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Walls and other fiction

Andrew Worthington
CUNY City College of New York

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Walls and other fiction

by Andrew Worthington

Thesis mentor: Keith Gandal

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Andrew Worthington

MFA Thesis

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Introduction to *Walls and Others Prose*

This thesis is a collection of various prose fiction that I wrote during my time in CCNY's MFA program. "Walls" was originally written in my first semester (fall of 2010) as a long short story, and it is now the title of my first novel *WALLS*, which will be released by Civil Coping Mechanisms Press in 2014. It originally was written in third-person, limited point-of-view, but I changed the perspective to a sort of experimental first-person, omniscient viewpoint during a revision of it over a year later. The piece titled "The Julia Page" is also a portion of that novel, and it was written early in the winter semester of 2012.

Also collected here is a short story I wrote in the spring of 2011 called "Calling Back Home." It was published by the literary journal *Midwestern Gothic* in 2012. The final piece in this collection is "Okay, Cupid" which is the beginning of a new novel. It centers on a protagonist who uses the online dating site

OKCupid.com, but I am developing other plots related to the main characters work life and home life, as well as exploring the people who run OKCupid. Overall, I think this collection gives a good sample of the various work I have produced in the program, and I feel confident in my writing abilities as I move towards graduation.

Walls

The floor tiles were that color that is hard to describe: beige but gray but light brown but dark orange but also almost just a plain white at the same time. I felt as if they had been chosen because of their void mediocrity.

I walked down the hallway without any aim, aside from finding a purpose for the tiles, the doorframes, the ceilings, the walls. I thought I could no longer think a single thought. Every thought was merging into the next without my permission.

The fourth floor of St. Benedictine's hospital had four hallways that connected to form a rectangle. The northern hallway had a westward erection that caused it to intrude on the uniform four-corner layout, but all that was at that end's end was the emergency exit stairway, and my room.

I was not near my room. I was wandering south along the western corridor. Mrs. Richardson was at her desk on the northern corridor. I couldn't see this, but I knew. She was sitting there with her big scarlet-framed glasses, her fat ass too lazy to move, her eyes just staring at my projection on that security

screen. I looked up at the camera and winked. As she shook her head, there was not another wind source on the floor.

I turned the corner.

I stared at a framed print of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* that was along the southern corridor, thinking that if this was a novel or a film it would seem cliché for there to be that painting right there at that moment. I laughed.

"What are you laughing at?"

I gasped and turned around. There was a short man standing there. He had on a nurses' uniform. Orderlies didn't really exist anymore. They now shared duties and titles with the women. But as he looked at me I knew that it would be him and not Mrs. Richardson that would have to subdue me if I got violent. He thought I would get violent. It didn't even cross my mind. I thought he was pathetic, though. He had a beer belly. He wore narrow rimmed glasses but he looked stupid.

"The painting," I said.

"Oh, yeah," he said, "It's a good one."

"I don't know about if it's good or bad," I said, "But I like it."

He nodded at me. He stared at the painting. He realized I was not a violent threat.

Looking back at me, he asked, "Don't you think it is about time for bed, Tom?"

"What, do I have to go to bed, right now?"

"I would say so."

"I can't just walk around a bit more?" I asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Everyone else is already asleep."

"Can I have something to eat?"

"We don't usually go into the pantry at night. Otherwise, everyone would want me to make an exception for them."

"The rules would break from took much bending," I said.

"Exactly," he said.

"So I should just go to sleep?" I said.

"I think that would be best."

"Better than what?"

"Just in general."

"Oh."

"So what do you say, you want to go to bed?"

"I, um...Can I get some food first? Otherwise, I won't be able to fall asleep."

"Tom."

"Please?"

He sighed. "Follow me," he said.

I followed him towards the pantry.

Inside the pantry there were baskets filled with fruit, a large refrigerator, over a dozen cabinets, and sitting on one of the wooden counters there were boxes of the small personnel prepackaged cereal bowls that you just had to put milk in and enjoy. I chose a banana. I took another one. I shrugged my shoulders and looked around the room. He saw me looking at the cereal again.

"No sugar," he said.

"Okay."

"It keeps people up."

"I guess I am done," I said. I walked out the room and back into the hallway. I stood there waiting for him. He wondered why I didn't walk straight to my room, since it was already clear that I was going to bed now.

"Let's go," he said.

As we neared the nurses' station, located across from my room, I stopped.

"Can I get something to help me sleep?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. He walked over to Mrs. Richardson, who was sitting behind the long desk in a revolving bar stool chair. I stood where I was, while he asked her in a hushed tone if I could have a sedative. She rolled her eyes. Around the frames of her glasses I could see her skin more clearly.

"Do you know where you are, Tom?" she asked me.

"I think so," I said.

She sighed. I was annoying her.

"Well, we usually have to wait to give out pills until the doctor sees you, but I can give you something light."

I shrugged. She sighed again.

She walked back into the office behind her. There were shelves and cabinets everywhere, but they were made of plastic, unlike the shelves and cabinets of the pantry. She returned with a Dixie cup. It contained a small scarlet pill. She said the name and I didn't listen to what it was called, and she became more annoyed.

"Thanks," I said.

They encouraged me to go to bed again, so I went to my room and leaned against a pillow. I don't know exactly when it was that I fell asleep.

We were out candyflipping in Kent around the college bars, but none of us were in college that semester.

I wasn't having fun. I couldn't feel the acid. I couldn't feel the X.

I stood near the bar listening to the band play very average music, a mix of metal and new wave and emo and everything in between.

The stage was short and small, and there was a curtain that was sagging at the side of the platform.

Molly was talking to a guy she had introduced me to a few minutes earlier but I didn't remember his name. He leaned over and hugged her, and it looked too playful to me.

I would have felt jealous if not for my exhaustion—with her, with the show, with the drugs, with the city, with the era.

I walked over towards her and the guy. She glanced at me but continued her conversation with the guy.

As I stood next to them, not saying a word, feeling like an outsider next to my own girlfriend, I began to think of ways that I could kill this guy. They

laughed again and he punched her playfully in the arm. I kept staring at him, wondering how I could murder him.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said the guy, “If this is your girlfriend.”

“I don’t care,” I said.

The guy didn’t listen to my response. He kept talking to her.

I stood there and the guy seemed small and insignificant and she seemed small and insignificant and I felt small and insignificant, but what the hell else is there to feel?

They kept talking. They were discussing the merits of Akron over Kent.

“Akron is for preppy losers,” said the guy.

“Maybe,” she said.

“Kent is more artsy and shit.”

“I guess so.”

“Fuck, DEVO went to Kent.”

“But they were from Akron,” I said. They looked at me. I wasn’t supposed to talk.

“But we’re talking about colleges,” said the guy.

“None of us is in college, anyways,” said the guy, and he added, “No one that matters graduates from college.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I asked.

“Yeah, what do you mean?” asked Molly.

The guy looked at the stage. “I don’t need to get a fucking degree to do what I want to do,” he said.

“That’s a way of looking at things,” said Molly.

I shrugged. It was a way of looking at things, although I wasn’t sure what we were looking at. I was silent as they continued.

“I’m in school, anyways,” said the guy.

“Oh yeah?” said Molly, “Where?”

“Tri-C.”

“That stands for Cuyahoga Community College, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I knew someone that went there. You can only go for two years, right?”

“Yeah, it’s a junior college,” said the guy, “I will hopefully just get a job in the tech industry.”

“Doing what?”

“Working with computers. Probably at some business office. Fixing them, programming them, stuff like that.”

Molly nodded. The guy didn't seem interested in himself, anymore, after all that depressing talk about community college and fixing computers in an office. I began to understand him. I was the guy.

I walked over to Tony, Nita, and Jack. They were standing near the door.

"We were thinking of leaving," said Tony.

"Okay," I said.

I walked back over to Molly and told her the group plan. I walked away without speaking to the guy.

Nita was saying, "I just want to go home," as I returned. She was pretty demanding of Tony. He made the plans, but she gave the orders. I liked her curly black hair, and the smooth skin on her face.

"Yeah," I said, "I think we are going to go." Molly approached our circle as I said this.

We all went outside to smoke and to decide if we should leave, but it was already decided.

Jack and Tony walked towards the gas station down the street to pick up Phillies. Molly answered her phone and walked down the sidewalk a bit. Nita and I stood there.

"So did you like the show?" she said. I knew she was being sarcastic.

"Yeah, it was great," I said. She knew I was being sarcastic.

"I'm kidding," she said, even though she knew I had been kidding.

"Me too," I said, even though I knew she had been kidding.

I looked up and the clear night sky and said, "It's nice to have stars every once in a while."

"Yeah," she said, "Do you know any of the constellations?"

"I mean, the big dipper. I don't know where it is, though."

She said something about a star and pointed to it. She leaned up against me as she pointed. I felt the acid kick in. I felt the X kick in. She nudged me with her elbow and it felt like fellatio. The stars neared closer for a second, before retreating back into their proper place. Tony and Jack returned with a cigar.

"We were going to go roll this over at my place," said Tony.

Nita rolled her eyes. I think only I saw.

"I might just go home," I said. I called to Molly. She nodded.

"Alright, I'll see you guys later," I said.

"You sure, man?" said Jack.

"Yeah."

"Alright, whatever," said Tony. He was kidding. We had kidded for so long, nothing was a joke anymore.

"Bye, guys," I said.

I walked towards Molly. She waved and we began walking towards the car. I hoped that she would drive.

I remembered waking up in the middle of the night. Mrs. Richardson was standing outside my door. I saw her shadow in the hall outside my door.

"OH, MY LIFE IS SO HORRIBLE," she said.

She was talking about me.

"RANCID BOY," she said. "LIVES LIKE HE'S THE ONLY ONE IN THE WORLD."

I put the sheets over my head. I must have blacked back out.

My waking in the morning was one of those slow-wakings, when I wake up every half hour or hour for several hours, but I never actually get up and out of bed.

I was up at 9, which was much earlier than usual, but I had also fallen asleep at 11, which was earlier than usual.

The same male nurse was standing outside my door when I finally opened my eyes to the day.

“Hi, Tom.”

“Hi,” I said. I couldn’t remember his name. I wasn’t sure if he had ever told me his name. I didn’t care.

“You are about to miss breakfast,” he said.

“Am I?”

“Yes. Breakfast is served from 9 to 10, every morning.”

“Can I shower first?”

“We aren’t allowed to let you shower, yet,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t really care about a shower. The night before I had been demanding answers. I wasn’t anymore. I felt groggy.

He stared at me. He thought I was going to take awhile to get out of bed. He still thought I was a trouble patient. He had a talent for disguising his face. His face didn’t move, except for his eyebrows, which were permanently raised.

I had taken all my clothing off in my sleep. I got out of bed and put on my gown. I put on my hospital socks. I looked at the floor tiles. I wondered why I had never considered the banality of floor tiles.

“Okay,” he said, after I had stood up, “I will show you the dining room, and then that is it for me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It is time for me to go home. My shift is over.”

“Oh.” I realized that I was making this guy stay after his shift was over. He wasn’t a possessor of power. He didn’t exist merely to be my male nurse. He was here because it was his job, because it was how he paid his mortgage, paid child support, paid for his mother’s nursing home, paid for the Chinese buffet every night, paid for the wine he drank by himself afterwards, and paid his phone bill, in order to call the plumber, who fixed his toilet later that day.

He walked me down to southwestern corner of the floor, by the big pantry that he had shown me the previous night. There was an old man in a wheel chair sitting at a table. He had yogurt on his chin.

“How are we doing, Lou?” asked the male nurse.

Lou grunted something inaudible, but it wasn’t an angry grunt. It was a resolved grunt. He had resolved to be old. He had resolved to be in a wheelchair.

The male nurse wiped Lou’s chin with a napkin. He wheeled him towards the door.

“Help yourself to whatever is left,” he said, “I will see you tonight.”

"Okay, bye," I said. "Thanks."

I made myself a bowl of cereal, by which I mean I took a small milk carton and poured it into a prepackaged bowl of Special K.

I ate a few spoonfuls, but then I just stared at the bowl and watched the cereal get soggy.

"Hi, Tom."

There was a new male nurse.

"How are you today?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

"Here is a menu for lunch and dinner." He handed me a piece of paper.

"Please mark what you want."

"Okay."

"Breakfast is always served buffet style, but lunch and dinner we get you the food beforehand."

"Okay. Do you have a pen?"

"I can get you one."

"Okay."

"Follow me."

He walked me back towards my room. At the nurses' station he stopped and asked for a pen. Mrs. Richardson was gone. There was a younger, less obese nurse now.

"Hi, Tom," she said.

I didn't like that she knew my name. I hadn't told her my name.

I went to my room. Lunch and dinner were pretty much the same menu. Cheeseburger, hamburger, or veggie burger. Pasta, salad, or soup. Orange juice, apple juice, milk, or water. For lunch, there was also a decaf iced tea option. For dinner, there was also a Salisbury steak option and a garlic bread option. I chose a cheeseburger, pasta, and apple juice for lunch, and a cheeseburger, soup, and apple juice for dinner. I was already hungry. I wished I had eaten the Special K, even if it was soggy.

I gave the menu to the nurse at the nurses' station.

"How did you know my name?" I asked her.

"Oh, Mrs. Richardson told me to expect you."

"Oh."

"I'm Cindy."

"Oh, nice to meet you. Can I eat a snack?"

“Sorry, you will have to wait until lunch. However, Doctor Rodriguez is going to see you soon.”

“He’s my doctor?”

“Well it’s a she. But your doctor, yes.”

“Okay. I am going to lie down. Tell me when it’s time.”

I sat on my bed staring out the window. It sure wasn’t a Van Gogh view. I could see a parking lot and some trees. The light gray of the highway was visible through some of the trees, but I couldn’t make out any cars.

“That’s some boring shit,” I thought.

Fifty minutes later, the male nurse escorted me to the doctor’s office. It wasn’t an office as much as a closet, big enough for two benches. That didn’t really surprise me. Getting used to the budget of the ward didn’t take long.

Doctor Rodriguez entered the office. She had glasses. It was the same as every other person I ever met with thick glasses. My father had thick glasses. People with thick glasses didn’t look at me. They didn’t even stare. They penetrated.

“Hello,” she said. She kept smiling and she wasn’t really paying close attention to me. Even when she penetrated me with her eyes, it seemed like a

distracted kind of penetration, like a prostitute who just has to fuck some dude but doesn't really care, and who could blame her?

She shuffled some papers around on her lap.

She said, "How's it going?"

I asked her when I could leave.

"Do you know why you are here, Tom?"

"Yeah, I came here," I said.

"You're not well, Tom. We think you might need some time, still."

"I'm fine."

"Well, your parents are coming today, so maybe if—"

"Hold on, they know I am here?"

"Of course."

"How?"

"You are still on their healthcare. They are your emergency contact."

"Oh, so why are they coming?"

"To see you."

"I know that's what they are coming to do, but why? I didn't ask them to come."

"Well—"

"I don't want to see them."

"Well, that's your choice."

"Good."

"But we are going to keep you over the weekend," she said.

"You mean, until Monday?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"You signed a form last night. You're a danger to yourself."

"So? Now it's today. I want to leave."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"Fuck it."

"Tom..."

"I, um. I, um. I, um. I'um. I, um."

I was got in a fit, indefinitely repeating those two words. That ended after a minute and a half but Doctor Rodriguez had opened the door, motioning to the male nurse, who entered the room and hugged me with one arm.

"It's okay," he said.

I wondered why Doctor Rodriguez hadn't just hugged me with one arm.

After I calmed, she told me the pills she was going to put me on. I had never heard of them. I didn't know the names of too many pills. They all sounded the same. She smiled as if I were normal and told me she would see me on Monday. She didn't have to work on the weekends.

I walked past the rec room but it was still locked. I went to my room and lied down. I woke up and went to lunch, where I was given exactly what I ordered. I liked the cheeseburger. It had a kind of soft plastic texture but it was definitely edible.

That afternoon they let everyone except me go outside. It wasn't really outside, it was just a patio with high barbed wire fences one the other side of the dining room.

I lied in my bed and wished I had a cigarette.

Molly and I were lying in bed. We hadn't fucked that night. She had gotten pissed when I tried to drive home. She wanted to just get a cab. She said she

would pay. I had to work in the morning and I didn't want to have to come back and get my car.

Now it was morning, and we were lying there, and I didn't really want to think about apologizing to her, and I didn't want to go into work. I was thinking about Nita. I had felt something that night. I had felt some movement.

Molly was an odd choice for me, but not in my view, but from the view of my friends. She was a bit on the chubby side, and she was shy and quiet sometimes, but also loud and assertive other times, like when she was drunk. We both liked to read similar authors. We liked the same music, but her taste wasn't as good as mine. We liked to get fucked up, but she liked to get really drunk, whereas I liked to do drugs and disassociate. She thought we might have a future, but I was mostly trying to string a long a wet dick as long as I could. Sometimes I would get excited by delusions of immorality, or at least longevity, but they passed.

Nita was different. She was a prize. She didn't seem easy. She had different interests, but some of her interests were more advanced than me. She was also Manuel's girlfriend. That wasn't something I had to keep in mind. It was already always on my mind.

I turned on the radio on the computer on my way to the bathroom.

I masturbated in the shower, and it wasn't to the girl on the other side of the wall.

When I came out of the bathroom, Molly was sitting up in bed. I told her I had to rush to work. I kissed her goodbye quick and went out the door.

I took my time getting to work. I smoked a cigarette in the car. I parked in the grocery store parking lot and walked across the street into the Doughnut Connection. I usually did drive-thru for my coffee, but I wanted to smoke another cigarette before work. I also didn't want to destroy the environment with the extra engine time in the drive-thru line.

The lights of the supermarket always woke me up.

I walked over to customer service and clocked in, then I went to the opposite end of the store to the deli. I went in "the back," as it was called, because it was the part of the deli where the customers couldn't see us. It was also where we cleaned dishes and set mouse traps. I put on my apron and walked out to the counter.

I was working with Andy.

Andy was in his thirties, maybe almost forty, and he had something wrong with him. He wasn't retarded, but he wasn't very intelligent, at all. He always had grease stains all over his white collared work shirt. The moments I knew he was always going to be a deli clerk at that supermarket occurred every day when I walked in.

It was no different that day. He said, "Look who's here."

"How's it going, Andy?"

"Pretty good. Pretty good."

"Cool."

"How are you doing?"

"Alright."

"Guess what," he said.

I didn't answer him. Either he was going to say he bought some new DVD or he was going to tell me gossip about work or maybe he would tell me that he was planning a trip out of town. There was never anything out of the ordinary.

"Guess what," he said again.

"Who are we working with today?" I asked.

“Sophia.”

“Nice.”

It was a slow day, so I went over to the cheese slicer. I took an open loaf of Colby Jack and placed it on the slicer and switched the dial to automatic. Andy watched me. Slices of cheese started coming out, and I tried to pick them up as fast as I could to put them in a stack. The stack began to get tall and fall over so I started a new stack. Mike the manager trainee was walking towards the deli.

