STARS

University of Central Florida
STARS

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019

2007

Frat Star

Nathan Andrew Holic University of Central Florida

Part of the Creative Writing Commons Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation

Holic, Nathan Andrew, "Frat Star" (2007). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019.* 3205. https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/3205



FRAT STAR

by

NATHAN HOLIC B.A. University of Central Florida, 2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of English in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2007

ABSTRACT

This thesis, a social novel in the tradition of Tom Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities and Michael Chabon's The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay, is all at once an attentive firstperson study of a twenty-something man close to his cracking point in his first post-college job, a detailed exposé of national fraternities, and the sweeping panoramic view of an entire generation of over-programmed college students searching for direction. Frat Star follows a fragile college graduate named Charles Washington, who takes a position as an "Educational Consultant" with a national fraternity in his first semester after graduation. For sixteen straight weeks, he drives across the country, from college to college and fraternity house to fraternity house, meeting with alumni and students, and living on frat house couches and in seedy off-exit hotels. As he travels, the pressure mounts for Charles to convince his family and friends back home that this is a "Real Job" and that his work actually matters to the business world, but at each new fraternity house he visits, his yearning for the old college atmosphere grows-the beer, the parties, the girls!threatening to send him into a frightening tailspin. How can he be a professional when the temptations of youth still seem so attractive? And before Charles can sort out what is happening in his own life, he finds himself stuck in a vicious tug-of-war between students, alumni, administrators, and the national fraternity, when he must deal with one particularly abrasive undergraduate fraternity and the aftermath of its disastrous decisions.

Spanning thousands of miles, from Florida to California, from Illinois to New Mexico, this thesis takes us inside fraternity houses, into their attics and their basements, behind the scenes of their rituals and ceremonies, inside their parties, inside their heads, giving us a view not only of the power of the national fraternity, but the disconnect between alumnus and student, between Baby Boomer and Generation X and Millennial. Incorporating research as varied as the

ii

generational studies of Howe and Strauss, and Alexandra Robbins' psychological study of the "Quarterlife Crisis," *Frat Star* stretches across the country, stretches across genre, stretches from text to illustration, but is ultimately the human story of a young man's longing for morality, independence, and purpose in a world he simply has not been prepared to understand.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| PART I: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT1 |
|---|
| Chapter One: Friday Night Workshop2 |
| Chapter Two: Alumni Weekend21 |
| Chapter Three: The Ship55 |
| Chapter Four: Emergency Visit97 |
| Chapter Five: Flight to Las Cruces154 |
| PART II: FRAT STAR |
| Chapter Six: Charles Washington205 |
| Chapter Seven: Juarez |
| Chapter Eight: Frat Star |
| Chapter Nine: The Millennials |
| PART III: THE NATIONAL FRATERNITY |
| Chapter Ten: Headquarters |
| Chapter Eleven: Debrief |
| Chapter Twelve: Walter LaFaber422 |
| Chapter Thirteen: Back to Illinois445 |
| Chapter Fourteen: The Interest Group487 |
| Chapter Fifteen: The Colonization |
| Chapter Sixteen: The Second Week |
| Chapter Seventeen: The Leadership Retreat |

PART I: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Chapter One: Friday Night Workshop

Summer Training in Indianapolis University of Kentucky East Tennessee State University University of Virginia—Green Valley

University of Pittsburgh

Shippensburg University St. Joseph's University New Mexico State University Texas Tech California State University—Fresno California State University—Highland California State University—Long Beach California State University—San Francisco University of Delaware Marshall University Miami University (Ohio) University of Toledo Central Michigan University University of Michigan Bowling Green State University Purdue University Indiana University Headquarters – Mid-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis) University of Oklahoma University of Kansas University of Missouri-Columbia University of Nebraska Iowa State University Thanksgiving Vacation Bradley University University of Iowa Headquarters (Indianapolis) Christmas Vacation

University of Kentucky to East Tennessee State. East Tennessee State to Green Valley College. Green Valley to Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh to Shippensburg. To St. Joseph's. To New Mexico State. To Texas Tech, Fresno State, Highland. University after university, college after college for sixteen weeks. A full semester of travel. Three days at one school, pack up and drive, then three days at the next. Twenty-four hours a day at fraternity houses. Twenty-four hours a day on the road for business travel.

I'm at the University of Pittsburgh now—the end of week two—and I'm in the Chapter Room of a crumbling two-story fraternity house so rife with a rotten-orange-juice smell that I've been fighting my gag reflex since I arrived two and a half days ago. All around me, on deteriorating couches and rusty metal fold-out chairs, sit the twenty-five dues-paying live-in brothers of the Pittsburgh chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity. During the day, this is the "Main Foyer" (at least, that's what the *blueprints* call it), but when the fraternity assembles for meetings, the brothers drag couches and chairs from all of the first-floor bedrooms and closets and construct a haphazard meeting facility. The Chapter Room, they call it. Among my job responsibilities: document and report any damages to alumni-owned housing facilities. Here, I've almost given up. Where do I start? The burn marks on the front door, perhaps? The rotting railings of the front porch? The stagnant liquor-beer-trash-water in the dark corners of the basement?

I'm a paid staff member for the Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity Headquarters, one of three Educational Consultants, and each of us is responsible for covering a chunk of the country—my travel region is the "Great Midwest," stretching from New Jersey to Nebraska and visiting the undergraduate fraternity chapters thriving (or surviving) at the college campuses across our regions.

Three days at one school, pack up and drive, then three days at the next.

My car is my office. My home: the fraternity house guest rooms of the Great Midwest. My job—my *business*—is fraternity. We are recent college graduates, the three Educational Consultants, responsible for fulfilling intensive visit responsibilities at each chapter. Collecting paperwork and completing key database updates, for instance. Hosting presentations and facilitating workshops. One-on-ones with each of the chapter's eight officers, roundtable discussions with the Alumni Advisory Boards, meetings with the campus Greek Advisor and the Coordinator of the Office of Student Activities or the Dean of Campus Life or the Director of Clubs and Organizations. We are responsible for investigating and uncovering any infractions of NKE Supreme Laws: hazing allegations, housing code violations, failure to meet alcohol and social guidelines.

We are...*I* am...responsible for modeling appropriate behavior and instilling in the brothers of each chapter the mission of Nu Kappa Epsilon: "to develop our members into the socially responsible leaders of the next generation."

Critics tell me that it's just college. It's just a fraternity. My father, in fact, questioned my decision to take this job after I graduated this past Spring. "You act like you're going to save the world," he said. "Charles, you're going to be working for a fraternity. Do you realize what that sounds like?" True, this might seem insignificant, but this is serious. This is big business. Millions of dollars each year pass through some fraternity chapters. Old chapters on historic campuses, especially. Alabama, Indiana, Kansas, Cornell. They live in ten-columned plantation-style mansions with eighty live-in members and full breakfast-lunch-dinner meal plans, cleaning services, Spring Formals, alumni anniversary banquets, faculty luncheons. And each year, millions of dollars pass through the National Headquarters, the governing body for all 125

undergraduate chapters: student fees, alumni contributions, investments, grants, conferences. And Nu Kappa Epsilon isn't the only national fraternity. There are more than sixty. Sigma Chi, Delta Upsilon, Beta Theta Pi, Pi Kappa Phi. So many Greek letter combinations that you start wondering how any of them didn't accidentally duplicate one another. And the National Fraternities belong to professional associations: FEA, FIPG, ICE, NEA, CAAA. Fraternities might have started as secretive six or seven-member orders, and their history might be captured in nostalgic turn-of-the-century photographs, the corners yellowing around young faces eager for fraternal bonds, eager to share professed values through rituals and handshakes and ceremonies. But now it's much more than that. There's too much money for this to waste away into "drinking clubs."

These are *leadership* organizations. Providing members with more programming and more opportunities for personal and professional growth than any other youth organizations in America, Boy Scouts probably included.

Leadership. That's our business, our mission. That's my mission.

The only problem is: some of the chapters know it, and some of them don't. Some bad habits—alcoholism, unsafe parties, hazing—still persist, despite our mission. Tonight, a Friday night, is the end of my fourth chapter visit of the semester. I'm in the middle of an Alcohol Education Workshop, the risk management component of the National Fraternity's "DO IT!" initiative. Two years ago, NKE suffered three alcohol deaths in a single semester (Brandon Kane, Wisconsin, fell from a balcony during a Big Brother ceremony; Eddie Sandor, San Jose State, asphyxiated on his own vomit; and Kyle Benet, UTEP, died when, after a party, he drove his truck into the concrete divider in a Texas highway). We've been aggressive since then, establishing zero-tolerance policies and conducting alcohol workshops, like this one, designed to

both reduce rising insurance costs due to ongoing litigation as a result of alcohol-related injuries or deaths, and to educate members on the dangers of alcoholism.

Currently, I'm sitting silently on a sofa so saturated with beer, liquor, wine, soda, smashed candybars, cereal milk, rainwater, and demon piss, that the cushions are probably more liquid than solid. The assembled fraternity members are busy finishing an exercise I gave them about ten minutes ago; I passed out Sharpie markers and tear-away sheets of paper from my portable presentation pad to every member.

"I want you to create a timeline of your life," I told them all (and I could almost *hear* the squishy noise of everyone rolling their eyes in unison), "but I want the timeline to focus on your life with alcohol. For instance, your *birth* would be your first drink. Major events might include a drunk driving experience, a night where you made a poor choice because of alcohol, or maybe just your twenty-first birthday."

I checked my watch.

"Feel free to have a little fun with this, but make sure to respect your peers," I said. "I'll give you fifteen minutes." And since then, the members have been attempting—with various degrees of awkwardness—to draw their timelines, using the floor or the couch as their desks, sharpies poking holes through the paper. After I passed out the materials, I slipped from my front-and-center position as Presenter to my current position on the couch as Observer.

I don't expect much of this workshop, of this visit. Pittsburgh is one of those groups that sets the stereotype, that puts *Animal House* to shame. A collection of "Frat Stars," as we call them at Headquarters. "Very *fratty*." A group that lives in the '80s, still, in a decade where anything went. An underperforming franchise for our business. Eight members on academic ineligibility. Four members serving university probation for underage drinking. Two live-in

brothers who are not even enrolled in school this semester. I'll leave Pittsburgh tomorrow with all mandatory tasks completed, with some very slight indications of progress in some areas, but without any real *breakthrough*. I've pitched a good game, but these guys haven't given me any run support.

"Yo, EC," someone calls from across the Chapter Room.

He says it again, and I look up. EC: Educational Consultant.

"My name is Charles," I say.

"Right," he says. "Sorry, man." He's wearing dirty gym shorts and an ash-gray shirt cut-off sleeves—with a faded slogan across the chest. Looks like it says *What's My Name* or *Ain't the Same*. Or maybe *Play the Game*? I met him yesterday—he smelled like rusty barbells and weeks-old laundry—and we talked about the National Fraternity and the other Pennsylvania chapters for a bit. He *loves* this fraternity and all of his brothers, he kept saying, but he *hates* "Nationals." We're always getting his chapter in trouble, he said. I've already forgotten his name. Could be James or Joe or Jason. So many names, so quick. I need a system to remember them all. "How much longer we got for this?" he asks.

"We've got a few minutes," I say, and I struggle to lean forward on the sofa, to look professional, and I slip, sink back into the cushions. The couch is broken and the springs squeak unceasingly. Feels like I'm getting eaten alive by a soggy stack of laundry. I smooth my dress pants again and again. Still dry, somehow. "Don't worry," I say, "I don't expect these timelines to be artistic masterpieces."

James (or Joe, or Jason) nods, goes back to darkening some gigantic black letters on his paper.

Some chapters get it and some chapters don't.

The University of Pittsburgh, our "Delta Beta" chapter, does *not* get it. For the past two days of my visit, they've treated me like a Headquarters Spy, like an enemy, just because I'm trying to enforce standards. One of them dropped a couple homemade business cards on my suitcase, all of them featuring the job title, "Fun Nazi." I forced myself to laugh when they asked me if I liked the gag, but I didn't smile. This chapter doesn't get it, the *mission* of leadership development.

For these guys, NKE Fraternity is a drinking club.

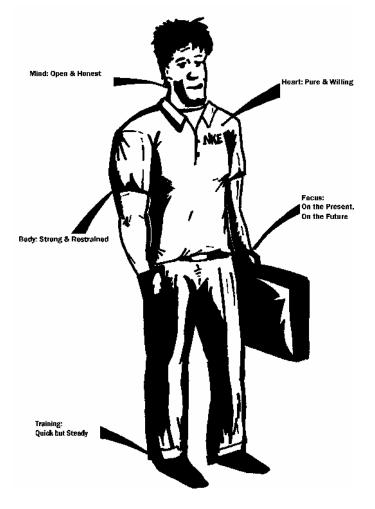
I remember college, sure. Been there, done that. I'm twenty-two, graduated four months ago from Edison University with a degree in Organizational Communication (minor in Finance). My father told me to shop around, find my most compatible long-term employer, put the degree to use. Told me that working for a fraternity would be a waste of my time, an extension of college. Little more than a flop-house road trip. Non-stop beer binge. "You're on your own now, you understand?" he said as he gripped my shoulder, neither with hostility nor with a sense of encouragement, his few gray hairs seeming to shine in his thick black scalp like the white-hot embers beneath the dark logs of a dying bonfire. "You're a college grad," he said when I packed up and left home for this job. "You support yourself, now, job or no job. That's the life of a professional." But with my Organizational Communication Bachelor's, I'd had a tough time figuring out exactly where to apply, what to do with my degree. Then, Nu Kappa Epsilon flew me to Indianapolis for a weekend, introduced me to their strategic plan, to what fraternity should be: leadership, training for the professional world, a learning laboratory to mold socially responsible citizens. As a Consultant, I would be on the front lines at America's universities, battling the fraternity stereotype and building the ideal leadership development organization. The Executive Director—Dr. Jim Simpson, Delta Chapter, '68, a University of North Carolina

graduate with a tobacco road accent so slow and soothing that everything he says sounds like a thought-out compliment—told me that I was a "Diamond Candidate." President of my chapter and Vice President of Student Government, he said and shook his head respectfully. Cum Laude. *Diamond Candidate*. Told me that he had no doubt in his mind that I could make the tough decisions, that I could help achieve the mission.

And Walter LaFaber, the Director of Chapter Operations for the past ten years at the NKE Headquarters, a former football standout at the University of Alabama, a man with massive shoulders and an Adam's Apple so profound that it seems to nearly pierce the skin of his throat, put his hand on my shoulder and said that I reminded him of...well, *himself*. "I look at you," LaFaber said in his characteristic low voice (it's a combination of linebacker grit and motivational speaker energy), "and I see a man ready to become a true professional. I see a man who's ready to make a difference in the world."

As an Educational Consultant, my contract would run just a single year, but career options would blossom afterwards: I could get a job at almost any university, LaFaber said, in college administrations, in student personnel or recruiting, in fundraising and alumni outreach. "Fraternity is all about becoming a man, you know that," he said. "But half of that is the networking, gathering contacts, meeting the right people." If I can finish this year on the road, then, and if I can fashion myself into a man distinctly different from the rowdy frat boy I once was, it won't matter what my degree was or what my father thinks. I'll have a real taste of professional success, which is judged not in the numbers of a college GPA but in the letters that spell out the job title on a business card, and I can slide smoothly into a position in Collegiate Student Personnel.

Dr. Simpson called me a "Diamond Candidate," but LaFaber said that I was damn close to the textbook "Marathon Man," the hand-drawn diagram in our pledge books that represents everything the National Fraternity wants to build its members to be:



I took the job, the challenge, and before this semester began, I created a strict daily schedule designed to achieve maximum efficiency in both my personal and professional lives. I created a goal sheet for my sixteen-week Fall Travel Schedule: goal-setting ensures structure and productive living and respectability: key categories include "Exercise" and "Healthy Eating," and individual goals include "Fast Food only four times/ weekly," "Jog three times/ weekly," and "No gas station candy purchases/ EVER." Three straight months of life as an Educational Consultant, of fraternity house hopping. Don't need to drift back into the college lifestyle, into drinking games and late-night pizza and waking up at noon on someone's sofa. Professionalism is everything.

I try to lean forward from the couch, try to reach my notebook on the condiment-stained coffee table, and I fall back into the couch. I lean forward again, *stretch*, grab the outline: "Life with Alcohol Timeline," it says, "15 min."

I've given them twenty.

"All right, guys," I say and push myself up, stand and wobble, pat my behind—still dry, surprisingly—and walk to the center of the room. "Good job, guys. Very good," I say. I clap my hands, attempt to make eye contact with as many of the fraternity brothers as possible, many of whom are still coloring or drawing unrelated pictures on their timelines. I keep my demeanor as friendly and positive as possible (laugh, smile, bend the knees so I don't appear wooden like an old English teacher, keep one hand in pocket), because that's how Walter LaFaber presents and it *works*, but I can never mimic his voice or his mannerisms as well as I'd like. "So tell me, if you can," I say, "why I had you all participate in this exercise."

The brothers trudge back to their seats, timeline papers clenched in their hands, but no one immediately volunteers an answer. Most stare at the floor, look in different directions, check the time on their cell phones.

"Anyone?" I ask.

A couple seconds pass.

I can hear my own heartbeat in my ears.

"We're a bunch of drunks, yo," someone says finally, and everyone laughs.

"Well," I say, try to smile. "Anyone else?"

A couple seconds pass.

"So," I say, "how many of you were surprised by your timelines?"

No answer initially, but then one hand rises reluctantly, slinks upward like a periscope poking out of the water. Then, another hand rises. Three or four more. All right, all right. Not so bad. Very good response, in fact. Most of the hands then drop, flop back into laps as though I had snake-charmed them all into the air and now my spell is broken. One of the brothers, though—and I think I met him, think that his name is Tony—hasn't realized that he's the only one with his hand still raised. I point at him and say, "Great. What surprised you about *your* timeline?"

"What?" Tony says, looks around. "Oh. I don't know. Guess I...guess I've had more good times than I thought?" A few random snickers throughout the room. I think he's done. He's made a joke. How mature. And this is probably the best I'll get out of this workshop, this chapter, just jokes and snappy—

"Putting it all on paper, I mean," he says. "I had some good times, but holy shit, I think I've spent more money on alcohol than I've ever had at any one time, you know?"

Everyone laughs.

But, wait. Wait. This is productive laughter.

"Excellent," I say. "Putting it all on paper. That's a great point. Anyone else?"

"These guys made me into an alcoholic," someone blurts out and everyone laughs again. And I'm about to scowl but then I'm thinking, *wait*, this is productive. This is. I'm doing all right. "I'm just joking, you know," he says. "I ain't complaining at all. But I probably could've made a whole other timeline just from the time I've been living in this house. Maybe that says something."

"Interesting," I say. "Thank you. That's a very honest observation. It seems to me that these timelines, more than anything else, allow us to see trends in our habits. When I created mine, you'd never believe the things I learned about myself."

And, amazingly, I feel like I have their attention. They're sitting forward in their seats, all thirty of them alert, elbows at angles and palms pressed against their knees, baseball caps lifted out of their eyes; for the first time in the presentation, their eyes are wide with interest. Like they actually want to talk about this, like they actually want to *get it*. Breakthrough moment! I've got my breakthrough moment!

"Would anyone like to share their timelines?" I ask.

And now, without a moment's hesitation, someone stands from a fold-out chair, eager but unsure, like he's been recognized at a major awards show and must now deliver his speech. He's wearing a navy NYPD shirt and a Yankees hat turned backward, bill flipped up. I think he's either the "Vice President" or the "Director of Chairmen" for the chapter, one of the officers I've met briefly but haven't talked with extensively.

"Thanks for volunteering," I say, and he nods and walks to the center of the Chapter Room, holds his paper high for everyone to see. It's the typical Life with Alcohol timeline, a bumpy black line from left to right across the page, sharp date-lines shooting upward like porcupine spikes, each carrying a barely-legible description. Typical. But for Pittsburgh, this is progress.

I slip away, sink back into the couch.

"At first," NYPD says, "I was going to try to draw every time I've been drunk on this one paper." He's got a coughy coal miner's voice, but he's keeping everyone's attention. "But we

only had fifteen minutes to do this," he says. "Time was limited, you know what I'm saying? Had to pick and choose."

Everyone laughs.

"So I was like, well, I could just write the times when I've puked," he says. He waves his hand across his timeline. He says he can't even remember all the times he's puked, but he tried anyway.

He says that it's pathetic.

He's learning. They're all learning.

When I gave this presentation at the University of Kentucky, my very first visit, one of the brothers stood up and tore off his Wildcats hat and said in this ultra-bluegrass voice, "You calling us *alcoholics*?" Took me the rest of the presentation just to convince him that I wasn't trying to insult anyone, that I never said that alcohol was evil or that it made anyone a bad person or an alcoholic, that I was only trying to help them understand alcohol responsibility. That alcohol education is an important part of leadership development. I have a small stack of "Fun Nazi" business cards, but that only means that these Pittsburgh guys have a sense of humor. Here, now, they're still sharing, learning.

Someone else stands and volunteers.

Says that his name is Gerry and he's an alcoholic, and everyone laughs.

Shows his timeline.

Points to the major events in his college career. Big Brother night. Homecoming. End of Finals Week. End of freshman year. Sophomore year. Junior year. The night of his first sexual experience. The first night he got drunk with his parents. And he tells a story about the first night he lived in the dorms here at Pittsburgh, how his father left him with two 12-packs of Rolling

Rock for his mini-fridge, how he and his roommate played Power Hour and they both got wasted and paranoid and stupid and didn't know how to get rid of the bottles and they spent the night sneaking the bottles and the caps and the cardboard cases out of the dorms and across campus to the Meal Hall dumpster, little by little, any way they could. Picture that movie *Shawshank Redemption*, he says, when Andy breaks out of prison over the course of many years by carrying chunks of his chiseled wall in his shoes and dumping them into the prison yard.

And it's a good story and everyone's into it, having fun. And I'm laughing, too, caught in the moment and laughing because I did almost the same thing my freshman year at Edison University. Carried a backpack of empty bottles out of the dorms. Got caught, too, and had to explain to my parents why I was on university probation before classes had even started.

And he keeps going, listing each offshoot of his Life with Alcohol timeline, and I *do* understand this guy, Gerry. This college kid. That's part of my mission. Part of progress is understanding. Not just condemning. And I'm thinking how much his timeline is like mine. Drunk on Bid Night. Drunk after Initiation Night.

He talks about his twenty-first birthday, and I'm thinking of my own.

I'm right back there, right back at my alma mater, right back at EU, right back in Fort Myers, Florida. Right back at Hem-Haw's on Central, sinking into the dark cushions of the back booth. Boom. Shot of Jack, from Ronnie. Boom. Sex on the Beach, from Tara. Boom. Three Wise Men, from Eddie. Boom boom boom. Knocking 'em down. I'm right back there, singing "Under the Bridge" along with the jukebox, making out with Natalie, telling somebody that I'm going to kick his ass cause he called me a pussy, and then it's boom boom boom and three more shots, and then I'm face down on the floor, under the booth's table, New England Clam Chowder vomit chunked across the dark floor like I sprayed it out with a hose. George, grabbing me by my

left arm, dragging me under the table, across the vomit, dragging me out the only way that he could get to me. Dragging me out of Hem-Haw's *twenty* minutes before I officially turned twenty-one.

College. Yes, I've been there, done that.

And I'm staring straight up now, looking at nothing, looking at everything, while Gerry explains his last timeline caption. The ceiling fan rests motionless overhead, broken and beyond repair, its blades (and the ceiling itself) splashed with dried caramel-brown blotches. The chapter president told me that someone tossed an open beer into the fan as it spun, and instead of scrubbing the splattered mess with hot water and a sponge and 409, the chapter's elected House Manager pulled a can of spray-paint from the supply room and drenched the stain with a coat of white paint. The stain had recently broken through the paint, the chapter president said, and was now growing larger.

My face remained flat as he told the story. Later, though, I imagined a more productive reaction. I imagined a discussion about "respect for housing," about "personal responsibility," about "pride in the fraternity." I imagined unclasping my laptop and sitting down and working with the President and the House Manager to create a set of bullet-point action initiatives that could make this house into a clean and profitable unit. But the timing wasn't quite right; I always swallow my words or say the wrong things.

Gerry walks back to his seat and the chapter applauds him. I understand Gerry. I understand this chapter. Timing is right, now. "One more timeline," I say. "Anyone else?" One more.

"Yeah, I'll go," someone says, and it's James (or Joe, or Jason). The one who smells like gym clothes and basketball courts. The one who hates "Nationals" but loves his fraternity brothers. When we talked earlier, I should have convinced him of the mission of the National Fraternity. I could have. I know it. He walks to the center of the Chapter Room, presses his timeline against the wall, smoothes it so we can all follow the Sharpie-drawn milestones. And I can almost feel the room pulsing with electricity, now, hairs standing on end, as though we're all waiting for lightning to strike and sizzle the house from the inside out, reduce everything—the rotting boards and the broken toilets and the broken members—to a pile of post-disaster rubble, a scene of destruction like the one the cable news stations played after the NKE fraternity house fire at Auburn two years ago. Everyone in the room is buzzing, ready to be reduced, ready for the lightning strike breakthrough so we can clean up the rubble, clean up this mess of a chapter.

Develop our members into the socially-responsible leaders of the next generation. One more. And this is it.

"All right," James (or Joe, or Jason) says, and his timeline is fairly empty. "Here goes. This is when I took my first drink," and he points to a scribbled date at one side of his sheet, "and this is when I learned that I'm a huge fucking alcoholic," and he points to the other side, where the word "today" is drawn in all-caps. "The end," he says.

The entire room seems to burp one quick uncontainable laugh, then swallow and fall silent. What did he just say? Silence, now. Silent as the inside of a coffin. Heads turn. All eyes on me. Staring at me like I'm supposed to be offended, and I'm trying to think of the right reaction. The reaction a *professional* should have. Anger? Surprise? Disgust? This is *business*. You don't do something like that in the business world. And then someone laughs...cackles...in a way that sounds as if it's aimed at me.

And then someone else.

And someone claps with great enthusiasm, and then someone else says, "There you go, Jay," and the room descends into a growing cheer chorus, and everyone's laughing and clapping now, hollering. And then someone pushes someone else off a couch and people are throwing paper. Disgust, right? This is business.

And, shit, right there—ten seconds ago—was when I was supposed to say something, supposed to grab hold of this slippery moment and force it to stay still in my hands and straighten and look meaningful. And I fucking missed it, and once again I'm forcing myself to cough out a chuckle, and all I can do is try to look like I'm supposed to look the way I do, however I do, and I'm clapping and telling everyone that I hope they had a good time and that they got something out of the workshop.

"You're all right," James (or Joe or Jason) says. "You're all right with us."

The chapter gives a mild applause for me and thanks me for coming; mostly, their backs are turned as they clap, eyes already focused on whatever destination—upstairs, bedrooms, bathrooms—has already been on their minds for the last forty minutes of this workshop. It's the sort of polite reception but scattered reception one expects for the unknown opening act of a small rock concert. This minor task finished, they shuffle out of the Chapter Room, pushing couches back into bedrooms and folding and stacking metal chairs. The President—another semi-familiar face, another forgotten name—walks up to me, tells me that I was better than the Educational Consultant that came to Pittsburgh last Spring, that I know how to take a joke, and invites me to come out with the chapter tonight, to hit up a place called "The Mill."

"Um," I say.

"It'll be a damned good time, man," he says. "We can talk and shit."

"The Mill. Is this a restaurant?" I ask. "Or a bar?"

"Little bit of both," he says.

"What kind of food do they serve?"

"I don't know. Burgers? Nobody ever eats there, know what I'm saying?"

"Just drinking, then?"

"I guess," he says. "We get some tables, chill for the night. Nothing formal. But the guys, they'll listen to what you have to say."

"It sounds like fun," I say. "I do want to talk. Kick back."

But there is this image of Walter LaFaber in my mind, Windsor-knotted tie under a sleek black blazer; LaFaber, sitting behind the steel and metal of his modern desk at the Headquarters building, rows of higher education journals in his bookshelf; LaFaber, my boss, who saw someone different in me, a professional with two degrees (never mind that they're both bullshit degrees, never mind that I didn't have any other job lined up except for this one) rather than a clueless college kid. And there is this image of my father, also, standing on his front porch back in Englewood on his Saturday mornings, coffee mug in one hand and the other hand slipped into the pocket of his pleated khaki shorts. Hair combed, wearing a polo shirt tucked into the shorts. Even on a leisurely morning, a day off from work, he stands with a business-world poise.

"You'll come out?" the President asks me, here in Pittsburgh.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I can't. I wish, you know?"

"You got somewhere better to be?" he asks, laughs.

"No, no. It's just, you know, a bar isn't professional."

"What do you mean? You're, like, only a year older than most of the guys here. It's Friday night, man."

"No, really," I say. "I appreciate the invitation."

He narrows his eyes a bit, but I don't budge. Diamond Candidate.

"We're trying to build socially responsible leaders," I say. "I can't do that at a bar." And that's it. I've said it. I've made my decision, my responsible decision.

"Suit yourself, man," he says.

And now, this Friday night will end. These guys will all go out to the University of Pittsburgh bars and drink and enjoy the night, and I'll creak back upstairs to the guest room to sleep and to model good behavior. I'll wait until morning. Pack up and drive to a hotel for Saturday night. Pack up and drive to Shippensburg University. Pittsburgh to Shippensburg, yes. Other schools, other places to accomplish the mission. Update the Chapter Shipping Addresses in the database. Cover the proper material for the Alcohol Education Workshop. Shippensburg to St. Joseph's to New Mexico State. To Texas Tech. To Fresno State. Marshall. Toledo. Missouri. Oklahoma. Fourteen more weeks of travel for the Fall Semester. "Visit Reports Completed / 3 Days After Visit." "No Fried Food/ EVER." "Email Chapter Presidents/ Weekly." "No Alcohol with Chapter/ EVER." Goal-setting. Structure. Professionalism.

Don't need to drift back into the college lifestyle.

Fraternity.

But for me, it's business, of course. Business.

The Mill, I'm thinking, and for the rest of the night, it's all I can think about.

Chapter Two: Alumni Weekend

It's past 9:00 AM on a Saturday morning, but all is still pre-dawn peaceful here in the Pittsburgh chapter house. It's so quiet that I can actually hear both the low hum of the outdated refrigerator in the kitchen down the hall and the scattered snores of still-drunk fraternity brothers in their upstairs bedrooms, and I actually feel disrespectful as I brush my teeth in the first-floor bathroom. The faucet trickles just a tiny stream of water and I'm so slow and gentle with my toothbrush that the friction of brush bristles against enamel is neither producing noise nor loosening plaque, but still I feel as though my every motion is registering a racket loud enough to wake everyone upstairs. For twenty more minutes, I'm still a guest in this fraternity house, and I'd like to remain undetected so that I can leave easily and enjoy my Saturday off.

But, of course, in this nest of silence, suddenly my cell phone ring-tone blares through the first floor, and the phone vibrates against the wood floor of the guest room at the end of the hall. Without even dropping my toothbrush or spitting into the sink, I dart down the hall—and the fucking ring-tone seems like it's getting *louder and louder*, booming like an approaching locomotive, probably waking up everyone in this damned house, and why didn't I *silence* the fucking thing?—and I find the phone on the bed, flip it open, say something with a mouthful of toothpaste that almost passes for "hello."

"Charles, good morning," says a familiar voice on the other end. It's a crisp, starched voice, formal and low, the kind of voice that's never caught off-guard, that would never answer a phone with a full mouth: Walter LaFaber, the Director of Chapter Operations for Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity. My supervisor.

"Eyyy," I say, trying not to swallow, and I walk as fast as I can back to the bathroom. A glob of toothpaste slips down my throat and I almost gag.

"You weren't asleep, were you?"

"Mmmm?" I say. "Mmm-mmm."

"Good, good. I'd hoped not. Where are you right now, Charles?"

As I tip-toe back to the bathroom, I attempt the word "Pittsburgh," but it probably sounds more like "Riisssrruhrr." A pointless question, though; LaFaber knows where I'm at. He drafted all of the consultant travel schedules back in late July. He mapped the distances between chapters, divided the three consultants into travel territories. Brock London, a hardened Texas boy built like a tractor, travels Texas and the Gulf States; Nick Bennett, a UCLA grad who tried to wear jeans to the office last month, travels the South. LaFaber decided all of this; he decided that I would drive from Green Valley to Pittsburgh, from Pittsburgh to Shippensburg. This question is just an early-morning formality, the sort of friendly phone call greeting designed to let me know that he cares about me and he cares about my day...but right now, I just keep staring at this slimy Pittsburgh bathroom that I've used for the past three days. The once-white floor tiles have taken on a distinctive urine color, the shower head coughs out water in inconsistent bursts, and a thick black-orange mildew trail slinks from the sink's rim to its drain. I stare at this and I think that LaFaber is comfortable at his condo in Indianapolis, that he probably got a full night's sleep last night (I slept on a broken futon here in the guest room), and that it's Saturday morning and he's not working and I am. I want to stay focused-business-but I misplaced my shampoo and a couple print-outs, and as I searched for them just hours ago, I knocked the tall stack of "Fun Nazi" business cards into the depths of my suitcase; they fell under shirts, inside shoes, everywhere somehow.

I cover the phone's mouthpiece, spit into the sink. The frothy mess slides slowly across the mildew, disappears into the drain.

"What are your plans for the day?" LaFaber asks.

"Just driving, most of the morning," I say. "I have a hotel room reserved for tonight." "Travel day," he says knowingly.

"From here to Shippensburg. I need to stretch out in a real bed. Get organized before my next visit. Recharge my batteries, you know?"

"So you've got no plans, then."

"Well," I say, and I should have seen this coming: like a lawyer leading a witness, LaFaber never asks a question if he doesn't already know the answer. He's a thick, sporthardened man with the energy and unwavering sensibilities of a head football coach. Has a full shelf lined with leadership books in his office at Headquarters, and he's certainly put them to good use. Knows exactly how to get his employees to do what he needs. He'll stare you down, silent, brown eyes growing darker by the moment, the little scar on his forehead shining brighter like it's watching you, too, and you'll eventually cave. Doesn't matter what he's asking ("I need you to run up to West Lafayette tonight to deliver a package"); when he's done, you're convinced that it was your idea. Every time we talk over the phone, I picture him rigid with the same discipline I remember him displaying at the office. I picture perfect posture, combed and waxed hair, unwrinkled pants, standing-never sitting, never leaning back, reclining-while on the phone. Walter LaFaber, staring into his office walls as though, perhaps, he can actually see past the trees outside, past the other Indianapolis office buildings, as if he can see for miles and miles and miles and he can actually stare me down from hours away. "No," I say because his silence is too much. "No, not like...*plans* plans...but, you know."

"So can you cancel the hotel without any fees?"

"I don't know," I say. I lean into the mirror. Flesh around my eyes looks worn. I could probably sleep for another five hours, I think. Another six or seven hours. Sometime after 2 AM last night, after the Mill closed, the first wave of drunk brothers crashed back into the house and raided the kitchen. Every fifteen minutes after, another carload seemed to bang through the front doors all at once, loud and destructive, and they swore and shouted and drank in the main foyer for what seemed like hours, and as I lay on the guest room futon, I constantly watched the door, afraid that someone might have forgotten I was here, afraid someone might burst into the guest room to play Beer Pong or to have privacy with some girl.

"Most hotels don't charge cancellation fees," he says.

"Oh," I say.

"I've got a treat for you, Charles."

"Really," I say.

"I spoke to Dr. Wigginton," LaFaber says, "and he'd like to meet you."

"Dr. Wigginton? Meet me today?"

"Today," LaFaber says, and I can tell from his voice that he's smiling. I just can't tell for whose benefit he's happy. Is it because he's given me an opportunity to meet a distinguished alumnus, or because he's scheduled away my Saturday, and he's certain that he's maximized my every paid second? Opportunity or employee efficiency? LaFaber is a supervisor dedicated not only to the success of his company but also to his employees' morale, slapping backs and issuing compliments, gripping shoulders, clapping high-fives, spouting lines like "Put your heart and soul into this!" and "There's no down time on NKE time!" but I wonder sometimes if he *does* care about people, or if he cares only for the national fraternity's efficiency. "You'll be able to stay with Dr. Wigginton tonight," LaFaber says. "This isn't a problem, is it?"

I'm thinking about last weekend, when he questioned my dedication because I wasn't willing to drive more than 300 miles to Virginia Tech to investigate complaints of an unsanctioned party. "I'm all the way in Pittsburgh already," I told him. "Can the school investigate?" LaFaber told me that the National Fraternity needs standards, that if we don't hold ourselves accountable, we might as well become Animal House. "We'll see what becomes of the situation," he said sadly. "We could have made a difference, handled things ourselves, kept the school out of it. I just hope this isn't a recurring issue with you, Charles. You *are* a traveling consultant, after all."

And a Diamond Candidate, yes.

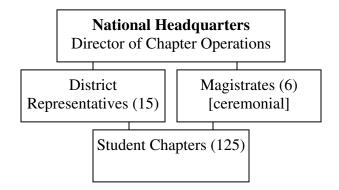
"I can make it to visit Dr. Wigginton," I say eventually. "Where does he live?"

Thirty minutes later, I slip out of the Pittsburgh chapter house, leave them all in content slumber, and I drive up Interstate 79 toward an out-of-the-way Pennsylvania town called Wallace, so far north that I'm almost cruising into New York and so far west that I feel like I'm heading back to Indianapolis instead of actually progressing through my travel schedule. Tomorrow's chapter visit is Shippensburg University, which sits squarely in the center of the state, south of Harrisburg and west of Gettysburg, a straight-shot drive from Pittsburgh. But with each mile I travel north toward Dr. Wigginton's home, the distance I must drive tomorrow grows and grows.

Meeting with—and, apparently, *staying overnight with*—Dr. Wigginton is both a mandatory Educational Consultant detail and a perk of the job. I have no real business to conduct, no forms to fill out or meetings to facilitate, but "face time" with a distinguished alumnus who has consistently donated tens of thousands of dollars each year to Nu Kappa

Epsilon National Fraternity Headquarters is, like any foundation with heavy-hitter donors, essential for the Fraternity. As a traveling consultant traversing the country, I can truly experience a small part of what is, perhaps, the greatest social network in America: fraternity alumni. I'm thinking of Sigma Chi, of their alumni. I'm thinking Drew Brees and Brad Pitt. I'm thinking of Beta Theta Pi: Sam Walton, Ken Kesey, Dick Gephardt. I'm thinking of Sigma Phi Epsilon: Dr. Seuss and Orel Hershiser. I'm thinking of Delta Kappa Epsilon: George W. Bush and George Steinbrenner. Astronauts, governors, CEOs, baseball players. Musicians, actors, writers, skyscraper owners, presidents. NKE has seen, in its history as a fraternity, five governors of South Carolina and four governors of North Carolina, twelve Major League Baseball All-Stars, three NFL All-Pros, one Academy Award Winner (for cinematography), two Gold Star winners, two Emmy Award winners, the former CEO of Insight Marketing...an impressive list that, along with other famous alumni from other national fraternities, reads like a "Who's Who" of American historical figures.

For Nu Kappa Epsilon, Dr. Wigginton is in a class all his own. As appreciation for his generosity, Headquarters recently bestowed upon him the rare title of District Magistrate. With 125 chapters nationally, NKE utilizes a complex system of alumni government. A print-out of this system is included in my handbook, just pages before my goal sheets and the Nu Kappa Epsilon Educational Consultant Code of Conduct.



There are 15 "districts," each with several student-elected District Representatives who facilitate communication and activities between the various chapters in the district. Some districts also have a Magistrate, who—as defined by *The Marathon*—"Stands as guardian of the fraternal bonds of a region," but (from what I gather) serves in a ceremonial capacity, paying money to wear heavy and colorful sashes at conventions. Dr. Wigginton is the sort of alumnus with awards named after him, both at the National Headquarters and at his alma mater, Penn State; he made his career in business and politics in Philadelphia, initiated a charitable not-for-profit in Chester, and supported State College substantially enough for the university to name a fundraising office after him; his connections and networks stretch across the States, touch Tampa and Miami, San Francisco and Seattle, and even though I'm running on my energy reserves this morning, spending an evening with a man who has authored books on investing and who runs his own Foundation can hold promise for my post-consulting career.

Of course, I would have liked to have known about this visit, planned for it. I needed a night to myself to catch up on exercise (my goal of "Jog three times/ weekly" remaining unfulfilled all semester, so far), post-visit chapter reports, and pre-visit contacts for Shippensburg and Saint Joseph's for the coming week. I'd budgeted this time to spread out on a bed at a hotel, watch television, grab a drink from the hotel bar, grab a couple drinks, take a break from the same conversations.

Dr. Wigginton lives in Wallace, Pennsylvania, a quiet mountain town far removed from the commerce and industry of Pittsburgh, and even from the sprawl of the suburbs. And far removed from the convenience of the interstate, too, I learn. I rumble off the highway sometime before 11 AM, slow onto a two-lane country road bordered by overgrown grass and cut with deep potholes. The jolt from 75 miles-per-hour to 35 is extreme, and as I coast through a quick

succession of two-stoplight towns, the speed limit again decreases, this time to 25. Soon, the towns disappear and the scenery once again becomes an endless expanse of cattle-grazing land.

Still, I am plodding so slowly that I could probably read as I drive.

I scroll through my cell phone, call and leave a voicemail with Jenn, my girlfriend back home. I leave voicemails with a few old fraternity brothers who have graduated and moved on to office jobs, with a few young fraternity brothers probably enjoying their Saturday at the pool or at a football game, with the other two NKE consultants, Brock and Nick, who are probably enjoying a day at a hotel in Memphis or Austin or wherever their travel schedules have deposited them. Nobody answers, of course. For fifteen minutes, I leave voicemails, my voice slowly sinking in spirit as I talk to myself and stare at the lonely landscape and imagine beaches and pools and lounge chairs and stadium bleachers and tall cups of beer and tubs of popcorn and group photos and chants and pre-parties and post-parties.

Finally, after noon, after an hour of driving that felt like a full day, I arrive in Wallace, a small town with only one main road. Old men sit outside downtown diners so quaint that they probably weren't even built to be quaint. Every store and every business is built into a house, and every wooden store-front sign is hand-painted or hand-carved; the houses are labeled as "Family Dentistry" or "Attorneys at Law," and they sit next door to houses labeled as "The Thompson Family" or (frequently) "Franklin Residence."

In the distance, the blue outlines of modest mountains zig-zag across the horizon.

The air is different, here. The sun seems farther away. Rural Florida is all swampland: thick briars and low, mean palmetto bushes. Bugs, spiders. Hot, dark, muggy places where things slither and snap and bite and burrow. Rural Pennsylvania doesn't feel as if it is packed so tight.

When I pull into Dr. Wigginton's brick-laid driveway, just past downtown Wallace, he's sitting on his front porch reading the newspaper and drinking from a dark brown coffee mug. Same thing my father does every Saturday morning. As soon as he sees me—he doesn't recognize *me*, necessarily, but when a new vehicle invades this quiet town, it's probably headline news around here—he stands and buries one hand in his slacks pocket, nods, lifts his mug gently in my direction. I've seen his portrait at the Headquarters along our Hall of Fame wall; I've seen him at conferences; Dr. Wigginton is the kind of man who still dresses like a gentleman from a bygone era, like a character in a *Godfather* flashback, someone on the streets of Old New York. Now, he's wearing a button-down white shirt, brown jacket (pocket watch inside, probably), dark dress pants. He is sixty or sixty-five, probably, but has the happy-smooth skin of a man who has known no failure. He wears glasses, but he seems in such good health that his eyesight might be his only deficiency: he stands tall, slender, doesn't hold his back as he walks, doesn't bumble with rusty joints.

He approaches the car, shakes my hand as soon as I clear my door, and before he says a word or gives even a hint of an introduction, he laughs with a burly intellectual huff, and he's looking at me like I should be laughing, like we share some inside joke or some common experience, so I force a few scratchy chuckles.

"So *you're* the one," he says after the laugh has subsided. His face, so smooth seconds ago, is overtaken by a frightening system of wrinkles as he smiles. "You're the lucky traveler, are you? You took the Headquarters bait this year?" And then another round of huffing laughter.

I force myself to cough and smile.

"No, no," I say. "This is like a dream come true."

"Mmm," he says.

"The fraternity had an incredible impact on me as an undergraduate," I say, "and I want to share that with others, help them to achieve all they can."

"Yes, yes, I understand," he says dryly, sips his coffee.

I stand still for a moment while he tips his mug back and makes a straw-at-the-bottom-ofa-milkshake slurping noise for what seems like five or ten seconds, the slurping growing so loud at one point that it scares some nearby birds on a lamp post, and then he pulls his face out of the mug and does an odd tip-toe lift and settles back on his heels. "So you'll be staying with me tonight, I assume," he says.

"Well," I say. "Yeah, I thought."

"I suppose that's all right," he says, his tone perhaps indicating that he didn't know. That Walter LaFaber didn't ask him. This multimillionaire Pennsylvania icon thinks *I'm* imposing on his summer home, thinks I just *happened* to drive four hours out of my way, that I'm some roadweary drifter who needs food and shelter before returning to a sun-beaten life of hitchhiking and odd jobs on odd farms. Alumni visits are supposed to be opportunities to impress important people; I'm supposed to hand him my resume and he's supposed to find me a job. I'm supposed to talk to him about his connections. That's the point. Networking. This wasn't supposed to start so...unpromising.

"If that's all right," I say. "You know, if you've got an extra bedroom. If your wife doesn't mind."

"Mmm," he says, dipping his face into his mug again, apparently searching for something more. "No wife, no wife. Have you had lunch yet?"

I scratch the back of my neck, say, "No."

"I've got chili on the stove, and I've got a lot on my mind. I hope you don't mind if I pick your brain a bit. So much to talk about with these Pennsylvania chapters, my goodness," he says and shakes his head, laughing again at some joke that maybe I should understand but don't.

"I don't mind at all," I say. "That's, well, that's what I'm here for."

"Fantastic. I'll show you to the guest room, and we'll get you situated," he says. "Then, young man, we shall talk *fraternity*."

Dr. Wigginton's house is old, the type that makes haunted creaking noises. And instead of the steep odor of rotten beer-urine-demon-piss to which I've become accustomed, his entire house smells of coffee beans and toast, a faint tomato aroma—the chili—wafting from the kitchen. It's not the sort of house you'd find in Florida. It's tall off the ground, has a deep basement and high ceilings, is so roomy that it'd cost a Florida fortune to air condition in the summer. And inside, it's brown. Brown to match his coffee mug and his blazer. Brown and yellow carpeting. Brown and white walls. Brown wooden-framed paintings of Jesus, right next to brown-framed printings of the Lord's Prayer, right above a dark brown piano and a brown sofa and recliner. And that's just the living room. The dining room is equally brown, and as I walk past the office on the way to the guest room, I notice that it, too, is drowning in brown. A dark brown desk...but the room is highlighted by a contrast of Nike red, a maroon-and-blue NKE flag hanging on the wall, a gigantic framed portrait of Dr. Wigginton standing against a mantle (a pressed and dried white carnation under the frame: the flower of the fraternity), a framed oil painting of the Penn State chapter house; like a church sanctuary washed in the colors of its stained-glass windows, this room is *aglow* under the illumination of fraternity shrines and relics. This is the sort of display—plaques, composites, awards, banners—every fraternity man dreams about and tries to build during college (but which usually amounts only to a membership placard,

some framed photos gifted by sorority women, and maybe a couple tacked-on-the-wall minicomposite photos).

I pull my monstrous suitcase through the living room, its wheels leaving dark brown trails in the high carpeting, and I unpack on a tiny, twin-sized bed, its comforter the smell of an abandoned, back-of-the-attic stack of sweaters. When I pull my toiletry bag out of the suitcase, a "Fun Nazi" business card flutters to the bed's brown sheets.

* * *

The chili is brown, also, a lumpy brown mass of ground beef and kidney beans so thick and mashed that bean is indistinguishable from beef. The calorie count probably exceeds my daily allotment; I need Subway or Chick-Fil-A, a garden salad or a turkey wrap, anything to offset the sausages and cheesesteaks and French fries I was forced to eat in Pittsburgh. Anything but chili. I crumble a palmful of crackers and rain the crumbs throughout my bowl, mix it together. The color remains the same. We sit on the porch together, Dr. Wigginton in a rocking chair and me in a matching wooden porch chair, both of which are painted in a horribly offsetting pea-green color.

"If I was part of the original chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity," he says solemnly, rocking, small spoonful of chili frozen at his lips, "I would offer you a glass of sweet tea. Being a simple Yankee, however, I hope you enjoy *sweetened* iced tea."

On a small table between us, he has left a pitcher of tea and two rocks glasses.

"The tea is fine, thanks," I say. "I like artificial sweetener better, anyway."

"Mmm," he says. "So you are from Florida, I'm told."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, yes, the South. The fertile lands of the fraternity's early growth. Have you been to any of the original chapters in South Carolina?"

"No," I say. "I graduated from Edison University. It's a private school on the Gulf Coast. Probably ten or eleven hours away—"

"The Alpha Chapter at Carolina Baptist is a thing of true historical beauty," he says. "You *must* get down there. A cobblestone road winding through campus. Sycamore trees lending shade over the front porch of the fraternity house. Wood-paneled exterior as white as those clouds," he says and closes his eyes. This sounds rehearsed, like he said this in a speech once and now recites it in conversation. "Bell-tower adorned with bronze busts of our founders. It's a tiny school, but the house is magnificent. Mag-*nif*-icent."

"Well," I say. "Interesting."

"This is what makes fraternity so endearing," he says. "The tradition."

Since I've arrived, Dr. Wigginton hasn't stopped talking, and I've run out of ways to respond. We sit and eat, and he keeps talking. He's seen every East Coast chapter house, he tells me. He and several other Penn State alumni took a summer retirement trip along the coast several years ago, stopping at every school at which a Nu Kappa Epsilon chapter house had been erected. "Have you been to State College yet?" he asks.

"No. I've only been in Pennsylvania for three or four days."

"Mmm," he says, and I don't think he heard anything after *no*. "I visited two weeks ago for a coach's brunch. Only a few old-timers came by. An impressive mess those young men have made of that home! I still remember when we had the wood floor replaced with tile. When we added the back wing to provide extra rooms. When I lived in that house, you see, we had just forty men, and we worked our *tails* off to keep it clean. A different generation, I suppose. Now,

these young men have more than a hundred live-in members, and they seem incapable even of wiping the sprayed beer from the glass frame of the chapter's charter." Briefly, I picture the ceiling fan at Pittsburgh, the beer that the brothers had painted over rather than cleaning. "They cannot empty the trash cans," he says. "Even on gameday, they cannot just pretend—and this is a four-million dollar house—that they're grateful, appreciative of the grand tradition."

Dr. Wigginton talks and talks and talks, tidbits of interesting tales tucked into dry tangential expanses, and I remember talking with Walter LaFaber a month or two ago, back at Headquarters, when he first discussed the esteemed Dr. Wigginton, the alumnus whose financial contributions and keen insights made possible the fraternity's award-winning "DO IT!" time management program (created almost a decade ago, this program is not only the backbone of our mission of leadership development, but also the model for my own goal-setting this Fall). LaFaber had a general's look in his eyes, the sort of sharp edge that says that the subject of his conversation is serious. At least, that's what I *thought*. Now, I know that there was something else in that look, a smile behind the stoicism. A laugh waiting to happen. Every year, LaFaber probably tells the consultants to meet with this nostalgia-happy old man who is nothing like what we expect, and every year probably delights in their post-visit complaints.

He talks and talks and talks. About Penn State. About how much money his chapter raises for a charity event called 'Thon. About the Nittany Lions and Joe Pa. About Headquarters. About how, when he went to school, Nu Kappa Epsilon had but fifty chapters, all East Coast, and then absorbed a West Coast fraternity, and then expanded into the heartland of Illinois and Iowa and Oklahoma and we're incredible now and this new direction, our *mission*, this leadership development *drive*, is so fantastic for fraternities, for *our* fraternity.

Leadership development, yes. I try to insert myself into the conversation, steer it away from Headquarters and from fraternity programs, guide it toward people, toward the real world, toward my career options. "It's going to be tough to leave Nike when my contract expires in May," I say. "I don't even know where to start looking for jobs."

"Mmm," he says. "A common enough problem. What's your degree?"

"Organizational communications, with a minor in finance."

"Mmm." He stares into the clouds again. "A vague field. Difficult to find quality careers."

"That's what my father said. But my advisors told me the opposite."

"I would have advised you toward a different major."

"I can't go back now," I say and try to laugh, hands gripping my pants.

"You graduated in Spring? You're fortunate to have found a job so quickly."

"I worked hard in college. I'm, you know, confident about my prospects."

"Organizational communications," he says, inhales and seems to taste and savor the afternoon air. "My colleagues have grown fond of filtering resumes, you see. They receive large stacks, hundreds, and so they conduct polls to make candidate selections more efficient. There are some degrees that...due to the reputation of certain programs' usefulness or difficulty, I suppose...they will discard the resume if they see these degrees. But you're lucky, Charles, with the path you've begun. Continue to wedge yourself into the world of college administration, that's what you should do."

"You think this is my *only* option?"

"Mmm," he says, shrugs. "Ahh, that reminds me. Have you visited Illinois?"

"Not yet," I say, but he just told me that my degrees—*plural*!—were worthless. And right now, a bowl of chili in my hands, unending old-man-voice buzzing in my head and already onto a new subject, I can only think about how quickly he dismissed the four years of college that were supposed to be the foundation for my entire life. Diamond Candidate here in Wallace, Pennsylvania, but he wasn't impressed. And all I can do now is listen, listen, remain the face of professionalism.

Listen as he talks and talks and talks.

"It was an all Southern fraternity in the early century, that's what they won't tell you in those manuals," he says, referring to *The Marathon*, the 250-page, plain-red hardcover pledge manual our fraternity distributes—filled with information on "DO IT!" and filled with diagrams and hierarchical charts of the National Fraternity's organization, with pictures of our founders, with the history of the Fraternity, all of it worded like a middle school American history textbook, and I keep picturing my resume slipping from pile to pile, filtered, winding up in a recycling bin or in a shredder—and then he clears his throat and lets out another "Mmm, mmm," like the low motor hum of a failing weed whacker. "You see," he says, "you'll learn a bit when you visit Penn State next week."

"I don't visit Penn State this semester," I say again.

"Mmm," he says. "We were the first chapter established north of Mason-Dixon's line, you understand. The original founders at Carolina Baptist were hesitant about the proposition of expanding northward, see, because in those days, these young men still had grandfathers who'd served in the Civil War. Try to tell some Confederate soldier that you're now brothers *brothers*—with another young man in Pennsylvania, of all places." I shift in my chair, open my mouth, have no energy to say anything. Close it. Here on the porch, time seems to have come to a complete standstill: in the tiny town of Wallace, along a semi-important road, I haven't seen a single car coast past since I sat down with my chili. The breeze hasn't blown, the front yard maple trees haven't rustled; no neighbors have walked past; it simply is an absolute standstill. Diamond candidate, I'm thinking. Just listen, remain professional.

"Once the Penn State chapter was up and running," he says, "and this was, oh, 1913, 1914, I believe...once they were operational, they spoke with friends at Penn, Cornell, Pittsburgh, Delaware. The schools, in those days, they all played one another in baseball, see, so our brothers—all of whom played for State—knew the outfielders at Pennsylvania, it was just that simple. And the brothers, they just started all of these chapters all across Pennsylvania and even as far west as Miami University in Oxford."

"Well," I say. "That's...interesting"

"They don't write any of this in those pledge manuals," he says. "But we're the reason— Penn State is the reason—that this fraternity flourishes from coast to coast. Oh, certainly, certainly. We'd have been a strictly Carolina fraternity, otherwise."

"Well," I say, "interesting."

We sit outside until the chili goes cold. Very cold. And I consider trying to redirect the discussion back to Charles Washington, back to my career, but right now, that topic seems just as cold and bleak.

Later, I sit in my guest bedroom, laptop open on the brown desk, and I pretend to finish reports that I've already finished, using the overwrite function to literally replace already-

existing text. In the living room, Dr. Wigginton sits remarkably upright in his recliner watching USA or TBS or some basic cable network, the deep chimes of *Law & Order* scene transitions ringing as loud as a grandfather clock.

I have my cell phone pressed to my ear, and—as usual—no one answers.

Four times I've called Jenn, today. Voicemail, every time.

"This is Jenn," her voicemail recording goes, her voice sad-happy depending on the syllable, a mix of highs and lows: "this"—*high*—"is Jenn"—low. "I'm out right now, busy busy busy, so leave me a message and I'll get right back to you. Love ya." "Love"—so *high*—"ya"—so low.

Beep.

"Jenn," I say, "it's me again. It's sometime around four, I think. You're probably out at the pool? Or, wait. There was a football game today, wasn't there? Well. Anyhow. Made it safe to Wallace." I whisper: "I need someone to talk to. *Please*."

Hang up.

We've talked only three times in the past week, despite my goal to call her twice daily. And we scrape for conversation, painful silences after she tells me about parties she's been to, sorority events she's helping out with. "Jackie got engaged, so we went out to celebrate," she told me a week ago, and I pictured these five or six girls, seniors and best friends, going out to Macaroni Grill and ordering Caesar salads and chardonnay, but she said, "We got retarded down at Central." You went to the bars, I asked. To the clubs? "All I remember is dancing," she said. "I don't even know were we went. I just smelled like tequila this morning." When I packed my Explorer with all of my possessions and left Florida for Indianapolis in mid-summer, all of life felt complete: a degree, a job, a serious girlfriend. But now I imagine Jenn in her short jean skirt,

highlighted blonde hair wet with the sweat of close dancing, close bodies packed into Night Lights. And I wonder if she imagines me, *here* and *now*, or if life is complete for her without me.

I hide awhile longer here in the brown guest bedroom, thinking about all of those bodies, all of that energy.

* * *

Dr. Wigginton pokes his head through the guest bedroom doorway sometime after 6 PM, and he's wearing his blazer again, looks so over-layered with clothing, so hot and stuffy that I'm beginning to feel uncomfortable in my khakis and polo.

"It's dinner time, young man," he says, knocks on the wall with his knuckles.

"Oh," I say. "Oh, okay. Give me a second to save my reports." And I close my laptop hesitantly but don't unplug it or put it back into its leather case because he doesn't move away, and as soon as the computer is tucked away, it would be just me and him. Maybe I can wait until he lists our dinner choices, then counter with, "Well, I'm still pretty full from lunch," or, "I've got so much work to finish up." Maybe I can hide in the guest bedroom all night. Go to sleep early.

"We're meeting a few other alumni," he says.

"We're going out?"

"Oh certainly, certainly," he says. "It is a Saturday night, Charles."

"Oh, great," I say. "Excellent."

"If you young men can handle an older crowd, that is. If you can keep up."

"Oh," I say. "Ha. No problem. Yeah."

"There will be a couple State College alumni, like myself," he says, "and a few who drive from Pittsburgh. We have alumni outings once a month, you understand, to stay fresh as advisors and volunteers, to renew those bonds"—he clasps his hands together like links in a chain— "those bonds of fraternal friendship. You can give us all the updates from the Headquarters, let us know what we—ahem—we distinguished alumni can do for the National Fraternity." Something about the way he says all of this…his over-emphasized grandeur, his Charlton Heston voice, like he's in a 1960s Biblical Epic…so dramatic that it feels staged. "We meet at a restaurant up the road called The River Bend," he says. "It's not Florida, but they have some great seafood. Some great lake trout."

"Ah," I say, "interesting."

I spend thirty minutes in the bathroom getting ready, close my eyes in the shower and...I think I fall asleep for a moment, standing up.

The drive seems to last forever. Buckled back in a passenger seat for the first time in weeks, helpless, I silently criticize every driving maneuver Dr. Wigginton makes, pressing my foot against a phantom brake pedal, grabbing the "oh shit" handles and bracing myself when the car jerks unexpectedly, leaning far to the left as though my weight disbursement will effect a smoother turn. You stopped too long at a stoplight, I'm thinking. Use your turn signal, I'm thinking. Fast lane is clear, pass this guy. Conversation rarely veers from fraternity life, from discussion of national policies or my observations of student behavior, and only once do I manage to squirm out of that subject and ask: "So what sort of work do you do now? Are you, like, *fully* retired?"

"Oh certainly, certainly," he says and he turns the heat higher even though the car already feels stifling. I finger the window controls, decide that it's unprofessional, disrespectful perhaps, to roll it down. His car: his decision on the temperature.

"So you have no responsibilities with Morton & Sons, anymore?" I ask. "Do you still talk to anyone there?"

"I've rid my life of the stress, young man. Now, I work for the fraternity. I'm doing that which has always been closest to my heart."

As we drive, the sky fades from blue to orange to post-sunset purple. The car snakes through thirty or forty minutes of winding twenty-five-mile-per-hour backroads to wind up at a restaurant on a hilltop overlooking the same interstate that I traveled earlier today. Beyond the interstate—in the distance— is a perfectly circular (and dark) lake, broken in the center by shimmering, white-capped rapids; thin and barely-visible branches of a river (rivers?) shoot off in several directions. We pull into the chunky dirt parking lot, Wigginton's vulnerable Metro bouncing high and low in the potholes. The restaurant, "The River Bend," is the type of place that screams "corporate," the type of restaurant with a gigantic sign and bright, flashing neon logo so extravagant that it simply could *not* have been produced by some Mom and Pop with entrepreneurial ambitions, the type of restaurant with a mountain-home façade, piles of firewood on either side of a stone walkway leading to heavy oak doors. The River Bend could just as easily be a repainted and redesigned Cracker Barrel or Smokey Bones.

Inside the restaurant, a plump teenaged hostess in a maroon polo and deep brown corduroys leads us to a back-corner table that has been so ultra-lacquered that my drink (water with lemon) slides across the table in a collected puddle of condensation, almost as if pulled by an under-the-table magnet, and nearly careens off the edge. We sit alone for fifteen minutes, perhaps, Dr. Wigginton asking me if this isn't just the most *fantastic* restaurant ever, and I try not to answer too honestly. "Try some homemade apple pie," reads one advertisement on our

placemats. Another reads, "Try a Smirnoff and Tonic with Coke and Lime!" Eventually, after we finish an entire basket of complimentary combread, two other alumni join us.

They walk together, these two, but one clearly leads and the other follows sheepishly. Ben Jameson, the leader, is in his early thirties, wearing khaki shorts and a Merrill-Lynch polo (no undershirt, either, so his nipples poke out in the restaurant's air conditioning), and hails from the University of Pittsburgh. He speaks in frustrated tones about his wife and kids back home. "Little Matt's been reading Dr. Seuss lately," Ben says. Amazingly, despite his age, despite his degree and his ten years of work experience following graduation, despite the fact that his hair is thinning and his muscle has softened to a fatherly flab, he's got the same *fuck the world* tone to his voice as the undergraduates at Pittsburgh. "Kid walks around the house *constantly*, reading out loud," he says. "One fish, two fish. Go dog go. Whatever. Drives you fucking *cra-zy*. Trying to watch Sportscenter, and the kid's standing in front of the TV saying *daddy daddy daddy*, listen to me, listen to me, and what am I supposed to do? I can't *ignore* him."

The other alumnus, the follower, is skinnier, bald with hairy arms, and only smiles nervously in agreement with everything Ben says. His name is Anthony, also a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh. Both men, I believe, serve as alumni advisors for Pittsburgh, though I'm not certain of their specific roles. Regardless of their official titles, both—as advisors—are responsible for helping the Pittsburgh undergraduates to enforce financial policies and chapter bylaws.

"I need to get fucking hammered tonight," Ben says. "Hammered." Anthony looks down at the table and coughs a silent chuckle, nervously. "Don't worry," Ben says to Dr. Wigginton. "Anthony drove us." "Oh certainly, certainly," Dr. Wigginton says.

"Where'd our waitress go?" Ben asks. "Little cutie, wasn't she?"

I'm dressed in flat-front khaki pants and a striped button-down. Every time Ben speaks, I pretend to smooth my shirt and my pants, staring straight into my lap so that I don't have to make a response. So that, if the waitress *does* happen to walk past, I don't have to make eye contact with her and I don't have to take responsibility for my association with him.

"I love these nights out," Ben says. "Makes me feel young again."

Several minutes later, two older Penn State alumni arrive and exchange excited pleasantries with Dr. Wigginton. One, Henry Guffman, has zoomed past the age of forty, looks a little like a swollen Don Johnson (with the addition of an untrimmed moustache), and "owns a little construction company in Barlow, just down the road." The other alumnus, Clyde Hampshire, is just as old and wealthy as the Doctor, and occupies several ceremonial positions in the fraternity. When he introduces himself, he tells me that he served for eight years as the Housing Board President for Penn State. It was so great, he says. That does sound great, I say.

"Our monthly alumni gatherings are always in flux," Dr. Wigginton says. "Some months, we have more than fifteen. Other months, as few as four or five. Either way, small or large, these reunions are the perfect nourishment for the fraternal hunger."

"Right," Ben says. "So what about it, gentlemen? Split some pitchers?"

"Mr. Hampshire?" Dr. Wigginton asks, looking at Clyde. "Shall we?"

"I might as well," Clyde says. "I'm already up past my bedtime."

Dr. Wigginton and Clyde Hampshire laugh old-man laughs.

