ever been in—had crashed and burned, Celeste didn't hold a grudge. Travis admired this quality in her, though he often thought it had something to do with the sexual abuse she underwent as a young girl. With that kind of trauma, the only way a person could deal with the coldness of the world and maintain some sanity would be to forgive.

The message from Celeste read:

hey basterds n bitches! reminder! birthday drinks @ 10 @ libations. after hours at my

place. b there or b gay. or b there and b gay. its all the same 2 me.

Travis sighed. Even after three months, he still hoped each new text message, each e-mail, each missed call, each knock at the door would be from someone else, to be from *her*. He stumbled out of his bedroom and surveyed his house. Though all the blinds were closed he didn't need to look out and see it was another dreary February afternoon.

The state of his house paralleled his mental state, especially for the last three months. As he looked around he saw a sink full of dishes—the dishwasher was broken—and trash that needed to be dumped somewhere illegally because he had quit paying for the trash collection service. The broken chair still lay in the corner. Specks of paint and drywall still crusted the splintered legs of the chairs and the hardwood floor. He had not gotten around to repairing the dents and holes in the wall near the fallen chair. Patching up the evidence of their last conversation together with spackle and paint seemed like he he would be scrubbing it from the memory tapes, like it had never happened.

He went to the refrigerator, but knew the emptiness that lay inside if he should open the door. What kind of breakfast could possibly be made from an unopened bag of carrots, Concord grape jelly, and a stick of butter? He couldn't even make coffee because she had taken the coffee-maker. The only thing to drink in the house was a half-empty bottle of Jack that sat on the counter. CDs, mail, and fast-food detritus littered the countertop. As the Leonard Cohen song went, "He used to live alone before he knew her." He had come full circle.

Travis started boiling some water for ramen noodles, his breakfast of champions when he heard a scritch-scratch sound from the corner of the kitchen.

Albus was back.

He knelt down by the broken dishwasher and peeked in through one of the slits in the

gray, plastic no-kill mousetrap. It was about the size of a shoebox with a white plastic handle on top. Every morning, Travis found Albus, the Amazingly Persistent White Mouse, scratching away in the mouse-trap and, every morning, Travis would release the little bugger into the great wide open. The bastard kept getting back into the house and getting stuck in the same trap.

Travis shook his head and thought, *That little guy'll never learn.*

Travis thought about releasing Albus farther down the block, but the chilly wind put a stop to that. He set the mousetrap at the edge of the porch and opened the door. As Albus scampered down the concrete steps and into the dead grass, Travis thought about Celeste's invitation. He had known about the birthday drink and the after-hours for several weeks thanks to Facebook, but he was still undecided on whether or not he should go. Three months ago, he couldn't stand to be alone and would spend days cycling through his contact list, texting people left and right to do anything with them, even if it meant loitering around their workplace establishment until they were off. He would even straighten items on store shelves to pass the time. Life felt a little more stable when a shelf of product was properly faced.

Travis went back inside and descended to the unfinished basement with his laptop in one hand and a hot bowl of noodles in the other. In his pajamas pocket, his cell phone, his life-line to the outside world, bounced with each step.

The fluorescent lighting flickered on and he was greeted by a wall that represented the sum total from years of mowing lawns, umpire gigs, roofing jobs, ten-percent-plus-a-dollar tips, and credit card debt. Plastic shelves lined every wall of the basement. Each shelf held four rectangular cardboard boxes, filled with comic books, first alphabetized by company, then by title, then by issue number.

After months and months, he was close to completely alphabetizing and databasing his

comic book collection. As his laptop booted up, he tried to ignore the empty spaces on the bookshelves where her books had once resided. The day she left, he still remembered passing his hands through the open air, imagining his fingers phasing through weathered pages of Bukowski, Kerouac, Kundera, and Patterson.

There were three B's to the comic collector's life: bags, boards, and boxes. Bags, made of slick and clear polyethylene, designed to block out the harsh, fading qualities of light. Thin, white, acid-free boards measuring 6 ¾ by 10 ½ inches designed to prevent the smallest crease, bend, or tear were the support for the floppy thirty-two-page books. White cardboard boxes with lids stored up to one hundred twenty-five issues standing upright like little erect soldiers, waiting to be deployed in the name of escapist adventure. Plenty of Scotch tape was required as well for fastening the bags shut.

The software he used for his databasing his comics connected online where cover art, production credits, market value, and character lists could be downloaded. He had named his database "My Wasted Life."

He sometimes wondered what the point of it all was. He doubted he would ever have the time or desire to re-read even a tenth of the 12,000 titles in his collection, and even if he did, the stories probably wouldn't affect him the way they had when he was just an insecure adolescent. No, he was an insecure adult now. People often told him, "Maybe they'll be worth something someday!" but he always found that insulting. They were worth something in the present moment. He liked to think his children and his children's children would delight in reading them, but dreaded the likelihood they would be more interested in whatever the next big digital simulation of reality happened to be. Still, he liked to keep things nice and orderly.