“Here comes Mike,” said Andy.

“Yeah,” I said. “I see.”

Mike the manger trainee smiled mechanical quickly as he came over and then his mechanical smile was gone.

“Make sure you shave before you come in to work, Tom,” he said.

“I did,” I said.

“Really?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. I hadn’t shaved but I didn’t want to concede.

“Well, it doesn’t look like it,” he said.

“It’s just a mid-day shadow,” I said.

“Well, make sure you shave before work from now on,” he said.

“Okay.”

“Andy,” he said.

“Mike,” said Andy.

Mike walked away. I shrugged at Andy. Andy did this laugh grunt where you could see all his poop yellow teeth. I exhaled a laugh.

Sophia came in at 3:05, and stood in the back talking on her phone for a few minutes. When she came out I told said hello and told them I was going on break.

I went outside and walked around the corner of the store to a bench that was nestled between some overgrown vines. I looked out over the fence at New Route 8. Cars were going by. I smoked three cigarettes.

I went back inside and bought a small bag of carrots. I ate half the bag in the break room and then my break was over. I clocked in and walked back to the deli. Andy went on break when I returned.

“Hurry up,” I said to him, “You don’t want to be late for break.”

He ground his teeth in some kind of smile.

I rolled my eyebrows.

“He doesn’t even do anything on break,” I told Sophia. “He just sits in his car with the radio on.”

"I know," said Sophia.

"It's the same at the end of his shift," I said. "He rushes out of here ten minutes early, but he goes home and sits on his ass not doing shit. He has no life."

"You don't have to tell me," said Sophia.

"Anyways, how's it going?" I asked.

"I'm good," she said. "I am happy to be here."

She wasn't happy to be there. I wasn't, either.

I let the slow hum of the slicer automatic soothe me as it went back and forth and back and forth.

Sophia had measured the previous stacks into pounds and wrapped them.

Sophia was younger and better looking than a lot of the deli women. She wore a lot of makeup, though—I wondered if she would end up looking like them.

"Are you closing?" she asked.

"No, I am only here till 9. You're alone for an hour."

"I fucking hate this job."

I hummed a quick steady flat note, to show my support.

A girl from up front – Karly – come over towards the deli.

“God, I hate this bitch,” said Sophia.

Karly was a dream of mine, a dream I have already explained, but she was hated by many of the female staff, for her holier-than-thou vibes she projected, or at least they thought she did.

“Hi, Sophia!”

“Hey, Karly.”

“How are you?”

“I’m okay. What can I do for you?”

“Oh, nothing. I am on break. Just decided to do a round around the store.”

“Oh.”

I pretended like I was concentrating on the cheese. I had been into Karly for a while, and Sophia, but I didn’t have anything to say, or at least not anything that I was going to say.

“How are you, Tom?”

“Hey, Karly.”

She smiled and continued her walk around the store.

“Fucking conceited cunt,” said Sophia.

“What do you mean?” I said, laughing.

“She’s a slut.”

“Hold on, isn’t she actually really into abstinence and shit—all that waiting till marriage crap?”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. She is into that goodie-two-shoes Jesus shit, but she struts around like a fucking whore.”

I didn’t really have anything else to say so I just smiled and raised my eyebrows.

“Shit, and here comes Andy, that fucking idiot,” she said, and I noticed he was walking back from break.

“Yeah.”

“Like what the hell am I doing here?” she asked me.

I couldn’t tell her.

When Andy got back, we all did our little jobs in order to appear as if we were busy. Management never likes if the workers appear to have free time on their hands.

Sophia’s boyfriend walked in the store’s sliding automatic front doors. He was coming to get her for break. He had on a backwards hat and a shirt with a popped collar.

"Hey," he said, as he approached the counter.

"Hey, baby," she said.

"You going on break soon?"

"Yeah, I'll go now," she said. She turned to me, and Andy, and said, "I'm going on break now."

As she walked away, I asked Andy what he thought of her boyfriend. Jake was his name, I think.

"He seems like he wants to be a tough guy," said Andy.

"Yeah," I said.

"I hate this place," I told Andy.

He nodded. He agreed.

I liked the cheeseburger I had at dinner the second night as much as the one I ate that day for lunch. It was the highlight of my evening, I think. I still didn't care to talk to any of the other patients, but none of them were really too talkative anyways. The dining room was mostly silent except for a couple conversations that were uncomfortably staggering along.

They had the TV room open after dinner and I sat in there and stared at it. Some people couldn't watch it because it made them too anxious. When these people wandered into the TV room there would always be a nurse in their shadow. I wasn't one of those people.

A baseball game was playing. I sat on the couch.

A lady with black hair entered the room. She sat down in a chair that was facing the side of the TV. She couldn't even see much of the screen but she sat there and stared at the TV, anyways.

"My daughter plays basketball," she said.

"Oh yeah?" I didn't want to talk to her.

"Yeah, she's really good, too."

I grunted.

"Do you play sports?"

"I did."

"Basketball?"

"I did."

"Baseball?"

"I did."

"Football?"

“No.”

I had been a long-distance runner in high school—that was my main athletic endeavor. I was average and never was able to push myself hard enough. I remained on the outskirts of varsity during my four years on the team. She wasn’t going to mention cross-country or track and field, though. She was only vaguely aware that those sports even existed.

My baseball career had been fairly promising, but it fizzled out after I got beamed in the head. When I woke up, I wasn’t as confident at the plate. When I quit, no one was surprised. If I had never lost my confidence, perhaps I would have been telling her how I played baseball, and she would be impressed, or perhaps I wouldn’t even be sitting on that couch talking to her, because I would have been a different person.

“My daughter is jock,” the lady was saying. “Hopefully she will be able to get a scholarship to college for sports.”

“That’s always a good thing to have happen,” I said.

The lady nodded three times.

I returned my gaze to the game. She returned her gaze to the side of the TV.

The Pirates were playing the Mets. I didn't know any of the players. Ten years earlier, I would have known the names of almost every player on the field.

I got up and clicked the channel button that had an upwards pointed arrow. I pushed it several times until I got to CNN.

CNN was discussing the war in Iraq. I had forgotten that there was a war on.

The lady left during a commercial break.

I sat drawing striped snakes in a moleskin notepad they had given me that day. They said I should write down my thoughts. I kept drawing snakes that were in lines, one snake eating the next. I didn't know what it meant, but it soothed me.

Mrs. Richardson entered the TV room. She had a guy who was about my age with her.

"Hi, Tom," she said.

"Hi."

"This is Dale. He's going to be your roommate."

"Hi," I said.

"Oh, hey," he said. He had long black hair and he was pale.

He sat down on the couch next to me. Mrs. Richardson stood near the door.

"The TV is fucked," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He pointed at it. He was referring to the blue-green tint that had infected the corner of the screen.

"Oh," I said.

"The magnetism is all wrong on it," he said. "The magnetism is fucked up."

"Huh."

Mrs. Richardson stood smiling at the door. I turned and stared at her.

"Lights out in fifteen minutes," she said.

"Okay."

She left and I returned to staring at the TV. Wolf Blitzer was saying things.

Dale bit his nails and looked at the floor tiles. He had scars on one of his wrists. The other wrist had a bandages taped on it.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"Oh, I was just having fun," he said.

I nodded.

He looked ready to pass out at any second, but when we went to our room a few minutes later he sat up cross-legged in bed.

“Is it okay if I turn off the lights?”

He breathed and said, “Sure.”

He sat there for a while and I lied there staring the ceiling, even though I couldn't see it in the dark.

When I woke up the next morning, Dale was still sitting cross-legged, with the same sedated stare.

He was the first one to go to breakfast. I saw him on my way to the dining room. He was holding a small carton of milk.

“Did you eat already?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “I got this, though.” He raised the milk that was in his hand.

“Well, I'll see you later,” I said.

He raised his milk again.

After breakfast I took a shower, and they had let me change out of the treaded hospital socks and hospital gown into my original outfit that I had entered the ward in.

My parents came to visit me that afternoon. I didn't come out to say hello. I sat in my room. The nurse led them inside.

"Hi, Tom," said Mom. She gave me a hug.

"Hi."

"Tom."

"Hey."

Dad looked around the room. Dale was sitting on his bed. He locked eyes with Dad and then he got up and walked out of the room.

We talked about football and politics and their jobs. We talked about everything other than the fact that we were in a mental ward.

A nurse came in and told us that Doctor Rodriguez would see us all.

"I thought she wasn't here on the weekends," I said.

"She usually isn't," said the nurse, "But she came in today."

We made our way to the office closet.

"Hello!" said Doctor Rodriguez when she walked in. She introduced herself and my mom introduced them, and they all shook hands.

“So how have you been, Tom?” said Doctor Rodriguez.

“Fine.”

“I was glad I was able to make it into today, so that I could meet your parents.”

“Oh.”

“Are you glad to see them?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. I guess.”

“How are you folks doing?” she asked them.

“Oh, we’re trying to remain positive,” said Mom.

Dad nodded.

“How about you?” she asked him.

“Oh, this is a mess. I mean, right?”

“Not necessarily,” said Doctor Rodriguez.

“Well, we have his grandmother. She is his mother’s mother. She is just like this. Out of her mind, and a vegetable basically. Now it’s happening again.”

Doctor Rodriguez nodded and looked intently at him through those glass lenses. I wanted her to challenge him, but she was trained to never pass judgment, except in the form of writing prescriptions and making diagnoses.

“How does that make you feel?” she asked me.

“Whatever. I mean, whatever.”

Dad sighed. Mom sat trying to smile but looking like she might cry.

“Can I leave?” I asked.

Doctor Rodriguez looked down at me, such that her eyes overlooked the lenses. I had never seen eyes before. “Well, Tom, like I said yesterday, I think you need some more time.”

“No.”

“Well, I’m sorry you feel that way, but—“

“No, I mean, can I leave this room?”

“Well, sure Tom. But—“

I got up and left. Fuck them, I thought.

They came to my room four minutes later. I said goodbye. I hugged Mom while Dad stood by the door. They left me a grocery bag of clothes.

I wasn’t allowed outside that afternoon. I was glad that Saturday was almost over. It was the weekend, but it didn’t feel like the weekend. Every day felt the same.

I went with Mom to see Grandma in the nursing home. I had been out to a party the night before, and it was my day off, but Mom really wanted me to, and I decided it was best to go see Grandma while I still could.

She had been in assisted living, but her money ran out, so she was in the budget ward, sharing a room with another lady.

We entered her room and the lady had the bed by the door.

"Hi Judith," said Mom.

"Who are you?" said Judith.

"We're friends of Mary's."

"Who is Mary?"

Mom walked past Judith to the other side of the curtain.

"Hi, Mom," she said.

"Why hello!" said Grandma. "Look who's here."

"Hi, Grandma," I said.

"Hello, Brandon."

"Um..."

Mom cleared her throat. "No, Mom, this is Tom."

"Oh, of course. I knew that."

We all smiled.

We got her in her wheelchair and rolled her down the hall to the visiting lounge. There was a window and outside the window there was a small courtyard.

"Have you been enjoying the food?" asked Mom.

Grandma smiled at her.

"Mom?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Are you enjoying the food?"

"Oh, sure. They cook us something nice every now and then." She winked at me.

"Did you take a bath yet?" asked Mom.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing."

"My daughter's husband came around earlier," said Grandma.

"I know," said Mom. "I'm you're daughter."

"Oh, of course. I know that."

Mom suggested we sing some hymns. I wasn't really into it, but she had brought along the Presbyterian hymnal, so we sang from it. Grandma didn't even have to look at the lyrics. She remembered them all by heart.

After a couple songs, Grandma began to cough.

“Are you okay, Grandma?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. I’m fine. I’ve always had allergies in this home, ever since I was a little girl.”

I looked at Mom. She looked like she could cry.

“Hmm...Look at those flowers outside,” said Mom. I knew she was frantically trying to save the conversation. “They sure are beautiful,” she said.

“Yes, they are,” said Grandma.

I looked out at the window at the courtyard where there were five pots filled with some half-dead, half-alive flowers.

I entered the house and some people looked over at me and I didn’t know them but I knew the owner of the apartment but I didn’t see him.

“Is Manuel here?” I asked.

“He’s upstairs,” someone said.

I walked into the kitchen. I saw Nita making drinks by the sink. She was standing with a guy and a girl I recognized but didn’t remember.

“Hey.”

“Hey, Tom. You remember Pat and Patti?”

“Hey.”

“Good to see you again,” said Pat.

Patti smiled.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“It’s early” said Nita.

“It’s eleven,” I said.

“Exactly, no parties start until midnight, dumbie.”

“Oh.”

It felt as if parties were getting later in the start times every year. People didn’t really go to parties to get drunk anymore. People got drunk and went to parties.

“I have to run to the store and get some limes,” said Nita. “Here you drink this.” She handed me her drink.

I nodded to Pat and Patti and went upstairs. Tony was sitting in his room with a CD case that had a couple small piles of coke on top of it. Jack was sitting on his couch.

“What are you guys up to?” I asked.

"What do you think," he said.

"Good point."

"You can share some of mine," he said, "But you have to throw down."

"How much?"

"How much do you want?"

"A gram, I guess."

"Um, then 50."

I pulled out two twenties. "I'll owe you ten," I said.

He rolled his eyes, but started cutting lines.

"How long have you been here?" I asked Jack.

"I dunno."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I dunno, man."

"What do you have dementia or amnesia or something?"

Tony laughed and said, "I think he's been here for a couple hours."

I nodded.

Tony motioned me over towards the table, where there were six lines.

“Those two are mine,” he said, pointing to two lines at one end. They were all the same size. I snorted the two in the middle. I rubbed the leftovers on my gums. There was a little leftover and I put it on the end of a cigarette.

“That shit’s gonna smell like crack,” said Jack.

“Whatever,” I said. He just wanted to do his two lines. He didn’t give a shit about my cigarette smelling like crack.

I lied back on the bed and exhaled. I felt light.

“We should go downstairs and associate,” said Tony, after they had each done their lines.

I finished my cigarette and followed them downstairs.

Pat and Patti were standing in the kitchen still. Molly was here now, with Nita, talking to them. I didn’t make eye contact with any of them. I went into the living room.

Tony and Jack were standing talking to some people I didn’t know. I got a Corona out of a box on the ground. I sat down on a couch. There was some guy with long mangled hair sitting next to me.

“This isn’t yours is it?” I asked, holding up my Corona.

“Nope,” he said.

“Sweet.” I raised my beer in cheers, and he did the same.

We sat there in silence for ten minutes. There was a small group of girls dancing. Jack and Tony were talking to people. I looked at my watch and figured I should get back up and mingle.

Molly was in the kitchen and I felt she didn't really care to see me, mostly because I hadn't cared to see her for a week or so. I had ignored her, and that pissed her off. I went in anyways. Nita looked over in my direction and raised her eyebrow slightly. I smiled.

Pat was talking about the election that was a year and a half away.

"I mean, we just have to get the Republicans out of the White House. Hillary or Obama or Edwards or any of these people might not be the best, but they're better than having another Republican. It is time to get them out."

"I don't know if agree with that," said Nita. "I think that there isn't much difference either way. Sure, they might be preferable to what we have now, but it would just be buying into the same system."

"So what are you, a Marxist or an anarchist or something?" said Pat. "There's no way that you can avoid the problems, least of all through joining up with one of these freelance independent types of parties. Radicalism never saved anyone."

"But what does radicalism actually mean, though?" said Patti.

I leaned on the counter and stared at them all. I remember being in high school, when I would go to the library and check out *The Communist Manifesto* and *The Society of the Spectacle* and other left-wing books. I had had ideals. I had wanted to make radical change. I thought I could maybe work in politics some day. Now, all I really wanted was to go back upstairs and do another line.

Molly wasn't interested in the conversation either, but she also wasn't interested in talking to me. I guess I had pushed her away. She went into the living room and I went out on the patio.

There was a stash of leftover burgers in Dale's bedside table drawer. I noticed it one day when I returned from breakfast and saw him taking one from his drawer.

"Where'd you get all those?" I asked.

"They're mine," he said. "They're my emergency stash."

I had never really eaten cold or lukewarm burgers.

"How do they taste?" I asked.

“Delicious,” he said, and he said it with such certainty that I didn’t dare intrude any further.

Music was audible from his headphones. I could barely hear it, but I wondered how he could hear me.

“What are you listening to?”

“Drowning Pool,” he said.

“Drowning Pool...they did that ‘let the bodies hit the floor’ song, right?”

“Let the bodies hit the floor,” he whispered.

I smiled and nodded. “What else do you have on there?”

He handed me the discman.

It was mostly nu-metal, but there was the Sublime song “What I Got” near the end of the mix.

“I used to listen to this song a lot,” I said.

“Turn it up,” he said.

Brad Nowell’s vocals came out muffled but audible. We each stared nodding our heads.

We each began mumbling the lyrics, forgetting most of them, but when it came to word “riot” we both screamed it out.

We each sang the guitar solo.

The nurses came and stood outside our door. They smiled at us like we were crazy.

Dale and I sat there talking about the landscape. He wanted to be an artist, and he had been drawing the landscape outside the window.

I told him it was like what Van Gogh did, except Van Gogh had a fucking view.

“The view is what you make it,” he said. “It is what it is.”

I thought that sounded like a contradiction, but I didn’t get a chance to say it because there was a man in pajamas standing lurking outside our door.

I turned to him.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hey,” I said.

“What music were you guys listening to?” he asked.

“Sublime,” I said.

“I’ve never heard of them.”

“They’re fairly recent,” I said.

He nodded. Dale was drawing on his notepad, and didn’t seem interested in this man.

“I teach music history,” said the guy.

"Oh yeah? Where?"

"At the college."

"Oh, you're a professor?"

"Yes. I am a professor."

I nodded and tried to think of a way to end the conversation.

I heard the pay phone ringing. The professor turned around and walked to the other side of the hall to answer it.

"Hello?"

"No, they're not here," he said.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"It was for Tom," he said.

"I'm Tom, man."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Sorry."

I shook my head and went over to the nurses' station. I asked the nurse if I could have a quarter to use the phone. She asked whom I was going to be calling. I told her I didn't know.

“I couldn’t find that book anywhere. It wasn’t in Barnes and Nobles or Border’s.”

Jack looked at me and shook his head. “Just buy it online, dude,” he said.

“It’s not that,” I said. “It’s just why the hell are there no other bookstores in this town.”

“The colleges have bookstores,” said Nita.

“True,” I said, “But they cater to students. I’m not a student.”

They stared at me. They were pissed that I was drawing out the conversation so long.

“It’s not a big deal,” I said.

Jack put out his cigarette and returned inside.

Nita and I stood there talking.

It was the beginning of April, but it was cold out, and there were no stars in the sky.

“How is work?” I asked Nita. She worked at a boutique.

“Pretty well,” she said. “I think I want to go back to school, soon, though.”

“I don’t really know about that,” I said. “I can’t really understand what the point is...it seems retarded.”