"All right, then," Ben says. "Where's our little girl? Where is that little thing?"

I lower my head, smooth my pants.

"Hey, cutie," Ben says. "We're gonna need some service. Let's go."

Scattered laughter around the table. I keep my head down, pretend to scroll through my cell phone.

Our waitress arrives and introduces herself, and someone—Clyde Hampshire?—cuts her off to say, "Thank God we have *you* tonight. I don't know what we would have done, had we been waited on by that fat gentleman." Laughter. "A wasted night," someone else says. Hearty man-laughter. Some nervous female laughter, too.

When I look up, Ben is very obviously staring into the chest of our twenty year-old waitress. She's blonde—no, brunette…her roots are clearly visible—and has the athletic build of a volleyball player. Almost looks like Jenn, except that Jenn is leaner and *never* allows her roots to show. And Jenn doesn't wear choker necklaces like this girl; the farther I travel from Florida, it seems, the more popular that surfer apparel and accessories become. Ben leans into her, lets his voice descend into an *older is sexier* tone, and says, "Need a pitcher of Yuengling and six glasses."

"Okay?" she says. "That it?"

Six glasses. Six of us. Five alumni...and myself.

And that sounds fantastic, I'm thinking. Yuengling. Splitting pitchers with the big boys. After all, that's what we did back at EU: any time the alumni came back to the house, we bought a couple cases of Heineken, a couple bottles of Kendell Jackson. Loosen up, enjoy yourself, we were thinking. Cut us a check for our scholarship fund or for our big-screen TV fund. A couple brews with the big boys, I'm thinking, and I'm picturing myself on the edge of my seat, beer in my hand recounting the stories of my first two weeks of travel to an alumni audience enthralled, laughing, beers in their hands, too. I'm picturing stories. I'm picturing jokes. Jokes with alumni. I'm smelling the beer, I'm tasting it. Yuengling. Crisp and cold, light carbonation. I'm tasting it.

Six glasses.

But it's not...possible, not appropriate. I am an Educational Consultant, a representative, a Diamond Candidate, and the National Fraternity does not allow consultants to drink alcohol with students or alumni, does not allow consultants to attend parties or social events where alcohol is present (*only* restaurants are acceptable). "The three D's are off-limits," our Code of Conduct tells us. "Dating, drinking, drugs." This is who I must be, now. This is post-college, the real world. The professional world.

I say quickly to the waitress, "None for me. Just five glasses is fine."

"None for you?" Ben asks.

"Mmm?" Dr. Wigginton asks.

"What are you, the sober driver?" Henry Guffman asks in his deep, throaty voice. "No, no," I say. "It's just—I can't drink with students or alumni."

"Oh, the Headquarters," Dr. Wigginton says, shakes his head. "*Silly* little *rules*. Come now, Mr. Washington. I'm certain a glass of beer at a *restaurant* will not get you fired. We're tight-lipped. We aren't a bunch of rambunctious college students, after all."

"No, it's not that," I say. "It's a...personal decision. I like to stay clearheaded."

"You got to be kidding me, right?" Ben asks. "Some of us are twice your age, and *we* don't care about clear heads. Do we care about clear heads?" he asks the waitress, who still stands by nervously, attempting a smile, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

"I guess not," she says. "No clear heads tonight."

"Fuckin' A," Ben says. "This is a *fraternity* gathering, for crying out loud."

I'm silent for a moment.

"Just five glasses," Dr. Wigginton tells the waitress, touching her hand.

"Well, fuck," Ben says. "Not going to twist your arm. Five glasses, then."

I want to tell the waitress that I *would* drink if I were with my friends. And I want to tell her that these are not my friends. I want to tell her that I'm not one of them, that I'm not old, that I have a girlfriend and I don't need to throw my game at 18 year-old waitresses. And that if I did throw my game at her, I wouldn't call her "cutie" or "sweetie" or whatever. I'm silent for several minutes, then, as the five resume or finish bits of conversations from previous gatherings. I learn that the quiet one, Anthony Simmons, is the District Representative for Western Pennsylvania, a fairly important advisor position. I should have known. Sometimes, though, the names and districts and regions blur together; I've seen these names on donor rolls and contact sheets, but I've never seen faces or heard voices.

They talk fraternity. Talk and talk and talk.

The state of their chapters, the state of students today.

The beer seems to sparkle in the pitchers. I drink water.

Ben drinks his beer in massive gulps, and Anthony tries to keep up, taking long and labored sips each time Ben does. So much for sober drivers. Clyde Hampshire and Dr. Wigginton appear to be drinking conservatively, small old-man-sips, but by the time the waitress arrives again, both are finished with their beers and ready for a new pitcher. Henry Guffman tells us about all of the things he doesn't understand about young people: the tattoos, the piercings, the torn jeans, the baseball caps turned backwards. "You know, I read this thing," he says and he's got the tone of a researcher with some incredible new finding. "It's called the Beloit College Mindset. They put it out for teachers and professionals that work with college kids, I guess, and it's just this giant list of factoids. Like, for kids coming into college right now, it says that Paul Newman is a salad dressing, not an actor. Stuff like that." "Intriguing," Dr. Wigginton says.

"And, like, AIDS has *always* been a problem for them," Henry says. He sits back in his chair, gulps his beer. "Maybe I'm starting to sound like my grandfather, but I just want to go back to the good old days, you know? These kids. So different."

Dr. Wigginton and Clyde Hampshire both laugh.

Soon, the pitcher is finished. And another, before our food arrives. And another.

"How is the chapter at Pittsburgh, these days?" Dr. Wigginton asks Ben. And it's a question he must have asked me four times while we ate chili on his porch. I'm aching for some other conversation topic: the NFL maybe. College football.

"Delta Beta's doing good," Ben says, slicing his steak. He sticks his fork into a thick, fatty cut, holds it up in admiration, and crams it into his mouth. Delta Beta is Pittsburgh's chapter designation; each of our fraternity chapters has a one or two-letter designation (Carolina Baptist is "Alpha" chapter, South Carolina is "Beta," etc.) used forever to identify that school as part of Nu Kappa Epsilon. "Never better, actually," Ben says after he swallows. "Kicking ass. I went to their last party, and I was fucking shocked. We never got girls like that when we were in school, you know? We had fun, yeah, but this was ri-*dic*-ulous. How's Delta Alpha?"

You went to an undergraduate party? I'm about to ask, but-

"We have a few problems with Delta Alpha," Dr. Wigginton says.

"Anyone hear about Delta Delta?" Henry asks.

"Delta Delta," Clyde Hampshire says, shaking his head.

"Are you going to visit Delta Delta?" Henry asks me. "There's a problem chapter, right there. I tried advising them. Too difficult. But I hear good things about Gamma Alpha. Bad school, but really good group of guys, I hear." "Those Gamma chapters," Dr. Wigginton says. "In such a tough spot."

"Fuck the Gamma chapters," Ben says, and he's craning his neck, looking around for the waitress. "I fucking hate New York. Where's our waitress?"

An evening with five alumni, successful in their careers. And we're talking in Greek letters. And all of them are talking now, talking over one another, saying Gamma Alpha and Gamma Zeta and Delta Beta and Fraternity House and Chapter and Pittsburgh and Penn State and Hey Babe, Let's Go, Babe, and Delta Delta and Fill It Up, Baby, and Delta Delta and Do Not Want to Go Home, What a Fucking Headache and Delta Delta and We've Gotta Do Something to Help Those Guys and Illinois is a Financial Nightmare, Can You Believe It? and Delta Beta and Alpha and Beta and Gamma and—

"We're starting a new program at the Headquarters," I say suddenly, loudly, and maybe I'm cutting someone off, cutting everyone off. "A mentor program."

The table goes quiet. These five men all turn to me, necks moving so slowly that I expect them to squeak like old wheels on rusty axles, and they stare. Henry Guffman's bloated face and cheeks seem to constantly change shape as he breathes, his overgrown mustache rustling noticeably as the air enters and leaves his nose. Anthony's gaunt, skeletal face has taken on tones of red from all the beer he's drank, his pale bald head now contrasting more heavily as a result. They stare, all five of them.

"We realized that a lot of students are joining campus organizations for the purpose of networking," I say. "And since we're in the business of leadership development, we decided that *we*—the National Fraternity, with all our alumni—could provide more programming for our members. We're trying to organize groups of alumni in some of our major cluster areas—that's what we call our greatest areas of alumni concentration, Atlanta, DC, Philadelphia, *cluster* areas, we call them—and we're building a database and compiling names and careers and we'll have these roundtables—"

"Sounds like a lot of effort," Anthony says, thin face unmoving as he speaks.

"Well, sure," I say. "But well worth the effort. If we can—"

"You see all these movies," Anthony says. "Like that one. What's it called? *The Skulls*. Where fraternities are these, like, highly-organized secret societies that run the world, and new pledges get convertibles and 100-grand jobs when they graduate."

"Well," I say, "the idea of the mentoring program isn't—"

"I hired this Nike kid from Delaware," Henry says, and tiny beads of beer line his lower mustache. "Straight out of college, I hired him. He tells me, this fucking kid, he tells me he was President of the chapter there, that he was House Manager, that he was this and he was that. This kid doesn't even have...well, I guess I can only blame the school, not the fraternity...but this kid couldn't do shit for research without google. Had the toughest time actually calling people. You got to hire a Nike, though, you know? He's learning, this kid. He'll be all right. You got to hire a Nike, is all I know."

"I give my money," says Clyde Hampshire. "I simply cannot give my time, too."

"Only retirees can afford to give time!" Dr. Wigginton says, slaps the table, laughs his "inside joke" laugh, again, loudly.

"Tell you what, doc," Ben says, "I win the powerball and the first thing I do...well, second thing I do...first thing is, I dump the wife and pick up a little piece of ass with *college girl* written all over her...Just joking, of course, ya'll keep that to yourselves. But the second thing I do is I put a couple hundred grand into this fraternity. You match me, we invest that shit, and you see what we can come up with. You and me, we'll spend every minute of every day with this fraternity. Make it something special."

"It wouldn't take much time," I say. "It's just that college kids *need* mentors in the business world. They need someone to help them figure things out."

"Bah," Clyde Hampshire says. "Millennials."

"I don't think I know what that means," I say.

"Millennials," he says again, and I hadn't noticed until now how massive his gray eyebrows are, hairs curling outward here and there. I hadn't noticed that his nose hairs descend, also, that he has missed a few spots shaving on his neck and on his left cheek; the hair is long, looks as though he's missed those spots for days. I expected a man with so many business-world accolades, such wealth and prestige, to appear careful and orderly, but Clyde Hampshire shakes, jitters, slurs under the influence of alcohol. "The Mil-*len*-nial Generation," he says, "that's what they're calling kids today. Kids born now, kids going to school. It's the next generation after Baby Boomers and Generation X. Kids who don't know their ass from a hole in the ground."

Dr. Wigginton laughs hard, but no sound comes out; he holds his belly.

"They know all about the *Simpsons* and Britney Spears," Clyde Hampshire says, "but they can't tie their own shoes. Of course they need mentors! Of course they can't figure anything out! Everything has been handed to them."

"Here, here!" Ben Jameson says, pounds his glass on the table, perhaps unaware that his own children are part of the Millennial Generation.

"Ahh yes," Dr. Wigginton says, eyes half-closed, head swaying. "If it weren't for *us*, many of these undergraduate chapters would be headed down that dreary road to closure. They *need* us." He places his cold hand on my wrist and I try not to flinch. "Why, Mr. Washington,

just last Spring, we had to step in at Penn State. The administrators, you see, they attempted to shut down the house. They claimed to have evidence of some indiscretion, hazing or sleep deprivation or some such childish nonsense." He releases my wrist, and I back away. "These students should have been capable of handling the situation themselves. Instead, I had to organize the alumni, men whose combined contributions to that university exceed seven digits. We had to threaten the administration, Mr. Washington: punish the undergraduates, and we withhold future donations." His eyes are open now, face smooth but blooming red. "What Mr. Hampshire says is God's honest truth. These children are handed everything. What more should we be expected to give them?"

This night has slipped from my grasp...what should have been a networking opportunity for me, a chance to speak with successful alumni, has now become no different than last night would have been, had I gone with all of those drunk brothers at Pittsburgh to the Mill. And it's Pitcher Number Seven, and I still hang my head each time the waitress stops by the table, and every other word out of everyone's mouth is slurred, some of them dark, too, and it feels like the first time I ever saw my parents drunk. When I was fifteen or so. They came home from a party, a housewarming party, and my mother and father crashed through the front door, laughed odd squealing laughs, stumbled through the dim hallway and cooked leftovers in the kitchen while I pretended to be asleep. They made ridiculous comments, borderline absurd, and howled and the next day appeared normal again, like werewolves the morning after a full moon. My father, in the morning, was back to wearing pleated khaki shorts and a polo, sipping coffee on the front porch. They knew, though, knew I'd heard. And I think they realized my mental picture was altered that night, altered irrevocably, because this gave them license to resume "Saturday Nights on the Town," something they'd abandoned the moment I'd been born. As an only child, my

parents kept me involved all throughout middle school and high school, in soccer and Key Club and Englewood Service, always telling me about my potential and about how I could be *anything* but I needed to be *skilled* and *driven*, and so—starting, perhaps, that night when I was fifteen they could see the credits rolling on their responsibilities as parents. They imagined a rewind to their youth, to independence. I would be off to college in two years, gone, a financial burden but no longer a physical one. Out in Englewood, many of my friends experienced the same, but their parents one-upped my own; no longer needing large houses for their kids to spread out toys and textbooks, they moved into the city, into condos in Tampa and Orlando and Miami, or back up north to downtown Chicago or New York. All those ideas we had about who our parents really were had vaporized.

When the dinner bill is delivered—I reach for my wallet, but Dr. Wigginton is a king, a provider for his people, and covers everyone, and Ben and Anthony and Henry are sort of hohum like they expect it but I'm jubilant because this meal cost more than my daily budget allows—Ben makes one last attempt at the waitress, but she looks beyond patience and so he says "fuck it" (loudly), and I help the Doctor out the front door, take the keys and help him into his passenger seat, and I drive us back through dark roads and twisting mountain setbacks, back to Wallace and to his home, and he sloshes through his front door, through his living room, falls into his bed in his blazer and dress pants.

I turn off his bedroom lights.

For awhile, while I'm in the shower—and even the bathroom has a musty old man odor to it, like vinegar and harsh Dial bar soap and orange Bic razors—I think about how funny it would be to snap a photo of the good doctor, passed out like that on his bed. Snap a photo and

share it with the other consultants. So pathetic, this old, drunk man. This fraternity figurehead, this Nike Hall-of-Famer. This man who has been built as an Alumni Legend...look at what lies beneath the fragile façade!

I think about snapping the photo.

But I don't.

Dr. Wigginton will remain Dr. Wigginton in everyone else's eyes.

Late at night, I call Jenn again, and when she answers, all I hear is the static-loud noise of a party, a bar, a club, a DJ, whatever, and she just keeps saying, "I can't *hear* you!" and so I hang up and turn off my phone. I sit on the brown sheets and a sharp glint of white catches my eye, something poking out from under the pillow; when I lean closer, I realize that it's that fucking Fun Nazi business card again. I turn it over in my hands, over to the white, blank back, over to the front, to "Fun Nazi." I should toss it into the trash, just forget about it because it was a meaningless gag, but I place it flat atop my laptop case so I can stare at it. I'm the Fun Nazi? I wander Dr. Wigginton's kitchen, floorboards creaking, find a bottle of Jack Daniels, floorboards creaking from somewhere else but his bedroom door is still shut, it's just the old wood of this house, and I take four rapid-fire shots—boom boom—and replace the bottle, and sit on the porch and all is black and sounds like crickets or birds or wind, branches snapping.

Early in the morning, I wake up for a cup of coffee, toast, and oatmeal. I leave as quickly and quietly as I can, thanking and thanking Dr. Wigginton until I've said "thanks" so many times that it doesn't even sound like a real word anymore. "You are welcome back any time, my brother, *any* time," he says, and I say, "It's a little out of the way," and he just says again, "Any time, Mr. Washington, that bedroom is yours." Pack up and drive.

Wallace to Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh to Shippensburg.

A long drive today. Barely slept, and if I was tired yesterday, today I feel like I could collapse at any moment. Clothes are wrinkled, but no time to iron. Suitcase is a disorganized mess of dirty and clean clothes. Didn't have time to do laundry. Hair feels long. Fingernails. I don't shave, don't brush my teeth. Pack up and drive and arrive at Shippensburg and stay professional. Three days at Shippensburg, then. Three days.

Then I pack up and drive. Then: St. Joseph's. Then, finally, a night at a hotel. Then...well...yes, then then then.

Chapter Three: The Ship

Summer Training in Indianapolis University of Kentucky East Tennessee State University University of Virginia—Green Valley University of Pittsburgh

Shippensburg University

St. Joseph's University New Mexico State University Texas Tech California State University—Fresno California State University—Highland California State University—Long Beach California State University—San Francisco University of Delaware Marshall University Miami University (Ohio) University of Toledo Central Michigan University University of Michigan Bowling Green State University Purdue University Indiana University Headquarters – Mid-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis) University of Oklahoma University of Kansas University of Missouri-Columbia University of Nebraska Iowa State University Thanksgiving Vacation Bradley University University of Iowa Headquarters (Indianapolis) Christmas Vacation

"Be on the look-out," LaFaber said to me in our one-on-one last Monday afternoon, shortly before I facilitated a recruitment workshop for the brothers at the University of Virginia—Green Valley (the students call it "Green Valley College," or "GVC," the school's name before its 1995 absorption into the UVA system). Each week, I call LaFaber at 2:00 PM on Monday afternoon for our one-on-one, a thirty or forty minute catch-all discussion which serves to both debrief him on local chapter issues, and which allows him to provide commentary on the chapters I will visit in the coming week. "Be on the look-out for anything and everything, Charles," he said in that meat-grinder voice of his, and I pictured him standing in his cold office, fingers touching the spine of some leadership journal in his metal bookshelf, looking out the window and searching for me. "It's *Rush* season. An exciting time, but a dangerous time for the fraternity."

"Don't worry," I said. "I remember Rush. I only graduated in May."

"Just be on the look-out," LaFaber said with a tired tone, as though I'd ignored him. "You've never been to some of these schools in the Northeast. Anything suspicious, you report it. Right away."

After a long drive from the western mountains of Pennsylvania, I pull into the choppy gravel parking lot for the Shippensburg University fraternity row on Sunday morning, tiny stones kicking up from the ground and *tink*-ing against my Explorer's underbelly. A headache pounds under my skull in an inconsistent rhythm, my eyes feel crusty no matter how many times I rub them, and my back aches with unending exhaustion from all of this packing-up-and-driving, from the poor sleep, and from the detour to Wallace, Pennsylvania. I park between two Jeeps at the far end of the row, as far away from the seven identical fraternity houses as possible, crunching over a few empty beer cans on my way to the curb. Nu Kappa Epsilon has the very

first house on the row, and, like the seven other fraternity houses situated around this gravel parking lot, it is a two-story, sandy-yellow block building with a crumbling wrap-around porch. And each house has the shell-shocked look of having been party-bombed last night. Red cups and Rolling Rock beer bottles litter the yards, along with Taco Bell wrappers and Shell Station plastic 44-ounce cups and deflated basketballs and volleyballs and dirty socks and underwear, all of it existing together in a muddy marshland of trampled grass. Looks like all of the stock photos of Woodstock, the day after. Wouldn't surprise me to find frat guys forming garbage into peace signs. Or anarchy signs, maybe.

It's noon here in Shippensburg, but the row whistles with a Western Ghost Town emptiness. Full parking lots, sure, but the middle of the day feels like the dead of night, here. Shippensburg appears to be smack-dab in the middle of "Rush Season," starting its recruitment festivities, and this devastation must be the result of last night's Rush parties.

Be on the look-out? Not very difficult. Not very difficult, at all.

Now, it's just a matter of reporting the infractions.

Rush Season. Fraternity "Rush." Across the country, in the early weeks and months of the Fall semester—right *here, now*—fraternity chapters scrape together thousands of dollars from their budgets—*tens* of thousands, sometimes, at schools like Florida, Florida State, Georgia, Ole Miss, SEC, Big Ten, Ivy League, *big-time* schools where big money is on the line—to repaint the super-scratched and super-stained exteriors of their houses, to replace broken hinges and door knobs, broken doors, to purchase two-story-tall banners with bright Photoshop-designed lions and tigers and "star shields" and Vikings and dragons and larger-than-life Greek letters (ΣAE in italicized purple impact font, $AT\Omega$ in regal gold and navy blue, ΘX in thick, muscular letters). Rush Season. The long, dormant summer at the fraternity house is immediately shattered as forty or fifty testosterone-fueled twenty year-olds re-converge upon their residence; and the long, dormant summer of the college campus is likewise shattered by the uncontainable thrill experienced by new freshman students moving into dorms for the first time, attending large lectures in centuries-old college halls, allowing themselves to be pulled in every direction by their new independence. It is an explosive mixture, these two populations of young people, these thousands and thousands of eighteen to twenty-two year-olds suddenly replanted in the excitement-rich university soil, these kids in Abercrombie t-shirts, in Gap jeans, all at *once*, thinking about youth and about friends and about MTV and parties and *Van Wilder* and *Animal House* and every other college movie ever created, thinking *Hardbodies*, thinking Spring Break, ESPN College Gameday, *all at once*...and the fraternities are there with their Rush budgets funneled into the Fall semester façade, houses renovated and redecorated to prove who's the most attractive fraternity, doors flung open, kitchen tables topped with barbecue and brownies and two-liter soda bottles. Rush Season. Doors open, arms wide open to take in the young and eager masses.

At most schools, Rush is informal, a week set aside by the university and the Interfraternity Council for all fraternity chapters to recruit, recruit, recruit, to replenish their ranks with freshman men aching for activity and desperate for a home away from home, for some sense of inclusion at a mini-city of 20,000 students. During Rush week, fraternities hold informational sessions and dinners (depending on the school and the chapter, this could range from cook-outs to lobster bakes) and social events, vote late at night on the potential new members, and then issue bids to those desired for membership. For all students, it's a whirlwind week of hard work and long nights and new faces.

Back at Edison University, Rush was much more formal. Male students paid an entry fee to be escorted from house to house, in shirt and tie, by a Rush Guide for a full week. At the end of this week, the student decided, by filling out a scantron, which fraternity he would pledge. I was usually responsible for giving the Rush presentation to the assembled group of freshmen at our house, listing our intramural championships, our Homecoming contest wins, our academic accolades; during the presentation, another fraternity brother (James Hawk, usually) would pull several freshmen from their seats, offer them a "house tour," lead them upstairs to his bedroom, tell them to close the door, shh shh, and he would open a large blue cooler in the center of his room, revealing packed ice and plastic milk jugs filled with alcoholic mixed drinks. "Enough of the presentations and trophies and shit," he'd say. "Dig in, boys. This is what it's all about." I'd like to think—here, now, as a consultant—that we didn't do this, that I didn't know about it. But, as a freshman, I drank from those jugs.

Rush Season.

And I am a different man now.

At the National Headquarters, "Rush Season" means two things: (1) New Members and roster changes and the promise of financial stability for the chapter; and (2) The dangers of alcohol and illegal parties.

Recently—this Rush Season alone—one University of Texas fraternity chapter received 200 underage drinking citations at a party. Members *and* guests. With that many tickets, and university sanctions and national fines and rising insurance costs, every member of that chapter will be immersed in debt for years. At Arizona State University one week ago, a fraternity brother—it was Delta Pi, I believe—was giving a tour of his chapter house when he discovered a

dead girl in the basement from a party the night before. She had crawled into a closet, drunk, and had asphyxiated on her vomit.

Be on the look-out, LaFaber said. Anything suspicious, report it. *Right*. If I encountered something that devastating, I wouldn't know what to do.

Earlier this morning, over the bottom right corner of the plexiglass covering my speedometer and odometer, I taped the Fun Nazi business card I found on my bed last night; it seemed to keep reappearing no matter how I tried to dispose of it, so I figured, why not just keep it around as a reminder? The only problem, though, is that it didn't *mean* the same thing this morning as it did last night. Last night, I saw this card and thought, "You don't have to be a Fun Nazi. Stay young. Replace those two words with 'Charles Washington,' instead." Now, I'm thinking the opposite.

A Jeep grumbles into the gravel space beside my Explorer, and I lean back in my seat, pretend to look through my center console for something important. Something, anything, so that I don't attract attention. Don't mind me. Don't mind the guy with the out-of-state license plates, the guy in shirt and tie with a full wardrobe hanging from a rod stretching across his backseat, the guy who's going to function as a *spy* for the next three days. The Jeep's doors open and two guys hop out. One of them wears a Penn State Athletics shirt with blue gym shorts, and he's carrying a brown paper Burger King bag in one hand and a Gatorade bottle in the other. The second guy wears a Phillies hat with a red TKE shirt; there's some sort of graphic on the back, along with an illegible script slogan and a giant splash "Fall RUSH!" along the bottom.

"----on his damn couch," TKE-shirt shouts as he slams shut his door.

"With that girl?" the other one asks. "Holy shit."

They both laugh, their voices fading as they hop-scotch the yard trash and pass the NKE house before finally disappearing through the open doorway of the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity house. Just a couple Tekes. No affiliation with Nu Kappa Epsilon. I'm fine. Nobody knows that I'm here.

I didn't plan it this way, though; I didn't *want* to sneak in unannounced. I called the Shippensburg chapter president, James Neagle, seven times this past week. My notification schedule works like this: a start-of-the-semester form email to alert chapters of my visit; phone call reminders at one month, two weeks, one week, two days (1-2-1-2) prior to my visit; and personal emails to all officers at two days prior to my visit. James Neagle has received extra attention, too, extra emails, and he hasn't responded.

LaFaber warned me about our Shippensburg University chapter. They'll be a difficult visit, he said. They're *frat stars*, he said, the sort of group that's given many a consultant a headache. Last Fall, LaFaber said, they told the Educational Consultant that he couldn't stay in the chapter house, and he had to find a hotel twenty minutes away. They locked their front doors, wouldn't let him inside. The undergraduates were placed on suspension for this, but what did they care? Out here in rural Pennsylvania...so far from the Headquarters in Indianapolis...what does *suspension* mean? Some chapters fear the Headquarters, think we're always watching, but we visit for only three days before we pack up and drive away. Once every semester, perhaps, we descend upon a troubled chapter and conduct a rigorous investigation, make an example of someone.

Sitting in my Explorer, Britney CD recycling and starting over, I flip open my cell phone and dial Neagle's number. No answer. Straight to voicemail, again. Here I am, past noon on a Sunday, tired from an all-morning drive (no...tired from a *full day and night* with alumni, tired

from driving yesterday, tired from six days spent in workshops and one-on-ones with fraternity chapters, tired all around), only half-professional since I didn't shave this morning, and my tie hangs loose and sloppy over my light blue button-down, like a dog's tongue after a long run. My head pounds. Here I am: I rushed to get here, and now I have no schedule, no purpose until I talk with Neagle.

Be on the look-out. Anything suspicious, report it.

"Toxic," Britney's singing. "Don't you know that you're toxic?"

I think of walking inside, just walking straight up to the fraternity house and opening the door and finding Neagle. I think about what the last consultant had to do. I think that this is what I've got to do. Just walk straight up there, right into that mess.

I think of Fall Rush back at Edison, of the four years' experience I've got. The jugs of alcohol, the drunk freshmen. This is *nothing*, I'm thinking. I can handle this. I think of calling Jenn, too. I've got a minute. A quick call, that's it. I think of her happy, high-low voice. I think of her in a sorority t-shirt, blonde highlighted hair falling over a powder blue shirt. I think of the party, the bar she went to last night. I think of her dancing. I think of her sleeping, still. I think of myself, here, in shirt and tie.

"Toxic," Britney's singing. "Don't you know that you're toxic?"

I adjust my tie slightly, check myself in the vanity mirror, step out of my vehicle. This is what I've got to do, yes, just march forward, so I tip-toe through the wasteland yard of fraternity row, plastic wrappers and beer bottle labels sticking to my shoes, and I knock on the front door hesitantly, off-and-on for a couple minutes, before I finally check the handle—*unlocked*—and step inside.

If the main foyer at the University of Pittsburgh felt like it was on life support, this place feels like a corpse left in a hot dumpster for three weeks. The main foyer is a square room, a long hallway stretching out of the back like a tail and leading into parts unknown, and a sickly staircase at the front, leading down to a basement, and up to a likely-ransacked series of bedrooms. But there is evidence of a strong history, here, evidence of alumni support: hanging composite photos of the entire chapter, a glass-encased trophy shelf (spattered, of course, with something brown), an NKE flag along the back wall, and several portraits of prominent alumni. There is also evidence of Rush Season, too: display boards broken in half...the 3 x 5 color photos that had probably, at one time, been glued to the foam boards, now scattered throughout the room. Sofas stand on-end, burnt or soaked cushions stashed in corners or on the stairs or in the fireplace.

I envisioned minor damages, and minor damages are easy to document. Oh, but this is worse. Full economy-sized trashcans overflow with bottles and cans; cigarette butts are smashed into the scuffed, wood-paneled flooring. Muddy footprints lead in every direction, keg-dragging scrape marks in the hallway...but I see—I *feel*—no residents lurking about. I stay quiet, though. Even mafiosos who wear "tough guy" faces and brag that they don't care about jail time don't want the police searching their houses.

Despite this lifeless emptiness here at Shippensburg, there *is* life here on Greek Row, the Sunday morning after the first wave of Rush parties. There is life, certainly, and it's going to be every bit as defensive, antagonistic, *viral*, as it was for the last consultant. Wouldn't let him sleep in the house. Didn't care about suspension. Consultants...they chew 'em up and spit 'em out, here. That's how it goes at the Ship. Small, dead-end school in small, dead-end Shippensburg, a town of two roads whose intersection forms the center of town. Along one road is the university,

an imposingly historic administration building sitting atop a hill and staring down at the campus below. Along the other road are little one and two-story houses and shops smashed up against one another, white and baby-blue paint peeling from the exteriors. House after house, it's all the same: gift shop, antique store, gift shop, antique store, like the repeating background of an old *Tom & Jerry* cartoon. A dead-end, here. Kids that wind up at this school aren't here for learning and growing. They just had no place else to go. And when they join fraternities and sororities, forget about *missions*. Forget about leadership development. Fraternities at a school like this form for beer-glass-clinking social reasons, for party after party. Frat stars. Drinking clubs.

And sometimes they even become something worse. LaFaber told me about one of our SUNY chapters, Rochester or Albany or Plattsburgh, one of those cold campuses in rusty upstate New York, that the National Headquarters closed several years ago. "Thugs," LaFaber said. "I couldn't believe these kids were actually in college." The fraternities had become gangs at this campus, and the administration forbade wearing the Greek letters on any clothing, deemed it the equivalent of wearing red bandanas in Compton. After an altercation with another fraternity at a school football game, our NKE chapter "fire-bombed" another fraternity house with flaming bottles of Everclear.

I follow the scrape marks down the first-floor hallway, into the darkness, tip-toeing across the floor with careful steps as though this is a crime scene investigation. Minor damages, I could handle. But this is the stuff of Rush Season nightmares. Kegs. Underage drinking. Drinking games. Hundreds of guests. Lease violations. Infractions so heavy that mere suspension sounds like a good deal, like trading in a totaled Buick for a brand-new Rolls. This is huge. This is catastrophe. Irrecoverable. Fatal error.

"Oh, shit," I say, feet clicking and snapping off the floor as I enter the remains of a onceindustrial kitchen at the end of the hallway. How many NKE Supreme Law infractions can I find in here, without meeting with a single undergraduate, that would push our National Alumni Council to immediately revoke this chapter's charter, effectively closing the chapter and eliminating our association with (and our liability for) this risk management nightmare? Have these guys ever looked at, ever heard of the Supreme Law of Nu Kappa Epsilon, our studentcreated fraternity laws that govern every chapter across the country and uphold our values and our mission? Keg over there, by the sink ("Law XVI: No chapter shall store kegs or beer troughs on fraternity premises, nor purchase either with chapter funds."). Empty bottles of Everclear and Hawaiian Punch over there, near the trash can, probably the ingredients to a batch of Hunch Punch or Jungle Juice ("Law XVI, Section 3: No chapter shall make available free-flowing sources of alcohol to members or guests. This includes, but is not limited to, mass-packaged beer (cans or bottles), kegs, open bars, and mixed-drink 'punches.'"). Drugs. Could I find drugs, too, if I searched? Could I find something that pushes this from an NKE offense to a Pennsylvania state offense? Criminal activity? And...if I found this information...if I even found it...what would these guys do to me? If I was sent to investigate the fire-bombing at that SUNY campus, what would the brothers have done to me, there?

Above me, the ceiling creaks with activity, and I jump. Upstairs—the bedrooms—the fraternity brothers are waking up, no doubt. Tumbling out of beds, tossing sheets to the floor, stumbling to the showers, sliding into board shorts or blue jeans, preparing to clean the crime scene before the National Spy arrives. James Neagle has received my messages...sure, he has...and he probably thinks he's got some time...he probably thinks that I wouldn't possibly arrive before he he's had the chance to talk to me over the phone.

The stairs creak, wooden boards under the severe stress of stomping sneakers. Someone coming down...

Shit. I shouldn't be here.

Stairs creaking.

Shit. This is breaking and entering, this snooping that I've done. I retrace my steps through the hallway, quietly as I can. Overhead, the ceiling creaks louder, in several areas. In the stairwell, someone says something that sounds like "lunch." Shit, shit. I retrace my steps back to the front door, push it open gently, walk onto the porch so softly that it feels like I'm floating, and I step down each of the cracked stairs, out into the lawn.

I turn my back on the house, hoping no one is watching me from an upstairs window. I turn my back on the house, stuff my hands into my pockets, walk with stiff steps back into the gravel parking lot and back to my Explorer. Back where I'm safe. I picture the first floor filling now, swarming with frat stars. I pretend that I've made a daring escape, and I sit in the front seat of my Explorer, staring at the house from a distance. I'm back where it's safe, surrounded by my car, my office.

The Fun Nazi card stares back at me from its spot below the speedometer. Sharp corners, crisp type, looks like a real business card: someone took a lot of care in constructing this joke. Fun Nazi. *I'm* the Fun Nazi, now. The spy, the policeman. Four months ago, this was my life and we were chugging hunch punch from milk jugs at Edison U, but now this is my job.

I'll have to ask questions, here. I'll have to probe. Be rigid, uphold standards.

I'll have to document this. All of the proper forms and the proper signatures.

Rush Season, LaFaber said. Anything suspicious, report it. And until now, I haven't really *done* anything as a professional. No real break-through moments. I've visited alumni and

I've held conversations, but...no tangible results I can tell LaFaber, nothing I can tell my father. This is my chance at professionalism, here, at real responsibility. When I told my parents on graduation day that I'd decided to take a job as a consultant, my father said, "A consultant? You've never worked a day in your life. How do you know enough to be a *consultant*?" When I told him I would work for a national fraternity, he said, quite simply, "That's a real job?"

This is my chance. So, from the seat of my Explorer, I dial James Neagle once more, and finally, someone answers. "Who's this?" a rough big-city voice asks.

"Charles Washington," I say assertively.

"Who?"

"This is Charles Washington," I say. "The Educational Consultant."

"The what?"

"From Nu Kappa Epsilon Headquarters. I *am* speaking to James Neagle, correct?" "Yeah, this is him."

"James," I say, "I've left you several messages about my visit. Dropped you a few emails, too."

"Huh? Oh. Must not've gotten them. Haven't checked my email in awhile."

"What about your voicemail?"

"Huh? What'd you say your name was?"

"Charles *Washington*," I say. "The EC? From the Nike HQ? I'm going to be in town for the next three days. You know, to meet with your advisors and officers, to conduct workshops, to inspect your house?"

"From Nationals?" James asks. "Whoa. First I heard about this."

"James, listen," I say and I want to swear, want to tell him that I know he's bull-shitting, but this is my chance at *real* professionalism, and I bottle those words that I want to say. "I'm going to be here until Wednesday," I say. "We need to sit down and make out a schedule for my visit. Today. Sooner, rather than later."

"Bob," James says, but it's hand-over-the-phone muffled. "Fucking guy from *Nationals* is coming into town. Now."

Another voice, distant: "The fuck *they* want?"

Then, James again, to me: "Are we in trouble or something?"

"No," I say. "No. Every chapter gets a visit from a consultant at least once a year. This is just standard. I meet with your officers, help you plan your budget and recruitment schedules, just sort of...help you out and check up on you. Have you never met with a consultant before?

You *are* the president, right?"

"Yeah," James says. "No consultant's ever been to Ship before."

Head pounding.

"We got Rush, man," James says. "We're too busy for a visit or whatever."

Head pounding.

But here, now, I've got to do it. I've got to start the visit. Violent reaction or not, cursing and threats, I've got to start the visit. Fun Nazi. Start the inspection.

"Well," I say, "I'm here in your parking lot."

"You're *here*, already?" he says.

"Parked," I say.

"Everyone's asleep, man," he says. "You know...it's fucking *Sun*-day, man. Day of rest. You can't come in here all unannounced and shit." "It's noon," I say, check my clock. "It's almost one, actually."

"Yo," he says. "What the fuck? Let us clean the place up a little, man."

Head pounding. Fun Nazi. Professionalism.

"I'm..." I say. "I'm walking up to your house right now."

And I do. I leave my Explorer and walk the same path through the garbage-yard, knock on the door, wait a moment, and when the doors open, I make myself look surprised at the inside of the house. "Oh, hello," I say when a young man enters the doorframe. He is grogginess personified, a bear ripped from sweet hibernation. He is Shippensburg's version of Nu Kappa Epsilon. Some chapters bring credit to the National Fraternity. They achieve stellar GPAs, plan massive community service events, go on to excel in difficult careers. This lumbering giant, the body of a rugby player and the face of an old mangled boxer, cigarette wedged behind his ear, stands in the doorway for ten seconds or so, seemingly drooling and staring in the distance without any indication that he has control of his muscles, and he is a billboard—a *billboard*—for our fraternity. Sleeveless blue NKE shirt with letters so large that I could probably read them from the parking lot. I can picture him chugging cans of Coors Lite in ten seconds flat, then crunching the can in his palm. I can picture him biting the jagged caps off bottles of Rolling Rock.

"You the guy from Nationals?" he asks.

"That's me," I say and extend my hand. "Charles Washington."

He bumbles forward a few steps, pulls the front door closed behind him, and accepts my hand in a skull-crushingly powerful handshake. Reminds me, strangely, of Walter LaFaber's grip. He pulls the cigarette from behind his ear, sticks one hand down his black track pants, fishes around, and I feel sort of unclean watching this, but a moment later he removes his hand

from his pants and he's holding a lighter. "House is a little messed up right now," the rugby player says.

"Looks like the whole Row is," I say, motioning with my chin. "What happened here last night?" And I know the answer but *his* explanation will spare me plenty of skirting the issue. A good consultant asks questions constantly, places the spotlight on his subject, makes his subject *tell him* the necessary information.

"Had a couple people over," he says, sucking on his cigarette until the end turns emberred. A moment later, he blows smoke into the light September breeze.

"Looks like a *lot* of people were here," I say.

"Maybe," he says. "I'm James Neagle, by the way. Chapter president."

"Very nice to meet you," I say.

His eyes seem to regain life and energy with each smoky inhalation, and his zombified glaze is starting to melt; underneath, however, is suspicion and distrust. Hatred, perhaps. Two types of chapters: those who get it and those who don't. This is a hard-core drinking club, here, and our mission of leadership development stands counter to everything that Neagle believes his fraternity chapter should be. Violently counter.

"Got my room cleaned up," he says. "You can stay on my couch, I guess."

"Um," I say, "excellent."

Couch. I'd almost hoped to be sent to a hotel. For privacy. For distance. It would have made the documentation a great deal easier.

"You probably want to look through our house," he says, "don't you?"

"I'll, you know, need to document some things."

"Phhh," he says, blowing smoke everywhere. "Figured."

Neagle stands a full six inches taller than me. His traps aren't even flexed, but they're large enough to make him look like he's wearing shoulder-pads of granite. I've got to stay here for three days. Three days. On this guy's couch.

"Lot of guys still sleeping?" I ask.

"Some."

"I'm, you know, a little hungry right now, I guess," I say. "Have you had lunch?" "Naw."

"Are you hungry?"

"Phhh," he says, flicks his cigarette. "Sure. I could eat."

"Excellent, excellent. We could take a ride. Give your guys a chance to wake up."

"I'll drive," he says. "I know a decent place."

And I stare at the closed door for a moment, wondering why I need lunch and knowing I should be inside now, but I follow him down the rickety porch steps and slide into the passenger seat of his mud-splashed pickup, and I think, *there's time later*. The pickup gives a healthy cough and a deep *vroom*-ing grumble as he gases it and drives us out of the gravel parking lot and into town. The conversation is one-sided for most of the drive: I ask him how he likes school, why he joined the fraternity, why he decided to become president, what's his major and what are his career aspirations, and his answers crackle with disinterest. Quick sentences. Little elaboration. No questions for me, in response. No investment in the conversation. He's the youngest of four children, I gather eventually, and the first to go to college. The others went into the military. He's a business major, wants to work in Philly. A bank, maybe. Deeper probes—do your parents like the idea of the fraternity? what do they think about you as president?—elicit shrugs.

He takes me to a restaurant called Little Philly Bagel, and it's one of those order-at-thecounter-and-get-a-number-and-then-a-waitress-comes-to-your-table-and-delivers-your-food sort of places. The kind where I always wonder whether or not to leave a tip. It bothers me; I leave 17% at restaurants, always, and I *need* to know what I'm supposed to do at a place like this. I order a ham sandwich. He gets something deep-fried. We sit in awkward silence and wait for the waitress to deliver our lunches. Finally, she comes, and I feel reassured when someone else is nearby, even if only a waitress. Just in case, I suppose. Just in case he gets loud, violent.

"Your house," I say, "is a real mess."

Neagle makes a clicking noise with his jaw, then says, "Sure is."

"I guess, you know, it *is* the start of the semester, huh?" I say.

No response.

"Were there, you know, things in that house that would violate rules?"

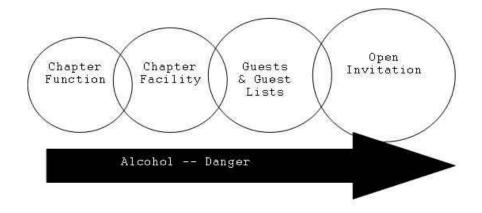
And now the waitress is gone.

"Phhh," he says, like he's still blowing smoke. "What rules?"

"Rules rules," I say. "University rules? IFC rules? City ordinances, laws?"

"Phhh," he says again. "Listen. Thing you got to understand is we don't worry about any of that. Our house is off-campus. The land is in dispute between city and county. Police make it a point not to come by. They don't want the hassle. So we're golden, baby. Anything goes out on the Row."

Satisfied, face chiseled into a case-closed expression, he bites into his fried sandwich chicken, fish, beef, pork?—and an oozing glob of orange-white sauce bubbles from the side and splashes onto the wax paper of his food basket. His mouth is so full, chewing is so strained and strenuous, that he looks like a predator. Like a tiger tearing into a tackled zebra. "We've got Headquarters rules, you know?" I say. "No matter where you are." I open my portfolio notebook, show him the Circles of Danger diagram:



When alcohol is present, the danger is greater in each new overlapping circle of danger. "You guys could, um," I say and shrug, "get in a lot of trouble for this stuff. It's...rules."

"Do what you got to," he says and stares me in the eyes.

I look down, look into my notebook and shuffle through papers.

Anything suspicious, report it, LaFaber said. A nice, well-meaning mandate, but he doesn't have to sleep on the couch in James Neagle's bedroom, down the hallway from forty alpha males without mercy for guys in shirt and tie, forty guys itching to smash the shit out of smarmy "Nationals" consultants "out to get them." LaFaber simply receives my typed reports, makes decisions from Indianapolis.

"Let's go over the schedule for my visit," I say.

He shrug-nods, continues chewing without making any effort to acknowledge that I said anything, and he probably assumes that I will do all the talking, that I will simply recite a schedule so that the chapter can go through the consultant visit motions.

"Did you complete the scheduling worksheet?" I ask.

He raises his head slightly, eyes zero in on mine, and it looks like he's got rocks behind his cheeks. He doesn't nod, doesn't say a word, doesn't swallow, doesn't move.

"You mean, you're not here just to count our kegs?" he asks, smiles.

"The visit schedule was in one of the emails I sent you," I say, and when he doesn't respond, I keep going because I'm not good with silence: "I guess, um, you probably didn't check it?" No response. "Well. I've got some workshops that I absolutely *need* to facilitate, and some paperwork that's essential," no response, "so I guess the thing is, you know, what's most important is to figure out, of course, *times*, and sort of find the best time to meet and to get these things done and to talk with everyone and everything, you know?"

He swallows, speaks in a sloshing stuffed-mouth grumble: "Don't got a chapter meeting till next Sunday. Till after Rush is over."

"Right," I say. "Rush."

"We're really busy," he says. "This is a bad time for a visit."

"I can't, you know, just leave town."

He swipes a French fry through a patch of collected orange-white sauce. "I'll do what I can for you," he says, and he pops his last bite of fried matter into his mouth.

And I realize that I've been speaking so much that I've barely touched my sandwich; when I attempt to scarf it down in one quick minute, he looks at me with this *you're disgusting* look, so I only finish half of it and throw the rest out, pretending I wasn't hungry. And then we're back out in his pickup, old plastic water bottles and dented Coke cans at my feet, many of which are filled with a few ounces of chunky brown fluid. Filled with chewing tobacco spit. Six, seven plastic bottles. A collection at my feet, swishing. When we arrive back at the house, the

yard is still a garbage wasteland, but several fraternity brothers lean against the unsure railings of the wrap-around porch, and the dumpster is overflowing with black trash bags.

"I'll get the schedule together," he says and jerks the gearshift into park.

I ask him if I can maybe take a look around the house, and he steers me to a squat guy on the porch named Chris, who wears plaid golfer shorts and a white polo shirt and has a hat that says simply, "SHIP." Neagle tells me that Christopher here will show me around while the officers are gathered in the chapter library. "Show him the sights," Neagle says. "Take care of the big guy, here," and he slaps me on the back.

We spend several minutes wandering the premises, out on the muddy lawn, and Chris he's shorter, but much thicker than Neagle—tells me how *bad* Teke is, how dorky the Kappa Sigs are, how Pi Kapp just got booted from campus, how every sorority just *loves* Nu Kappa Epsilon and this is the best fraternity in the world and they're going to kick ass during Rush. He's looking down Greek Row as he talks, looking at the other houses not as neighbors, friends, or even competitors, but as enemies, and he goes into maniacal blinking spasms every minute or so, laughing non-sensibly. Each fraternity house has a bright, two-color banner hanging from the second-floor window, strung up with bungee cords, which says "Rush Kappa Sigma" or "Associate with the BEST!"

"I spray-painted a penis on Fiji's front door last Fall," Chris says, laughs. Blinks rapidly. I'm visibly uncomfortable, but he keeps talking, and now he's pointing at the slightly-sloping roof of the NKE chapter house, the back side that I haven't seen yet, and he's saying, "This is balls to the wall, man," and *holy shit* the *roof*, and he's saying, "Gonna get at least twenty pledges this Fall, maybe thirty," and someone has painted the words "Fuck the Bullshit: See *NIKE* City" across the shingles in bright red paint. "We had the biggest party last night," he says, blinks. "Ha!"

And the words on the roof, each as tall as a basketball player...a rusty red...and I could never have imagined anything like this...this is worse than soggy cushions and sloppy bathrooms...worse than anything I've seen. More expensive...

"At *least* twenty pledges," he repeats.

"Is that..." I start. "I mean, shit. Is that *perm*-anent?"

"Oh, it's so fucking tight, yo," he says. "Everybody loves it. It's like those old Rock City barns, you know what I'm saying? See Rock City? Ha!" Blinks rapidly.

"I mean, shit," I say. Ordinarily I try not to swear in front of students, but it's like burping after finishing your sixth beer. It bubbles out of your throat and pops out unexpectedly. "You do know who I am, right?" I ask.

"The guy from Nationals," Chris says.

"Yes."

"We should win some kind of award for Rush this year," he says. Blinks, laughs. "Like, you guys have awards at the conferences every year, right? Most pledges Rushed? That kind of stuff? We should win some of that shit this year."

"Do your alumni know that you've painted...graffiti...on your roof?" I ask and unbutton my shirt's cuffs. Oh, there's going to be hell for this. Alumni will stand back, turn their heads when pool tables fall to three legs or when bedrooms go into extreme and irrevocable disrepair. The house survives in these instances. And sometimes, many alumni probably think, the more "use" a house gets, the more successful the chapter. As long as it's there for Fall football and Spring basketball, little bits of destruction are fine. Hell, alumni like Ben Jameson probably *contribute* to the destruction. But it's my job to explain to these kids that leadership development should extend to house management. This isn't just a place to party, to avoid campus RAs or police or administrators; the house itself is a learning environment, twenty or thirty or (sometimes) eighty or ninety brothers living together and maintaining their own living quarters. *Fuck the bullshit*, the graffiti says. This is so far beyond leadership development, so far beyond explanation, that it scales the wall of what even the most lackadaisical and uncaring alumni will accept. And if those alumni raise a fuss, then this chapter will face serious trouble: fines, rising rent costs, member expulsion, eviction.

"Alumni," Chris says. "What do they care? Not like they do anything for us."

"They bought the house," I say.

"They never fix anything," Chris says. "Never donate money."

I could lecture him. I could spout off the Top 100 Reasons Why Alumni Don't Give Money Back After Graduation (house damage topping the list), attempt to do missionary work on Chris, this gruff ball of muscle. Help him *get it*. But he's already pointing to some other features of the house, laughing, flexing his biceps comically as he points to a few broken posts below the porch, to a sinkhole, and I think that...I should just conserve my energy. Conserve what little I have. Pick my battles. Because I don't have a private minute until next Saturday, until after Shippensburg and Saint Joseph's.

"Fuck the bullshit," he says to me. "Oh, we're fan-fucking-tastic!"

Just hours later, I'm in the Shippensburg basement for an Executive Board meeting, and I am exhausted but am also energized by fear, by the eight pissed-off, unsmiling fraternity officers surrounding me.

This isn't how I picture professional "business meetings" with socially responsible leaders. No, I picture conference tables and TV/VCR combos and dry erase boards and padded gray chairs and suits and ties, and absolute attention when someone speaks. When Educational Consultants came to visit Edison University, our house was spotless, and our chapter library arranged like a boardroom. But this is what I'm given, here: a basement so dank and dark that it feels like a medieval dungeon, complete with a distant, slow dripping noise; the vents apparently open up into someone's room upstairs, and the basement echoes with 50 Cent's "Many Men" over and over again, interspersed with grunts and clanks like someone's working out with freeweights and this is his *get pumped* song. In the corner is a warped ping-pong table (no net) covered and stacked high with yellow and red plastic cups, a syrupy crust of old beer at the bottom of each. The basement smells like wet burlap. And the officers are wearing board shorts and stained wife beaters, are saying things such as, "When is this gonna be over, yo? Told Jess I'd meet her at the pool." Sunday afternoon in the Shippensburg basement, and there is so much wrong with this picture that I wonder why I didn't follow my father's advice and try to turn my senior-year marketing internship into a full-time job.

"First," I say and open my portfolio notebook, "a couple housekeeping details that I'm required to go through. No, um, pun intended. About the housekeeping thing." Blank stares, angry stares. "Okay," I say. "I'm going to pass out the Officer Update Form. I need you all to update your contact info and return it to me by the end of this meeting."

Now, they're not even looking at me. Eight officers, staring at the vent, probably wishing they were behind their own stereos, under their own barbells.

"Blood in my eye, dog, and I can't see," 50 Cent blares through the vent. James Neagle, chapter president, makes no attempt to sustain everyone's focus.

"And I'm try'n to be what I'm destined to be," 50 Cent raps.

"Next," I say, speaking louder, "I need to schedule one-on-one meetings with each of you. I've got a list of visit responsibilities while I'm here, things I need to talk about with every single officer and items I need to collect from every officer."

"And niggas try'n to take my life away," 50 Cent raps.

I stare at the vent, willing it to shut, but there's no chance of that.

"I put a hole in a nigga for fuckin' with me," 50 Cent raps.

I speak even louder, facilitating a rigid discussion of "Chapter Efficiency" and running my finger down a checklist on my laptop, questions such as, "How many active members are currently in your chapter?" and "Does each officer have an operations manual?" and the answers thud like a thick, dusty library book dropped on a table. The eight officers have sort of melted into one giant and dark clump, a mass of antagonism, of crossed arms and squinted eyes, of sighs and shaking heads, and I wonder how long before they're done with me. And it's only Day One. I continue with the questions:

| Does your chapter have a written budget | | Ν |
|---|-----|---|
| Semester Dues, Per Brother | 415 | |
| Housing Corporation Dues, Per Alumnus | ? | |

And then: "How many new members has your chapter recruited in the past year?"

"Recruited?" one of them asks. Danny is his name (and I know not because he introduced himself, but because I'm staring at an officer contact sheet). Danny DeKalb. Kid with unnaturally good looks, hair so perfect he doesn't look like he wants to mash it down and spoil it with a baseball cap like everyone else. A blonde in a room full of urban Pennsylvania black-haired youths. He's the Vice President of *Recruitment*, but his Paul-Walker-face is cocked into a

sucker-punched scowl. He looks like the sort who doesn't overwhelm with brute force, but instead knows exactly how to crack a spine with one well-placed blow. "What do you mean by *recruited*?" he asks.

"Recruited," I say. "New members. Like, through Rush."

"Why not say *Rushed*, then?" he asks. "Why this technical word? Makes us sound like we're a business or something, not a fraternity."

"Um," I say. "Rush and recruitment are...not the same. Rush is a week out of the year, set aside by the Interfraternity Council, advertised to students, and then all of the fraternities and sororities use this single week to try and recruit, or *Rush*, all of their members. At the Headquarters, though, we found that it's better to say *recruited*, because that way, we don't have to be confined by, you know, that single...week." Blank stares.

"Thirty," Danny says. "Fucking shit, man. Thirty pledges."

I nod, thankful, and input the number into the worksheet: 30.

"Next question," I say. "Do you use alcohol in recruitment?" and I can't believe I read that aloud. Oh, shit. I'd been meaning to skip over it, to avoid that discussion here, when I'm so out-numbered. I'm so tired, and I don't want to end up like a key witness in a mafia trial, concrete boots, but I'm thinking of the things I saw and the things I probably missed. I'm thinking of kegs, hunch punch, jell-o shots, ice slides, jager bombs, frozen margaritas, shotguns, Irish car bombs...if it's *in*, and it's cheap, and it'll rock the Row, these guys have probably done it...probably did it *all* last night.

"That's, like, against the rules," Danny says without humor.

The others nod, their faces aglow with deceit.

"Rush starts on Wednesday night," Neagle says. "After you leave."

"But you had a Rush party last night," I say without thinking.

"Rush starts on Wednesday," Neagle repeats.

"But you had a party, right?" I ask. "An open party? Free alcohol?"

"Can't be a Rush party if it's not during Rush Week," Danny says, shaking his head. "Everybody gets pretty crazy the start of the semester, man. The whole Row blows up. We drank some beer, had some people over. No different than anyone else."

"It doesn't matter," I want to say, thinking not just of university and IFC sanctions, not just Supreme Law and suspension, but drunk driving accidents, porch collapses, blood alcohol poisoning, vomit asphyxiation, house fires, students falling from second-floor windows, and a hundred other ways that fraternity members (and their guests) have died over the years, have died over the past *five* years. Head pounding, and I'm thinking of everything that could go wrong at an open-invitation fraternity party, regardless of the specific day on which the party is held: marijuana and ecstacy, beer and GHB swirling together in a lethal mix, 16 year-old girls in the bedrooms of 25 year-old males, drunks drowning in bathtubs, young men crushed under tumbling dressers or trapped in freezers. Lawsuits. *It doesn't matter!* Rush is a full season at universities, not a day or a week, and here, in this house, it's an unending nightmare.

But it's all blank stares from these assholes. All the programming and workshops and manuals that the Headquarters provides, and it's blank stares because they don't care. At EU, as wrong as it might have been to serve drinks to freshmen, we understood the consequences, the Circles of Danger. We maintained some sense of order and calm, rather than allowing it all to explode into "anything goes." The freshmen wore shirt and tie, were escorted back to their dorms. There was safety despite the recklessness.

And Danny says, "What the fuck do you know, anyway?

And I say slowly, almost choking, "I know that you guys are not in good shape, financially," because it's the only thing I can say that won't cause me to collapse emotionally and that won't cause them to erupt. It's safe because it's just numbers. I *can't* tell them that their house is a disgrace and that they're a disgrace, that they're worthless and dangerous. No. Just numbers, inarguable numbers, because no one can get offended at numbers, nobody can get violent: "You don't have enough members to afford this house," I say. "Your dues are too low. You're spending more money on Rush than a full semester of pledge dues will generate for your chapter. These numbers don't indicate a very promising future."

"Phhh," Neagle says. "Thanks for the update. You're a real Positive Pat."

* * *

At night, I try to sleep on Neagle's couch upstairs; I stare at his empty, unmade bed, and wait for him to walk upstairs from...whatever they're all doing on a Sunday night, down in the main foyer and in the basement. Reverberating bass clangs through the cob-webbed metal vent. I need sleep. I needed to fall asleep before midnight; it's unprofessional to sleep in past seven or eight. My sleep-wake schedule is critical. Last night, I stayed out too late with the alumni. Went to bed too late.

But I can't sleep. I keep thinking about what might happen if I let my guard down. Mustache on my face in permanent marker. Fake plastic snake on my chest.

And I'm awake. Awake for hours, it seems, and Neagle's bed remains empty.

The bedroom is hot, dark, full of angry, angular shapes.

Before tonight, sleeping accommodations have been below expectations, but still manageable. At the University of Kentucky, I stayed with the Alumni Advisor in his son's old bedroom (his son, apparently, is now at Tennessee). Clean bed, clean sheets. A bit awkward to

be surrounded by photos from this kid's prom, by framed pictures of girls at graduation, by a giant Sara Michelle Gellar poster that I'm sure his mother has been itching to rip down. Acceptable, though. At East Tennessee State, I stayed at the chapter house, on the top bunk in a half-filled room still half-put-together. Move-in was just a week ago, they said, and I had to leave my suitcase in the Chapter Room because my three-day roommate still hadn't put together the sprawled-across-the-floor pieces of his desk, of his computer, of his entertainment center, of his surround sound system. Move-in, though. I understood. Total chaos when thirty guys move in, all at once. At Green Valley, several brothers worked as RAs, and were able to procure me a room at an unoccupied dorm unit on campus. They even supplied me with sheets and a pillow. After East Tennessee, the echoing and empty chamber of my dorm room almost felt like a hotel stay. And finally, at Pittsburgh, I received the house guest room. At the time, Pittsburgh felt like a melting house of wax, but now...a fucking *couch* in the president's bedroom? I'd kill for Pittsburgh again.

The couch cushions are hard. No. Just one is hard: the middle cushion.

Sometime after 2 AM, my eyes adjusted to darkness now, head pounding and still no Neagle, I roll off the couch, kneel beside it, inspect the three cushions. And I knew it. I fucking *knew* it. Different patterns! All three cushions have come from different couches! I move the hard cushion to the end, to my feet.

Head pounding.

But now the "head" cushion is too soft, and every time I hear any noise in the hallway, my eyes open uncontrollably and I tense up, and I can't sleep. And something is poking me in the back, and it's probably something they left in the couch, like a fork or something, just to fuck

with me, but after awhile I check it out, and it's just a spring: a spring has popped out of the cushion fabric. I feel an open wound on my back.

| Monday | | |
|--------------------|--|--|
| 9 AM | One-on-One w/ House Manager | |
| 11 AM 12 PM | One-on-One w/ Treasurer Lunch with Alumnus, Rick Hall | |
| 1:30 PM 4:00 PM | Workshop One-on-One w/ Historian | |
| 5:00 PM | Dinner at Meal Hall w/ Treasurer | |

Head pounding, and my sleep is critical because this is tomorrow's schedule:

Sometime after 3 AM, head pounding and still no fucking Neagle, I'm wondering *if* I can document infractions, *how*, because I *hate* these fuckers, and I'm wondering if I have it in me, the courage to be a Fun Nazi, and I'm staring at the cigarette-smelling pillow that Neagle gave me, that *fucking asshole*, and it is covered in hair. Short hair. Clipped. Curly. Cat hair, I want to think, but no. Shavings from someone, sometime. Head, neck shavings? Chest shavings? Scrotum shavings.

I throw the pillow on the floor, use the armrest for my head. Roar because Neagle isn't here, that fucker, and if he was...if he was, that motherfucker...

And now, I spend the night staring directly at Neagle's bed, coughing loudly, swearing every now and then, hoping to wake him. But the bed remains empty, I know that. Even when I awake in the morning (at some point, apparently, I fell asleep), more tired than when I'd first crept under the rough blanket he'd provided for me, Neagle wasn't there. Empty bed. Empty fucking bed, and my back hurts from the couch.

Anything suspicious, report it, LaFaber said.

And that's it, now. Fun Nazi, it's not so difficult.

Fuck Shippensburg.

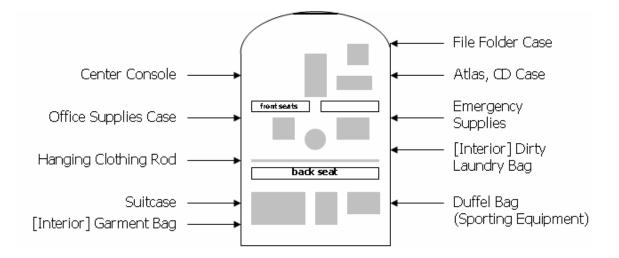
Sometime after 11 AM, as I sit in the foyer talking with the Treasurer, Neagle bumbles in through the front door. "Spent the night at my girl's place," he says. "Thought I'd give you some privacy. You sleep well?"

"Hmm?" I ask, and I could waste my energy on being mad at him—you *fucker*! I needed a good fucking night of *sleep*, and you gave me your *couch* when I could have had your *bed*, you lousy *piece of shit*!—but I keep it in check, say, "Oh, oh yeah, fine."

Anything suspicious, report it.

And that's it, now.

I find the necessary materials in my Explorer. I find the files I need. I find it all. I keep a mammoth plastic snap-shut box on the passenger-side floor of my Explorer, and inside the box, I've assembled a file-system for each of the universities I'll visit throughout this Fall semester. I have files for each chapter: manila folders stuffed with membership reports, financial data, chapter histories, disciplinary records, names, addresses, phone numbers, alumni contact information, fraternity house floor plans, correspondences, old newsletters. Fraternity is a business, and my car is my office.



I drew up a floor plan to keep the Explorer as organized as possible. Sixteen weeks of travel, and I need to be as efficient as possible. I take the Fun Nazi business card from its spot below the speedometer, tuck it into my shirt pocket. I pull the digital camera and the Housing Damage forms from the snap-shut case in the back seat, red pen from the center console—*red*—and I snap pictures everywhere, waiting for moments when the rooms are empty and brothers are in class so I don't get caught. I snap photos of the leaks in the basement, the keg taps in the cupboard, the over-filled dumpster, the structurally unstable porch, bottles of Absinthe in one brother's bedroom, marijuana posters, bongs under beds, anything, everything, more than 250 pictures, until I'm deleting the tame photos to make room for extra pictures of destroyed walls and—*jackpot*—a receipt on Neagle's desk for two kegs, the Visa account identified as an NKE credit card. I'm on the look-out. Anything, everything. Fuck Shippensburg.

I fill out all the forms in red pen. Red.

I sign them, date them.

Rush Season, LaFaber said. And yes, here I am, a professional doing his work so quietly that Special Ops would be proud. Forms, forms, forms, until I've got a stack so thick that it bends the paperclip that holds it together. All of Monday, I spend like this. I retreat into my

Explorer as often as possible. I retreat so no one will find me, but I also retreat to a place where order surrounds me.

At dinner, Neagle sees me walking to my car, shouts from the porch: "Dinner?"

"Got a couple things to finish," I say. And I'm back in the Explorer.

And even though he tells me, later in the night, that I can take his bed because he's going to be at his girl's place, I sleep on the couch.

Tuesday evening.

Lists and lists of infractions, I've got it. Digital photos of the kegs stored in bedrooms, in closets, dirty shirts thrown sloppily over the taps. Bongs beside x-boxes. I've got it. Written infractions like police reports, on the NKE standardized forms, the letterhead, official, signed, authenticated, *my name* fucking them:

China

No officer signature necessary, only my own, only the Educational Consultant, the Fun Nazi. This is a drinking club about to lose its charter, its house.

Tuesday evening, safe in my Explorer, I dial LaFaber at the National Headquarters, the final minutes of HQ business hours. He answers after one ring, knows it's me from the Caller ID, and says, "Charles, it is *great* to hear from you," so quickly that I think he might have been speaking before he even picked up the phone. Maybe staring out his window, seeing me in my Explorer so many hundreds of miles away.

"Why is it good to hear from me?" I ask.

"It's always good to hear from you," he says.

"Oh," I say. "Well, I guess," I say, and where do I go from here? "I'm at Shippensburg right now, but you probably already knew that?"