He worked steadily for six hours, only taking a break to take a shower and masturbate.

Every day for the last three months, it had been the same, a mental recreation of their last time together: a half-hearted hump, doggy-style in the dark, his grunts and her silence, the ever-growing sense of his irrelevance to her, his desire to pull his dick out and shove it down her asshole, for no other reason than to get a reaction from her.

Besides going to the comic shop every Wednesday for new comics, this daily recurrence was the closest thing in Travis's life to a religious ceremony, a disciplined act of penance paid through self-flagellation, a mortification of the flesh. There were days Travis thought he had single-handedly destroyed his instrument of desire, only to find a resilience the next day, a resilience matched only by his despair.

Many times after he finished masturbating in the shower, he would think of Roy Batty's monologue about moments being lost in time, like tears in the rain, and he would contemplate seeing his semen mix with the soapy water and go down the drain, his little desire washed away to some water-processing facility.

Travis finished washing and stepped out into the steamy fog of the bathroom. It didn't matter if the fan was on, a shower always meant his little bathroom would have the visibility of a riverboat scene in *Apocalypse Now*.

He dried off, put on his bathrobe, and plopped down on the couch in the living room. He was about to pop in a DVD and make another batch of ramen noodles when the pixie-tone caught his attention. His heart rate sped up a notch. Celeste again.

trav! r u coming tonite or not? let me know you silly billygoat.

Travis hated when people abbreviated his name. Were two syllables really too cumbersome? He knew Celeste called him that just because it irked him. Celeste had been an

exotic dancer for the past few years. Once over cocktails, Celeste began to drunkenly rattle off a litany of co-workers' names and their histories of abuse.

“Melanie was raped when she was fourteen. Amanda was fingered by her foster brother when she was twelve, Steph's boyfriend used to beat her if she wasn't in the mood for sex, Jill used to...”

From what Celeste had told him, eighty percent of women working as strippers were former victims of sexual abuse. Celeste had not been a stripper when Travis dated her, though she had always been attractive, fun, and bubbly, but also somewhat pudgy. Through diet pills and secular fasting, she shed the pounds and became the best dancer at the Library Lounge. Sometimes Travis and his friends would go to see her dance. She once told Travis stripping was the easiest job she had ever had. She said the real trick to being an effective stripper was to convince the customer there's nothing else in the world she would rather be doing than grinding on his face.

Travis remembered the first time he visited the Library, shortly after he was old enough to drink legally. This had been way before Celeste worked there. The first dancer Travis had seen was a young, Auschwitzian girl who was dancing on the center stage. She never made eye contact with the men who put money in her garter. Travis watched how her eyes frantically scanned the bar, as if she were searching for someone she might know, someone she would she feel ashamed if they knew her secret, that she rubbed her tiny tits in men's faces for dollars. She resembled a frightened animal in a cage. Seeing the terrified look in her eyes brought Travis down. It conjured up sympathy, a recognition of shared human desperation, not sexual arousal.

In fact, strip clubs never seemed to get Travis aroused. He didn't know whether to blame it on desensitization to sexual stimulation, an increasing physiological impotency, and/or the fact Travis felt love should be part of the equation.

Travis didn't want to be a dick, so he texted back:

Maybe. I have some stuff to do. I'll let you know. I promise.

Travis felt better after sending the text, although he knew he was likely going to skip the drinks and the party.

Another text message arrived almost immediately.

trav u better be here tonite muthafucka. my friend bri just broke up with her b/f and wants 2 get laid. i told her ur big. lol!!!

Travis chuckled a little for the first time in a long time. He wasn't sure if he should be flattered or worried about not living up to expectations, but then he caught himself. What was he thinking? He had met Bri once and couldn't stand her. She had big breasts and that was about it. Even though there was a part of Travis that wanted to fornicate with Bri in an attempt to help him get over his ex-girlfriend, he realized it would probably only make him feel worse. Plus, something about Bri made him think she probably had herpes. The 8-ball of Cost/Benefit Analysis was pointing towards "No."

Travis watched some cartoons in the darkened living room while drinking several Jack and Waters. He passed out to the sounds of clattering dishpans as another chase between a cat and mouse resulted in domestic disorder.

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The pixie-tone woke Travis once again. He had no idea what time it was, but he groggily got up to get the phone, cursing Celeste's annoying persistence. He flipped open the phone and was surprised to find it was a text from his friend Austin.

get your ass down to sidewinders! my band's about to play. 3 dollar cover.

Travis had forgotten his promise to Austin that he would go to see their band play, even though Travis really didn't care for metal music anymore. Austin had been a good listener after the break-up and Travis felt he owed it to him to be supportive of his music.