“To get a job.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Her eyes were clear and innocent, although I knew she wasn’t. She looked over me. I looked up at the clouds. She looked up at the clouds.

When we went back inside, there weren’t many people left. I had a headache. I had shared some of my coke with other people, but I had still done a lot, but that was earlier, and it was starting to wear off.

I could tell Jack and Tony were thinking the same thing.

“Yeah, man,” said Jack, when Tony asked if wanted more coke.

I shrugged.

“Alright, well we are going to go get some,” said Tony. “You want to throw down?”

I realized he was saying I had to throw down, because I owed him ten dollars.

“Sure,” I said. “I have to go to an ATM, though.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Okay, you owe me, though, dude. Don’t forget.”

“Okay.”

He and Jack left. There were four people in the living room. Nita and I sat down on a couple table chairs by the kitchen. They didn’t seem to notice us too much.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

“Not too much.”

She lit a cigarette.

“Do you think there will be anything else eventful tonight?” I asked.

“No,” she said.

I kept wondering who’s call I had missed, but eventually I stopped wondering. I could see outside my window. The sky was blue and the grass was green.

There were these two ladies, one of whom I have already told you about—the one with the curly black hair. The other lady also had curly black hair, and they were friends, and they wanted their cosmetic products. But the nurses wouldn’t let them into the closet, which was a room that they kept all our

belongings. They kept arguing about with the nurses, and the nurses didn't give in, so the ladies did speed walking laps around the ward.

The professor got into an argument with the nurses. He kept asking them why them why he was there.

"Why do I have to take these pills?" he asked. "Why am I here?"

"You're here because you weren't taking your pills," the nurse said.

The professor also was convinced that his roommate was stealing his pants. In reality, the professor's pants were in the closet. He wasn't allowed pants. But he thought his roommate, a skinny little middle-age guy who never talked, was the culprit.

At lunch, the professor was muttering threats across the 20 x 25 foot dining room to the guy. The guy just sat there with his head down. A male nurse stood by the door smiling, looking ready to beat the professor up.

After lunch I wandered the halls. I walked towards the exit door at the southern end of the ward. It had a padlock and there was a sign on it that read "NO ELOPEMENT."

I stared at it, and wondered it was referencing sex.

A doctor I had never seen before was coming towards me. He stood by me. He looked at me and then he looked at the door.

“What does that sign mean?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?” he asked me.

“Does it have to do with sex?” I asked.

His face contorted.

“Well?” I asked.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

He motioned to the male nurse. The nurse came and led me away and the doctor exited the ward.

I sat in my room trying to read a book. It was *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Freud. Dale had lent it to me. I had flipped to a middle chapter where Freud was discussing the id, ego, and superego. I kept staring at the same page for an hour. I wasn’t even reading the words.

I heard screams from the room next door. A quiet old black man lived in that room. I went out into the hall to see what was going on.

The old man was lying on the ground with wet eyes. A nurse tried to help him back into his wheelchair.

“Get away,” he shouted.

He slapped her wrist.

"I can do it myself," he screamed.

The nurse retreated into her nurses' station and picked up a phone and dialed something. The old man was flailing on the ground like a beached shark that hadn't eaten any food in days.

Three male nurses rushed up to the old man and picked him up. They placed him on his wheelchair, strapped his arms down, took him into his room, came out, and locked the door behind them.

The old man's screams were still audible.

Dale went back into our room. I stared at the old man's room, with its shut door.

The nurse who had tried to help the old man up was being consoled by the others nurses.

The professor walked over to me.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, "But how did he end up on the ground?"

"He fell, and the lady tried to help him, and he freaked out."

"Wow."

"Now they've turned the water off," said the professor.

"What do you mean?"

“They turned off the water in our rooms and in the water fountains.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

I walked down the hall to the water fountain and nothing came out.

“What the hell,” I said.

“Yeah,” said the professor, “Some of us have been talking. Things need to change around here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, we are going to take matters into our own hands.”

I smiled mechanical at him. His eyes were wide and bugged out.

“Well, I’m gonna get back to my book,” I said.

“What’s the name of it?” he asked.

“I don’t remember,” I said.

I went inside and closed the door most of the way. I went and sat on my bed. I could see his shadow at the bottom of the door. It stayed there for a few minutes until he walked away.

Nita and I were the only ones left at the party.

"I wonder where Tony and Jack are," I said.

"Probably at the dealer's place doing lines," said Nita.

"You think so?"

"Yes."

"Well, I should probably head home," I said. I didn't get up.

"Stay a bit," she said.

She leaned her head on my shoulder. I brushed my hand through her hair.

She looked up at me. I gave her a big wet drunken kiss and she retreated her head a bit and licked and bit her lips. She gave me a soft kiss and we started making out. She retreated her head again and locked eyes with me, and then she gave me a quick kiss.

"We should leave," I said.

She nodded. She was very drunk, blood shot eyes and all. I was very drunk too, and I only noticed that detail, and not its meaning.

"I can't drive," I said.

"I'll drive," she said.

I made a surprised face and shrugged. We got in her car.

“Where is your place?” she asked.

“North Hill, off of North Main Street,” I said. “You didn’t know that?”

She didn’t answer me.

When we got to my apartment I opened the door, and right after I closed it I took her and started making out again. I took off her shirt and started licking her neck and breasts.

We ended up on my bed. I fingered her but she wasn’t getting wet, so I went down and gave her head.

“Do you have condoms?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter.”

In my mind, I shrugged.

“You’re on the pill, though, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she whispered.

She got on top of me and massaged my dick up and down until it got hard. She started moving in towards her vagina. She put it in but I wiggled and it came out. She put it back in and it stayed and we fucked for however long—I don’t know exactly—but it went on for longer than it usually did when I was drunk.

The screams from down the hall echoed into my room and around my head until I opened my eyes.

“Give me my pants back!” the professor was yelling.

I put on socks and walked into the hallway. The professor was shoving his roommate, the little guy, against a wall repeatedly. He kept screaming about his pants. The little guy didn’t say anything.

A swarm of nurses converged on the scene. The professor stopped and turned around, surveying his odds. He tried to make a break for it but they had him surrounded. As several of the male nurses held him, Mrs. Richardson came over and injected something into the professor’s arm. He went limp.

Mrs. Richardson yelled, “Get back to bed,” at all of us that had come out of our rooms.

The next morning, the professor wasn’t at breakfast. His roommate was there, and he had a band-aid on his forehead.

The water was turned back on after being shut down for almost a full day.

The professor did show up to lunch. Usually, he was talkative, one of the most talkative, talking to people who weren't even talking back. Bu that day, he sat there is silence, with a dead look in his eyes.

After lunch, I did my daily wandering of the ward's four hallways. I saw that there was a new patient moving in to one of the rooms.

I walked by the room. I could only see the back but I knew it was a girl from the hair and the build. There was something familiar about her physique. I stared at her butt.

She turned around. For a split-second, I thought it was Nita. It wasn't, though. This girl had hair was that highlighted, and the bone structure in her face was more bloated, but it was almost her, its was almost Nita.

I took a few steps back. The girl stared at me. I turned my head and walked away.

I saw her again at group therapy later that afternoon. Her name was Amanda. She sat across from me in the circle. She talked about her problems with anorexia, and how her older brother had raped her at an early age.

"And now he's over in Iraq," said Amanda, "And when he comes home everyone calls him a hero and praises him. No one remembers what he did. We don't talk about it. He's the hero."

She started bawling. One of the women got up and went over and hugged her.

“You’re the hero,” she told Amanda, “Not him.”

Amanda kept on crying.

I thought about how these people had serious problems. They were schizophrenic and anorexic and rape victims. It made me feel bad, like I was intruding.

Afterwards, we did art therapy, which was voluntary. Most days I went back to my room, but that day I decided to stay. Only Dale, Amanda, and a couple others stayed. The activity was karaoke.

I was shy so I sat there and didn’t get up. They were playing “Waterfalls” by TLC.

Dale asked for the mic. He started singing the words, but in a deep, raspy death metal type of voice.

“Don’t go chasing waterfalls,” he mumbled loudly.

I started laughing. I looked over at Amanda and she was laughing too.

After I had sex with Nita, I hoped that it would progress into something more.

I didn't call her but I kept messaging her on AIM. Her icon was sometimes green but then it would go idle with its yellow and a message saying, "NitaRXtheHOUSE88 is away from the computer."

It wasn't until the second night after that I finally got a reply. It said she was going to call me and asked what time was good. I had skipped work that day so I said whenever.

I waited with my flip phone on top of the chair by my bed. I stared at it, waiting for it to vibrate. It vibrated.

"Hi, Tom," she said.

"Hey, how are you?"

"I'm good. I think we need to talk."

"Okay."

"I told Tony about what we did."

"What?"

"I had to tell him. I had to."

"Why?"

"Because of I love him."

"I love you."

"We don't even really know each other. You're good friends with Tony.

That is how I know you."

"I want you."

"Tom, you need to stop. I am about to hang up."

"Why did you fucking tell him?"

"I told you, because—"

"You have to give me a real answer."

"Tom, this is over. I have told you everything."

"I already knew everything. But you told Tony everything."

"Sorry."

"Whatever."

I breathed into the phone.

"Tom?"

I breathed again and then took my head away from the phone and flipped it closed. It snapped and I put it on the chair again.

My brain was fried. I had had hopes with Nita but they were gone. I was gone.

I went into work the next day, thinking it would keep my mind off of Nita. It didn't. It was a Sunday and it was very busy. There was a crowd of over

30 people on the other side of the counter, waiting for me to cut their meat. I kept thinking I would see someone I knew, someone who also knew Tony and or Nita and or just someone who had heard about me fucking my best friend's girlfriend.

I went on break once the crowd died down. I got in my car and drove away. I didn't think I would go back.

Doctor Rodriguez was sitting across from me with those eyes and those eyeglasses.

"I have some news, Tom," she said.

I raised my eyebrows and tilted forward. "What?" I thought. "Get on with it."

"We are going to let you leave tomorrow," she said.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes. There is only one condition."

"What?"

"That you go home with your parents."

I had rejected this plan earlier in the week. Now it had been a week and I realized it was my only choice.

“Okay,” I said. “That’s fine.”

I told Dale afterwards and he said, “Congratulations” in one of the least congratulatory voices I had ever heard.

He informed me that he was leaving that day, too, except he wasn’t leaving the hospital. He was just going to a different ward.

“They’ll have better food,” he said.

“We should stay in touch,” I said.

“Yeah, man,” he said.

He wrote down the URL for his Myspace. I took it and said I would add him. I forgot that I didn’t use Myspace anymore. I had deleted my account the week before.

I deleted all my social media accounts, and lied on the couch of my apartment. I didn’t want to know anyone that I knew, not if that would have to know me as the person I was.

I went to the liquor store and bought a case of vodka. I went to my dealer's apartment and bought some coke, valium, oxycodone, mushrooms, and acid. I was about to leave when I realized I had forgotten to buy pot.

I had spent half the money in my bank account, and it wasn't like there was going to be a cash injection, because I planned to take as long as I wanted off of work.

I was drunk and high for every day for 6 days straight. On the seventh day, I woke up and drank a cup of tea. As I smoked my first cigarette of the day, I looked outside. There wasn't a yard outside my window. There were just a bunch of overgrown weeds and some trash.

I decided to go to my parents' house. I couldn't find my car keys, so I decided to just take the bus. I rode along Old Route 8 north towards the Falls.

We went over the Woodridge Bridge. I had read in the paper how the Ohio state government had used some of its first federal stimulus money to build a bigger fence along that bridge. Too many people had jumped off of it.

I remembered one time at work, people had told me how one person was getting ready to jump off the bridge but couldn't decide. Police came and shut down all traffic. People started getting out of their cars and yelling for the person to jump. They honked their horns and screamed at the person to just get it over

with. The police ended up getting the person to come down safely. Investigations were ongoing into the people who had shouted for the person to jump.

I got off the bus at Broad Street. I walked down the hill a few blocks to the house I had grown up in. The key was in its normal place, inside the garage's exterior lamp.

I turned on the TV and skimmed through the channels. There was nothing. I went upstairs and opened the medicine cabinet. I saw there was some vicodin left from when Dad had had surgery to remove cancer a few months before.

I took the bottle of pills downstairs. There was some orange juice on top of the freezer. I got out my flask and made a screwdriver. I swallowed the 8 pills that were in the bottle.

I remember sitting back down in front of the TV, trying to find a channel and then I blacked out and the next thing I remember is waking up in the emergency room after getting my stomach pumped.

Amanda came over and kissed me on the cheeks as I was leaving the ward with my parents. I hadn't really talked to her, but she seemed in a lighter mood than she had been the previous days.

The two crazy ladies with black hair were still complaining about their cosmetic products.

The old black man was sitting in his wheelchair again, and there wasn't any animation to his eyes anymore.

"I never said thank you," I said to Mom, as we walked into the parking lot.

"For what?" she asked.

"For finding me that day. For calling 911."

"Oh, you know there is no need to thank me."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You don't need to apologize," she said.

"We are just glad you are better," said Dad.

I looked out the window of the car at the wooden fence along the road.

"I, um," I said. "I, um, I don't know what I was going to say."

When we moved my grandma to the assisted living for the first time, she kept making jokes and being sarcastic, which wasn't her nature. She was usually very sincere and serious.

"I've decided to just laugh at this whole thing," she told us. "That's my way of making it through it."

At the time, we all thought it was just her being demented, but these days I don't know if I would agree with that opinion.

As I walked into the house with Mom and Dad, I felt relieved, renewed, knowingly and happily a walking cliché, eager for my second chance at life.

It was not long before a long wave of melancholy came to me. I felt pathetically contained in my old room at my parents' house, while my sisters were off in different states living what one could consider the normalcy of adult lives. It was as if I had to go back in life, almost like learning to walk again.

I walked outside one day late that spring and lit a cigarette and walked down the boulevard to the local elementary school that I had attended. A class was out for recess. Several girls and a boy sat atop a jungle gym talking. The

rest of the class was on the pavement courts preparing a kick ball game. I remembered that my friends and I had once stood on those same courts and said someday we would start the first professional kick ball league. I watched as the two captains gleefully chose who would be on their team. Each child would smile with unearned pride or frown with unearned disgust depending on whether they liked the team that had chosen them.

The Julia Page

We were sitting in the living room smoking pot, burning incense, smoking cigarettes, burning more incense, drinking vodka, playing guitar and keyboard, playing *World Cup Soccer 2008* on Playstation 2, and waiting to go out, as we trembled at the thought of how rare the possibility was that something might happen that had never happened to us before, something that wasn't as abstract as the word "something," and which would deliver us from the monotony that had become getting fucked up and going out, to wherever was out there, where we would get more fucked up, our heads becoming deformed and then euthanized, and that's not to say that was our only course of action, but it was the course we had chosen in light of the other options, such as a family movie night, or *World of Warcraft*, or a night out bowling with the post-teen Christian fellowship group, or suicide.

I had been out of the mental ward for almost six months.

My goal was to return to college down in Athens, finish my two and a half years, and move to anywhere.

The windows were closed but we shivered, breathing the dead, awkward

air.

Dan was passing a bowl around the couches. There were three couches in Dan's mom's living room.

Dan was sitting on a bongo while the rest of us each had our own couch.

"We should just roll a J," said Tony.

Miguel shrugged. I didn't move.

"That would be chill," said Dan. "I think Sean and Luke might come over," he said, checking his phone.

"I would throw down," said Tony, "But I don't have enough to make a fat enough J."

He looked around at the rest of us.

Miguel and Dan said they were out. One of them said they would call to get some. Tony was a dealer but he didn't have his stash with him. He had been pulled over and busted for possession. Now when he went out he carried only enough for himself.

I didn't want to give them any of mine—I was already stoned, plus I wanted to conserve my pot—but I said okay. I got out my bag. I didn't want it to seem like I wasn't their friend. It could have been a D.A.R.E. ad.

I began placing buds on the table. Tony put down three buds, so I only

pulled out three as well. Dan got out his papers and started breaking up the weed.

"Who are Sean and Luke?" I asked.

"You know Luke," said Dan, "Luke Reklawyks."

"Oh, yeah."

"Sean is his friend."

"Oh."

I waited without much anticipation for the arrival of Sean and Luke.

Six minutes later, the doorbell rang.

Luke looked the same, with his American Eagle hoodie and cargo pants, a wavy mat of shit blonde hair on his head.

Sean looked about how I might have expected him to look, if I had expected anything. His hair was cut short, but not buzzed short, and he used hair gel to spike it up. He had on a black t-shirt and blue jeans. The tee shirt had a small, insignificant pocket on the left breast. I kept staring at it, wanting to jump up and rip it off. Between him and Luke there were three superfluous pockets in front of me now.

I began to create a list of possible ways I could exit the apartment without seeming rude:

1.) Pretend to have received a text message, look at my phone, make a confused face, and announce to the group that I had to leave.

2.) Go to the bathroom, and come back and pretend that I didn't feel well, although I realized that one wouldn't strictly speaking even be pretend.

3.) Go to the bathroom and jump out the window (it was only a second-story apartment).

I had gotten to my seventh idea (exit the apartment as I fake a coughing fit, in order to avoid telling them what was wrong, or anything, continue coughing as I leave the building, and then sprint for my car once I got outside) when I heard someone say the name Julia Darrow.

"Yeah," said Sean, "I don't really get her. She still wants to date me but she's such a bitch."

"You're talking about Julia Darrow?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said.

I looked around. Dan had gone to elementary school with me, but he was peeling an orange, and didn't seem to notice anything else.

Sean kept on talking, but I wasn't listening.

All the oldest kids at our elementary school would go to the Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Society (CVEES) every year for one week in the winter.

The reason for the trip was because when my parents were my age, no one cared about the environment, at least around Ohio. The Cuyahoga River was infamous across the country as the river that kept setting itself on fire during the sixties and seventies.

CVEES educated us about how the rivers were all connected, and polluted, and how humanity's survival was dependent upon the survival of the rest of the planet. They made their points more subtly than that, talking about canals, taking us on hikes through the white woods to see these canals, which were physically the same as sanitation systems in rural areas, big tunnel holes in the ground that were formed from mud and rocks.

The camp instructors were mostly 30-something New Age freaks. They all wore park ranger uniforms and seemed to love their jobs. One guy had apparently never gotten over ADD or ADHD or whatever they called it back during his childhood. He would spaz out as he led us in this song "All The Rivers Run" at an almost screaming pitch. We laughed at first, but then it just got weird.

I found it hard to concentrate on the events, even when I was being screamed at. My mind was on Julia Darrow.

She was cute, but not hot. That was kind of why I liked her. I didn't want Samantha Terry, the really hot new girl. Every guy in the class wanted her, and they all had their almost wet fantasizing hands all over her image. I wanted Julia Darrow—comely but with unconventional characteristics, such as her dark red hair, or her athletic talent, in spite of her evident apathy towards it, or her mysterious family background, living on the outskirts of town, a dead mother and a fanatically devoted father, who was the only dad who came to pick up his kid from school, and who was fat, and who talked even less than she did.