"Yes, yes," he says. "Another reason for my good mood."

"Shippensburg? I thought you said this chapter was worthless."

"It was," LaFaber says. "Until you got there."

"What do you mean?"

"You've done a hell of a job in two days, Charles. A hell of a job. I just spoke with Donald Annbloom, their Housing Corporation President? We're on the verge of some good things out there."

I don't...know about this.

"I don't...know about this," I say.

"Sometimes," LaFaber says in his gritty halftime-speech voice, "when you're on the ground, in the middle of combat, enemy fire all around you, it's difficult to see that you're actually winning the battle. That you're winning the *war*."

"I'm really not sure that's the case," I say. "I've got to tell you about some of the things I've found here. This chapter is about as bad as it gets."

"Okay, okay," LaFaber says, and I think he sighs. "First thing's first. Did you write any of this information down?"

"Yes," I say. "*Yes*. I've got photos. I've got descriptions, catalogues, forms. I've got everything but their charter."

"Hmm," LaFaber says.

"This place is a risk management *night*mare," I say.

"All written down?"

"Yes," I say proudly. Because I've done it, everything I needed to. Everything. I've shed those old college clothes, the t-shirts and jeans, stepped one leg at a time into the pressed pants of professionalism. The Real World. I've made the right choice, the tough choice. *Exhausted*, but I've done everything I could to fulfill our national mission.

"Okay, okay," LaFaber says. "Let me tell you what Donald Annbloom told me. Our conversation. You realize the sort of sacrifices that Housing Corporation has made in the last few years, right?"

"They're in debt, right? Finances look pretty bad, here."

"The Housing Corp—it's really just five alumni—they still have more than half a million to pay on the mortgage, Charles. This is big-time, you know. Dire. And that Ship chapter hasn't had their house filled to capacity in more than ten years. That Housing Corp is accumulating so much debt..."

"They can sell the house," I say.

"Charles. You've been staying in that disaster for two days—"

"Three."

"Three days. Do you really think anyone would buy it?"

"Maybe. Another fraternity? One without a house, maybe."

"That's a dying Greek Community, Charles. Ship has closed five fraternity chapters in the past three years. There's nobody *left* to buy it. And no National Fraternity is going to start a new chapter there. It's not safe. It's a financial sinkhole."

"So...are you saying that...what are you saying?"

"This looks like the first good Rush the chapter has had in five, ten years," LaFaber says. "Thirty new pledges, they're shooting for. We're hopeful that they can fill that house. Their president—this James Neagle fellow—actually set up a payment plan with Annbloom to start chipping away at the chapter debt."

"I found kegs in the house," I say. "Kegs!"

"Hmm," LaFaber says. "Yes. That is a serious infraction."

"You should see some of the things I've documented. I'll send you the photos."

"Hmm," LaFaber says again. "Listen, Charles. This is great. This work you did is great. But you've got to understand when I say that we can *mold* this chapter. Remember our mission, Charles. Our business is to *develop* socially responsible leaders, not just cut our ties when things are tough. They're with us. They're on the verge. What we've done is shift their attitude. That's the tough part for a higher-ed professional."

"Kegs," I say. "Their attitude?"

"You haven't sent me any of those photos or documents yet, have you?"

"No."

"I need you to delete them, Charles."

"Delete...you're kidding me."

"We can work with them, Charles. They're with us."

"All the work I did," I say. "Work with them? All the work I did."

There is a silence from the other end; Walter LaFaber can be as excruciatingly patient as a first-grade teacher, holding his thoughts, thinking or waiting for someone else to speak, but silence makes me uneasy. So much blank space, and I want to fill it. While I've been driving the highway the past few weeks, past open fields that extend so far into the distance that they go hazy, I keep picturing some sort of commercial development, progress, in all of that blank space. Right now, it's just grass. Just tree stumps. Certainly something must be better than *blank space*! And so I keep talking, telling LaFaber how I had to sneak around to take pictures, how I had to investigate, spy, and this was such a dangerous operation because *what if they found it*? And we can't just give up now. It's not fair to anyone, not fair to me.

"You have to realize," LaFaber says, so patient, "that this isn't about you."

"I know that," I say.

"This is about something much larger than you."

"I know. It's just that we've got all of this...evidence."

Silence again.

"This is about a national organization," LaFaber says. "No matter what the efforts of our employees, we run this operation as a business. Millions of dollars are on the line, Charles. You know that."

"What these guys are doing is *not* good, though. It's dangerous."

"I appreciate the work you've done, Charles," he says. "But I need you to keep something in mind. Nu Kappa Epsilon isn't your run-of-the-mill business, your Kinko's or Xerox or FedEx. We aren't that type of corporation."

"I know that," I say. "I know, I know. We're non-profit, values-based."

"Yes," he says. "And tell me again where our money comes from?"

"Alumni. Our foundation. Student dues."

"Correct. Our money comes directly from those we are supposed to discipline. When we close our chapters, we shut off our income. We have no money for the programs, the workshops,

the consultants, the Headquarters, all that helps us to keep our focus on values and leadership development. We live and die with the students."

Silence, and I'm supposed to be understanding and accepting Walter LaFaber's viewpoint, but I have to fill the blank space, and so I say, "This just doesn't *feel* right."

"This isn't about you," he says again. "This isn't about feelings."

Here in Neagle's bedroom on Tuesday night, as I twirl the Fun Nazi card around and around in my hands, I'm surrounded by tacked-up *Maxim* centerfolds and covers. A year ago, Neagle said during dinner last night, *Maxim* just started shipping magazines to the house. More subscriptions than there were members in the house. So many magazines. So the guys cut them apart, plastered them to walls. In the bathrooms here at Shippensburg, there are tall stacks of sticky magazines, wet with God knows what. Sticky pages, ink-smeared covers. In Neagle's bedroom, Christina Aguilera receives a full wall. The same photos, over and over again. Christina in a thong. Christina in the pool, with a beach ball. Fun Nazi card twirling, twirling, corners bent a bit now.

I'm trying to think of Jenn, but I'm afraid to call her. We keep missing one another, and I'm afraid that another phone call will mean another message. Here in Neagle's bedroom, alone, models staring at me from every wall, liquor bottles staring at me from the top shelf of his doorless closet. Neagle's room is the prototype for frat star bedrooms...*Neagle* is the prototype frat star. Here in Neagle's bedroom, everything is *wrong*, but at the same time, at the Headquarters in Indianapolis, everything is *all right*.

A new generation of frat stars will assimilate into Ship after Rush.

At Edison, where housing wasn't an issue—the university owned all of the fraternity houses, maintained them as residence halls—we always feared the rules, the reach of the National Headquarters. But there is no reach. Flipping the Fun Nazi card, staring at the typed title, flipping it again, staring at the blank back, all that blank space.

Two doorways down, 50 Cent is playing again. "You can find me in the club," 50 is spitting, lazy-hip like he's equally unafraid of both death on the streets and of critical reception, "I'm into havin' sex, I ain't into makin' love—"

And I don't hear barbells this time. Only laughter. Conversation. Jokes. *There is no reach*, I'm thinking, and I know they're drinking over in that bedroom, that they're clinking Bud Lite bottles, that they're talking about college football and the NFL and movies and music, and not *rules*, and there is no reach, and I want to change out of my khakis—in college, I *never* wore khaki pants, how fucking *old* they make you feel—and over there, the song changes from 50 Cent to Britney Spears, and she's asking them, "Don't you know that you're toxic?" and they're laughing cause they know it's true, they are, they're listening to Britney and it's cool, baby, cause she's hot and they're toxic, and she's asking me, "Don't you know that you're *toxic*?" and I'm thinking, yeah yeah, if this isn't about *me*, then I don't have to model good behavior and follow some strict Code of Conduct, and I'm standing up, stretching, tossing the business card onto the top of my suitcase, walking to Neagle's bedroom door, walking to the hallway—

—but suddenly someone is in the doorway.

—Danny, the Vice President of Recruitment, is in the doorway, and he's saying, "Time for our one-on-one meeting, right?" and he's shutting the door halfway, just halfway, and it's just the two of us in the bedroom and I can barely hear the music now, and Danny's saying, "I been

thinking a lot of stuff, you know, and I got a lot of things I want your opinion on. A lot of different ideas."

And I'm saying, "Yes," and it's business as usual.

Wednesday morning. Late morning. I haven't talked to any of the brothers this morning because it's pack-up-and-drive time. It's rearrange-my-items-in-my-suitcase time. It's straightenup-my-Explorer time. Pittsburgh to Wallace. Wallace to Shippensburg. Shippensburg to Saint Joseph's in Philadelphia.

I shove my suitcase into the back-hatch of my Explorer, carefully removing stray items and finding new homes for papers and materials that have somehow come loose from their previous positions. I replace several shirts on the backseat rod. And, packed up tight, I drive, making sure to tear out of the Greek Row parking lot, making sure to leave a heavy cloud of dust to coat all of the parked cars. Fuck Shippensburg.

Drive to Saint Joseph's.

But, sometime around noon, the green Central Pennsylvania countryside slowly morphing into the gray outskirts of big-city urbanization, my cell phone rings. I turn down the stereo volume, diminishing Britney Spears' voice until it is no longer audible, but still I sing it in my head. I answer the phone without checking Caller ID.

"Charles," comes an urgent, ultra-professional voice on the other end.

"Walter," I say. "Walter LaFaber. So good to hear from you again."

"Hmm," he says. "Yes. Listen, Charles..."

"Good news again, I hope," I say. "Good news because it's me?"

"Not quite, this time," he says. "Unfortunately. Where are you, Charles?"

"Driving," I say. "Heading east to Philly."

"You're already on the road?"

"Yeah."

"Get off on the next exit, Charles," he says. "Get off on the next exit and turn right back around, just the way you came."

"What—" I say. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Emergency," he says. "Extreme emergency at the University of Illinois."

"Um," I say. "So?"

"You've got to get to Illinois tomorrow morning, Charles."

"I'm...I'm in Phila-*del*-phia," I say.

"You've got to get to Illinois tomorrow morning, Charles," he says again. "You are a traveling *consultant*. This is the job. This is what you live for."

"That's...how far is that? I can't just turn around!"

"You can," LaFaber said. "Nobody plans emergencies, Charles. Nobody plans on a kid going to the hospital for blood alcohol poisoning. Nobody plans on finding flyers posted all across campus for an open keg party at the Nike fraternity house. Six bands, Jell-O shots, water slides, a *Girls Gone Wild* camera crew. Ultimate Rush party, the flyer said. This Thursday. We need you there before this happens. *Need* you. It's rough, I know, but it's something every consultant has to do at some point."

"You're fucking kidding me, right?"

"Charles," he says, voice rigid again. "Show some professionalism."

Drive. Turn around and drive.

Shippensburg to Philadelphia, u-turn, Philadelphia to Illinois. To fucking *Illinois*. To Champaign-Urbana, to Central Illinois. Approximately 147 miles between Shippensburg and Philadelphia, according to the Yahoo! Maps directions I printed and store in my snap-shut plastic case on my passenger-side floor. One set of directions for each trip, from university to university, chapter house to chapter house: Pittsburgh to Shippensburg, Shippensburg to St. Joseph's, St. Joe's to Delaware, to Marshall, all the way through December at the University of Iowa. But no directions from Philadelphia to Champaign-Urbana. No mileage. No telling how long this drive will take.

Three days at Illinois, an emergency visit, three days on red fucking alert.

Rush Season. Anything suspicious, report it.

Oh, this is good. Oh, this is fantastic. Oh, pounding headache.

I set my Explorer to cruise control, imagine myself in an office, in an apartment, anywhere that isn't moving so much. Anywhere stable.

Chapter Four: Emergency Visit

Summer Training in Indianapolis University of Kentucky East Tennessee State University University of Virginia—Green Valley University of Pittsburgh Weekend Visit with Alumni Shippensburg University St. Joseph's University

EMERGENCY VISIT: University of Illinois

New Mexico State University Texas Tech California State University—Fresno California State University—Highland California State University—Long Beach California State University—San Francisco University of Delaware Marshall University Miami University (Ohio) University of Toledo Central Michigan University University of Michigan Bowling Green State University Purdue University Indiana University Headquarters – Mid-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis) University of Oklahoma University of Kansas University of Missouri-Columbia University of Nebraska Iowa State University Thanksgiving Vacation Bradley University University of Iowa Headquarters (Indianapolis) Christmas Vacation

Shippensburg to Philadelphia, Philadelphia to Illinois.

Shaky today, from the caffeine and sugar. From the coffee, the sausage biscuit, the orange juice, the coffee again, the Mountain Dew, the glazed donut, the coffee again, all the things I swore I would *not* eat while I traveled.

My hands shake on the steering wheel as I drive, in the early afternoon of my second day of travel toward the University of Illinois. It's past noon, but a giant styrofoam cup of cold coffee still sits in my cupholder. The liquid is colored muddy brown with powder creamer, sweetened with brand-less pink packets, and now—an hour after I bought it—it looks unnatural, not the sort of thing I thought I'd ever consider drinking. One of my goals for this Fall Semester was, simply, "No Coffee in Mornings," because I read a *National Geographic* article which claimed that apples wake you up quicker than coffee, and they're more nutritious, but comparing apples to coffee is like comparing apples to oranges, and thinking about it—a fucking *apple* while driving—just seems ridiculous, and I needed coffee. Especially last night. I needed something rough, something sharp enough to scare sleep away. What does it matter, breaking one little goal? I had a goal to uphold standards at Shippensburg, too, and that didn't work out. Last night, on Hour Four of my drive, I even drank a couple sodas. I stopped at McDonald's, broke another Fall Goal, ate a 20-piece Chicken McNugget as I drove.

Shaky from the caffeine, shaky from the travel.

And now I've stopped at another gas station, a 7-Eleven on the outskirts of Champaign-Urbana, home of the university. More soda, a bag of Cheeto's, a prepackaged turkey sandwich with squeeze-on mayonnaise. I sit in my Explorer, chewing, licking my fingers, sipping, headache growing, and I stare at the Fun Nazi business card stuck below my odometer. I've stared at it for hours, off and on, flipping it around to the blank side sometimes to wonder what

might have been printed for me in all that white space. And I've thought for hours, also, that I need to call Jenn; every stop I've made, I've pulled out my cell phone and I've come close to calling. Aside from back-and-forth voicemails, we haven't spoken in five days; it feels like I've even let my goals for this long-distance relationship slip, and talking to her might confirm that feeling.

Fun Nazi, the card says. I flip it to the blank side because I *am* still in control of my career and my life, even if my goals are slipping, and I pull out my cell phone and dial and stare into the blank business card and I force myself to be like LaFaber. Patient. Wait. The phone rings three times, and I'm already thinking that she won't answer. Maybe I *should* just hang up, put it off and don't deal with it, with her, keep up the idea of a "relationship," pretend she isn't talking to other guys, pretend she could still be interested in me, pretend that I could *also* talk with or flirt with girls if I wanted to because I am still young, hang up—

"Hello?" she asks suddenly.

"Jenn," I say. I smooth my pants. "Jenn. Hey."

"Charles," she says.

"How, um, how are you?" I ask.

"I'm good, Charles," she says, and her voice is not high-low, not sorority-girl happy. A silence follows our opening remarks, the type I've been encountering so much lately, where both parties in the conversation seem to realize that there is so much to be said but so little of it is actually productive. I think of LaFaber again, and I wait her out. "Too busy to call me, lately?" she asks finally.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm sorry. It's been pretty bad. A lot of phone tag."

"I've been pretty busy, too," she says.

"Oh yeah?"

"It is possible for me to be busy, you know," she says.

"Yeah. Of course. I just...you know?"

"A lot of sorority stuff," she says. "Senior year stuff. I got nominated for Homecoming Chair, so things have been crazy."

"Oh, cool. I didn't know about that."

"We haven't talked."

"Right."

"We're doing Homecoming with Kappa Sigma," she says.

"Ahh," I say. "Good stuff."

"We like those guys," she says. "They came to our house and made us breakfast the other

day. They're really excited about Homecoming. I think we have a chance to win this year. We

have a great idea for a float."

"Breakfast," I say.

"Breakfast," she says. "And a rose for every girl."

"Interesting," I say. "Breakfast and roses. Real gentlemen, those guys."

"Charles, I hate to do this."

"Do what?"

"Cut us off. But I'm supposed to go to lunch with some of the girls."

"You can't talk for a couple minutes?"

"Things are hectic," she says. "Homecoming. Don't pretend you don't remember. By the way, you *are* flying back for the weekend, right?"

"Plane tickets are so expensive," I say.

"You have a job, a salary. You haven't been back here in more than a month."

"This job is non-profit. I can barely afford my car payments."

"You have to come back," she says. "Next weekend. Homecoming is a big deal, Charles. You can afford it. You can get a *weekend* off, for crying out loud."

"I'll look into it," I say. "I really will."

"They're calling my name," she says. "Call me later."

I pull out of the gas station, grumble along the interstate toward the university. Shippensburg to Philadelphia, Philadelphia to Illinois.

Six hours of driving last night before a sharp detour into northern Ohio to find an alumnus who, LaFaber told me, had a guest bedroom in which I could stay for the night. LaFaber gave me this guy's number yesterday afternoon, told me there was no need to blow \$80 of Headquarters funds on a hotel when he'd found a place I could stay. "Life in a non-profit is *never* easy," LaFaber said. "It's a labor of love." So he hooked me up with this alumnus, Paul Bennett, a former Educational Consultant now studying Student Personnel at Bowling Green State University near Toledo. Six hours of driving…plus two more hours to get to Bowling Green. At one point, I missed an exit, drove twenty minutes out of my way. When I finally realized that I was heading in the wrong direction, I also realized that I couldn't remember the last hour of driving. Not a single second. The last hour of my drive had become a blank: I'd blacked out.

"How's the road treating you?" Bennett kept asking last night. "What's been your favorite visit? Your favorite school?" And then he asked about the National Fraternity, about any big news, about his alma mater, the University of Kansas, because "I can't get back there as often as I'd like." It was one of those conversations where I kept myself to one-word answers, hoping he'd take a hint so I could get some sleep. Eight hours of driving last night and another seven hours of driving this morning. So much caffeine and my head pounding, all the way, hands shaking. Head pounding, shirts on the hanging rod in my backseat swaying and shaking. Stretching from door to door in the backseat of my Explorer, I've clipped a long metal rod to the hooks above each window. Supposed to provide *order* for sixteen straight weeks of travel. Supposed to provide a "comforting sense of home" (the package claimed), like this Explorer is my closet or my bedroom, as well as my office. But the clothes, dangling, swaying on their plastic hangers from the door-to-door backseat rod—one silver-black Ralph Lauren suit jacket (I'm wearing the pants), two pairs dress pants (one pair black, one gray), four dress shirts (two white, one navy blue, one light blue), one black wool winter coat, one navy-and-white windbreaker, one pair jeans, one pair khaki pants, two collared business-casual polo shirts (both white, one with the letters NKE embroidered above the heart)—they look shaky on their hangers, like they could slip off if I hit a bump, and the hangers all face the same way—

ና

—which is important because every time I stop, like now, the shirts sway, and if I placed them the wrong way, they would twist around and shoot off the hanging rod and my backseat would be a mess, utter disorder, even if just two or three hangers slipped off, and then I would lose count of my shirts and the days on which I wore them (some can be worn twice before washing) and I wouldn't be right, no, and I'm wondering if I placed the hangers in the right direction, even, if I mixed up the directions in my head, if I'm arranging my life under the wrong system. This Explorer is packed so tight that it's hard to move, sometimes, that's it's hard to breathe.

Seven hours of driving today, and I've arrived in Champaign-Urbana, heading toward the University of Illinois. This is it, this visit. It means everything. "This isn't about you," LaFaber said yesterday, "this is about a national organization." And yes, it is about the organization, but it's about *me*, also. I keep thinking of that ceiling fan back at Pittsburgh, the beer or liquor splashed across the blades and across the ceiling after some party, and instead of just wiping it off and spraying clean the area, the brothers forgot about it, let it crust and stain, and then simply painted over it all. And now the lumpy, moldy stain is breaking through, darker and meaner than ever. I've spent the past several months in this job, building my life as a higher-ed professional, defending the integrity and the mission of national fraternities and my career choice; I've spent three weeks on the road, now, and I have only missed opportunities to show for it all. I need to make a difference, that's my problem. I need to matter, and I need this job to matter. I need to create change, "develop" the students like LaFaber said, not just document alcohol infractions and recommend suspensions, not just paint over the problems; and if I can't do it now, my own stain in my professional life will only grow and overwhelm whatever thin paint I brush over it.

Seven hours of driving today, and now I coast through the obligatory "campus town" district of Champaign-Urbana, down a road called Green Street; students seem to skip from street to street with a mocking, over-the-top happiness, as though they know and don't care how exhausted I am, how grimy I feel from the foreign showers I've been using, how mixed-up, how deflated, how envious of their t-shirts and shorts and afternoon freedom. They sit outside internet cafes at metal tables, and they type on sleek Vaio laptops with built-in wireless cards. They sit outside the Starbuck's across the road, outside Panera Bread, outside the "Used Books" shop

with the heavy black door. They sit in a carefree September happiness, their class syllabi still fresh from their professors' copy machines, the spines of their textbooks still un-creased from lack of use, quizzes and midterms and final exams and portfolios still months away. Oh, they're happy here at Illinois, happy and basking in the stress-less community around them. It's Rush Season, but not just for fraternities; the season is a state of mind, and everyone on this campus is living it, flaunting it. Sorority girls walk in groups of three or four from Smoothie King or Jimmy John's, wearing cheerleader-skimpy gym shorts with $\Pi B\Phi$ or KK Γ across perfectly round asses; tables of male and female Asian students sit outside ZaZa's and they're all wearing the same fraternity/sorority jersey, and it must be a co-ed group, and it's got five Greek letters but I've never heard of it. Two black kids, one in an Omega tank-top and the other in a stark white undershirt, hop out of a Honda parked at the curb, and they saunter into Subway. Several students rush out of the bookstore on the corner-the two-story bookstore, dense with orange and blue—and scurry across busy Green Street, avoiding bicycles and cars, avoiding campus shuttle buses so large that they're actually two buses joined in the center by some accordion-like connector. Blue shirts, orange shirts, giant I's everywhere, shirts with "CHIEF" or "Fighting Illini" splashed across the front. They're all so satisfied, these kids, that they could be coming from the pool, not from class, that they could be wrapping up their week, but it's only *Thursday*, 3 PM! Yes, it's easy to see that it is Rush Season at the University of Illinois. It's Rush Season for everyone. Everywhere, it's in my face. Every intersection, every sidewalk, every building.

These quick glimpses into the lifestyle in which I was immersed just months ago.

I accidentally take another sip of my coffee; it's cold and tastes like dog breath.

Only the local bars look used and abused, worn out from an early-semester Wednesday night: Garcia's, White Horse Inn, Station, Murphy's, Legends, Brothers. Most of them, here on

Green Street, are still closed, but bartenders stand outside the doors, slapping the dirt from filthy mats. In the back of a bar called Legends, a bartender hoses out a trash can, a thick and gooey liquid bubbling out of the bottom as the spray of water tears loose whatever has clung to the plastic. Mid-shift servers and cashiers file into Murphy's, into Brothers, into Zorba's. Thursday is the new Friday for the business world, and twenty-somethings flock to Thursday night Happy Hours with ill regard for the coming Friday workday. But college towns take this one step further, and *Wednesday* becomes the new *Thursday*. And last night, a Wednesday night here on Green Street, was likely an exceptional mess of late night bar-hopping.

I drive past a long grass expanse—the "Quad," I think it is called, which is cut through the center by so many sidewalks—where students lay out on towels. Nobody even did that at Edison University, back in Florida. EU was mostly a business school, without as much of a liberal arts focus as some of these state universities, but this is *unreal*, this *contentment* everywhere. Rush Season, *they* love life, but *I* spend ten minutes, *fifteen* minutes, turning down one-way roads, backtracking, making wrong turns that I can't correct, ending up in places I've been five times already.

Head pounding. Shirts swaying and shaking on their hangers. I have a campus map that I downloaded from uiuc.edu a month ago, but it's packed away in my snap-shut case, and even the fucking map can't tell me which roads are shut down for construction and which roads dead-end unexpectedly for northbound traffic. I pass fraternity house after fraternity house, sorority houses, left and right, all around me, but they are scattered and mixed in between classroom buildings and dorms and bus stops and the campus YMCA and the Armory and the ice skating rink, and there's no central fucking Greek Row so there's no pattern and no way to know exactly how to find the Nu Kappa Epsilon house. Fifteen minutes, *twenty* minutes, but finally I find West

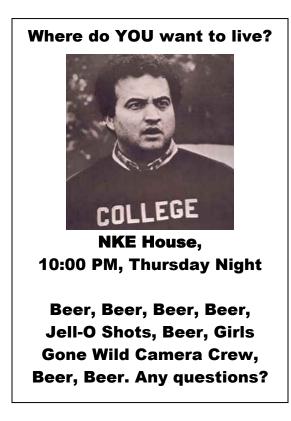
Chalmers, a street also over-populated with historic fraternity houses: tudor-style mansions with gigantic maple trees shading rolling front lawns, standing next door to limestone castles with every decadent Gothic feature save for gargoyles; three and four-story mansions with "RUSH" banners hanging from the roofs. Five fraternity houses in a row on Chalmers, and another seven or eight down Armory Avenue. Houses, fraternity houses in every direction.

Shippensburg's Rush Season was dangerous, certainly, but at Illinois, a school of 40,000 students where more than 5,000 currently affiliate with fraternities and sororities (the largest Greek Community in the country), the possibilities are scary.

Moments after I turn onto Chalmers, I come upon the fraternity house I've been looking for. I pull into the NKE house parking lot, into a tiny dirt pen in the shadow of a magnificent structure that, were it not in a college town, were it not surrounded by similar houses, were it not occupied by 75 fraternity brothers, could be serviceable (at least, from its exterior aesthetics) as a mansion in the Hamptons. I have a bit of trouble negotiating my Explorer into a parking spot, almost scrape past an Oldsmobile.

Shirts sway in the backseat, and I can't see out my back window.

The tall, wooden lamp post outside the house is covered in flyers, top to bottom. Fifty or sixty fluorescent-papered flyers stapled to the crackling wood.



And this flyer is probably posted all over campus.

This is it. Illinois. An historic chapter with more than 2,000 alumni since 1921 (living and dead), smack-dab in the middle of Big Ten Country. If I can't make a difference here, save *this* ship, I'm just painting over a stain.

I'm awake, but not really. My steps are short, scuffing shuffles, and as I march to the front porch of the Illinois house, I stumble in small sidewalk pits.

The porch of this chapter house is modest, stretching only the length of the building's front side, which faces Chalmers. But the front door is an intimidating mass of oak, the letters "NKE" chiseled into its surface, along with elaborate, expressionist white carnations and the date of the chapter's founding: "1921." There is a small metal button-pad above the door handle (a lock, I assume)...but someone has wedged a rock—about the size of a football, and painted in

deep Nike red, with the words "Go Away!" scrawled across in black marker—between the door and the frame, keeping the door constantly opened, rendering the lock irrelevant. I push open the door, hold my breath, expect chaos...I expect the travesty of Shippensburg or Pittsburgh.

The exterior of a fraternity house, I've concluded, doesn't decide my impression of the chapter, no; it's not the roof and the shingles (which have been in place since before most current members were born), and it's not the porch or the windows or the front yard, necessarily, because *that* disorder is outdoors, out-of-sight-out-of-mind for most residents. No, my impression of the chapter is formed instead by the condition of the main foyer, the central living room for the chapter, the inescapable common room of the fraternity house, shared and used by everyone.

And here at Illinois, after I walk up a half-flight of stairs (the front door opens into a small lobby, complete with an old coat rack, and then a short staircase which leads to the foyer) and into the main foyer, there is nothing...literally *nothing*. It is just an open room, wood-paneled walls and floors that make it feel like a colonial library, but no furniture, no posters, no framed portraits, no stitched NKE banners or flags. Just a an open room (empty), a fireplace (empty), a mantle (empty), and several thick rolls of visqueene (the industrial-strength black sheeting most college students use to protect floors or walls in the case of parties or Homecoming or Greek Week decorating) pushed up against the wall, looking like smooth black bails of hay.

The main foyer is dark and hollow, and I wonder if this is an encouraging development. Maybe this room is the utter absence of "frat stardom," of all that I have come to expect out of a drinking club chapter. In fact, if this chapter had the foresight to clear out the room to preserve all furniture from the inevitable damage it would sustain during a house party, I almost admire their sensibility. Of course, I also wonder if this room-clearing signals a party more destructive than I can even imagine.

As I search this empty room, this room so lonely that it echoes with every tinny move I make, I locate two stairwells on opposing ends of the room, both of which seem shrouded in shadow. I pick a stairwell, my feet leaving deep, booming thumps with each step I take. It is a pretentious and academic sound, a *cathedral* sound, the kind of thoughtful clanging I imagine whenever I hear someone say, "hallowed halls."

I descend into the gigantic basement of the fraternity house, which is sectioned off into several separate rooms (a kitchen, a mess-hall-style cafeteria, and a library). This house is, quite simply, a small dormitory, a structure meant to house and feed at least eighty or ninety men with maximum efficiency in all expenses.

I find a door marked "Chapter Library," knock, and a fresh-looking young man in a white polo shirt answers. He's got the messy-stylish hair of a fraternity guy, slick two-inch long brown hairs shooting in every direction across his scalp (seemingly random, but I can tell that he is meticulous in his hair-styling, careful in his creation of such a random, messy appearance), but he's holding three thick library books under his arm, one of which says, *A Critical Approach to the U.S. Tariff.*

"You must be Charles Washington," he says in a mild voice.

"Right," I say.

"Adam Duke," he says. "Chapter President. I was just about to give you a call, see when you were getting into town."

"Oh," I say. "Interesting." And I follow him into the Chapter Library.

This room has its own fireplace, also, and above the fireplace hangs a golden-framed charter, the original 1921 document preserving the signatures of the chapter's founding members and the edict of the National Fraternity, which establishes the group as the Iota Alpha chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon. Everything appears clean and polished; no stains, no dust, no burn marks. I'm searching for damage, but nothing.

"I wish I, you know, had more time to talk to you on a one-on-one basis," I say, my words shaky. Trying to be assertive, muster some focus. Adam Duke is about my size, nothing special, but his voice is calming, not antagonistic; I expected someone who would act like an enemy, like the kids at Shippensburg, not like a teammate. "But I've been given a strict schedule," I say, "people I've got to meet with for the rest of the day. I just got here, and I've already got a meeting in a couple minutes with your campus Greek Advisor. Then a dinner meeting with a bunch of your alumni."

He nods, reassumes his seat in a plush leather chair behind a sturdy desk. He motions for me to sit down on a wooden chair on the opposite side of the desk.

"So," I say, "I can only speak briefly. For now."

"No problem," Adam says, nodding still. "I've got class in about twenty minutes, anyway. I'm supposed to lead discussion today. But ask me anything you want to know."

"Oh," I say and scratch the back of my neck. Nobody's ever given me that prompt before. I think I actually *wanted* him to be an asshole, just so I could be an asshole, too. Give all of my frustration some purpose, or maybe just some relief. "Okay, then," I say. "Well. First thing's...first. This freshman...the blood alcohol poisoning thing." I don't know exactly what I'm saying, what I'm asking him. I say, "This thing is pretty big," and wish I'd said something more meaningful. "Josh Martin is his name," Adam says and nods. A scholar's nod, like he knows everything. "And honestly, I don't know how this was inflated into such a big story. It's not really a big deal. Josh barely drank anything in the house."

"It was a party, right?" I ask. "He had *something* to drink, right?"

"No," Adam says. "No party. Most of our brothers were out on Green Street, actually. Josh Martin is a high school friend of one of our brothers. In town for the football game last weekend. But they both drank so much beforehand that neither wanted to go out. Josh passed out in the basement sometime after midnight, I think. Actually, we were pretty lucky that someone found him down here and called 9-1-1. They said he looked like he was barely breathing."

"And he's fine, now?" I ask.

"Physically, yes," Adam says. "If he hadn't been here at the fraternity house when he passed out, with so many people nearby, he might have died. But, still, his parents...can you believe this? They keep calling for an investigation, calling for suspensions, throwing out the word 'lawsuit.' Like *we* gave him all that alcohol."

"I see," I say.

"So that's where we stand, currently," Adam says, nods again.

"Okay," I say, head pounding, swaying, but I need to focus. "Then there's the other big problem. This blood alcohol poisoning thing...we can deal with it, since it doesn't really seem, you know, according to what you just said, that you've done anything wrong. But this party. We need...we need to deal with this issue, too."

"Certainly," he says. "What would you like to know?"

"This doesn't...sound good," I say. "There's so much wrong with this decision."

"Truthfully," he says, "I think this is the best decision we've ever made."

"What are you talking about?"

"Things have been rough around here for a few years, ever since the rape accusations. We need something to really get our heads above water."

"Rape," I say. "Rape? I didn't hear about this. That doesn't sound good."

"No, no, *two years* ago," he says. "When I was a freshman. I guess...well, of course, I don't know all the details because I was just a pledge at the time. Not really privy to the inner workings of the house. But something happened in the basement. Without getting graphic, I'll just say that there were four girls and seven guys, total. All mutual agreement. Next day, though, one of the girls goes to the campus police, says she didn't want to do it, she was forced, she didn't give consent, et cetera, et cetera."

"Four girls and seven...what does this have to do with your party?"

"We were a strong chapter then," he says, "back when I joined." He's nodding as he talks. They had a hundred and ten guys, he says. Best GPA on campus, best intramural teams, intense campus involvement. One of the top houses at Illinois. But with the accusations of rape came the impending threat of lawsuits. Despite extensive in-house hearings coordinated by the chapter Executive Board, and despite the accusing female dropping her case and apologizing, the National Fraternity still arrived on campus and immediately—without any judicial processes— expelled all seven of the "offenders," and then conducted a rigorous re-organization, suspending ten or fifteen other members who didn't meet some standard or another and placing the chapter on a year's probation. Frustrated and confused by this odd turn of events, nearly a quarter of the chapter (and almost the entire pledge class) protested these national decisions by turning in their pins and moving out of the house. I let him go on for awhile; he makes solid and honest eye contact as he speaks (if this was a job interview, he'd be hired on the spot), but my focus keeps

drifting to his styled brown hair or to the history books that rest on the desk before him, or to his white polo, which I realize is Burberry, and his thick silver watch, which looks like a Tag. Adam Duke is wearing clothing and accessories straight from the front-matter advertisements of GQ or *Esquire*. He's 19 or 20 years old, probably doesn't have a job, and while I smell of old coffee and McDonalds and am so poorly put-together that I might as well work at the DMV, he has the carefree look of young money, born into a swollen bank account or a thriving family business or a job waiting after graduation.

"I don't get it," I say. "What's the relevance of all of this?"

"The entire year after the accusation," Adam says, "even though the case was dropped, everyone on campus was talking about it. Calling us rapists. And who wants to be associated with that? Guys couldn't even wear their Nike shirts on campus, couldn't even bring girls back to the house anymore. We had an awful Rush last Fall, and, if you haven't noticed, there are plenty of empty bedrooms here in the house. Economically speaking, it costs more to maintain this place—air conditioning, meal plan, electric—than the money we generate through rent. Things have fallen apart since those accusations."

"It's been two years, though," I say.

"Exactly," he says. "This year's Rush, this is our last chance. Incoming freshmen don't know about the rape. People around campus are starting to forget. If we can have a good party, a real blow-out, we can have a good Rush and things will be normal again. There won't be this cloud over our house."

And this is the same type of thing we used to say back at Edison, at the end of every semester. We always saved ourselves until the end of the semester at EU, had one "blow-out" party at the beach, out in Captiva. Jugs and jugs of margaritas, coolers over-filled with Coronas. "Wasted on the Water," the party was called, and because we kept such a sterling reputation throughout the school year, we figured that we were much less likely to get into any serious trouble for this one party we had. This *one* little party, where we usually booked three bands, hired four security guards, and set up a basketball-court-sized tent in the sand. We deserved to cut loose, we thought. That's what college students *do*, after all. I close my eyes, rub them. Smooth my pants. I'm shaking. A caffeine shake.

"Listen, Adam," I say. "I understand your position. But flyers? A fifteen-kegger? This breaks so many rules that I don't even know where to begin. I'm tired. I've been driving so much, and I'm...I've got to hopefully explain to your Greek Advisor why the university shouldn't take immediate action. You see how this is tough for me?"

"Other houses are having parties," he says. "This is nothing out of the ordinary."

"I just..." Close my eyes, rub them. When I open them, the room is blurry, Adam is blurry, swaying, and I'm picturing my Explorer grumbling over rough roads, the shirts in my backseat swaying on their hangers, door handles rattling, bags and suitcases rustling, everything so tight and feeling like it is going to collapse around me. What I'm supposed to say...it escapes me. Head pounding. "*Please*, Adam. Just cancel the party." Slipping out of my mouth: "Just *cancel* the thing, all right? This is a *big* offense. Big." And, I'm thinking, I don't know if I have the energy to be the Fun Nazi right now, to document everything like I did at Shippensburg, and then to have it all mean nothing.

"How big of an offense?" Adam asks.

"Big," I say. "*Big* big," but I don't know. Two days ago, I thought I knew the values of the fraternity, the resulting disciplinary action from running counter to those values, but I don't know anything. I only know that I want to sleep, that a company credit card means *shit* when you

can't use it for a hotel room, that my head is pounding, that my hands are shaking and my vision is swaying. "You seem like a nice guy," I say. "An intelligent guy. Really you do. So I'm not going to lie to you or anything. I'm a *straight* shooter. I don't beat around the bush. You know what I'm talking about, Adam? Honesty, you know? Honesty is the best thing. Why...what's it do for anyone to be deceptive? To lie to someone? To lie to themselves? You know?"

He nods understandingly, but I know that he can't possibly understand. He's wearing Burberry and he's got it made.

"I'm...frustrated, Adam," I say. "I'm frustrated with some of the things I've seen. I've had to deal with things you couldn't imagine, and I really...just don't have the energy right now to deal with more of this shit. I want things to work out. I need it, Adam. I need you to work with me, here. You're going to *cancel* this, Adam."

He nods.

I'm silent for a moment, trying to replay back what I just said.

"So, they sent you out all this way just for our little party, huh?" he asks and smiles mercifully. "You weren't supposed to be at Illinois until late October, right?"

"Yeah," I say. "That's right. That's exactly right."

"We have your visit listed on our semester calendar," he says. "We'd planned around it. Even found an alumnus off-campus who has a guest room. For tonight, we just cleared out one of the empty bedrooms and set up an air mattress for you."

"Well," I say, "that's good."

"I do feel bad, though," he says. "Right now, you were supposed to be at—" and he holds up his finger, closes his eyes, thinks thinks, processes, gives me the "don't help me out, here" head shake, and finally says, "Saint Joseph's University, right? That's quite the drive you had to make. I apologize for that."

"Yeah," I say. "A bit of a drive, yeah."

"Where are you headed next?"

"Delaware?" I say. "No, wait. I don't know. I'm a little mixed up right now."

Swaying. Details are swaying, shaking loose.

"This is quite the job you've got," he says. "Driving back and forth like that. We really don't want to make things difficult for you."

"Thank you," I say. "Just do what needs to be done."

"I'll call the Executive Board together," he says and nods. "Don't worry. By the time you get back here tonight, we'll have this sorted out."

"Good," I say, and I want to feel relieved. "Good, good. Good. I mean, I wish I could stick around here, help you out with this, but I've got to meet with the Greek Advisor. Try to prevent the university from going crazy about all of this. You...take care of this, Adam. I'll be back after dinner." And he shakes my hand, like actually *shakes* my hand with real feeling and I look into his eyes, these crisp, green eyes, absolutely clear like he's paid good money to ensure they will never go bloodshot, and he looks so trusting, and he heads to his class and leaves me in the library.

And I want to feel relieved. Like I've just had a breakthrough moment, like I've made a difference and I've ensured that Adam and Illinois are "with us" and that the party will be canceled. Like I can call LaFaber tonight, and I can call my father and I can say, *look*, look what I did, I just *saved* a chapter and a house and so much money and maybe even some fucking *lives*.

I saved everything. This is important work, and I am achieving something of real value. This was a good decision, this job, because I have chosen a career that matters.

This is it, then. This is it.

Before I leave the house to meet with the Illinois Greek Advisor, I walk up the stairwell from the basement to the first floor, but I don't stop in the main foyer. I travel another floor and wind up at a hallway lined on both sides with bedroom doors. Many of the doors are closed, posters for the Fighting Illini or 50 Cent or the Chicago White Sox taped to the surface. The first door on this floor, however, remains open, and a small nameplate beside the doorframe indicates that this is the "President's Room." Adam Duke forgot to shut his door before he left. I resist the urge to creep inside and document receipts and illegal paraphernalia as I did at Shippensburg because, if Adam cancels this party, nothing else matters. But I do walk as far as the door, peek around the corner and into the room. The walls are painted in icy blue. A flat-screen plasma TV—40 inches, at least—is bolted into the wall like a mounted portrait, tall and thin silver speakers bolted to the wall on either side of the television. At the far end of the room is a frosted glass shelf, fastened into the wall and held by several white brackets; along the shelf are no less than ten full bottles of liquor, and the only brand that I can see from where I stand is Grey Goose. This kid is in college, and his fraternity house bedroom feels like a penthouse.

Down the hallway, a door opens, and I'm quick to hustle back to the stairwell.

I stuff myself back into my Explorer, back out from the tight NKE parking lot, and pull out onto the chipped and pot-holed road, car bouncing heavily. But I am already facing oncoming traffic on this road, driving the wrong way on a one-way street, and someone is honking and I turn onto another street the first chance I get. This town...these roads...I could have walked from W. Chalmers to Turner Hall—the historic building which houses the Office of Greek Affairs—but the Illinois campus map makes the school look so sprawling that it exhausts me, attempting to measure the distances in my head: the inches of the map, converted to miles, to quarter-miles, to footsteps, to sweat on my forehead and sweat under my arms and a soggy dress shirt and soggy socks and I'm not even unpacked so I can't just change clothes when I get back from my meetings, and so I drove. I twist through the one-way roads, up hills and down hills, past construction (the school feels unfinished, even though many buildings look just as old as the historic Water Tower in downtown Chicago), past granite and limestone and crowds of blue-shirted students waiting for their shuttle buses to pack them up and shoot them back to their freshman dorms or their fraternity or sorority houses or their graduate and family student housing. Twisting and turning, past Turner Hall *ten times* before I can find a parking spot beside a bar called Clybourne, but the parking spot is reserved 24 hours for police and emergency vehicles and I don't need this, not now, please not now, and I drive until I finally find meter parking outside a Panera Bread probably equidistant from both the NKE house and Turner Hall.

In effect, I drove ten minutes just to spare myself about five minutes of walking. And *meter* parking! I'll have no receipt when I fill out my expense report.

Outside, as I walk, the air is hot but not uncomfortable. Thank you for the heat, God, Illinois seems to be saying. Thank you for the giant magnolias in full green radiance. Thank you for grass and leaves and *heat*, hot hot heat, so we can walk about in shorts and t-shirts, so we can be reminded for just a couple months that the world is not always dead. That there is something living under all that snow and ice, that wasteland. Thank you, the world of Central Illinois seems to be saying in a way that Florida never can and never will. Florida simply says, "let up a little, will ya?" as its grass grows brown from the heat, as the ocean and the pools warm to bathwater.

No, Florida is not grateful. But here, in the waning weeks of summer, before the leaves drip to bright orange and yellow and red and drop from the trees, Illinois is happy.

When I enter the overly-air-conditioned lobby of Turner Hall, a four-story structure which seems to be dedicated mostly to administrative offices rather than faculty offices or classroom space, a young Asian girl at the front desk directs me to the elevators and to the Greek Life office. I follow her directions, up the elevator, out onto the third floor, and I pop out into another lobby, this one swarming with students in orange, blue, white, "Chief" shirts and "Illini" shirts and "Illinois Football" shirts and "Illinois Basketball" shirts and they all love this school, *love it*, and once again I'm the easily identifiable Fun Nazi—shirt and tie, scowling—in a world of youthful contentment.

I follow a sign that says "Greek Life," and soon find myself in *another* lobby.

"You must be from Nu Kappa Epsilon fraternity," says a pineapple-haired young woman in a pant-suit, and she rises from her computer desk with her hand outstretched. She smiles with such force that she looks almost like Jack Nicholson's Joker character, as though she has had plastic surgery to maintain the smile; and she sounds unbearably energetic, happy, too happy, but—like me—she seems shaky and sustained only by coffee, headed for a caffeine crash. "I'm Sandra Worth," she says, "the Graduate Assistant for Greek Life. You're Charles Washington, correct? The consultant?"

"That's me," I say. "How'd you know?"

"You've got the consultant *look*," she says, giggles in an insider way. She is the model of higher-ed enthusiasm, this Sandra Worth, likely a 23 or 24 year-old graduate student straight from four undergraduate years as an RA or an Orientation Leader, now funneled into 50-hour work weeks as a Graduate Assistant in whatever department her College Student Personnel

program sees fit. In this case, she works under Dr. Lynn Jacobs, the University of Illinois Greek Advisor.

"The consultant look?" I ask.

"Tired," she says and giggles again, but not like anything is funny. She giggles as though it's something she simply cannot help. Like diarrhea. Like cramps. Like vomiting when you've downed ten shots of tequila "You look very tired."

"Thanks," I say.

"Not in a bad way," she says. "Really. I've been the Assistant here for the past year and a half, so I've seen a lot of consultants, and I've seen the whole cycle."

"There's a cycle, is there?"

"Oh yes, oh yes," she says and laughs humorlessly. "You start off looking like you're going to conquer the world and then you start looking tired. A couple weeks in bad beds with no sleep. Am I right?"

"Something like that," I say and yawn unexpectedly.

"How long are you on the road for?"

"Just one year."

"You're lucky," she says. "Some of the fraternities employ their consultants on two-year contracts. They have junior and senior consultants so that the younger guys have a support network. With a job like this, in higher education, it's easy to fall back into the trappings of college life. It's always right in your face, you know?"

"The *trappings* of college life?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says and giggles. "You know. The parties, all that? So we try to put consultants in contact with one another while they're here at the university, just so you have

some interaction with other professionals. Or, you know, us grad students can take you out. We like to have fun, too."

The trappings. All that Sandra says, even the tone of her high, caffeine-pricked voice, reminds me of a girl I knew back at EU, an ADPi named Elizabeth Westfield, and I'd known her all four years of college. In social settings, she seemed always to loudly relate her career progress. She'd tell everyone her grade point average, her completed coursework, her interactions with businesspeople of note. During our senior year at EU, she landed a decent internship and, a couple weeks before graduation, while we were celebrating the start of Dead Week at a bar called Gulf Breeze, she told me she'd just lined up a job with Coleman Harris Advertising as soon as she graduated. We're too old to even be at this bar, she said. It's a college place. We're graduating. I can almost hear a conversation between Elizabeth and Sandra, both of them discussing the "trappings of college life" with disdain. But they're trapped in cubicles now, learning the programs their bosses tell them will best economize their time, maximize their efficiency. They're learning how to fill in forms, busy work, just as they did when they colored paint-by-numbers in kindergarten. They've joined the "Real World" because now, they only go out on Friday and Saturday nights to bars that serve Stella Artois and Heineken in bottles, to bars that serve twenty different kinds of martinis, to bars where balding thirty-five year-old men in sweat-necked white dress shirts are the new sought-after, post-college frat stars? "The trappings of college life," Sandra said, and perhaps a week ago I would have agreed with her assessment, I would have discussed how much I've changed since I graduated, but now college life no longer sounds like a trap.

"We're only one-year contracts," I say.

"Spring will be different for you," she says quickly, as though she's just been waiting for her turn to say it. "There's a whole new cycle for Spring. But I can't spoil it, you know? The *experience* of consulting is the main reason to do it."

"Yeah, the experience," I say. "Did you do it?"

"No," she says sadly. She shakes her head, short blonde hair ruffling a bit and revealing modest highlights so subdued that I wonder why she has them at all. Her pant suit is tight on her skin, but she doesn't look like she minds. My caffeine energy seeps out of my skin, but I still sway. "I wanted to," she says. "I really did. It's just...I wanted to go to grad school, not put it off. I figured if I put off grad school, I might never come back. Life's so short, you know? And I just wanted to get on with it, and—"

I nod, thinking of Wasted on the Water, the time that I spilled daiquiri all over Jenn and her shoulders were stained red for the rest of the day, and her white bikini top was stained, but we were so drunk that we just laughed and she dumped a daiquiri over my head, and there were no problems.

"—and it's absolutely everything I expected," she says. "Wait. Wait a second! Don't you want to know what sorority I'm in?"

Head pounding, and I'm not sure I heard everything she just said.

"Sorry," I say. "What sorority were you in?"

"Don't use the past tense," she chirps. "We're members for life, remember."

"Right. What sorority are you in?"

"I'm a Delta Zeta," she says. "From Miami University."

"Oh."

"We were founded there at Miami," she says. "Very exciting."

"Oh."

"Miami *University*," she says, "in Oxford, Ohio. Not 'The U,' in Florida. Not the University of Miami. I'm sure you were wondering that. Miami University was a school before Florida was even a state. No offense."

"No, none taken."

"Don't you want to know about your chapter here?"

"I figured that when I talk to Dr. Jacobs, she'd—"

"Quick objective viewpoint on Nu Kappa Epsilon," Sandra says, eyes closed. "I only know their chapter president, Adam, because I've communicated with him so much the past week about the alcohol poisoning. You know the details, right?" I am about to interject, but she doesn't give me time. "He's a nice guy, and the brothers are all nice guys. Great GPA. But we have a term in our program, and that's 'All-Star Squad.' You know how some sports franchises will go out and spend money on the best free agents, and they'll have a group of great individual athletes, but the team itself doesn't win? That's Nike! Very nice individuals, but they're not a good team, a good fraternity."

"Thank you, Sandra," I say. "I appreciate you telling me that. But I...I've got a few meetings later in the evening, also. Is Dr. Jacobs ready for me?"

"She's meeting with the Dean," she says. "I updated her appointments on Outlook to clear time for your meeting, but you know how it goes? The Dean comes first. It's hard to cut it short when you're eating cobb salad with the woman who controls your job."

"Ahh," I say.

"You can stay here and wait," Sandra says and pats a padded chair beside her desk. "I'll keep you company!"

I can't tell if she's flirting or if she is just unceasingly cheerful. Either way, the prospect of "time with Sandra" isn't appealing. This is my first extended contact with a college-age girl in several weeks. I'm reminded to call Jenn back, but I'm also reminded of how many guys Jenn talks with everyday. How many other fraternity guys.

"Okay," I say, and sit because I don't know where else to go.

Sandra asks me what my favorite Greek Community has been. I start to answer, but then she asks me if I've ever been to Indiana University. I start to answer, but then she tells me that MGCA was one of the best weeks of her life. I start to speak, but then she tells me about all of the chapters at Illinois, about how this Greek Community is great, the largest in the country. The prototype. It's tough work to be a fraternity or sorority member here, she says, but it's so rewarding, and I'm thinking that Jenn wouldn't screw around on me, that she's probably just busy, just like me. Such an incredible community, Sandra says, and the percentage of the student population in fraternities and sororities is unbelievable. Every now and then, there's a small problem, but the chapters are all so old and established that it only takes a call to the alumni and they stop in and have a come-to-Jesus meeting with the undergrads, and the problem goes away. Jenn is a bit of a flirt, I suppose, has this way of putting her fingers (just the tips) along the upper portion of your chest as she talks, on every guy's chest, and I never thought about it because I was always around, and she wouldn't screw around on me. Sandra is talking about Miami, now, about how-at Miami-the sororities don't have houses and one sorority wanted to build a house but the other national sororities blocked it because that would hurt their recruitment numbers and then *they'd* be forced to build houses also and there's so much *money* at stake. And there's just as much money at stake here at Illinois, much more than at Miami. Million dollar houses. Millions of dollars in alumni contributions to the university. She talks about how impressive the

new Pi Kappa Alpha house is—have I seen it?—and she's telling me that we have a great responsibility in higher-ed, that we need to ensure that the organizations don't slip up, and it's totally under our control, she says, but I'm thinking that it isn't under my control, no. I'm trying to insert myself into a four-way tug-of-war between students, alumni, the university administration, and a National Headquarters, all of them tugging at the simple concept of a student organization, and with so many people tugging and so many opinions on what the organization should be (Leadership Organization! Drinking Club! Home Away From Home!) and so much money, I don't have any control and I can't create any change, no, and my vision is shaky and I'm picturing the shirts swaying in my backseat again, and I'm picturing myself back in my Explorer, so packed into my Explorer and surrounded by suitcases and snap-shut cases and boxes of supplies that I can't even move my arms and I can't turn the steering wheel and I can't reach the emergency brake, and it's like getting strapped into a rollercoaster and knowing that I'm stuck going wherever this machine wants to take me, no stopping it, up up up, dowwwwwnnn, and I'm thousands of miles from Jenn and I have no control there, either, and I've got to call her.

"I think..." I say.

Sandra's voice, her giggles...they're somehow inside my head, cutting into my brain...they're behind my eyes, pulling my eyes back into my skull...it feels like my face is puckering into an implosion. Head *pounding*.

"I think I need to make a phone call," I say, and stand up while she's talking.

Outside the office, outside Turner Hall where I can actually get cell phone reception, I call Jenn. All around me, as I stand on the building's concrete steps, a half-block from the

bustling green quad that serves as the campus centerpiece, students are either lounging lazily or bursting in Rush Season excitement. And all is the same back at Edison University in Florida. EU is a private university, of course, with an enrollment always bobbing above or below 7,000, compared to the University of Illinois' 40,000 or so; and while the much-larger Illinois campus seems to pride itself in its historic halls of thick brick, all built like bunkers to withstand cruel winters, the classroom buildings at Edison look instead like office-park developments, threestory structures with blue-tinted reflective glass facades, ground to roof, which glaze over with air-conditioning condensation in the humid summers.

Still, there is no shortage of excitement and recklessness back at my alma mater. In the late-afternoons of early Fall, we'd sometimes drag the couches out of the fraternity house and onto our lawn; we'd drag televisions outside and drink and watch Marlins games or Sportscenter; sometimes we'd grill hamburgers and set up lawn chairs and kiddy pools on the grass and invite sorority girls over. This is how I met Jenn, in fact, on one such afternoon, a Thursday or a Friday, when most of the classes for the day had ended and a pack of Kappa Deltas strolled up our front walkway, wearing thin t-shirts under which the bright straps of bikini tops were clearly visible, and carrying beach towels. When we talked that afternoon, Jenn and I on side-by-side chairs under a waning sun, we spent probably an hour discussing our favorite *Seinfeld* episodes and quotes, learning one another's lives through our relation to the sitcom. She'd always remember the Soup Nazi episode, for instance, because her parents held a family conference after the show ended to tell Jenn and her sister that they would all be moving from Atlanta to Tampa. There was an ease to our conversation, back then, unforced because neither of us was in a hurry. Now, though, our very relationship seems at stake each time I call her.

"How was lunch?" I ask when Jenn answers the phone. I try to sound like I'm interested, but I think my question comes out sounding condescending.

"Fine," she says. "It was just Applebee's."

"I had gas station food for lunch," I say. "Applebee's sounds good to me."

"That doesn't sound like a very good choice for lunch."

"I wish I could choose," I say. "But it's hectic out on the road."

"You could have had something else, I'm sure."

"Well, yeah," I say. "I didn't mean, you know, that I definitely couldn't have."

"You look up plane tickets at all?" she asks. "For Homecoming?"

"I haven't been in front of a computer."

"So...no, then?"

"Yes," I say.

"Yes, no? Or yes, yes?"

"Um," I say. "Yes, no?"

"Yes, no, you haven't looked up plane tickets?"

"I just—" I say. "I haven't been in front of a computer, I said."

"You're being difficult on purpose, aren't you?" she asks.

"Me? I didn't mean to be. I'm being difficult?"

"Homecoming is a week and a half away," she says. "You know that."

And her voice is low and disaffected, not at all the high-low syllables of her voicemail message, the intonation of some happier time.

"I know that, I know that," I say. "You told me. Things are just difficult for me."

"You've got a laptop. I don't understand why you can't just book some tickets."

"I'm not even unpacked," I say. "I'm...God, I don't even know where I'm at."

"You're at the University of Illinois," she says.

"I know that," I say. "But...I mean, it's all maps and...I don't even know where I'll *be* next week. I have to check my schedule. Like, really."

"I thought you had your schedule memorized. Pittsburgh to Shippensburg, Shippensburg to Saint Joseph's, all that."

"Things have changed," I say. "It's...it's harder to stay organized."

She sighs. "What's the point of having a boyfriend I never get to see?"

"I just—" I say. "Wait, what?"

"Listen, Charles," she says. "I'll, you know, have to call you later tonight. This probably isn't a good time. We're supposed to have an Executive Board meeting in a couple minutes." Someone is laughing in the background. A girl's laugh, light and innocent, but I can't help thinking that it's *me* that this girl is laughing at.

"Sure," I say. "Oh, sure."

"What?" she says, not to me. "Oh, God."

"Hello?" I say.

"Charles, hold on." And suddenly the phone grows louder with laughter, and Jenn tries to say something else but her voice breaks up a little and she says, "I've got to go, Charles. Why don't you just give me a call later tonight, could you? Or tomorrow."

"Right," I say.

"Call me when you get the tickets," she says, and she hangs up without saying goodbye.

Slipping. Things are slipping. We had a way that we always ended phone conversations back in Fort Myers, a couple words (*not* "I love you," but something just as routine and

mechanical), and I'm thinking but I can't remember, and I'm holding the phone so tightly I'm surprised I'm not cracking the plastic. I run my hands through my hair and shake violently, shiver, like it's cold out but it's still very hot, and I have a cry deep in my throat but I contain it, and I wonder if I could cry even if I wanted. Walk back inside, thinking "composure." Slouching, though.

* * *

Ten minutes later, I'm finally ushered into Dr. Jacobs' office, past several stacked boxes of three-ring binders and file folders that spill from her office into the hallway (as though she's just moved into this office and hasn't finished unpacking...but I was told that Dr. Jacobs has been the Greek Advisor at Illinois for almost four years). Her degrees are posted prominently on the far wall of the office: Bachelor's from Nebraska, Master's from Pittsburgh, Doctorate from Penn—and certifications are scattered about, mixed with group photos from dozens of conferences. Fake smiles. Bookshelves wrap around the room, and the reading material all feels predictable: volumes of 3-ring notebooks labeled as ASB Manual or Operations or Conference 1999, and probably ten different books called "Leadership" by authors as diverse as John Wooden and Rudy Giulliani.

Dr. Jacobs is a gaunt woman—skeletal and frightening—in her early '50s, with short, jagged black hair, wrinkle lines crackling on a dry and unfriendly face, and her smile looks more like a teeth-gritting gasp. Most Greek Advisors last a year or two in their positions, cycling from low-level administrative positions to something more substantive (Assistant Dean, perhaps, or Director of Campus Housing). At many schools, the Greek Advisor position is seen only as a transitory testing ground, an entry-level starting point for new Master's degree holders. Thus, many Greek Communities are in a constant administrative disarray, allowing so many "drinking clubs" and "sorostitute houses" to function without university penalty. Dr. Jacobs, I've been warned by LaFaber, has decades of experience in university administration, but was demoted to Greek Advisor for conduct issues. Perhaps, by leaving packed boxes on her floor, she is registering her disappointment with her position in Greek Affairs and is still holding out some hope for a transfer to a new department.

"Nu Kappa Epsilon, Nu Kappa Epsilon," Dr. Jacobs says. "I wish I knew more about your fraternity."

"Nationally?" I ask. "Or here at Illinois?"

Generally, I have a list of questions that I ask each Greek Advisor, a list of worksheets that I share with them. Most meetings between Greek Advisor and Educational Consultant are a sort of information catch-all for both participants. Today, I'd hoped to simply tell this woman that the party tonight is going to be cancelled, rather than spending an hour examining statistics and memos.

"Both," she says and holds up her palms. "You see, we have more than fifty fraternity chapters on campus, Mr. Washington, more than twenty-five sorority chapters. That's as many groups as most national organizations have across the *country*. By and large, many tend to be complacent organizations here. They live in the bubble of their houses, sectioned off from the rest of the student body as though their house is just another dorm. It's a mentality of House-Centrism, I call it. A loss of campus community, an inability to see beyond the front porch of the single fraternity house. And it extends to the very language used to describe the groups. People don't say 'fraternity' or 'chapter' or 'brotherhood,' here. People instead ask, 'What house do you belong to?' The fraternity, then, loses the values of generations past, and instead becomes a

meaningless piece of real estate that binds the members, holds them hostage, deprives them of opportunity rather than making available an entire new community."

"Hmm," I say and I look around for a clock on the walls. "Interesting."

"And this, in turn, breeds a sort of revolving door feel for the Greek Community," she says. "If a group is huddled into itself, it does not feel responsible for—or acknowledge—the others. Last Spring, Sigma Nu couldn't maintain the numbers necessary for keeping up with the housing costs. So the National Headquarters dissolved the group and agreed to re-start the chapter in four years, once many of the original members have graduated. Standard, standard. But what's interesting at Illinois is that nobody misses that chapter. Nobody notices. It's just another house. Here today, gone tomorrow, back in four years. I've been fine-tuning my article on this theory for two years, now."

"Hmm," I say.

She is silent. She stares into my eyes with such a look of satisfaction that I think she feels our meeting is finished. Maybe I was wrong about her. Perhaps she has grown comfortable in her position as Greek Advisor. She hasn't completely unpacked, and she seems to know very little about the chapters on campus, but she has obviously been using this position to further her own research.

"And, of course," she says, "the impact on the Millennials is profound."

"Millennials," I say, straightening in my chair. "Yes, I've heard that term. That's the second time, actually, that I've heard that term in the last week."

"Millennials," she says and gives her teeth-gritting smile. "You must check out Strauss and Howe's work on the subject. Seminal, seminal. And Harold Vernon, a man I know personally, has written extensively on the Millennial Generation." I nod as if I'm interested.

"What we've found about Millennials, kids in college now," she says, "is that they're very community-oriented. They have been nurtured by parents. They have been involved in team sports and after-school programs all their lives. Unlike Baby Boomers or Gen-Xers, Millennials *are* the establishment. Just like the old G.I. Generation who fought World War II. And they're adapting to a culture formed, these past thirty years, by social rebellion. Punk rock, grunge rock. Bra burning, war protests. It's a complete turnaround, this return to conformity, and it's the reason for tragedies such as the Colombine shootings. A tighter-knit community creates more outcasts."

"So the fraternities are becoming stronger communities?"

"Yes. But unreasonably so. House-Centrism, remember? Almost two hundred years of tradition in some of these houses. Alumni, money. Each fraternity believes it is the only community that matters, and so their behavior becomes arrogant, dangerous. And those who don't join fraternities are branded outcasts. But on a campus as large as this, that means that we've got 35,000 outcasts, a striking majority, all of them Millennials as community-oriented as the fraternities. So we could be looking at a destructive backlash, an uprising, in the immediate future."

"It's a good thing we've got a noble purpose, then," I say unconvincingly. "We can change the culture. Keep it focused on leadership."

"The Millennials have no purpose for their community, that's the real problem," she says and shakes her head. "The G.I. Generation had a quote-unquote good war, and the space program, and a new information age. But the Millennials strive toward no true goal. They have

only a sense of entitlement. Of course, that's very much off-topic. That's an article I've only just begun to draft."

"So," I say, and I rub my eyes, "how does, you know, Nike fit into this?"

She wipes her forehead, bends down to a file cabinet, opens the squeaky-clean door. I wasn't prepared for this. I was prepared to ask her...*my* questions. But now, I can't even remember what they are. *Would you consider Nu Kappa Epsilon to be in the top third of chapters on campus*? I'm thinking: hangers swaying in the back of my Explorer, shirts slipping off, details slipping from my mind. She's ruffling through a stack of papers inside a manila envelope, all of the papers printed on heavy gray cardstock with a blue "T" in the middle of the letterhead banner. She licks her finger, turns a sheet, scans some sentences, licks her finger, turns another page. Reads.

Finally, she says: "I know only what I've heard this week. A houseguest in the hospital for blood alcohol poisoning, and a flyer for an open keg party. You can imagine how that colors my perception of your group, can't you? The better question is: what can *you* tell me about them, Mr. Washington?"

I open my portfolio notebook, thinking that I have the list of questions here.

Shirts swaying, details slipping. I'm thinking of questions, but it doesn't matter.

"How long have you been Greek Advisor?" I ask.

"Four years," she says, eyes narrowed as though I've challenger her on some key issue of her research.

"And you don't know anything about them?" I ask. "They're on your campus, and you don't know anything about this fraternity?"

"Like I said," she says without looking up, still looking through papers, "it is very easy to lose yourself in a Greek Community so large. While we've compiled ground-breaking research, for many of us in these administrative positions, we simply cannot make the time to get hands-on with the groups. The sheer number of organizations, of students, and the constant student turnover, all of these things work against us in that regard. So we leave the hands-on work to the practitioners in the field, such as yourself. For us, Mr. Washington, these groups remain—" and she tears a sheet from the manila envelope, presents it on her slick desk for me to gaze upon:

| Chapter | GPA – Chapter | GPA – New Members |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Sigma Alpha Mu | 3.394 | 3.291 |
| Delta Tau Delta | 3.390 | 3.010 |
| Alpha Tau Omega | 3.284 | 3.201 |
| Delta Upsilon | 3.275 | 2.998 |

"Numbers," she says. "Numbers and letters on a page."