Travis went to the bathroom and considered shaving the week's worth of stubble. If he should happen to meet a girl, he was always more confident when he was clean-shaven. Plus, he didn't like to rough up a girl's face if making-out should occur, but in the end he decided to just brush his teeth and take a shower.

He drove downtown in his little white compact and saw that the Friday night college crowd of beautiful young things was out in full-force. Sidewinder's was a relatively new bar on the main drag that was also somewhat removed from the trendy, frat-tastic bars near the center of downtown. This remote location meant Travis was actually able to park within five blocks of his destination.

From the moment he entered the bar, he knew he was unlikely to see anyone he knew. This was a good thing. For the last three months, he had been anxious whenever he visited a

familiar haunt; the fear that he would run into her was always in the back of his mind, however he had a hard time imagining she would be caught dead in a dive like Sidewinder's.

Heavy metal music blared from somewhere in back. It could be Austin's band, Grundel Punch, but Austin thought all the frenetic rhythms, squeally guitars, subsonic bass rumbles, and screaming vocals sounded alike. He scanned the bar to see if there was a familiar face, but found no one, no one but people who made Travis ashamed to be white. A puny guy wearing a shirt that said WHITE PRIDE WORLDWIDE came up to him and asked for his ID. A gaggle of pale, bulbous women wearing ironic mini-skirts checked him out from the bar. Travis looked away reflexively. What must it be like to be someone that no one would like twice at? It seemed that half the people who had ever been arrested *sans* shirt on COPS were in this bar. Sidewinder's was clearly the poster-bar for the Aryan nation.

Travis made his way to the bar and bought two over-priced beers that came in little plastic cups. He was beginning to regret coming. After determining that Austin must in fact be on stage, he made his way into the darkened music area. The scent of maple syrup that comes from fog machines hit his nostrils. Flashing strobes and bright lasers pulsed with the thrashing music.

Travis stood near the side of the stage where Austin could see him. Austin was built like a brick-layer: a stocky beast of muscle with wild black hair. He wore a wife-beater that had "Fuck you and your drum machine!" written across it in Sharpie. Austin's biggest musical influence was Animal from the Muppets, and he pummeled the drum skins as if he had caught them had sleeping with his girlfriend.

After what seemed to be a very long time, Grundel Punch finished their set with a half-way decent medley of Metallica covers. The house lights came on so the sound guy and

musicians could remove their gear for the next band. Austin descended from the stage and gave Travis a high five. Just that brief contact made Travis's hand wet from sweat. He rubbed it off on his jeans and gave Austin the beer he had purchased in congratulations of the fine and frenzied set.

Austin drank half of the beer in one chug before rattling off a string of adrenalin-infused statements, "Thanksforcoming, man. I gottagetmyshitoffstage sothenextbandcan play.Theysuck, bytheway, but that'llgiveyou time tobuyme anotherfuckingdrink. Soundgood? Thas what I *thought!*"

After the drums were put away in their plastic cases, Travis and Austin took an empty table far from the squelchy noise of the following band. Over a pitcher of Old Style, they began to reminisce about old memories, their shitty band back in high school, and former girlfriends. They had lived together once, five years ago.

Travis suddenly though, *Everything seemed to have happened five years ago. Including Laura.*

By their second pitcher, Travis was beginning to feel like himself again. Austin was always good for cheering him up, either with his crass sense of humor, marijuana, or introducing Travis to silly TV shows. Austin was in the middle of telling Travis about a show called *Weeds* when something derailed his train of thought. He leaned in and motioned for Travis to come closer. Austin said, "Dude, my girlfriend is finally coming around to the idea of having a threesome—"

"—and you want me to be the third man?" Travis said it with half-joking, half-hopeful intentions.

“Fuck, no! With one of her college friends. I love ya man, but I wouldn’t let any other dude stick her. Anyhow, this other chick’s face isn’t much to look at, but her body…”

Travis nodded. “A regular butterface.”

Austin gestured his cup at Travis, spilling some of it in the process. “Exactly.”

Travis hung his head a bit. Talking about sex right now was still difficult. “Well, good luck with that. Let me know how it goes.”

Austin shook his head. “I still can’t believe you didn’t let me in on that threesome you had with Laura.”

Travis had forgotten Austin knew about that. He knew Austin was maybe trying to remind him of glory days, not the more recent times of woe. Laura and Travis were both undergrads and she had introduced him to many exciting, erotic twists: exhibitionistic copulations for the enjoyment of his roommates, stoned sex where he was able to contemplate the enormity of the universe while staring at the birthmark on her shoulder, duct-tape bondage. Their love seemed so strong, her suggestion of bringing another man into the bedroom just seemed like a logical extension and escalation of the pleasurable possibilities their bodies could provide. Travis was momentarily lost in a remembrance of the logistical complications involving the third man when he felt a rhythmic buzz in his pocket. He took out his cell phone and wasn’t surprised to see Celeste had written another text:

trav u pussy! where r u? cum on down! bri’s here. ;)

“Who is it?” Austin asked.