I spent most of the time during that week thinking about those things.

We would split into groups to follow one of the instructors on hikes, and when Julia wasn't in my group I would impatiently await the intersections of trails, where I would hope to catch a glimpse of her baby blue jacket (this was in the 90s, before that color became overplayed and cliché).

I remember sitting in my top bunk in the camping lodge, slowly humping the mattress. I didn't really know what I was doing—I was only ten—but I had seen it in the movies, at least the small bits I could catch before my parents told me to leave the room. Wet patches would show up on my underwear. I would

notice in the morning, but was too tired to care, because I hadn't fallen asleep until two hours before. I wondered if it was sweat or pee. Efficient masturbation methods would come a year or so—and a couple more Julia Darrows—later.

That week was the first time that some of the other kids revealed their love interests. Most of the guys wanted Sam Terry, as I had expected from the start. Initially I was intrigued to hear them vocalize it in a really roundabout way, through games of Truth or Dare and other recess excuses for gossip and disclosure, although eventually I became annoyed for the same reason.

It was also almost exclusively guys that announced their likes.

Brian, the most talented basketball player and the presumed prince of our grade, had pronounced his like for Sam Terry, the presumed princess of our grade. Unfortunately, his best friend Kyle had the same crush, and he decided to announce it soon after Brian.

I offered what I considered to be risky hints at my own likes, but everyone was so lost in their dawning pubescent terror, and I doubt that what I considered a big deal even registered as a muted burp to any of them. We were all more concentrated with surviving that week than we were with the survival of the environment and humanity.

They had us play a game every day during free time. It was called

scouting. It was like hide and go seek, except that the seeker had to stand in one place, and the hiders could only hide in a certain area. Most of us hid behind trees, and the goal was to sit still and not be seen. I don't know how any of us lost.

CVVEES was the week that we learned more than ever before about nature, our own nature.

None of us went home that week feeling that we had gotten what we wanted.

We rode home in relative silence, the buses farting smoke like indefinitely delayed diarrhea.

The yards turned green and the sun started to stick around longer.

In the weeks after CVEES, I began writing my first journal. At first, it consisted mostly of inane lists and poems inspired by Will Smith.

Eventually, I dedicated a page in my journal to Julia Darrow. I titled it "The Julia Page." It was actually three and a half pages long. I wrote about my previous attractions, including one to our fourth grade teacher the year before, as well as a detailed history of my thoughts on Julia.

It restated much of what I have said already, but as I saw those thoughts on the page—"The Julia Page"—they ceased their ricocheting around my skull. At that moment, as I looked over the page, they were almost no longer mine. They were just marks with a pen on a page, marks that no one would understand if they were from a different millennium. After all, once I say or write one of my thoughts, it is no longer mine, because it has left the building (the brain).

I kept the journal under my mattress, but I knew it was only a matter of time, in the most literal sense, before I would let someone see it.

I did. I showed it to Nicole Delmedico, who worked the same crossing guard shift as me, and who I considered to be a close, nonsexual friend. I approached her locker, where she was putting on her crossing guard uniform.

"What is this?" she asked.

"It is something I wrote," I said, "I would just like to hear what you think about it."

"Okay..."

She stood there reading it. She didn't make a facial expression the entire time, and this made me nervous. She seemed to be concentrating. I wanted her to smile or frown or raise her eyebrows or grunt a laugh, I didn't care which, but I couldn't stand the blankness. It was like talking to someone and receiving a

voided stare back, as if they didn't even understand what language was being spoken.

When she finished she folded the pages and held them at her side.

"This is crazy," she said, and she placed the pages in her hoodie pocket.

"Give it back," I said.

"No."

"What are you doing?"

I grabbed at her back pocket but she shifted away. I kept trying to reach it, and she kept moving away. Our old second grade teacher Mrs. Black came out her classroom.

"What are you folks doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Nicole, and she began walking away.

I smiled mechanical at Mrs. Black and began walking backwards, before turning around to follow Nicole.

She was outside, telling the two other crossing guards about it as they walked to the four-way stop. I ground my teeth. When I said hello to the other two, it was evident that they knew that I knew that they knew something I didn't want them to know.

I hoped that Nicole wouldn't do anything more with "The Julia Page",

but I also knew that wasn't likely. That would be like a crow flying down and finding a dead human body and not letting any of the other crows know about. There was going to be feast of human flesh, and the crows could already be heard cooing in the hollow morning air. She gave it to Kyle, who shared it with Brian, who shared it with my close friend John.

I sat next to the three of them at the lunch table as they talked about me in the third-person. They were making plans to type it up and print out copies, and then sell those copies. I realized I was faced with a choice: either I could tell on them, and lose their friendships, or I could go along, and lose my dignity. I decided to go along.

John was the only one of them with a computer at his house, and so his parent's dining room became the headquarters for the operation. At first, they seemed surprised with my willingness to help them with the project, but I acted like it didn't matter.

"Are you sure you won't get in trouble?" asked John's mom. We were huddled around his family's computer.

"Yeah," said John. He stopped typing and turned to her briefly. "He's sitting right here. He's fine with it, aren't you, Tom?"

"Yeah, I'm fine with it," I said.

They typed up "The Julie Page" and I also gave them my lists and poems to publish, too. It was agreed that we would charge seven dollars per copy, and would split all the profits 4 ways. I didn't take into account the fact that I was both the author and a partner in their venture, and they didn't, either.

We sold thirteen copies that Monday before the A.M. school bell even rang. Seven dollars a copy. 91 dollars.

I had a feeling that it was selling too fast. I started making restrictions on whom it would be sold to, and, of course, that only helped to spread its popularity.

Word of "The Julia Page" spread across the lunchroom like the plague, and by the time recess came it had terrorized the hill of our playground, infecting even the introverts who sat by the fence under the shade. I should have quarantined myself the moment I put the pen to the page.

Julia Darrow knew about it. I saw her reading it by the jungle gym. I only glanced at her a couple times, but I knew she was gazing at me with dizzy anger. I couldn't think. I was dizzy, too. The worst part was I didn't care. I wrote these things, and there wasn't any slander, and if there was, it was against myself.

I looked over to the other side of the playground and saw Kyle fighting with a guy from our grade named Guy. Apparently, Kyle had refused to sell a

copy to Guy. Now Guy was ripping off Kyle's shirt.

Recess ended, and our gym teacher Mr. Workman came over, and then he grabbed Guy's shirt. I made my way to the lines that were forming for our return to class. Mr. Workman escorted Guy and Kyle into the building.

Our teacher Mr. Bennet came out and opened the doors and we filed inside.

I locked eyes with him, although his spectacles were in the way, which only intensifies the act of locking eyes with another person.

"Mr. Maddox," he said, "Can I have a word?"

I shrugged. He pulled a copy of "The Julia Page" out of his back pocket.

"Can you explain this?"

"No. And I didn't do anything wrong." My voice gained volume.

He raised his eyebrows and shook his head. His face got red and he motioned for me to go to the empty art room across the hall.

A few minutes later, I was joined by John, Kyle, and Brian. Mr. Bennet came in and slammed the door. I imagined what the kids in the other room were thinking. Then I realized that they were all imagining what was going on in this room. Their thoughts were now total speculation on what was happening to me.

Mr. Bennet wiped sweat from his forehead and rolled up his sleeves and

said, "What the hell is this?"

None of us said anything.

"You wrote this Mr. Maddox?"

"I did."

"And you let them sell it?"

"I am selling it, too," I said.

"You guys never thought you were doing anything wrong?"

"We didn't do anything wrong," yelled Kyle.

"How much money did you guys make?"

"About 168 dollars," said John.

"Where is it?"

"Its our money," said Kyle, "We earned it."

"Did you know it is illegal to sell materials on school property without permission?"

"That's not true," said Brian.

"Where is it?"

"It's right here, in my pocket," said Kyle. He pointed to a pocket in his cargo shorts.

Mr. Bennet walked over and ripped the button off the pocket. He put the

money in his shirt pocket.

We were sent to the principal's office. The principal must have gotten sick of seeing us in her office, because she left soon after we arrived and Mr. Bennet sat in her office. He called us in one by one. I was last.

"I see a guy before me with so much potential," said Mr. Bennet, "But you're just wasting it all away. You have no ambition."

"I do," I said. "I don't know. Whatever."

He shook his head. Whatever.

I was glad when the day was over.

I didn't feel any guilt. I felt embarrassed.

We got detention. My parents got called. I got grounded.

I didn't care about getting disciplined, but what I did care about was that the topics in "The Julia Page" were discussed so abstractly and so remotely by the people who were telling me it was wrong. It was as if the problem was immediately evident and there was no need to discuss whether it was a problem, and why. Erections were never discussed. Romance was never discussed. It seemed like the problem was more in their own unwillingness to discuss what had occurred, so that they could remove themselves from any responsibility when years later we became sad and bored and self-destructive, making them

disappointed, but that initial refusal to acknowledge the crux of the problem would assure that their consciences could be clear.

The school year concluded without a climax.

The Columbine shootings took place a week after we got in trouble for “The Julia Page.” I didn’t find out until two days after, because I was so distracted from the fallout from “The Julia Page.” Everyone wondered what could make anyone do that. Theories were postulated, but everyone wanted to just not think about it, to just make sure it didn’t happen in our town. For the next ten years, we would have school shooting drills every month or so. During those drills, we would turn off the classroom lights, sit in the corner, and the principal would speak in code over the loud speakers.

Nicole Delmedico apologized to me for handing over “The Julia Page” to Kyle. She said she had liked him, and had hoped that would make him like her. It hadn’t.

I called Julia nineteen times one day until her father answered. I asked for Julia. He put her on the phone. I asked her if she wanted to go out. She said

okay.

We never went out.

We never really even talked.

I was dating her but nothing happened.

The next fall I didn't talk to her at junior high, either.

She started wearing nicer clothes. She started putting on make-up. I wasn't as drawn to her after that.

One day at lunch someone asked me what had happened with us.

"We broke up," I said.

"Who broke up with who?"

"We just broke up."

"So she broke up with you, right?"

"No."

I looked at her across the lunchroom, but I didn't stare.

I constantly had to find something new to look out, or else my eyes got sore.

Calling Back Home

After he had hugged his brother and sister goodbye, Donnie turned to his mom and said, "I never want to see to you again."

She was staring at him with neither a smile nor a frown. He locked eyes with her. He felt his confidence faltering and looked away.

"Okay," she said, "But if you leave like this you're not going to be allowed to come back here."

"That's fine with me," he said, feeling his boldness returning. The leaves on the tree in front of the house were turning pink with spring. He hadn't noticed. The neighbors were sitting on the porch next door pretending to be unaware of the scene.

"Okay," she said. "Just you so know."

"Yeah, okay."

He walked over to the van that was parked in the driveway. It belonged to his friend Brent, who was letting him crash while he looked for his own place.

“Ok man, I’m ready,” he said. He kept his head down while they pulled out of the driveway. As they drove away he turned back to look at the house, and he saw his mom hugging his younger siblings, one on each side.

When Donnie was in high school, Patti Dipre’s house became the mecca for all his friends’ who knew their parent’s wouldn’t let them to drink or smoke at their houses. She didn’t really want such activity going on in her house, either, but she was often gone working one of her two jobs, making it hard to enforce. She had also been a partier back in her own younger years, and she focused her energies on trying to get him to be, at the very least, smart and responsible about it.

But one day, when she came home from work and found a pound of pot half a foot high lying on the kitchen table, she lost her temper. Smelling pot coming from the basement, she hurried down the stairs. Three of his friends were sitting on the couch dazed out listening to *Dark Side of the Moon*. They didn’t notice her as she reached the bottom of the stairs. She rolled her eyes. She

had never had much tolerance for stoners, even in the craziest days of her youth. She turned off the speakers.

“Where the hell is Donnie?” she demanded. They looked up at her. They were scared but they figured it wasn’t that big a deal. She was Ms. Dipre. She was cool about stuff.

“I don’t know,” one of them said, “He had to go out, I think.”

“Why don’t you do this at one of your places?” she asked. She was a small and quiet woman, but she never took shit from anyone.

They looked at each other, the two guys that hadn’t said a word looked at the one who had, and he looking at them as if he hoped they might chime in.

“Our parents would call the cops,” he said.

“Funny,” she said, “That’s what I think I’m going to do.”

“C’mon Ms. Dipre,” the spokesman of the three said, “We just smoked some new ganj, it’s supposed to be the bomb.”

“Well, you got ripped off,” she said, “Because that smells like swag.”

They looked at each other again, wondering if this was true.

“Didn’t you hear me,” she said, “Get out of my house.”

Once they were gone she went up to the kitchen. There was some fried chicken from the night before left in the fridge and she microwaved it. She

scooped some potato salad onto the plate and pushed aside some of the pot to make room at the table. She lathered the potato salad and fried chicken in hot sauce. After she was done eating she called Donnie's cell phone but he didn't answer.

Her youngest son, Jeff, was in his room doing homework for art class and her daughter, Rachel, was sitting in the living room watching *Tila Tequilla* on MTV. They were a few years younger than Donnie, and they were good students and hardly ever got in trouble, despite the fact that she spent more time and energy parenting Donnie than she did the two of them combined.

Their dog Groucho was laying on the carpet next to her, and their cat King Charles was climbing on the piles of boxes that took up the other half of the living room. The house was filled with boxes. Patti never liked to throw anything away. A loud commercial came on the TV and Groucho stood on his four legs staring at it. He kept staring at the screen as the program returned. King Charles slowly crept towards Groucho, but he wasn't aware of the cat. King Charles began licking Groucho's testicles but Groucho was still staring at the screen and didn't notice.

"Eww," said Rachel when Patti pointed it out to her.

"To be honest," said Patti, "I find it less trashy than this program."

Rachel laughed and said, "Yeah, this is junk. But it's fun to watch."

"Yeah, its pretty entertaining," said Patti.

When the show was over Rachel went up to her room for bed. Patti began cleaning the house. She had gotten off work at the grocery store only a couple hours before and had to be at McDonald's for her job as the morning shift manager in six hours. But relaxation and rest never really interested her, or at least she had a trained immunity to such things. She called Donnie's cell phone again. She was surprised when he picked up after the second ring.

"Hey, mom, how's it going?"

"I'm fine, but where the hell are you, Donnie?"

"I was out playing baseball."

"At 11:30 at night?"

"Um, yeah..."

"Would it shock you if I said I didn't believe you?"

"I guess not. That's up to you, though."

"Where are you?"

"I'm getting a ride home now."

"Okay. I want to talk to you when you get home."

"About what?"

"You know what, Donnie."

"Uh, alright. Okay, I'll be home soon."

It took nearly an hour after the call had ended before he entered the front door. He nodded at her.

"Hey, mom."

"What the hell is this?" she asked, motioning her head towards the table.

"It belongs to a friend. He needed a place to put it."

"I want it out of my house."

"Okay."

"Donnie, I know you've probably started to deal drugs and there's nothing I can do or say to stop you, but you're not going to like it very much when the cops get you."

"I'm not really that into it, mom."

She raised her eyebrows. He caught her eye. She motioned to the table with her head again.

"I just do it to smoke for free. And I only sell to my friends."

"Donnie, you need to get this out of the house right now or I'm going to call the cops."

"Really? You'd do that?"

“You bet.”

“What the fuck?”

“Get it out of here, Donnie,” she said, her small voice growing in volume.

“Okay, okay. Chill out.”

He went into another room. She heard him talking on his phone. She went up to her bed but she couldn't sleep. Someone came into the house and began talking in hushed tones to Donnie. Walking down the staircase to the first floor later, she saw them stuffing the pile of pot into sandwich-size plastic bags. She realized that the situation was worse than she had previously believed, but she knew that no matter what she did he wouldn't listen.

A few weeks later the local DEA knocked down the front door. Her shift at the grocery store deli was only halfway over when she got a call from Donnie. She hadn't tipped off the law, but she was felt relieved as if she had. He needed her to come bail him out. The cops had found several ounces of ecstasy and a laundry list of prescription drugs in his room. When she picked him up from the station the officer on duty said he would receive a letter in the mail regarding his court date.

At his court date came he was given probation and sixty hours of community service that summer.

“Wasn’t this a felony though?” she asked, “Shouldn’t he be required to go to juvy or rehab or treatment or something?”

“Well, he was charged with intent to sell, so I can’t really require him to go to rehabilitation,” said the judge.

“But he’s not a drug king pin, he’s an addict,” she said, noticing Donnie’s glare out of the corner of her eye, “He’s only selling because he needs money to buy more.”

The judge said there was nothing he could do. He gave Donnie a lecture but Patti knew it didn’t make any difference. It felt to her as if no one could help. Her words with the judge were almost a *déjà vu* to the words she had had earlier that year with the school principal, who told her that Donnie had missed over sixty days the entire year, adding that he was failing two of his classes that semester.

“Only two?” she had asked.

“Yes, that’s correct. It’s not looking good, Ms. Dipre.”

“But only two classes he’s failing, that’s it? He’s missed almost half the year so far.”

The principal hadn’t had an explanation. Neither had the government’s child support office the dozens of times over the years she had demanded that

they track down his father and gather the money she was owed. Neither had this judge.

After the sentencing she told Donnie to wait in the hall while she went to the ladies room. She flushed the toilet and washed her hands. Splashing water on her face, she looked in the mirror and noticed a gray hair growing on the left side of her scalp.

Patti had always wanted children, and when she missed her period the week before her twenty-fifth birthday she took it as a blessing. At the time she was dating a man named Don, who upon hearing about her pregnancy almost cried and asked her if they could name the child after him, if it was a boy.

“Of course,” she said.

Don was in the construction business, but more on the management end of the business rather than the manual labor aspects. He wore suits every day, although most days that just meant a sweat suit. Don was from Youngstown, and Patti knew that he was connected with the mob but not part of it. This

didn't really bother her, because her grandfather and uncle were had been members of the Cleveland mafia. What did bother her was when Don didn't turn out to have a lot of balls. He left town later that year amidst the final federal crackdowns of the Cleveland mob in the late 1980s. Patti never heard from him again, and Donald Jr. would never meet his father.

Patti quit smoking and drinking after her son was born. One reason was because she didn't want to set a bad example, but a deeper reason was that she no longer felt the need to fill those desires. As she held Donnie in her arms in the maternity ward, she felt that nothing else in the world could equally capture her devotion.

Years later Donnie asked her if his father had been a gangster. She had told him, in so many words, yes. He told her that he would kill his father if he ever found him. It was obvious to her that Donnie wasn't a killer. He had already started using drugs, overdosing once up to that point. But he still had the smile sometimes of an innocent baby who really could never hurt anyone, except for himself as he crawled across the floor or whatever the equivalents were for teenage boys. When he smiled that smile Patti was glad that she had gotten him all to herself.