"But in four years," I say. "Four years, you've been here."

"It is im-*poss*-ible," she says coldly, leans back in her desk chair, and now turns her attention to her computer and scrolls through whatever Internet Explorer window is stretched across her screen, "to meet everyone. If a chapter is unwilling to actively involve itself in the campus community, and is unwilling to take that first step to attend our workshops and our community-wide events and ask for guidance from Greek Affairs..." She holds up her hands again. "If that is the case, as it is with Nu Kappa Epsilon, we can only do so much."

Head pounding.

I've been to five states in three weeks, visiting chapters. She has them all at her doorstep, and she knows them only by Excel spreadsheets. I rub my eyes, and my head pounds harder. Her neck is so thin, the size of my wrist, probably, except covered in hanging and wrinkled flesh. It's an uncaring neck. Her voice, too, uncaring.

"I can tell you this," she says. "We need to get this situation—this party—worked out as quickly as possible. Illinois does not need an incident to start its semester."

"I agree," I say. "Definitely."

"We need to get this squashed," she says. "These parties, these keg parties, are simply the trappings of a bygone era," she says. "The remnants of the 1970s and 1980s, when a carefree *Animal House* attitude permeated our Greek Communities," she says. "This is not acceptable in the *Here* and *Now*," she says. "We need to get this taken care of, this situation," she says.

The trappings, she said.

"Oh, I agree," I say.

"Call me in the morning," she says. "I'm looking forward to an update."

And what will *you* do, I'm thinking. Nothing. *Nothing*. Absolutely *fucking nothing!* Shaky, I stand, stuff my hands in my pockets. And I'm thinking of all of these things to say to Dr. Jacobs, about how she's got too much skin for her skeleton, about how she'd rather document change than create change, but I say nothing. Because I have control of this party tonight; I have the power to create change, even if it is only in such a small capacity as preventing a party. This is it, then. Illinois.

I gather myself, still shaky, and leave the room.

After I leave Turner Hall, I meet up with three alumni at a pizzeria called Garcia's, where one of the alumni has assured me over the phone that we will find "dee-lish deep dish." There's a problem with how he speaks, how happy and unconcerned. "There are *real* concerns here," I keep saying when we sit down together, around a pizza that takes up most of the table...my head pounds, and I drink Diet Coke after Diet Coke instead of devouring the pizza like the three alumni do. I look for fear on their faces, for anger or hope or desperation or disappointment, but these guys—all thirty-somethings who are in town for the first time in years, I think—are talking as if they haven't thought about the fraternity since college. They are more focused on Garcia's, on Champaign-Urbana, on the University, than they are on the party later in the night.

"Illinois has a chance to go deep in the tournament," one of them—Ed Huggins—says at one point. I try to refocus his comment, force the issue, try as hard as I can, and I say, "You'll have nowhere to come back to if the chapter closes."

"I'll be honest," Huggins says. "This group is..." He lifts his hands in the air, shakes them around a little, closes his eyes and makes an I-just-swallowed-piss face. "They're just...*eh*hh? Just so, so. I walked around with them during Homecoming last year, and I was...seriously...a little embarrassed. It'll be good to close them down. Get rid of that rape reputation. Start from scratch."

"Closure isn't a foregone conclusion," I say. "We need to think about this chapter as if it's still the brotherhood that you were a part of. We need to think about this party."

"It's a different house," Huggins says. "Different than when I went to school."

"You have to care," I say. "You have to care."

"Why?" Huggins asks. "What can I do? They're kids. Kids party."

"You don't see what's wrong with this? Flyers? Kegs? The liability?"

"We're losing a ton of money keeping that house open right now," Huggins says. "I see what's wrong with our bank account. Hell, I hope they have the party. You'll shut 'em down on the spot, right?" It becomes difficult to eat, to cut my deep-dish pizza into manageable pieces. Time is running out before the party, and I'm wasting my entire evening with alumni who have no intention of helping me. As I carry a bite of pizza to my mouth, a chunk of tomato and cheese slips from my fork and lands on my shirt.

"Watch out, buddy!" Huggins says.

When I get back to the Nu Kappa Epsilon chapter house after the dinner meeting, sometime before 9 PM, the sun has melted beyond the horizon and all has gone late-summer dark. It's the sort of color that speaks of a coming cold. The Florida sky doesn't take this color; it seems to stay red—warm—for so much longer.

Ten or eleven brothers stand on the front porch, arranging fold-out tables into rows and, perhaps, blockades. Two of the brothers wear black shirts with the word "Security" screenprinted across the front in white. On one of the tables is a tall, rectangular cardboard box, about the length and width of a ruler, inside of which is a stack of neon orange wrist bands, the type generally given out at clubs and bars to denote "21 & Up." Beside the box is a black Sharpie and a couple pocket folders stuffed with printer paper. From somewhere inside the house comes a drummer's *thump*, then a ba-*dump*, then a *thump*, ba-*dump*-a-*dump*-a-*dump*, then the crashing of cymbals, then a strum of guitar strings and microphone feedback and someone saying in a deep voice, "Check the levels, man, it's fucking crazy distortion." One of the bands setting up.

Nothing has changed. Adam Duke hasn't reconsidered. And I'm too late to change anything. The party will still happen.

"You've got to be kidding," I say, then louder so the brothers on the porch can hear me, "You've got to be *fucking* kidding me!" No one turns to look, though. Someone is beat-boxing into the microphone, freestyle rapping.

Our spiral-bound "Educational Consultant Resource Guide" says something about this, says something about the recommended procedure for handling social events. Phone call to Headquarters before anything? Make every attempt to end party, *then* a phone call to Headquarters? I remember every word of the "Code of Conduct," Page 12, all of it, from "Model the behavior of the ideal Nu Kappa Epsilon brother, the Marathon Man," to "Safeguard the National Fraternity's good name," to "No dating, drinking, or drugs." I remember these, but I'm trying to picture the proper procedure for stopping this party, which page of the resource guide, how many bullet-points, in which order, and where did I even leave the resource guide? And I can only picture the hangers in the backseat swaying, clothes slipping off, scattered on my backseat, entire Explorer cluttered, and I'm covered, suffocating under it all. Explorer bumping, shooting downhill and I can't stop it. Clothes slipping, Explorer slipping, details, composure, everything, my chance at preventing this party slipping.

I run my hand through my hair, across the stubble on my chin; my hand is still shaking from so much caffeine, so I stuff it in my pocket. And there in my pocket, I feel something small, rectangular, with sharp corners: the Fun Nazi business card. At some point, I'd pulled it from my dashboard and dropped it in my pocket. I flip it over and over before me, staring first at the "Fun Nazi" side, then at the blank back. This is who I am; that's all I *need* to know. I am in control.

And so I walk up the steps to the front porch, and I don't know what I have in mind, but I need to do something. *Something*. And then I see, in the far corner of the porch, beyond the tables and the scurrying brothers, a shiny row of metal cylinders. Here are the fifteen kegs, all

grouped together as though just delivered. Silver surfaces glistening with condensation. One of the fraternity brothers stands behind them all, the handles of a rolling dolly in his grip, and he's looking at all of the kegs with an expression that says, "where do I start?" Someone else points to one in back, says, "We need to get at least five of them into the freezer downstairs. The rest, you can take into the library and the backyard and start icing."

"We need one of them up front," someone says. "For the guys working the table all night."

"A full keg up front?"

"Why not? It's not like we're hiding this shit."

I walk up the stairs, and one of the brothers says to me, "Party's not until 10, bro." He tears open a bag of ice, dumps it into one of the half-trash-cans in which the keg will likely be deposited.

"I need to speak with Adam," I say.

"Oh," the brother says. "You're *that* guy, aren't you?"

And these guys are bigger than I thought they'd be. Than I hoped they'd be. Bigger than Adam, bigger than me. Thick, defined torsos under Abercrombie polos. Sleeves barely covering their biceps. I don't know why, but I expected them to be smaller, weaker-looking. A financially unstable chapter with a poor reputation, I thought. Maybe they'd all be pale suburban kids with freckles and red hair and flabby stomachs. Five-six, five-seven. Scared kids. Insecure. Easy to handle. But these guys aren't. They're tall, built; these guys seem like they frequent GNC, like they use Cybex machines instead of free weights. Refined muscle. And expensive clothes.

"Yes," I say. "That guy. That's who I am."

"He's in there somewhere," the brother says. "Just hold your breath in the foyer. They just spray-painted the visqueene."

"Right," I say, but they aren't even paying attention to me anymore.

I stand tall, walk past them, picture the blank side of the business card and try to convince myself that I'm in control. I walk into the house, into a club-dark room where the walls are now covered in black sheeting, where the black sheeting is graffitied with neon green gang-land-style words like "NIKE, BITCHES!" and "Cum on over, baby, Cum on over" and "Make your mom happy, Sleep with a NKE" and "The bigger the cap, the bigger the peelin" and neon pink renderings of the Nike swoosh and ultra-violent red spray-painted Rolling-Stones-style tongues and it's all glowing under this flickering black light, all around me, and a DJ booth is set up in the corner and it reminds me of a wasp's nest, tucked in the corner like that, some guy in allblack standing behind a crate of records and he's wearing dark sunglasses and headphones, and the black light reveals lint clinging to my pants and detergent stains across the front of my dress shirt, and the tomato stain from the pizzeria seems to stand out even brighter, and someone has spray-painted "YOUR MOM!" in electric yellow and I stumble a moment-all around me-and find the stairwell and it's dark, too, and I keep stumbling, and I trip down a couple stairs and then I'm opening a door and I'm walking into some other room, and it's another open room and I haven't been in here before, and the band—four guys in grungy indie-rock clothing, torn jeans and vintage Spaghetti-O's t-shirts—is tuning its instruments and they all see me enter the room and they look at me and the lead singer says, into the microphone, "You need something, bro?" A wave of feedback pierces the room and I shake my head and I see a doorway to the backyard and I walk as quickly as I can past the band and out the doorway.

Out here, out where the sky is dark, the air should be fresh but instead it smells like cigarettes. I spot Adam. He's wearing a pair of jeans so destructed that I can see the insides of his pockets poking out in several different holes; his hair is spikier now, and his new shirt seems shinier. He stands in the backyard, supervising a couple guys as they hammer stakes into the ground, wrap orange construction-site netting from stake to stake, and create a compound out of the yard to—perhaps, in some lackluster effort—pretend that they are keeping people from entering the party from the back.

This is it, then. This party is minutes from becoming a reality.

"Don't, please don't," I tell Adam.

"The fuck do you care?" he asks, and the words sound so different. His voice sounds edgy and unsympathetic. This isn't the same Adam.

"I don't understand," I say, head pounding. "You didn't get the Executive Board together? You didn't get this sorted out?"

"Over there, over there," Adam says to one of the brothers, who carries a dirty cinderblock. "We got it sorted out," Adam says. "And it's looking pretty good."

"You never had any intentions of canceling this party, did you?"

Adam reaches down into a cooler, picks out an ice cube, clenches it in his closed fist until water seeps out from between his fingers. In his other hand, he holds a full bottle of Anchor Steam. Fifteen kegs, and this kid's bought his own six-pack of micro-brewed San Francisco beer. He doesn't respond to me, just shakes his head.

Guitar strings from inside the house. Then: "Check, one, two."

"All this time," I say. "I go to your Greek Advisor, to your alumni, try to work through this. All this time, it doesn't matter. You weren't going to cancel this party." "Yo, yo," someone says over the microphone inside, and it blasts out of the speakers, static-saturated. He sings: "Summer-*tii*-iiime, and the livin's easy."

"You could get arrested," I say. "What if someone dies this time? Not just alcohol poisoning. What if some freshman chugs a bottle of vodka and falls face-first into the toilet? You're responsible, Adam! *You*. The chapter president."

"You have to take chances," he says, shakes his head.

"Chances," I say. "What are you talking about? You're such a smart guy."

"Yes. Yes, I am."

I start to say something, a sound, but I can't think of any adequate response.

"Right now, I'm at home," Adam says. "I'm at my fraternity house. I mean, don't you realize that? You fucking people at Nationals keep talking about risk management and circles of danger, all these terms. This alcohol responsibility stuff. But don't you realize? Don't you realize that this is fucking *college*?"

"It's college, but there are still real consequences for your actions."

"It's college, and everybody parties," he says. "That's what I meant."

"Why did you lie?" I ask. "You said you'd make an effort to stop this."

"I never said that. You said that."

"I just...what are you hoping to accomplish, Adam? Come on."

"A party. A good party. What does it look like?

"You could lose your house over this," I say. Straining, not sure if I believe that. Head pounding. "Headquarters could shut you down."

He shrugs. "You make the rules, not me."

Microphone feedback inside.

"Let's go somewhere to talk about this," I say. "Somewhere else."

"Talk about what?"

"Talk about how to work through this."

"Not interested in that conversation," he says. "We're not canceling the party."

"Just tell me," I say, fingers at my temples, "what you're hoping to get out of this. You could get evicted, thrown in jail. What's the risk reward?"

"You realize," he says. "Don't act dumb. You went through Rush. You know. Shit, look at you. You only graduated four, five months ago? Without a party, you might as well order pizza and play chess and jerk one another off during Rush. This is how it's done, man. *You* know. I know you know."

"We've got very specific rules, though," I say, straining.

He tilts his Anchor Steam back, chugs, wipes his lips with the back of his hand.

"Fuck your rules," he says.

"Fuck my rules?"

"Fuck your rules. This house has been absolutely pathetic for the past two years. Who visits the *rapist* house, huh? What have your rules gotten us? More pledges? More girls? You kicked out half our house and left us for dead. This is it, for us. I don't want to go through all of college paying the price for what some girl said *before* I was even a brother. This party will keep the house alive, change things. This is how it's done. Don't you realize? You have to take chances."

"Fuck my rules?" I say again.

"You heard me."

"I don't..." I say, shaking, and I swear it's cold outside now.

Slipping, everything, because I'm thinking about Wasted on the Water, our annual party at Edison University. Had we been confronted just minutes before the party started (hell, even days or weeks before the party) and told to pack up, dump out the booze, go to sleep, we would have revolted. It was *our* social event, our chance to unwind and play drunk volleyball and sit in hot tubs with beautiful girls and drink in and enjoy our own youthful recklessness...and no one could take it away from us. And I have nothing more to say to Adam Duke except "I don't…" because, in my mind, I've flipped over that Fun Nazi business card and I'm looking at the blank side so that I can remember—by staring into all that white space—who I was just six months ago, before I forced myself through such a striking change, before I imposed so many rules upon myself and surrendered control over my life to a career. I'm thinking of all the blank space, all the possibility.

The chances. The opportunities.

"And I mean, shit," he says, "Nationals has been trying to shut us down for the last two years, anyway, for finances or reputation or whatever. We're a poor investment on a great campus, they say. We're dead, one way or the other. Have the party, we get shut down. Don't have the party, we have a shitty Rush and brothers quit and we get shut down. If this house is going to get shut down no matter what, we might as well go crazy, right? We might as well go as crazy as we can with this party."

Microphone feedback.

"You're not...right," I say without conviction. "Don't do it. Don't do this."

"We have to," he says, tosses his empty Anchor Steam bottle onto the ground, and turns his back on me. "Stick around if you want, though. It'll be a good time."

Minutes later, after stumbling back through the dark house, feedback pounding everywhere, head pounding, I sit behind the wheel of my Explorer in the NKE house parking lot, and I dial LaFaber at his home number. My tie is tight, and I keep grabbing at it, making it looser and looser until it hangs from my neck sloppily.

A group of girls walk to the front door of the NKE house—they're all wearing tight white pants and bright-colored tube tops that keep slipping down their breasts, and they keep pulling the tops back up, *slipping down*, pulling up, over and over, these sorority types—and one of the brothers is already handing them wrist bands and red plastic cups, and the girls are giggling and walking inside, and this is it, then, and I've accomplished nothing. LaFaber would tell me to be resourceful, to never give up, that this is what consulting is all about. But I can't even remember the standard operating procedures for parties and social events. I walked away, passive, unable even to issue a stern ultimatum. Everything is slipping, careening downhill, and I'm stuffed and can't find the emergency brake, can't stop anything.

Head pounding.

As soon as LaFaber answers his phone, I spill the story of my entire day without taking a single breath.

"Charles," he says and sighs. "It's past 10 PM. Where are you, right now?"

"In their parking lot," I say. "And shit! Another group of girls just walked in. The party is fucking starting. It's *starting*!"

"Charles," he says. "You're still at the house?"

"I should go back inside—"

"You need to get *out* of there," LaFaber says. "If they are determined to have this party, we can*not* have you at that house."

"Where...what do you mean? Where do I go?

"It would be bad news if anything happened at that party," LaFaber says, "and a national consultant was present. Bad news. You need to get out of there. Get a hotel."

"Where? I don't..."

"Wherever," he says and sighs. "Be resourceful."

Past 10 PM, I'm thinking.

"I don't have an internet connection to look..." I start. "I don't know where the hotels are. I don't know where anything is."

"We didn't even have internet when I was a consultant," LaFaber says, sounding tired. "Be resourceful."

"I just...fuck."

"Charles," he says.

"Damn it," I say. "I'm stuck here. What do you want—"

"Charles," he says. "Hold yourself together. This is not the time to implode."

"Not the...what?"

"Get a hotel," he says. And usually, I imagine LaFaber at the window of his office, parting his blinds with his fingers and leaning close to the glass, staring out across the country, over thousands of miles of cornfields and highways and high-rises, seeing me and keeping me in line with his serious eyes. Now, though, I imagine him in the bedroom of his condo, sitting at the edge of his bed, eyes like slits, eager to hang up and go back to sleep. "Relax for the rest of the night," he says. "Get some sleep. You're no use to anyone if you're...wound up. I signed the paperwork this evening that effectively closed the Illinois chapter."

"This evening?"

"This evening," he says.

"Then why am I still *here*? Why did I spend all day trying to stop this? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Standard operating procedure, Charles," he says. "You know all about this, I trust. We immediately suspend a chapter whenever we hear of anything suspicious, just to cover our bases. That happened this morning. Pending investigation, our suspension process allows us to close a chapter within twenty-four hours of the initial suspension, which we did. Stopping that party would have been impossible. We can always reinstate Illinois, but from the looks of the situation, what's worth saving? Depending on what happens in that house tonight, we might have just dodged a bullet."

"They're still having the party, though," I say. "We didn't dodge anything."

"They're not Nikes, though. Not anymore."

"What does that mean?"

"They can do whatever they want," LaFaber says. "They can rape another ten girls, burn down the house, kill twenty freshmen, and it won't affect the National Fraternity. We've washed our hands of them."

"This seems so quick," I say. "I just..."

"Listen, Charles," LaFaber says. "The alumni have a cushion on that house. It's *Illinois*. A big university. We close the chapter, uphold our values, cut our losses for the time being, then re-organize a chapter on campus. Standard."

Standard. And I'm thinking of my goals, of the "Healthy Eating" section of my goals. No fried food. No KFC or Hardees. No breakfast buffets. No danishes or cinnamon buns or Krispy Kremes. No elephant ears. So many ways I could get fat, waste money, so many ways. No beer, I

wrote in those goals. No hamburgers and no French fries. No milkshakes and no ice cream (lowfat soft-serve, the only exception). No pork rinds or onion rings. No beer. Standard, I'm thinking, but what difference does any of it make? Because *look at me*, I'm already feeling softer and flabbier. I've accomplished nothing *at all*. I never had control of this chapter, could never change anything; they've been closed all day. I've been powerless, a failure, and I didn't even know it.

"I have to go," I say. "I have to find somewhere to sleep."

"Great," LaFaber says. "Just get away from that house. Get out of that city, even. That's the important thing. The second they find out they're closed, you *don't* want to be around. Nothing you can say or do will make things right for them."

By the time I find a hotel, check in, unpack, flop into bed, it's past 11 PM. My head is pounding so hard and with such steady rhythm that I find myself taking deep methodical breaths like I'm jogging. Pounding so hard that my head actually feels like it's shaking, like it's swaying. Deep breaths. I'm calm, now. Calm.

And I still feel like I'm slipping, rolling downhill.

I tug my heavy-weight suitcase to the far end of the room, drop it onto the floor, pop the top and swing it open. The opened suitcase looks like some dissected creature from a high school biology lab, a cut-open cross-section of my life, but it's not supposed to look like it does now, not at all, not supposed to be scattered like this, disheveled like this, no, because—ever since the start of the semester—I've organized it as follows: on one half of the suitcase, (clockwise) one stack clean undershirts, one stack clean boxer shorts, six total pairs of socks (three black, two brown, one white), black toiletry bag, plastic bottle of vitamins (underneath socks), cell phone recharger (underneath socks), one pair pajama pants (underneath shirts), three belts (one brown,

one black, one dress black); on the other half of the suitcase, in the zipped-up pouch, I keep my dirty clothes in a cotton laundry bag, my blue bath towel, and three pairs of shoes (tennis shoes, casual black, casual brown). But right now, it's a mess. The creature has been dissected by the classroom rebel, and he's stabbed everything with his scalpel, tied the intestines into knots around the face, and I don't know what's dirty, what's clean; nothing is folded; my boxers are bunched up, wedged in between mismatched socks and inside-out shirts.

The room is hot. I'm tired, but I can't sleep. I want to move. I'm suffocating.

I step outside the hotel, unlock my Explorer, open the center console. It's a highly organized console. On the left side, I keep a package of UniBall Vision Elite black pens, a stack of notecards, and a small flashlight. Each of these supports the next, fits so snug that removing anything would cause the infrastructure to collapse like a burning house. Running up the corner of the console is a thin plastic barrier, and on the right side of the barrier, I keep the bound Supreme Laws of Nu Kappa Epsilon (a constant reference guide), my Explorer owner's manual, and, under a pair of dark winter gloves, a flask filled with Jack Daniels. For emergencies. I remove the flask, lock the car, re-enter my hellishly hot room.

I drink most of the flask and my headache subsides, and I'm thinking that I could walk back down to the front desk, talk to the cute little girl at the counter in the red Ramada polo and khaki pants, maybe get her number or something, invite her to the NKE party, ha, but I can barely remember what she looks like, now, and I finish the flask and I'm calling Jenn, leaving her a message, and I'm not even sure what I'm saying, but it has something to do with how I need her to be there for me and *where is she* and when I look at the clock, I see that it's about midnight, and I'm thinking, *where am I going tomorrow*?, and I flop onto the bed, and I'm tired and my head is pounding harder.

Take chances, Adam Duke said.

Blank side of the business card, all that white space.

Six months ago, I was Adam Duke. President of the fraternity. Senior in the fraternity house. In charge, making decisions, directing a two-hundred-thousand-dollar budget. Ready to graduate and assume some important job. Ready. "Man on campus," people joked, and I had a resume stacked with involvement. The night before I flew to Indianapolis, incidentally, for my first interview with Dr. Simpson and Walter LaFaber at the National Headquarters, I sat at my final NKE Formal Ball in a rented Tommy Hilfiger tuxedo with Jenn, at the Royal Crown Country Club, half-drunk from dirty martinis. And my good friend and fraternity brother, Edwin Cambrio, stood up, clinked his wine glass, and informed all 200 of us in the room-fraternity brothers, dates, alumni-that we were now going to give a special dedication to Mr. Charles Washington, our departing Senior and chapter president. All eyes on me in that country club ballroom, as Edwin spoke into the microphone, all of those gigantic round tables-hanging white lace tablecloths, tall red candles (NKE red) on silver platters, petals of white carnations arranged expertly around the candle, salads positioned carefully on glass plates so that the red cherry tomatoes sat atop the purple lettuce in a triangle shape (the shape of our initiated brother pin)and young men in stiff tuxedos, hair gelled and waxed into gleaming man-brilliance, dates with brilliant curled hair creations themselves, with dresses shimmering on hour-glass EU-gymsculpted bodies, with makeup borne of thirty or forty-minute preparation, with chandelier earrings and heavy necklaces...yes, all of this, a room of such potential...the most intelligent, talented, attractive men and women of Edison University. Each table full of students buzzed with its own electricity...they could turn the lights off and still the room would glow. And this room, all eyes on me as Edwin spoke and told me that it was his honor to stand before us all tonight.

His hand over his heart (which was buried beneath his thick, black tux jacket, beneath a traditional white tuxedo shirt and smooth blue vest). His honor to present me with a plaque, recognizing my dedication to the university and the fraternity. And a heavy applause followed this introduction, the brothers with whom I had entered the fraternity as a pledge cheering the wildest. Alumni clapping for the man whose name graced the "Update Letters" that our chapter mailed to each alumnus at regular intervals throughout the semester. Success, at that moment, seemed a foregone conclusion. At Formal Ball, I had never been filled with such optimism, feeling like I mattered and I was going to do something important and worthwhile with my life, and I never thought I'd wind up in an empty hotel room drinking Jack Daniels by myself. A failure in the first six months of my career.

Minutes later, I'm back in my Explorer and I'm driving toward the Nu Kappa Epsilon fraternity house, toward the party, even though LaFaber told me to get out of town and keep away. My driving is erratic, shaky, and I pass a police car parked at a gas station and I grip the steering wheel harder and try to drive straight but I slip over the center line in the street and have to correct myself. I watch out my rear view mirror, slow down, but the cop doesn't follow. When I finally arrive at the house, the parking lot is packed, bumper to bumper, and so many kids are standing in the front yard, in a winding line from the curb to the porch and the door, that I park around the corner and watch the party from a distance. One of the fraternity brothers—it could be Adam, for all I can see—stands atop a keg on the porch and points to someone in the line and shouts and laughs. Another pack of girls, white pants and tube tops, saunters past my Explorer and joins the giant, slow-moving line into the party. From inside the house, the microphone feedback has been replaced by the steady bass-thump of party hip-hop. I can only imagine what's happening inside. Hundreds of students holding plastic cups full of keg beer, guys pressed

against girls, strobe lights and smoke in the air, so loud with the combined noise of a thousand conversations and a band and a DJ that you can say anything you want, move anyway you want. Such freedom. It doesn't seem dangerous, this party. They're just having fun, unwinding, and my hand is on my door handle, shaking on the door handle.

My hand on the door handle.

I stay that way until the long line outside the house dwindles.

Until there are only a few people left on the porch, drinking beer and engaging in casual chatter. And one of them looks like Adam Duke, could be, and he's staring directly at my Explorer with such a hard, determined expression that he might as well be shaking his head, and I realize that I can flip the business card to the blank white side, but he—they—still see only the words, "Fun Nazi," and I'm not welcome inside, not here.

So I watch the party for awhile longer, but eventually I return to the hotel.

Sometime after 3 AM, I wake up because I've got to piss. I'm still fully-clothed, my head hurts, and I walk into the bathroom and piss for about two full minutes. I think I dreamt about urinals for the past few hours. Urinals and college bars. As I piss, I'm thinking: *where am I going tomorrow*? And when I come out of the bathroom, I rummage through my papers because my head is mixed up, and I forgot what school I'm supposed to be at next, details slipping, and I discover—*holy shit*, I discover—that I'm supposed to be in New Mexico next, in Las Fucking Cruces, and my flight leaves out of Philadelphia on Saturday morning, shit, I booked that flight because I was supposed to be at St. Joseph's and I thought an early-morning flight was best because it was such a long fucking flight and I've got to drive all the way back to where I came from, Philadelphia, all twelve hours, and my head still pounds, and I'm dizzy and still drunk.

First thing, tomorrow morning. Drive.

Philadelphia to Illinois, Illinois to Philadelphia.

Flight out of Philadelphia. Flight to El Paso.

Chapter Five: Flight to Las Cruces

A semi-truck roars past me on the interstate, eighty miles per hour at least, its windy wake rattling my parked Explorer on the road's gravel shoulder. I shiver even though it's still an 80-degree afternoon and the sunshine is baking the interior of my car. I've turned off my air conditioning, too...in fact, I've turned off my battery, also, because I've been parked here along I-70, somewhere south of Pittsburgh, for two hours. I shiver, I suppose, because the passing semis feel dangerous and deadly as I sit and wait in my Explorer, but I also shiver because each truck—rumbling along so effortlessly to its destination—reminds me that my front tire is a shredded, gashed rubber mess torn apart by a deep pothole several hundred feet back in the fast lane of the highway. I am already behind schedule to make it back to my flight out of Philadelphia tomorrow morning.

For most of this morning's drive through Indiana and Ohio, I've been avoiding potholes. Until a series of sharp cuts opened in the early miles of Pennsylvania highway, they'd been nothing more than another aggravation. I entered Western Pennsylvania two hours ago (surrounded by the familiar farmland that I'd just left on Wednesday), making decent time and thinking that I could stop soon for some food and some rest; suddenly the car in front of me switched lanes and there—before me—coming at me quickly, unavoidably, inevitably—no fucking chance to switch lanes, no chance—a dark, deep hole in the pavement, a hole of immeasurable darkness and depth, and my first thought was that all of those images I've been picturing—stuffed in my Explorer, topping a hill, speeding downward toward something black and unknown—had finally come true. My front tire fell into it first, fell hard like a ballet dancer misjudging her steps and falling off stage and into the orchestra pit. Then my back tire fell, hard and violent, a crunching metal noise accompanying the jarring smash and tilt of my Explorer.

And the steering wheel seemed to slip from my hands, assume control of itself and of the Explorer, and I swerved into the center lane (and had there been any other vehicles around, I would have crashed into *them*, and things would be much worse), then into the shoulder where I slowed and where my lopsided SUV kicked up dust and gravel on its bumpy journey to its current resting place.

It took me a moment to realize what had happened. Adrenaline was animating my every tired muscle, but I still couldn't move because I didn't know where to start. The hanging rod in my backseat had come loose, sending shirts and pants as far north as the dark corners of my front passenger seat floor; my Atlas and my CD case had somehow disappeared from the seat, and my bags and suitcases were rearranged throughout my car, under or on top of one another. An absolute mess. I was—I *am*—still stuffed in this Explorer, but now I am stuffed in chaos, not order.

Smoke rose from the front of the car, from the back, a combination of hot rubber and disturbed dust, and I worried that something else might have happened in that dark pit. Some severe damage to the undercarriage of my car, some one-in-a-million gas tank puncture...and I sat in my car, immobile, unsure what to do as the traffic passed me, as the uncaring traffic passed another traveler among the faceless numbers that travel Pennsylvania's highways daily.

It took me five minutes, I think, to finally open my car door...shakily, clumsily, my head pounding harder...I stayed close to my car as I exited, and I shivered or flinched each time a semi passed. They are ten feet away at least, but they seem so much closer. Each time, they rattle the car; each time, they rattle my bones.

A little over five hours of driving left to Philadelphia for tomorrow morning's flight. Seven hours down, but five hours left, as I sit in my car and wait for AAA to arrive and assess

the damage and either change my tire or tow my wounded car to a shop. I wanted a hotel room tonight. I wanted to pull into a town just outside Philly, find a place to rest and sleep before I hopped on a plane and flew more than halfway across the country. I wanted to beat this headache, to feel good and healthy again, to pull the slipping bits of my professional life back together. But nothing, it seems, will work out the way I wanted. If I'm supposed to be a professional in higher education, I'm supposed to be able to create change; so far, I've been consequential. I'm just trying to hold myself together now, painting over the stain of repeated failure in my career, painting over the stain of a job that feels more and more like a mistake each new day.

Another semi passes, shaking me so vigorously that I wonder if any of these drivers are coming *closer* just to scare me.

Philadelphia to Champaign-Urbana. Champaign-Urbana to...somewhere in southwestern Pennsylvania, some grassy spot far removed from the city of Pittsburgh (which is north of me, somewhere), some spot where I can see no mile marker and no distinguishing landmarks that I could list for the AAA tow truck driver, who sighed and told me it'd be at least two or three hours before he could finish his current list and then attempt to find me. First question he asked me: "Are you in a safe place?"

"I'm fine," I said, and that was a mistake which put me at the bottom of his list.

I thought about calling LaFaber, but I don't know what to expect from him. Maybe he'd tell me that the National Headquarters still believes in me, that they'll pay for any damages to my vehicle, that they can change the time of the flight. More realistically, though, he'd tell me to "tough it out," to get to Philadelphia by any means necessary. Or he'd tell me that he's disappointed in my driving, that this is my mess to take care of. Or he'd tell me that I sound

hung-over (which I am). My head hurts worse than ever; my left eye has resumed twitching. Spastically, too, as though it could pop out of my skull at any moment. I brushed my teeth twice this morning at the hotel and my mouth still tastes like Jack; even though I stopped for gas station coffee and a package of powdered donuts, the festering aftertaste of alcohol still overpowers everything I've eaten. Every breath I take sends new pain to my head, to my revolting stomach. And maybe LaFaber would know this, would stare out his window and see my hangover.

I just need to get to the airport.

Maybe then I can figure everything out. Maybe then.

Friday afternoon turns into Friday evening. Still waiting.

Even if I knew how to change my one wrecked tire (I don't), and even if I knew how to check the other tire for damage (all I know is that its pressure has gone down slightly in the last hour), I am still wearing a clean, white dress shirt, a tie, and a pair of khaki pants. I've thought about changing, but I can't change clothes out here in public for the same reason that I can't piss on the side of the highway: I am a professional and this isn't the sort of behavior one would *expect* from a professional, and I can't imagine LaFaber or Dr. Simpson or Dr. Wigginton jacking up their cars and getting dirty in a sweaty undershirt in front of all these passing vehicles. Besides, I am too tired to do anything but wait...my head is pounding too hard...my wheels are scraped and mangled...even with new tires, this doesn't look good.

Still waiting.

When I called AAA, I couldn't identify my exact location. "Might take longer than usual, then," dispatch told me. Earlier today, as I drove in a hung-over haze, the Midwestern landscape

filled with giant Ohio sycamores trees, receded to barren and jagged strip-mining, filled again with flowing hills that rose and rolled like green waves; mile after mile, the landscape shrank, grew, rose, fell, flooded, emptied, melted, as though I was watching millions of years of erosion and weather-change in minutes, hours. As I entered Pennsylvania, the distance filled with the outlines of the Alleghenies, and billboards for businesses I'll never visit, things I'll never try— Dean's Apple House, The House of Cards, Army Surplus Mega-Store. But here, there are no landmarks. Just anonymous land. It's fine for AAA to know these roads, to know every inch, every mile, but what do I know? As I stare out in the distance now, my eyes focus upon a single willow tree far out in the valley, where a seeming army of cows has huddled together under its shade, in the only shade for miles in this open, hot September field. So I call back AAA for the fourth time and tell the dispatch operator that *yes*, there is a landmark here. There is. A single tree and a group of cows. She sighs, thanks me.

The sun is falling, here in Western Pennsylvania. Falling over the horizon, bringing me closer to my 8 AM flight to El Paso. And then I will spend three weeks without the comfort of my Explorer, plane-and-school-hopping as I fly to El Paso (en route to New Mexico State University in nearby Las Cruces), then am shipped to Lubbock and Texas Tech, then Fresno and Highland and Long Beach, then finally San Francisco before my final flight back to Philadelphia to reclaim my Explorer, which I will then drive to the University of Delaware. Driving across the entire country would be a critical misuse of a consultant's time, LaFaber claims, so the National Headquarters breaks apart the West Coast and divides the schools between the three traveling consultants and books us on flights to Los Angeles or Phoenix or Seattle, then has the chapter brothers drive us around. When I land at each airport, I will find myself at the complete mercy of each chapter for pick-up. If they ignore my emails and phone calls and decide to leave me at the

airport...I'll likely have to pay for my own taxi. My chapter back at EU feared the National Headquarters and the Educational Consultants, did whatever was asked of us, but I know now that this is a rare attitude among students. And while I'm at these chapters, I have no car. No rental. Nothing. Total reliance on the chapter to get me where I'm going. The National Fraternity is non-profit, cannot afford such amenities as rental cars. I'm reimbursed for gas mileage while I drive my own vehicle, but a rental, at \$30 a day *plus* insurance *plus* gas for two weeks...that is beyond our means, just as hotel stays for every night of the week are not a feasible option.

And even now, I'm thinking, I have to rely on a tow truck. What if my Explorer is damaged worse than I imagine? My car...my office... fucked...my entire life in that vehicle, all my clothes and all my goals and all my schedules and all my essentials, my soap and shampoo and toothpaste and shoes and belts and CDs and everything I own...this job, working for a non-profit, awards me only a poverty-line paycheck, \$12,000 annually, which I am able to stretch out to cover car payments and insurance and cell phone and food only because I am a vagabond and I have no rent to pay, no power bill and no cable and no water and no room in my Explorer for non-essentials. It is a thin salary, made tolerable only because I know this is a one-year contract and that this job should lead easily to another in the world of higher education. It is a thin salary that does not allow me to build any savings, and, should I quit or lose this job, my bank account would last just a split-second...not even long enough for a month's rent. And if I've destroyed my most important possession, my car, my office, I'll not only have no money to cover its repair, I also won't have...the closest thing that I currently have to a home.

Just thinking about this has my head pounding harder, my stomach clenching tighter, my eye twitching more rapidly.

"This will be like a vacation for you," LaFaber told us in our summer training, just after he handed us-Brock, Nick, and me, the three NKE Educational Consultants for the academic year—our completed travel schedules, as we all sat in the conference room at the National Fraternity Headquarters building. "Consultants have a tendency to get a little burnt-out halfway through the semester," LaFaber said. "I know that you're all excited right now, ready to take on the world, but we-at the Headquarters-know that this can be a rough job. You visit places that, well, aren't exactly tourist destinations. Especially up in the Northeast, Charles," he said, referring to the travel schedule I was staring at in what must have seemed (and probably was) disbelief. Nick and Brock pored over their own schedules with curiosity, but only mine appeared to be dramatically different than I'd expected. Nick had graduated from UCLA, and he received the "Deep South Territory," a travel region that included North and South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, Florida, and Georgia. The fraternity's most historic and influential chapters, situated in states where the scalding cold of a true winter remains just a lingering threat, just a bone-chilling cold front or snowstorm that lasts a few weeks and reminds everyone how lucky they are that they don't live in New York or Chicago. Brock, a graduate of Texas Western, received the "Gulf Coast Territory," and is currently visiting chapters in Mississippi, Texas, Arkansas, and bits and pieces of the Rocky Mountain states. Upon receiving my own travel region, I found that I would be traveling "The Great Midwest," a geographically misleading title, since it includes New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, states where fraternity life hangs by a thinning thread. Tough states, tough schools, and tough chapters. "We want you to get a breather," LaFaber told the three of us as we ran our fingers down the list of chapters that we would be visiting, coming inevitably to the series of California or Washington or Arizona colleges, our "vacation visits."

"A change of pace," LaFaber said, "because we want to keep you fresh." And I remember him saying "keep you fresh" as though he was talking about something he owned, something over which he held complete control. Like he was talking about his own legs, maybe, as he trained for a marathon. "Keep you fresh," I'm thinking now as I press my finger to my lower eyelid, waiting for the unnatural skin spasm. Fresh. Fresh paint, I know, doesn't fix a moldy ceiling.

Friday afternoon. Still...fucking...waiting.

I call Nick, who is somewhere in South Carolina right now; he is probably nearing the "vacation visit" portion of his schedule, too. We have been labeled, the two of us, as mirror images, as twin brothers. Same height (just a hair under six feet tall), same weight and build (active gym-goers), same brown hair and smooth faces and tanned skin. But while I have tried, since taking this job, to dress always in pressed slacks and crisp button-downs, Nick dresses more casually; short-sleeved shirts left untucked, slip-on Steve Madden shoes without laces; he styles his hair with greater flair; all summer, during our training, he woke up later in the mornings (letting his alarm ring for far too long), would go out to a bar on Tuesday or Wednesday nights when we had to be in the office by 9 AM the next morning. I withheld my comments about how he shouldn't still behave like a college student, particularly because Nick and Brock, the other two consultants, were my only two friends during this past summer in Indianapolis. Twin brothers, Nick and me, but we are nothing alike: I have a long-term girlfriend in Florida, and Nick is gay, single, and could care less about commitment.

"Broke down in Pennsylvania?" Nick asks after I explain my current situation. "Sounds like a bad movie about drug addiction."

"Ha, right," I say.

"I got stuck in some mud a week ago," he says. "If that's any consolation."

"I guess," I say. "So, Nick...have you had any...situations...yet?"

"Situations?"

"Alcohol infractions? That sort of thing?"

"Shit, no," he says and I can picture him surprised at the question, glaring at the phone as if it had just farted. "These South Carolina chapters, they're all pretty chill."

"No kegs? No parties?"

"A little of that, but nothing major," he says. "I told myself from the start, though, that I wasn't going to be a Fun Nazi."

"Oh, right."

"I heard you ran into some problems at Illinois. An emergency visit?"

"It was pretty intense."

"You're out of there now, right?" Nick asks, voice—as always—interested, but never fazed. "That's the great part about this job," he says. "No matter what the problem is, it never lasts longer than three days. You're there, you're gone."

"You're right," I say, but I don't mean it. After all, my head hurts and my eye twitches. One of my dress shirts is ruined from a pizza sauce stain. I have a cut in my back, stiffness in my joints from that couch at Shippensburg. My suitcase is sticky from the fraternity house floors. And my Explorer could be fucked. Everywhere I've been, all of these places are following me, staying with me.

Finally, after 8:00 PM, the tow truck arrives and parks directly in front of my Explorer. The muddy driver-side door opens, revealing a man much skinnier than I expected. A wiry man with an unkempt, rusty moustache, and unshaved, reddish facial growth. Arms so hairy that I can't tell if the skin underneath is heavily freckled or just dirty. Cigarette-yellowed teeth and a voice that constantly gurgles with each new sentence he speaks. He shakes my hand, but greets my situation and personal appearance with disinterest.

"Florida," he gurgles, spits, when he looks at my license. "Ya'll better watch out up on these Pennsylvania highways. Weather damage on the pavement, and all that."

"Nobody fixes the potholes?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Sometimes. If someone actually hits one and complains."

"That's what it takes? That thing was huge."

"No blame or nothing. People just get used to the holes, out here."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Well. Let's take a look at them tires," he says, and he shuffles to the front tire. The verdict, he tells me after careful examination, after he rubs his oil-darkened fingers over his hairy chin, is that not only is my front tire destroyed and my back tire severely damaged (still driveable, he assures me, but...*whoo*, he says...rubber looks battered and I'm going to want to get it taken care of, quick), but both wheels are also damaged beyond repair. Even with new tires, he says, the sharp, stray metal from the dented and smashed wheel could puncture my tires at any moment. Looks like a fork with two of the prongs bent in the wrong direction.

"I can change the front tire," he says, "but I might fuck up the spare, even as I'm doing it."

"How long does a spare hold together?"

"One of them little donuts? Don't know. Maybe a couple hundred miles, tops."

"I've got to get all the way to Philadelphia," I say.

"Whoo," he says. "Philly. Can't say that's a smart idea, what with them wheels all fucked up. You'd be looking for trouble, you do that."

"I've got a flight."

He shakes his head. "Whoo," he says again. "I'll change the tire. But I'm telling you this, man," he says. "Them donuts are quick to burn out. I know I said it could get you a couple hundred miles, but you don't want to drive on it for more than an hour at a time. Heat it up too much, and your spare'll be toast in no time."

"Right," I say.

"I mean...I'd take yourself up to Bethel. Get new wheels and new tires. They'll have to put a special order in, you know, but...this ain't safe, what you got."

But there's no doubt in my mind as the tow truck driver talks, no doubt. My plane leaves early in the morning, and I am not leaving my car anywhere except the Philadelphia International Airport parking lot. What are the chances that a mechanic's shop would even remain open on a Friday night? So I watch the driver shake his head one more time, then climb back into his clanking truck, and I wait until he's pulled back onto the highway and he's out of sight—I pretend that I'm making phone calls—and then I drive in the slow lane, my spare tire heating beneath me, catching tiny potholes and bumps in the road and every one of them feels greatly magnified with this weak tire. I have to turn my radio louder to drown out the high-pitched squealing sounds made by the spare. I try not to think of long-term solutions, right now, only short-term. Airport, I think. Airport. The national fraternity's "DO IT!" time management program suggests that life is a checkerboard of short and long-term goals, that a successful leader must integrate both. I'm picturing the diagram in *The Marathon* pledge book:

| marriage | Practice for Intramurals | children | study for test |
|------------------|--------------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| History paper | career | jog | house |
| MBA | Date on Friday | health | Cash check |

But I've discarded or abandoned so many of my goals, and so much has gone wrong and I've had to find new solutions and new goals, and it feels like I've painted over all of it and have a new checkerboard that looks nothing like the original:

| Jenn? | Get to Airport | Health? | Don't hit another pothole |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Find mechanic | Career? | Buy new tires, wheels | Goals? |
| My Explorer is fucked | Paycheck won't cover this | None of this is working. I can't be LaFaber | Spare is overheating, pull over |
| * | * | | * |

The drive to Philadelphia is only five hours of actual *driving time*, but it is so bumpy that I become haunted with visions of my spare tire melting and spinning apart and so I stop every thirty minutes or so. Let it cool. I stop at a Denny's along the interstate, order a fried chicken sandwich because it's been an awful day and my eye is still twitching and my head still pounds and, in situations like this, grease is good. Greasy, fried chicken with greasy French fries and a small tub of ranch dressing. I sit alone in a booth, still dressed in my shirt and tie, and I think my waitress feels sorry for me. Later, I stop at a Super Wal-Mart and wander the aisles and end up in the pharmaceutical section, looking at all of the different pain relievers. Aspirin, non-aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofren, chewable tablets, gel capsules, 24-hour relief, instant relief. I buy three different brands. I stop at a rest area a little while later, find it difficult to simply sit at a

dark picnic table making random phone calls to friends who don't answer, and so I stop at another Super Wal-Mart because it's the only store that's open so late.

I sleep for four hours in a cigarette-smelling Sleep Inn, knowing I've wasted money from the slim hotel account that Headquarters has given me, knowing I don't even have time to unpack and relax and take anything more than a quick shower, knowing I don't even have time to shave and iron a new dress shirt...so I wear the same khaki pants and a wrinkled NKE polo when I leave the hotel at 5 AM.

Early Saturday morning, I drive the remaining hour into Philadelphia.

Finally the countryside crackles into industry, and the industry clouds the clear skies and replaces the green grass and trees. Finally, all is cement and steel and glass, blinking intersection lights and car exhaust, thousands upon thousands of cigarette butts tossed from open windows and collecting alongside the curbs, discarded newspaper pages caught in sweeping currents of air and fluttering across the highways. Finally, the chirping of birds, the low hum of lawnmowers and crop-dusting planes, is replaced by commercial boom and by 100 and 200-passenger jets zooming high overhead. Finally, I arrive in Philadelphia. Finally, I arrive at the airport and at long-term parking.

When I find a parking space, though, I am hesitant to leave my Explorer. For three weeks, my damaged car will sit in this lonely spot here at Philadelphia International. My home, my office, will be vulnerable to thunderstorms and heavy wind gusts. Deep clouds of dust will engulf the vehicle, will be washed away; splotches of mud, spun from some truck's tires, will splash across my door; children will bump my hood; neighboring car doors will open too far and too quickly, leaving scratches and gashes in my paint. My tire will leak, go flat. My Explorer is my one constant. Packed so tight with essentials that I can feel the engine straining to start,

sometimes; I can feel the slow acceleration; I can feel everything rolling or sliding on the seats or carpet when I brake, shirts rustling on their plastic hangers from the backseat rod, my blood-red suitcase banging into my back door or catching in the carpet and leaving tiny tears. I know all the sounds. And after three weeks of nonstop travel, I have to leave it behind. Live without it, and without so many of the things with which I travel and depend on.

Last night, exhausted beyond belief, I packed like this: Suitcase, Garment Bag, Laptop Case. Two checked items and one carry-on. I would love to take my duffel bag, bring along my gym clothes and sneakers and some t-shirts, maybe some emergency pants, but it's not possible. I simply cannot carry four bags across long-term parking, onto the shuttle, off the shuttle, through the airport's check-in terminal, to the baggage check-point, to security. I can't do it now, and I can't do it for all of the flights I will take over the next three weeks. Three bags: one over my shoulder, one in each hand.

As it is, my suitcase might exceed the fifty-pound weight limit that the airport imposes for checked luggage. I never realized how much I need until I was forced to leave things behind. And I'm sure I won't realize what I've left behind until I'm too far away to go back, until those things are out of reach.

The Fun Nazi business card is wedged into the space below my odometer.

Three weeks, I'm thinking, and I could take it to stay focused. Keep it in my pocket, pull it out and use it as a motivational tool. I could take it.

But instead I flip the card over, look into all that white space, and leave it.

Inside the heavily air-conditioned airport, a thin sweat breaks across the back of my neck; it's one of those sweats that, when you wipe at it, your hand comes away dry, but you know it's

there and that it won't go away even if you spend an hour in a freezer. A dry sweat, if that's possible. It's the sweat of end-of-the-line frustration, that's what it is, but I've got to maintain my professional appearance. I am in control of my life, and I refuse to allow things to slip any further.

At the National Airlines ticket counter just inside Philadelphia International, the e-ticket terminal spits out my credit card without reading it. "Insert a VALID credit card," it says, the word "valid" capitalized and flashing as though I wouldn't have noticed it otherwise. I re-insert the NKE company credit card, the card on which my tickets were purchased, and the terminal spits it out once again, repeats the same over-emphatic message. I'm hoping for a magnetic strip error. No, no. A machine error. *Their* fault.

Maintain appearances, I'm thinking and I wipe my neck and forehead and try to smile for the long line switching back and forth behind me, the long line of maybe thirty travelers (although my flight to Dallas en route to El Paso does not leave for another two hours, so it is uncertain whether I will see these faces again on my flight) and they all stare at me impatiently, as though each passenger has a time limit at these fucking kiosks, and I've exceeded mine. I look around for someone at the nearby ticket counter. Someone human. I smile again, but I expect some burly Pennsylvania security guard to grab me by the neck and grumble into my ear, "Back of the line, buddy," as though I was just some punk frat star fucking around with the machine, and maybe I am, because I still feel like a walking wreck. Stomach pains and headache. If a security guard *did* jerk me back, I think I would actually projectile vomit directly into his face, into his mouth and his eyes and his nose, a burning mixture of still-unprocessed Jack Daniels and gastric acid and Denny's fried chicken and white-powder donuts, covering every inch of his skin as though I was spray-painting a canvas. Just minutes ago, I passed a woman and a child, both

standing directly in the middle of an automatic doorway, searching for the correct ticket counter. Standing right there, like they owned the fucking place. I brushed past her, must have sighed long and hard because she said "Ex-*cuse* me," as I passed. I turned to her, and—incredibly—one of my eyes twitched in a maniacal sort of way and I sniffed my nose *loud* and said "*Mmm*," meaning "sorry," but she just shook her head sadly, not knowing how hard I was clenching my stomach at that moment and how hard I was trying to not look like some unprofessional, disrespectful frat boy.

I re-insert the credit card, and now the message changes: "Your credit card cannot be read. Please see a Ticket Agent." I fumble through my wallet, searching, searching for my debit card instead, and I find it and try to jam it into the machine but the message won't disappear, just jeers back at me like I've committed a crime and there is *no escape* from the law! "GIVE UP!" the machine seems to scream at me. "WE'VE GOT YOU!"

"Fuck," I say. "Fuck fuck fuck."

Then realize I've sworn aloud. Around this crowd, these businessmen, and I'm wearing this NKE polo, this billboard for my business. I've sworn.

Fuck, I think. Fuck fuck fuck! and I keep jamming my card into the slot.

"Sir," I hear from somewhere distant, and this could be addressing anyone, but something about the tone suggests that it's me. Something exasperated, annoyed, accusing. Behind the ticket counter, now, someone has finally materialized. Finally a real human, a woman in her thirties with tired eyes, a brown-haired woman who looks like she's seen it all and has no time for this shit, and I don't know if it's possible, but I almost feel bad that I've inconvenienced her. "Sir, you're going to need to come over here," she says, sighs. "We'll need to input your information manually." Longer sigh.

She motions with one old-beyond-its-years hand, which is decked out in cheap jewelry, like her hand is the proud recipient of a thousand crackerjack prizes. Her voice carries the burden of decades of two-pack-a-day cigarette addiction, and her hair fizzes back off her scalp in a sloppy ponytail. Not enough time for style, it seems to say. Not enough time for anything. Her face is a series of dry wrinkles and ridges.

I lug my suitcase, my garment bag, my carry-on laptop case to the counter.

Maintain appearances.

Sixteen weeks of non-stop travel. Philadelphia to New Mexico State. New Mexico State to Texas Tech. To Fresno State. To Highland State.

Maintain appearances. Professionalism, I'm thinking.

"Sorry," I say. "Airport travel isn't really my thing. I mostly drive everywhere."

"Name," she says. "ID?"

"I mean," I say, "I travel a lot, you know? For my company. Just not on planes."

"Name. ID."

"Washington," I say, handing her my license. "Sorry."

"Flight number," she says.

Then: "Number of bags you'll be checking today?"

Then: "Siiiiighhhhhh."

She hands me my tickets, still doesn't look me in the eyes, and then she points to another line about fifty feet away. "You'll need to take your checked baggage to the security center, and they'll tell you where to go from there." She fastens stickers around the handles of my luggage.

And then it hits me: she didn't comment on my Florida driver's license. For the first time in over a month, someone was unimpressed by the distance I've traveled. I could tell her that I've traveled from Fort Meyers, Florida, to Indianapolis, to Kentucky, to East Tennessee, to the mountains of Virginia, to the big cities of Pennsylvania, to the heart of Illinois and back again, and now I'm headed out West, and she'd still be unimpressed. Surrounded by this crowd of middle-aged men in navy blazers and hastily ironed, deep-brown dress pants, each of them smelling of Old Spice and hotel rooms and travel-sized bottles of Neutrogena facial lotion, each of them packing the same Jos A Banks travel toiletry bag, each of them representing a different state and a different business, each of them carrying laptop cases, bad beards, stringy middle-aged hair, lives lived in service of their employers' missions...

Oh, I'm so unimpressive, even to her, and I feel a sharp pain in my stomach.

"Ugh," I say. "Could you, um, tell me where the closest bathroom is?"

She sighs, long and forced, and it occurs to me that even her sigh—her indication to the world that she is weary—sounds as though it is draining her of energy. "Right next to the checkpoint," she says and shakes her head.

"Great," I say. "Thanks."

"Yeah," she says.

I rush to the men's room, enter the first stall and gag because someone has left wet, sopping brown towels bunched up on the toilet seat and on the floor, and so I back out and rush to the handicapped stall, where I spend the next ten minutes squatting because I don't want to actually press my knees against the moist floor. My hands grip the toilet seat, the cold plastic which I can only hope has been cleaned recently, and—as my stomach pains persist, these quick jabs to my guts—my face plunges forward every several seconds, into the toilet, in anticipation of some sort of painful expunging. It's just dry heaving, though. Nothing actually makes it out of my throat, and even though I would feel better if I expunged all of this poison from my body,

I'm glad I don't have to deal with vomit breath for the rest of the day. I'm glad I don't have to dig through my bags for my toothbrush and toothpaste.

When I drop my suitcase and garment bag off at the security center—two men in white dress shirts and black ties, wearing white latex gloves—the two men take both bags and drop them onto a clinical table, open them...everyone in the airport seems to be looking at me, at my belongings—and they peek through my boxer shorts, open my toiletry bag, hold up my razor, and it's Charles Washington on display for everyone. Maintain appearances, I'm thinking, and I smile and cough a laugh and look away and pretend everything is ordinary, ordinary. And my suitcase was already disheveled before this inspection, and now it's worse. They sift through several pairs of dirty boxers (which I forgot to toss into my dirty clothes bag...and shit, I forgot my dirty clothes bag, and now how will I keep my dirty clothes separate from my clean clothes for the next three weeks?) and they make disgusted faces like I'm such a *slobby* little college kid, and they find my other NKE polo and it registers to them that I'm wearing an almost identical shirt and they laugh. I realize I'm scowling, so I smile again.

I didn't see my goal sheets. I thought I'd packed my goal sheets into my suitcase.

My bags—me, my things, my life—are zipped back up, dropped onto the conveyor belt, and they all disappear into darkness.

Then, it's another security checkpoint. Another line of business travelers, and I stand, step ahead, stand, step ahead, until it's my turn at the X-ray machine, and I am processed like the rest. I have to take off my shoes, take out my laptop computer, unfasten my belt, and it's reassuring that I'm the same as all of these other business travelers—but then I *beep* when I walk through the metal detector, and I am swept from head to toe with a device that looks like a hair straightener, two times, three, siiiiggghhh from the security guard, and I smile and cough even

though the world is swaying because my head is pounding so hard, and I am then told to collect my belongings, and it's difficult to slip back in my shoes while I'm standing, and everyone looks annoyed, but finally I'm walking to my terminal in one piece again, but feeling like I've been disassembled and reassembled twice, and I'm just hoping I look all right.

At the gate, I learn that my flight has been delayed for mechanical reasons, that the next plane in line will not be ready for hours. Two hours, at the earliest. Three seems more probable, they say, and that's 11 AM or noon before I'll leave Philadelphia. Good thing I've got a half-day layover in Dallas. And I could sleep in one of the terminal's bucket seats, but I cannot— absolutely refuse to—allow myself to be perceived as a college kid, so I find a seat and sit with remarkable posture, no slouching, open my laptop and nod at the Excel spreadsheets on the screen and read through old reports and type and save documents, and this feels good. Just like anyone else in the airport. Just like any of these other business travelers. So far, all of my time has been spent at universities, and no one questions my professionalism there. No one questions whether I have graduated, whether I have a degree or earn a salary (however meager); they might not *like* me, but they know that I am self-sustaining, that I have emerged beyond the world of college to stake my claim in the Real World. Here, though, in a place where I am noticeably different, younger, who's to say I'm not 20, 19, some amateur know-nothing kid?

Two seats down, a man shouts—well, not *shouts*, but he speaks with unnecessary force into his cell phone, saying "I don't *care* what Anderson told you. What did you *listen* to him for? Is *he* the General Manager? Listen to me. I want you to cancel that order. Do you hear me? We would lose our *ass*-es on that."

Actually, several other blazer-wearing travelers are doing the same. "Friedman, ha!" one yells into his cell phone. He's a tall man, overweight and spilling out of his seat, and he looks like he hasn't paid attention to health or fashion since the day he took his first big job: he just keeps shopping at the same men's store, buying new navy blazers when the old ones go into disrepair; he has his barber touch up his Brawnie Man shag cut whenever it starts taking too long to blow-dry; he trims his moustache the morning after he realizes that it's dangling into his coffee when he takes a sip. "Ha ha!" he says. "That guy doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground! Wait till December, I'm telling you."

I am the only one looking at them. They don't notice one another, these travelers.

And I'm typing a report that says, "My meeting with the Greek Advisor at Illinois yielded little insight into their chapter operations. She seemed unfamiliar with both the local chapter and the National Fraternity. She had no knowledge or concern about the sexual indiscretions of several years prior." And it doesn't feel significant, doesn't feel like something a college graduate should be doing. Fraternity is business. Big business. But it isn't business like the guy next to me who's moving millions of dollars and will fly home tomorrow to a four-bedroom house with an HDTV wall-mounted in his bedroom. I can almost hear someone asking if I'm in college, if this is a real job, and I just want to say that I'm a consultant and leave out the details. I'm unimpressive, even more than them. After graduation, I wanted to avoid the trapped entrylevel life of cubicle-with-aging-desktop-computer, of parking-spot-office-building-wirelessnetwork-lunch-break, because it all seemed so pointless. The entry-level life: put in ten years, 9 to 5, before you can advance and do anything of real consequence. So much wasted time. But right now, I don't even feel like I've graduated, like I'm part of the Real World.

I sit in silence. Grab a newspaper so it looks like I keep up with current events.

Still going to be more than two hours until boarding, the woman at the gate tells me, and my eye twitches. Philadelphia International has a decent-sized "Air Mall," shops from The Gap to Brooks Brothers arranged along several hallways, and I'm tempted to shop, tempted to find a new shirt or a new pair of shoes because I want things...things like a real professional would have, not this rotating wardrobe...but I've got nowhere to put any of it. Stuff it in my suitcase, my garment bag? Impossible, the way I have it all arranged and packed. I've got a pre-assigned shirt for every day of the week, pre-assigned packed shirts, and any new additions would totally fuck my system.

Just minutes later, I relocate to the Sports Nation Restaurant & Bar a few gates away. I can't tell if I'm hungry, don't remember the last time I had a meal "on schedule." I fall heavy onto a stool far removed from any other travelers at the bar. This place is typical *airport*: slick brown bar-top, and underneath the lacquer are crazy cartoon drawings of airplanes taking off and soaring, like the airport has got to reassure us—even as we order drinks to calm our nerves—that we have nothing to worry about when we fly. Like these full-color brush strokes, these curved wings structured like arms, these legs for wheels, these googly eyes over the nose of the cartoon plane, these Disney World airplane perversions are going to calm *any*one once their plane shoots down the runway and into no-stopping-now inevitability. Just a façade. We know danger. We've seen it, and no fucking comic strip is going to convince us that this is all safe. But even the airport is maintaining appearances, post-911, in whatever ways it can.

The bartender is a late forty-something woman, and she's got the same glazed and tired look as the woman at the ticket terminal, the same look as everyone else I see at these sorts of jobs, the look that says, "I've worked in too many different places to even pretend that I enjoy working, anymore." She punches numbers on a computer screen, scribbles something into a calculator-sized notepad, and glances back and forth between the computer and the rows and rows of liquor bottles against the wall-length mirror at the back of the bar. Inventory, probably, at this time of morning. It's barely 10:30 AM.

I clear my throat, squeak my stool a bit, and the bartender turns around. She's wearing a gold nametag on her maroon polo shirt, and it says, "Mindy."

"Hello, Mindy," I say.

"Give me two seconds," she says, sighs, and turns around.

I straighten on my barstool, thinking she probably would have taken my order if I'd been wearing a blazer or a tie.

My left eye twitches.

A lone man in a gray suit sits at a large six-top table in the dining area of Sports Nation, and he's got his laptop open on the tabletop, an extension cord dropping from the computer to the floor and extending twelve feet—under several other tables, one of which is occupied—to one of the restaurant's wall outlets. Like so many of the other Blazers, he's holding a cell phone to his ear (as he types) and speaking loud enough for everyone in the restaurant, all six of us, to hear his every word: "You don't do that in this business," he says. "At the end of the day, we've got to make a decision, don't we?" he says. "It's like comparing apples and oranges, so I don't even know why we're having this discussion," he says. His waitress, the only waitress working, steps carefully over his extension cord, smiles at him even as he turns away and speaks *louder* into his phone, and she points to his empty rocks glass and mouths "another" and he nods, very annoyed.

Mindy is still taking inventory.

I clear my throat, but she doesn't look my way.

So I think, *fuck it*, who's this guy talking to, anyway? Could be anyone. His brother, his father, his mother, his wife. Could be anyone, but he's got the Look, the appearance of Big Business, so I open my own cell phone, scroll through my recently called numbers for someone to dial. LaFaber? No. I haven't even told him about my flat tire, and that's a conversation I don't want to have. Brock? No. He never shuts up; that's a conversation that would be too one-sided. Jenn? And before I know it, I'm dialing Jenn, dialing her for the first time since the Greek Life Office in Illinois, dialing from a Philadelphia airport, and she's answering the phone, *actually answering*—

"I was wondering when you'd call me," she says.

"Oh," I say. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Both."

"Okay? Did I just wake you up or something?"

"No," Jenn says and there's a strong rustling noise. "I was getting up, anyway. Where are you? It's loud. What's that beeping noise?"

"I'm at the airport. One of those golf cart things is driving by."

"What are you doing in the airport?"

"I told you in July," I say, "back when I emailed you my travel schedule. I told you I'd be flying out West."

"Whoa, sorry. I didn't memorize your schedule."

"You should at least look at it."

"I do," she says. "Every now and then."

"I'm flying to New Mexico."

"Cool," she says, yawns.

"So what's going on at the house today?" I ask loudly, then look around Sports Nation at the other Blazers on their cell phones. Maintain appearances. I could be talking to anyone, a business associate. "Ha ha!" I say when she doesn't immediately answer. "Good stuff, good stuff. What's in store for your Saturday?"

"What's in 'store' for my...who talks like that? Why are you laughing?"

"Anything big happening down in Fort Myers? Big events?"

"Charles," she says. "Are you still talking to me?"

"Ha ha!" I say. "I don't know what would make you say that. But I can't wait to get

down there soon. It's been awhile since I've been to that part of the country."

"I don't..." she says. "Did you book your tickets for Homecoming?"

"Send me an email," I say and look around. "Remind me of the specific dates, again. I'll

have to input it into my Outlook calendar. I've got my laptop with me."

"Charles, really," she says. "Next weekend. Did you book the tickets?"

"Oh, I'm fantastic. Absolutely fantastic."

"You're...what are you *talking* about? We're talking about Homecoming."

"Things are going so great with the consulting."

"Okay? What does that have to do with anything? You can't get away?"

"Ha ha!"

A pause.