“Celeste. She’s with some people down at Libations for her birthday.”

“You ever have a threesome with her?”

“God, no. She’d never do that.”

Austin shook his head. “That’s all right. You got that one time with Laura. That’s more than most guys’ll ever get. How awesome is that? Damn, she was hot!

“Yeah, she was.”

“Bryan did her too, right?”

This snapped Travis out of his state of dejection. “What? What are you talking about?”

Austin’s eyebrows started up slightly as he realized maybe he had said something he shouldn’t have said. “Oh, him and I were at a party awhile back and he was bragging about fucking her.”

Bryan had been Travis’s roommate during his year-long relationship with Laura. He was a stocky, handsome college dropout who became the night-manager of a Holiday Inn. On several occasions, he had let Laura and Travis use the hotel pool and hot-tub after a night on the town. One semester, when Travis had two massive final projects due the next morning, Laura had brought over little Zip-lock bags of speed to share with everyone in the house. The effect of the amphetamine had given Travis a focus and productive blaze he had not experienced before or since. The next morning afterwards, Bryan confessed that the speed had made Laura and him randy and they had made out on Travis’s bed while Travis was working on the computer only a few feet away. Travis hadn’t even noticed and this revelation hadn’t bothered him at that much at the time, but sex...that was something else.

“Did he say when he did it?”

Austin waved the question away. “Nah. You know he might have been making stuff up to brag. We all wanted her back then.”

It's true that Laura had been Travis's vanity girlfriend, someone he was drawn to mostly because no girl who had ever looked like that had ever taken an interest in him before, a Gwyneth Paltrow lookalike who sometimes was asked for the actress's autography while vacationing in foreign countries on her rich dad's dime. Travis still had difficulty determining how much of Laura's instability had been due to her high-end, privileged drug use, but the relationship had grown toxic. It was truly unfortunate how the most endearing people often have the most severe emotional problems, sometimes coupled with existential crises and crippling depression.

Austin could see Travis was hung up on it. "Dude, don't worry about it. That was five years ago. I think she might have rebounded with him after you broke up. Forget about it."

Travis pushed the thought to the back of his mind and said, "Oh, well. Let's get another pitcher."

Austin stood up and took out his wallet. "This next one's on me," but then paused and gestured across the bar. "Say, don't you know that guy?"

Travis turned around and saw Celeste's boyfriend Steve. He was easy to pick out of the crowd; he was the only person in the bar who was clean-cut enough to be in the military, with his trim haircut and clean-shaven look. Travis wondered what he was doing here while Celeste was at Libations. Steve saw him looking over his way and walked on over.

He slapped Travis on the back, which unnerved him. Travis couldn't stand unsolicited physical contact. "Hey, Trav! What're you doin' here, buddy?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"Ahh, my buddy's in the next band, Monkey Death Squadron 5000! You heard 'em before?"

“Can’t say that I have.”

Steve got in Travis’s face and made the International Sign for Rock n’ Roll, the one Ronnie James Dio (R.I.P.) invented, the one popularized by Beavis & Butthead, the one used by corporate restaurant chain managers to motivate their slave servers, the Sign of the Devil. “They fuckin’ rock! So, I couldn’t really miss ‘em. C was a little bummed, but you know what they say: bros before hoes, dicks before chicks!”

For the life of him, Travis couldn’t figure out what “C” saw in Steve.

“Hey, but after their set, we should totally get over to Libations for last call. By then most of C’s friends should be there, including Bri. You met her before?”

Travis nodded.

“Massive, huh?”

Travis nodded again.

“All right. Well, I’m gonna go listen to the band. After they’re done, let’s head on over, ‘kay?”

It was easier for Travis to just nod than to provide an excuse.

Steve swaggered into the concert room and Austin began talking about new albums by bands Travis didn’t care about. He wasn’t really listening. He kept imagining his best friend Bryan humping Laura. It made him sick in his stomach and he knew it wasn’t the alcohol. Austin could tell Travis was upset, so he did what he thought best and playfully slapped Travis across the face.

Austin laughed and said, “Hey, don’t be a pussy! Let’s go hear some fucking heavy metal!”

Travis nodded and staggered up out of his chair. He was drunker than he had thought. He

followed Austin back into the cacophony. While his eardrums were being murdered, he kept thinking how pathetic he was and how somewhere, on that Friday night, all of his ex-girlfriends—save Celeste—were probably having sex with their current boyfriends, or, even worse, some random guy. It was so easy for them to replace him. Just then, Travis recognized a song that Monkey Death Squadron 5000 was playing. It was a minor alt-rock song from five years ago by some band no one could remember. The song was called “100 Blouses.” MDS5K really rocked it out, but the singer of the band actually sang the chorus and the words hit Travis hard.