On his last day of high school Donnie was sitting at Taco Bell with his friends Chris and Brent. Most of his friends he had been in school with since kindergarten had already been away at college for a year. Brent had always been a grade below him but now they were graduating at the same time. Chris was several years older than both of them and had dropped out of school the day he turned sixteen.

“You guys should celebrate,” said Chris, “Graduating high school and all, you know.”

Donnie and Brent shrugged their shoulders.

“I mean, I also want to try that new bud we got,” said Chris.

Donnie and Brent grinned and nodded their heads in agreement.

“You guys want to roll up a few blunts and go for a cruise?” asked Donnie.

“Hell yeah,” said Brent.

Several hours later they were on their third blunt and well outside of town, rolling along a two-lane highway past endless fields. Donnie realized he had no idea where they were driving.

“Yo, where the fuck are we guys?”

“I don’t know, man,” said Brent.

“I think I could live out here,” said Chris.

“What?” asked Donnie.

“You know, in the country,” he replied, “It seems really chill.”

“Yeah, maybe. You’d probably get bored though.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t need most of the shit I put up with.”

“Yeah, but out here it’d be the same just different. You’d get annoyed with harvesting crops or milking cows or cleaning up chicken shit or whatever.”

“No, I would love that shit.”

“You’re just stoned dude. You’d miss Taco Bell and bars. You’d hate having to spend your afternoons in the fucking sun picking crops and shit. It’s like community service.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“Hold, on,” interjected Brent, “So we don’t know where we are?”

They drove in silence for a few minutes, each of them looking around at the fields.

“Hold on,” said Donnie, “If the sun rises in the east and sets in the west and the sun is setting over there that means we’re going...”

He began counting on his fingers and then he realized that didn’t make any sense.

“Southeast, right?” asked Chris, “We’re going southeast?”

“Yeah,” said Donnie, “Yeah.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Brent. “I wish there were some fucking signs on this road that had cities on them that I had heard of.”

“Yeah, if you guys see any signs for Akron or Cleveland or any cities you know tell me,” said Chris from the driver’s seat.

“We should turn around though, right?” said Brent.

“Well, not exactly turn around, because we need to go north, but kind of turn around,” said Donnie.

The sun had set before they found another road going the direction they needed. By then, none of them had any idea where they were going. But after an hour of darkness they found out where they were when they passed a sign on the side of road that read, “Welcome to Kentucky, the Bluegrass State.”

They each began cursing. All three of them called friends on their cell phones but no one they called knew directions. Chris pulled over at a rest area.

"We need an adult," said Brent, "Someone who knows these fucking roads."

"Call Kirby," said Chris.

Donnie called Kirby, a heroin addict in his fifties who supplied them with pharmaceuticals, but he didn't answer his phone.

"I'm gonna call my mom," said Donnie.

She picked up on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Oh, hey, mom, it's Donnie."

"What's up?"

"We're in, uh, Kentucky."

"What?"

"Yeah."

Chris and Brent were twitching with laughter in their seats. Donnie smiled at them and made a facial expression telling them to be quiet.

"How the hell did you end up in Kentucky?"

"I don't know. We were just out for a drive."

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“Mom?”

“Hold on, I’ll get a map. Wait, did you guys try looking at a map?”

“I don’t think we have any in the car.”

“What about a rest area? Have you passed any recently?”

“Rest areas have maps?”

“Yes...”

“I thought they just had vending machines and bathrooms.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to find a rest area?”

“Oh, we’re at one right now.”

She sighed into the receiver, and it crackled in Donnie’s ear.

Donnie’s first attempt to move out the house failed after three weeks. Patti was at work when he called but she called him back while she was on break.

“Don’t you remember what I said when you left?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I told you that you wouldn’t be allowed back after the way you left.”

“Oh.”

She told him she was bringing home Chinese food for dinner. He could come over if he wanted.

Over the following months he still wasn’t technically living at home. Everything he had taken with him, a suitcase filled with clothes and a box filled DVDs and video games, was still at Brent’s apartment. But he slept and spent more of his time at the house than he did anywhere else.

At Christmas morning that year he was sitting around the tree with his mother, siblings, and grandparents. His grandparents had asked him what he wanted for Christmas and he had asked for a pair of boots he saw in the mall and a few video games. His mom had always made sure he had everything he needed but on Christmas and birthdays his grandparents got him everything he wanted.

Following dinner he sat on the screened-in porch drinking coffee and smoking cigars with his grandpa. His grandpa asked him if he thought he would go back to school and he said he didn’t think so. His grandpa commented on how school wasn’t for everybody. He suggested that maybe Donnie would

like the military. It would give him discipline and a sense of purpose. Donnie had never really considered joining the military, and he wondered why he hadn't, because it seemed like the perfect solution to the flat, pointless flow he felt in his everyday life. The war on terror and politics in general had never been of much interest to him, but he liked to go hunting with his mother and brother and grandfather, and hunting terrorists for a living seemed to be a perfect profession. They were really like animals kind of; he didn't consider them be rational in any sense.

He didn't tell his mother that he was joining the Marines until he was about to leave for boot camp. The discipline of it bothered him, but he used the anger that he repressed to fuel his energy during training. He was unable to complete any of the 3-mile timed runs that were conducted twice daily in the time required. When he got half a mile in to each run he felt a heavy bulge building near his heart was. The doctor said he had a condition. He didn't tell his mother that he was coming home.

The plastics factory gave him his job back once he came back from basic training. The job didn't stimulate him at all, but after a couple months he had been made a shift manager. He finally was able to move into his own apartment.

On his first night as shift manager he was doing rounds, making sure everyone was keeping up with their quotas. He stopped at one machine being operated by a middle-aged guy in his twenties who was missing two top front teeth. The guy was lifting a press up and down, over and over again. Donnie couldn't take his eyes off of it.

"Something wrong?" the guy asked him.

"No, looking good, Jack," he told him, "Looking good."

The next day Donnie called Chris.

"Hey man, do you still hang out with that black guy, the one who works for the big coke dealer in Studio City or one of those apartments on the other side of Route 8?"

"Yeah, every once in a while," said Chris. "Why?"

"I was looking to get a gun."

"Why the hell you need a gun? You're not even selling anymore, not that you needed it when you were selling."

"I don't know. I just think it's something I should have."

“Yeah, man. I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

“Why the hell would need a gun?” asked Chris, laughing.

“Alright, whatever man.”

He hung up the phone. He wondered why he could get any drug he wanted but not a gun. His mom hid her guns somewhere in the house that he could never figure out. He was sitting at the house that night, having stopped by to check his email and Facebook since he didn’t have his own computer. There was a photo of some rich kids he knew holding up dead ducks they had hunted. It occurred to him suddenly that he could just buy a gun from a sporting goods store.

He stayed up all night and drove to the mall to go to Dick’s that morning. They had him sign several forms and told him there would be a three-day waiting period. At work the next two days he was more talkative with the other workers than he usually was. On the third day he woke up and went back to Dick’s. The gun was \$199.99 plus tax. He swiped his debit card and felt a wave of anxiety leaving his body. Sitting in his car in the parking lot he held the gun in his hand. He let it rock back and forth suspended from his fingers, and he didn’t remember a hand gun ever feeling so light.

The third time Donnie Dipre overdosed he realized it as it was happening. He had dropped out of Cuyahoga Community College earlier that week. He could feel his heart banging against the walls of his chest. This was a normal physical sensation from coke, and he knew that his heart was actually beating slower. But he felt as if a hand was gripping his brain, suffocating it. He had split an eight ball and about a dozen hits of ecstasy with his girlfriend over the course of the afternoon. She had been in the bathroom for what seemed like an hour.

“Steph,” he moaned.

She didn’t hear him.

“Stephanie,” he moaned louder, trying his hardest to form a shout.

She came out of the bathroom.

“I have a headache, it hurts like shit. Do you have any aspirin or Tylenol or something?”

She went into the bathroom. There was a half-eaten pizza sitting in its box on the carpet next to her bed. He leaned over the bed and stared at it and decided he would never again eat pizza. Stephanie returned from the bathroom with a bottle of Tylenol.

"This is all I have," she said.

He snapped open the bottle of Tylenol. It was about half full and he threw back his head and dropped them all into his mouth. He laid on the bed for a minute or two waiting for something to happen. Stephanie asked what was wrong and he held up his hand to silence her. It was odd feeling, his mind about to turn itself off, so inevitable and intractable. He almost didn't even care if it was ever switched back on afterwards. He grabbed his cell phone from the other side of the bed.

"Who are you calling?"

"My mom."

She didn't pick up but she called him back thirty seconds later.

"Hey, Donnie," she said.

"He," he mumbled.

"What's wrong?"

"I think I'm ODing, mom," he said.

"What? What did you take?"

"A bunch of shit. I just swallowed a bottle of Tylenol but it didn't do anything."

"Are you stupid?" she yelled into the phone, "Where are you?"

"Stephanie," he said. He felt his brain was about to putter out of gas.

"You're at Stephanie's? Call 9-11"

"Alr—"

"Nevermind, I'm going to call. Tell her to call me when she knows what hospital they're taking you to."

At the hospital he got his stomach pumped. When he regained consciousness he saw his mom standing next to his bed. Next to her was a man in a police uniform.

"Hey mom," he said.

"Hi, Donnie."

"Who's the pig?"

"I'm with the Akron PD, son," said the man.

"Okay?"

"There was a bag of coke in your jacket when you arrived at the hospital tonight, over three grams. Would you know anything about that?"

“Um...no?”

When the time came for his court date he dressed up in his one suit and stood next to seven other defendants in front of a judge. The courtroom looked different from the ones on television. He had been in court twice before and they never looked like they looked on television. He wondered where these television courts existed.

The judge told him he faced a 90-day jail sentence. Donnie stared forward wide-eyed. The judge asked his mom to stand. She told the judge she thought that a court-ordered rehabilitation followed by mandatory drug-testing was a much better solution. Donnie turned around and glared at her. He much preferred her proposal, but he didn't like the fact that she had sway over the outcome. He was over 18, but the judge was still talking to her as if she were his legal guardian.

After a month at a rehab clinic on the other side of town, Donnie returned to his mother's house and decided he wanted to leave. He didn't know why he had continued living there for so long. He began calling around to see if anyone could let him crash for a few weeks. His friend Brent said he could move in temporarily until he found his own place. He got his suitcase of the closet.

Looking around his room, he realized he didn't really need most of his stuff. He wished he had an attachment to any of his possessions.

Although she was only in her early forties, Patti's hair was already developing a gray tone. She didn't bother to dye it.

She was only given three days paid leave from Acme after the funeral. She took off another two and a half weeks before the bills were beginning to pile up on her kitchen table. Rent, utilities, and medical bills were in one stack. The other stack was Donnie's mail.

One letter was a notice from the library. Apparently Donnie had taken out a book a month before and never returned it. She looked in his room but it wasn't there.

She went to his apartment to look for it. There was dried blood spattered on one of the walls. The rest of the apartment was clean, which surprised her because Donnie had always been messy. She couldn't find the book.

The next day she called the library to tell them it was lost. She explained

the circumstances.

After offering condolences, the lady on the other end of the line said, "Well, there is still fourteen dollars in fines on his record and the replacement fee will be twenty-two for the lost book. Take your time, though. And once again I am sorry for your loss. Anything else ma'am?"

Patti gazed forward silently at the refrigerator. The phone rested between her shoulder and head. She stared at her fingers. They had wrinkles. They looked old. She put her hands over her face, letting the phone fall, swinging back and forth limply from its cord on the wall.

[Selections from a new untitled novel-in- progress]

In an office filled with words

The documents on the desk had words like INDIAN and AGREEMENT and FEDERAL and MILITARY and I sat there pushing letters and pushing Enter. Typing words and waiting for search results to load so I could find the correct documents and put them in the system. We were thinking about deleting the hard copies of the documents on my desk because they were already available online, but we thought maybe it would be useful to have them around, in case a person didn't know how to use a computer. However, we were planning—or at least we were employed by people, who were employed by people, who were

also probably employed by people, who were planning— to make everyone use computers, at some point in the future.

Sometimes, I went home from work so brain-dead that I would march around my apartment in my bare feet. I would wish we had a carpet and/or a vacuum. Usually, I tried to walk around with at least sandals on. I would walk around and feel like my feet were clean and I didn't have to worry, if I was wearing sandals. Otherwise, my feet would get gray and brown and then near black, and I would have to wash them before I got in bed, and then tip-toe quickly back to my bed in order to avoid getting more crap and crud on them.

I looked at my feet, which were clothed in sneakers. It felt strange that my feet were there. I couldn't remember a specific time I had had to think about using them.

The documents on the desk also said words like IS and AND and ARE and WHY.

When I looked up documents I didn't normally include any interjections or conjunctions or linking verbs in my search terms, and I mostly only used nouns, and usually those were proper nouns. All other words got used randomly and without discretion.

My co-workers were working, or they were pretending that they were working.

I thought about how we needed to become more advanced—as a society—so that I could more briefly Enter all of what needed Entered into a totally-obedient robot that could do whatever it wanted, as long as it did what I needed it to do, and as long as I didn't have to do much of anything, and of course as long as it did what I wanted it to do.

My eyes got sweaty at my job. I stared at things for too long; or rather, I would stare at one particular thing—the computer—for too long.

I felt like I could search for the interjections and the conjunctions and the linking verbs, but I figured neither was supposed to mean anything. I figured proper nouns ruled the world.

I never found any information that proper nouns didn't rule the world.

“Okay, I'm leaving,” said Maria, who was one of the four people who worked in my cubicle with me.

“Bye,” I said.

“Bye now,” said Pablo. “And have a good weekend.”

“You too,” she said.

There were three spots in the cubical and then there was The Colony, a desk on the other side of the floor, by the microwave and the refrigerator. There were 4 of us. I would only come into work if I was sure I wouldn't have to sit at The Colony.

Pablo was a biology student at the university we worked at, and someday he would probably be a rich doctor or scientist, hopefully, or at least probably. I already had my college degree, and I had used it to get the job, and I was on an equal level of rank and seniority with Pablo and two other kids who didn't have college degrees yet.

Pablo was working on something, or pretending to be working on something, so I pretended to be working on something. I realized maybe he was pretending to be working on something too. I didn't know for sure, though. I couldn't see his computer.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

"I'm working, man," he said.

I thought that it could be a novel that he was working on. It would go like:

PEOPLE WORK IN CUBES.

PEOPLE TALK IN CUBES.

PEOPLE WORK IN CUBES.

PEOPLE TALK IN CUBES.

PEOPLE WORK IN CUBES.

PEOPLE TALK IN CUBES.

It would be repetitive and cyclical and true to life. Minor things would change but the opaque cohesion of the universe would stay the same. The universe would expand and contract, expand and contract.

Eventually, I realized that eventually things would have to change. Things would have to start to happen that weren't supposed to happen. The end of the universe wouldn't be enough.

"What are you looking at?" I asked Pablo again.

"I'm working, man," he said.

"I mean, really," I said.

He breathed in a noticeable manner.

"I'm looking at the New York Times sports blog, the NFL news," he said.

"Playoff talk?" I asked.

"Actually, they're talking about next season."

"The NFL already has preseason shit?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"It gets earlier and earlier every year," I said. "The fucking season isn't even over yet, and they are already discussing next season."

"Yeah, it's crazy," he said. "They want money."

"Are the Browns expected to do well next season?" I asked.

He laughed.

"I think they're going to be great," I said.

He laughed. "I think pretty much everyone agrees they will be the worst team again, or one of the worst" he said.

I felt shitty but I should have known that I would feel shitty, if I was going to think about the Browns. They always sucked.

He was a Giants fan. He was from New York. He had lived there all his life. He hadn't had his childhood ruined by bad sports teams. I was from Cleveland. I had had my childhood ruined by bad sports.

"I'll bet you," I said. "I bet you that they will win the Super Bowl Next Year."

"Okay," he said, laughing.

"Okay," I said. "I bet you that they will win a conference championship game."

“Okay,” he said, laughing.

“Okay,” I said. “I bet you that they will make it to the conference championship game.”

“Okay,” he said, laughing.

“Okay,” I said. “I want you to give me 50 to 1 odds on that.”

He looked at me for a second. He looked at me for more than a second and he said, “Okay.”

“Is that even possible, probably?” I asked.

“Probably not at all,” he said.

I laughed and said, “It’s on.” And I laughed because I realized that I would owe him two dollars in a year, but hopefully by then I would have more money and I would be drinking more and better, and maybe even doing more and better drugs again, and it would be OK, those two dollars. I would have more money and I wouldn’t think about how two dollars could be used instead to buy a tall beer, or a couple loosies, or a couple burgers at McDonald’s.

He grunted what sounded like it was supposed to be a final laugh, and returned his stare to his computer. His teeth were big and straight. I wondered if he had had braces. He was pretty poor. He said he lived in a two bedroom

apartment with his parents and his sister. I didn't think his parents could have afforded braces.

It was slightly winter but they treated the heating in the library like it was extreme winter, and there was extreme heating. I was grateful. I knew when I got home I would be sitting directly in front of a portable space heater, blowing dry heat at me in near futility. I didn't have heating in my apartment; well, I did, but it didn't work.

I didn't feel it was possible for me to get a boner. Why would I? I was going to reject it preemptively, every time that it was possible, and hope that that would work.

I put on my headphones and got down to work. I listened to the song "Sunshine Superman" by Donovan, but I also thought about how it was a formulaic choice and I was existentially fucked, or actually eternally fucked, because I had thought that, or rather because I had listened to the song.

"Are you listening to music and wishing you could delete all this crap?" I asked.

He didn't answer me.

I went into the cataloging software on the computer and entered 47 documents into the system as "available—see shelf" and then I stamped them

with a "U.S. Government" and "Harlem College" stamp and placed them on the corner of my desk. Technically, according to the catalog, the documents I had just entered were already on the shelf in the public sections of the library. But I hadn't put them on the shelves yet, and I figured no one would look at them in at least the next day, or probably ever. Whenever I went into the Government Documents room in the library, there was very rarely anyone in there. I had once seen a condom and some candy wrappers on the floor of the back corner of the Government Documents room, but I had never seen a person. There was also a ski jacket at the bottom of a shelf, but it didn't appear to have an owner.

"How's it going?"

I looked up. It was my boss, Ellen. She was in charge of all the government documents in the library. She had inherited the section of the library with the largest back log, by far, but it was also the least in-demand with readers of any section of the library, so it was okay that it had the largest back log, by far.

"Everything going okay?" she asked us.

Pablo took off his headphones. For a few seconds we both sat there gazing at nothing, that midway somewhere between the computers we had been staring at and the person talking to us right then.

"Good," I said.

“Yeah, good,” said Pablo.

“Good,” she said.

“How are you?” I said.

“I’m good,” she said. “I’ve been working on this deletion thing. I want us to delete things. Things can be deleted. They must be deleted.”

“How do we get to do that?” Pablo asked.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” she said. “I think we can just delete them, but I don’t know what the protocol is, so I have been checking what other libraries have been doing. What they do, I hope to do. But I don’t know what they do yet, for sure. I have to be sure before I can do it.”