"Ha ha!" I say.

"This is fucking frustrating," she says.

I smooth my pants, try to laugh again, look around the bar and no one is looking at me, and so I say, "What's the weather going to be like next weekend?" "It's Florida. Same as always, Charles."

"Ahh, yes," I say. "Truth be told, I haven't actually...*purchased*...the tickets." "I knew it. I knew it."

"I just don't...I'm not sure which airport I'll be at. I have to look into it." "Do you remember the day you told me you wanted to be a consultant?" "Yes," I say.

Sometime last Spring. Jenn and I had been dating most of my senior year at Edison, and I'd just sent in my application. Anyone that asked, I told them it was a Plan B sort of job; I was President of Nu Kappa Epsilon at EU, the president of an award-winning chapter, and Walter LaFaber and Dr. Simpson had both called me in an effort to recruit me as an Educational Consultant. I was sure to get the job, I told everyone, so why not just apply? Just in case nothing else opened up. The truth, though, is that I didn't apply anywhere else. My father was pushing me to apply for the business where I was interning, but they had no openings. The truth is that this was my Plan A, and, one night after Jenn and I had spent sixty bucks at Wine Bar and our conversation was drifting towards "future," I told her that I didn't know what I'd do if I didn't get the job, that working for the National Fraternity was the only thing I wanted to do. I had an Organizational Communications degree, and most employers didn't even know what that *meant*. I could go into higher education, student personnel services, something like that, those were my options, my goals, and this job would give me a full year's experience and would position me perfectly for such a career.

"What did I say when you told me?" she asks.

"I can't remember," I say and look around, "not off-hand."

"I said that the only way we'd be together is if you got some weekends off—not all of them, just some—so you could come back to Florida. That's what we agreed."

But *this is a job*, I want to say, and I just got a flat tire and did more than \$1000 worth in damage to my Explorer for a job that pays nothing, and I am trying to change from the boy I was in college and I am in a world that she could never understand and she should just try to be *professional*...out there in Fort Myers, waking up at 10:30, en route to the EU pool, en route to Skippy's Beachside, en route to pre-parties and drink specials and post-parties at the Kappa Sigma house and black mini-mini-skirts and those 1980s turquoise t-shirts she loves, the ones with the gigantic necklines where one bare shoulder hangs out, and alcohol and *good fucking times* where there's not a blazer (not a Blazer) in sight...she can't understand...and I say, "All right then, yep, I'll get back to you!"

"What the *fuck* does that mean?"

"Okay, ha! Talk to you when I land," I say, shut the phone and turn it off. Clench my fist. Clench my stomach. But...strangely...Mindy, the bartender, is now standing directly in front of me.

"Jack and Coke," I say. "Rough day. You wouldn't believe."

"Oh, I'd believe," she says, finally making eye contact.

Just seconds later, Mindy returns and slides me my Jack and Coke, which I finish in about two minutes. It's almost methodical how I drink it: alternating between sips and stares down into the drink, and looking up into the tables, where a couple more Blazers have arrived and are now huddled at tables, eating early lunches. Sip. Look. Sip. Look. I smile every now and then, just in case anyone wants to know whether or not I'm happy.

But I'm not done. I order another Jack and Coke.

Alternate between sips and stares, sips and stares. Trying to look like I belong.

The crowds outside Sports Nation have grown, also, as the airport traffic-planes skidding to a stop outside, planes blazing off, mothers and fathers reigning in families of five or six and toys dropped across the tile floors, Blazer after Blazer grunting past with thick-shelled briefcases—increases in the late hours of the morning. Crowds forming long lines that wind in snaking formations, shooting out from Starbucks and McDonalds. Couples-young couples on their first vacations, maybe—holding ice cream cones, the mint chocolate chip dripping down the waffle cones, and they laugh as they try to lick it up. Coffee at 10:30 AM. Hamburgers. Ice cream. Jack and Coke. The airport, a random collection of displaced or re-placed travelers. Gray hair, blonde hair, brown hair, highlights, buzz-cut, mullet, and-what the fuck?-from the crowd outside Sports Nation, someone stares back at me. Directly at me, as though "people watching" is a crime. And it's someone familiar. A thirty-five year-old man with hair so thin that he shouldn't still be using gel. The gel thins his hair even more, and it sticks to his scalp and everything is even shinier than it should be because it's reflecting the overhead lights. And he's staring at me and he huffs a short laugh. Thirty-five year-old man carrying a laptop case and wearing a short-sleeve blue dress shirt with his tie loosened. Clean-shaven, except somehow still rough. Looking like he was just involved in gritty combat with a copy machine. Familiar, but I've met so many people.

And he takes a step in my direction.

I slide the Jack and Coke across the bar-top so that it might possibly—this is a stretch be the property of some other (non-existent) patron on the barstool beside mine. Is it bad to drink this early in the morning? Unprofessional? Is this man important? I touch my hair briefly: it's a pointy mess, an ugly smattering of slopped hair that I didn't have time to arrange this morning.

When I stepped out of the shower, I squeezed a glob of hair gel into my hand, plopped it onto my scalp, and I tussled my hair without ever once looking at my reflection to ensure that it had a semi-intentional appearance.

He walks closer, his brown eyes growing darker as he approaches. Still smiling like he just got away with something. I could imagine this guy as the cover-boy for a book on corporate scandal.

My eye twitches. I look like shit. Absolute shit. Oh, and he's ten feet away, and just as I catch a whiff of his generic deodorant and after-shave, a whiff of starch from his dress shirt, I place him: *Ben Jameson*. Ben Jameson, who I met back in Wallace, Pennsylvania, when I stayed with Dr. Wigginton; Ben Jameson from the University of Pittsburgh; Ben the drunk alumnus with a wife and two kids who never stop reciting Dr. Seuss. Ben Jameson is in the Philadelphia International Airport, standing beside me, breathing hard, laptop case heavy in his hand.

"Well, howdy," Ben says, looking down at me.

"Oh," I say. "My God. I never expected..."

"Damndest things happen at airports," he says. "Crazy fucking places."

"I guess, huh."

"No one's sitting here, right?" he says and drops his bag on the floor and takes the barstool beside mine. "Long fucking week. I need to get wrecked. Spending the whole damned day in airports, today."

I don't know what to say, so I nod understandingly.

"There was this one time," he starts, then yells "BARTENDER," then continues: "Out at this airport in Spartanburg, South Carolina. What a little shit-hole that was, I'll be honest with you. Sunday afternoon, and I'm at the airport wearing this Nike shirt from college. Casual day, you know? This old guy, seventy years old at least, a Dr. Wigginton type, except with this thick Southern accent, talks all slow like, 'We-eellll...hello thar, suu-uuun. Niii-iiice Sun-dy, is'n it?' And he sees my shirt and tells me about his pledge days at the University of North Carolina. Tells me about how they used to—back in the '50s, I guess—cover these kids with honey and drop feathers all over them and then drive them out to the middle of nowhere and just leave them there. Crazy stuff. Old School. And those guys from North Carolina are, like, *distinguished* now. Senators and CEOs and shit. This guy just tells me this stuff, right out of the blue."

"Ahh," I say.

"Fucking airports," he says. "So where you headed now?"

"New Mexico."

Mindy arrives and there's a glimmer of recognition in her eyes.

Ben laughs and shakes his head and says, "Hey there, Mindy. I need a Jack and Coke, but mostly Jack. Two, actually. We need another for this kid, here," and I start to raise an objection because this is an alumnus and I shouldn't be drinking but he just points at my glass as if to say, "too late, you're busted," and then he's talking again: "No shit, New Mexico. There are schools out there?"

"I'm visiting New Mexico State University. So...yeah."

"Probably all they do is teach English, am I right?" He laughs. "Those Southwest states, I'm telling you. Over-run by Mexicans. Shit. Schools probably are, too. Not that I'm prejudiced or anything. But they're taking over down there. Pretty soon, they'll be spreading all over."

And all around Sports Nation, the tables are filling. A woman in a black pant-suit sits and opens a trashy-looking airport novel, one with a romantic pink cover and an ornate, scripted title. Two fat men in navy blue suits pull out chairs at three different tables, debating which has the best view of their gate, before finally settling on a booth. All around me, the restaurant is busy, thick clusters of travelers arriving an hour before boarding, knowing that they won't be able to suppress their hunger and wait for a post-flight lunch. And I am wearing a polo shirt and sitting with a foul-mouthed bigot in a short-sleeved button-down. When Ben initially said "shit," I flinched, and with each new swear, I glance around even though no one appears to be paying attention. Only when he says "Mexican" does someone—one of the fat men in the navy suits—raise his head, but it might have been a coincidence. I shift in my seat to give the appearance that maybe I don't know this guy and he's a lonely drunk who needs company and he's bothering me.

"Well," I say. "It's New Mexico. I think it's always sort of been..."

"The fraternities there," he says. "Shit. Probably all a bunch of Mexicans, too, huh? Saying our oath in Spanish. Can you imagine being a *brother* to someone who doesn't even speak English?"

Mercifully, the drinks come and the bartender asks Ben for his credit card. He tells her to start a tab because we've both got some good time to kill before boarding. Then he tells Mindy that the University of Pittsburgh game is on ESPN2, so if she wants a tip, she should probably change the channel. And amazingly, she does.

"Mindy's the best," Ben says.

"You know her?" I ask.

"Been here a thousand times," he says. "You take care of Mindy and you're in good shape. Ain't that right, sweetie?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says without looking at him. "Of course you don't," he says. "You're an Eagles fan. You're clueless." "So," I say quickly, thinking that my professional appearance is slipping as he argues with this bartender, "there's a Pittsburgh game on today, huh?"

"Of course there is," he says. "It's Saturday. College football gameday."

"Right."

"I forgot," he says. "You went to some small school, didn't you?"

He gulps his Jack and Coke, and I take a small sip of mine.

"Who do you play?" I ask.

"Some sucker school," he says and chokes on his drink, coughs, and then laughs. "Every year, they bring some poor sucker school up to start the season, televise the game, give the team a good sell-out win on national television. This year, I think it was some school out in Florida. Probably *your* school, for all I know."

"Heh," I say and two seconds ago I didn't care, but now I hope it's not EU.

I take a larger sip.

"So where are *you* headed, Ben?" I ask.

"Same shit, different day," he says. "Out to Boston this afternoon, then Hartford for most of next week. Back to Pittsburgh next Friday."

"I didn't know you traveled so much."

"Nothing big. It gets me away from everything."

"Right," I say.

"The wife, the kids. Everything."

"You don't wish you could just slow down? Settle in one place?"

"I got these friends, spend every night at home. They're dying, brother."

"Dying?"

"Life is all about moving. You stay still, you're fucking dying."

"I don't know why, but I thought you said you worked a desk job."

"Nope," he says. "All the chumps work behind desks, am I right? No, listen. Really. Desks are entry-level work. A fucking monkey could do half the work that they have college graduates doing. It's downright embarrassing."

"They're the only jobs open."

"Fuck that. There's jobs out there. I don't give a fuck what anyone says. Look at me, you know? Senior year of college, my parents both died within a year of one another, so I had to find a job. Quick. Take care of my younger sister. I just made sure to take the best one, best money, instead of settling like so many of these kids are doing today. Just a BA and I started off at 45 grand. My advice: don't settle."

"But you travel," I say. "You've got no time at home."

"Ha, good one," he says. "My other advice. Don't get married."

Silence for fifteen seconds. We both stare at the television.

"Are you satisfied, then?" I ask.

"What the *fuck* are you talking about?"

I look behind me. No one has moved.

"With your career, I mean," I say. "Are you satisfied with who you work for?"

"The fuck are you asking that for, all of a sudden?"

I look around again.

"Stop that," he says. "These fuckers...what do they care about what I say?"

"It's just...I try to be professional."

"Professional. Professional," he says and shakes his head.

"There's a certain way that I try to present myself."

"Do I look satisfied?" he asks. "Shit. I'm just like you, kid. Just like any of these pricks around here, all of them lying to each other. Nobody likes making chump change and doing clean-up work for some executive making twice their salary. Nobody likes that shit. But it's a job. You're not supposed to like your job. You just shouldn't hate it."

"Hmm," I say. "Interesting."

"Mindy," Ben says. "One more Jack and Coke for both of us. And a little extra pour, if you know what I mean."

"Um," I say.

Mindy smiles, and it's the first time I've seen her smile. It doesn't seem right. It's like watching a former linebacker—one of those guys with jutting chins and rock-solid jaw lines and angry black eyes and countless scars and blood blood blood constantly on his mind—sitting in shirt and tie on a morning talk show.

"We have a tradition back home," Ben says. "Game day tradition that's been going on for years. We call it Big East Bellybuster."

"Big East Bellybuster?"

"Yessir. We give a toast to every team in the Big East. Well. A toast to their opponents, actually. The conference has changed a little in the past couple years, but it's the number one reason to look forward to game day."

"That could be eight drinks," I say, "if conference play hasn't started."

"The start of the year is always rough," he says. "God, I miss college. *Mindy*." Mindy returns and Ben slips her a twenty. He mouths something to her. "They don't like you getting rip-roaring drunk before your flight," he says when she walks away. "So it's good to know people." A moment later, as we watch the college football scores scroll across the bottom of the television screen, he pushes a plastic Starbucks cup—the kind usually used for Frappuccino—in my direction. At the bottom is a lightweight, liquidy yellow shot, and he says, "Drink it, but don't make a scene." He's got his own Starbucks cup, and when he sees the score for the McNeese State-UConn game, he says, "Godspeed to you, McNeese," and we drink the shot. "I got held off my flight at Dayton Airport because I got so drunk, but that place is small potatoes," he says.

We take another shot to Indiana, playing West Virginia.

Then another to Western Michigan, playing Rutgers.

Then another to Middle Tennessee, playing at Cincinnati.

I realize that I'm slouching in my seat, totally unprofessional, so I straighten up, look around, and as always, no one pays any attention because they're all absorbed in their laptops, and Ben's pushing another shot in my direction, and we're toasting to Eastern Illinois, I think, and Ben tells me to be quiet when the ESPN Gameday crew discusses the University of Pittsburgh game which is coming later in the day, and I keep nodding along with their commentary, even though I've never watched a Pitt game.

"Kicked out of an airport, ha," I say, and Ben just nods. "I've been kicked out of a lot of places, but an airport? I actually got kicked out of this American Cancer Society fundraiser during my junior year."

"Killer," Ben says, sips his Jack and Coke and stares at the television and squirms in his seat when ESPN replays a bone-jarring tackle from last week's Temple University football game. The program cuts to a shot of a football player on a stretcher, then to another shot of the coach near tears at a press conference. "This could be his career," the coach says. "He could be done."

"You bought a ticket for fifty bucks," I say, "and it was all-you-can-eat grouper and an open bar. I went with a couple of my fraternity brothers. Bad idea, right? We made t-shirts that said, 'Drinking for charity,' and we finished off a fifth of vodka each before some guy in a tuxedo came up to us and said we'd had enough."

I'm picturing those hangers in the backseat of my Explorer, those hangers swaying as I grumbled over potholes, the entire Explorer thrown into chaos when I fell into that final, deep pothole, hangers shooting from the rod that stretches from window hook to window hook. I never cleaned it all up, not completely. I never cleaned *myself* up today, not completely, but suddenly there's something reassuring and fresh about not caring. About my professional appearance slipping, just as easily as those hangers.

We take a shot to LSU, I think?

And I've forgotten where I am, and I look around and spy all the Blazers and everything, and I swirl around on my stool and knock my laptop case onto the floor and Ben Jameson beside me is laughing as I stoop to collect the bag, and I search through the side pouch and check my ticket and the clock on my cell phone and it's blurry, not just swaying but actually blurry. I've got a couple minutes until boarding time, thank God.

"Thank you so much for the drinks, man," I say, standing. I shake my head. "*Sir*. I mean *sir*, not *man*. Sorry. You know how it goes, you know? Talking with undergrads all day long, and shit, I start speaking like them. But seriously. Thanks for the drinks. I mean...I shouldn't have, you know? But it's cool to let loose a little."

"No problem," he says, and he sips a water now, and I never even saw Mindy drop it off. "I've got the money. I'll tell you what. You coming back to Pittsburgh anytime soon?" "Not this semester," I say, and I actually grab his water from him and take a gulp, place it back in front of him, stumble a little, and he laughs. "Maybe in the Spring."

"Tell you what," he says again. "Here's my card."

He hands me a silver business card, foil-etched name and position below a bright red logo: "ED-TEX INDUSTRIES." Ambiguous but sleek. Like a defense contractor or a high-tech operation, some sort of company that is deciding the future of the planet, and I'm downing shots of bourbon with this guy, this alumnus, in a Philadelphia airport. Maybe this guy's more important than I thought.

"You're all right, kid," he says. "Good head on your shoulders. You drop me an email when you know you're coming for Spring. I'll make sure I get some basketball tickets, gather some alumni in town for the day."

"Alumni," I say. "I can't drink in front of alumni."

"News flash," he whispers. "You're wrecked right now."

"No-0000," I say.

"I'm an alumnus," he whispers.

"No-0000," I say.

"I'll sweeten the deal," he says. "Barbecue at the house before the game. I buy the kegs. We'll stack 'em high in your honor. Stack 'em and drain 'em. We'll show you how we do things out in Pittsburgh."

"If you insist, I suppose."

Ben Jameson pats me on the back. "Last piece of advice, man. Live it up, baby. All this you got in front of you. Young and shit. Probably got a hot little thing back home, too, don't you?"

"My girlfriend," I say and nod emphatically. "Jenn."

"Piece of ass with 'bend me over' written all over her, am I right? Live it up."

"Yeah," I say. "She's cool."

"Everything changes, is my point," he says. "All of it. You get a job. Wifey gets fat. You get a couple little brats running around the house, never see your friends anymore. You lose your goddamn hair. You got no more time to yourself. You wonder how all this happened, you know? So all I'm saying is, live it up. You're young right now, man. You come to Pittsburgh, you're going to live it up. What do you say?"

"Yes," I say.

"All right, then," he says, pats me on the back again. "We'll make it happen."

"Yes," I say again. "I'm sold, man. I'm sold." And we shake hands. I thank him again for the shots, for his time, tell him this was a great time, and I mall-walk to my terminal. Walking fast, not thinking about where I'm going or the steps I'm taking, it's the only way I can walk straight.

This is the second time in two days I've been wasted, and I like it.

Walking in a single-file line behind ten or fifteen Blazers, each of them toting a laptop case, each of them handing the attendant a boarding pass—we are all part of Boarding Group #3, Seats 11-25, but *I* am different, not just another one of them—and then continuing into the accordion tunnel that connects the airport to the airplane. Each Blazer is processed by the attendant; each Blazer seems to have a system for entering the plane, seems to have done this a thousand times, seems to take just 3.5 seconds to hand over the boarding pass and make friendly-but-not-inviting eye contact with the attendant as she scans the pass before he reclaims his stub

and walks to the next line. 3.5 seconds. On the plane, each Blazer seems able to navigate the center aisle to his seat without even checking seat numbers, and seems able to deposit his carryon bag in the overhead compartment (or below the seat) in an equal 3.5 seconds. Scattered families/vacationers stall the progress of everyone, but the Blazers are streaming in like highspeed internet, and I'm so drunk and bumbling that I feel like outdated dial-up, which is cool.

I knock into someone, slur an apology, and plop down into Seat 13.

Beside me, of course, is a Blazer, and he's packed some sort of light lunch, tiny Ziploc baggies with slices of cheese, crackers, strawberries...On his tray table is a copy of Stephen Covey's *The* 8^{th} *Habit*. He smells like cardboard and cologne, and his trimmed beard is so wooly that I almost feel like itching it for him. A dark black-and-silver pen, the sort that someone probably paid to have inscribed, pokes out of the breast pocket of his dress shirt. He's already tightened the seat belt around his bulging waist.

He seems to have a system for flying, my Blazer-Neighbor, and it pisses me off.

My head is spinning and I want another drink.

All around me, Blazers are staring at me as they find their seats, slide their jackets under their seats or store them in the overhead compartments. One frustrated man with curly black hair has trouble folding his large *Wall Street Journal* in such a way so that he can read a tall article while still giving the wide woman beside him room enough to position her laptop on her tray table. A shorter man in a green blazer opens a Cinnabun to-go bag with clear delight, the passengers around him giving comments such as, "Ooh, that looks good" with obvious disdain overwhelming their voices. They stare at me, all of these men and women, and they see the embroidered letters on my polo, NKE, and they envy the glazed, intoxicated look in my eye, even if they pretend not to, and the captain's voice crackles from overhead and people are buckling seatbelts and I close my eyes—

—and I'm so fucking drunk and the plane is moving down the runway, moving and bumping, and the Blazer is in the window seat and he barely looks out but the runway is whipping past like a gray smear and the buildings, trees, towers, here, gone,

plane

lifting

up

BREATHLESS, everyone.

Fingers clutching my thighs.

BLAZER beside me, feigning comfort.

Lifting.

Lifting.

The plane evens out.

Turns.

Whole world straight.

Then, on its side.

Plane straightens out

Fingers tight on my armrests.

First time I've been on a plane in years.

And a few seconds pass and the cabin pressure is so fucking tight that it feels like I'm back in my Explorer, surrounded by all of my notebooks and snapshut cases and binders and

forms and the Explorer is collapsing and I can't breathe, and this is worse because I don't have the steering wheel in front of me.

And I sit. Sit. Sit. Fingers clenched on my pants.

And the plane is *tighter* than my Explorer, tighter, more suitcases and more duffel bags and more seats and more garment bags and more jackets and blazers and men and women and children and noise and I can't breathe and I sit in this Business Travel Compartment, suffocating, just another piece in this system, and how much money does it cost to fly Flight 183 from Philadelphia to Dallas? How many miles is that, and how much gas is expended to move this hunk of metal and people and Samsonite from Point A to Point B? 150 passengers? \$200 tickets? Staff costs, gas costs, marketing costs, web site costs, on-board snacks and drinks, plane maintenance, cost of the *plane* itself, in-flight movie and magazines and headphones. To move my Explorer from Champaign-Urbana to Philadelphia (760 miles), it costs the National Headquarters \$266, which is 35 cents per mile travel reimbursement, but then we've got to add staff salary, right? so we add the fixed staff salary of \$12,000 per year (which equates to roughly \$33 per day) and a dining allowance of \$5/\$10/\$15—breakfast lunch dinner per diem—which I cannot exceed but which must be paid with credit card (receipts must be included on my expense report, stapled, mailed to Walter LaFaber, Director of Chapter Operations, who gives them to our Headquarters Financials Director) and of which I do not receive the remainder if I do not spend in its entirety, meaning that the maximum Headquarters per diem payout would be \$30 a day and the minimum could be \$0 (but I generally hover around \$20 each day), but I'll add all of this up, and I'm breathing easier now, and let's see, if it's 760 times 0.35, plus \$33, plus \$30, and that's about how much the Headquarters is willing to pay for a Consultant's travel day (and, of course, to achieve this number, student dues-and that's the amount of money we charge to each

initiated student member of NKE, payable by September 15 of each Fall semester and February 1 of each Spring semester—are fixed at \$50 per man per semester, and alumni contributions to the Headquarters, not the Foundation or the Brothers Assisting Brothers program, must exceed \$200,000 after cost, which is tricky since our giving campaign nets millions for the Foundation and BAB scholarship program but very little for the Headquarters, because who wants to donate non-tax-deductible money to the un-sexy business end of fraternity life?), which is \$330 for today, and if you take that as an average amount, multiply it by 32 (the approximate number of schools I'll visit in a semester), then I cost about \$10,560 each semester, and even if there's something wrong with that number, with my math, I know that all of this is calculated carefully at Headquarters. The amount of money I can spend at hotels, the number of chapters I can visit, the alumni dinners I attend, the emergency visits I make, the chapters I keep open, the chapters I close, all of this is part of some pored-over budget, some system, and not some grand mission statement...just the same as my own development as a professional...the goals, the spreadsheets, the forms, the shirts, the ties, the business cards, all of it a system designed to meet that budget, a system, not proof that I've become more responsible-

I'm breathing again. Still tight. I'm still surrounded, but I'm breathing again.

My Blazer-Neighbor munches on crackers, makes "hmm" noises as he reads Covey. I never want to make "hmm" noises when I read a manual or a guide. Blazer-Neighbor dog-ears a page. He's trying to organize his life according to this book.

Fuck this guy.

Fuck his system.

I want to open my laptop and play Solitaire just to spite him. I am who I am, and I don't want to be him. Blazer beside me coughs, says "hmm," turns the page of his book. Next page is a diagram of something, some "success model" or something. Yes, I'm sure that model worked well when it was implemented at IBM. Yes.

And an overhead bell dings, and the captain tells us that it is safe to move about the cabin, and all around me, Blazers unbuckle their seatbelts and stand and stretch as though this—the take-off, the flight—is some great effort for them, like they've just run a marathon or built a skyscraper with their bare hands, and it has expended so much energy for them. They stare at me, these Blazers, and as I loosen my grip on my pants and stretch out and breathe easy, they seem to understand all that I am, all that I represent. I am everything they've lost. Flying is not a routine for me, and I am not searching through my bag for tasks to "catch up" on. They think I'm in college, still. *Good*. Good! They want my youth, my energy. They want to be waxed when they touch down in Dallas. They want what I am. They hate their blazer-suffocated lives, and they want *mine*.

It's Saturday, Saturday, and I'm not opening my laptop case again.

No. I refuse to open my goddamn laptop.

Since the day I graduated, I've been trying to change myself to be one of them. Ha! Guess what? They want to be *me*, now. I am amazing, young and amazing, living while they're dying. It's Saturday and I'm going to get so waxed, just the way I should on a Saturday, like this is a college football game day at Edison, and it *is* a game day at Pittsburgh and at Nebraska and at UCLA, and I'm going to get even more waxed when we touch down in Dallas and I'm going to miss my connection. This is a good thought, yes. Knowing that everything is slipping from my grip, hangers scattered. Knowing that my own system is finished. Knowing that life can resume, can move againNeed another drink.

Need out.

Need out.

Need out of this system.

Need my identity, my youth.

Don't need a blazer, don't need business cards, don't need to be the Fun Nazi, only need to look at the blank side of that business card, all that white space.

Need to be who I was in college, before my identity was decided by a business card. Abuse the system. Stay out until three in the morning. Sleep in until noon. Drink Miller Lite by the pool as soon as you finish your big Biology mid-term. Fuck a girl that wants to be a med student, tell her that she's got no knowledge of anatomy. Take shots with some underage kid who wants to be a cop, some kid whose cop dad is paying for the shot you're taking. Boom boom boom. Take the shot, take shots at the rest of the world, this system. Live. Like, *really* live. Not just in a way that will improve someone else's bottom-line.

This Blazer Suitcase blazes over patterns of interstate-farm-community, all of it a patchwork system of property ownership, someone making money off this sprawling landscape, and I'm picturing all the universities in the distance, all the white-columned houses, all the students and the alumni and the administrations.

Up here, you can see the patterns. See how the pieces fit together.

Up here, it's all so clear.

The Blazer Suitcase blazes. My eye twitches a little, and everything is tight, but it's all so clear.

Somewhere over Oklahoma, I wake up and feel like I'm going to vomit. Like all of those Big East shots, whatever they were, have been gathering in my stomach like a drafted army, training while I've been complacent, waiting until we're over the most sickeningly bland section of the country to really charge and baton-thrust my stomach, and it's sharp pains and I can almost taste the gastric acid in my mouth.

I unbuckle my seatbelt, push myself up, stumble through the aisle, bump into Blazers on their laptops, mutter "sorry sorry," bump into sleeping women and children, bump *hard* into a Blazer writing on a yellow legal pad and think briefly that he's looking *very* productive right now and *look at me* and what's everyone going to think if I just spew all across the aisle, all across their pleated dress pants, all across the gold buttons of their navy blazers. Ha! Will they think I'm airsick? Just something I ate? Or will they think what they should: that this is the gloriousness of youth, this drunk wreck wandering toward the bathroom with lurching zombie steps and outstretched arms? Because I can still *do* this on Saturdays...I can still recover...I am still *me* and I haven't changed and surrendered to the Real World. Will they look at me like I'm just a giant *Fuck You*?

They all look so productive, these professionals.

I slither into the cramped bathroom and shut the door. Hang my head over the sink and stare at my blurry reflection in the mirror. Someone has left a wet brown paper towel sopping in the sink. Bunched up like a turd. Earlier, I would have been upset: this disrupts the clean system of the bathroom. Now. Whatever.

I smooth out my polo shirt. Smooth and soothe. Stomach pains pass.

My head—my whole body—still feels like it's getting crushed under my collapsing Explorer, suffocating suffocating, and the low rumble of the engine, so constant, makes this feel like a flight into forever. Smooth and soothe. The engines...so consistent...head feeling lighter...stomach pains gone...just want to sit on the toilet, just in case...hang out here...close my eyes...just in case, just in case...

* * *

A knock at the door.

I lift my head from my hands and *oh shit, oh shit,* how long have I been in here? World refocusing. Engine still rumbling, but seems louder, clearer.

With weak knees, I stand; all of my limbs are fuzzy, but when I open the collapsible door and clunk out, I don't feel as bumbling. Two men, sans blazers but still suffocating in shirt and tie, stand in the aisle outside the bathroom, looking confused and startled. "Oh," one of them says. "Sorry. I didn't know if anyone was in there."

"No problem," I say. "Airport food. You might want to wait a few minutes before you go in there. Wait for it to clear up. Or hold your breath."

When I return to my seat, my Blazer-Neighbor is sleeping, his Stephen Covey book wedged into the seat pocket below his tray table. He looks like a bad sleeper. Like he's going to burst out in a series of booming snores to rival the plane's engines. I sit down, stretch out, wish I could turn on my cell phone to check the time; I hail the flight attendant, wondering how much a Jack and Coke runs. Five dollars? Worth every penny. I have a chapter visit in hours, so I've got to make the most of my time.

Outside, past Blazer-Neighbor's greasy-red nose, Oklahoma continues. Or maybe it's Texas, by now. Maybe we're about to head into our final descent. Either way, it's a vast expanse of reddish green land, the hair-thin gray stripes of two-lane country roads sectioning it off here and there. Vast. Red, green. Either way, I need a drink. *

*

*

Connection in Dallas. Four hours to kill. *Four hours*. And I've been traveling around in time. From Central Time in Illinois to Eastern Standard Time in Philadelphia to Central Time in Texas, and it was a three and a half hour flight. So, really, even though my flight left a little after noon, and three and a half hours have elapsed, it's still only 3:00 PM here, and I'm hungry, thirsty, antsy.

I find a Chili's in the airport, one of those miniature versions of the real thing, sized to fit in whatever open space the airport had available, and I grab a stool at the bar, order a beer and a medium-rare hamburger and fries, and I'm thinking, "pace yourself," but I'm also thinking, "four hours to kill."

Four hours. Would have been longer had my flight not been delayed.

Working for a not-for-profit...we go for airline bargains, not efficient flights.

I check my messages. Jenn left several, and as I listen to her tell me that she doesn't think this is working out but she wants to try, really, she wants to keep this thing going but she needs something from me, I smile and laugh because I'm young, because nothing matters right now, nothing matters when you're young and haven't dedicated your life to rigid goals and demanding employers and an intractable relationship. She wants to try? She's back at EU. Parties every night. Homecoming week. Kappa Sigma fraternity house. She wants to try? Sure she does. Watch this.

I scoot a couple barstools down, next to a middle-aged woman who seems pretty discontent. She's smoking. Has the look like she's not even inhaling, just needs to hold the cigarette between her fingers. Just needs something warm.

Finally, the bartender returns.

"What can I get you?" she asks.

"Jack and Coke," I say.

"ID?" she asks.

Thank God she asked. Ahh, youth. I'm happy to show her.

The woman beside me is drinking a beer. It's a light beer, one amber shade removed from clear, and I don't even detect any foam, any carbonation, any condensation. It might as well be a lukewarm, last-night left-over.

I'm thinking a lot of things as I sip my drink and watch the Sportscenter college football highlights on the television at the back of the bar. I'm thinking that I could talk to this woman next to me, listen to her old-woman problems or whatever, and pretend that I don't mind how old she is. I'm thinking, sip after sip of my drink, my pounding headache loosening with each sip and almost *gone* now, that Jenn doesn't matter anymore. Jenn is *commitment*. So finally I grab the bartender's attention, and I say, "Two Jack and Cokes, please. One for me, and one for my friend here." And the old woman looks at me with disinterest and shakes her head and the bartender says something to her, followed by "kid," and I laugh and ask the woman if she's sure. No drink? She tells me that I've *got* to be kidding her.

"Fine, I'm kidding," I say. "Ha ha."

I scoot back down to my original seat. Drink more than I should.

The flight to El Paso isn't as tedious and I'm no longer sick. The West Texas desert rises and falls in a crumbling, red-brown grandeur, the world's largest sandbox, and I don't know our altitude but this is the first time I can actually see *real* detail from these windows. Weatherbeaten gorges. Individual rocks. Footprints, perhaps. Scratch marks on the rocky walls of steep mountains. Tumbleweed. I've got a window seat, and at one point I press my face to the glass for a good five minutes. I've got no neighbor in the seat beside me; this connection flight is a smaller plane, two seats on the right side and just one on the left. I'm not suffocating. Up here, all the world is so clear.

I sleep for a bit, wake up re-energized on final descent, devour the bag of peanuts left for me. When we land, I buy a pack of Trident to cover the alcohol smell still sizzling on my breath.

At the baggage claim, waiting for my two checked bags to spin around the dizzying conveyor belt, waiting with all of the same people whose heads I stared at on the plane but who all look so different and awkward now that they're standing, waiting.

Black bag spins around, not mine.

Blue bag, not mine.

But there...the red monstrosity!

After I grab my suitcase—and I'm definitely not sober yet, but I can act like it, and I don't want to *be* sober, either, I want to go out now, want to have a fun Saturday night at New Mexico State—someone confronts me. He's wearing a red t-shirt with "NKE" across the front, and a slogan that says, "When it comes to JUST DOING IT, accept no substitutes," and he says to me:

"Hey, is your name Charles Washington?"

I'm silent for a moment.

His presence has officially ended my day-long vacation, has officially plunged me back into the cold waters of "work." And I could say *no*, walk away...it's what I want to do...say *no*,

have time to myself, have fun being young...but this is a college kid, and he—I'm certain knows how to have fun, where to go in Las Cruces.

So I say, "That's me."

"I'm Sam," he says. "Sam Anderson."

"Nice to meet you, Sam," I say.

"I'm the New Member Educator," he says with much pride.

"That's great, Sam," I say.

"How was your flight?"

"Oh, super," I say. "A little short, but...well...super."

"Have you eaten yet?"

"Hmm," I say. "I'm not sure."

"You got your bags, right?" he asks. "We've got dinner plans."

"Dinner," I say. "Super. I'm really thirsty."

PART II. FRAT STAR

Chapter Six: Charles Washington

Summer Training in Indianapolis University of Kentucky East Tennessee State University University of Virginia—Green Valley University of Pittsburgh Weekend Visit with Alumni Shippensburg University St. Joseph's University EMERGENCY VISIT: University of Illinois

New Mexico State University

Texas Tech California State University—Fresno California State University—Highland California State University—Long Beach California State University—San Francisco University of Delaware Marshall University Miami University (Ohio) University of Toledo Central Michigan University University of Michigan Bowling Green State University Purdue University Indiana University Headquarters – Mid-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis) University of Oklahoma University of Kansas University of Missouri-Columbia University of Nebraska Iowa State University Thanksgiving Vacation Bradley University University of Iowa Headquarters – End-of-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis) Christmas Vacation

"Whole lot of *nothing* out there, isn't there?" Sam asks from the backseat of the car, noticing that I—for the duration of our drive, so far—keep staring out the passenger-side window for long stretches of time. Sam, who met me at the baggage claim and escorted me to this car, knows that I'm from Florida, that this is my first time in the seemingly endless deserts of the Southwest, but he doesn't know that my head still swims in a pleasant half-drunk buzz and that I keep blanking out and then snapping back to consciousness. The driver, Jose, rarely looks at either of us, holds the steering wheel and commands the car with remarkable discipline.

"It's very...big," I say, rubbing the back of my neck.

It's Saturday evening, about the time my parents are sitting down for dinner back on the Gulf Coast, about the time my fraternity brothers back at EU are just starting to make plans for their night, about the time Jenn usually steps into the shower for her hour-and-a-half "going out" makeover, and I'm sitting in the passenger seat of a styrofoam-smelling Toyota Corolla, riding the dry highways of southern New Mexico. Sam Anderson, the New Member Educator for Nu Kappa Epsilon at New Mexico State University, sits in the backseat, stuffed between my suitcase and a pile of backpacks and orange vests and camo hats and hooks and poles. Jose Rodriguez, the driver, is NKE's chapter president, and this Corolla—its paint dulled under what feels like an inch-thick layer of desert dust—is his vehicle; he drives the three of us from the El Paso International Airport to Las Cruces, New Mexico, home of NMSU.

My headache is completely gone and my eye has stopped twitching, but I greedily chug a Dasani bottled water because I've never felt so parched in my life...dehydrated from alcohol, sure, but out here, the entire world feels like some warped version of a snow globe where the snow has been replaced by dirt and dried-out vegetation. And someone is shaking this dust globe every few minutes, every time I think the dust has finally settled. I'm thirsty and I need to be

refreshed. Need to. It feels too good to drink and watch football, too natural, to be young, and I can't go back to the way things were, dry and stuffy. The night is young and Las Cruces certainly has its share of college bars.

Just thirty minutes ago, when Sam and I stepped out of the airport and into the early evening to find Jose's idling car, hot air blasted us as though we'd opened the oven door to check on a baking pizza. This isn't stifling Florida heat, doesn't feel like a steam room, doesn't immediately drench and boil your skin. It isn't the Northeast or the Mid-Atlantic, either. It isn't Pennsylvania, where late September feels like a transition to a violently cold season, and all of the American Eagle advertisements are already showcasing long-sleeved polos and sweaters in dark browns and oranges in anticipation of Autumn's falling leaves. No, this is a pure heat. A "dry" heat is what people call it, but until now I've never felt it before. I've never been to the Rocky Mountains, to the deserts of Arizona or West Texas. Born and raised in humid Florida, my farthest trips west came when my parents took me to see cousins in Dallas.

I remember bragging to my father about my "vacation visits," in fact, telling him that this jobs would afford me the opportunity to visit California and New Mexico for the first time. "If it's a *real* business trip," he said dismissively, "it isn't vacation. The closest you'll get to sight-seeing is going to be the drive from the airport to the hotel."

"We're non-profit," I said. "I don't have the money to stay in hotels."

"Are you going to brag about *that*, too?" he asked.

A typical response from the man. My relationship with my father, though, has been uneasy ever since I made the decision to attend Edison University, an expensive private school in Fort Myers without the instant and international name recognition of his alma mater, the University of Florida. Despite my constant efforts to apply for my own student loans, to pay the

cost of the inflated private tuition myself, my father insisted that he pay and that I graduate debtfree. His parents had paid for his college, and he was damned if he'd let his own son try to support himself before he was ready, then fail. My mother would tell me that his abrasive, toughlove personality ("I'm a realist, not a pessimist," he's always been fond of saying) was just an act, an attempt to replicate all of those sitcom dads of the late '60s, men's men who put food on the table and paid the bills and involved themselves only marginally in their children's lives. And maybe that's true. In stark contrast to many of my friends, whose fathers speak in gleeful high voices about how marriage and child-raising is a 50/50 effort with their wives, and who took their sons grocery shopping and clothes shopping and who agree to quit their jobs and move when their wives get better job offers in Minnesota or Los Angeles, my own father believes that mothers put in the time and fathers put in the cash. Whether he's a throwback to some other era, I can't say, but he's particularly attuned to all matters of finance; he earns the paychecks and he pays the bills. So yes, my father paid my tuition, and every elective I took, he asked what I believed its "career relevance" to be ("Digital Design?" he asked once. "That sounds like a hobby course."). And when I took this consulting job, telling him that employers would salivate over my travel experience, he found ways to be disappointed. "Make it worth it," he said. "Four years at EU and your first job pays nothing? You better come back so experienced that I want to hire you. And that's a stretch, given what I know about your work ethic."

My father has never been here to New Mexico, though. He's never seen an airport like I just saw, a country like I am seeing right now, a school like I'll visit. He's stuck in a weekly rotation of shirts, ties, and blazers, of bag lunches stored in the office fridge, of mornings at the breakfast table watching FOX News, of evenings at the dinner table watching FOX News, of Saturday nights spent at one of three Naples restaurants. He works in the bubble of retirement-

rich Naples, Florida. He is a financial advisor in a city bustling (hobbling, actually) with old, white retirees. And I am young, sitting with two fraternity guys, headed to a major state university—and a major *college town*—in a place I've never been, and I am going to make the most of my time here. All that white space, I'm thinking, all that opportunity. No more painting over stains.

"Las Cruces is right past this mountain," says Jose as we near the university. Jose is a muscular Hispanic with a meticulously well-maintained fade; he wears all white (a white polo with white Miami Vice linen pants), and he speaks a slow and thoughtful English, touched with just a slight Spanish accent. I can't tell if his tight haircut means he is conservative, a strict Catholic, a committed ROTC student...or if his linen pants and back-seat collection of hunting equipment means he is a wild youth. "From Las Cruces to El Paso, it is only thirty minutes," he says, "so this is not a bad drive. And Mexico is just beyond the river in El Paso, so it is a quick drive from our school to Mexico."

"Your school's only half an hour from Mexico?" I ask. "Interesting."

"Always interesting," Sam says, "but not always healthy."

"Oh?" I ask, hoping he has stories. Hoping we've got a trip to Mexico planned for tonight. Hoping that Las Cruces is the sort of college town teeming with atmosphere, with bars at every corner, with so much culture and debauchery that my brothers back in Fort Myers would blush. "I've never been," I say, "but I want to check it out."

"If you go," Sam says, "just make sure you order bottled water. Otherwise, you're going home with a vacation souvenir totally different than you want."

"Ahh," I say, rubbing the back of my neck again.

"Mexico is so close," Jose says, "but this is not good for many students." He drives barely a mile per hour over the speed limit, rarely passes any of the slow right-lane traffic on the highway. Perhaps it is his weak car that is responsible for this plodding, or perhaps Jose himself follows traffic laws with rigid attention. After all, he sits in his seat with an upright driver's ed posture, even adjusts his rear view regularly. "On weekends," he says, "so many students drink their lives away in Juarez, where the drinking age is only 18. Of course, drinking age is barely even checked in Juarez, you understand."

"My eight year-old sister could drink in Juarez," Sam says from the back seat.

I can't tell whether they approve or disapprove of all of this underage drinking. Whether they also participate in "drinking their lives away," or they stay clean and sober.

"Shit," Sam adds. "I even took my sister out there, once."

"Ha!" I say quickly. "You get her wasted?"

Sam is a joker, it seems, the kind of loud and crude, well-built, baseball-cap-clad asshole that reminds me of the seniors on my Varsity baseball team in high school. Always a sarcastic response or a semi-witty remark, regardless of the situation. Seniors in high school—on Varsity teams—don't give a fuck about the world because they're on top; they've made it. Can life get any better? Sam's incessant cracks give me great optimism for the mindset of the New Mexico State chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon. Drinking club, I'm hoping. Please.

"She's eight," Sam says. "No, I didn't get her wasted."

"Oh, no," I say. "I was only joking."

He stares at me with angry eyes, cheeks hard, hat so tight on his scalp that it looks like it might burst. Then he smiles, says: "I know, bro. Just fucking with you."

I exhale, can't stop myself from letting loose a couple relieved laughs.

"So you'll wait until she's thirteen to get her drunk?" I ask.

"Exactly," Sam says.

I turn to Jose beside me and ask, "Are you from Mexico? Juarez?"

"Oklahoma," he says. "But my parents. They are from Mexico. They live in Las Cruces. They own a pecan farm." And he points out the window, past dark and dry and unending spaces of New Mexico and West Texas desert, and in the distance stand rows and rows—thousands—of scraggly, half-dead trees, thirsty-looking like they hate that someone has planted them out here, and Jose says: "Just like those. Pecan trees. Those are owned by the university, I think. Our school is very agricultural."

"Didn't know that," I say.

"That is why we are called the Aggies."

"I see. Did you have a football game today?"

"We play at Utah State," Sam says from the backseat. "Night game."

"Fantastic. You do anything special for road games? Get together for drinks?"

"We tailgate for home games," Sam says. "Away games aren't televised, though."

"Too bad," I say and shake my head. "Well, there's plenty of other games tonight. We should stake out a spot at a bar, get some pitchers."

"Um," Sam says and meets Jose's eyes in the rearview and they both have this look like "This guy's coming along? Fuck!", and *shit*, I think I came on too strong...these guys see me as an Educational Consultant still, a Nationals Fun Nazi, not a friend and not a drinking buddy, so I change the direction of the conversation just a bit.

"Did you happen to see who won the Pittsburgh game?" I ask. "Earlier today?"

"Pittsburgh?" Sam asks. "The Steelers had a game on a Saturday?"

"No, no. The University of Pittsburgh."

"There's a university in Pittsburgh?"

"It's a large school," I say. "Probably bigger than NMSU."

"I doubt that," Sam says.

A silence falls upon the car for a few moments, and it occurs to me that my statistic—the reliable statistic, the number of students enrolled at a university—is offensive in some way for Sam Anderson. For four years, his entire world is New Mexico State University, the restaurants and the dorms and the classrooms and the professors and the bars and the roads and the football team and the students. It is a community that he has come to depend on for his emotional, physical, and intellectual health. Admitting any sort of deficiency in the university is, perhaps, to admit personal flaws and insecurities. So I change the direction of the conversation again.

"So, like, are there cool things to do in Mexico?" I ask.

"Many things, yes," Jose says. "You just need to know what they are."

"Ahh, interesting," I say.

The landscape doesn't change much, looks like we're going nowhere, but at some point we circumvent the looming mountain—which really just looks like a pile of soil and rocks that someone dumped on the horizon—and a messy bit of civilization is scattered over the rolling dust-scape ahead: Las Cruces. As we near the city and the university, I see that the vast, open fields of dirt surrounding the city are littered with discarded plastic bottles (orange juice bottles, milk cartons, soda, fruit punch, water bottles, all empty) and dancing grocery bags and tipped-over shopping carts. In the city, right next to adobe-style houses, are dumpy lots or old and nearly-abandoned storefronts. It feels like someone took an ordinary city, shook it up, and tossed

it out across the desert. Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, despite the exhaust and the cracking highways, felt like finished cities beneath the grime, places populated purposefully, places rich with activity, but here, all the world looks like some forgotten-about desert landfill.

This is a mess of a place and, *shit*, this is not even a college town. Not like the University of Illinois. No. Here, all I see are standard four-lane streets with standard names (Stewart Street and Payne Street, and even as we pass the stadium—which looks like a tall, grassy mound, cut in the center with bleachers—there is no "Stadium Avenue"), standard two-story commercial buildings, standard fast-food locales like McDonald's and Carl's Jr. This is it. It's a sprawl of garbage, of poverty, of construction, of urbanization born of a staple state university…but it is not a college town. No strip of college bars, no swarms of students in NMSU t-shirts, no Rush Season excitement. Through my car window, I watch a large Hispanic mother herd her three children up the stairs of their apartment building. A mother? A family? In a fucking college town apartment complex? My headache feels on the verge of returning as I face the prospect of another four days of spreadsheets and reports and business-as-usual.

As we drive to Jose's apartment, where I'm told I will unpack and sleep for this visit, we pass short, hunkered-down classroom buildings that look like cheap high school structures. New Mexico State University, unlike the historic schools of the Northeast (Shippensburg, for instance), probably had the misfortune of being built in the 1960s and 1970s, and instead of century-old brick decadence, it is a functional budget-crunch campus. I get the feeling that *every* expense was spared in creating NMSU.

"You keep staring out the window," Jose says. "Are you all right?"

"I'm great," I say. Rub my eyes. "This is just so new to me."

"This?" he says. "This is Las Cruces. This is not a place to love."

Oh, I don't love it, I'm thinking. No way. I'd love a bar, maybe. I'd love a big, hopping Greek Row. I'd love any indication of *college*.

"I've just never been anywhere like this," I say.

"It gets old," Sam says from the backseat, removing his hat and running his hands through his haphazard brown hair. He's supposed to be excited about New Mexico; this is my fucking *vacation* visit. He's supposed to talk about the NMSU football team, about concerts and restaurants and bars and festivals. Hell, five minutes ago he looked offended when I suggested that another school could be larger than his own.

"So what are the plans for tonight?" I ask. I'm on the edge of my seat, have unbuckled my seatbelt without realizing it, and I try to make eye contact with both Sam and Jose (though his eyes remain fixed on the road ahead). My buzz is wearing off, and I feel somehow desperate. "Some cool stuff to do in Las Cruces, right?" I ask.

"Cool stuff?" Jose says.

"Like, going out?" I say, nodding vigorously.

"We never talked about these things with our last consultant."

"Don't worry about that," I say. "Who was your consultant last year?"

"He was short," Jose says. "Very serious."

"Well," I say, "I'm serious, but not that serious."

"Some killer army bars, if you're into that," Sam says from the backseat.

"Army bars," I say, and no...I'm not into that...but I'll take anything. And I suddenly realize with depressing certainty that, because I have no car, I'm at the mercy of whoever owns a car in this fraternity chapter. If they don't want to go out tonight, I can't just tag along; I will actually have to *convince* them to drive me to a bar. "Our last consultant," Jose says, flipping his turn signal a full 200 feet before he makes his turn, and completing a magnificent hand-over-hand rotation of the steering wheel, "he told us that the very best thing that we could do for a traveling consultant was to make sure you had time to rest, and that you had time to yourself."

"Time to rest?" I say.

Sam brushes sweat from his forehead, knocks his baseball cap sideways, leaves it like that. "Yeah," he says. "The guy kept saying that he was so tired. That he was exhausted from all the traveling."

"Oh," I say. Chug my Dasani, still thirsty. "Oh, that's not-"

"So we thought that it would be nice," Jose says, "if you had some privacy tonight. We have some plans, some things to take care of, so we will leave you at my apartment so you can relax."

"Leave me at...?"

I can watch his DVDs, he says. They know a great taco-burrito delivery place and they'll order me some dinner. I can watch TV, read a book. I can play X-box, fool around on the internet, get caught up on reports. I can go to sleep early, he says. The place is all mine, he says, and I can sleep as late as I want tomorrow. Wake up refreshed.

"I don't..." I say. "I don't..."

"Don't worry about us," Jose says. "We have many things to take care of."

Sam's baseball cap is sideways still, and he doesn't care, still hasn't fixed it, *hasn't fixed it*, and I should have realized it sooner, fuck, that this is the look of a frat guy, not someone who loves the mission of the National Fraternity, not someone who reads the *One Minute Manager* and has a job lined up for the day after graduation and can't wait to get a Men's Wearhouse

preferred card and personalized business cards. His hat is sideways, and he is really, really fratty, Sam is. I should never have worried about whether these guys were going out to the bars tonight; I should have worried only about whether or not I could squeeze myself into their plans.

"So what are you guys doing, then?" I ask.

Silence in the car. Sam scratches the hair under his hat.

"Tonight," I say. "What are you guys doing?"

"Nothing exciting," Jose says. "We just have some planning and details and things. I think that I would probably rather stay at home if I had the choice."

"Right," I say. "But really. What are you guys doing? I'm totally *not* tired." Out on the town, I'm thinking. Hitting up that one college bar in this entire dusty, trash-covered town. Hitting up the one hidden college bar, some shack-in-the-woods dive with plank floors and two-by-fours for walls, but giant beer tubs lining the interior, and twenty year-old college girls in short black skirts and low-cut sex tops, and 50 Cent bumping loud enough to shake the neon Budweiser signs on the walls. That's where they're going, and *oh, it's nothing exciting*, and they figured the old man wanted to sleep. Fuck that.

"Well," Sam says, and now he adjusts his hat.

"We do have an event for our pledges tonight," Jose says.

"An event for your pledges," I say and nod. "Tell me more."

"It is nothing that we were trying to keep secret," Jose says, his slight accent giving the words an exotic appeal, as though New Mexico State's pledge event is special because it is unlike anything I have ever experienced before. "It is nothing bad," he says. "It is actually an educational event. An Etiquette Dinner. We got the idea from National Convention, and we have been doing it for the past two years." "And I can't come?" I ask, giving a faux-shocked face.

"It would probably be very boring for you," Jose says and then laughs humorlessly, gruffly, as I imagine a bull might. "We simply use the *Marathon* as a guide, and give a quick etiquette lesson to all of our pledges. We talk of things like pulling out chairs for ladies, passing both salt and pepper when someone asks for salt, working from the outside in when using silverware."

"Yeah," I say. "I remember when I was a pledge. Way back when. There were guys in my pledge class who'd only eaten TV dinners all their lives."

"Right, right," Sam says from the back, suddenly excited. He's the New Member Educator, so the Etiquette Dinner is likely *his* event to organize. "They come to college *so* rough. We've got so many guys who grew up in military families. Love hunting. Hiking. Don't know the first thing about manners."

"Most of our brothers," Jose says in his slow English, and he turns the steering wheel hand over hand, absolutely textbook *again*—and we pull down a choppy road that leads to a mud-colored apartment building, "most have grown up in either the military or as firstgeneration immigrants. Homes without fathers, or very poor homes. We are half and half. Military homes or poverty-line homes."

"It's an awesome event, really," Sam says quickly, perhaps eager to justify the Etiquette Dinner as much as possible so that he can avoid trouble from the Fun Nazi. "We get them together, our pledges, and they're all dressed up in shirt and tie and everything, and we invite a sorority to come over as their dates—"

"A sorority?" I ask.

"Right," Sam says. "They, um...come to the house..."

And now he's gripping the bill of his baseball cap, wondering if he said too much.

"This sounds like fun, actually," I say. "I think I want to do this."

"You want to ..." Sam says. "You want to participate?"

"Definitely."

"Are you sure? This is for our pledges."

"Etiquette dinner," I say again, turning the words over in my mouth, trying to taste whether they are sweet or sour, business or pleasure. "Yeah, this sounds good. This sounds fun. So what's the deal? When does it start?"

"Wait, you really want to do it?" Sam asks. "No joking?"

"Of course, of course."

"Hmm," Sam says. "'Kay. Well. Guess we can..." He looks to Jose.

"We change things just a bit," Jose says. "I suppose this could work."

"All right," Sam says. He isn't upset necessarily, doesn't look as though I have spoiled his best-laid plans, just continues to run his fingers over the bill of his hat, staring at the ceiling of the car in strong contemplation.

"I've never done anything like this during a chapter visit," I say. "Usually, it's just meetings. I like to have fun, though. Really, I do. I'm a consultant, but I'm, you know, still *your* age. I'm still young."

"Right," Sam says. "I guess you are."

Etiquette Dinner, I think, still turning over the words in my head, trying to process potential images of the night through a mind in a waning state of inebriation. Suddenly, though, I can only imagine spreadsheets and a Code of Conduct and "three times/weekly" and "No Dating, Drinking, or Drugs" and "NEVER," and I rub my eyes, smooth my pants, try to make it go away. At Jose's off-campus apartment, I drag my bags to his living room and then empty a bag of his potato chips and watch the USC game while he's in the shower and, completely sober now, I open my suitcase and stare at the inside, at the shirts, the socks, the shoes, the belts, the toiletry bag. Just as it was when I stared into it at a hotel in Illinois, nothing is where it should be. And after a careful inspection, I realize that—yes—I definitely left my goal sheets behind in my Explorer. They're nowhere to be found. Maybe I can still have access to them, though? Maybe I have them saved on my laptop? And I am thinking that these black shoes could be easily moved a couple inches, and this stack of undershirts could be easily straightened, and this bottle of vitamins could be easily lifted. It isn't too late, not yet, to grab the paintbrush and in thick strokes to cover the events of the last week.

Slam on the brakes. Create structure once again.

But I grab only what I need from the suitcase, from my garment bag, shut both of them and try—eyes closed, straining—not to think about how I will organize them later.

Before I shower, I check my cell phone's voicemail. Unexpectedly, I discover that Jenn has left three messages since our morning conversation in the airport bar in Philadelphia. The first message is confused, cryptic, sounds like she called for a reason and then forgot ("I, uh…listen, I called Charles, because…I've had these weird feelings lately"), and it's all rambling build-up with no payoff. The second message is more focused, articulate, but still Jenn doesn't seem to really say much; she tells me that she wants to make plans *now*; am I getting a hotel room, because I know I can't stay at the sorority house, right? And what was I thinking about for Thanksgiving? When can I get back to Florida for Thanksgiving? I get the whole week off,

right? This message is all questions, a feeling-out perhaps, but underneath I can hear the slightest evidence of the emotion that finally surfaces in the third message.

"Charles," she says, no accompanying happy high tone in her voice to counter the upset low, "we need to talk. Really. We need to talk. Where are you? Things are not good, Charles. Where are you?" She sounds drunk. Forceful, determined, a bravery fueled by alcohol. The middle of the afternoon and a six-pack helped her to find the words that she hasn't been able to speak in the last couple months.

"Where was I?" I ask. "Where was I?"

I call her back, not even willing to suppress a rising anger because I want it to match no, *exceed*—that sharpness that I sensed in her messages. Where was I? Things are not good? I'm working. Out in New Mexico. *Working* while she's drinking.

"I was in an airplane, Jenn," I say as soon as she answers. "I was in the air."

"What are you..." she starts, then switches to, "Charles, why are you yelling?"

"Why am I yelling? I'm not yelling."

"You're shouting."

"I was in an airplane, Jenn," I say again.

"Okay? What are you *talking* about?"

"You kept asking where I was," I say. "In your messages. I was in an airplane."

"Fine," she says. "All you had to do was tell me—"

"I'm trying to tell you."

"All you had to do was tell me what you were *talking about*," she says. "You just call me and start saying these random things. How am I supposed to know what you're talking about?"

"Why leave the message, then?" I ask. "Why leave a message like that if you don't want an answer?"

"How..." she says. "What's going on here?"

"I'm answering your question, that's what's going on."

"You're yelling again."

"I'm not."

"I got emotional today," she says. "What do you expect? You told me you'd call me, and I didn't know you were flying all day."

"You knew. I told you this morning."

"No," she says. "I knew you were flying, but I didn't..."

"You were preoccupied," I say. "You didn't care."

"Charles," she says.

"You've got your fraternity socials," I say. "You were at a football game all day, weren't

you? Tailgating? What do you need a phone relationship for? You're just doing me a favor by

staying with me, staying with the old man. Don't do me favors."

"Charles, don't. I didn't mean to...you misunderstood me."

"Were you at the tailgates today? With another fraternity, right?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You were."

"Fine. So what?"

So what? And a list of answers suddenly occurs to me. So what? *So what*? So you were in those grassy parking lots outside the stadium, standing beside beer troughs and flirting with other guys for free cans of Bud Lite. So you put your hand on some frat guy's bicep and asked him to give you a hand, and he helped you up onto his tailgate. So you asked another guy, bigger, drunker, to hold your legs while you climbed up onto a keg and did a keg stand. He held your legs and you were wearing a jean skirt probably, and he helped you down and with a towel wiped off the beer from your wet t-shirt. Gave you another beer. So you're young and you're in college and you never even had to worry about changing who you were, and I've lost you.

A list of answers occurs to me. But I don't say any of them.

"I don't need this, you know?" I say.

"Don't need what?" she asks.

"This," I say. "You, on the fence like this. I want a girlfriend who's either with me or is not."

She sighs. "What do you want me to say, Charles?"

"I don't know," I say, "but I don't want...this."

"I was emotional today," she says. "I missed you, is that what you want to hear? I was sad, and then I was angry, and then I was just drunk and everything kind of boiled. I don't know what else to say."

"Well, then. It's all settled. Life's perfect."

"Don't be an asshole."

"I've got to get a shower," I say. "Work never ends around here. 24/7, you know? I need time to think, so I'll call you tomorrow." She protests a bit, tells me that I should call her again tonight, but there's no point in that. I don't want to pencil in another goal for the evening—"Call Jenn/ 9:00 PM," or "Devise strategy for reconciliation/ 10:00 PM"—while she enjoys her night. No, I instead hang up my clothes on the towel rack in Jose's bathroom, and I shave, and I arrange my hair gel and my comb and my toothbrush along a mostly clean countertop, and I step under the showerhead and hot water hits me and I watch the layers of grime on my skin come loose and wash away.

After I shower and dress, I am driven to the NKE chapter house, which is directly across the street from the university. I step out into the paved parking lot of the house, and Sam says, "Just wait outside here with the pledges while we finish getting set up inside, 'kay? We'll be back in a second."

Darkness is taking control of the evening sky, and I stand outside a khaki-colored fraternity house that would probably blend into the dusty landscape in the daytime. Even though it's mid-September and the sun is setting sooner rather than later, the desert heat remains in the air; but the sky is a wide-open dark navy space and the moon is high-definition white clarity, and I am certain that Las Cruces will have cold nights ahead. Surrounding me, outside the adobestyle chapter house, are the fifteen pledges for this Fall's Nu Kappa Epsilon new member class. Rush concluded two weeks ago, Sam said, so this is all still new to these pledges. They are living the tail end of Rush Season, the still-clueless days before the definition of "fraternity" balloons to mean a national organization with 120 chapters and a National Headquarters and Educational Consultants: they are living the days when "fraternity" is a cozy college family.

Amidst these fifteen freshman students, I alone wear a full suit and tie, just unpacked from my garment bag. The others wear a mix-and-match, borrowed-from-here-and-there, whatever-I-could-get-my-hands-on ensemble; they wear awkward-sized dress shirts with out-of-

style ties poorly tied, torn cargo khakis, scuffed and dusty dress shoes. Poverty-line, Jose said, and I can see that now. For some of these kids, seventeen and eighteen year-olds, this might be the first time they've ever had to wear a suit and tie. I stand among these fifteen unpolished freshman men, and we wait outside the house for the new pledge sisters of Alpha Alpha Sorority to arrive.

I consider introducing myself as the Consultant, listing off my job responsibilities and speaking of the national mission, modeling the correct social behaviors of the NKE Marathon Man. I wouldn't have to be a Fun Nazi, necessarily, just a professional.

"—this fucking girl, *Maria*," one of these kids says, "body like it was, you know, *built* for fucking."

Uproarious laughter from the rest of the pledges.

"You got a light?" one asks me. He's got spiky black hair that shoots in every direction, and wears a violent red shirt with vivid black pants.

"No," I say. "Sorry."

"Have I met you?" he asks.

This early in the semester, I realize, all the pledges still seem to be learning one another's names. They don't know each other, and they don't know me. We're all strangers. So I could introduce myself as the Consultant, sure, but I would immediately be labeled with the intractable black type of "Fun Nazi." No, I have a choice. Back in my Explorer, the card is flipped. That blank white space. Possibility.

"Yeah, you've met me," I say. "I'm Charles."

"I don't remember you." He eyes me suspiciously, unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth. Solid spikes of hair, under the fading light, looking somehow *more* solid and dangerous than hair should. "No, you don't look familiar."

"I've been busy," I say. "With class."

"You look nice. Nice suit." He stares me up and down, eyes squinted.

"Thanks."

"You look a little old to be a pledge. How old are you?"

"Freshman," I say. "But I took a couple years off after high school."

He sucks on his cigarette, then realizes it's still unlit. "True," he says. "True."

Tonight, yes, I am just another pledge. One of them. Enjoying Rush Season.

He asks someone else for a light, is successful in his request, but still stands nearby and could continue conversation at any second. Just another pledge, I'm thinking, but I don't blend in. Beside me, these kids look fresher than fresh meat, so inexperienced at life that I can't imagine any parent sending them away to college on their own. Shit, I can't even remember looking or acting like these kids. I never tried, as the spiky-haired kid beside me is now doing, to smoke a cigarette with such forced displays of adulthood, taking long and dramatic drags. Another pledge has a plastic flask tucked into his sock, and takes quick sips while no one looks.

"—so drunk that I passed out under the coffee table!" one of them says.

Uproarious laughter.

I smile awkwardly.

Sometime after 8:30, after thirty minutes of waiting in the growing darkness of the September evening, after all of the pledges have let their shoulders slump and have gone from stories of raucous drunken debauchery to muffled complaints about "when this shit's going to

start," five modest sedans, each adorned with either "ROXY" logos on their windshields or pink lays hanging from their rearview mirrors or Alpha Alpha bumper-stickers on their back windows, pull into the gravel driveway. The pledges organize themselves into an excited clump, like paparazzi on the red carpet at a premiere, nearly salivating in anticipation for the arrival of females, of sorority girls who will be forced to listen and talk with them for the duration of this event. This Etiquette Dinner, while supposedly "educational," is a fraternity-sorority "mixer," and there is *no one else* here but NKEs and Alpha Alphas; it's like a forced date between fifteen guys and fifteen girls. So everyone's got a chance. Hell…even me.

I stand behind the Pledge Clump, inconspicuous as I can be.

The car doors open, so many at once that I'm surprised no door bangs into another, so many doors opening that it just sounds like metal microwave popcorn—tump tump tump tump metal the sorority girls step out of the cars and form a single-file line behind an older, assertive brunette.

"All right," one of the pledges says softly. "This is it, boys."