*“I’ll take a friend of yours out to dinner,
Then I’ll take off all her clothes and look for you in her,
100 blouses come undone,
I look for you in everyone,
I touch so much that I go numb,
I look for you in everyone.”*

Travis really hoped that the darkness and the fog would make it so no one could see him crying.

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Before the set ended, Travis had gone to the men’s room to get himself together. He didn’t even have to urinate. He just needed to get away from the noise for a bit. He slapped water on his face, slicked back his hair, looked at himself in the mirror, scanned his face, studying each blemish, each asymmetrical feature. He wished he could look away and still study his face, but every time his eye returned to the mirror, he was greeted with the same empty look. He didn’t know how long he had been there, just splashing water on his face and slicking back his hair, but

when he walked out, the music had stopped and the “get-the-hell-out” lights were on. Once the bands were done, people tended to split and alcohol sales went down, even though it was an hour before closing. Travis couldn’t seem to find Austin, but then he saw a missed text that read:

where’d you go? couldn’t find you. tired as fuck. went home. call me later if you wanna hang out.

Travis thought going home sounded like a good idea, but he didn’t want to be alone. He suddenly wanted to talk to Celeste. She had been his intermittent confidant, his Female’s Perspective-on-Things, for so long. Travis scanned the bar and in the harsh light found Steve by the stage, chatting with a few girls who looked like they needed fake IDs to be in a bar.

As soon as Travis approached them though, Steve lost all interest in them. Steve put his arm around Travis’s shoulder and Travis let him. Steve gave him a noogie and said, “All right, buddy! Let’s go see some women!”

It was a bit of a chilly walk to Libations, past drunken hordes crowding the sidewalk, past seashell-necklaced frat boys with their hands in their pockets, past puffy-jacket gangstas and their cross-armed hoes, past soro-raptors—mini-skirted college girls who didn’t know how to walk in heels and ended up looking like carnivorous creatures from *Jurassic Park*—but eventually Travis and Steve arrived at the out-of-the-way bar that Celeste frequented for some inexplicable reason. It was on a side-street away from the bar district hubbub and as they approached Libations, they found Celeste and Bri smoking cigarettes outside. Celeste gave Travis a hug and he stood outside with them, though he was a little cold and he didn’t smoke. Side by side, the two young ladies appeared to be polar opposites in many ways: Celeste had blonde hair, some height, big green eyes, and a perky frame, while Bri, in keeping with her

reputation, had enormous breasts that kept people from noticing anything else about her physical appearance. It had been awhile since Travis had seen Celeste. She was now in her mid-twenties and it was apparent that her lifestyle was catching up with her. It wasn't anything especially overt in her appearance, just a tiredness around the eyes. Travis briefly thought about the first time he had seen Celeste dance. He had been impressed by her fluid rhythms and her unbridled passion for her art, not to mention the bizarre transformation her physique had taken from a pudgy cuteness to sex goddess. He sometimes wondered what she would be doing with her life if he had been willing to commit to her. Would she have still become a stripper? That first time at the strip joint, he sat down in one of the chairs by the pole-dancing stage which jutted out into the middle of the room. As a joke, he put a five-dollar bill on the stage. She strutted to the rhythm of AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long." All she wore was a G-string and impossible heels. She sat down in front of him, the heels making a clicking sound when they touched down on the drinking ledge.

"Ooh, big spender! Baby, I'm gonna make you real happy."

She wrapped her legs around his head and pulled him in to where he was merely two inches away. Travis remembered there the scent of peaches. The whole thing was so ridiculous they both couldn't stop laughing.

Into the triangular fabric he said, "Hey, I've seen this pussy before!"

She smiled down at him, through two fleshy, perky twin peaks, and said, "Shut up, you goofball, and enjoy your dance."

It was a silly memory, but it made him smile.

Celeste snapped her fingers in front of his face. "What're you smilin' about, Big Boy?"

"Nothing," Travis said. "Are you two almost done smoking? It's cold out here."

The girls finished up their cigarettes and they went inside.

Libations looked like a bar Tarantino would shoot some clever scene of a witty conversation between two hitmen: dark, polished oak paneled the walls, black leather booths provided a certain amount of privacy with their high backs, the lights were low, super-soul sounds of the Seventies played on a jukebox. Currently it was playing “Let’s Stay Together.”

Steve was waiting for them at the bar. They all took a seat and Travis noticed how empty the place was. “Where’s everybody?”

Celeste made a subtle motion with her head to indicate the bar down the street. “They’re all working at the lounge. Most of them will be over before closing time. There’s an after-hours at my place.”

Travis nodded and ordered a beer. He was able to relax a little now. It felt good to be chatting with Celeste, although he had expected her to be drunker by this point in the night, especially considering it was her birthday. She had always been able to hold her liquor better than him.