Pablo and I nodded.

“Well, okay then,” she said. She walked quickly away.

Her way of socializing—how she entered a room (or cubicle), how she exited a room (or cubicle), how she talked, how she made faces—was all related to the fact that she spent the majority of her life in front of a computer, or in front of one of the 3 computers at her desk, plus her I-Pad. At least that was what I thought. I wondered if I was going to end up being the same way, and/or if I was already starting to.

Reach

"You have nothing to lose," Nevin said.

"Yes I do," I said.

"What? You might be embarrassed?"

"Yeah."

"Who cares?"

"I care."

"You'll be the only one who knows."

"But I'll know. And I won't be the only one who knows. People will find out."

"How?"

"I'll see someone I know on there. You'll tell people."

"No I won't. And who cares?"

"I care."

"Only you and that person will know."

"But we'll both...fuck it."

I put out my cigarette and got up, went to the bathroom, splashed water on my face, and sat on the toilet looking at a poster with pink borders and a

hedgehog in the middle, and a page from a magazine that was in Chinese explaining air flight emergency protocol.

The next day I was sitting on the couch again, and Nevin was sitting in the same spot, on the other couch. I was on the \$99 Target futon, and he was on the \$149 IKEA futon.

“It’s really hard to meet people in the city,” I said.

He didn’t respond. He was typing on his laptop.

I thought to myself about how when I said ‘people’ I meant ‘girls.’

“I mean, think about it,” I said. “This is one of the most densely populated areas in North America, and it’s hard to meet people. We stare at each other on the subway. Or we pretend not stare at each other on the subway. But we do stare at each other.”

He didn’t respond. He was still typing on his laptop.

“You’ve lived in cities,” I said.

He looked at me.

"I mean, I'm from urban sprawl, suburbia, industrial wasteland America," I said, "and you're not."

"Yeah, I grew up in Manilla. We both know that. What are you talking about, dude?"

"How do you meet girls?"

"I've been dating Samantha for two years. I knew her before we moved here. I know as many people here as you do."

"I don't care about knowing people."

"Then what are we talking about?"

"I don't know. Cities."

"A city is just a place where a greater number of people live in one area and in closer proximity than in other places."

"Yeah, I just said that."

"Okay. Well, haven't you hid huge details about yourself from people you lived really, really close to for years?"

"Like who?"

"Like your parents."

"Like what?"

“Drugs, sex, whatever. Huge details you would tell some random drunk person you met at a party, as a way of impressing them, or finding common ground.”

“Okay.”

“Well, that’s how you don’t know anyone in this city. You’re too close to them.”

“What?”

“You think it matters. Or you’ve thought about how it doesn’t matter so much that you think it matters.”

“What matters?”

“Other people.”

“Other people are other people.”

I thought for a second about how it sounded profound for me to say that, and then I realized that it was obvious, or that it didn’t make any sense at all.

“I might make an E-Harmony account,” I said.

“Do it,” he said.

His eyes went back to his computer.

I typed “online dating websites” into Google and went to the Wikipedia entry on “E-Harmony.” It said it was free and for both sexes. I clicked on the link on the sidebar for the website URL and it took me there.

I put in my basic information. It said I had an algorithmic percentage. It said I could look at matches. I didn’t know how it could know who I could be matched with solely based on the information I provided, such as my age, gender, and location.

I clicked on my matches. They were mostly people in their later 20s who had jobs that paid middle-income salaries. They mostly lived in nicer neighborhoods, or at least safer, or at least whiter neighborhoods. But it did also show some black women, who lived in my neighborhood.

I stared at it. I stared at it for a while.

I closed my computer.

I made a quesadilla.

I was sitting on the Target futon and Nevin and Samantha were sitting on the IKEA futon. They were lying down on it, with him near the cushion and her near the coffee table.

The song "Me and the Devil" by Gil Scott-Heron was playing. I nodded my head back and forth to the percussion. I wondered what would happen if my head and neck just kept continually rocking back and forth like that forever. It didn't seem to matter.

"How was work?" I asked Samantha.

"It was good," she said. She had on her white dress shirt that she wore to work and it had stains on it and I figured work probably wasn't good for her that day, not that it probably was any day.

"It's a nice restaurant," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "It's fine."

I nodded, but then I realized I was already nodding to the Gil-Scott Heron that was playing.

"What did you do today?" she asked.

"I went to work earlier and then I hung out here," I said.

"Tom made an online dating profile today," said Nevin.

I shook my head no as if I hadn't. I had.

“What?” said Samantha. “Where?”

“E-Harmony,” I said.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Isn’t that the really religious Christian site? That is homophobic? And it doesn’t allow same-sex couples and stuff?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “That’s not what Wikipedia said.”

“Really?” she said. She took the computer from Pablo. I started typing on my computer. She was looking up the truth about E-Harmony, but I was going to find it first. I realized it didn’t matter who found it first—it was the truth, after all—but I wanted to find it first.

My internet wasn’t loading. I had to close down my browser and wait for the connection to load. Samantha was typing.

“Yeah,” she said, “it says here that E-Harmony was originally only for opposite-sex relationships. ‘Family-oriented’ relationships, is what it says. Now it has a separate site for same-sex relationships.”

“Shit,” I said.

“It also says that it does cost money,” she said.

“Oh,” I said.

"You said you didn't have to pay," Nevin said.

"I didn't," I said.

"It says you can have one month of free browsing," said Samantha, "but you have to pay after a month, and you also have to pay if you want your algorithms to be more accurate."

"Fuck," I said.

"Yeah, that sounds crappy," said Pablo.

"You should just use OkCupid," said Samantha.

"Isn't that trashy and creepy and shit?" I asked.

"Lots of people use it," she said, "or I heard lots of people use it."

"Yeah. I can't use this," I said. I closed the tab on my browser for E-Harmony.

"Yeah, you should use OkCupid," said Pablo.

I made an OkCupid account, really casually; I stayed up most of the night, during which I was drinking and/or smoking and/or on some pill and/or

some other pill. I would take pauses and watch the first snow of winter slowly form a thin sheet of white against the ground outside.

I put in all my information and I answered lots of questions. And I started to make an algorithm for myself. Names popped up on my sidebar and the more questions I answered, the more and more closely related they became in their locations and the algorithmic match percentages that were below their names.

Names and pictures started coming up and I started clicking on pictures.

I liked the website because it felt like I was doing something. I wasn't just sitting around wondering what would happen next if I did nothing.

I felt relieved that there wasn't any more of the looking at Facebook without end, looking at photos that I knew or didn't know, it didn't matter, and things did matter, just not the things that I happened to be doing.

I don't remember her name but she was Asian or Asian-American, and she lived in Queens. We started typing broad things about our lives. I typed about my job. She typed about her job. I told her what I wanted my job to be. She told me what she wanted her job to be.

We typed to each other over a day or two. I wasn't really that interested in typing after the first day. She said that we could meet and hang out if I wanted. I said yeah that sounded great. We exchanged numbers and made plans to see each other that weekend. The weekend came and I looked at my OkCupid account and looked at other people and their pictures and I saw a message from her asking if I still wanted to hang out. I stared at it for a few minutes. I smoked a cigarette and stared at it. I told her we should meet at MoMA PS1, the contemporary art branch of MoMA in Queens. We agreed to meet at a certain time on a certain day, the next day.

The next day came and I looked at the time and felt tired. I looked at the message thread I had had with this girl. I closed my eyes and thought about myself in the third-person, and it didn't matter if I went to see her or if I went to sleep, and I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

Follow

When I finally went on an OKCupid date it was with a girl that I felt was a safe choice. And I mean that I knew I probably wouldn't be insanely anxious around her because I felt she was not at all out of my league. I hadn't gone on dates; people didn't go on dates anymore, really, unless they were already dating someone—it made me wonder how anyone ever met. I had met girls when I was already drunk. I knew I would get drunk immediately when I met this girl, but I wouldn't drink beforehand.

She was blonde, although some of the roots in her hair were black. She was a bit on the chubby side. Over messages we talked about our jobs—hers was as a pizza delivery girl, and she was starting her own fashion line. I worked at a library. It felt anticlimactic to say that I was trying to work at a library. I said I was also in grad school, studying history. I wasn't in grad school, and I wasn't really studying history. I did read some history books, but that didn't mean I was really studying the shit.

History seemed vague to me, so I figured it was safe to say that I was interested in it. I was interested in history, but what was history, really, besides

everything. I was studying everything, even though I wasn't really studying anything.

There was indecision on both parts, as to where we should meet. I don't think either of us really cared; we were more curious than anything.

As I headed to the date, there was part of me that wanted to head home. I wanted to head home and sit there and ignore my phone and ignore my computer. There was another part of me that wanted to let go. It seems cliché and vague as a general philosophy—to let go—but it seemed temporarily satisfying to me. I also wanted to have sex. I hadn't had sex in a few months. It is depressing but easy to avoid sex.

I didn't plan to avoid sex when I met with her. I planned to hang out with her, and if that led to sex, then that was OK.

We didn't have a specific plan except that I would meet her at Washington Square Park. I left to get there ahead of time and I got there an hour early. I nodded to myself, lit a cigarette, and sat on a man-made cubic stone in front of a building. I watched the NYU kids walk by, and it reminded me of being in school, walking around in groups with friends and worrying about what I wore.

I hadn't called my parents all week, so I called them, since I didn't have anything else to do.

"Hello?" said Mom, when she answered. There was a questioning caution in her tone, as if she worried who might be calling.

"Hey, Mom. It's Tom."

"Oh hi, Tom."

"HOW ARE YOU?" I shouted in my mind.

In reality, I said, in a quiet voice, "How're you?"

"Good," said Mom.

"Yeah," I said.

"Good," said Dad.

"Oh, hi Dad," I said.

"Hi," said Dad.

"What are you doing?" asked Mom.

"I'm meeting some friends in the city," I said.

"In Manhattan?" asked Dad.

"Yeah," I said. "That's what we say when we mean Manhattan."

"Okay," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

“So what have you been up to this week?” said Mom.

It was Friday. How was it Friday—the end of the week—and all I was doing was sitting here across from this park talking to my parents at 6 PM?

“I’ve been working at the library,” I said. “It’s fine. Tedious.”

“That’s good,” she said.”

“What have you been up to?” I asked.

“Oh, just the usual,” she said.

“Yeah, the same old,” said Dad.

For a second, I tried to imagine myself as someone who never knew what cigarettes felt like; that didn’t work, and I lit another cigarette.

“How are the Browns doing?” I asked. “How is Ohio State doing?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “The Browns are really bad. Ohio State is doing well, but they lost a few. We’ll see what happens in the bowl game.”

“Yeah,” I said. I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Well, I’m gonna go hang out with my roommates and eat and relax for a bit before I go to bed.”

“Okay,” Mom said.

“I’ll talk to you later next week, sometime.”

“Okay,” said Dad.

"We love you," said Mom.

"I love you too," I said.

As I closed my cell phone I could see that they were still on the line. I hung up. I wondered if they were watching their digital landline phones, seeing exactly when I disconnected. Maybe they wondered what I was going to do next.

I walked to another cubic stone and sat down on it. I called Nevin, and he answered on the third ring.

"Hey," he said. "What up?"

"Nothing," I said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm at the DMV. Paying for a ticket. Fucking sucks."

"Oh damn, that sucks," I said.

"Yeah. Oh yeah. Jack is in town this week. He gets in tonight. He'll be staying with us. He's bringing OCs.

"Oxycodon?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm in the Village," I said. "I'm going on an OKCupid date finally."

"Yeah? That's great, man."

"Yeah, she's just some girl. I don't know."

“That’s cool,” he said. “Well, have fun. You should come hang out with us after. I’ll let you know what’s up.”

“That sounds good,” I said. “I’ll see you when I get back from my date later.”

“Yeah, good luck man.”

“Thanks.”

“Later.”

“Later.”

The stone cube I was sitting on was cold.

I stood up and looked at the sky, where there wasn’t any snow coming down, but it was dark and gray.

I got a text from the girl—Melissa—saying that she was getting off work late.

“My interns took forever,” she said.

I didn’t know that she had interns. I told her OK.

She asked if we could actually meet over in the West Village, by Avenue of the Americas. I told her OK.

I started making my way over there and responding to her texts. She was going to be on the northwest corner of 4th and Avenue of the Americas.

She was going to be in a cab, so I wouldn't see her until she got out of the cab.

She was going to be dropped off the southeast corner of 4th and Avenue of the Americas.

I didn't notice her, but she texted me, saying she was waving her hand.

I saw her hand in the air and walked over towards her.

I was smoking a cigarette and I put it out fast.

We said hello and started walking east, repeating most of what we had already said over text.

She stopped, and started going through her purse.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I was actually wanting to light one myself, but I felt weird. I didn't want to if you didn't like it."

She laughed a little and said, "Okay."

She had several layers of clothing on her upper body, all wound tightly together at the top with a scarf.

I lit a cigarette and asked where we were going.

She thought I had places in mind, but I didn't. I knew places, but I didn't know which one I would want to go to. I didn't want to see anyone I knew.

We were walking along and neither of us was leading us anywhere.

"Do you know anywhere?" I asked.

"Yeah" she said, "I guess so."

She seemed disappointed that I didn't know places in the area. I had picked the area right above where she lived, figuring that she would know places.

She led us to a bar on 5th between one avenue and another. It was a small walk-down bar that had almost no lighting and two rooms.

We ordered Coors Lights.

We went into the room that didn't have the bar in it.

She knew that bartender and he said stuff to her as we were walking away.

We sat around the corner behind a wall, out of view from the bartender, except when he and the other bartender walked through the room into the storage room or kitchen—I didn't know which it was.

We talked about our families and we talked about jobs.

“Yeah, my parents own my apartment,” she said. “But they don’t live here. They just like to have it for when they visit. And they wouldn’t want me living in one of the neighborhoods I might live in if I was paying myself.”

“Cool.”

“What do you do?”

“Yeah, I work in a library,” I said.

“That’s interesting,” she said.

“No, not really.”

“Oh.”

“I mean it’s not horrible, though.”

We had sorted out a lot of this during the OKCupid messages, but it appeared that we were just going to say everything all over again.

“Yeah, I do delivery for a sushi and pizza place,” said.

“Two different places?”

“No. One place. Sushi and Pizza.”

“Weird,” I said. “Never heard of that.”

“I’m also starting my own leggings line.”

“What are leggings?”

“Like these,” she said, pointing to the gold, kind of shiny tights that she was wearing.

“What’s the difference between textiles and clothing?” I asked.

“Doing all clothing is such a big project,” she said. “I don’t want to be that big in fashion, at least yet. I like to work on individual parts of it.”

She said her interns were going to come to her apartment the next day to work on a line of leggings she had designed.

“That’s impressive,” I said. “Starting your own business like Mark Zuckerberg.”

She laughed nervously, apparently unsure if was joking or serious; I was both serious and joking.

I took a Xanax that was in my jacket pocket and I offered her one, and she accepted.

We finished a few more beers.

“What are you up to the rest of the night?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I already told you I have to work in the morning.”

“I have to work in the morning, too,” I said, even though I figured I would just call-in sick the next day.

“Well, we could just go my place,” she said. I agreed.

Navigating that far downtown was often a mess, so we walked to the southern end of the Village and caught a cab.

She sat next to me in the cab, and I kissed her on the cheek. She turned and smiled at me, although there was an apparent nervousness in that smile.

We picked up some beer in Tribeca on an avenue near her place that was deserted except for the rush of automobiles on the street.

We walked into her building and there was a doorman.

He said hello to her and gave her a key.

“I always leave the key with him,” she said. “In case I get drunk and lose it.”

The elevator doors were silver and shiny, and it didn’t make any noise as it moved upwards towards the 24th floor, where she lived.

I didn’t know if I had ever been in an apartment on the 24th floor of a building before. I didn’t know if I had ever been in a building with a doorman before.

The apartment had three bedrooms and a large kitchen and lounge area, with a wide flat screen TV, four couches made of leather, and a see-through glass dining table.

“You live here by yourself?” I asked.

“My parents come up from New Orleans, sometimes,” she said. “My mom doesn’t work anymore so she comes up a lot.”

She took me on a tour of the apartment, showing me one of the rooms that she had converted into a studio for her business, and another room with a bed with a comforter and sheets that looked like they had never been slept in.

“Who are your interns?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “One of them is a student at FIT, and the other is still in high school.”

“Do you pay them?”

“I give them money for lunch sometimes.”

We made our way into the kitchen, where I leaned against the counter as she furrowed her face.

“I am really hungry,” I said.

She opened the shiny silver fridge, and there was nothing in it except for yogurt and some lettuce.

“You don’t eat?” I asked.

“We can order something,” she said.

“Okay, like what?”

"Papa John's?"

"Okay."

I looked in my wallet, where I only had a ten.

"I don't have any cash left," I said. "I spent it all at the bar on our drinks."

She squinted her eyes at me.

"I can pay you back for the pizza," I said.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she said.

She called for the pizza.

After she had ordered, I walked towards her and kissed her once, and again, and again.

We kept making out and I pushed her towards the couches, and then I pushed her onto one of them.

I looked outside at the skyscrapers, and they didn't seem real.

"Settle down," she said.

I hadn't noticed my quick, heavy breathing and uncontrolled licking of her face, a part of it covered in a layer of my saliva.

I hadn't hooked up with anyone in a few months, and it was obvious.

"Do you want to watch something on TV?" I asked.

"Sure," she said.

She put on The Office, and I groaned.

“What?”

“This show is starting to be much, much less funny. It’s getting stupid.”

“Okay,” she said.

She scanned through the channel menu.

She chose a movie I hadn’t heard of, and I didn’t mind, because I wasn’t really watching anyways.

“I am going to buy pot,” she said.

“Where?” I asked.

“Here,” she said. “He will deliver it.”

The pizza got there before the pot, which was unfortunate, because it would have tasted better if I had smoked first.

We kept drinking lots of beer and making out and I kept trying to take off her clothes and she kept resisting.

“Be patient,” she said. “Be calm. You seem really nervous.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. She pecked me on the cheek. We looked at each other.

I realized she was fat.

I had known her physical appearance already, before I even met her, but I had been desperate—I was desperate—and I liked it.

I got her down to a t-shirt and the leggings, at which point I could tell she probably wasn't going to allow any more clothing to come off.

I put my hand on her leggings.

“Are these made of plastic?” I asked.

“Vinyl.”

I put my hand under her leggings and tapped on her clit for a bit with my fingers, listening to her moan a little in a low voice, before opening up the lips and fingering her.

I went on for a few minutes until my fingers started getting wet and sticky.

I hoped that she would go for my dick, at least give me a hand job, but she didn't.

We dry humped, and I couldn't get more than kind of hard.

I thought about how I did find her attractive, but I wouldn't be able to have sex with her, because if I thought about

“We should maybe not have sex the first time,” I said.

“I agree,” she said, and pecked me on the cheek again.

I looked at a clock, which said it was 1:30 AM.

How the hell was it 1:30 AM?