The NKE pledges whistle with delight as they check these sorority girls out. Like the young men, these freshman girls are all dressed a bit awkwardly, like they're unsure if they're going out to a club or going to an internship. They remind me of Paris Hilton from *The Simple Life*, wearing Gucci as she corrals a group of pigs on the farm. Some girls wear brilliant kneelength red skirts with black halter-tops, and others wear tan or black pants so tight I could see their goosebumps poke out if the nighttime temperature dropped ten degrees. These clothes glimmer with newness, as if they were purchased from the mall earlier today, purchased for this occasion just as the NKE pledges borrowed ties from roommates earlier today. They're mostly Hispanic, the girls, just like all of the guys, and each moves with obvious side-to-side hip sways

like she wants to squeeze every ounce of sexiness from each step. The clothes might not look natural, sure, but the difference between the guys and the girls: the girls make it all look *good*.

Several girls wear shimmering silver or gold necklaces with gigantic cursive charms reading "Rachel" or "Tamara," and twinkling hoop earrings, and purses obviously purchased from Clare's or Rave or whatever celeb knock-off store is in the Las Cruces Mall. Items that were undoubtedly hip in high school, and that have yet to be phased out of their wardrobes. And I realize with a shiver that all of these girls are eighteen. Maybe a year older at most, maybe even a year younger. Eighteen.

My suit is Ralph Lauren, silver-black (the salesman described this color and style as the *new*-new black, "a suit for men who know that there are just *so* many possibilities for black"). The suit's black fabric is off-set (barely) by thin silver pinstripes, a look, the salesman assured me, "that says both business and pleasure." I spent most of my graduation gift money on this suit, but I can see now that this is an outfit for a different world, a suit that should never have been assembled and worn for a New Mexico State pledge function. I stand out as the old guy, I'm sure of it now. I'm the only one whose tie looks tight and confident. A graduate among freshmen.

A desert wind cuts through the parking lot, and we all get sand in our eyes.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

"Gentle-men," Sam projects in a bellowing voice from the front doors of the fraternity house, suddenly. And he stands strong and erect, assuming a more commanding demeanor, as he walks down the stone steps of the tan house and surveys the massive crowd of freshmen—guys and girls—before him. He wears a white button-down tucked into khaki pants, and a pair of brown Steve Maddens. This is a new Sam. Not the same Sam that met me at the baggage claim,

who wore a faded baseball cap: this is *New Member Educator* Sam, the voice of authority for the pledge class, the man elected each semester to teach and test the young pledges on the history of the fraternity, on traditions and customs, on behavior. He walks toward our clump with a puffedout chest, passes us without so much as a special glance in my direction, and shakes the brunette's hand.

They give one another soft smiles that seem to hide some sort of secret.

"The kids are going to have a good time tonight," Sam says in a low voice.

"I hope so," she says, voice straining for maturity. "They got all dressed up."

"Don't worry, Nicole. I'll have them home at a reasonable hour."

They give those slight smiles again, Sam whispering something inaudible.

And then Sam looks back at our Pledge Clump and says, "All right, guys, you know the drill. Form a single-file line and then we'll pair off with the ladies. 'Kay? Once you get a partner, walk to the front doors of the house and someone will seat you in the dining room."

"Dining room?" one of the pledges yells. "Ha! Yeah, right!"

Sam shakes his head. "Thousands of comedians out of jobs," he says, "and you got the nerve to try to be funny? Come on. Any other jokers out there?"

Silence from the Pledge Clump. Most of us look down at the dirt.

"We've cleaned up the house," Sam says, "made it into a first-class restaurant for the night. Remember everything we taught you. Act like respectable Nu Kappa Epsilon gentlemen tonight—do *not* embarrass me—and I'll see you again after your dinner."

My stomach clenches again, not quite with the sort of extreme violence that precedes vomiting, but the sort of clenching that instead precedes a roller-coaster drop. No matter how high the coaster is, how many times I've been on it, my body tightens like a fist as I wait for the unbearable drop and consider whether or not I've made a poor decision. The same feeling I've been having so much lately, picturing my Explorer grumbling downhill, hangers shaking, the cause and effect of cresting a hill and careening without brakes down a pothole-punctured road. Drop and crash, cause and effect. Drinking all day long. Pressuring my way into this Etiquette Dinner. Socializing with a gigantic clump of freshman males. And inside? Freshman females. And maybe there will be hazing. Maybe there will be alcohol, and maybe I'll drink, and maybe I'll encourage underage drinking, and certainly I'll fail to report anything I see because I'll be involved, and maybe I'll accumulate my own list of consultant Code of Conduct infractions. Maybe, maybe, maybe. An unbearable drop feels inevitable, but out here in the desert, I need my life to be different than it's been. I want this Etiquette Dinner to be the equivalent of "College Night" at Tango's, to be "Wasted on the Water."

Sam whispers something into Nicole's ear and they both laugh and then step away. She motions with a long and elegant arm for the guys and the girls to begin pairing, the sort of gesture that says "sigghhhh," but not in a tired way. This girl is probably Alpha Alpha sorority's Vice President of New Member Education, the initiated sister responsible for her sorority's young pledges.

And just seconds later, Nicole has dug a digital camera from her purse, and adjusts certain buttons and scrolls through previously captured photos. Then she raises the camera and points it at the crowd as we are pairing.

"Fuck," I say, and I turn my back and see the flash all around me.

Just my back. No one will recognize that.

"Fuck," I say again when I turn around and Nicole snaps another photo and I am suddenly, unavoidably, front and center in the shot.

"Oh, fantastic photo," Nicole says happily. "That's going on the web site. Good luck, girls. You look great."

"Fuck," I say, and the other pledges are rushing forward now, shaking hands and speaking in low and sometimes-shaky voices (camera's bright flash again illuminating the parking lot in periodic bursts), and a few have tried to lift their partner's hands to kiss the tops, but it is such a forced attempt at chivalry that it's laughable. They're about to have dinner in a frat house, not take a romantic carriage ride through Central Park. Another camera flash, and I step forward now, hesitantly, camera flash, and I turn to escape it, and by chance I now stand before a beautiful dark-skinned girl with electric highlights in her light brown hair, and they glow with Hollywood brilliance when the next camera flash strikes, and as I stare at her, this gorgeous girl who also looks too confident to be a pledge, the camera and the photos and the incriminating evidence no longer seem important. She wears dark blue eyeliner and a black cocktail dress that makes the curves of her breasts and her hips shimmer, and she tells me her name is Maria; and, as someone noted earlier, her body looks like it was built for fucking.

"Very nice to meet you," she says in a soft voice that carries little accent.

"No, no," I say. "It's very nice to meet you."

"Do I know you?" she asks, looking at me with real curiosity, hand on her hip.

"Maybe," I say. "I'm around the house a lot."

"I swear I've met you."

"Sure, sure," I say. Straight-faced. Just another pledge. "Probably."

All of us walk inside the house, pair by pair; somewhere behind me in the parking lot, Sam Anderson argues with a pledge who claims that there aren't enough girls to pair up with. "We're one girl short, Brother Sam," the kid says. "What am I supposed to do? I don't have a partner." I turn around and—just as I pass through the front doorway—accidentally make eye contact with Sam, who has his hand on this kid's shoulder and is telling him that he's sorry, that we must have miscounted, that he'll have to sit this one out, and I'm responsible but *fuck it*. I need this more than that pledge does.

Maria and I enter the front room of the fraternity house, and because I wasn't able to see the inside of the NMSU house earlier, I have no basis for comparison on how well these brothers have "made over" the "dining room." But I'm certain that it's an admirable effort. All around the dimly lit room—composite photos on the wall, along with assorted wooden paddles and a thick, empty trophy case at one end of the room—are long tables (probably fold-out tables) disguised into presentability by plain white tablecloths draped over the tops; the tables are set with nonmatching silverware and sloppily folded paper napkins. Not exactly the level of class I would expect from Carolina Baptist or Cornell or even EU, but it's a fraternity house Etiquette Dinner at a poor university. LaFaber, in fact, might even question how this décor impresses in its new members the mission to build socially responsible leaders ("Is this the best you can do?" I can almost hear him asking), but I don't care. Not now.

Maria sits across from me—I pull out her chair and help her into her seat, and upon seeing me perform this small act of courtesy, of course, several other pledges around the room bumble out of their own seats and attempt to do the same—and beside me is the pledge who asked for a light just fifteen minutes ago. His name is Michael, I've just learned, and I now notice that his violent red shirt (with black tie and black pants and black shoes) is complemented by a pair of *white* socks. He's got a lot to learn.

I focus my attention exclusively on Maria, because if I let her speak first, I'll have allowed her to ask *her* questions. She could ask what year of school I'm in, how old I am, how I

like the fraternity or NMSU so far. Her questions risk my exposure as a fraud, risk wasting this moment of college life that I've been granted. Tonight, at least, I can try to be younger, be like I was during my senior year at EU, the President of Nu Kappa Epsilon, the J. Marcus Gufley Scholarship Winner, the Vice President of Edison Student Government, the "man on campus."

So I say: "Where are you from, Maria?"

"Santa Fe," she says. "How about you?"

I cough, consider my answer.

"I'm from Florida," I say.

"You're kidding."

"Not kidding, no. This entire state is brand-new to me. Have you lived here your whole life?"

"Yes," she says and runs her fingers through the ends of her highlighted hair, letting it all fall lightly on bare shoulders. "My parents moved here from California."

"Long way away," I say.

"Not as far as Florida," she says. "I don't think I've ever actually met anyone from *Flor*ida."

"You've never been to Orlando? Disney World?"

"Yes, once, but...this is different. I've never met anyone from Florida out in New

Mexico. Why on Earth did you come all the way out here?"

"My story's not too interesting," I say and look down at the table, shrugging. Thinking of a story. Beside me, Michael is struggling to find the right conversation-starter for his partner, a girl with caramel skin and intricately braided hair, and a complexion so clear and smooth that she somehow looks too young for college, and were I not seated at a fraternity-sorority mixer, I

might have guessed her a high school student. She looks bored already, folding and re-folding her napkin and staring at the ceiling, and I feel bad for the both of them. I can't let my own conversation with Maria become something so pitiable.

Back in Florida, Jenn is piling into a car with her sorority sisters, and they're on their way to Central, to Tango's maybe, to a college bar where men and women alike are all at the peak of their lives, healthy and attractive and free of the responsibilities that come after graduation, and for the second time today she will drink free beer and vodka tonics purchased by frat guys at the bar who think they've got a shot with her. And probably, they do. After college, the bars change and the patrons age, and while you might find choice specimens in the mix, you might also wind up drinking beside someone whose personality has been sucked dry from so many hours spent in cubicles. After college, there are no more fraternity-sorority mixers. After college, single people no longer "hook up" after social events, but instead go on blind dates or double dates with married friends or build relationships in their offices that they hope will someday grow into something permanent and functional. No, no. I have tonight, and only tonight. Once this is over, I might never find myself in such a rich social opportunity.

"Tell me your story," Maria says. "I'm sure it's interesting."

"Well," I say, "Florida's a fun state, but I needed something different. It's so humid sometimes that you sweat a gallon just walking from class to class."

"Wow," she says. "So, where do you live out here—"

"How is Santa Fe?" I ask. "I've only been to Las Cruces and El Paso, so far." "You haven't been to *Juarez* yet?" she asks and holds her hand to her mouth. "Juarez?" I ask. "Like, Mexico? No. Should I have been?" "Oh my God," Maria says and she taps the high school girl beside her and says in a quick burst, "oh my god shelley, charles hasn't even been to juarez."

Shelley brightens immediately, turns her attention from spiky-haired and boring Michael and smiles at me and says, "Oh my God" dramatically, like she was just saved from a burning building, pulled from the window by a firefighter on a ladder.

"He's from *Flor*-ida," Maria says.

"Oh my God!" Shelley says again. "What are you doing out here?"

"Just...still getting used to a different state, is all," I say.

"Florida," Maria says. "We *have* to take you to Juarez. I can't believe you've never been. I mean, it isn't nice, but you can drink. You have to go."

"I can drink anywhere," I say.

"What do you mean?" Maria asks. "Are you twenty-one?"

I'm silent for a second, hear my heartbeat growing louder. Maintain appearances, I'm thinking. Just another pledge, I'm thinking. "No," I say. "I've just been to a lot of different places. How do I know Juarez is better than going to, say, LA or Fresno?"

"Fresno?" Shelley asks. "Eew."

"Fresno's awesome," Michael says, and he's leaning over onto our side of the table, arms and elbows on the tablecloth, hair almost poking me in the face (the plastic-alcohol odor of his hair gel and the stale smell of cigarettes wafting heavily in my direction), but no one acknowledges that he spoke. Shelley, in fact, rolls her eyes; her mouth twitches a little, the sort of reaction one might have from eating spoiled meat.

"Juarez," Maria says. "We're going. Trust me. You'll love it."

"What happens if I get really, really drunk in Juarez?" I ask. "I've seen those shirts that say, 'I was drunk and left for dead in a Mexican prison.""

"There are Mexico horror stories, Charles," Maria says loudly, scoots her chair a bit to the left to show her disinterest in Michael. "That's why you go with a group."

"Yeah!" Shelley says. "It's more fun that way, too."

"But you have to find the *right* group," Maria says.

"Who are you?" Michael asks me, but he looks at Maria. "I don't know who you are, bro. Never seen you before. Who *are* you?"

I swallow, look into my lap and adjust my napkin, think about making a formal introduction to Michael, then decide that I should probably just pretend that we've met a dozen times already, and that I can't understand why he's acting in such a peculiar manner. So I smile, straighten my tie, am prepared to tell him this—

"I like your tie," Maria says. "And that suit? What color is that?"

"Silver-black," I say and exhale. "It's supposed to be the next big thing."

"It's very classy."

Michael turns away for the time being, still eying me suspiciously.

Soon thereafter, a short Hispanic guy wearing a white button-down tucked into blue jeans, walks from out of a doorway at the back of the room, and he carries four styrofoam bowls of salad balanced uneasily on his wrists and palms. He arranges them in front of each lady at the far table, and then heads back through the doorway to the kitchen. A moment later, he returns with more salad bowls, then walks back to the kitchen to grab more bowls. Over and over, he does this until all thirty of us have been served, and I joke with Maria and Shelley about how a single tray would be more efficient to carry all of these plates, about how it's great that we've broken out the very best china for tonight, and while I worry my jokes are contrived, they laugh with such honesty that I wonder if I might somehow sparkle with the same lively energy that attracted Jenn more than a year ago.

My freshman year at EU, I was no different than any of these NMSU pledges, still learning how to act with some measure of confidence and grace, but during my final years at Edison, though I was never irresistibly attractive or hypnotically charming, I certainly felt like I could hold conversation with any girl I met. I had learned enough, at least, to give myself a chance at working a spark into a fire.

I won Jenn over in a similar setting, actually. She's a year younger than I am, and—as is the case with the most choice of college socialites—she was just reaching her social peak at the start of her Junior year. Freshman year, while fraternity guys are rough and unrefined, sorority girls at EU are a veritable witch's brew of wild and uninhibited freedom, of first real experiences with excessive alcohol consumption, of sex and their first one-night stands or first one-night stand-ups, of boom-boom-boom hook-ups (five, six guys in one week); they are untamed, everywhere, out of control, the sort of girls that, if you want anything more than a drunken atthe-bar make-out, you avoid. Sophomore year, they settle down, but they're *pissed off* because the upperclassmen guys (who used to be interested in them the year before) are now turning their attention to the new class of incoming freshmen. Junior year, though, the girls are most comfortable; they're 21, legal drinking age, and they're not intimidated. They know who they are, and they know how to have a good time without getting stupid and without getting pissed off.

Jenn and I met on a sunny afternoon at the start of her Junior year during Rush Season, on the lawn of my fraternity house, as we stretched out on beach chairs and drank and talked

about Seinfeld. Just days later, her sorority-Kappa Delta-organized a Grab-A-Date, one of those affairs where each girl is given 24 hours to find a date for some unspecified and undisclosed date location (usually a bar nearby campus). At the zero hour, desperate because she'd only heard about the Grab-A-Date fifteen minutes before it was to start, Jenn came to the NKE house and asked everyone where she could find someone named Charles Washington, the guy she'd met on the lawn just days ago. "The Charles Washington?" one of my brothers asked. "The resident 'man on campus'?" I was the President of NKE at the time, and the VP of ESG, and was involved with more EU clubs, organizations, and honor societies than I can remember now. My brothers joked constantly about such a resume, calling me "MOC" or "man on campus." And that night at the Grab-A-Date, it didn't matter that I'd realized—at the start of the semester—that I would soon be graduating and that my older friends all complained that they couldn't find rewarding jobs and that I had no idea where my degree would take me. It didn't matter, because I entertained Jenn with story after story of my three years of EU exploits, and she loved my exciting persona, even if it wasn't who I really was. But what's worse than talking with a stranger who lacks a defined personality, or who talks incessantly about his insecurities? So I played the part of campus heavyweight, and Jenn was captivated throughout the night.

I imagine a dark future if I've lost such an ability. If I can no longer conjure a winning persona, if I can no longer spin conversation with girls. If, as I've trudged through my travel schedule all semester—Shippensburg to Illinois, Illinois to New Mexico State, speaking only to men, to administrators—willing myself into some perfect professional, the Nu Kappa Epsilon Marathon Man, I've lost all the personality I once had. If I've become just as typical as any entry-level, career-centered office worker.

Back in Florida, of course, Jenn hasn't lost a thing; she can go out and she can flirt and make something happen; she is young, attractive, fun.

I can still be *that* Charles Washington. I know I can.

Here in the dining room, Michael plunges into his salad before Maria or Shelley has starting eating. I wait to pick up my fork until they've taken their first bites, and he doesn't notice. I ask them how the food is and I fold the napkin across my lap and I don't chew with my mouth open and I swallow and wipe my mouth before speaking.

Michael again asks if he knows me, has his hand on my shoulder. I brush his hand away—Maria and Shelley stare at this scene the way most people regard parents who must reprimand their children in public—and I whisper so loud that it probably isn't a whisper: "*Come on*, Michael. Quit messing around."

"Is he all right?" Maria asks.

"He's a joker," I say. "Funny guy. Heh."

After he finishes delivering the salads, the server in the white button-down brings out styrofoam plates of steaming spaghetti and lumpy meat sauce, and plates stacked high with storebought garlic rolls. Perfect. Two nights ago, I stained one of my shirts with pizza sauce, and tonight I'm wearing my nicest outfit. Stomach is clenched again, and it feels as if everything could go horribly wrong in an instant.

I can still be *that* Charles Washington, though, the one from Florida.

"What are you studying, here?" Maria asks.

"Business," I say. "But I'm already thinking about changing."

"To what?"

"College. I can major in *college*, right?"

She laughs. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Nope," I say. "I don't even know anyone around here."

"Good," she says. "Guys without girlfriends are more fun."

"Yes," I say. "Yes they are, aren't they?"

Michael, thankfully, doesn't speak to me for the duration of dinner, instead attempting to quiz Shelley on NBA stars and statistics. And somehow, I've got something going with Maria: I play the persona of the Mature Florida Kid, commenting on differences in weather, landscape, student attitudes, and dress. Amazingly, she remains engaged by my conversation throughout dinner, as careful (and phony) as my stories are.

"So," Maria says, "does everyone, like, have orange trees in Florida?"

"Orange trees?" I ask. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Don't laugh," she says and laughs herself, and both of our hands are above the table and she stretches out her fingers and taps my hand playfully. "It's a real question."

"I don't ask you if all New Mexicans have cacti in their yards."

"You *do* have an orange tree back home, don't you?"

"Yes," I say. "Everyone's got orange trees. And we go to the beach everyday."

"Don't laugh," she says and play-hits me again.

"Sorry, sorry. This is good stuff. I'll have to remember this."

And I can't stop laughing. It's amusing, I realize, because everywhere I've been, I've only noticed those things that are strikingly different from my own state, my own hometown, my own college; I've viewed the world through the lens of Florida, and now I'm being viewed through the lens of New Mexico. *New Mexico*! But it works, it works, this persona, and for some

reason, I feel...more distinct...because someone isn't looking at me by my job description, by my business card.

But the dinner, and all conversation, ends abruptly when Sam and Nicole, the New Member Educators, reappear at the front doors of the chapter house, and—his arms folded before his body, her hands at her waist and her foot tapping an impatient rhythm—Sam says, "All right, gentlemen, I need you outside *now*."

And there is no explanation following this statement.

As the pledges rise from their seats, confused, Nicole says, "Thank you guys," with a fake sing-tone in her voice that I'm sure could shatter glass.

So I smile at Maria and Shelley and say, "Thank you for a wonderful time," and I shake both of their hands (but only the very ends of their hands, their fingers, not a full hand grip like I'd give another male) and I follow Michael and join a line of awkward, bumbling pledges out the door and into the parking lot. I walk with the grace of a true gentleman, realizing that I didn't stain my shirt with marinara.

For a very brief moment—here outside where it has grown dark and where the distance affords only jagged black outlines of miles-away mountains, no city lights in the barren deserts beyond Las Cruces—all is quiet in the fraternity house parking lot. Fifteen young men simply stand with hands in pockets, with stunned looks on their faces like they can't believe the Etiquette Dinner just ended. The same kind of look you might see throughout a theater audience when a movie ends unexpectedly, seemingly without tying together all of its loose storylines. Jump-cut to credits. But this lasts only a moment.

Very soon, the scattered pledges converge in the center of the lot and re-form their Pledge Clump, except this time it's a jubilant mass. It's howling and laughing and, "Yo, that was *money*,

baby," and high-fives and pats on the shoulder and hand-pounds and "I almost got her number, man," and even spiky-haired Michael is high-fiving his pledge brothers, laughing, bragging as though he was the model of a charming gentleman, as though he wasn't reciting Shaq's rebound totals for Shelley or slurping his spaghetti and splattering the meat sauce across the tablecloth. I don't join the mass, standing instead on the periphery to avoid drawing attention to myself, but I can't help loosening my tie and unbuttoning my wrists, my own minor display of victory. I did all right, better than I could have imagined. And nothing bad happened. No worries.

After a couple minutes, though, Michael breaks free of the Clump and speaks in more heated tones. "Yo," he says, "I would've fucking had my girl's *number*, too, bro. She was all up *on* me. But this other guy, yo, he fucking cock-blocked me *all* night."

Me. He's talking about me.

Cock-blocking.

"I kept trying to talk to her," Michael says. "Kept trying to work my way into the conversation, but this fucker kept brushing me off, knahmean?"

"Brushing you off?" someone asks. "Who was it?"

And outside, here in the unlit parking lot, I grab my tie again, try to tighten it. Inside, during the dinner, I performed admirably. But I stole the show from the pledge; I pissed off the eighteen year-old. I'm *found out*. They'll call my lies, these kids, and we'll walk back inside, and I'll have to apologize to Maria and this moment—this taste of college, youth—will quickly blow past, but it *won't* really, because I'll have to deal with my deception for the next four days. No car, and I'll be stuck in the house until Wednesday, answering for this. I hide behind a section of the Pledge Clump and scroll through my cell phone for nothing in particular. Just another student, just another pledge. Michael glances in several directions, looking for me.

The New Mexico night is cooling quickly. I'm no longer perspiring, but I can still feel dried sweat and desert dust caked all over my skin. Dust in my eyes, my nose. Feels like this state could bury me one sand grain at a time, if it wanted. Dirt. Grime. It's in layers over my face. Bits of black dirt in my hair.

"Yo," Michael says, and he's located me in the crowd. He walks to me, bringing along with him a stocky, Hispanic kid who seems persistent in his efforts to grow out a full beard, but his facial hair is spotty over smooth cheeks. Michael stands in a tough guy stance, body swaying from side to side, boxer style, the sort of pose he probably saw on a 50 Cent video. He wipes his fist across dry lips. "Yo, who the fuck are you, man?"

Silence in the Pledge Clump. Heads turning to stare at the three of us.

Maybe...maybe they have known all along that I didn't belong, that I was posing. Maybe I've looked like a bigger impostor than I thought, the only guy *not* in on the joke. Only five years separate us in age, but I look generations older than these kids.

"My name is Charles," I say. "I thought we'd met."

"No, no," Michael says. "Who are you?"

"We sat at the same table. I'm Charles."

"Course we did. You think I don't know that?"

All eyes on us. And the Pledge Clump breaks apart like a frightened flock of birds, but forms again just as quickly, but now it has formed around *us*. The Pledge Clump has simply moved, come closer, surrounded the three of us in the same way that a mob might form around a middle school fight, like they've been waiting for a confrontation all evening. Like they know I'm too polished to be authentic. "Who the fuck *are* you, bro?" Michael asks. "I never seen you before. Never seen you at any parties, at any pledge meetings, nothing."

"I'm Charles," I say. "Charles."

"I don't know what you're trying to pull, yo, but I know my pledge brothers. I know that this is Tony, right here. I know that that's Ro, over there. That's Miguel. That's Richard. But *nobody* knows who the fuck you are."

I am young, I wish I could say. One of you.

And I don't want to lose this persona.

Don't want to reintroduce myself as "someone from Nationals."

Don't want to reintroduce myself to Maria when we go back inside.

Don't want to lose this Charles Washington, become the Fun Nazi again.

All eyes on me.

But there's only one thing I *can* say. "I'm an Educational Consultant from the Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity National Headquarters," I say, but receive only vague looks from the Clump. They've got no idea. "You guys might have read about my position in your *Marathon* pledge books. A consultant? From the National Headquarters?"

"The fuck..." Michael says.

"Yo, this guy's a fucking spy," Tony—the stocky sidekick—says.

"The fuck?" Michaels says again, head shaking.

"Brothers were testing us," Tony says.

"Oh, *shit*," Michael says and his chili-colored face immediately drains and his anger is gone and I could swear his pupils dilate and his spiky hair deflates and he looks like he's going to throw up. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit." "Um," I say.

"I'm so fucking sorry, man," he says and takes my hand and tries to shake it, but I pull my hand away because I'm surprised. He looks like he was dipped in wax. Barely moving or breathing. "Oh shit, *sorry*, man. Sorry. Don't tell the brothers, man. Don't tell the brothers I didn't know who you were. Oh shit. Don't tell them I stepped to you, bro."

And, amazingly, the rest of the Pledge Clump appears just as scared. One of them has turned around, is digging his fingers into his hair with the sort of stressed-out "I've lost everything!" panic that I would expect of a stock broker just after a market crash. Another has closed his eyes, is breathing super-slow and gripping his chest.

"Oh, God," I say. "It's all right. Don't worry."

I feel like I knocked over a domino set-up accidentally, like I just set something in motion that cannot be taken back.

"Oh, shit," Michael says again.

"Yo, yo," someone says. "Michael's a little slow. He's not usually like this."

"He doesn't usually make these kinds of mistakes," Tony says. "He's a good kid. He just has...you know...some issues. We'll work it out, man, *really*."

"The brothers are good to us," someone else says.

"No, I'm just here to have a good time tonight," I say. "I'm not, like, spying on you guys. I'm not here to get you in trouble or tell the brothers anything. All right?"

Silence from the Clump. They don't believe a word I'm saying.

Michael still isn't moving, breathing, so I repeat, "All *right*?" and finally he nods and some color appears to re-enter his face. This is the sort of debilitating and senseless fear is like an alarm, sounding that this fraternity chapter hazes with reckless abandon. I should ask

questions, right? I should take Michael aside, ask him if he's been hazed? But inside the house is Maria and Shelley, and the Etiquette Dinner isn't over, and these kids have only been in the fraternity for weeks...they wouldn't be hazed yet, no.

"Oh fuck me," Tony says. "Look. It's Sam."

And we all look back to the fraternity house, all of us at once, as though we're a group of high school kids caught smoking in the bathroom by the campus rent-a-cop, and Sam Anderson stands in the open doorway of the house, a featureless silhouette framed by the muted orange light of the dining room inside. All of the pledges back away from me quickly, as though I'm the cigarette butt that they've tossed into the urinal. *Nothing to see here*, their worried look says. *We're just talking. Not smoking, for sure.*

"*Gentle*-men," Sam says. "You may now re-enter the house," he says. "And let's make this quick, 'kay? No pussy-footing around here."

The pledges form a single-file line, myself at the back, and smiles are finally—*finally*—returning to their faces. Like the threat of push-ups and air chairs and whippings has ended because there is still an Etiquette Dinner to be finished. There are *girls* present. Parents can't spank you in public. I breathe easy. Sam wouldn't haze, I'm thinking. Jose wouldn't haze. Much too disciplined, friendly.

We march through the front doors, myself at the very end of the single-file line, and I smile and nod at Sam as I pass through the doorway, and he gives me a handshake and says, "I hope they haven't been *too* much trouble for you, man," and I shake my head and then I'm inside the living room again and it has changed considerably in the last ten minutes. Tables folded up, shoved against the wall. Sorority girls gone. The eerie emptiness of this chamber is broken only by a single chair in the center of the room, behind which stand ten older brothers of the chapter.

They stand along the room's far wall, near the entrance to the kitchen, and they stand with authority, arms crossed over their chests or hands on their hips. Jose, chapter president, foregrounds this thick, side-by-side mass of intimidation...this Brother Wall. The Pledge "Clump" seems to exist as a support network for scared kids needing companionship, but this Brother Wall exists to frighten, and is confident enough that each stands without leaning on the next. They fix their glares intently on the line of pledges entering—confused—into the empty room.

One of the pledges in front of me, as soon as he sees the chair and the brothers, skids to a stop and says, "Aw, shit."

Jose steps forward and waves his hands in a calming manner. He's got an unimpressed smile on his face, a "quit acting like pussies" smile, a "be a man" smile. No matter how good-hearted the fraternity chapter, pledge semesters can be scary, I suppose, as rumors and stories circulate of other chapters' horrendous physical and emotional tortures; parents, friends, and fellow students are quick to share clipped newspaper articles detailing the Big Brother Night mishaps from Arizona State or Southeast Missouri; movies featuring ultimate pledge humiliation—*Van Wilder, Revenge of the Nerds, Dorm Daze*—seem to play endlessly on HBO and TBS. No matter a student's safety, the pledge drifts through his semester in a culture of fear and paranoia. Here in this room, even though nothing bad will likely happen, these young men are currently processing thousands of embedded mental images from Court TV, *USA Today*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Animal House*, and, because the girls are gone and now the parents *can* spank them in public, the pledges all concoct different scenarios of their own imminent abuse.

"Everyone, if I could have your attention please," Jose says from the Brother Wall, his accent a bit more pronounced now that he is speaking so loudly. "I would like to introduce you

all to our Educational Consultant, Mr. Charles Washington. Everyone is familiar with the duties of our national consultants, yes? He will be staying with me for the next few days. Attending our meetings, observing our fraternity. Please make him feel comfortable." And I worry that he says *comfortable* as though it is a warning for all of the brothers: *Nationals is here*! *Watch what you say*! *Watch what you reveal*!

I attempt to loosen my tie while everyone stares at me, but I realize I've already loosened it, so I try instead to stand loose and give the impression that, perhaps, I don't usually wear such professional attire. Now that everyone knows that I'm a consultant, the suit works against me; it grays and thins my hair, withers and wrinkles my face, inflates my waist and stomach until I am aged and unwanted, until I fast become the opposite of everything I was in college, of everything I wanted to be during this visit and this dinner.. When I try to smile casually, only half my mouth will cooperate.

"Thanks, Jose," Sam says. "All right. For all of our pledges who don't know what an EC is, make sure to read up in your pledge books. There'll be a quiz later."

Laughs from the Brother Wall. Big, heaving laughs.

"Kay," Sam says. "You might be wondering what happened to all of the girls. That's a legitimate question. Here's your answer: they're gone. Their sisters picked them up and they left through the back. So the social part of tonight's activity is over. Before they left, though, we asked each of them to fill out a short questionnaire so we could *assess*"—he lets the word linger, like he is proud of using it—"your progress as pledges."

Tony, the stocky pledge in front of me, makes an "Mmmm" noise, grinding his teeth together and forming his hands into such tight fists that he eventually shoves them into his pockets to retain some semblance of composure. "I knew it," he whispers to no one. "I knew it." He looks like a student after a final exam, bolting out of the classroom to confirm his answers in the textbook...and learning that he was dead wrong on more occasions than he'd expected. Many of the other pledges fidget and cough.

"Without further adieu," Sam says, holding a stack of 8 ½ by 11 printer paper (the etiquette questionnaires, apparently). He reads a name off the top sheet: "Could I have Michael Garcia step to the front."

Michael, he of the spiky hair and the red shirt and black pants and white socks, gives a *who me?* look, eyebrows raised in utter disbelief, and Sam responds with his own twisted facial expression, the intractable kind that says, *yes, Retard, YOU*. Sam points to the chair and Michael shuffles over with heavy feet, his face again draining of color.

"Stand on the chair," Sam says.

Michael obeys; he steps reluctantly up, stands atop the seat of the chair, and looks once over his shoulder at the brothers behind him—they snicker and mouth "what the fuck are you looking at?"—and then back at his pledges, searching for support. Spiky-haired Michael is on display. No matter what persona he had attempted to form—maybe he wants everyone to think he's a tough guy or a party guy or a ladies' man or a super-pledge—he is now just a limp shadow of a man. He now stands at Sam Anderson's mercy. More accurately, he stands at Shelley's mercy, as Sam Anderson holds a paper filled with her long, in-depth questionnaire answers.

"Michael Garcia," Sam says, again reading from the paper. "Your date for the evening was a girl named Shelley DeJesus." Sam looks back at the Brother Wall. "Pretty fucking hot girl, too. Got a good look at her when she came in. Garcia here is a lucky cat. So let's see how well you did tonight, Mr. Garcia. 'Kay?"

Michael appears to be holding his breath.

Maybe choking. Maybe close to crying.

When many see the headlines of "hazing" in the newspaper, it is usually some sort of physical abuse. Whether this occurs on a college lacrosse team, a military unit, or a fraternity, the sort of hazing that spawns lawsuits is generally the sort that causes injury. The true definition of hazing, though, includes not only "bodily harm or danger, offensive punishment, or disturbing pain," but also any activity that "causes embarrassment or shame in public" or makes someone into "the object of malicious amusement or ridicule." This is the sort of activity that generally goes unreported, but is just as illegal as paddling or push-ups or thumb-up-the-ass "elephant walks."

It's still uncertain what is developing here, but as a consultant, I could raise my voice. I could stop this. Then again, though, this could be nothing. Back at EU, the fraternities were heavily monitored by the university; the houses were owned by the school and functioned as private dorms, with RAs and cleaning crews. We still had parties, sure. We held Wasted on the Water, which could have gotten us into serious trouble with alcohol infractions. But we never hazed, really. With RAs in the house, it would have been impossible, unless we found some secret spot in the woods or some abandoned warehouse, which would have been just as terrifying for the brothers as for the pledges. We joked about hazing, gave our pledges a little scare (just as Sam appears to be doing), and while we might have become ferocious hazers had the circumstances been different (we fit the profile, certainly, of most recent hazing cases: middle-class white suburbanites, restless and aggressive), I had no experience with *real* hazing.

"The first question on this sheet, 'kay," Sam says. "Did your date introduce himself and shake your hand? Let's read what Shelly wrote." He pauses for dramatic effect. "'No. He just

matched up with me and told me to come inside with him. Didn't know his name until after we sat.""

Atop the chair, Michael stares at his shoes, says, "Heh," and swallows.

"Well," Sam says, "that's not very good etiquette, is it?"

The Brother Wall laughs. The Pledge Clump gives thin smiles to show they are in good humor (perhaps in an effort to lessen their own approaching on-the-chair torture). Michael, on the chair, lets his shoulders drop and his smile fade. He stands high above everyone else in the room, but somehow I still feel as though I'm staring down at him.

"The next question on our *assess*-ment," Sam says. "Did your date help you into your seat?" Dramatic pause. "Hey. I'm no psychic, but I bet I can guess this answer, too."

The Brother Wall breaks into assorted laughs again. I have the feeling that it isn't so much Sam's lackluster wisecracks that earn the laughter, but rather Michael's gushing embarrassment each time a new questionnaire prompt or response is read.

"Next question: Did he wait for you to eat first before beginning his salad?" Sam asks. "Oh, big fucking surprise here. Looks like we got another 'no.' I feel like a broken fucking record." Despite the cliché, Sam still receives an unlikely amount of laughter from the dark, glowering Brother Wall behind Michael. The questions continue, too, from obvious—"Did your date ask you how the food was?"—to odd—"Did your date chew with his mouth open?"—(and Michael attempts to protest Shelley's answers several times, but Sam silences him with a thunderous "*shooosh*!") before the climactic clincher of a final question: "Would you go on a second date with this man?"

Michael's face is whiter than white, now, lips quivering, dry spiky hair rattling.

"Stop this," some part of me screams, the consultant part of me, the Fun Nazi part of me, but I suffocate the scream. I shift my weight from my left leg to my right, position myself near a closed closet door where no one else stands. I position myself far from the action, in a shadowy stretch of space where no one can see my facial reactions, where—*soon*—no one will remember I'm here.

"Let's take a quick survey of the room, shall we?" Sam asks, taking another dramatic pause before giving Shelley's answer. Several of the brothers make exaggerated "hmm" faces; one strikes the Thinker pose, fist under chin; several others are less subtle, shaking their heads with unapologetic vigor. "What do you guys think?" Sam asks. "Would you give him a second date?"

Some laughs, then a "*fuck* no," then a collaborative "psshhhh" noise and some dismissive waves and some more laughs, a "get the fuck *outta* here," a "*boooo*," and then Jose quiets the crowd and says: "Be nice to the pledge. Remember we have company." Amazingly, at just a quick word from their chapter president, all of the brothers become submarine silent, their hands drop to their sides, and their outrageous pantomimes cease completely. Jose looks at me, face black in the shadows of the room's far reaches, and shrugs his giant shoulders, and then says: "Tell us, Sam. What did Shelley say?"

"Shelley wrote just one word," Sam says. "Sorry."

"Oooohh," I hear.

"That fucking hurts," I hear.

"Blue balls, baby, blue balls!" I hear.

"La chica," someone says, and speaks several Spanish sentences, and I don't know what he's saying but he gets a grand applause, and all of this effects deep failure in Michael's eyes.

But in a warm and brotherly display, Sam actually helps Michael down from the chair, whispers something in his ear, and gives him a good-natured shove that sends him wobbling across the room and into the waiting Pledge Clump, where he is received with back-pats and ass-slaps and hair-ruffles that immediately straighten his flopped-over spikes.

"Fuck that girl, man," Michael says.

"Yes sir," Sam says. "This is brotherhood in here."

"Bros before hoes," Michael says, standing tall again.

The other pledges laugh and agree, and when the brothers laugh, the pledges laugh harder. I hadn't expected this. Everything about this moment has become...tender. The support in the face of Michael's public humiliation. Even though the fraternity put him through all of this to begin with, the aftermath is familial. Yes, if anyone asks about my involvement, this is what I'll point to. This image, brothers hugging and laughing.

But it's just a moment.

Just a glimmer, a single sand grain swept away and displaced. Here, gone.

And the moment fades into five minutes ago, because Sam says, "Joseph Santiago, please step to the front," and points at the chair. A tall and lanky basketball-player-type with a shaved scalp emerges from the Clump, steps forward, and when he's on the chair, his head almost touches the ceiling and he has to raise his arms and grab the ceiling fan just to maintain his balance. "Another fucking pledge," Sam says. "Let's see if you're as big a fuck-up as Garcia."

And it's starting again, this roast of unwilling pledges. And I have to watch this fifteen times, have that many experiences to record in my mind, that many opportunities for something to go wrong, someone to feel "emotionally" hazed or remember that I'm here and question why *I* am involved with any of this and why I am not stopping it.

"Duncan!" one of the brothers catcalls and pumps his fist.

Santiago smiles and responds with a fist-pump, also.

Jose stands beside me, suddenly, his face glowing with enthusiasm, and he tells me that this pledge plays for the chapter's intramural basketball team and that his nickname—Duncan is a reference to the San Antonio Spurs' All-Star center, Tim Duncan. "Is all of this a bit much?" I manage to ask (but not naggingly), and he tells me no, this activity is a great "break 'em down and build 'em back up" exercise. He tells me that the pledges love it. Trust me, he says. This is the sort of thing that makes these kids into men. He laughs, leans back, takes a deep breath and stands tall.

"Enough," Sam says. "We all know you got a mean jump shot, Duncan, 'kay? But let's see how well you play the ladies. First question: did your date introduce himself and shake your hand? His date, her name was Cyndi, she wrote, 'He told me his name but he tried to kiss my hand. Very polite, but come on. Who kisses hands? Is this 1950?" Sam stops, makes a face like he just took a huge whiff of a bad fart, and holds the paper a few feet away like it was the fart's source. "*Duncan*! Wow. This girl sounds like she was way *into* you, bro. And you might've just ruined it off the bat."

Duncan smiles, head still lowered a bit so he doesn't knock into the stationary ceiling fan. "Heh," he says, face dropping into dejection.

"Did he pull out your chair and help you into your seat?" Sam reads, and now he speaks in a high-pitched girl voice, too, puffing out his chest with mock boobs and rubberizing his legs and wrists to give him a limp, effeminate stance. The Brother Wall laughs. "No," he says. "Joseph just sat down. Didn't help me into my seat at all!"

One after another, the pledges take their place on the chair. The questions continue, the answers continue. The questionnaires feel like an unending horror story that could easily be submitted to Men's Health or GQ for some "social disaster" column. "He swore at the dinner table!" one questionnaire says, and another says, "Someone should tell him to match his shoes with his belt. A woven belt does not go with dress shoes, and a plaid shirt does not go with a striped tie." Every few questions, a pledge wins a small battle—"He was very friendly"—or even the entire war—"If he asked, I would probably go on a second date." But mostly, this is a forum for ridicule, improv comedy night for Sam, and his material, admittedly, grows far more inventive as the night progresses. At one point, Sam tells a pledge that he is dressed like a disposable background gangster from *Scarface*, that he is even acting like he's just snorted ten lines of coke. He pulls jokes from sources as varied as Spaceballs and The Dukes of Hazzard. He manages to both alienate the pledges and earn their favor. Questions continue. Answers continue. One pledge after the next. On the chair. Off the chair. Humiliated when it's their turn, relieved when it's someone else. Laughing while the brothers laugh. Until finally Sam motions for the last pledge, a skinny white kid with red hair and thick glasses and an atrocious red-and-greenstriped dress shirt (the sort of thing you see only at thrift stores and Christmas parties), to step off the chair and rejoin the Pledge Clump.

"Better luck next time, Ronald," Sam says, and this red-haired kid does bear a striking resemblance to Ronald McDonald. Just give him red overalls and big floppy shoes and he could have a career as a ribbon-cutter at McDonald's grand openings. "All right," Sam says, "we've got just one more. Could I have our honorable Educational Consultant, Charles Washington, step to the front of the room, please?"

"What?" I say, and I'd forgotten I was even a part of this. I stand in a corner, watching the activities from neither the Pledge Clump nor the Brother Wall. I've become so silent, in fact, that even Jose—still beside me—seems to have forgotten that I'm here.

"Come on, Charles," Sam says. "Right up here."

"I don't know if this is such a good idea," I say, fingers picking at my suit jacket's buttons.

"Come on," Sam says. "We won't embarrass you, 'kay? It'll be fun." He stands beside the empty chair, a stack of crumpled questionnaires at his feet, only one sheet of paper remaining in his hand: mine. He smiles with the power of the untouchable, much like the sarcastic drill instructor from *Full Metal Jacket*, because he knows he is in charge here. Fun, yes. But about a hundred reasons *Why I Shouldn't* bottleneck at the entrance to my brain. I'm thinking that I'm a consultant, that this activity is fine for pledges but I shouldn't do this, condone this. Thinking appearances, thinking LaFaber, standing at the window in his office and staring out across the country and spotting me on the chair.

And once again, all eyes are on me. Staring, deep. Daring.

Michael Garcia, at the forefront of the Pledge Clump...a tiny figure against so many bulky, well-muscled ROTC students...his once-crushed face has regained all of the antagonistic, biting fight that it had when he "stepped to me" outside...his eyes on me.

Thinking "fuck appearances," thinking young and wanted. Thinking I can take this. Thinking college. So I take a step. Another. One foot in front of the other until I'm beside Sam, until I'm climbing the chair, until I'm looking down at eager sets of eyes that are measuring me against everyone else in the room. I'm the consultant, the Marathon Man, the ideal Nu Kappa Epsilon brother, and all eyes are on me, and the pledges probably want me to be broken down into a know-nothing dip-shit, a scumbag, a numb-nuts, a worthless pledge sack of shit, dirty dirty pledge fuck or whatever the brothers probably call them...

"Charles Washington," Sam says, and his tone is all different now. It's softer, sedated, like he's got a full shelf of personas to choose from and he's restocked Pledge-Humiliator and pulled down by-the-book New Member Educator. "Your date—and in case any of you guys didn't see her, or don't know who she is, let me just say that you're missing out, 'kay—your date was Maria Angelos."

"Oh, shit," someone says.

"That's some retarded-ass shit," someone else says with real awe.

"You are a lucky, lucky man," Sam says.

I smile. Everyone smiles, I think.

"Hopefully," he says, "you could teach these kids a few lessons, huh?"

"I'd hope so," I say.

"First question," Sam says. "Did your date introduce himself and shake your hand? What did Maria say..." and he doesn't use the sarcastic high-pitched girl-voice again, instead opting for a serious and soothing voice, the sort of inflection a father would give a son when teaching him how to shave for the first time.

I struggle to remain still atop the chair.

"Yes,' she says. 'Charles was, from the start, a true gentleman. He never stopped smiling, and was very polite in his introduction.""

Behind me, the Brother Wall—which, I can imagine, would certainly have been intimidating for the pledges, so many whispers and snickers and rude remarks—laughs lightly, and several brothers sing praises: "Not bad, man. Representin' Nike in here, man. Rep-re-*SEN*-tin'!"

The Pledge Clump remains a mixture of straight faces and fake-respectful smiles. Still scared. As though this could all end in a split-second, and any one of them could be called back to the chair for another un-manning.

"Next question," Sam says, "and let's see if it gets any better. Next question is: did your date pull out your chair and help you into your seat? Maria answered: 'Yes. Charles made sure I was comfortable throughout our date.'"

Select smiles from the Pledge Clump.

"Straight P.I.M.P.," a brother says behind me.

"No doubt," Sam says. "Made her feel *comfortable*. Girls always tell me they like it rough, but Charles seems to have the right idea. Shit. Looks like we could all learn something from our man, here. Ready for the next question?"

Trying not to smile, I brush a bit of fuzz from my suit jacket, straighten my belt—which had been going slightly off-center—and make a weak, wheezing chuckle. To reinforce my strength, my cool, I say, "Heh, yeah."

"Kay. Here goes. Did he wait for you to begin your salad before he started eating?" Sam says, and he keeps making little quote fingers each time he reads Maria's words. "Yes,' Maria says. 'Charles even asked if it was good, and if I needed salt or pepper.' Damn, Charles. I think *I'm* falling in love with you."

Michael still stares back from the Pledge Clump, on edge, probably waiting for Sam to deride me, for Maria to dispense with me. But each of the questions is answered in a similar manner, with a "yes" and an adoring explanation of my gentlemanly prowess, and I feel like it

could have been *any girl* on that side of the table and they would've melted under the heat of my conversation. Anyone. Bring on Angelina Jolie. Bring on Jessica Alba. Jenn is doing her thing in Florida? Fine. I'm doing my thing out here.

"Final question," Sam says, "and this is the best, trust me." His eyes bugged, he nods his head spastically and licks his lips, and I'm wondering how we could *not* trust him. "Would you go out on a second date? And I think everyone already knows the answer to this one, don't we? But listen to what Maria wrote. 'I would *definitely*'—and she drew a smiley face, too—'go on a second date with Charles. Who wouldn't? He needs to call me, and Shelley and me will show him Juarez for the first time.'"

Sam stops and reverent silence falls upon the room. Michael's hostility appears broken, shoulders crumpling and face overtaken with futility. A loud noise might shatter him. "And she left her number," Sam says. Staring directly into the pledges, he holds his arm out, stiff, and dangles the paper before me. "Bravo, my friend," he says. "You have truly shown these scumbag pledges the way."

I shouldn't need all of the respectful smiles—*real* smiles—and the applause that follows. I shouldn't need it. But I do. I haven't seen a friend, a real friend and not a "business associate," in months. I haven't seen Jenn in months. I shouldn't need strangers to validate my youth, my worth.

But I do.

Six months ago, I sat in a country club's banquet room for Formal Ball, my own fraternity brothers and alumni clapping and congratulating me and thanking me for my dedication to the college and to Nu Kappa Epsilon for four undergraduate years. Graduation was fast approaching; my name was being etched into plaques; I was being given a respectful

farewell—"Thanks for the memories!"—by the undergraduates, and an enthusiastic welcome— "You're joining our world now, the Real World!"—by the alumni. At the time, I thought, "it doesn't get any better than this." What a moment! What a stage! All eyes on me, but in the best way possible.

But that was a *goodbye* moment.

Right now, this is a *hello* moment. This is *welcome back*.

And it means so much more.

So instead of correcting Sam for saying "scumbag pledges," I pluck the paper from his hands, take in the sweetness of Maria's responses, of the smiley face, of the phone number, and wave from my place atop the chair as the applause grows.

Chapter Seven: Juarez

My visit to New Mexico State progresses unlike any other, as my mind is constantly and completely dedicated to imagining Maria's rich toffee skin, her smooth but firm arms and shoulders and calves, the light curls of shiny, highlighted black hair that fell just past her shoulders...Maria...Maria, whose number I programmed into my cell phone. Maria, whose body radiated sex—*built for fucking*—and bad college decisions and I have no doubt in my mind how her breasts would feel, how it would feel to rub against her, hard. Her breath against my face, hot, needing me. I haven't hooked up with a girl, haven't made out or kissed or groped or touched, not since...early July, the last time I saw Jenn. But it's Maria who occupies my mind. Maria.

But I don't call her, can't. I imagine a lot of things, but I don't call.

On Saturday night, after the Etiquette Dinner ends and after I split a six-pack with Jose at his apartment and watch the last bits of the Hawaii football game, I sleep on his pull-out couch. When I wake up in the morning, he's long gone and has left me a hand-scribbled note telling me he's gone to help his father with some chores. Without a car, I've got no way to leave, and my body is aching for the sort of go-go-go activity in which I've been whipped about for the past three weeks. Aching to spend the entire day in the same way that I spent last night. But I sit on Jose's second-floor balcony and drink coffee; I cook eggs in his kitchen, and it's been so long since I've cooked that it feels odd to see and to know what's actually going into my food, to actually wash my own dishes. Jose returns for lunch, and we spend the afternoon at a restaurant called El Sombrero. His sister is good friends with the owners, so we sit in a screened-in patio with wobbling ceiling fans and we are not bothered, and we are joined by several other chapter brothers and alumni, and we talk and drink and eat chips and salsa for hours. Eventually, I don't even hide my Tecate cans when a new brother arrives. I listen to the various challenges faced by this NKE chapter—financial challenges, mostly—and I offer simple solutions.

"I should call the Executive Board together for a meeting tonight," he says.

"Yeah, probably," I say.

"That is what you said in your emails."

"Right," I say. "We definitely need to have a meeting, right."

"The last two consultants, they came here and they acted like they were better than us. Like we were below them because we are always behind on our national dues payments. It is not our fault, you know?" Jose says. He has a notebook with a printed-out Excel budget on the table before him, and it shows that nearly all of the New Mexico State brothers are delinquent in their dues payments. "This is a poor school. Money doesn't come so easily for us as it might for UCLA or Arizona."

"Those consultants were assholes," I say. "They graduate and they think they know everything. They don't even know what they're talking about, half the time."

"It is good," Jose says, "that you act more professional than they did."

"Right," I say again and sip my Tecate.

And the tables at El Sombrero are filled, all day long, with other Nu Kappa Epsilon brothers. My body is aching for activity, and there's one thing on my mind. *Maria*, I keep thinking even as I meet up with Jose, Sam, and the other NMSU officers for an Executive Board meeting on Sunday evening. Sixteen straight weeks of travel—one full *year* of travel—and no women. I spend all of my time amidst sweaty males, amidst gym shorts and cut-off fratty t-shirts and the smell of Certain Dry deodorant and stale French fries and unwashed laundry; I spend my time on grimy beds and slimy couches; I spend my time with football and rugby players, with rough alcoholics and spoiled, pissy pretty-boys. No women, so I'm just supposed to stay celibate or try to make some pointless, Senior year relationship seem more important than it was, keep it despite thousands of miles between us? And what are the odds that Jenn and I will reconcile, long-distance? And anyway, *fuck her*. It's a Sunday night and she didn't call all day, and she could be out at Ladies' Night at the Ale House for all I know, out with the brothers of Kappa Sigma Fraternity, downing pitchers and touching them in the same flirty way that Maria touched my hands on the table last night.

When I meet back at the fraternity house for an Executive Board meeting and I am seated once again in a room full of brothers and pledges, I am showered with praises for my wooing of Maria. Pats on the back, cat-calls, howls, encouragement. Since I'm staying at Jose's apartment, this is my first time back at the fraternity house since the Etiquette Dinner, and these kids have had a full day to discuss my questionnaire, to discuss my "playa status" (as one pledge says), to elevate me to Legend. The out-of-town brother that came into Las Cruces and entranced the beautiful Maria Angelos. Spiky-haired Michael is playing ping-pong in the chapter library when I arrive at the house, but he drops his paddle and rushes to me as soon as he sees me. "You are a god," Michael says to me, and his eyes are glossed over in disbelief, looking at me like I'm Brad Pitt.

Jose notices the commotion I cause in the fraternity house and tells the Executive Board that it would probably be best to meet somewhere else.

"He has not been to Buenos Noches," Jose says. "We can meet there."

"They've got great salsa," Sam says.

We take two cars, and I decide to ride with Sam this time. I am still haunted by the styrofoam-and-spoiled-onion smell of Jose's car, and I work out the odds in my head and

conclude that maybe Sam's car will be a bit more pleasant. And the car itself isn't awful, but the car *ride* is an intense affair; everyone is piled on top of one another, spitting curses, yelling for Sam to turn the air up, accidentally stepping on someone else's foot...there are six of us in the Honda Civic—*six*, because Jose had room for only three in his equipment-cluttered car—and only Sam and I are fortunate enough to claim comfortable front seat spots. The other four Executive Council officers, all of them clad in polos which include red, white, and yellow in alternating stripes of various thickness, scream in discomfort from the backseat. One says, "Did you just touch my fucking *cock*?" Another responds in a meek voice: "Bro. Our Educational Consultant is in the car." And the first replies: "He's heard *swear* words before, dude."

Sam says, "And he's going to hear a lot more if he doesn't give Maria a fucking phone call."

"I'm thinking about it," I say. "I still don't know if it's such a good idea."

It *would* be a good idea, of course, if I could predict Maria's response. But there remains the possibility that she wrote those responses out of politeness or cuteness, and a phone call would reveal me once again as the old, out-of-his-league alumnus.

The drive is short but bumpy: constantly, someone's leg or knee or foot pounds the back of my seat, and I've moved up my seat as far as it will go, but out of courtesy I've asked, "Do you have enough room?" maybe four times, and the response has always been, "If this was an *orgy*," and everyone's laughed each time. So I keep asking.

Finally, we arrive at a Mexican restaurant—another Mexican restaurant, and I can still taste the refried beans on my breath from this afternoon—called Buenos Noches, and outside the restaurant, at the entrance of the cramped parking lot, is a thick wooden board in the shape of a

gigantic green pepper, hand-painted. And as the car doors slam shut behind the five of us, Sam's car seems to lift several inches off the ground.

Inside Buenos Noches, our table is large and round, looks like it would be the perfect flotation device after a shipwreck, looks like it could save fifteen people or so from tumultuous post-wreck waters. And it is adorned with so many baskets—no, *buckets*—of tortilla chips and deep bowls of salsa that the entire restaurant seems occupied in a constant state of crunching. Around me are the eight Executive Board officers for the New Mexico State chapter of NKE, and each looks thoroughly unimpressed with the number of chips and salsa buckets.

In heavy contrast to the chapters I've thus far visited, Sam is one of only two white men seated around me: four are Hispanic, one is black, and one is Asian. From their initial conception in the mid-1800s as secret literary societies, fraternities have always been clubs for "Good Ole Boys," exclusive societies where status plays a huge part in member selection. The wealthier the campus—Duke, Cornell, USC—the more important the role of status. At Northwestern, maybe "status" is the section of town from which you come. At Emory, maybe it's your last name. If a potential new member comes from a line of wealthy businessmen, or if his father and grandfather and great-grandfather were all members of the fraternity, you can bet that this kid is going to get invited to membership. At some schools, maybe "status" is skin color. I've heard stories from older alumni about fraternity life in the 1950s and 1960s (even the '70s and '80s, probably), when chapters split divisively (or voluntarily closed themselves and disbanded) over the issue of admitting black men. These are supposedly regrettable memories today, of course, though they certainly survive at "traditional" chapters in the racist bedrock schools—Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina—where members whose fathers and grandfathers wore Nike Red still shudder to

think that they could call anyone of another ethnicity a "brother." Most often, though, are those chapters and those brothers—like Ben Jameson from Pittsburgh—who might not be violently racist, but who nonetheless cling to an un-revisable definition of fraternity that does not extend beyond the ethnic makeup of their own chapter: "a group of upper-middle-class white guys." Nu Kappa Epsilon's mission includes an initiative called "Diversity of Brothers," and states that "every chapter should take extra efforts to seek out potential members from diverse backgrounds so that chapters will be stronger through their difference, and each brother may learn from his fellow brothers." Most national fraternities have done the same, and have lately even revised this statement to include an open-armed addendum on homosexual men. At a public university like NMSU, maybe "status" is unimportant. Maybe skin color and wealth are unimportant.

Seated here in Buenos Noches, I realize that I haven't said a word about fraternities or missions in hours. Everyone has been asking me about Maria and I've been quick to simply tell college stories, and I wonder if maybe I've been too silent on NKE, if they expect me to talk about missions even though it's obvious I don't want to. So, after we've ordered our food, I say: "It's great that you guys are really fulfilling, really *living*, the Nike Diversity Initiative."

They give me sandblasted stares, all eight of them, stripped of any emotion save surprise. "What do you mean?" Sam asks. Generally quick to make a joke, he now appears humorless. "Diversity initiative?" he asks.

I search the table—white, black, Hispanic, Asian—and look for a glimmer of recognition. "I mean, like, it's great that you guys are so *diverse*, you know? Some chapters aren't quite so...full of people from different backgrounds."

Sandblasted stares. Silence.

"Kay," Sam says. "Never heard of a diversity initiative. So...like, chapters out in Iowa are just a bunch of white farmboys, huh?"

"They have never seen a Mexican before, probably," Jose says. "I bet I would scare them half to death."

"No," I say. "No, that's not I what I meant. No."

"Sure it was," Jose says.

"No. It's just...some chapters are traditional."

"Tradition, ha," says Brandon, the short and (by his own admission) enchilada-fattened black Treasurer for the chapter. Each semester, the Treasurer sets the dues for the fraternity chapter and spends much of his time collecting and writing checks (rent or mortgage payments, electric bills, pledge and brother pins, mixers, all of the things that can compose a \$100,000 budget for a group this size). Earlier today, while we ate at El Sombrero, Brandon and I talked for over forty-five minutes about the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Arizona Cardinals; he's had Cardinals season tickets since he was a boy, he said, and they're the sorriest sports franchise you can imagine. But he's fiercely loyal, kept telling me that dedication is the most important quality of a good citizen. "It's funny," Brandon says now, "cause we're such a young chapter. We've only been chartered for ten years or so. There *is* no tradition here, and that's what I like."

"Right," I say. "But I try to focus on the positives."

"We met the brothers from LSU at the last National Convention," Brandon says. "Five feet from us, and one of these pricks says, 'They're letting beaners into Nike now?' Beaners, this guy said. I almost socked his ass. I'm not even Mexican!"

"Dark skin is dark skin to some," Jose says, then turns to me. "I will bet that you see some 'traditional' chapters, though." "Sure," I say. "I visited Green Valley, a little college in the mountains of Virginia. Town of about 5,000, including students. Southern kids who grew up in town and, when they graduate, never leave. Nike has been around Green Valley since the '40s, so half the town is Nikes. The furniture store owner, the gas station owner, the mayor, the police chief. It's like a country club. Lots of pressure in that school to be a Nike."

"Shit," Sam says. "Not everyone can be as chill as us."

"The more tradition," I say, "the more uptight everyone gets. The fraternity turns into a tug-of-war between students, the university, alumni, and nationals. And there's some serious money at stake, some serious investments."

"So," Sam says, "this is a real job, then?"

"Yes," I say.

"You get paid?"

"Yes."

"You're not in school, still?"

"I graduated."

"Real job. That's awesome. Is this fun?"

"It has its moments. But it's a job, you know?"

"You're visiting fraternities," Sam says. "Frater-nities."

"I bet you get to see a lot of shit like our Etiquette Dinner, huh?" Brandon asks. "I bet

you get to see some pretty cool parties."

"Chapters are scared of me," I say. "They think I'm there to spy on them, to get them in trouble."

"But you're not?"

"Sometimes, yeah. Doesn't matter why I'm there, though. Most chapters hate me as soon as they meet me."

"That sucks. I'd go crazy if I were you."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"If I had to always be a bad guy."

The Fun Nazi business card, I'm thinking. Keep it flipped, I'm thinking. I shouldn't have brought up the mission, the diversity initiative. What was I thinking?

"I'm not a bad guy," I say. "I don't *want* to be a bad guy, anyway."

"We got to take you to Juarez," Sam says. "That settles it. You're going. We'll treat you like a brother, not a fucking spy."

"Okay?" I say.

"Seriously. Call up Maria. Take the night off, 'kay? Have fun."

"You guys won't give this Maria stuff a rest, will you?"

"Come on, dude. This is a fraternity. Brothers take care of one another. We want to make sure you have a good time. You already have the girl's number."

"Don't twist my arm," I say finally, but I still don't think I'm serious.

Dinner ends. Beer at the house, they keep saying. A couple beers on a Sunday night, and I don't disagree. When we pile back into Sam's car, I'm given the front seat again but now there's no end to the swearing. There's no caution flags, no PA warning that "THE EC IS IN THE CAR!" Now, it's green lights and gas pedals to the floor and Sam saying, "I always have to fucking drive you clowns around," and Carlos in the back saying, "I'm going to get so fucking ripped tonight, bro," and someone else adding, "That Phi Mu is working bar on Tuesday night, man, and she is so fucking banging," and "I want to bang the shit out of her," and it's a race track jam-packed with speeding swears and zipping 200 mile per hour disregard for the Professional in the car, but I've given that up, trashed that persona, and I can let loose now.

Over a year ago, when Jenn and I got together for the first time for her sorority's Grab-A-Date function at a bar called Icy Jack's, I used my "Man on Campus" persona all night to impress her. We sat on barstools beside the gigantic Iron Tee arcade game, the DJ's heavy bass and snyth beats forcing us to lean close to talk. And every word we both said, every comment we made, we leaned just a little closer, until finally she had her fingers firmly on my arm and her lips nearly touched my ear as she spoke. Icy Jack's is one of those bars that's not only dim and poorly lit, but is also cast in the glow of blacklights, so that everything around you feels like a photo negative. Jenn and I had been drinking, sure, so the world around us-awash in these cold blues and purples-seemed not only different, but also mystical. And the normal rules of science no longer seemed to apply that night; time either slowed or sped up, depending on the moment, and gravity seemed to lighten a bit (as though someone had turned a dial, just as simple as adjusting a thermostat) so that we moved more easily through the crowd, onto the dance floor. Jenn led me to dance, I remember, holding my hand as she cleared a path through the crowd. I don't remember any songs that played that night, and I don't remember what she looked like as she danced, or what I looked like as I danced. I remember only that the entire room, so many bodies under blacklight, no longer looked like a room, even. I might have been wedged between Jenn and forty or fifty or two hundred people I didn't know, between walls and beertubs, but I wasn't suffocating, no; I was moving in a space of dark blue, earrings and wristwatches and rings sparkling here and there like stars. From the front lawn of the fraternity house just days before, to barstools at Icy Jack's, to the dance floor, to...well, there seemed to be so much possibility, and I felt like I was in complete control. Not a "Marathon Man," no. A Frat Star.



I can see for miles in every direction out here in the desert, all this open space, but no one in Indianapolis can see me. No one is creating my schedule here, mandating where I go next. Not Walter LaFaber, not my father, not Jenn, not anyone.

I wait to call Maria, wait until I've been asked—"you're going to do it, right?"—and urged—"bro, she was all up on your D"—by every brother and pledge in our NMSU chapter, wait until I'm absolutely convinced that, if I do call her, the result can only be positive; a rejection might shatter the illusion of "Charles Washington" that I've built at this chapter. I wait all Sunday night and all day Monday. I wait through two-hour-long chapter meetings on Monday evening (during which I earn a round of applause when Sam introduces me as the Nationals Pimp, but during which I say nothing "mission-oriented," opting instead to simply compliment Sam and Jose on such a great chapter visit thus far). I wait through three or four officer one-onones (during which the conversations quickly derail from Nu Kappa Epsilon policies and procedures to *The Matrix* and G-Unit and USC's killer season). And I almost wait through Monday night, too, but I'm sitting in a Mexican restaurant called Green Chile with Jose and four other brothers—all native Mexicans, and they tell me why this is the best "Mexican" (and not simply "Tex-Mex") restaurant in Las Cruces, and holy shit, I've had Mexican food for every meal for *days* now and I've never shit so easily in my life—but these guys won't let me continue waiting. Monday night, and they're assertive.