It had been almost a year since they had last caught up on life in general. Whenever two people bind their lives together, they also rope in their network of friends, and when the relationship ends, too often those friends also disappear. So naturally, Celeste had questions about Travis’s friends. It wasn’t until she asked “How’s Bryan? I miss that crazy guy” that his name triggered Travis’s memory and he recalled the new information that had recently come to light. He decided to get Celeste’s take on it. “You know what I just heard recently? That he had sex with Laura.”

Celeste raised one eyebrow at this. “Bryan? Get the fuck out. Are you serious? I always thought he was gay.”

“No, no, he’s not gay. He’s a metrosexual.”

Celeste snorted. “What’s the fucking difference?”

“Nevermind. I’m just wondering why one of my best friends would do that.”

“Who cares? It was five years ago. Forget about it.”

Travis was somewhat flustered. “How can I forget about it? One of my best friends possibly, *possibly* slept with my girlfriend, either while we were still dating or shortly afterwards. I feel like I need to ask him about it.”

Confrontation was never Travis’s strong suit. The thought of it filled him with anxiety.

Celeste shook her head. “She’s out of your life—has been for a long time—and Bryan’s worth way more as a friend. Why throw that away on stupid shit like this?”

Travis exhaled and tapped his fingers nervously on the counter. So what if it was true that one of his best friends had gotten some from one of his crazy exes? It’s not like Travis had this code of honor where his ex-girlfriends automatically became off-limits to his guy-friends. But what if it had happened when they were still dating? Travis tried not to imagine the contorted expressions, the slap of flesh on flesh, Bryan hearing the sounds Laura would make, the violent shudder of her thighs when she’d come, and the way her belly would quiver for a minute or two afterwards. Cut could he trust his next girlfriend—whoever she ended up being—and Bryan to be alone together? Should old sins be left to fade away or should they be brought into the light?

He needed another beer. He turned on his bar stool to more face Celeste straight-on. She mocked him by doing the same and gazed intently into his eyes, eyebrows scrunched together as if she were a doctor delivering grave news to a parent whose child had just been in an accident.

“All right, Mr. Serious. Tell me how it is.”

“Okay. I don’t really care that much whether it’s true or not—”

Celeste interrupted with “—you just want to know the truth.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

They swiveled back to their original positions and sipped their drinks.

The Not-Knowing was the hardest part. Once confronted with the truth, one could find a way to deal with it, to rationalize it away, to compartmentalize the pain.

Travis threw his arms up in the air, an act of mock resignation. “Ahh, well! So what if he did sleep with her, huh? She had really started to get fat near the end of relationship. You know, from her anti-depressants.”

Celeste didn’t say anything, which made Travis feel like a cad, so after an awkward silence, he added, “I’m just kidding, you know.”

“No, you’re not.” Celeste could always cut right through his bullshit.

Travis tried to back-pedal. “You know, it’s true that anti-depressants make women really gain weight....But hey, c’mon, listen, Celeste, I’m just trying to say I don’t actually care that much.”

“But you do!” She poked him in the chest. “Tell me, Travis, do you think of all your girlfriends as your possessions?”

“Just the ones who are worth a damn.”

Celeste laughed a little. “I guess I’m the only one you thought of that way then.”

Travis suddenly felt like they were in a classic 1940s Hollywood film. He was Bogart and she was Bacall.

“Hey, you’re being unfair. I’ve dated many amazing women.”

“Then why’d you treat them all like shit?”

Travis didn't like this dark turn in the conversation, mostly because there was some truth to her comment. He stared down at his drink. It would be his last since he was out of money.

Celeste put her hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. He looked down at it and thought about how he didn't mind the unsolicited contact. She said, "Hey, I'm just fucking with you. Lighten up, you big bastard."

Last call came and it was closing time. More of Celeste's skeezy posse had arrived. They were mostly twenty-something white trash girls, many of them with yellowed teeth and pointillist acne, and Travis thought of how easy it would be to make something happen with one of them, but the thought made him cringe. Travis wasn't in the mood, and, plus, they were all pretty dumb. Travis didn't need dumb. He needed something else.

Celeste stood on her chair and announced to the room, which was populated entirely with people for her birthday. "All right, you sluts and perverts, you know where the after-hours is, so mount up and we'll see you over there!"

They paid for their tab and Celeste asked if Travis was coming over.

Travis shook his head. "Sorry, I've got some stuff to do. Thanks, though. Happy birthday!"

Celeste gave him a hug. "Whatever, loser. It's your loss! Goodnight, Travis, you big puss."

The posse went one way and Travis began the long, cold walk back to his car, which at this hour was now the lone car on the street. As he walked, Travis knew it was too late to call Bryan. He didn't want to confront him over the phone, anyhow. He was also too embarrassed to do it in person. It all seemed so ridiculous. He kept thinking there had to be a better way to get to

the truth. He couldn't exactly call up Sarah after five years and say, "Hey, did you sleep with Bryan?" He didn't even have her number, e-mail, or anything.