I didn't think the train to Bed-Stuy would come that late at night, at least not before I killed myself, which would be hard, because there wouldn't be any trains to jump in front of.

I also didn't have any money for a cab.

"Can I crash here?" I asked.

"What do you think I run here?" she said, "A hotel?"

I wasn't sure if she was just joking or if she was seriously pissed that I wanted to stay there. I didn't say anything, because there was nothing I could say to improve the situation.

I kept making out with her, and put my hand on her again, and we went to her bed.

It was a big bed, probably a King-size bed.

We lied there for a bit on top of the covers. I tried to put my arm around her and she leaned away.

She set four alarms, and took off her leggings, and when the leggings came off the width of her legs seemed to double, and I pretended not to have

noticed. She wasn't attractive really; of course, maybe she didn't find me attractive, either.

All four alarms went off the next morning at 6 AM.

I felt like someone had been chopping on my head with an axe all night.

"Get up," she said.

I lied there.

"Alright," she said, "I am going to go get dressed and shower, and you need to be ready to go by the time I get out. My interns are coming."

I went back to sleep.

"Get up," she said.

I looked at the clocks at it was 6:30.

I moaned and groaned and got out of the bed.

She went into the kitchen.

I put on my clothes and followed her into the kitchen.

She was standing against the counter, looking out at a laptop computer.

"Well, that was fun," I said.

“Yeah, it was fun,” she said.

“I am pretty busy with the holidays coming up, but I will give you a ring after the New Year, okay?”

She nodded and said, “Okay.”

I think we both knew we would never see each other again.

It wasn't like the movies.

I walked down to Chambers Street, past people in business clothes and a few tourists, and got on the red line, and then got on the B38 bus in downtown Brooklyn.

The skyscrapers of downtown Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn began fading behind me as the bus went into Fort Greene, and by the time we reached Bed-Stuy I looked back and I couldn't see them anymore.

There weren't many people on the streets, aside for one or two people on each block pushing shopping carts along that were filled with recycled cans and bottles. A guy with a hard hat on was carrying a lunch-box with him as he walked to the subway. A few of the businesses were starting to open.

I went into my apartment and there was a heavy stale cigarette smell and bottles and cups and cans everywhere. Two people were sleeping on one futon and one person was sleeping on the other. I didn't look at their faces, I just went to my bed and lay down, but I couldn't close my eyes, and the sun was already beating through my window.

An hour later I heard movement in the living room—apparently they were waking up; they started talking about drugs and shit.

"Where is Tom?" someone said.

"I'm in here," I shouted.

My old college friend Jack opened the door and came over and hugged me on my bed.

"Where were you last night?" he asked.

"I was out on a date."

"An online date," I heard Nevin shout from his room.

"Did you have condoms?" Nevin shouted.

"No," I shouted back.

"So you didn't bang her?" said Jack.

"No, I did" I said.

"What?" shouted Nevin. "You had sex?"

"Yeah," I said.

"So you raw-dogged it?" said Jack.

I didn't say anything.

"Who was she?"

"I don't know," I said. "She kind of sucked. She lived in Tribeca."

"That's rich," said Nevin. "What does she do?"

"I don't know," I said. "She had her own clothing business. Design. She's kind of sucked."

"You're just giving yourself off-handed compliments," said Donner, one of my other roommates .

Samantha was in the living room and she looked in my room and asked, "So, will you see her again?"

"I don't know."

"Oh man," said Jack. "Raw-dog!"

He went out into the living room and said the word "raw-dog" over and over again, and I went to the bathroom to take a shit, reading an entire article on Marxism and television in VICE magazine, waiting to flush until their laughter had receded.

Look

I came out of the bathroom and told everyone I was going back to sleep for a few hours.

“Well, have a good trip home,” said Nevin.

“Thanks.”

“Oh, you’re going home today,” said Donner. “Have a good time in Ohio.”

“Thanks. You all have a good time too.”

I went into my bedroom, closed the door, and waited for everyone to leave before I came out into the living room. It took about three hours.

The whole apartment had the stale stench of tobacco smoke. A few dead leaves were lying on the ground by the window and I wondered how they got there.

Two empty bottles of whiskey and an empty bottle of vodka were on the dining table. It was a dining room table because there wasn’t a dining room. The living room and the kitchen were one relatively big room—not that big but bigger than other rooms I had seen in the city. The kitchen side was cluttered with some dirty dishes and produce such as tomatoes, carrots, onions, and garlic

that were all covered in a thin but noticeable sheet of dust. The couches on the other side of the room had half a dozen blankets of various types scattered across them.

I sat down on the cheaper futon and felt a spot on it that had a cigarette burn. The couch was black but white cotton popped out of the small and circular burned through spot when I leaned towards it. I leaned towards the burn spot repeatedly; I enjoyed watching the cotton come out of the couch.

The next door neighbors were playing Caribbean music really loudly. I told myself I needed to do some research on Caribbean music, so that I could describe what I was hearing more specifically than just calling it "Caribbean music." It wasn't as useless a term as "World Music", but it was pretty fucking useless.

I went to the fridge and there was nothing to eat that belonged to me. I was leaving to go home to Ohio that night, so I figured I wouldn't eat anyone's shit, because I wouldn't be around to replenish whatever I took. I thought about how that could just as easily be rationalized as a reason for just taking their shit, but I liked to be honest when I could.

My suitcase was lying on my bedroom floor, half-packed, and I threw some more clothes in it. My flight didn't leave for 6 hours, but I didn't feel like

sitting around the apartment all day, and I didn't want to go buy groceries for an afternoon. I checked to make sure I had everything and headed outside and began walking three blocks to the nearest subway. I kept my head down but I imagined that other people were watching me as I rolled my suitcase along the sidewalk.

Falling and/or flying from/through the sky

As I sat waiting for my flight to begin boarding, I thought maybe I was having an acid flashback or something. I recognized the faces of two or three people I had gone to high school with. There was one girl: she looked older and bigger than she had in high school, but she still had curly brown hair and the athletic build that made her talented at whichever sport it was that she had excelled at in school—I couldn't remember what that was. There was another girl: she had blonde hair and she was skinny and she was talking to this guy, who I also recognized. He had black hair that he either sprayed or gelled, because it was spiked up in the front, which was the same look I remembered him having in high school, back when that look was in style; he also had on a North Face jacket and dress pants, the same as he would have worn in high school. I had on a hoodie and jeans. I felt like a bum. I didn't want these people to see me.

I kept staring at them and trying to make eye contact but they didn't stare back at me. It didn't make sense that I would try to make eye contact, because I thought I didn't want them to see me, but obviously I actually did want them to see me.

I rubbed my beard and grazed my hand through my head. I looked different than I had in high school. Perhaps they didn't notice me. They all looked about the same as they had back then. I considered approaching them but I didn't.

They started boarding Zone 1. Business class. The guy with the gelled hair walked forward and I resented him, although only because I always resented people who sat in business class. His name was "Luke", I thought, maybe.

I was in Zone 4 and so was the girl who had been talking to that guy. Leigh was her name, I thought, and I was pretty sure that was correct.

We boarded the plane. I didn't say anything as I got into my seat. It was an aisle seat. She sat down across the aisle from me, in the same row, but she was by the window. I looked over at her but I didn't say anything. She looked at me. I looked away. I looked back at her and she wasn't looking at me but then she was.

"Hey," I said. "Did you go to St.Vincent?"

"Yeah," she said. The word came out of her mouth like slow motion audio.

"Leigh Reynor?"

"Yeah! Tom Maddox?"

“Yep.”

“Wow,” she said. “You look different.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You look pretty much the same yourself, actually.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

She put her hand on her hair but she didn’t do anything to her hair aside from touching it.

“What do you do here in the city?” I asked.

A line of people walked past us in the aisle.

“I’m a graduate student at NYU.”

“Nice. What are you studying?”

“English.”

“Oh cool. What do you want to do with that?”

“Work in publishing.”

I nodded. She nodded. A woman came up and stood between us in the aisle.

The woman had a dog carrier with a little white beagle in it, and she had a huge suitcase, and I wondered how she had been allowed get the suitcase on the plane. It seemed above the maximum weight for carry-ons, by a lot.

“Hello,” she said in a loud, deep voice to Leigh.

"Hi," said Leigh. Leigh had a soft, high voice.

"I guess I'm sitting here," said the woman.

She tried to force her bag into the overhead compartment but it wasn't fitting. A flight attendant came up to her and said, "Ma'am, I'm going to have to put this in another compartment."

"I don't want it to get smashed," said the woman.

"I will personally make sure it doesn't get smashed," said the attendant.

The woman sat down and wiggled around in her seat and I wanted her to put on her seat belt but she was taking forever and I wanted to take her seat belt and buckle it for her or strangle her with it.

"This is my dog. Her name is Margarita. I hope she doesn't bother you."

"Oh no, I don't mind. I love dogs," said Leigh.

"What do you do in the city?" Leigh asked me.

"I work at a library," I said.

"Oh. Where?"

"Harlem College."

"Do you live in Harlem?"

"No I live in Brooklyn."

"Oh, I thought about living in Brooklyn. I've heard good things about it."

The flight attendants started doing hand motions along to the pre-recorded flight safety instructions that were being played over the inter-com.

After they were done, I turned to Leigh and said, "Where do you live?"

"Upper East Side."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"What do you think of that?"

The women sitting between us sighed loudly.

"I like it," said Leigh. "It's quiet."

The captain got on the intercom and welcomed us aboard.

"Were you talking to a St. Vincent's kid?" I asked Leigh.

"Yeah," she said, "That was Luke Carr."

"Oh damn. He was like a year below us, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"I think I saw someone else I might have known too. She looked like Megan Hennis?"

"Yeah, I saw her too, but I wasn't sure, so I didn't say anything."

"Did you see me?"

"Yeah I saw you too, but I wasn't sure, so I didn't say anything."

“Luckily I talked to you.”

“Yeah.”

She laughed. I laughed.

“So—”

I started saying something but the woman who was sitting on the aisle across from me, between me and Leigh, sighed again. I looked at Leigh and raised my eyebrows. Leigh made a frown of mock fear with her face. I stared ahead at the seat in front of me, where I could see the crown of a guy’s buzz cut sticking out from beyond the top of the seat.

“We are waiting for some traffic on the runway,” said the captain. “We hope to get off the ground in the next twenty minutes or so.”

I turned to Leigh and she looked over at me, but the woman leaned forward and blocked my view. I assumed she did it intentionally.

I fell asleep.

When I woke up the captain was saying that we were preparing to make our final descent in the Canton-Akron airport. I looked over at Leigh. She was reading a book and it was a library book that had a solid color cover, so I couldn’t see what the title was or who the author was.

After we got off the plane, Leigh and I veered around the woman who had been sitting between us. The woman mumbled to herself. I had hoped I would feel relieved that the woman was behind us, but all that happened was my main focus of anxiety was removed and now I had to think of things to say to Leigh.

We walked next to each other towards the baggage claim area.

“Where do you live?” I asked. I had never known where she lived. I had never been to her place.

“I still live in Silver Lake,” she said. “With my mom.”

I nodded and couldn’t think of anything to say so I didn’t say anything.

“You live in the Falls, right?”

“Yep.”

I saw my parents standing near the security checkpoint with all the other parents and other people waiting for their family or friends.

“Well, we should hang out sometime in the city,” I said to her, although it was more mumbling than speech.

“Yeah, we definitely should,” she said.

I started veering towards my parents. Leigh and I were talking about graduate school, and she seemed confused why I wasn't walking straight towards the baggage claim.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad."

"Hi, Tom," they both said at pretty much the same time.

Leigh looked surprised; her mouth formed the shape of a small frozen "O".

"You remember Leigh, right?" I said to Dad.

"Yeah, of course," he said.

"Hi," Leigh said. "I'm Leigh." She shook my mom's hand.

"I had Leigh for...Geometry and Trigonometry, right?" said Mom.

"Yep, that was me," said Leigh.

"Wow," said Dad. "So you live in New York now?"

"Yep."

"Doing what?"

"I am in graduate school."

"How is your brother?"

"He's good. He lives in Indonesia now, actually, with his wife."

They kept talking and I wasn't listening, but I had already heard it. I looked at Mom and she seemed to be listening but I thought maybe she was just pretending to be listening.

When we got to the baggage area, Leigh and I moved towards the crowd that was vaguely forming around the conveyor belt. When the sirens came on to signal that the luggage was on its way, people rushed to the front of the line. It reminded me of how if you throw bread crumbs in the city then pigeons swarm to eat it all.

I looked around and I didn't see the guy who we had gone to high school with. He had gotten off the plane first, since he had been in first-class. I saw the other girl I had gone to high school with, but she was talking to her parents, so I definitely wasn't going to go talk to her now.

The sirens stopped going off but the conveyor belt was still moving but there still wasn't any luggage on the conveyor belt. I thought about how it was weird that we were all sitting there anticipating something that was definitely going to happen. It was going to happen and there was almost a 0% chance that anything would happen that we couldn't pretty much just predict in advance.

I turned around and saw my dad talking to the guy who I went to high school with—the one who had been sitting in business class.

The luggage started coming. Leigh's bag came first and she walked away.

After I had gotten mine, I walked towards my parents.

"Got everything?" asked Dad.

"Yep."

We walked through the automatic sliding doors that led out to the parking lot. Leigh was standing on the edge of the lot looking at her phone.

"Do you need a ride?" Dad asked her.

"No, I should be fine," she said.

"You sure?" said Dad.

"Yeah, my mom is coming to pick me up."

"Well, alright."

"Have a nice night," I said to her. "And a good break. Let's meet up sometime in the city."

"Yeah, definitely."

"Have a good holiday," said Dad.

"You too, Mr. Maddox."

We walked towards the car. I was doubted whether Leigh want to hang out back in New York City. I put my suitcase in the trunk and got in. The seats were cold. I couldn't wait for the car to heat up.

The answer to your question has not been found

The television was playing football and it had been playing football for what felt like hour and it felt like it would be playing football for many more hours.

My niece Lucy was on the carpet by the Christmas trees, and by the stairs, past the television. She was over a year old and she liked running up the stairs over and over again. She would go step by step. She knew which step would be the step that would make someone get out of their chair to go make sure she didn't fall and get a concussion and/or die (it was the fourth step) We would always go over to the stairs to sit on the steps below it to make sure she didn't fall, because they said that she didn't know that it was dangerous, but I always thought that she did know it was dangerous and she just went up to that fourth step because she knew we would come to make sure she didn't fall.

My brother Mark was looking through a copy of The Economist and his wife Jessie was playing computer games on a palm-pilot or Gameboy or one of those things. Dad was sitting in the chair rocking back and forth with his leg behind his butt, spectacle-covered eyes intent on the television. Mom and my

sister Caitlyn were in the kitchen talking. They were probably also cutting vegetables or something, but all I could hear was them talking, and although I could hear them talking, I couldn't hear what they were saying.

Lucy was about at the fourth step and I got up from the couch to go sit behind her on the stairs. She saw me come over and she stopped and looked back at me. When I got there, she started walking up the stairs. I followed her up the stairs and picked her up and swung her around like she was a helicopter crawling through the air.

We went through all the upstairs bedrooms. I stopped in my room and bounced her up and down against the bed while I checked my OKCupid profile. I didn't have any new messages, so I picked her up and started swinging her around gently again.

I wondered if she knew what was going on at all, what it was that she knew, what she thought, and if she would ever remember this. Probably not. Someone had probably whirled me around like a helicopter in these same rooms when I was a kid, and I didn't remember. Who knew where those brain cells went.

I took her through my parents' room and my room and my sister's room, and down the stairs, and back in front of the television.

Almost the same old things

My friend Charlie, who I had gone to high school with, called me asking if I wanted to hang out, and because I didn't have any other plans, aside from hanging out around the house with my family, I decided to go out for a beer with him.

The bar we met at was across the grocery store I used to work at, and I thought about how I could go say Hi to my old co-workers. I was early for meeting Charlie, so I decided to go over and see what was going on.

I went towards the deli, which is where I had used to work. There was one person I kind of knew on duty, but it looked like he was getting yelled at by the manager, or they were having a spirited discussion among unequals. I didn't know the other two people who standing behind the counter. I walked out of the store.

I stood outside the front doors and lit a cigarette.

"Tom?"

I turned around. It was my friend Brenna.

"Hey," I said.

I walked over to her and we hugged.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m waiting for a friend at the bar across the street,” I said.

“Who?”

“My friend Charlie. We went to high school together.”

“Charlie Puckett?”

“Yeah. You know him?”

“Yeah, he and my best friend had a thing for a while. They dated.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, pretty crazy, right? Small world, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you want to come with me to get a drink with him? We need to catch up.”

“Sure,” she said. She got a cigarette out of her purse and she lit it and we started walking towards the bar.

She hadn’t gone to high school with me, but we had gone to the same church and grew up a few blocks from each other, and we had gone to the same schools for most of our lives until I went to Catholic high school and she went to the local public high school.

Charlie was sitting inside when we got there. We sat down at the bar next to him, with Brenna in between me and him. She directed her speech at him and I was anxious to get the bartender's attention, so I didn't really pay attention to what they were saying.

The television was showing the local news. The sportscaster was talking but I couldn't hear what he was saying, because the volume was turned off.

I ordered a Pabst and Brenna and Charlie ordered the same.

There was a 30 second commercial break on the television and then the world news came on.

"I fucking hate this healthcare shit," I heard the bartender say. He was talking to a group of people who were at the other side of the table.

"I don't want to stand here all night trying to get tips and make a living just so that my money can go to some crack whore who hasn't worked a day in her life."

Charlie looked over at me and raised his eyebrows. I shrugged and shook my head and smiled.

"What do you think of the new highway they're building?" Charlie asked me.

"I haven't seen it yet," I said.

“We were talking about how it’s wider now, and you can go faster,” said Brenna.

“This guy really fucking pisses me off,” I said, nodding towards the bartender, who was still ranting about politics.

“Eh, what can you do,” said Brenna. “Some people are idiots.”

“Yeah, but why do they have to be idiots around me,” I said.

“Well, at least you don’t still have to live here,” she said.

“True. Good point.”

“Let’s go to a different bar,” said Charlie.

We walked down the street to a bar and grill. We sat at a booth and a waitress brought us beers.

Later on, we were outside smoking cigarettes, and I wondered if I was good to drive.

“Do you guys think I’m good to drive?” I asked.

“How many have you had?” asked Charlie. “Four?”

“Yeah.”

“I think you’ll be OK.”

“OK.”

“Yeah, you’ll be fine,” said Brenna.

We said goodbye to each other. I hugged Brenna and shook Charlie's hand. I fiddled around with the radio in Mom's car as I watched them each drive off in different directions.

When I pulled into the driveway at home, all the lights were off inside. As I put the key in the front door and it creaked as I opened it, I was reminded of being a kid and coming home late and hoping Mom and Dad didn't notice or they didn't try to smell my breath or have a conversation with me.