"Do you have her number *right now*?" asks a pudgy chipmunk-cheeked guy with curly black hair and a blue Adidas shirt. His name, I think, is Andy, but I've been afraid to call him by name. Just in case I'm wrong. The name might be Alejandro or something I can't pronounce, and I don't want to say the wrong thing and look like some culturally insensitive clown.

"I saved it in my cell phone," I say.

"Listen, bro," Andy (?) says. "You're only here for two more days."

"I'll call her tomorrow."

Andy curses in Spanish, speaks an entire Spanish sentence. An entire paragraph, perhaps. All night, when they haven't been extolling the benefits of green chile salsa over tomato-based salsa ("New Mexico is green chile country, amigo," they've said a thousand times) or bragging about their fathers' gamecock training pens, they've been drifting into Spanish or Spanglish as though I could understand them. "Como?" I keep asking, jokingly, and they laugh. "You're from Florida," Jose said to me last night. "How is it that you do not speak Spanish?"

"Give me the phone," Andy (?) says.

"Why?" I ask, grabbing a tortilla chip from the large black bowl in the center of our table. Every restaurant keeps its tables stocked with endless tortilla chips. I've come to expect these free pre-meal appetizers, and I'm sure I'll miss them when I'm back in New Jersey or Delaware or Indiana.

"If you don't call her, I will," he says.

"I'll do it," I say. "Just not...now."

"You only got one more day here, amigo."

"I know, I know."

And before I know what's happening, Jose has me in a quick wrestler's move headlock, and the tortilla chip flings out of my hand and lands on the floor. I make a desperate *unngh* noise, flail for a second, but Andy (?) has my phone and he scrolls through the numbers and says, "This is what brothers are for, homeboy." And then he says, "A-ha!" and his face lights up because he's found Maria's number in my phone and he's hitting "dial" and until now, it's been pure fantasy. Until now, it's been just another in a long line of "things I want to do but never will," but when Andy says, "Is this Maria? Oh. Oh, good, good," the fantasy itself is just a fantasy, because Jose lets me loose and Andy (?) says, "Charles lost your number, so we called you for him. Here he is."

He hands me the phone.

Released from the headlock, I flop forward in my seat and take the phone hesitantly, hear Maria breathe "hello" and I clear my throat and speak. And five minutes later, I have plans to go out to Juarez on Tuesday night.

My schedule on Tuesday looks like this, but I only keep track of it because Jose printed a copy from his computer:

| 9 AM | - | Wake up |
|----------|---|--|
| 10 AM | - | One-on-One with Alumni Relations |
| 12:30 PM | - | Lunch with Vice President (Rancho's all-you-can-eat) |
| 4:00 PM | - | One-on-One with Greek Advisor |
| 6:00 PM | - | Dinner (Taco Bar) |
| 8:00 PM | - | Juarez |

I spend the day at a second-hand boardroom table in the fraternity house chapter room, scrolling through ESPN.com and reading Aaron Karo's "Ruminations on College Life" articles. The officers come to me for the meetings. Sometime on Tuesday afternoon, I receive a phone call from Walter LaFaber. Very rarely does LaFaber call me outside of our scheduled "one-onone" phone conferences. If he does, it can mean one of only two things: either there is some terrible emergency, or he needs me to drive five hours out of my way to service some chapter or alumnus. Today, I have no patience for either, but still I answer the phone and use my best superexcited Disney World voice.

"Hey Walter!" I say.

"Great news about Illinois!" LaFaber exclaims, oblivious to my sarcasm.

"Oh yeah?"

"They've been completely evicted from the house! Completely removed!"

"Holy shit," I say, suddenly deflated. My smile fades from my face. "It's been how long? Three days? Four days?"

"They were issued eviction notices on Friday morning," LaFaber says.

"The chapter has only been closed for a weekend," I say. "That seems a bit quick to pack up and find a new place to live."

"The house is absolutely destroyed!"

"You sound happy. Why is this good news?"

"We can go after them, Charles," he says. "These disrespectful...well...I should watch my language. But do you realize how much history is in that house at Illinois? Since 1921, that chapter has stood for the ideals of our organization. On the final walk-through this morning, the Housing Corporation found severe structural damage to several support beams in the basement. Water damage in the top floor. Beer stains the size of watermelons. Dog fur. *Dog* fur! Pets are not allowed in that house, Charles. Missing doors. Cracked windows. The list goes on and on. We can go after them. We have the last laugh with these clowns."

"That's...ridiculous," I say. "They couldn't possibly have done all of that. That house has been in continuous occupancy since the '60s."

"They signed leases. If they didn't create the damages, they should have reported them when they first moved in."

"Structural damage, Walter? That takes years. That's not a one-night party."

"Oh, we won't sue them for everything," he says, sighs. I can picture him in his office, a thick manila folder before him, complete with grainy black-and-white photos of damages, complete with ten-page-long spreadsheets and checklists and signed and verified documents. All the things I could have sent him as I investigated Shippensburg. I can picture his face, thick Alabama football player cheeks smoothing in uncontainable smiles, his thick blow-dried hair shaking as he laughs and twirls around in his chair and attempts to stay professional despite his victory over the Illinois undergraduates. Scar on his forehead glowing as it does when he gets excited. "We have the sort of list that can make a statement," he says. "A stern warning to other chapters who think that they can abuse alumni property. A reminder that we are a leadership organization, not a drinking club, and we hold our members accountable for their actions."

"This doesn't seem right," I say. I've collapsed in my chair in the chapter room, have closed my eyes and have taken to smoothing my pants legs.

"Remember the mission, Charles," he says in a gravely voice. Oh, here he is. Here is LaFaber, the man who can stifle his emotion in a split-second and revert back to a walking and talking leadership book. Yes, he's back. "Our fraternity lives by a lofty set of standards," he says. "These men at Illinois, they did not live up to those standards. They violated every bulletpoint of their lease. This is justice, plain and simple."

Remember the mission. And, yes, I can *recite* the mission right here, right now, because my mind is still an Educational Consultant manual and the details are no longer slipping, and I can see my job responsibilities, Page 4, and Visit Expectations, Page 8, and National Hierarchy and District Structure and Suggested Bylaws, and, most important, I can see Page 1, black spirals touching the edge of the text, and I'm picturing it in my head, a perfect mental image of the Perfect Fraternity:



Yes yes, I remember the mission. It's easy to memorize words on paper.

"We dodged a bullet with Illinois," LaFaber says.

"Those kids," I say. "Where are they living, now?"

"Not our problem," he says. "Listen. I want to talk. We need to get caught up. I have a few concerns with those guys out at New Mexico State. But I've got an important conference call with some Illinois alumni, have to give them a timeline for our return to campus. Give me a call sometime tomorrow, could you?"

"Sure," I say. But I won't.

On Tuesday night, Sam drives. He's made several comments about being a "chauffer" or a "DD" for Maria, Shelley, and me, and each time he's said it, I've given my driest chuckle and said, "no, no," but that's just the last remnants of my supposed professionalism speaking. Days ago, I worried that I would be buried out here in the desert, sand grain by sand grain, but I suppose it isn't Charles Washington that has been left behind in the dust, but rather my forced attempt at a "professional" life. The Real World. The New Mexico wind is shifting sand dunes, blasting that old life with waves of amber until it is completely covered.

As soon as Maria enters the car and I'm sitting with her in the cramped backseat while Shelley sits in the front, I tell her that Sam has agreed to be our DD for the night, no worries, what a great fraternity brother and chapter president, etc. Jose follows behind us, driving Brandon and two other Alpha Alpha sorority sisters.

This is the same route that we took the other night when Jose first drove me into town from the airport in El Paso, a long drive across an open wasteland of charred desert, Now, though, the sky is dark, save for stars speckled across the blackness in such bright patterns that I think, for the first time, I can actually see constellations, I can actually see something in all of that space. The world is so dark and unending, even on the ground...unending...and out here in the desert, with only a blinking light here and there, a car on some road far from here or a radio antennae in the distance...aside from these things, aside from the highway itself, there are no distractions here. No office buildings. No billboards. No Blazers. Just...space. And Maria beside me in the backseat, smelling like raspberries and wine and sex.

And Sam plays a hip-hop mix-tape, but only softly, and Nelly is singing, "It's getting hot in here, so take off all your clothes."

Just thirty or forty minutes ago, Sam and I stopped into Hanson Hall, a co-ed dorm, and walked through the hallways with the sort of self-assurance born of several years of Frat Stardom. We are important, our stride said. Look at us. Destructed jeans. Striped button-downs,

sleeves folded up halfway to our elbows, top two buttons unbuttoned. Faded brown belts. Flipflops. (For me, of course, this look is all thanks to an afternoon trip to the mall, which is—ha ha—the same thing that most of the freshmen did just before the Etiquette Dinner, but most of my packed clothes are still office-building awful, so I needed to do this.). Sam made stupid jokes about the rough, rough freshmen we passed in the hallways. Cocky laughs at their expense because they still wore high school graduation t-shirts and jean shorts. And we met Maria and Shelley on the third floor, where they stepped out of a room so pink and purple it hurt the eyes. They stepped out and followed us to our cars in the parking lot outside, and everyone in the dorms knew they were in the presence of Frat Stars, superstars. Look at us. Shining like we were, smiling like we were. Might as well be walking on a red carpet.

"Do you drink tequila?" Maria asks in the backseat of the car.

"Shots?" I ask. "Or, like, do I sip it like a drink?"

She laughs, glitter on her face sparkling. "Shots."

"I try not to," I say. "Tequila is bad news."

"Oh, no," she says. "Tequila makes good memories."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"What the hell," I say. "This is Juarez, right? First time in Mexico for me. It'd be an offense to *not* drink tequila."

"That's exactly what I was going to tell you."

After we pull through the border check-point, we drive through a city that is all lights and dust and dark buildings and slimy alleys and surly congregations of homeless Mexicans on street corners beside flashy tourist-stop restaurants. I've never been to Mexico, but I have been on a cruise, and Juarez reminds me very much of the grimy-glitzy port cities of the Caribbean, those places like Nassau and Barbados whose subsistence depends on the constant loads of cruise-ship passengers disembarking for a day, those places that are used and abused by American travelers who stay for a day and get trashed and then take off. Yes, that is Juarez. A border city where, Sam tells me, impoverished Mexicans will create jobs where none are available. Some stand on corners and count the seconds until the next bus will arrive, or until the streetlight changes, and, for a nickel or a quarter, tell the time remaining to any interested American passersby. When we park at a bar called "Dios Mia," Sam hands a limping, unshaved Mexican a twenty and the man simply nods and stands on the sidewalk beside Sam's car. Sam has just hired this man as a security guard for his vehicle.

The other car—Jose's—has not yet arrived, but Sam assures me that this man has also agreed to protect a dusty Toyota Corolla.

"You're not scared, are you?" Maria asks me. We walk behind Sam and Shelley, and they chat amicably, but I'm not listening. Maria walks close enough beside me that she continually brushes up against me, sometimes places her hand on my forearm as she did at the Etiquette Dinner several days ago, and her skin is so cool and smooth—almost slick—in comparison to the rock-hard, hairy, or strong arms and hands I've shaken in the past month. And I think briefly of Jenn, of her touch which was so similar, of her hand leading me to the dance floor and the world going dark blue and so much possibility appearing in front of me, so I keep touching Maria, however subtly I can. A hand grazing her waist as we enter the restaurant, a palm on her upper arm after I laugh at one of her jokes. Or, like now, an arm around her shoulder as I say, "I'm really scared, but I think I'll be all right as long as I have you for protection."

"Right," she says. "I'm so intimidating."

"You can be, yes."

"Do I look as mean as some of these guys on the street corners?" she asks.

"No," I say. "Intimidating in a different way. Like, when we were in the parking lot outside the Nike house, just before the Etiquette Dinner, I think all of the other pledges were scared to pair up with you."

"Scared of me? Why?"

"Because you're hot, of course," I say. "So far above them."

"And you weren't scared?"

"I was. But you were the only girl left. I had no choice."

Dios Mia is a dive bar in Mexico, but somehow it's a college bar.

All the way out in Juarez. Servicing the students of NMSU and UTEP and the El Paso community colleges and probably many other Texas universities within an hour's drive. A college bar. A typical college bar. Sweltering, packed with girls wearing short skirts and low-cut tops with thin straps and belly-buttons and lower-back tattoos showing; packed with guys wearing slogan t-shirts ("FBI: Female Body Inspector" and "College" and "Your Retarded" and "Let's do the NO PANTS dance") and torn jeans and baseball caps. Hip-hop music playing so loud that you can only hear the pounding bass and an occasional hint of the chorus...not that it matters, of course...if you know the words, you gyrate and sing, and if you don't know the words, you just gyrate. Typical college bar. Hundreds, *hundreds* of kids too young to drink legally in the states, chugging and yelling and dancing and high-fiving. Plastic cups all filled with the same watered-down amber liquid, this pattern broken only by an infrequent pink or orange mixed-drink. Nary a bottle to be seen, cause they cost twice as much as the cheap Natural Light keg beer (lots of headaches tomorrow, as a result). Floors so sticky with spilled beer and liquor that you wonder if they've ever even cleaned this place. The bar—a long wooden countertop behind which two super-quick Mexican men pour beers and splash alcohol into sugary cupfuls of punch or orange juice or tonic water—is so busy with college students craving drinks that it looks like a mosh pit. Cramped, this college bar, but that just means that Maria is constantly pressed against me, and that's fine. I'm not suffocating.

"Drinks are on me tonight," I say to Maria and she looks at me again like she did at the Etiquette Dinner, like I'm some rare breed of New Mexico Man, one that actually buys a drink for a lady, and her eyes say *I want you*, and she touches me on the wrist and says, "Thank you," and it doesn't occur to me until after I've gone to the bar for two Coronas (was immediately recognized by a bartender because I flashed a twenty) and handed one of them to Maria and watched her drink half of it, that I am 22 and she is 18, that I have seriously broken the law by giving her this drink, even if this is Mexico, I have broken so many NKE policies, and Jose and Shelley are on the dance floor, grinding, and there is a strobe light flashing over the dance floor and then it stops and it's a slower song now, a nasty song, "Freek-A-Leek," and the place is now submerged in blacklight and I stop worrying, and Maria has her fingers on my belt, pulls me close, says something about dancing, and I think, "this is what I've been missing."

I say, "Let's get some tequila first, right?"

Boom boom boom.

Philadelphia to Illinois.

Illinois to Philadelphia. To New Mexico State. To El Sombrero. To Green Chile. To Juarez. To Corona. To Jose Cuervo. To Jose Cuervo. To Jose Cuervo. To Corona. To the dance floor, where Maria is bending over in front of me, quickly, ass against my crotch, and then she's standing and we're front to front and her face is in my face and then she moves like Shakira, all hip shaking like hot sex, and then her face in my face, lips on my lips, tongue in my mouth and she bites my lower lip softly.

To the bar. To Corona.

To the dark corner of the bar, where we kiss more and my hands are at the small of her back, at the bare skin below the lowest length of her shirt and above the highest length of her tight black pants, and her hands are on my traps and boom boom boom, this is it, right here, and she bites my lip again, tongue, skin, and this is it.

This is how I'll spend my semester.

New Mexico State to Texas Tech. To...fuck it, wherever.

Business? Professional life? Real World? No, no. Fraternity.

Chapter Eight: Frat Star

It's sometime early in the morning in Maria's dark dorm room, so early that it might still be last night, so dark that almost everything seems indistinguishable from everything else, and I'm crouched over in the center of the room, naked except for a pair of boxers, searching for my clothes. The clarity of any narrative, the sequence of events leading from last night to this moment, becomes hazy after I downed tequila shots and hit the dance floor, but I'm certain that I tossed my shirt and jeans onto this floor, and I'm certain that this occurred because I crawled into bed with Maria and had some sort of sloppy, incoherent sex, and I'm certain that—after all this, after everyone else fell asleep—I vomited in the community bathroom at the end of this dorm floor's hallway. And not just "vomited," like into a toilet, but *vomited*, like across the sinks and the mirrors, the type of unexpected projectile puke that you don't feel coming until it's already shooting out. These are the cold certainties of my morning.

I walk slowly through the dorm room, hunched over, patting the dark, Astroturf-like carpet. All across the floor are random shapes, some straight-edged and sharp-cornered, boxes or giant Tupperware bins or folders or textbooks, and some round and formless (I think I see a bean bag against one wall). Though a good deal of my memory is obscured by the cloud of a tequila hangover, I *do* remember that this dorm room is a pink and purple mess, with notebooks and binders and papers and packages of developed photographs scattered everywhere. I take a few lumbering steps, head still spinning from all the alcohol, so I wobble in several directions at once as I move, and finally I bump into what I thought was the bean bag. But when I lean down to touch it, I discover that it is actually a waist-high pile of clothes. Dirty, clean, I don't know. These girls either don't have a hamper, or they don't have a dresser. I stick my hands into the

clothing mountain, hope my jeans and my shirt lay somewhere on its slopes, but every time I grab something from the pile, it turns out to be a piece of girl's clothing.

A white skirt. A black halter top. A studded belt.

I toss each item into a separate pile so that I don't keep searching through the same clothes over and over again, but I soon realize that I *am* grabbing and inspecting the same clothes, and I can't tell one pile from the other.

Across the room, the blinds are shut tight, and not a single slip of sunlight sneaks through...if indeed the sun has risen. But there are sounds on the other side of that window, cars driving past, distant lawnmowers and birds and it's the noise of the world waking and grinding back to life for the Wednesday work day.

Something in my stomach gurgles, *groans*, and I nearly gag and so I clamp my fingers into the flesh of my stomach. Almost a full week of Mexican food and beer and mixed drinks is coursing through my intestines and steaming toward daylight, and I don't know how much longer I can last. Just minutes ago, spurred by this achingly full bladder and rumbling stomach, I slid out of the bed and stumbled noisily toward the door before realizing exactly where I was. Jose's apartment, I thought at first; Jose's living room, Jose's pull-out couch, where I've been sleeping. And then some of these black shapes throughout the room sharpened, and I could make out posters on the wall, colors, dark colors, then purples and pinks, an Alpha Alpha picture frame atop a tiny end-table next to the bed I'd just climbed off, and I finally remembered that most vital moment from last night: I came back to Maria's *dorm room*, and now, in a bed just feet from the twin clothing mounds I have just searched, buried beneath the bulk of the sheets and the fluffy purple comforter is a young woman under the blankets and pressed against the far edge of the bed, a young woman with swaths of glittery black hair spilling from underneath the blankets.

Maria. An actual person, undeniable evidence that—in the past twenty-four hours—I've broken nearly every Code of Conduct rule. I'm a phone call, an email, a photograph, a gossipy *whisper* away from termination.

On the other side of the room, close to the door, is another bed and another shape under the blankets, this one larger because it is two bodies: Shelley and Sam Anderson. No one else has stirred yet, though; despite my clatter, they still sleep. Their state of consciousness, of course, could change at any moment. A tinge of pain in the bladder, and like me, they'll spring from their beds and shoot down the hallway to the bathrooms.

My stomach groans again, and my bladder responds with a battle cry of its own.

I don't have much time, I can tell, before something bursts from one of my orifices, violently and unexpectedly, and I have no doubts that it will be just as foul as my tequila purge last night. I give up on my shirt and my jeans. They're lost, at least until the lights come back on. But I don't intend to run naked through a girl's dorm—a freshman girl's dorm—so I look for anything that might fit, a temporary solution.

Across the room, Maria turns in the bed, makes a mousy noise, and I hold my breath as I watch her. When she comes to a rest, she's no longer buried under the comforter, no longer facing the wall; now she faces *me*, here in the center of her room. I don't need her to wake up now. Let me get my head straight. Shit. Let me...get to the bathroom, drain my bladder, shit. Let me figure this out, clean up my vomit at the sinks. And hopefully it's early enough that no one has noticed. Hopefully Maria and Shelly didn't wander to the toilets late last night and find what I left behind.

Maria moves again, this time brushing away the blanket and revealing her entire head and upper chest. She folds her hands under her face like a pillow, and she faces—eyes still closed—

in my direction as though watching my every move. As she does all of this, I am standing in a stooped position in the center of her dorm room, holding up a pair of her panties—a lace thong, I believe—and so I fling it away and make an innocent face. She doesn't see, though, remains sleeping.

I toss aside a pair of Capri pants finally find a T-shirt, a small, powder-blue baby T, and I'm desperate so *fuck it*. I struggle into the shirt and it's so tiny that every flabby curve of my chest pops out. The shirt stretches wide around my biceps and barely covers my bulging stomach, which is pudgy from my poor diet and lack of exercise, and as much as I tug on the shirt, it isn't long enough to extend as far as my belly button.

No matter how much I rummage through this mound of clothing, though, I can't find my jeans, can't find any pants large enough to manage around my waistline. So I decide that a powder-blue baby T and a pair of dirty boxer shorts are good enough because it's all I got, and I head across the room to the door, remember that—because this is a university dorm—it's probably the sort of door that locks as soon as it closes, and so I grab a sandal from the floor and I turn the door handle softly, watching Maria and Shelley and Sam for any rustling, any sign that they hear me, and I open the door only as far as I absolutely need in order to squeeze out—hallway light flooding into the room as I do—and Maria wiggles her nose and coughs, so I hurry out into the hallway and stuff the sandal into the crack between the door and the doorframe so it stays open.

The dorm's hallway is lit by long, orange overhead lights, the type of exhausted, pharmaceutical color that I associate with over-the-counter cold medications and sore throats and runny noses. Doors line both sides of the hallway—heavy metal bedroom doors, so thick and strong that they could probably survive a battering ram attack (this is the type of "security" that

fathers demand for their college daughters, but it is the type of security that is rendered pointless when a daughter *invites* a young man to her room)—and to break the overwhelming industrial intimidation that these doors exude, the RAs have lined the cinder-block walls with colorful bulletin boards and have taped cut-out construction-paper New Mexicos just below each door's peephole. The dorm room occupants' names—female names, every one of them—are written in bubble letters within each New Mexico cut-out: Maria and Shelley on the door that I have just closed, Christy and Angel on the door across from me. Many of the girls on this floor have also decorated their doors with glossy photos taken from these first few weeks of school, sprawling collages of party-time craziness, of wild independence, of nights at El Sombrero and afternoons at NMSU football games, snapshots of long lunch tables at the campus cafeteria, ten girls to a photo, hugging, cheek-kissing, "sorority squatting," making their fingers into Charlie's Angels guns, holding red plastic cups and smiling like their days never have dull moments or tiring routines, and it's college college, exuberant youth, and some of the photos are cut in cute shapes, in hearts or in circles or in zig-zag outlines, and some of them have bright white thoughtcloud and word-balloon stickers stuck to them, as well, with smarmy captions such as "Who needs boys when you've got the girls?!?" and "Girl's Night Out!" And my tight stomach loosens, my spinning head slows momentarily, because I know that I'm part of this lifestyle again.

But just as quickly, my stomach tightens again, first from the agony of a sudden push and threat of explosion at my asshole, and then from the sight of a weekly class schedule posted on the door before me: Christy, apparently, has class at 8:00 AM on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Though my cell phone remains in the pocket of my lost jeans and I have no idea if it's 7:00 or 8:00 or 9:00, I know—just from the outdoor sounds that I heard in Maria's room—that the day is beginning. Christy—and the rest of the freshman girls on this floor—are ready to enter

this hallway to head to class, though they might not be ready to see a 22 year-old man standing in skimpy boxer shorts that reveal in this orange light both a set of dusty, hairy legs, and also a stretch of white thigh skin that hasn't seen sunlight in months; they might not be ready to see a man in a powder-blue baby T—and now in the overhead light, I can see the screen-print picture on the T-shirt, a black-and-white Anne Geddes photograph of a little boy wearing an over-sized suit and holding out a flower to a little girl wearing an over-sized sundress—with my gut hanging out and my chest hair popping out of the shirt's fabric. Yes, the halls will soon be crawling with female students on the way to and from class. Perhaps even Alpha Alpha sorority girls who might recognize me from the Etiquette Dinner.

I place my hand on the wall, steady myself, and—running my hand lightly over bulletin boards and doors and posters—I make my way to the end of the hallway, several times stepping barefoot on discarded staples and tacks from the hall's bulletin boards, several times biting my tongue to keep from swearing, while at the same time flailing my foot about to shake loose the tack or pushpin or whatever.

And when I am mere feet from the bathroom door, an electronic beep rings out from the opposite end of the hallway: the patient and unnerving noise of an elevator changing floors. And it is followed by the clinical swoosh of the elevator doors opening and sliding into their slits in the wall. Someone's coming home.

I dart forward to the bathroom, baby T making tinny ripping noises as I run.

"Totally bombed that test," says a girl from inside the open elevator, and her keys jingle in her hand. "Like, none of that shit was in the lecture notes. How am I supposed to know what a *macro* is?"

She steps out of the elevator, into the hallway.

And I run, and the bathroom is right here and I skid to a stop, a couple heavy rattling steps as I slow, and I look over my shoulder and she's standing still and looking down into her purse, and I fling open the bathroom door, hope she didn't see me, and before the door closes, the girl says, "Can I call you back? Gotta hit the bathroom."

The door shuts tight behind me, enclosing me in the women's bathroom, trapping me, because I'm definitely not in the clear. Not only is *that* girl on her way down here, but I suddenly realize that this room could be full of girls already.

The bathroom is long and suffers under honeycomb lights so muted that they seem to darken rather than illuminate the room. Five or six stalls line the wall to my right, and the opposite wall is composed of cold gray cinder-blocks; the bathroom floor is a moist expanse of tiles, punctuated down its center by grimy gold drains. Lucky for me, the stalls all appear to be unoccupied. At the far end of the bathroom, thirty feet away, is an unlit cave—the showers. Lucky for me, also, all of the showers, behind their faded pink curtains, appear unoccupied, too. I step forward, bare feet on cold wet tiles, and to my right—directly to my right, before the stalls—are the bathroom sinks, a row of five sinks, yellowing formica countertops and rusty faucets and...*shit*.

Vomit all across the counter, vomit splashed up on the mirror, chunks of vomit caked on the floor, up, down, across, in the sinks and hanging from the faucets...and this is all *mine*. Every drop.

And the bathroom might be empty currently, but I can't use it and I can't clean it, either, because that girl is heading here right now. If I slipped into one of the stalls to shit and to wait her out, still my hairy legs would be visible, and anyway, as soon as the girl from the elevator sees the vomit, she'll scream and then she'll see my legs and her screams will bring the RA and

the troops and then the dorm will have its culprit. I should have just snuck back into Maria's room the second I heard the elevator doors open.

I could lock the door, then, lock the door to the entire bathroom and keep everyone out until I've cleaned this mess. But when I inspect the door, I find that there *is* no public-access deadbolt on the door, only a keyhole.

I search around, looking everywhere in this dim bathroom for some sort of escape, and I swear I can hear the footsteps outside the door now, and there, just feet away, right behind me, across from the mirrors and the sinks, so close that I can't believe I didn't see it sooner, is a door cracked partially open, a janitor's closet!

The footsteps in the hallway clack louder, and I sneak into the closet, a tiny dark space lined with plastic shelves supporting thick rolls of brown paper towels. I pull the door closed behind me, leaving just one open inch between the door and doorframe so I can monitor the girl's reaction, and I settle into the cluttered closet, a broom poking into my back. The smell is an unforgiving mixture of bleach and passion fruit (scented antiseptic sprays: the fruit scent actually makes the spray smell more vile, somehow).

From the tiny crack in the door, I stare directly into my mess...straight ahead is the bathroom mirror, the sinks, the hardened chunks of vomit, the culmination of last night's exploits, the raw reminder of how far I traveled—*Mexico*—in both geography and in my own disregard for those intractable words of the NKE Code of Conduct.

The bathroom door opens, and this girl—wearing modest blue jeans, a maroon NMSU Tshirt, a pair of librarian-style glasses, her brown hair still in early-morning, pre-shower tangles this girl turns the corner and heads for the stalls without even a cursory glance in the direction of the sink and the mirrors and the vomit, and she shuts her stall door and I can hear her tearing off sheets of toilet paper and placing them on the toilet seat, and I think *NOW*! Now is the time for a getaway, the time to escape back to Maria's bedroom. I place my fingertips against the closet door, am ready to push it open and run, but stinging bladder pains shoot through my body again; I clench my stomach and picture myself actually clearing space inside my body, rearranging my spleen and my kidney to allow my bladder to expand a bit more. And all of these sinks, all of these toilets, seem to be engaged in constant draining and dripping, water flowing freely through pipes, and the bathroom is filled with noises that sound wet and slippery. I can't make a getaway, I realize. I'd shit my pants before I got to the door.

Her stall door opens, the toilet flushes, and this girl—this young college girl who, I've concluded, looks just like *Lisa Loeb*—is still buttoning her jeans as she exits the stall, is still buckling her belt, has her shirt pulled up over her stomach to adjust the jeans around her waistline, slips her fingers into her pants and grabs her panties and pulls them this way and that, adjusting, and I see the slightest glint of lavender fabric.

Oh fuck. Suddenly this is no longer simply an "embarrassing moment," a 22 year-old man trying to clean up puke. Suddenly, I look like a *pervert*, a peeping predator surveilling the women as they dress and undress. This is now so much worse, and what if a pack of girls walk in to take showers? If I'm caught, I'll look downright depraved.

"What the fuck?" Lisa Loeb says.

She now stands just inches from my janitor's closet door, back to me, and as she stares into the sinks and the mirrors and takes in the gross grandeur of the vomit, the slimy orange substance collected in the drain of one sink and the helpless strand of dangling yellow matter hanging from one of the faucets, as this girl sees all of this and absorbs the magnitude of it all, I stare into her back, into the folds of her maroon t-shirt. She might hear my breathing behind this

closet door, my rustling among the mops and towels, if she wasn't so transfixed by the image before her, the utter and vulgar destruction of the bathroom's sinks. She stands absolutely still and places her hand to her chest, gently, as if bracing for a heart attack, and she takes two quickburst breaths and her mouth drops into an astonished "oh my God" expression.

I'm pressing against the door in such gut-clenching anticipation that the closet door creaks open about four inches under my weight. I step back, startled, but the door swings open another inch. The space between door and doorframe has grown noticeably, and the door's hinges seem to be loose, allowing the door to wobble back and forth and threaten to open farther.

Lisa lifts her head, shifting her gaze from the vomit to the reflection of the closet door in the mirror. Did the door just move half a foot? By itself? Impossible.

I take another step backward in my cave, but now my left foot lands on something that makes an awful rattlesnake noise—the bristles at the end of the broom at my back—and the handle of the broom shifts and knocks into a shelf and the noise is quick and explosive, like someone dropped a handful of those white snap-cracker things we used to have on 4th of July, and a Windex bottle tips but doesn't drop to the floor.

Lisa Loeb steps closer to the door, is hesitant to open it. In her eyes, I can see fear: not fear of a sexual predator, necessarily, but perhaps she's imagining something furry or scaly, something slithering through brooms and toilet paper—

The bathroom door opens and another girl enters and Lisa backs away from the janitor's closet and says, "Hey."

"What's up?" this new girl says. She's tall and athletic, black hair, wears a Santa Fe Invitational t-shirt and has the look of a high school basketball player who wasn't quite tall enough for college ball. Her eyes look tired, as though she has woken up much earlier than she would have preferred.

"I think there's something in the closet," Lisa whispers.

"Something?" the new girl asks. "What do you mean?"

"The broom just fell down in there."

"Maybe it was just placed awkwardly."

"I really think there's something in there, Tara. I think it's a rat or something."

Although I can't see them—I'm crouching in a corner, now, far from the opening of the door—their voices have grown faint, as though they've backed away, afraid of the potential closet creature.

"Let's open the door, then," Tara says. "So we can shoo it out."

"That makes no sense," Lisa says. "It's in there. Why do we want it out here?"

"Shit, I have to take a fucking shower. I have to work in an hour."

"Take a shower, then," Lisa says, sounding both relieved and victorious, perhaps sensing a way to get out of here without having to face the closet creature. "There's nothing in the showers. Only in the closet. You'll be fine."

"The door's half open, though," Tara says. "I don't want it to come scurrying out while I'm shampooing myself. I don't have time for this shit."

"I have a mid-term at noon," Lisa says. "I have to study." Silence again. That draining noise again. My bladder. "I'll tell Linda about it," Lisa says. "And about *that*, too." "Holy shit. Who puked on the mirror?" "Some of the *people* on this floor," Lisa says. "I can't wait to move out of here. Get an apartment off-campus, you know?"

"I can't deal with this," Tara whispers. "I really need to get a shower."

"Okay, listen. Temporary solution. You go shut the door and hold it closed, and I'll grab the trash can and barricade the door. That'll buy you enough time to take a shower, and I'll go tell Linda to have maintenance check it out."

A barricade? I back up, press myself against some sort of shelving unit (almost knocking over a bottle of Liquid Plumber) and try to stay as far out of view from the door as possible. I see nothing, but I hear some minor metal-dragging noises, a 1-2-3 count, and I can picture a really complicated operation out there in the bathroom, the sort of ultra-timed system that might be employed for a SWAT raid of a crackhouse, one girl creeping toward the door while another scoots the trashcan into *just* the *right spot*, both of them poised and ready as though this is some life-or-death mission. And then the door bangs closed, and the trashcan crashes and Tara says, "Shit, the can fell over!"

"Whatever," Lisa says. "Let the maintenance crew clean it up."

"I don't want those nasty janitors in here while I'm in the shower," Tara says.

"They'll wait for you to get out."

Siiii-ghhh, from Tara. Then: "I'll stop by your room after I get dressed."

And then the conversation—mercifully—stops, and seconds later, the sound of a shower fills the bathroom. Industrial-strength water shooting down behind a set of curtains at the far end of the bathroom, crashing into slimy tiles. Tara might still be standing outside the shower, waiting for the water to warm, and Lisa might still be roaming the room, but I have to take a chance. I have to get out of here. If I stay in this closet, the RA or the maintenance men will find me. Wearing soiled boxer shorts.

So I push open the closet door, reintroduce myself to the muted fluorescent lights, and before me is a scattered pile of brown paper towels, q-tips, tampon wrappers, strings of floss, crumpled receipts, and a trash can, and I hop over it and take a long look down the far end of the bathroom: luckily, Tara is in the shower, so I've got ten minutes, tops. I rush into a stall, spend probably two full minutes—fuck, *it never ends*—pissing out a jet-stream of last night's beer and liquor, then another two minutes pissing out my ass—room filling with a wretched fecal smell and then I rush back to the closet.

White paper towels, Windex, buckets, gloves. Perfect.

Feeling lighter and quicker, I grab all of these supplies, leave the door open and the garbage spilled and rush to the sinks and kneel down before the vomit (and it smells like the ripest of vomit usually does), hold my breath and spray the mirrors with Windex, spray the sinks, spray the floor, Windex everywhere, slip my hands into the pair of yellow rubber gloves, pick up the orange chunks in the sink first, then make wads of brown paper towels and scoop up the rest, all of it melting and uncaking in the blue Windex. And I spray again, scoop, spray, wipe, minutes passing, and I can feel my ass crack hanging out of my boxers and my man-gut tumbling from the bottom of this shirt.

Spray, wipe, shower still going strong...shower stopping...then the sound of Tara opening the curtains—I freeze, still crouching—and her hand creeps between the half-opened curtain, grabs a towel, slinks back into the shower.

I toss the crumpled paper towel wads into the trash mound at the foot of the janitor's closet, leave the Windex and the 409 and the yellow gloves under the sink, leave the entire area a

sparkling and fresh *masterpiece*, better than new, stand, sprint to the door (shower curtain opening again), dash into the hallway and back to Maria's door, open it, slip inside, pull the sandal from the doorframe and close the door—

And I'm safe! Safe again! Ha ha! Clean bathroom! Empty bladder!

I can only imagine what this girl, this freshman girl who only wanted to get ready for work without any hassle, must think when she sees the sink and mirrors spot-free but the closet door hanging open and the trash mound remaining. And it's exhilarating to think about her face, to know that I got away with such a thing! Oh, college, college! My sophomore year, I snuck through a freshman girl's residence hall at EU with a few fraternity brothers. Carrying a couple tube socks, we unscrewed and popped out the peepholes from fifty dorm rooms, dropping the finger-sized metal tubes into the tube socks as though we were collecting Easter eggs on a morning hunt. The peepholes, we would later tie together and hang from one of the chapter house bathroom stalls, like a gypsy's beaded doorway. Pointless, really, but exhilarating! Oh college, where there are no consequences, not really. No permanent consequences, at least. Student conduct referrals, maybe, but they disappear when you earn your degree. Even when you enroll in a course, you can rework your schedule, withdraw, retake the course if you fail, transfer. Declare a major, but you can decide upon a new career path, you can change it. Date a girl, but until you graduate, no one expects a *college relationship* to be permanent. Oh college, where you are not suffocated with any pressure save for graduation.

Am I there again, in college? Last night, I danced in a packed club in Mexico, hundreds of bodies brushing against mine throughout the night, and just as in college, I didn't feel crushed under any collective weight; barely enough room to breathe, but I still didn't feel the same claustrophobia as when I wear a blazer and tie and surround myself with suitcases and laptop

cases and shirts and pants on hangers. All those bodies, and still my legs were free to move however I wanted to move them, still my arms were free to slide around Maria's waist and bring her close, still my pelvis was free to grind, my head was free to nod to the music. Still, we moved with ease through the crowd and to the bar, ordered another round of shots, and still we rode with Jose—drunk at that point, but his driving didn't feel dangerous—to another bar called "Pub," a hole-in-the-wall where we drank Tecate out of cans, crunched the empty cans in our fists and tossed them into a giant mesh-metal bin, and it was easy by that point to forget the careerfocused Charles Washington persona. Maria curled into my lap in our booth, just as effortlessly as if we'd been dating for years. Jose ordered a bowl of hot pecans from the bar—late night food, fantastic!---and now I can taste the pecans in my mouth. Foggy, some of the night: I don't exactly remember how we got back to the dorms, and I have only hazy memories of me and Sam bouncing into the walls here in the dorm building's hallways late in the night. But I do remember that Maria kept staring up at me while we were in the booth, her dark and interested eyes peeking out from beneath the shiny black hair that fell across her forehead and into her face, her hand on my thigh just inches from my crotch and fingers seeming to creep ever upward; I do remember that she said, among other things, "You seem older, but in a good way," and "Everyone tries to get out of New Mexico, but you came here," and that I felt not just wanted but craved, as though I had exceeded all expectations of what she wanted a man to be, and every time we kissed, it wasn't just the quick lip-to-lip starter smooches, nor was it the middle-school variety tongue-allover-the-place make-out, but she instead pressed her face into mine and bit my lips softly and I could feel heat, real heat, and these kisses seemed—by their very enthusiasm—to be an invitation to sex. And there were no awkward moments once we got back to the dorm, I know that. No questions about what I wanted to do, whether she wanted to do this; when we slipped

into the room, Sam and Shelley behind us, we said very little, just breathed heavy and turned out the lights and each couple seemed pulled to their respective bed, and Maria turned on the radio, loud, and in no time we were under the blankets and I was sliding her black pants from her legs, hands traveling over smooth thighs and then sliding her thong from her waist and pulling it over her feet and around her toes and tossing it onto the floor and her hands were working at my belt, at my zipper, and my head was spinning and I unrolled a condom that I got from somewhere, and I barely saw her naked body and she barely saw mine in the darkness, but she dug her fingers into my ass and pulled me forward and we fucked under her sheets, still drunk, laughing and whispering "shhh" a lot even though the radio covered all of our noise, and we moved, tried to change positions, and there was no grace to the sex and I can't even say if—by the end—it was satisfying. I can't say how long it lasted, if I came, if she came, if I went limp with whiskey dick or if I had an explosive orgasm. I can only say that in the night leading to the sex, we were both possessed by desire and were remarkably clear in communicating what we wanted, and that savoring sex became secondary to simply *having sex*.

Later in the night, of course, I woke up and flushed the condom and hurled gastric acid and tequila and half-digested salsa and tortilla chips in the sinks and, well, that's finished now. Cleaned, and I wasn't caught.

And it would be easy to convince myself that, last night, blinded by my first opportunity at sex since this past summer, I simply forgot about Jenn. But the truth is that I never forgot about her; all night long, I remembered her phone calls, her hints about other guys. And now, on the morning afterward, it would be easy to simply convince myself that I should feel guilty about this. But I'm not guilty. I remember the drive to Mexico last night, staring out across the blank black landscape, staring out at all that open space and breathing easy. I am not guilty because I am *there* again, in college. Right now, I am a man in a girl's dorm room; my clothes are missing, my wallet, my cell phone, all of it, lost under a pile of sorority t-shirts and sports bras and Five-Star notebooks, or lost behind the mattress. But I am *there* again, in a place without pressure and without consequences. In a place where this situation is funny, not damning.

But when I step forward through the room, my foot lands on something sharp—another thumbtack, a staple, a fallen wall hook—and it slips into my skin with such ease, such painful ease, that I'd swear I stomped on the little fucker, and I bite my lower lip, but somehow my throat and my lips won't allow themselves to be restrained, and—

"Fucker!" I shout, knowing my foot must be bleeding. Bleeding all over the carpet, bleeding all over Maria's jeans and camisoles and gym shirts.

"Fucker!" I say again, unable to stop myself, cause it feels as though the object—the tack, the nail, the *spike*—has lodged itself deep within the center of my foot. I stand on my free leg, raise my injured foot into my frantic hands, almost fall backward, hop to steady myself, bang into a bed, fall against a wall, raise my foot to chest level, squint, still can't see anything—dark, dark—fumble for the spot where the pain is sharpest.

Lights suddenly flood the bedroom.

"Charles?" comes a high, perplexed voice from the corner of the room, but I don't look that way, can't, because my foot is finally visible and I spy the offending object, position my fingertips—my fingernails—around it like tweezers, can't get a good grip—

"Charles?"

—looks like green glass between my fingertips, and I think I've got hold of it now, so I lean forward from the wall, yank, hop so I don't fall on my face.

"Charles, what are you doing?"

—and in my hand, I hold a bright green *plastic* sword, the kind which generally skewers maraschino cherries and orange slices and pineapple chunks and rests along the rims of specialty drinks like daiquiris and margaritas...a green sword with one side striped red in blood. I drop my foot to the floor, holding the sword before me, and it's a broken sword, actually, only half a sword, not very large at all. Plastic.

"Charles, bro," and now it's a man's voice from the bed, right beside me. "You all right, man?"

I wipe my forehead, don't drop the sword.

"Yeah," I say, smiling, huffing. "Yeah. I got it. I got it out." And a laugh escapes my mouth, the same sort of relieved laugh that spiky-haired Michael made on Saturday night when his humiliation had concluded and he stepped down from his chair.

But no one joins my laughter; the laugh effects only silence from the room.

Across the room, Maria stares at me from her bed; she has slipped the sheets and comforter from her upper body, sits upright in the bed and doesn't seem to be blinking. On the other bed—the one just feet away from me—Sam's head pokes out of the sheets, and his eyes are filled with ripped-from-REM-sleep exhaustion...he seems to be coming to a gradual understanding both of the spectacle he sees before him and his surroundings. A dorm room? And Shelley is not in the bed with him. Shelley is on the floor! On the floor beside the pile of clothes, just inches from the spot where I grabbed the baby T-shirt which I am currently wearing, so close that I probably came inches from touching her as I searched the floor earlier. On the floor, curled up, using a backpack for a pillow.

"I went to the bathroom," I say finally when my giggling has subsided. "And then I just stepped on this sword."

"Fuck, dude," Sam says. "Little fucker must have hurt, huh?"

"Are you all right?" Maria asks, and her voice is not heavy with shock or fear, but with an unexpected compassion. "I have band-aids."

I examine my foot. Strangely, it isn't bleeding, is barely red.

"I think..." I say. "I think I'm okay."

"Poor baby," Maria says.

This is the last time I'll see Maria, I realize, but she has no idea. She thinks this might be the start of something. She thinks that *last night*, that Juarez and tequila and boom-boom-boom, was the first time—of many times in the near-future—that I will wake up in her dorm room and use the community bathroom and sneak back under the covers to hold her. She doesn't know that I'm leaving in hours for Lubbock, Texas.

"You're sure you're all right?" she asks.

"Never felt better," I say.

"Gaahh," Sam says. He looks left-for-dead, has a prickly growth of facial hair and a tousled head of hair. "So bright in this room. What time is it?"

"9:00," Maria says, checking her cell phone.

"Fuck," Sam gurgles.

"Guess I missed my Psych class," Maria says.

"It's too early to be conscious," Sam says, closing his eyes.

"The early bird catches the worm," I say, forcing a goofy smile.

Sam snorts and falls back against the pillow, but Maria scoots up on her bed, revealing a bright orange "Powder Puff" T-shirt, and she squints hard and runs her hands through her hair. Wait, did I just say, "The early bird catches the worm"? I didn't even have an ironic edge to my voice! And I've been giggling, stepping on plastic swords, acting like a complete maniac. Tangles of hair fall across her face, and I can't tell what she's thinking. Confused? Annoyed?

"You have a good time last night?" I ask.

She pushes the hair from her face. I hold my breath.

"Yes, yes," Maria says. "You like Juarez?"

"Very fun. Don't know if I have the energy to go back, though."

"You'll always remember your first time, at least," she says, and now—yes!—she is smiling, has that look in her eye, the one with just the right amount of interest, the one that regards me as the Florida fraternity guy, the one without suspicion. She scoots farther up in the bed, against the wall and out of the sheets completely, and she's wearing pink and white *boy shorts*, the ass-hugger type so skin-tight and ultra-short that they might as well be lingerie. Maria stands and stretches, sheets collecting in a lump at the foot of her bed, her dark, bare arms stretching skyward as she faux-yawns, her full, toned legs viewable in their entirety (thanks to the boy shorts, which cling to just the tight upper-upper thigh), and she stretches and yawns some more, eyes closed but fully aware that Sam and I are taking it in, breathing it in, ignoring the growing buzz of lawnmowers and traffic outside, ignoring the noise in the hallway, the smell of dirty laundry and painted dorm walls, and channeling all of our energy and our focus into this...absorbing Maria's figure, that gorgeously proportioned shape before us.

She opens her eyes, glances at Sam. Only his arms and his head poke out of the comforter, but his arms are crossed behind his head as though he's settled in to watch a movie. Maria sighs, then turns her attention to me. "I shouldn't have taken a roadie last night," she says through her half-glossed lips.

"A roadie?" I ask.

"That's where that sword came from," she says and walks to me, takes my hands, takes the sword from my hands, examines the stripe of blood.

"She took a margarita for the drive home," Sam says. His gaze is fixed prominently upon the smooth fabric that gleams over Maria's flawless ass. "A *roadie*."

"I got pretty drunk," Maria says, giving a flirt-frown. "Sorry."

"No," I say. "It's...fine."

"I haven't been that drunk in awhile," she says, moving closer to me. Inches from me, now. "You brought out the worst in me."

"Oh," I say, "don't say that."

She kisses me on the lips, and it isn't a goodbye kiss; this is the sort of meaningful

morning kiss—I return it, of course, pressing her against me—that suggests evening kisses in the future, kisses even more sustained and engaging.

"Plenty of time for that later," Sam says. "We got class, Charles."

"You're leaving?" Maria asks.

"We got class, Charles," Sam says, and *shit*, my flight leaves El Paso at noon. He

remembered, but I didn't. "We need to get home. Just looking out for you."

"Right," I say. "Right, right. I need my clothes."

They're somewhere under the sheets, and Maria digs for them and holds them out for me. But when I try to grab them, she says, "Not so fast."

I pull back, unsure what I've just done or said.

"You're too cute in that outfit," she says, reaching across her dresser and picking up her cell phone. She opens it, pushes a button, and it clicks and flashes. A *camera* phone. "Had to get a picture," she says.

I scratch the back of my neck, try to laugh, then struggle into my jeans.

"You're not keeping that picture, are you?" I ask before we leave.

"Charles in a baby T-shirt," she says and laughs. "Never know when it might come in handy. Talk to you later, right?"

* * *

We plod through the dorm's hallways, Sam and I, bumping into walls. Sam slams into a door, hard, grabs his elbow but doesn't make a pained grimace, just keeps holding it as we walk. Finally, we exit through the main lobby, burn under mid-morning sunshine in the parking lot, and arrive at Sam's car. My head isn't pounding, isn't a throbbing mess like it was last week, but is instead delightfully slow and mixed-up as it was on the flight from Philadelphia. The world around us, of course, is in perfect working order, an achingly perfect machine. Sun is still shining in the same spot as this time yesterday, as if it was programmed by some technician somewhere for the sole purpose of keeping the business day on schedule. Professors and administrators, dressed in starched shirts and dry-cleaned blazers, walk to offices and classrooms, retracing the same steps as they have for years, walking like wind-up dolls. Blazers, their lives stuck in routines effected from the many consequences of post-college decisions.

I went to Mexico last night, I want to scream. I drank and puked and hooked up with a hot chick, and I got away with it! Easy as stealing peepholes. What did you all do? I'm going to Lubbock today, and I'm going to repeat...*what about* you *all*?

Students move in packs, girls holding notebooks and textbooks against their bodies, each in the same flimsy way, boys tucking their notebooks under their arms as if to say, "I don't care about class and I damn sure don't care about this notebook." They walk in packs, four or five or six of them together, purses and shoulder bags and occasional backpacks, but they are young and their steps are joyously less routine than their professors' and administrators', than the campus Blazers'. Their eyes, like mine, are glossed with the effects of last night; they're not hand-cuffed to the habit of life, no, but instead are running free in life's sweeping unpredictability.

Yes, it feels good to be like this. To be one of them. Really one of them.

"Did you drive last night?" I ask Sam, and I'm leaning over the passenger-side door of his car, face against the window, as he unlocks the vehicle.

"You don't remember?" Sam asks, fumbling with the keys, almost dropping them, but seconds later he unlocks the doors and we climb inside and he starts the engine.

"Just the ride home," I say. "It's foggy."

"Ha," he says and even though he doesn't smile, I can tell he'd like to show some amusement; like me, his brain isn't working properly, his facial muscles have apparently shortcircuited. He shakes his head, then says, "We had a pledge drive us."

"A pledge? Everyone was drunk?"

"Wasted," he says. "Shit, I spent sixty bucks at Dios Mia alone. Kept buying Shelley drinks cause she played that I-forgot-my-purse card. Or the I'm-under-21 card. Must be great being a hot girl. Free drinks all the time."

"But we didn't have any pledges with us," I say. "It was just the four of us in your car, and then Jose and Brandon in the other car."

"You really don't remember?" he asks, pulling out of the parking lot and depositing us onto one of the main roads surrounding the university. Without my own car, I've grown disinterested in directions. "We made some calls," he says.

"Who? *I* didn't make any calls, did I?"

"I saw you on your phone a couple times," he says, "but no, you didn't call the pledges.

That was all me and Jose. Didn't think I'd drink so much, thought I'd be good to drive. But I was breathing Jack by the time we left Dios Mia for Pub, and Shelley was a mess. Shit, that backfired on me."

"When did you call the pledges?"

"End of the night. You said you were cool with it."

"Wait. We had them come all the way to *Mexico* to get us?"

"That's what pledges are good for," Sam says in the same authoritative New Member Educator voice he used when he read the critiques after the Etiquette Dinner. A voice sharp with humor, but thick with military seriousness. "Designated driving. Teaches them respect. Brotherhood."

Some part of me understands that I have just involved myself in another activity that could be classified as hazing, I force myself to breathe easy. If the Etiquette Dinner was acceptable because it taught life lessons, then certainly *designated driving* is acceptable. What could be more responsible, in fact?

According to Sam, *several* pledges actually made the drive to Juarez at 2 AM so that Sam's car would not be left in Mexico. And when we arrived back on campus, Sam—craftily, cleverly—asked the pledge driver to drop us all back off at Hanson Hall, then quickly sent him on his way. "It was great," Sam says, "cause Maria and Shelley *had* to invite us back up to their room after that. Our ride was gone."

"They didn't want us to come up?" I ask.

"Oh, they did. They were all over us. I just needed an insurance plan."

Our conversation is interrupted briefly when Sam stops at Jose's apartment so I can pack. Thanks to yesterday's mall shopping spree, I'm leaving Las Cruces with more clothes than I brought, and my suitcase feels heavier and bunches out at certain spots because I just quickly stuff everything inside in whatever way the bag's proportions best allow (no organization), and I don't even have to convince myself not to worry about this extra bulk, this jumbled mess. While I'm in Lubbock, I'll have time to sort through the mess and arrange things in some reasonable fashion. And if not, oh well. No worries. When I toss my bags into Sam's backseat, I hear crunching and rattling noises from inside the bags (notebooks breaking? shampoo bottle cracking open?), and it doesn't bother me the way it would have just last week.

Jose is at work, so I don't get to say goodbye. Apparently, though, I gave him a bear-hug last night and told him he was an amazing president, he was my "dog" (I actually said that, Sam informs me). Last thing I do before I leave, I change shirts and give myself an "Axe shower": a quick spray of deodorant.

"Those were tiny beds, weren't they?" I ask when I get back into Sam's car. "Back in the dorm?"

"Shit, yeah," Sam says. "Dorm beds are the worst."

"Move an inch, and you're on top of someone."

"Shelley slept on the floor, but yeah, I know what you mean."

"You hook up?" I ask, but I've just started to wonder what he saw of me and Maria. In the heat of last night, I didn't stop to think about what I was doing and who saw, but this could be a tabloid-worthy scandal: a consultant banging some freshman girl while an undergraduate fraternity brother looks on. And as I say, "You hook up," I'm also aware that I've lapsed back into college-speak, into the sort of slang that came so naturally as a student—"that's tight," "that's sick," "just made hella cash," "what up, yo?"—but that I tried and practiced to banish from my vocabulary as soon as I spent my graduation money on that Ralph Lauren silver-black suit. For a time, when I began training at the Headquarters in Indianapolis, I nearly eliminated contractions from my speech, and I winced whenever I heard someone swear out loud. College is over, I thought. Everything changes in the Real World. I read and re-read the leadership books that LaFaber suggested, created goals, fashioned my entire being—all of my personality—into the mindless Blazer that I thought I had to be.

"I barely hooked up," Sam says. "She was damn-near passed out. That's what I meant when I said that all the drinking 'back-fired' on me."

"Oh."

"Obviously, *you* weren't paying attention," Sam says. "You were busy. I don't even remember how it happened, but Shelley crawled onto the floor just a little while after we got back to the rooms, and then I passed out too. Didn't even realize I'd passed out until *you* got up an hour or so later for the bathrooms, woke me up."

"When I puked?" I ask.

"You puked?"

"I mean...I'm not sure."

"You puked," he says and nods. "You covered all the bases last night, didn't you? Went to Mexico, got wasted, hooked up, puked. Good stuff, bro."

"Well, I try," I say. A week ago, I probably would have cried, cracked because an undergraduate knows everything (even if he didn't *see* it all), but now it doesn't seem to matter. Aside from my own memories, my own story that I am free to tell or to keep to myself, what really *happened* last night? "Got a question for you, brother," Sam says as he pulls to the curb beside the Departing Flights doors of the El Paso International Airport. "Why are you doing this? Why are you consulting? What made you decide to do it?"

And his voice is so disarmed, so low and confidential, that—initially—I don't even hear what he says. I'm just taken aback by the way he's speaking. And then I finally process the question and I search for an answer, and I come up with, "I don't know."

"You don't know?" he asks. "Seems like a hell of a hassle, all this flying and the meetings and what-not, if you don't even know."

Didn't have any other options with my degree? Didn't want to spend my time in a cubicle as someone's errand boy because I knew I was worth more than that? So many reasons, really, and I choose not to go with the one that I've repeated for the last several months—"I love this fraternity and want to help realize its noble mission"—but instead say something that isn't rehearsed. "I *do* know," I say. "I guess it's the same reason that talented athletes go to smaller schools instead of playing as backups at Alabama or USC. I wanted a job that meant something, you know? Something where I felt like I was useful, really making a difference? But I didn't want to waste my time in an office, doing monkey work, waiting ten years until I could advance."

"Cool," Sam says. He pauses, rubs his chin. "It's funny, you know? Cause I keep thinking about it, have been thinking about it since you first got here. I think I would have said the exact same thing. You think I'd make a good consultant?"

A different voice, perhaps, but this is the same Sam Anderson staring back at me, sloppy hair poking out of his baseball cap, scruffy cheeks and chin, the same Sam Anderson who made each pledge stand on a chair and absorb his insults.

"It doesn't pay well," I say.

"I don't care," he says. "Look. You come out here, you obviously have a blast. And everyone worships you now cause of the whole Maria thing, and they all listen to every word out of your mouth. They took notes, all that shit. We made a *budget* for the first time ever because of you. That'll save us...how much money?"

"Over ten thousand a year, the way we have it structured," I say unthinkingly.

"All I'm saying is," he says, "you made a difference, you know?"

"Are you being serious?" I ask.

"Totally," he says. "What could be a better job, you know? You're working with fraternity brothers. Family. It's all win-win."

And I can't help thinking that I just got away with something else. All the potentially damaging things that Sam knows about me, and I disarm them all by saying: "If you apply to be a consultant, I'll write one of your letters of recommendation."

And as I make my way to the airline counter, as I am processed from one checkpoint to the next, in a long line of Blazers, I wonder how any of this happened. How I got here. How I could have—how *anyone* my age could be so easily convinced that a profession should define your life. Especially entry-level positions we don't give a fuck about, and we abandon who we are just for these jobs. How did I get here? Alone? How did I get to El Paso in the middle of September, holding this luggage?

I hand over my baggage to the woman at the United counter, and for a flash of a second, as I lift my suitcase monstrosity, I worry that all of the extra clothes I bought at the mall, the bottle of souvenir green chile salsa from Café Ranchero and the six-pack of Dust Storm Amber Ale (brewed in Las Cruces) will push the weight of my bag past the allotted 50-pound limit that the airlines set...that I will have to pay a \$50 or \$75 extra fee for this flight...and for the flight to California...and for the flight back to Pennsylvania.

But there's no problem at the United counter.

As I head to the security checkpoint to walk through the x-ray machine, I briefly worry about my necklace, too, about my shoes, about getting selected as the random passenger for a full search...and then I worry—as they screen my laptop—about what criticism I could possibly write in my report for NMSU—

—but I'm through the checkpoint without a beep.

I walk to my terminal in record time, no problem. No worries.

Just before boarding, my cell phone rings: Walter LaFaber.

"How was New Mexico, Charles?" he asks.

He is picturing me, right now, in shirt and tie, isn't he? He is standing at his window and staring out and he is picturing the Diamond Candidate, just finished with a chapter visit, just finished with workshops, set to write reports on his flight from Las Cruces to Lubbock. This is what he's picturing, and I figure...let him keep this picture.

"Fine," I say. "Great."

"You sound tired."

"No," I say. "That's the sound of life, Walter."

"You must have gotten a lot accomplished, then? It's always great to be exhausted...but in a *good* way."

"Right."

"Just wanted to drop you a phone call," he says. "Make sure all is well with you. When you're so familiar with the driving lifestyle, taking a detour through airline country can be a bit of a jolt. Are you handling yourself all right?"

"I'm good," I say. "Healthy. Listen, though. I'm about to board. Can I call you back? Later today, maybe? Or tomorrow?" And he agrees, and I hang up, and it's *that* easy. He doesn't see me, all the way from Indianapolis. I am young again, not suffocating. Where I'm at now, there is only wide open space.

New Mexico State to Texas Tech.

I am a thousand miles from Indianapolis, from the Nu Kappa Epsilon Headquarters, and I have no worries. Back in Las Cruces, Sam Anderson will daydream a consultant's life, will each second imagine some exciting new aspect of the job until securing a position as an Educational Consultant becomes his driving motivation as he finishes college. And this is perfect, of course, because Sam will ensure my legacy in New Mexico; any scandal that surfaces—any talk of Charles Washington—*Charles Washington*?—cavorting about with sorority girls, drinking beers at restaurants and shooting tequila in Juarez bars—*Charles Washington*?—will only tarnish Sam's own chance at earning a spot at Headquarters, will only tarnish the letter of recommendation that I would write to Walter LaFaber.

He needs me, Sam Anderson does, so I have no worries.

New Mexico State to Texas Tech, and every day I realize how little power the onceimportant NKE Code of Conduct holds over me (no drinking with undergraduates? yeah, right), and how—similarly—little importance the National Supreme Laws and mission statements hold for the chapters.

Beers at my Wednesday night Executive Board dinner in Lubbock, and a Thursday night trip to Wanda's (voted one of the top tequila bars in West Texas). Back in Indianapolis, who knows that I'm drinking? And out here, who cares? Each day at Texas Tech, after hours of quick one-on-one meetings and database updates, the students whisper among themselves, planning and conspiring to take me out to the bars and get me wasted, completely unaware that I am eager to go with them. The perception, of course, is that, because I represent the National Headquarters, because I am a Fun Nazi responsible for enforcing alcohol rules, I never drink. So if the fraternity brothers can succeed in getting me loaded, they feel as though they've achieved some small victory against the evil, rule-imposing "Nationals." And, here at Texas Tech, I allow them to continue with this logic, and I use my drunken Thursday night as an excuse to cancel the Alcohol Responsibility workshop on Friday morning. Perfect situation for me. Less programming that they have to sit through, and less work that I actually have to do. And they'll never rat me out for being the drunk consultant, because they fear that I could transform back into the Fun Nazi and force them to sit through the workshops and maybe even conduct a rigorous investigation and reveal to the university that they have kegs in the chapter lodge (a suspension-worthy offense at Texas Tech). Nobody will call LaFaber to complain about me. Nobody.

Jenn has been leaving messages all week, but I've avoided the call-back because I'm afraid of how I'll sound when we speak. Guilty? Is it possible to sound guilty even when she has no way of knowing that I slept with another girl? And, well, I don't *feel* particularly guilty about it. Devious, then? Evil? Maybe I'll carry a plotting, conniving tone in my voice, as though I'm up to something, as though I'm trying to hide something.

Each of Jenn's messages grows more frantic, though, so finally I call her back on Thursday night. I make every attempt to give the impression that I'm tired, that my days have been filled with meetings, that I'm living in constant jet-lag, and that my hectic schedule has made it difficult to find time to call her. Jenn's voice, by contrast, sounds scratchy, and she explains that it's because she cheered so much at the Homecoming Spirit Rally the night before. But that's probably untrue: her voice sounds stripped of those happy high-lows that I remember, and I wonder if she's been crying, also.

"What time does your flight get in tomorrow night?" she asks.

"My flight? I don't leave here until Saturday."

"I'll be at the game on Saturday," she says. "Who's picking you up from the airport? You haven't been calling me back. You don't tell me things."

"I've been busy," I say. "I don't have my Explorer, so I can't get a second to myself out here."

"So what time are you flying in?"

"Not sure. Noon, maybe?"

"Who's picking you up?"

"I need to call the guys at Fresno," I say. "I don't know."

"Fresno? What does that have to do with anything?"

"My next visit is Fresno State."

"That's..." she starts, scratchy voice suddenly inflamed with emotion. "That's not what we're talking about, Charles."

"That's what I'm talking about. I'm in Lubbock, and I'm flying to Fresno."

"Homecoming, Charles. Homecoming here at Edison."

I rub the stubble on my cheeks, run my fingers along my smooth forehead. I'm standing outside the Texas Tech lodge in the darkness of a mid-September night, and although an occasional breeze rolls past, it's mostly still and quiet here in Lubbock right now. Homecoming. Homecoming in *two days*! This is an important moment, maybe the most important in our relationship, and the world seems to be waiting for my response. I've obviously forgotten about Homecoming, the single mid-semester weekend on which I'd promised Jenn that I'd return home; I've obviously forgotten to clear my schedule, to book plane tickets. And while I know that what she *should* really care about is seeing me, and while I could promise to fly back three weeks from now (thus solving the problem), I also know that this weekend has become symbolic for her. For Jenn, this is it.

"I could look up some prices," I say. "Hotwire.com, cheap red eyes. Bad flights, but I'm sure there are spots."

"Oh shit, I just want to hear you say it, Charles," she says.

"I can make this happen," I say, and there's a sudden urgency—desperation—to my voice that I didn't anticipate. "I'll get back there."

"I want to hear you say that you didn't book your tickets," she says.

"I'm looking for solutions, Jenn. Solutions. Come on, help me out here."

"I want to hear you say that you forgot."

"No, I remember. I was just...waiting."

"I want to hear you say that you don't care. Just say it."

"I do care, Jenn. I'm trying to take of this right now."

"Just say it, Charles. I'm through with this."

"Jenn, really."

"I knew it. Enjoy the fucking desert," she says and the line goes silent, and I'm standing outside in the eerie stillness of West Texas with the phone pressed against my ear for seconds, then minutes, and I know I'm not talking with anyone anymore and I know that there's no reason to continue standing here like this, but I'm searching for the right emotional response to all of this. A month ago, this would have been a shattering moment for me, my future consumed in a destructive blaze: all those mature images I'd dreamed of the way life was supposed to be postcollege, Jenn as my sorority girl wife, the two of us living in a downtown condo and driving back to EU for Homecoming every year, wearing NKE and K Δ "Alumni" shirts, young professionals. But now, here where the sky is a crisp star-specked blackness that I can see stretching from one horizon to the next over the undeveloped curvature of the Earth, unobscured by trees or highrises or billboards, I breathe deeply and instead convince myself that I am now lighter, freer to move, and that the blank picture of my future is more exciting to imagine.