Travis got to his car, and made a cautious drive back home. He knew he was too drunk to be driving, but he knew he could make it if he only focused.

When he finally pulled into his driveway, he turned off the ignition and just listened to the silence. He looked out at his darkened house and became afraid of going inside to the emptiness, to the mess, and the bed big enough for two, but finally he just sighed, got out of the car, and shuffled up the steps to the door.

Once inside, he rummaged through a cabinet and only found stale saltines. They would have to do. While standing in the kitchen, he wondered if Albus was back. He checked the mousetrap and, for the first time in three months, found it empty. For some reason, Travis knew Albus, his only visitor this winter, was not going to come back. Something triggered in Travis and he fell to his knees on the hardwood floor. He wanted to cry, but nothing came. In the machine of his mind, he felt there was a button labeled "Tear Release", but it didn't matter how hard many times he pushed the button, nothing happened. Instead he felt a tightening behind his sternum and he began to hyperventilate, his breath sounding like a steam locomotive warming up. His hands trembled, a sweat broke out on his forehead and he collapsed to the floor. He grabbed his chest, wanting to tear away the talons which were constricting around his heart, digging their way into his ventricles and atria. He knew he had to call 911, but couldn't move. He looked up at the counter where he had set his cell phone and, though he knew where it was, it seemed unattainable, like a dropped diamond ring in a storm-drain.

I'm going to die alone in this fucking house, he thought. As the seconds passed like eons, he imagined the look on his mom's face when she would hear the news that he'd died, and he

could feel tears streaming down his face. Then he wondered who would find him. How long would it take before someone actually came over to his house and find his body? Would any of his exes actually come to his funeral? Celeste, maybe. But that was the best he could hope for.

And then like that, the pain in his subsided and his breathing returned to normal. Travis lay there for a very long time before he tried to get up. He thought about what he didn't think about when he was dying: his comic books. A job. His student loan debt. Her.

He slowly got to his feet, steadying himself against the counter. It was 2:37 AM. He reached for his phone and dialed the first name in his contact list.

The phone rang and rang and Travis worried it might go to voice-mail, but then the call connected and he heard music playing in the background.

“Sup, muthafucka?”

“Austin,” Travis said before realizing just how out of breath he was. “Man, something crazy just happened. Jesus...I wanna tell you about it, but...what are you doing right now?”

“Just smokin' some weezle and listenin' to the Beatles.”

Travis listened for a bit and realized it was one of his favorite tracks from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

“Would...would you want to bring some of that over here and hang out for a while?”

“Sure, man. I'll also bring that show I was telling you about. *Weeds*. You're gonna love it.”

“Sounds good. See you soon.”

Travis set the phone and looked around the kitchen and dining room area. He looked at the chair and the holes in the wall and thought briefly about cleaning up the place a little before Austin came over, but decided it could wait until tomorrow.

Tonight he was content to just get by and get high with a little help from his friends.

Higher than God

I'm about to attempt a divebomb maneuver I can't believe how incredibly high I am but I've been battling paranoias I just had a panic attack for fuck's sake We got the dictaphone from my room to record the craziness. I wish some of the earlier stuff could have been recorded I really am wondering what we'll sound like on that tape Holy shit Austin made me watch the first episode of Weeds That is one insanely crazy show I don't think I've ever seen such a hyperkinetic dystopian dark dramedy before I started to get wiggled out and seeing freaky parallels to the American sociological landscape I keep bouncing to the future and imagining what I'll think when I read this. I am being crushed by the idea of the future Just the idea that on one side BEHIND US is all that has ever been all the past but nothing is in front of us but what arises from the perpetuation and replication and reproduction and birth of the ever-passing moment On so many fundamental levels reality right now is being birthed and rebirthed as of now I can't believe how I'm thinking right now This document is evidence of what happened here tonight I have tears streaming from my eyes, but not because I'm sad but because I am stricken with the enormity of what my life has become I am so very proud that I will have captured this moment this way I'm thinking Woah that was insane This is a just an honest expression of an inner mind that has let down all the floodgates all the guards all his parents all his lovers all his friends all of everyone Why...why I am blown away by this. If this is some...freaky...moment...when I long pause looking around the room at posters Austin still in the TV room I think without all the periods of ellipses people will read that last lie rather quickly That was supposed to be line by the way but Freud would have a field day with some of this I think I'm going to print it out and take it to my shrink He thought we made progress with my relationship chart I hope my next girlfriend never finds that I wonder what she would think I wonder why I will think Whoa That