I walked up to my room and said Hi to them as I walked past their room. There was no answer. I said it a second time and I heard rustling in their bed and Dad said, "Oh Hi, Tom. How was Charlie? Is everything alright?"

"He was good. Yeah, everything's fine. See you in the morning."

Sleep in heavenly peace

We rode in two cars to an Italian restaurant in the valley, just like we did every other Christmas Eve. The restaurant was called Iacommi's. Snow had been falling more or less continuously for five days. The end of the road to Iacommi's had a big 900 meter hill, and everyone was going really slow and pushing their brakes, because they were afraid their cars would just start sliding. It took five minutes for us to get down the hill. I noticed more government housing had been built along the sides of the road. At the bottom of the hill, a shopping complex that used to only have half a dozen shops now had many more shops, although there also looked like there were more empty shops now, too.

When we were kids, we hadn't gone to Iacommi's because the owner's daughter had been accused of throwing her newborn baby in the trash. Their business dropped off for a while, until someone else bought it. Then people came back.

We hung our coats up and Dad told them our name.

We sat there in silence as we waited for our water, our bread, and our food.

They brought the water and bread. Everyone took a piece.

"Hmm, this is good," said Mom.

"Yeah," I said.

My sister nodded.

I took a swipe of butter with my knife and put it on my piece of bread.

"You should use your butter knife," my sister said quietly.

"Does it really matter?" I asked.

"Well, kind of."

"I don't think the world will end. Stop treating me like a child. I'm 23."

"Okay, whatever."

There wasn't a lot of conversation over the course of the meal. We talked about church later that night, but only vaguely. We talked about the food.

On the drive home, I was looking at a field on one side the road when I remembered a recurring thought from my childhood. When I was maybe nine or ten, I would be driving around with my dad and my sister, or I would be walking around the house when no one else was home, and I would have these thoughts that were like nightmares, except that they weren't at night and I wasn't asleep—they were daydreams. I would imagine my brother and my mom being dead. I don't know why it was them, but it was. The rest of us had this sadness, this emptiness, this heavy emptiness that couldn't be described. I would

think about how we were carrying on, and I would imagine soft, slow, sad tunes always playing in the background. I never could figure out why I had started thinking those things, but after a while I stopped thinking that and was able to forget pretty easily, without much thought, that I ever had.

I got a media text from Nevin. It was of the subway station near our house. There was snow piled everywhere in the station. The trains evidently weren't running. It had been snowing in Ohio, but not that much.

I sat on my bed looking at OKCupid on my laptop for 4 hours before church that night. I had been talking to two different girls on OKCupid since my time home. We had made plans to meet in New York when I returned, or when they returned, or both.

I had daydreams about the OKCupid girls. They weren't wet daydreams, though. I dreamed about becoming intimate with them and talking about movies. Over the holidays, maybe I would be visiting their families, or they would visit mine. It would change things. It wouldn't be this monotony of the same annual routine.

Most years, I tried to dress as casually as possible for church, and Mom would always ask/tell me to change into something nicer. That year, I decided to just dress nice, so as to avoid any such confrontation.

"You look nice," she said, when I walked down into the living room.

Everyone was sitting around in their nice clothes. The television was on—it was a commercial break.

When we got to church, we sat in the back but by the aisle. Dad always liked to sit by the aisle. Otherwise, he got claustrophobic, I think. Like if the apocalypse happened, he would be screwed, if he was seated in the middle of a pew. Then again, he wasn't too much of a devotee to the whole religion thing, he

more just believed in a higher power, moral law, and that going to church was good because it made Mom feel good to have him next to her.

I saw Brenna with her mom; slowly, they made their way to the front-right side of the sanctuary and sat in a small pew.

I was relieved that I hadn't seen anyone I knew as we came into the church, but I doubted that would last. Maybe that was one of my problems: I had too much doubt. I should have had faith that I wouldn't have to talk to anyone I didn't want to talk to.

I got tired of standing up and sitting down every 5 minutes. Singing and then being silent every 5 minutes.

I saw two girls that I had been in church choir with. They were still in the church choir, except rather than being in the high school choir they were now in the old people's choir. "Adult" would have been the appropriate term to use, but that was what we always called that choir as kids: "the old people's choir."

We sang "Silent Night" at the end of the service and they dimmed the lights and everyone had candles. Each time that the end of the refrain came, everyone raised their candles. I watched the wax burning, dripping.

All I wanted for Christmas that year were the dreams I was having about the OKCupid girls to come true.

Pulling

“So what did you get for Christmas?”

“I got a new pair of speakers from my mom.”

“Oh, cool.”

“Yeah, now I can blast things louder on my computer. And there won’t be any fuzz or anything.”

“Awesome.”

“Also, my one friend got me the expansion pack for *Tower of Fury*. I’m excited.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a game. You have towers and then you have pieces and you roll dice to move your pieces along the board. You get two to five pieces, depending on your strength. You roll before the game to figure out your base strength, and then you can improve it as you move along. The main point is to collect attack cards, such as these ones in the expansion pack, and then collect treasure and— are you listening?”

“What? Yeah.”

“....”

"No."

"What are you looking at?"

"I'm looking at this person's profile. I can't figure out whether it's a bot or a person."

"Lemme see."

Jake shifted the computer screen towards Martin. Martin squinted at the screen. He clicked on the person's dating questions, their dating profile, their photos.

"It's gotta be a bot."

"What makes you say that?"

"The photos are too scandalous. The profile is too generic; it's trying really formulaically to sound like a 'kid-these-days'. They don't answer any of the questions."

"But a lot of people on our site don't answer questions."

"Yes, but according to our trackers, this account looks at a lot of other profiles, and sends them all pretty much the same message. If someone's account is that active, they almost always answer questions. Look."

"It says: 'Hey there. How are you? Cool musical choices. Want to chat?'"

“That’s definitely a bot. You can even look at the e-mail. What is that address? It sounds fake.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I guess.”

“It’s what I do.”

“So should I delete the profile from the system?”

“Yes.”

El Rincon

I woke up and went downstairs and my saw a couple kids I didn't know sitting with Dad.

"Good morning," I said to Dad.

"Oh, hey Tom. This is Brian and Tyrone. They are in debate club at the school."

"Hi," I said.

"Hey," they each said.

"We're playing Axis and Allies," he said.

"Oh, nice," I said, and I nodded at them.

The two kids nodded at me and returned their gaze to the board, but I kept staring at them. They were probably a bit freaked out. It must be kind of weird to go over to your teacher's house, especially to play board games. It might also be kind of boring, once they realized the game took thought and never ended.

I went back into the kitchen and poured a bowl of Crispix. The cereal was that kind of tastiness that isn't distinctive. It tasted like wood almost, but

delicious wood, but wood all the same, and wood that that would always taste the same, like wood.

“There’s some leftover strudel in the fridge,” said Dad. He was watching the two kids as they chose their move in Axis and Allies. They would probably pick some shitty territories and he would gradually annihilate them over the next three or four hours. That was what I always happened with me, when I was a kid. I would play with him, over and over again, and he would never let me win. He would also do the same strategy, the same color, the same attitude as he played the game and won. It was kind of like the Crispix I was eating.

.....

I sat in the dining room. I could hear them playing the game. I looked at that day’s Akron Beacon Journal. There were fights going on in the state assembly over budget cuts. The governor wanted to cut spending on the schools. One time on the phone my mom had told me not to tell anyone she had voted for him. She was in the union. She always voted Republican, but she had voted for him, so something hadn’t worked out.

There was a piece that previewed the next Browns game. There was an article next to it that speculated about the off-season. It didn't really mention the season that was currently in progress.

I finished my bowl of cereal and put it in the sink. I put some strudel on a plate and walked about to the couch room. I opened my computer. There was a message from a girl named Taylor I had talked to about seeing when I got back from New York. She mentioned the movie *Black Swan*. She said the guy who directed it was the best director in the world. It was in the theatres and I had meant to go see it but I never did, but I had watched it on my computer a few nights before.

I wrote back, "I didn't think it was one of Aronofsky's best films at all. I like how his last movie *The Wrestler* also dealt with an intense psychology of a main character, but rather than this movie, which has like SPD or MPD and imaginary people and shit, *The Wrestler* just presented a crazy fucked up guy in the raw or whatever. Like they didn't need to have imaginary friends or enemy in order to show his psychological chaos or something. Shit. This doesn't make any sense. Anyways, hope your holiday has been good. When did you say you are back to the city? I'm leaving tomorrow."

I sent the message and checked the other messages that were replies to my messages, which were often replies to their messages, and on and on.

.....

I walked outside and got in my mom's car. I drove down Old Route 8 towards El Rincon. There was a new shopping center being built, but it was mostly gravel and rocks and construction equipment, and that is how it had been for a while.

I thought, "They will probably put a Panera Bread there. People will go in a sit around a fake fire and read the newspaper and talk over coffee and eat soup from sourdough bread bowls. They might also put in like a Target or a Home Depot next to it."

I drove past the house of my best friend from when I was nine, but no one seemed to live there anymore.

I drove past a bus-stop and there were a bunch of people waiting there and that had probably been waiting awhile and they probably would wait a while.

In the El Rincon parking lot there was a guy standing in a building that looked like a concession stand. In front of that there were piles of Christmas trees

just lying there. A sign said, "BUY BACK TREES FOR \$5." I didn't know if that was a good deal. I didn't know how much a tree would even cost. It felt like trees should be free.

I went inside and there weren't many other people there but it was 1 in the afternoon so that made sense. Brenna wasn't there yet so I sat and stared at the menu. There were deals on margaritas for happy hour. Different margaritas cost different amounts but I didn't know why because there was just different brands of alcohol in them, but I assumed the higher costing stuff was better tasting. I order the cheapest of the three different types; it cost \$3.

There was a middle-aged couple sitting in a booth next to the one I was in and they weren't having a conversation.

Brenna texted me to say she was two minutes away.

Five minutes later she walked into the restaurant. We said hellos and she looked at a menu. The couple in the booth next to us started looking at us. I thought, "Get a fucking life you lame-ass boring booshie fucks."

The waiter came over and she ordered a margarita.

"What do you think of the construction they are doing on Old 8?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't really think about it."

I nodded. I stared at the people in the booth next to us. It was mainly just the guy that was looking at us. He saw me looking and at him and he stared at his food.

"I never really went to the old shopping center when it was there," said Brenna.

"You mean you didn't go to KB Toys?" I asked. "Or the Dollar Tree?"

She shook her head.

"What about Firestone Tires?"

She shook her head.

"What about Goodwill?"

"Yeah, I went there."

"There we go."

The waiter came over to our table.

"Is everything okay?" he asked. "Can I get you anything?"

"Do you want to just split a pitcher of this stuff?" I asked Brenna.

She shook her head.

"Okay, I'll just have another one of these?" I said to the waiter.

"Just one?" he asked.

I looked at Brenna.

"I'll have one, too," she said.

Two hours later we were sitting there with a table full of margaritas. It was 3'oclock. I had kept asking if she wanted to get a pitcher and she had kept saying no, and we ended up each drinking a pitchers' worth on our own.

The couple in the booth next to us had left. The family that had sat there after them had also left. There was no one sitting there. There were only a handful of people in the whole restaurant.

"I don't know if I can drink anymore," said Brenna.

"Yeah, I'm kind of shit faced," I said. "I don't know how I am going to drive home."

"Take the back streets. Stay off of Portage and Old 8."

"Yeah, it's only 5 minutes anyways."

Outside we smoked a cigarette and looked at the junior high school we went to. It had bricks that were a mix of yellow and red and brown. The school lawn was mostly green but there were several patches of dead grass.

"I should head home," I said. I flicked my cigarette on the ground and tapped on it with my shoe.

"You're leaving tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"It was nice seeing you, Tom," she said. "Have a safe trip back to New York."

"You too," I said. "Well, no, but you know what I mean."

We hugged. I got in my car and drove home drunk. But it was the middle of the day and no one was really out and I took the back streets and it was only 5 minutes or so to get home, so I figured it was safe.

.....

Everyone was out except my dad was out when I got home. He was sitting at the dining room table looking at an Ipad. I kept forgetting that my parents had bought an Ipad.

"Did they leave?" I asked my dad.

"Who?" he said.

"Those kids who were playing the game."

"Oh, yeah."

I went up to my room and laid down. I drifted in and out of consciousness for an hour or two. I thought of masturbating several times and even touched myself for a while but didn't come or try to come.

I looked at my old sports trophies on top of my dresser. Some of them I got just for being on the team. I remembered when I realized that I wouldn't be a sports star; it was when I got benched on the basketball team in the 8th grade. I remembered that once the reality of my own normalcy set in I began thinking about my kids. I wanted them to become sports stars. I wanted them to do something. When I was in 8th grade I wanted to have kids. It didn't make any sense. I didn't want kids.

New Year

I had lots of goals for the New Year: I wanted to be a vegetarian, I wanted to write a book or at least an essay or review (although I didn't know about what), I

wanted to exercise on a consistent basis, I wanted to be less social but more socially productive, I wanted to make more money and spend less money.

I made myself a veggie burger on a bagel with cream cheese. I asked Sheila if she wanted a veggie burger.

“No,” she said. “I’m going to eat at Oasis Falafel.”

“What are you doing tonight?” I said. “I hate New Year’s Eve,” I added. I didn’t know why I added that. I guess because I did.

“I’m going to this warehouse party thing in Bushwick with Danielle and Nina,” she said.

“It’s like a dance party or what?”

“I guess so. I think it’s more of a show. Ariel Pink is playing. Or doing a DJ set. Something.”

I approved with a frown and a nod.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m still deciding,” I said.

I didn’t have plans. My main plan was to meet up with my friend who was visiting from out of town and latch onto him. He wasn’t even staying with me. We were friends but not super close friends. I didn’t have New Year’s Eve Plans. I felt like I should, though.

He said he would meet me in Williamsburg. Sheila and I took the L to Bedford Ave. We got out to the street and it was crowded. But no one was really out, yet, it didn't seem. It seemed like everyone was on there was to somewhere, or on their way home to get ready, or get food.

I wasn't hungry when we sat down at Oasis Falafel but I ordered baklava.

Jack called me and asked, "Where are you?"

I said "We're at a falafel place on the corner of Bedford by the train station. "

"You mean Oasis Falafel?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's it."

I thought about how he might have hung out in Williamsburg more than me, even though he lived in Chicago. He had hung out there a lot in college.

"Who do you work for?" I asked.

"You know who I work for, Tom," he said.

"Goldman Sachs?"

"Yes."

"But what is that? What they do?"

"We invest for businesses. We help market businesses."

"But you are a business."

“Yes.”

I wanted to ask him other questions. I wanted to ask how he had been an anarcho-punk when we were in college and now we were less than a year out of college and he was working for an investment bank.

“Do you like it?”

“I don’t know, Tom. I get a pay check.”

I nodded. That made sense.

.....

Sheila left for her party and Jack and I made our way over to a bar a few blocks away. Some of our college friends were there.

It got to be 11:30 and there were four us and then my roommate Homer showed up after he got off work. Panic began to set in that we wouldn’t have a large group of people around us who we vaguely knew who could shout with us in happiness about the New Year. If we didn’t do this then we would be depressed, not just for that night, but for the whole year. The New Year.

Homer said he had a text from someone and they were at their apartment a few blocks away.

“Who is it?” I asked.

He said who it was.

“I don’t know them,” I said.

He said I should know who they were, that I did know who they were. I was pretty sure that I didn’t, but I followed.

We started running because it was five til midnight. We got the building but we didn’t know the apartment number. He called the person but they didn’t pick up. He started hitting all the buzzers by the door. Someone buzzed us in. We entered and listened for sounds. They were above us. We could hear a count down. We rushed up the stairs. They were shouting “Two” as we ran in the door, which luckily was unlocked. Some people looked over at us but most people didn’t notice. Everyone was screaming. People were opening bottles of champagne.

I made a fake smile and said “Yay!” or something to Homer and Jack and our friends Dosia and Bodhi.

I cracked a beer and headed over towards the window. I saw a few faces I recognized but I wasn’t going to go up to someone whose name I didn’t know and say, “Hey, weren’t you in the Sociology of Urban Holocaust with me?” I wasn’t drunk enough yet.

.....

At some point I tried to enter a room I was allowed to enter and there were a couple people doing blow and acting dumb and paranoid. At some point I went outside with Dosia to smoke a cigarette and I was sort of hitting on her and that just wasn't allowed because she was too good of a friend and I just didn't want to do that. At some point I went back inside while she talked to people. I couldn't find my beer and Jack said, "Here, dude. Just take mine." I took a swig and felt ill. I went into the stairwell. No one was around; everyone was in the apartment. I puked all over the stairs leading to the apartment. I went back inside and told Jack I just puked. He didn't seem to believe me. I left the apartment, walked downstairs, outside, and lit a cigarette. I thought about it was funny that I had puked all over those assholes stairs, but I felt that if I laughed I would puke again right there all over the sidewalk.

I started walking down Bedford. I lived near Bedford, but in a different neighborhood. Bedford Avenue goes almost all the way across Brooklyn, north to south. I started walking, vaguely looking for cabs.

Groups of people kept intimidating me away from flagging cabs.

I flagged down one cab and walked up to it and the driver said, "Where are you going?"

I told him I was going to Bed-Stuy and he said, "Oh, no."

The number of bars started to decrease. The number of shitty looking apartment buildings started to increase. The number of people on the streets decreased until there hardly was any. I wondered if I was in the Hasidic Jewish area and that was why, because they didn't go out at night probably, or if I was in a shitty neighborhood, and that was why.

I flagged down another cab and walked up to it and the driver said, "Oh, I thought you were with those people." He pointed to a group of college-looking kids down the block. I said no. He drove away.

I kept walking and noticed that I was near the Marcy Houses. I looked for cabs. There was one a while down the street. I waited and it drove past without stopping and I held up my hand. A few minutes later another one came and I flagged it, too. It stopped.

"Where are you going?" the cabbie asked.

"Bed-Stuy. Lafayette and Tompkins," I said.

"No," he said.

“Please,” I said.

He looked at me. He shook his head and shrugged.

He started driving down Bedford. When we got to Lafayette I told him he could just let me off.

I paid and got out of the cab. As I turned the corner onto Lafayette I ran into Sheila and 3 other girls I had gone to college with. We were all surprised to see each other, but not that surprised, because they were really drunk and I was too depressed and tired.

It wasn't a surprise that we ended up at a gay-friendly bar, as they called it. They were all lesbians or bi, including Sheila, who lived in the same room as Niki in my apartment.

Drinks at the bar were free but you had to pay a cover, and then it took forever to get a drink.

I kept going outside to smoke cigarettes.

I thought, “It's fucking cold. This by far the most fucked up date for everyone in the city to go outside and party.”

I finished my second drink and walked home alone without saying goodbye to them.

When I got back to the apartment, I puked again in the toilet before I passed out.

In the morning they were all in the living room of my apartment snoring in uncomfortable-looking positions on the couches or floor. Homer and Jack were there too.

I thought about ordering fried chicken.