WHY in the last sentence was supposed to be WHAT but it came out WHY What is going on here? My mind is playing tricks on me This could be brilliant I dun, don't know when to stop I'm looking at my battery meter and I think I must have more time I've only been writing for 11 minutes but I feel that minutes have passed There was supposed to be a dramatic pause after that last THAT God, I just almost finished Eats Shoots and Leaves today Punctuation must be the most insane concept ever To capture the nuances of human utterances performances and articulations of the I'm not sure what I'm trying to say here but it is quite good. British. Oh, man I'm having the best time of my life right now just typing away. I don't think I'll edit one little bit of this text when I share it with others. Welllll...maybe a little. I.....I just got hooked on the rhythm of pressing the period key in the rhythm of a leaky faucet on speed. It must have resounded through the air at least um, 32 times according to the best focusing of my eyes on the line that keeps sliding upwards would have you believe. Oh, man...I really hope I don't get called in to work tomorrow. On one hand it would be very good to get another day's pay in, but on the other hand...I'm fucking stoned! I really think there's a good chance I'm going to still be stoned in the morning. I really really better make sure I hit the Private (Just Me) button before uploading this entry. I would think my Livejournal would be pretty anonymous with the name, but my picture's right there. The big mug. With a cowboy hat. I'm just thinking about how a book of writings like this would be marketed. "For years, critics have passed over great works of literature which were merely ahead of their time, dismissing them as nothing more than the drug-induced ramblings of an intoxicated mind...but for once...they'd be write about Travis Steve." Ugh. I just misspelled "write" but I got "misspell" right. It's one of the most (if not thee most) misspelled words in the English language. I bet you already knew that. Okay, the inner editor is taking control of this crazy plane and I'm starting to fix things. No mountain crash for

this pilot. What's with the self-consciousness? Did I just invented a new literary genre? Stream-of-self-consciousness. That's almost as good as that band, The Self-Righteous Brothers. I'm exhaling right now. Who knows what's going to happen next? I feel like a documentarian of my own mind. Cinema verite cognitivique. That last word was made-up French. In case you couldn't tell. Okay. So, I'm really writing this for one person. You know who you are. I can feel your gaze like Franz felt Sabina's. That's right. I only have one section of the Unbearable Lighness left to read. New moments of transcendence really are a bitch. I wonder if Kundera ever felt this sensation of being dashed upon the rocks of heaviness and then blasted upwards to the field of lightness and back again like I was in a roiling wave during the bitterest storm. God, I...am heavy right now. I don't kkkkkkl whoa. I lost track of the period button there. Who ever heard of a kkkkkkl before? Austin just finished the second episode of Weeds. I already wrote about the show. There it is. What do all of my short stories and longer works all have in common? The ideas reflect some worldview. What is it exactly? I'd have to let you read all of them. I think there's another stupid French word that looks hard to pronounce (oueverere?) and means repertoire or canon or entire collection of works or something. Weird. I know. I wonder how long someone could read something like this. I bet you're wondering how long *you* can stand to read like this. I'm not sure. If you made it this far, I commend you; if not, FUCK YOU!

Oh boy. There's the first break in the stream of text. I am not pensive; I'm just thinking. That's one of my dad's jokes. Jor-El :: Kal-El. But in my case it's Jor-El :: Jor-El. I don't know if that is clear to anyone but me. It's got a sublimely geeky beauty to it. Yes. My shrink will most definitely get a copy of this.

I can see why Truman Capote said the things he did about Jack Kerouac. I'm going to call Austin and ask him if he could bring me some cookies and milk. I know, I know. I'm a big kid. Literally. You'd never know it. I just realized that King's X might have been right about well...only an esoteric circle knows. Que un misterioso. I really need to brush up on my Spanish. It's better than my French though.

Wow. The breaks are coming in equal rate of lines. That's weird. I wonder why my train of thought is clipping out like a clicker-clack thing they used in Hollywood films. You know, with the chalk. I am actually seeing the little runner of existence jumping from each moment to moment like stones across a river, but the river water that runs between those infinite stones is actually the gaps of existence turned inside-out to nothingness. See that little runner jump from stone to stone. They are like treadmills. Time is that runner. The runner always hopes to move closer to the other shore, but the stones that pass below his feet slide along the riverbed to a slot that looks like the goal in air hockey and then they shoot back through a pressurized tunnel back to the other side of the river and exit an inlet on the shore of infinity and begin their conveyance back towards the runner who never wavers in his pace, who never falls behind or dashes ahead. That's where I'm at ladies and gentleman. That's where I'm stuck and where I'm content to stay. With that, I believe I must cut the ribbon and say goodnight or goodday. It all depends on the red wheelbarrow or something.

For reading this: I love you.

You'd have to love me to read all of this.

Right?

I wasn't sure whether to end it there or not. Too many don't know when to stop.

Don't answer that earlier question about love. I know when to stop.

I think.

Maybe not.

Nope.

Energizer Bunny.

You know it to be true.

Who's home right now?

You know.

Just me, Travis Steve.