Texas Tech to Fresno State, and I am a functional consultant. By day, I help the chapters to create and fine-tune their budgets, help them to fill out Delinquent Forms for brothers past due, help them to research collections agencies for brothers who owe more than \$500, help them to research online dues-paying sites such as OmegaFi. Help them to update their decades-old chapter bylaws to comply with new university regulations on membership and housing. Collect checks for National Headquarters dues and national insurance. By day, a functional consultant doing what I must. By night, though, I travel to a shack-in-the-woods bar called Jimbo's on the fringes of Fresno, a musty-brown building at the end of a dark choppy road; it is adorned with glittering Budweiser neon signs, spattered with caked mud kicked off the back tires of pick-up trucks. By night, all in Fresno is just as it was in Las Cruces; I stuff myself into a car with six or

seven other fraternity brothers, and we all tumble out of the car as soon as we find a parking spot at Jimbo's, walk the quarter-mile gravel road, and I hear one of the guys say that "this place is a fucking dive" and "we're all going to get ripped, *ripped*," and Jimbo's appears to be constructed of driftwood. Boards creak as we walk across a shaking front porch, show our IDs to a mullethaired security guard. Feels like we're crawling inside a beaver dam. But inside, it's packed with beer tubs and girls and bars and the guys are all wearing jeans, ripped jeans, torn jeans, faded jeans, vintage Twinkies and Spam t's and striped button-downs and "Cocks" caps and trucker hats, and they all look like they just stepped off the set of *The Real World* and it feels like *home*, and I am dressed just like them.

"That girl's checking you out, bro," one of the Fresno State chapter brothers tells me, yelling over a Garth Brooks song.

"Introduce me," I say, and it is an intoxicating feeling to say this.

Here at Fresno State, the one-on-ones pop past so quickly that the days seem to turn to night in half the time. I ask the students to complete the reports for me because it's just details, formalities. "I won't make you do any workshops if you don't want to," I say, so we see a movie, go to the mall, go out to eat, tour the city.

Sunday through Wednesday at Fresno State, and not a day passes that I don't help a group of brothers rip open a box of Bud Lites and fill their recycling bin full of empty aluminum cans and glass bottles.

* * *

Fresno State to Cal State-Highland, and I remain a functional consultant, marking reports with the same gusto that I reserve for filing my taxes and completing credit card applications. I do no background checks or investigations even when I know that alcohol infractions are

rampant. I do not repeat that "The mission of Nu Kappa Epsilon is to build our members into the socially responsible citizens of tomorrow" because the message thuds in the members' minds as just another phrase to remember, no different than the Pledge of Allegiance or the Lord's Prayer...it is something we say to give the impression of values, but it is empty. I do not wear my silver-black Ralph Lauren suit and my Tommy tie into any more fraternity houses, and I do not conduct any more Alcohol Responsibility workshops. Functional, functional. No one will tell LaFaber that I am a traveling consultant by day, but my nights I have reclaimed. No one will tell my father that I have become a mockery to "professionalism." He wouldn't understand, anyway. He has sunk too deep in his own professional abyss to remember what life—what *real life*—tastes like. He wouldn't understand how this breath of youth entering my body has actually saved me because, for too long, he has lived without breathing.

Daily, I scroll past Jenn's number in my cell phone and think about what it would take to win her back. But I'm too far away, here in California, and it's better that way.

I delete Maria's number from my phone. This is what it means to be young, to be a college guy again, to live free of commitments and consequences. This is the difference between driving and flying. Driving, where I hit the gas and then the brakes and then the turn signal and then check the map and then hit the brakes again because someone cut me off and then the gas and then swerve and then move into the center lane and my fingers grip the steering wheel under the stress of a seven-hour drive and then I collapse into a jagged pot hole; and flying, where I instead settle into a seat and look at the window, and maybe there's turbulence but it isn't my problem.

In the Highland fraternity house chapter room, I spend a full morning calling auto shops in the greater Philadelphia area, pricing tires and wheels, deciding that I can put the tire on my

credit card but I'll pass on replacing the dinged-up wheel because the price is approximately equal to three-fourths of my month's salary and my credit card bill has already grown substantially larger than my bank account. I coordinate an appointment to change the tire, neglecting to tell the mechanic that my wheel is damaged.

When the afternoon turns to evening and the sun sets, I suggest to a couple of the undergrads that we take a drive to the local Save-Mart and pick up a couple 12-packs. "On me," I say, because I can pay with my NKE credit card and lose the receipt and report the expense as my lunch or dinner. I sign my name to the receipt,

China

and this, too, feels intoxicating. By the time we've all finished our first beers, I again feel lighter. The cold worries of back East thaw...crack apart...melt away.

Cal State-Highland to Long Beach State.

To San Francisco State.

Then, back on a plane for my visit to Delaware, where I will arrive a day late to the chapter house because I spend an afternoon at the auto shop in Philadelphia as the new tires are installed, and the mechanic tells me that he is worried about the condition of my wheels. The metal, he says, is so twisted that it could pop or destroy the rubber at any moment; he's surprised, in fact, that it didn't shred the spare.

"No biggie," I say. "My mechanic back home said it wasn't a problem."

"Your mechanic back home? I'm telling you now, cause this don't look good, that you're going to want to get new wheels."

"I'll take care of it. Just the tires for now, thanks."

After my Explorer is repaired, I just grab a hotel and relax at an Applebee's a block away because it's already 7:00 PM, and I don't want to drive at night. The stress of the potholes is bad enough during the day.

No worries. So far from Indianapolis, and no one sees a thing.

I spend three days in Delaware, then drive to Marshall in Huntington, West Virginia. My Explorer rattles worse than it ever has before, hangers shaking, but I try to ignore it. Marshall to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and most of the fraternity brothers are out of town for some road trip, so I have the house almost to myself. Miami to Toledo, up against Lake Erie. To Central Michigan in distant Mount Pleasant, where the brothers have secured for me a hotel room near the local casino. To the University of Michigan, where I visit five different college bars, probably a personal record. And then I drive south once again, Explorer making noises so loud that I have to crank up my stereo to an unhealthy level and I don't ever hear when someone honks behind me; I drive south, away from the lakeside industry and smokestacks and into the quiet cornfields of northwest Ohio. To Bowling Green State University. No worries.

Clean slate every three days.

Chapter Nine: The Millennials

Summer Training in Indianapolis University of Kentucky East Tennessee State University University of Virginia—Green Valley University of Pittsburgh Shippensburg University St. Joseph's University New Mexico State University Texas Tech California State University—Fresno California State University—Highland California State University—Long Beach California State University—San Francisco University of Delaware Marshall University Miami University (Ohio) University of Toledo Central Michigan University University of Michigan

Bowling Green State University

Purdue University Indiana University Headquarters – Mid-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis) University of Oklahoma University of Kansas University of Missouri—Columbia University of Nebraska Iowa State University Thanksgiving Vacation Bradley University University of Iowa Headquarters – End-of-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis) Christmas Vacation Pack up and drive, pack up and drive. Clean slate every three days.

In the last weeks, I've driven from Philly to Delaware, shot straight through West Virginia, across southern Ohio, curved northward and through the down-and-out Great Lakes cities of northern Ohio and eastern Michigan.

Here in the Midwest, away from the t-shirts and flip-flops and sunshine of the West Coast, away from the smoke stacks and strip mines and stacked-on-top-of-one-another cities of the mid-Atlantic, the universities feel different. Unlike both the East and West Coast schools I've visited, all of these Midwestern universities are hours from the crowded urban centers of each state. Still the schools burst with Chicago and Indianapolis and Cincinnati and Cleveland kids, but the campuses are secluded limestone-and-brick microcosms that stand in the middle of hundreds of square miles of cornfields. Miami University...*Old Miami*. The University of *Michigan*. Like the University of Illinois, they are communities of unblemished historic architecture, of thick, towering brick buildings emblazoned with donor names, of jagged limestone castles, of wide open spaces graced with statues of past presidents and administrators, all the campus surrounded by neighborhoods of fraternity and sorority mansions just as old as the school itself.

On campus, the sprawling green quads have now turned autumn yellow, ready to be frozen and covered in snow. The full, sumptuous trees are changing, too, shaking off red and orange leaves as though they've caught fire. Even the afternoon air has grown cold, even smells smoky at times. Living in Florida all my life, never having experienced any season save for endless summers, this has happened quicker than I imagined. And, everywhere I go, I am the only one who regards this change of season, this cold, as...as anything to be regarded.

The students seem to be changing with the season, also. Naïve freshmen have donned an extra layer of clothing (thick university logo sweatshirts, usually) and have "toughened up," learning valuable lessons after having suffered humbling first-year embarrassments, and the excitement of *FREEDOM!* has settled. The world no longer sparkles with newness. College is life, now. Midterms are approaching. Homecoming Weeks are ending at campuses everywhere, and it's the semester's final stretch before Thanksgiving.

Yes, the excitement is over. Break out that peacoat I bought, those gloves and that sweater. Break it out, those things I've never worn before in my life. *But I'm not changing*. No. I've already changed, and I like what I've become. I am Charles Washington again, not some blazer-clad clone. College, college!

But as I finish my drive to Bowling Green, I receive a phone call from Sam Anderson at New Mexico State. It's been three weeks since I last talked to him. As soon as I see the phone number displayed on my cell phone's Caller ID, a sinking feeling overtakes me. The same feeling to which I'd grown so accustomed throughout the early weeks of my semester: the sensation of cresting a hill and dropping suddenly. The roads here in southern Michigan are mostly flat, sometimes rising and falling in prairie rolls, but I suddenly hear the hangers shaking on my backseat rod; I suddenly feel as though my Explorer is barreling down toward darkness, brakes smoking and cracking and giving up, and I'm...sinking...freefalling. It's a feeling that I thought I'd conquered, but I suppose I'd just repressed. Sam *could* be calling to formally ask for his letter of recommendation, sure, to ask questions about the job or to ask advice, to give me an update on the chapter...these could all be reasons for the call, but somehow I doubt it.

"Got a question for you," Sam says, no pleasantries.

"Would love to hear it," I say, trying to hide a shaky voice.

"I just read that blindfolding is considered hazing."

"That's correct," I say.

"Blind-folding?" he asks, this high-pitched squeak in his voice that I've never heard from him before, the sort of uncontrollable voice crack that's only possible when you learn something completely unexpected...when, perhaps, you learn the truth behind some long-kept lie. "Just a piece of fabric? Just a shred of a bed sheet? Or a sock?"

"Sam," I say and I am pulling off the highway, pulling onto the shoulder, hoping the hangers stop shaking. I try to speak softly, gently, walking the tightrope of delivering the truth without upsetting him. I must control the history that has been written for me in New Mexico, must ensure that the textbooks of Charles Washington are not distributed nationwide. "The by-the-book definition of hazing includes a mention of blindfolds," I say. "It doesn't necessarily say anything about...any *material*. Just the blindfold itself is considered...by those who developed the definition...they say it is a way to demean someone psychologically. To scare them." Gentle, supportive: "Is there anything you need to tell me? Anything I can do?"

"Just fabric," he says. "Not physical abuse or any of that shit. Fuck."

"Sam. I can help, really."

"There's a rat," Sam says. "Fucking snitch."

"Who? What do you mean?"

"I tell these pledges every day that this is a *fraternity*, 'kay, a *secret* society. We're all adults now, I keep telling them. We don't reveal our secrets. Am I right?"

"Right on all counts."

"Kay," he says. "That's all I need to hear. This organization is founded on *secrecy*. Our letters. Our ritual. We don't run and tell our parents what we do."

"What happened, Sam? Tell me. I can help."

"We've always blindfolded," he says. "It's always been like that. Never knew it was against the rules. When I came into Big Brother Night three years ago, they blindfolded me. I didn't complain. *Nobody* complained. You don't fuck with tradition."

"You're right, Sam," I say.

"Last Friday, we do the same thing as always. We blindfold the pledges and have them march into this dark room. We're in the fraternal robes, all the brothers, singing 'Song for a Brother' just like it says in the New Member Education manual. We quiz them about one another," he says and pauses, as if considering whether it is wise to continue with the story and further incriminate himself. I recognize the tone in his voice because I've sounded the same way so many times this semester. He's right about one thing, though. This entire ceremony, blindfolds included, is outlined in the national officer manual that we give to each chapter; the undergraduates are *supposed* to do all of this. "They're all blindfolded in this dark room," he says, "and we give them these far-fetched questions that they can't answer. A test of brotherhood, 'kay? Like, 'Name the hometowns of your pledge brothers,' shit like that. Every time they get one wrong, all the brothers get, you know, *loud*, and yell at them about how they should know these things about their brothers. They're blindfolded, so it's kind of scary for them, but it's"—he's silent—"it's *nothing*, really."

"Is that it, then?" I ask. "You get a little loud, and that's the whole ceremony?"

"After that," Sam says, "we pretend to have a fake blackball session. Pretend to kick them all out. We tell them to get the fuck out of...we tell them to *leave* the room so we can vote on whether or not to keep them as pledges or kick 'em to the curb. Just then, though, a brother walks behind each pledge—this is the Big Brother—and he whispers the information into their

ears, the answers to the questions, and he argues for a second chance. They answer correctly this time, see? With a little help from their new Big Brother? That's when we remove the blindfolds and reveal the pledge's Big Brother for the first time. And we sing the song again, go through the whole explanation of how real brotherhood isn't just memorizing stuff, but being there for your brothers."

"That all sounds acceptable," I say, trying to reassure him but sensing that the New Mexico State version of these events—the version heavily influenced, no doubt, by ROTC drill instructor practices—includes another chapter that Sam has not revealed. "And one of the pledges was upset by this?"

"Some pledge told his parents the entire ritual," Sam says. "The entire ritual!"

"Relax," I say. "It's all right. It doesn't sound too bad."

"Well, fuck," he says. "That's not all of it, you know?"

"There's more," I say.

"Yeah," he says. "I guess."

"Tell me, Sam," I say, thinking that if *I* know *his* secrets, then he won't possibly reveal mine. "I can help," I say.

After talking evasively for another minute or so, finally Sam is ready to talk. "All right," he says, "but this has got to stay between us. I'm not kidding." And that's exactly what I needed to hear. Before the ceremony, Sam tells me, he sat the pledges—all fifteen of them, blindfolded—in the backs of pick-up trucks and hauled them all to some pecan farm on the periphery of developed Las Cruces; like prisoners-of-war, he had them all march single-file through the rows of pecan trees, both of their arms outstretched and clutching the shoulders of the man walking in front of them. Occasionally, one of the pledges would trip over a root or bit of upturned soil or get smacked in the face with a renegade branch, but finally they all came to a creek or an irrigation canal or something (Sam isn't sure; all he knows is that the farmer is a Nike from several years back, and looks the other way when they come onto his property), and Sam marched the pledges onto a modest wooden bridge with low railings, twenty feet over the shallow, rock-cut water. And there, with the boards creaking below their feet, and a steady stream rushing past below the boards, Sam made each blindfolded pledge—one at a time, so it was *safe*, he says—climb up onto a stepladder that he had positioned in the center of the bridge, stand tall, fold his hands over his chest, turn around, and fall backward.

"A trust fall," Sam says. "They thought they were walking the plank, you know? Into the water? But we had a bunch of brothers who caught them when they stepped off the ladder. Teaches the pledges to trust that we wouldn't put them in harm's way?"

"That's definitely not in the manual," I say.

"Nobody gets hurt," Sam says. "They could fall, sure, but nothing's ever happened. But one of our pledges told his fucking parents, see, and they were pissed. *Pissed*, 'kay. How could someone blindfold their son on a bridge, could have died, blah blah blah, all this shit. They called the university and got our Greek Affairs Director on the line. He called me—*me*, personally—and asked if the whole deal was true."

"You didn't confirm it, did you?" I ask.

"I said maybe, and he started talking about hazing, about expulsion."

"Does the kid want to pursue this? Or is it just his parents?"

"His parents," Sam says. "Our pledges fucking loved the ceremony."

"That's good news. If they only have testimony, and he doesn't want to testify..." "Well," Sam says. "Well, what?"

"The thing is, there's a picture."

"A picture? Of what?"

"When we had the pledges in the back of the pick-up truck? Blindfolded? Someone took a picture of us while we were driving back to the fraternity house. The Greek Advisor emailed me a copy of the picture. All these kids in white shirts, hunched over, heads down, black blindfolds on. Looks so much worse than it is."

"The Greek Advisor has this picture," I say.

"He gets pictures all the time, that's what he told me," Sam says. "Every time there's anything weird going on around the university, people take pictures and assume it's a fraternity. Could be the fucking football team, 'kay, but the Greek Advisor files the pictures away in case he hears anything else. In our case, he gets a phone call from some parents, and all of a sudden he's got a story that matches the pictures."

"But it's still just a story," I say. "There's still no evidence."

"They're using the blindfolding charge to put us on 'exploratory suspension' for the rest of the semester," Sam says. "And they want to conduct some big investigation."

"All right, all right," I say, and I'm not gentle and supportive now, but instead assertive. New Mexico State is like a suitcase full of secrets for me—the Etiquette Dinner and the pledge humiliation I witnessed, the beer I drank, the trip to Mexico, the pledges who were forced to act as DDs, the sex in Maria's dorm room, the vomit in the sink—and right now, someone is tossing duffel bags and back-packs aside to get to this suitcase; the further this situation progresses, the greater the chance someone will uncover all the details of my visit. Hell, if the university administration takes Sam Anderson down (hazing charges, he said, and *expulsion*), he'd probably hand over my suitcase without a moment's hesitation. Our Educational Consultant knows what we do, he'd say. He condoned all of this. "Let me handle this," I say. "Make sure your Greek Advisor has *my* cell phone number. Don't say another word to him, no matter what he says. Without confession, without clear evidence, all is hearsay. *Refer all questions to me*."

But still I'm thinking of all the things I can't control: have the parents called the National Headquarters, too? Has LaFaber heard about this yet? LaFaber will want to know if I saw anything suspicious in New Mexico, hazing, and how could I answer without incriminating this chapter and myself?

"And tell your Greek Advisor not to call Headquarters," I say. "I'm the national representative. You just let me handle it. This thing won't last another week."

"You're sure?" Sam asks.

"Blindfolding is against the hazing guidelines, but it's not serious," I say, knowing that this single situation, like the fabric, is only superficial. What lies beneath, for them and for me, is dark and damning. "Don't worry," I say. "I'm not worried."

Sam exhales, loud and prolonged, like a man coming to terms with something. "All right," he says. "I'll let you handle it. I trust you."

"That's right, Sam. We're good."

"I hope so. So where you at these days?"

"Heading to Bowling Green State," I say. "In Ohio. A lot of fun out here in the Midwest, but it's getting cold. Ya'll don't have that problem in Las Cruces, do you?"

"Little bit," he says. "Nights are chilly, remember? Gets cold really quick, soon as the sun sets. Happens so quick, you freak. What about the women out there in O-*hi*-o? They got any honeys, anything like we had for you in Las Cruces?"

"Maybe. But you guys take the cake."

"Oh," he says. "That reminds me. Maria keeps asking me about you."

"Maria?"

"You didn't forget about her already, did you?"

"No, no," I say, that sinking feeling returning even though I'm parked. "No, of course I didn't forget about her. What—" and I scratch the back of my neck, smooth my pants, scratch the back of my neck, "what's she saying?"

"I don't know," he says. "I only ran into her once. She was like, 'why isn't he calling me' and shit. I don't know. I played it off."

"Is that it?" I ask.

"Freshman girls, you know?"

"Right," I say, and he's calm and so I don't ask any other questions. We both hang up after another minute or so, Sam reassured that I will do everything in my power—and he must believe that my power is in much greater supply than it actually is—to deflect the Greek Advisor and the parents and bury the blindfold situation. But all of it...the allegation, the casual mention of Maria...came from nowhere, came like a cold night in the desert. Gets cold so quick, he said, you *freak*.

Cold maybe. But I can't allow myself to worry. Can't change, not again.

No matter if Sam's getting into a little trouble with some nosy parents or if Maria is getting anxious because her dream-boy is just a lie. I pull my Explorer back onto the highway, every bump in the road pounding into my tires and my dented wheels, reverberating through the cabin. Shirts and hangers swaying once again in the backseat. When I arrive on the Bowling Green campus, it has become a dark day, a wet day; a dim sunlight barely penetrates a thick wall of unmoving granite-gray clouds seemingly cemented across the sky. Everywhere, students walk without purpose, some holding up umbrellas to a quick drizzling rain that comes in twenty-second spurts. It is a campus dripping in browns and oranges; wavering "BGSU" banners hang from lampposts in colors that match the dead leaves that have collected in slushy piles across the mud-grass and soaked sidewalks. On any other day, perhaps, this campus might convey the same historic authority as Michigan or Illinois, but today it seems only a pale and depressed distant relative: the concrete buildings are stained dark with rainwater, appearing to glower down at students instead of welcoming them into the classrooms; and the library—a towering building, eight or nine floors, decorated along one entire concrete side with some sort of funky, graffiti-like artwork—seems today like a foolish experiment in modern art rather than a striking and inventive "statement."

It is a cold Sunday in Bowling Green, and before I leave the warmth of my Explorer to walk a puddle-spotted sidewalk to the Nu Kappa Epsilon fraternity house, I rummage through my backseat for my Edison University windbreaker. Since I left the Headquarters in late August to begin my sixteen-week travel schedule, I can't remember a single day of rain, and I can't quite recall if I stuffed my windbreaker under the seat or into my duffel bag or if, maybe, I left it in Indianapolis. Finally, though, I find it and make my way through a rain that seems to grow heavier and louder as I walk to the front steps of the chapter house. The NKE house is a simple brick structure identical to several other simple brick structures bearing other Greek letter combinations, and identical to many other simple brick structures that appear to be university dorms.

The president of this chapter, Bradley Camden, is short and has the sort of pudgy face and stomach that come not from excessive eating and drinking, I think, but from a lack of exercise. He meets me at the door and invites me into the house, where I am ushered down a long hallway to a special guest room that actually says "GUEST" on the door. The school owns the fraternity houses, Bradley tells me, and treats each of them as if it was a dorm, complete with a Graduate Assistant and a Resident Advisor—two fully paid staff members!—on the first floor of every house. Bowling Green likes to refer to itself as a "learning laboratory," he says with a shrug, and so the fraternities and sororities and clubs and organizations are supplied with seemingly limitless resources and graduate student advisors who are completing their Master's degrees in College Student Personnel.

"Do you have very many guests?" I ask him. "Enough to justify a guest room?"

"A lot of graduate students," Bradley says. "Every time they have a conference or something, they use all of these guest rooms to house the attendees."

"Do you even have control of this house?" I ask, setting my laptop computer onto a plain wooden desk so smooth and scratch-free that I wonder if anyone has ever even used it. The walls in this room, and throughout the fraternity house, are cinderblocks painted over with an off-white color, and the texture is bumpy and sloppy, as though the walls were dirty or chipped when the crews painted them. I think briefly of the ceiling fan back at Pittsburgh, of how the brothers simply painted over spattered beer.

"The university owns it," Bradley says sleepily. "But yeah. It's the Nu Kappa Epsilon fraternity house. Bowling Green just makes use of the resources at their disposal. They notify us if they need to use the chapter room or the guest room."

"They can use your chapter room, too?"

"They notify us," he says again.

"Wow," I say, and I'm afraid to ask the obvious: does the university allow you to have alcohol in your house? So I keep it to myself, and learn later—as we sit in a pizza place near campus, the only place I could convince the Executive Board to meet, on a Sunday night, that might serve beer (they kept suggesting Subway, and they didn't seem to understand how ludicrous an idea that was)—that the university does not allow alcohol in the fraternity houses. Bradley shrugs again. As we eat pizza, and as I empty the pitcher of Miller Lite before me, the undergraduate fraternity brothers shying away from the beer as though it was a poison, I ask what everyone does for fun in Bowling Green, and they tell me that there are *so many things to do* at BGSU, but they never elaborate. Parties? Football tailgates? Bars? They shrug, tell me that the university has a lot to offer. They're always busy, they say.

"Since you're a consultant," Bradley says when I see him in the kitchen the next morning, "you should check out the CSP program at Bowling Green. It would be right up your alley." He's dressed in the same ash-gray hoodie that he was wearing yesterday, and he's eating a McGriddle, one of those fast-food breakfast productions that includes several different breakfast foods—eggs, cheese, sausage, and pancakes, I think—all smashed together. I've scoured the kitchen for cereal, for orange juice, for granola bars, for anything, before my coming appointment with Bowling Green's Greek Advisor, but I find only discarded McDonalds and Burger King bags in the trashcan.

"I've thought about it," I say. "I'm not sure about grad school, though."

Bradley shrugs, tosses his McDonalds bag into the trashcan, where it lands on a heap of other brown fast-food bags. "What'd you say your degree was?" he asks. "Communications? Don't you *have* to go to grad school?"

I force a laugh and say, "Not at all, bro." He winces when I say "bro," so I say in a slightly more stilted tone, "Not at all, Bradley." But the fact is, I've heard about CSP more and more since I've hit the Midwest, in quick conversations with LaFaber and with nearly every Greek Advisor between Delaware and Illinois. I've heard about BGSU's CSP Master's program *constantly* for the last two days. It's the best in the nation, everyone brags, even when they don't know what it is. And Bradley's comment, suggesting that my degree is pointless without an accompanying Master's, causes that sinking feeling to overtake me once again. Throughout college, even though there were no real consequences, the clock was ticking until the Real World started. Now, with consulting, it feels like I've only added another hour to the clock.

When I walk into the lobby of the Greek Life Office (housed in a building that looks like a brown flying saucer), I am greeted not by one lone Graduate Assistant at a receptionist-style desk—as is usually the case—but by six graduate students, all of whom leave a long, twisting, wall-length computer desk and rush to me and shake my hand and tell me how much they admire what I am doing, that I'm making such a big difference in the lives of students everywhere.

"I wish I could travel to different universities," one blonde guy says sadly. "My fraternity didn't select me as a consultant."

"That's too bad," I say.

"It's always exciting to meet new consultants, though," a curly brunette reassures me. "It's so *ex*-citing." "Right," I say. "This is a...full office. What do you all do?"

"I'm Todd, and I'm the GA in charge of IFC," the blonde guys says. "And that's Lisa, the Special Events GA. And Tamara, the Panhellenic assistant. Rodney is the GA for NPHC. Shannon is the Department assistant, and Sheryl is the Recruitment assistant."

"That's a lot of assistants," I say and they laugh and smile politely. After I say it, I realize that this is probably a comment that every visitor makes, and that the GAs probably laugh every time it is said.

But they're everywhere, these GAs: in the fraternity houses, in the dorms, on every floor of this building, in every office, these young graduate students who still look awkward in their suits and ties. They scurry about with clipboards and portfolio binders and to-do lists for their departmental supervisors. GAs, GAs, GAs. Every major "student life" department at Bowling Green is the same, they say, from Homecoming to Orientation. GAs, GAs, GAs. The best program in the country for student personnel! You're guaranteed to get experience and good job placement. Whether you want to become the Director of Orientation at the University of Maine or the Coordinator of the Office of Student Involvement at Memphis, BGSU is the place for CSP. And, like me, these graduate assistants were all students who had been tremendously involved in campus life during their undergraduate college careers: these were presidents of fraternities and sororities, resident advisors, Preview Team members, Homecoming Kings and Queens, major scholarship winners, honor society inductees. They were all Diamond Candidates who chose to fashion their undergraduate social activities into their careers. I should go back to grad school, too, they say. Consulting gives me an edge on the application process. And this was the plan all along for me, wasn't it? To use my experience as an Educational Consultant to propel me into a career in student personnel? But over the past month, I think I've forced myself to forget about the future.

"You'll need solid references and a squeaky clean resume," Lisa says, "but I'm sure you've got all of that."

"In other words," Todd says and winks at me, "kiss all the right asses, and don't piss of the wrong people. It's a small world, this field, and nobody gossips like CSP."

"Right, ha," I say.

"This is what you're planning to do, right?" Lisa asks. "Grad school?"

"I guess, yeah," I say. "That's been the goal."

"Let's get you in to see Dr. Vernon," Todd says. "Looks like he's back."

Just seconds later, I am led into a large office decorated in dark brown. A mahogany desk, I think, with a mahogany pencil holder and a mahogany "outbox." A mahogany bookshelf, a mahogany end-table...the office is clean, open, and opulent, the sort of place that I would expect a powerful figure to inhabit.

Dr. Vernon, the Greek Advisor, sits behind his desk, but as I walk into his office, his back is to me and he stares out his floor-to-ceiling window at the crowds of students scattered on the wet pavement below. Slowly, he turns his chair to face me, and he motions with one thick hand for me to sit at the dark-cushioned wood chairs before his desk, his gold cuff links reflecting his lamplight like sparks on copper wires. Dr. Vernon. Dr. Harold Vernon. And he is a betterdressed version of every other Greek Advisor I've met so far, French-cuff shirt so starched that it doesn't even bend or fold as he pulls a folder from the top drawer of his desk, slides it onto the desk's surface just beside a book called *Generation X in the Job Market* by (surprise) Dr. Harold Vernon, and then he folds his hands before his face. "Charles Washington?" he asks. "That's me," I say.

"So good to finally meet you," he says in a flimsy voice that betrays the room's dark weight. "I've heard good things from my colleagues."

"From your colleagues?" I sit, adjust my pants, and realize that—yes—this is the nicest Greek Advisor office I've been in, that usually the Greek Advisor is some CSP kid fresh out of Grad School who takes the job (which pays \$30 K, tops) for a year or two until he/she can find some better-paying university position. The reason that New Mexico State's Director of Greek Affairs doesn't worry me is, quite simply, that the man is only a year older than me and just started the job after graduating from Wingate in North Carolina. Very rarely is the Greek Advisor as prestigious and glamorous (and well-paid) as Dr. Vernon appears to be. Only the University of Illinois had a Greek Advisor who wore comparable clothing (although Dr. Jacobs was a *woman*, of course), and that was the largest Greek Community in the country. Hanging from the wall to my right is a plaque that reads, "For 15 Years of Distinguished Service at Bowling Green," and with fifteen years of continuous employment (thirteen more than most advisors) Dr. Vernon must be very well-connected in the world of higher education and Greek Affairs. A small world, those GAs said. And Dr. Vernon's colleagues? He probably knowsprobably taught-many of the Greek Advisors that I've met throughout the country. All the advisors over the past couple weeks, to which I haven't even feigned interest during their rehearsed updates on "what the university is doing for Greek Life."

"My colleagues say that you've got a good head on your shoulders, Charles," he says. "Have you ever thought of continuing in your profession?"

I laugh unexpectedly, stop myself. "Consulting, you mean?"

"No, no," he says. "I'm talking about higher education. Student personnel. A career in anything from Greek Life to Residence Life. Bowling Green has an excellent program for College Student Personnel, you know?"

"I've heard."

"Any thoughts on the matter?"

"Before I started consulting, that was my dream job," I say.

"What is your degree?"

"Organizational communication."

"Ahh, how wonderfully vague," Dr. Vernon says. "Limited options, aside from administration. So what is your dream job now?"

"It's difficult to decide, to commit to a career," I say. "Especially in higher education. Most advisors seem out of touch with the students."

"Yes," Dr. Vernon says, his cuff links sparkling again as he motions toward the window and the students walking about campus, "and I'm afraid that, as we get older, we fall more and more out of touch. I completely understand your hesitation. Most of us take these jobs because we want to help students achieve all that they can, and then we get stuck in disciplinary positions. This can be a very rewarding career, though, Charles. When you finally make a difference in a student's life..." He lets his hand drop to his mahogany desktop, shakes his head, then looks me in the eyes. "Are you familiar with the programs that we coordinate here at Bowling Green?"

"I've only had a few meetings so far on this visit," I tell him, and that's an overstatement. After the pizza place last night, I watched Sunday night football in the guest room until I fell

asleep. The NKE fraternity brothers all seem so...sedated, uninterested in spontaneous conversation.

"We probably offer our students more programming than any other Greek Life office in the nation," he says, and then lists off the names and goals of alcohol awareness workshops coordinated by this office; he lists academic success workshops, scholarships specifically for Greek students, scholarship funding available for Greek students to use in their own scholarship programming, recruitment conclaves, leadership conclaves, and I hear the words "conclave" and "symposium" and "convocation" and "conference" and "workshop" and "retreat" used so often that I try to keep a mental tally and am eventually overwhelmed. The office (the graduate assistants, probably) plans Diversity Pot Luck Dinners and Faculty Luncheons, resume-building sessions and study skills presentations, Greek-wide service events, Greek-wide "Unity" barbecues. Dr. Vernon seems to have this entire boilerplate speech memorized for the benefit of traveling consultants and alumni and national representatives and other school administrators; it slides out of his mouth as easily as the Alphabet Song.

I'm not exactly sure what to say. The Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity Headquarters provides its own share of programs, from Brothers Assisting Brothers to the Circles of Danger risk management program to paid Educational Consultants to the Do It! program to the Leadership Conference each summer. But Bowling Green...I can't even remember half of what Dr. Vernon just told me.

"That's a lot of programs," I say.

"Our students are *well* taken care of," he says dramatically and taps his fingertips together like Montgomery Burns. "We're catering to the Millennials. Our practices will directly influence the rest of the universities in this country, you'll see." "Millennials," I say. "The Millennial Generation, right?"

"Absolutely," he says. "Are you familiar with generational theory?"

"No. I just heard some alumni complaining about Millennials."

"How cliché, to complain about the youth," he says, sighs. "The news media has it all wrong about students today, anyway. They like to equate all youths with one of a limited number of stereotypes. Pop Culture Consumers, maybe? Kids bursting at the seams with disrespect, just by-products of rap music and *South Park*? Total sarcasm, an extension of Generation X apathy. That's why you'll hear some people referring to students today as Generation Y, as though this new generation of students shares the same values and beliefs of the previous generation."

"That's not too far-off," I say.

"But it is, it is," he says. "It is a horrible stereotype. It isn't vulgarity that attracts the youth culture of the Millennials. It is the sharp commentary directed at an establishment that has become dysfunctional. Are children supposed to look up to Bill Clinton or George W. Bush, after all? No, they make fun of them because they let us down, because they let everybody down with their dishonesty. Are children supposed to just accept all of the rules imposed upon them by the Baby Boomers and Generation X, these older groups who have made a mess of so many social issues?"

"Yes," I say. "Quite the hypocrisy." He's really getting into all of this, now, and I suspect that this is his area of study. Judging from the book on his desk, at least, this seems like an area in which he's done quite a bit of research. And although I let him continue speaking (it seems to make administrators happy to simply have someone listening), I keep thinking how out-oftouch—how typical—he sounds, all these concepts and characterizations of a youth culture with which he rarely interacts. "Yes!" he shouts. "The hypocrisy! Or the media will stereotype all students as Columbine shooters, or drug addicts, or alcoholics, or hooligans, or sex addicts."

"You've done a lot of research that says otherwise, I'm guessing?" I ask.

"Of course!" he says, his face overcome with a joyous "a-ha" grin. "It would be silly to argue that some of the negative aspects of youth culture don't exist. They do, they do. But wouldn't it be equally silly to assert that the negative is *all* there is? Especially when those who assert these negatives are guilty of the same things? Studies now," he says, "are starting to reveal a very different side of the youth culture, something much more positive and much more encouraging. The makings, perhaps, of the first Hero Generation since the G.I. Generation of World War II."

"Students right now?" I ask.

"Millennials, those born in 1982 and beyond," he says. "What we're finding is, Generation X was a youth ignored by parents who were—I'm afraid to say, since I am one of these parents—too busy leading the cultural revolution of the '60s and '70s. Generation X is the slacker generation, the misfits, the punks, the rebels. But Millennials, they've been nurtured from birth by ultra-protective parents who want to correct that behavior. All of these students we see around us, these Millennials, their generation has the greatest potential *ever*, is what we've found. It isn't just that parents have been protective, but that parents have pushed these kids to succeed in surprising numbers. This is the smartest youth ever."

I think of Sam Anderson at New Mexico State, of students standing on a chair in the center of a dark room. I think of Adam Duke at Illinois, his big-screen TV and six-pack of Anchor Steam. I think of the Pittsburgh chapter room, the stain on the ceiling. "Parents are programming their kids from an early age," Dr. Vernon is saying. "Team sports, foreign language lessons, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Once they get into high school, kids are taking AP classes in their *sophomore* year. I read recently of a student entering UVA with 72 credit hours! High school enrollments are at their highest levels ever; college enrollments, likewise. These are high achievers, and they'll have more positive accomplishments by the time they graduate high school than most Gen-Xers have *even now*. If nurtured properly, think of the future."

"Do you...do you talk to the kids around here? I don't mean to be rude, but—" and suddenly I can't stop myself from interjecting what I've been thinking all along "—but I stay overnight in fraternity houses. These kids don't spend their nights studying and doing service projects. These kids aren't all high achievers."

"Ahh, ahh!" he says as though I've hit upon some important point. "These are very broad generalizations, to be certain, but isn't all of culture a generalization? And when you deal with tradition-oriented organizations, change comes slowly. If you're going to fraternity houses where the behavior is different than what I've described, or seems as though it may never catch up to what I've described, it might be because the older members—or the National Fraternity—or the school—still has no idea how to *service* this new generation. Once we begin to view them as who they are, we can help them realize their full potential."

"And that's your goal, huh? The goal of your programs?"

"That should be the goal of all higher education."

"Helping students realize their potential?" I ask. And what was it that Sam Anderson asked me before I left Las Cruces? *Why did you take this job*? he asked. And I said that I wanted to mean something. I wanted a job that mattered. Consulting was supposed to have this same aim

in mind: it was supposed to matter because I would be helping students realize their potential. I haven't, of course. But now, all those images of my post-college future that I've tried to erase, those images of a house and a yard and a front porch and coffee and newspapers and Jenn and khaki shorts on the weekends and a career and consequences, they come rushing back. Here's a job that matters, some part of me is saying. This is it! College Student Personnel! You're perfect for this, Charles! This is what you wanted before, and this is *still* your best option. Your only option, really. You haven't lost any time...consulting is the logical stepping stone into student personnel. This is your future, Charles Washington.

"They need these programs, these students," he says. "Crave them." His cuff links flicker once again as he folds his hands before his face, assuming the sort of distinguished pose that one might see on a book jacket. When I leave, we shake hands, and then I am immediately met by an army of graduate assistants outside Dr. Vernon's door.

"What did you think, what did you think?" Todd asks me.

Dr. Vernon's door shuts behind me.

"It was interesting," I say.

"This is a hell of a career, isn't it?" Todd says, and I wonder why they all keep trying to convince me that I should make this my profession. What do *they* get out of it? Todd hands me a copy of *The Chronicle*, on the cover of which is a title, "How we can help Millennials discover their future," by Dr. Vernon. Read it, read it, he says. This career is perfect for you, he says. And perhaps these GAs are all looking for that rewarding experience that Dr. Vernon spoke of. Perhaps they all need to feel that they've made some positive impact, that they've helped a student to find his way. *Me*.

The living room of this Bowling-Green-owned-and-operated NKE house is an awkward mixture of the friendly warmth of a Northern den and the impersonal frigidity of a university dorm lobby.

The walls are—like every dorm I've visited—painted white cinderblocks, spider-webbed here and there with cracks and chips in the paint, and the doors are heavy, bright red things with tiny black boxes on the walls beside the door handles (the keys are equipped with a computer sensor, which is re-programmed to a new code at the start of each semester); it is an indestructible room, meant to withstand fifty years of annual move-ins and move-outs; the carpet is a red and navy pattern so bright and hideous that its very ugliness makes it practically stainproof; three couches are situated in the living room, also, long green-cushioned blocks arranged in a sort of amphitheater square around a 32-inch TV that sits upon a wood-block TV stand.

The brothers of this fraternity house, though, have added touches of humanity to this square, unfriendly room, wherever possible. A metal tube runs the length of the wall around the living room—interrupted only by the two red doors, one which leads to the main hallway (and the hallways leads to the front door, the bedrooms, the laundry room, and the kitchen) and the other which leads to the live-in Graduate Advisor's room—and encased within the metal tube is a thick strip of cork. The cork, apparently, is the only part of the wall on which the brothers may hang any wall decorations, and in a straight line around the room, almost completely level, are hundreds of photographs from social events, and many multi-colored flyers for various campus and Greek Life events ("Welcome Back Expo," "Swing Club Dance-Off," "Greek Anti-Hazing Speaker"). On an easel near the hallway door rests the fraternity's gigantic composite photo, the annual wood-and-glass framed collection of posed tuxedo photos of each brother, which is much too heavy to hang from the cork.

It is a Monday night, and it is in this living room that I sit with the Executive Board of the BGSU Nikes, and we all eat our Burger King drive-through quietly, dabbing our mouths with our napkins, clearing our throats, munching softly, swallowing. I suppose I might have come across...the wrong way...yesterday when I asked where the bars were, because they look at me now with squinted eyes, with "you're not one of us" distrust, something I haven't seen since Illinois, something I thought I'd shaken when I traveled to New Mexico and became a college student again. The living room TV is on, playing old *Seinfeld* reruns.

"So," I say eventually, once I've disposed of the burger and moved on to my fries. "Do you guys cook very often? You have a kitchen, right?"

"No," says Bradley, the president.

"No?"

"No, we don't really cook."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," he says, shrugs. "Time?"

"What do you mean?"

"We don't have time," he says. "Not together, anyway. So many people have different schedules, you know? Half our guys either have class or work after 5 PM, so...we can't get together."

"You could still hire a cook, though. Late plates for anyone who works."

"University won't let us. They told us that we'd have to use the campus meal plan, have it delivered, and that isn't very good food."

"Why don't you take turns cooking? You can buy food in bulk."

"You serious?"

"A lot of alumni tell me that this is how some houses were run just ten, fifteen years ago," I say. "You guys have all this kitchen equipment in here. Industrial stoves and what-not. You could put it to good use."

"None of us can cook," he says. "I don't even...this sounds weird, but I can't even make scrambled eggs. I tried once, and they were all burnt."

I watch them for awhile. These don't seem like "Millennials," as Dr. Vernon described them. They eat fast food and spend their evening talking about *Saturday Night Live*. These kids here at Bowling Green spend their night engulfed in video games. All of them, it seems. Seven or eight of the fraternity brothers drag their laptops into the living room, plugging in wireless cards and network cables, and they play *Warcraft* together.

"Who's going to GAMMA tomorrow?" Bradley asks as a scream erupts from his laptop speakers. Then the sound of swords clashing. Then a gurgle. GAMMA stands for "Greeks Advocating the Mature Management of Alcohol," and it is one of the many weekly programs that BGSU mandates for each fraternity.

"I killed the fuck out of this guy!" another of the brothers yells.

"I'll go to GAMMA," someone else says. "Got nothing at that time."

"Intramural flag football tomorrow, too," Bradley says, explosions blasting out of the computer. "Daniel, could you make up a flyer for the bulletin wall? Remind everyone of the game?"

"Gotcha," Daniel says.

"You guys don't go out, then?" I ask, bored. Aside from an occasional comment or request from Bradley, this entire living room feels like the quiet floor of a library, the silence punctuated not by dialogue but by the completely-in-synch video game music of *Warcraft*. "Out to bars? Not at all?"

"Not really," Bradley says, sighs as if he's been distracted. "Some of the guys drink, you know? But nothing big."

Then silence again in the room, as they all hunch over their computers.

"Oh," Bradley says. "Chris"—the live-in Graduate Assistant—"wants to have a meeting with the Executive Board on Thursday. Everyone can make it, right?"

They all nod, never tearing their eyes away from their laptops.

They don't leave the house, don't leave the room. This is a cave for them. They are neither ambitious nor lazy, these kids; with midterms having just ended, they've got no studying to do, and when they need to be, these kids are incredibly intelligent and technologically proficient, wiring this living room into a super-quick network and blocking out their weeks to meet the obligations of all of these university programs they must attend. But there's something eerie about this campus, something Stepford Wives-ish. These kids simply live their lives one program at a time, don't necessarily make any decisions. At night, I drive to a local gas station, buy a six-pack of Yuengling, sneak it back into the guest room and drink by myself. It doesn't feel daring, what I'm doing. Amazingly, it feels forced, routine. I don't even know if I'm drunk by the time I finish the six-pack; I have no point of reference, no one to talk with. I sit on the bed, drinking without joy, *Warcraft* sound effects echoing from down the hallway.

My time at Bowling Green passes slowly, quietly, uneasily. It feels like a mild case of indigestion after a decent dinner, one in which you're not quite sure what to think of the meal you just finished. The chicken was cooked well, but was it cooked well enough? And was the

sauce too tangy? Not tangy enough? I can't decide whether the fraternity brothers at Bowling Green are responsible or robotic, rude or uninteresting. If I've decided on my career, or if I'm making another mistake. Nothing digests well.

I leave Bowling Green on an afternoon where the sky has again taken the color and texture of cracked cement, and I drive to Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, where the world seems even darker and more jagged. This is a campus of even grayer grays than BGSU, a campus where the cold sidewalk puddles seem longer and deeper. The students burrow into gray Boilermaker hoodies as late October winds slice through campus, tearing apart piles of leaves in the grass and sending the leaves rocketing through the air until they eventually smack against some poor student in his hoodie, leaving a muddy leaf-print some place noticeable. Purdue is experiencing the first bite of the coming, hungry winter, and I can't believe how fast the cold has come.

The fraternity houses are, like Illinois and Michigan and probably every other Big 10 university, spread out throughout the campus, and it takes me half an hour to find the correct one-way street, pull down the alley, and park in the correct parking lot for the Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity house. It is a sharp-edged limestone house—constructed from blocks of limestone as large as the parking spaces—that looks built for protection rather than comfortable occupancy. As soon as I make it to the front door (after darting through a steady driving rain), the chapter president tells me that I've got a meeting with the Greek Advisor in twenty minutes. My face is cold and wet, my hair dripping in matted-down tangles across my forehead, and I wear my EU windbreaker as I carry my suitcase and laptop case from the Explorer to the front door; underneath the windbreaker, though, I wear only a long-sleeved "Fresno State" t-shirt I bought while I was in California.

"I've got a meeting?" I ask. "In twenty minutes? You're kidding me."

"Yeah," he says. His name's Bryan O'Reilly, a thick Irish kid—half fat and half muscle, I think—with a shaved head and a fiery red goatee, and he takes huffing breaths after every sentence he speaks. "He said it was the only time he could meet. I can take your stuff upstairs, though."

"Didn't you think to call me?" I ask. "I look awful. I would have tried to get here quicker so I knew I could make this appointment."

"No," Bryan says. Huffs. "You didn't tell me I was supposed to."

I change into an NKE polo, stick with the same jeans I've been wearing almost nonstop lately, dart across campus to the Greek Life office, and dry my hair with a brown paper towel from the building's first-floor bathroom. The Greek Advisor here at Purdue is nothing special, just another 23 year-old kid with a Master's in CSP: he has a soft face, pale white and marked with acne scars on the cheeks, and his hair is such a thin, fair blonde that it looks like it might fall out at any moment. As he sits in his cheap, mint-colored desk chair, behind his scuffed desk (it's the sort of desk that has probably been dragged from office to office for fifteen years), boxes and boxes of folders and papers and disks and network cables at his feet, he tries desperately to maintain some feeling of authority. He is the *Greek Advisor* of Purdue, after all, the man in charge of the third-largest Greek Community in the country! He is only 23 and he has earned this post, has presented at conferences as diverse as SEIFC and SROW! With his eyes and his sometimes-fanatically-energetic speech, he is begging me to accord him the respect that he feels he deserves, but really...he's my age.

"Have you ever thought of a career in Collegiate Student Personnel?" he asks me eventually. "You are a fraternity consultant, after all. It would be a natural transition."

"That's what everyone's been telling me," I say.

"You seem like you'd be perfect for it," he says, although we've talked for only ten minutes, and I've simply regurgitated all of the higher-ed-speak spoon-fed to me by Dr. Vernon. "You've got a good head on your shoulders."

"Right," I say. "Just wait till you get to know me."

"Ha," he says. "Really, though. You should consider it. It really is a good thing to work with students, helping them to realize their potential."

"I am considering it," I say. "I just want to be certain."

"I'm sure you'll have everything lined up if you do apply for grad schools," he says, "but if you need a letter of recommendation, just let me know."

"Right," I say again, Sam Anderson suddenly on my mind. Blindfolding.

"It's a small world, higher education, but you got to know the right people."

"Kiss the right asses, don't piss off the wrong people, that's what everyone's been telling me."

"Yessir," he says, and then abruptly: "You closed the Illinois chapter, right?"

"Illinois?" I ask.

"For that big keg party, right? You had to walk into that situation and close that chapter, right? I heard about it." When I nod, he leans back a little in his cheap, creaking chair, and he says, "Oh man, that takes some serious..." hushed tone "...serious *balls*."

"Well," I say, and his face is pure delight because he—I think—he just used a word that reminded him of the old, carefree days of college, "I tried as hard as I could to save that group. I would have preferred that we didn't close them."

"Some chapters are beyond saving. You either get it or you don't, you know? In any case, I think it's better this way."

"Yeah, I guess," I say.

He looks at me with squinted eyes, the sort of look that indicates that some unspoken dialogue is now taking place. Self-consciously, he pats his thinning hair, makes it cover a bright spot on his scalp. "You don't think it's better?" he asks. Still squinting.

"Is there something I'm missing, here?" I ask.

"There's been rumblings from Illinois..." he says, eyes almost closed, he's squinting so hard, perhaps waiting for me to recognize the subject of the conversation.

"Rumblings?"

"Rumblings. You really haven't heard?"

"Good or bad?"

"Both," he says. "I'm good friends with one of the graduate assistants over there in Cham-bana. We did our undergraduate together at Iowa. But from what he tells me..." And he looks around, as if someone might be spying on him through the wall vents or from under his crumbling green desk, then leans forward and says in a low voice, "Nu Kappa Epsilon has an interest group on campus."

"An interest group?" I ask. "What's that?"

"An *interest* group," he says, spreads his freckled hands on the desk. "You know? An interest group?" When I give no response, he finally divulges the meaning of this term: "I guess

you haven't done any colonizations or anything yet, huh? Still pretty new to the game? Here's how it works. There are two different ways that a national fraternity can start a new chapter on a campus. The first way, you're probably familiar with." He gives me a prompting look, eyes wide, one hand stretched out with the palm facing me.

"Expansion," I say.

"Right," he says. "The National Fraternity contacts the college to gain permission to set up a new fraternity chapter on campus. The college can either say, 'No, thanks, we've got enough fraternities already,' or 'Come along, friends! We've got plenty of students, and room for one more student organization.' Smart colleges always elect to expand the fraternity community, given the proper timetable. At Purdue, we allow one new fraternity to colonize each Spring. Generally, of course, it's a fraternity chapter that closed down just a few years ago, and their alumni have been making phone calls to the administration ever since the closure and *demanding* that we start a new chapter..."

"Right," I say. "I heard that we already have some sort of expansion deal with Illinois. Five years from now, after all the expelled brothers graduate."

"That's what most universities prefer," he says. "But every now and then, you hear about a different method of colonization. Interest groups. Non-affiliated students on campus who want to start a fraternity. Like, let's just say you're some sophomore, and you look around at all of the fraternities on campus and you think, 'There's nothing here for me. These are all pointless.' But then you start thinking about how cool it might be to get your friends together and try to make a fraternity that, for you at least, *isn't* pointless. Start a fraternity from scratch."

"You're telling me there's an interest group at Illinois?" I ask. "Kids that want to form a Nike chapter? Only a month after we closed the old chapter?"

He shrugs, shakes his head, and for a moment he looks like a little boy trapped in a big blue blazer, a little boy cursed with thinning hair and the early effects of old age on his skin. As he shakes his head, I picture him in a sandbox, on a baseball diamond, on a bicycle, in a classroom behind a child-sized desk. He doesn't look old enough for this position, for a desk, for these clothes or that hair or those wrinkles, but here he is.

"I don't understand it, either," he says finally. "When an interest group forms, they usually declare themselves to be a 'local' fraternity, some combination of letters that doesn't exist. Or sometimes...and we've had this happen at Purdue...they'll call themselves something ridiculous, like Tappa Kegga Miller. Those fraternities collapse after football season, usually. Interest groups, if they're serious, usually wind up asking a national fraternity to be their sponsor. It's better for finances, for alumni, for longevity, for networking. For *resources*, mostly. And so this interest group, rumor has it, is petitioning the Nu Kappa Epsilon Headquarters to be a chartered chapter. Well, it's causing a little uproar in the fraternity community there."

And here, his face cracks into childish delight as he recalls his conversations with graduate assistant friends from the University of Illinois; "rumor has it," he says twice, thrice, then twice more, and "word around the grapevine," and "word on the street," and the cherry: "from what they're saying on the inside..." *Uproar*, he says with red cheeks. *Uproar*! The Lambda Chi Alpha Executive Director had assurances from the university that they would be the next fraternity to expand (next February) at Illinois, and now this interest group has thrown off the entire expansion schedule. And the Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity house on campus, vacant for the past four years (money getting sucked out of the alumni Housing Corporation bank account on a monthly basic), will now remain vacant even longer because *Nu Kappa Epsilon* has an interest group forming. *An interest group*! And Lambda Chi Alpha stands to lose hundreds of

thousands of dollars on this vacant house, while Nu Kappa Epsilon's interest group will move back into their house immediately and replenish the bank account. Illegal maneuvering, clandestine deals. Oh, the conflict between national fraternities, where millions of dollars are now at stake! LaFaber hasn't mentioned any of this to me yet, but quite likely, this means that I'll have to go back to Illinois soon. Likely, I'll be thrown right into the middle of this mess. But he speaks, this professional—this Director of Greek Affairs—in his too-large suit, and he relishes every gossipy syllable he spills; he has the excited eye twinkle of a nineteen year-old headed off to the bar with his brand-new fake ID. Gossip gossip gossip, as though this was still college he was talking about—who hooked up with whom last night, and when's the next big party, and who got a boob job, and who talked shit about Danny or Bill or James. And in a way, I suppose, it *is* still college for him. This is the same conversation, conducted in the same way as if he was still the Vice President for his undergraduate fraternity at the University of Iowa.

And I realize: this kid's got a job. A real job. And a solid career ahead of him after he finishes what will likely be a two-year stint as a Greek Advisor. I could do his job. Without a doubt, I could do his job.

"You see?" he asks before I leave. "Student personnel can be exciting. It's like being a student again. You really should consider it."

The next day, during the lazy hours of an early Thursday afternoon at Purdue, rain crashing against the roof of the fraternity house and turning the tall rectangular library windows into dark smears, my cell phone rings and vibrates unexpectedly, jolting me awake. Because I've had no meetings today (the Purdue brothers weren't eager to schedule meetings, and I wasn't

eager to *make* them schedule anything), I'd lounged out on the library sofa...and was just seconds from a deep nap.

I dig in my pocket for my vibrating cell phone, and when I finally pull it out—expecting an 800 number or an Indianapolis area code (the NKE Headquarters number, perhaps, and what would certainly be another LaFaber call)—it is instead a 505 area code. I recognize the numbers, but can't remember from where. California? Indiana? Pennsylvania? Michigan? So many places. I flip open the phone, and am greeted by a female voice, burning with acrimony: "I know who you are," she says in this soft but piercing voice. "I know who you *are*, Charles."

"Excuse me?" I ask. "How did you get this number? Who—"

"This is Ma-ri-a," she says. "Don't act like you don't know who this is."

"Maria?" I ask. "Maria, Maria?"

"Maria, Maria."

"Maria," I say. "I didn't recognize the number."

"Of course you didn't. You probably deleted my number, didn't you?"

"I..." Shit. Maria. One-night stand. Deceived. Abandoned. Hurt, probably, and holding a grudge. Why else would she find my phone number, track me down? *I know who you are*, she said, and she's figured it out, hasn't she? She knows that I'm a consultant, that I lied to her all that time, and she isn't calling to plan Date #2, no; she has some end in mind, now, some retribution. And, coupled with Sam Anderson's call the other day...my gut falls again, even though I'm not driving...my Explorer has topped the hill, is falling...racing downward...quicker, quicker...I shake my head, rub my eyes, light returning to my vision with an infuriating slowness. "Yeah," I say and exhale, decide to try the honesty card. "I deleted your

number. I did. I'm sorry, you know? Sorry...about that. I honestly didn't think we'd ever talk again."

"You're a fucking *ass*-hole," she says.

"I am. You're right. I had to—I had to leave town, Maria. I'm sorry. I should have called, you know? That was really...an asshole thing to do."

"You left town? That's an interesting way of putting it."

"Well," I say, "that's what happened. I don't know what you were told."

I swallow again, remind myself to breathe. Remind myself that this is just some college freshman halfway across the country, that there should be no worries, not now. No consequences. This is nothing. I can handle this.

"You were here for a *week*," she says. "Left town? It's not like you were ever really here to begin with. As soon as you got here, you were already making plans to leave, you asshole."

"All right, all right," I say. "Let's slow down."

"Bullshit, slow down."

"What have you heard, Maria?" Calmer, now. "Tell me what you've heard."

"It's what I didn't hear, *Charles*," and she says my name mockingly, perhaps accentuating the utter futility of my ever having spoken *her* name calmly. "We go to Juarez, I invite you to my room. We had sex under the bed sheets that my father bought me when he helped me move into this dorm room." A pause. "And whatever. Sex. Whatever. But I never—I swear to God I didn't think this would happen—not so much as a phone call from you. Not a word. And why was that, I wondered? I can handle an average, run-of-the-mill asshole, Charles, cause at least I can tell my girls to stay away, but you fucking *vanished*. It was like you'd never existed." "It wasn't, you know, my intention to-"

"I *googled* you, Charles," she says. "Funny, the things you find online. Full fucking profiles of Educational Consultants at the Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity web site? Your entire bio. Your degree, your honors and accomplishments, your travel territory. Do you want me to read it to you? You're at *Purdue* right now, aren't you?"

"You know..." I start, but I can't figure out what to say to her. I can't figure out what all of this means. I try to remain calm, but the blood in my head beats quicker, quicker, almost pounding as I hold the phone to my ear, and it's the same sound that my tires make these days as they rattle on my busted wheels, and I'm picturing the back seat of my Explorer, shirts swaying on hangers, and a suitcase overstuffed with clothing, shirt sleeves poking out and caught in the cracks. I speak, trying to sound calm and rational, trying to show her that this is all a miscommunication—I am Charles Washington, after all, clean slate every three days, so far away from her but suddenly so close to the Headquarters in Indianapolis—I am *in* Indiana—and that fact causes a touch of fear to grip my voice: "How did you get my cell phone number?"

"I called the phone number on the web site."

"What web site?"

"The Nike national web site. What else?"

"My phone number isn't listed."

"I called the Headquarters. Some guy answered—"

—who could have answered? A guy? Not one of the secretaries, obviously. Maybe she hit an extension number, got one of the interns? LaFaber himself?

"What did you say?" I ask, mouth dry, lips cracking.

"I told them I had to get in touch with you. Easiest phone number I ever got."

"What *else* did you say?"

"Oh, you're worried, aren't you?" she asks. "You're not supposed to sleep with little sorority girls, are you? Big no-no. I asked our traveling consultant about it when she came to the sorority house this past weekend. You're scared, aren't you, Charles?"

"Listen," I say. "Listen. I was wrong, all right?"

"Easy to say afterwards, isn't it?"

"What do you want, Maria?" I ask. "I told you that I'm sorry. But I'm all the way out in Indiana right now. There's not much I can do out here. What is it that...I mean, what do you *want*?"

I realize, after I say this, that it comes out sizzling like acid—*what do you want*?—like I'm some action hero who finally finds the dastardly villain who's been threatening to blow up the city for no real reason. *What do you want*? You've got no right to be upset, I might as well have said. I'm here and you're there, so what the hell's this phone call going to solve? *What do you want*? She's silent for a moment, perhaps considering the same things that I am considering, and figuring out how best to respond to such thoughtlessness.

"I want more than some half-assed apology," she says eventually. "We'll talk again, player. Till then, be easy on those little Purdue freshmen." And she hangs up, the phone at my ear going deathly silent and the room around me suddenly seeming much larger and darker, like I'm in the far reaches of some meandering, historic library where there are corners that visitors haven't seen in decades.

The rain slashes at the windows with greater violence.

Outside, a thin tree shakes and bends in the wind, one of its long, bare branches reaching almost to the muddy ground in a blast of wind, then stretching back skyward as the trunk

straightens and strengthens, then reaching down again in another gust...reaching, almost touching the ground. And I wonder if there's a point at which the branch—or the tree trunk—will snap. Which will snap first.

* * *

Later in the night, while the rain continues—drizzling, now, but cold and sharp—I sit with a scattered group of Purdue fraternity brothers in the type of warm, wooden living room that one would expect from a typical Hollywood "frat house" movie: a long fireplace, above which hangs a beautiful painting of (what else) the house itself, a limestone castle shimmering in summer sunshine; deep brown leather couches; a pool table at one end of the room; wooden floors which creak and smack as you cross them, sounding like fingers flipping through stacks of cash; composite photos—dating back to 1955—hanging from the walls; a spiral staircase at the far end of the room, leading to the next two floors; a coat rack, too…a fucking carved, wooden *coat rack*! Everything that you could expect of a fraternity house that has stood since 1948—the G.I. Generation's contribution to Purdue University—this house represents. And it's immaculate, also, because this chapter hires a cleaning crew to sweep through the house every Tuesday, and a full kitchen staff to cook breakfast, lunch, and dinner five days a week.

All is quiet tonight. Even the rain outside. Even the big-screen television at the front of the living room. All sounds like soft static, lulling, and many of the brothers stretch out on couches as though drugged. Some have opened textbooks, but they don't appear to be reading or studying.

Into the silence, I say, "Anybody want to grab a beer with me?" Around the room, all heads turn to me. "It's sort of quiet around here," I say. "Anybody want to, like, just hit up a bar or something for an hour? Let off some steam?" Stares. Blank-faced stares. "You've got some good bars around here, right? Or, we don't have to go to a bar. We could just go to Applebee's or something. It's so..." Stares. "Quiet," I say.

Stares, but now the stares seem to take me in from head to toe, from my mall-purchased Steve Madden shoes to my faded American Eagle jeans to my untucked Gap button-down. "You're a con-*sul*-tant, right?" one of them says, upper lip curled in this disgusted look like he's just accidentally stumbled upon his parents naked. Up and down, their eyes roll, these Purdue University Nikes, as though shocked with the consultant they've been given, shocked by my clothing, my casual speech.

"Just one beer," I suggest. "Just half an hour? Anyone?"

But they all, one by one, shake their heads and then open their textbooks or engage in some other low-energy activity simply to avoid eye contact. "We've got a mid-term tomorrow," one of them says. "In Statics."

Statics? *Statics*? All of you? What the hell is going on here? Why is everyone so concerned with tests and school and mid-terms, I want to ask. Just go out and relax, take a load off...*Drink with me*! You should all be Frat Stars, too! This is your youth.

And so I leave the house, leave them all to the "studying" they've got to do, *whatever*, and I head to a bar called "Brother's" (which, apparently, is some sort of Big 10 franchise, because they had locations at Illinois and Michigan, also) and I sit at the bar and it is busy and I order a pitcher of Bud Lite and twenty wings and try to talk to a couple girls beside me, but they've got boyfriends, I learn, and I notice—at some point—that the voicemail indicator on my cell phone is blinking, so, with absolutely no conversation in which to engage myself, I check my messages.

There is only one:

"Yes, yes, um, Mister Charles Washington," says a clumsy young male on the other end, "this is Donnie Ackman, from the Office of Greek Life at New Mexico State University. Yes. Well, I was referred to you by Sam Anderson, the...what was it? The New Member Education Chairman? Of the Nu Kappa Epsilon chapter here at State? Well, it looks...and I don't know if you've heard about this, but it looks like we've got some real issues with the chapter here. Some hazing issues that I fear you—and your entire Headquarters—may be interested in. Or, rather, concerned about. If you could give me a call back as soon as you get this message, hopefully we can get this worked out. Thanks a lot, Mr. Washington."

The sinking feeling in my stomach again. Swaying hangers, threatening to slip.

New Mexico State. Blindfolds. Hazing investigations. Maria. I can't get fired. It's the end of October, and I've been out of Florida for five months, out of school for seven months. If I lose this job now, I lose my recommendations. I lose the chance at a College Student Personnel career. If this Greek Advisor...if there's some investigation...and there *is* something in the darkness at the end of my fall, now, and I know what it is...my parent's house, back in Florida. I've got no money in my bank account to even afford a security deposit on my own apartment. Back to Fort Myers? Go back and live with my *parents*? Go back home as an ultimate failure, a bad reputation and a worthless degree.

I swallow whatever warm beer is left in my glass, pay my bill.

Drive back to the Purdue University chapter house, slum around the house all of Friday, and pack up and drive at first light on Saturday morning.

Pack up and drive.

Purdue University to Indiana University.

West Lafayette, straight down south to Bloomington.

And then, on a Wednesday afternoon, I will drive north once again to the dead center of the state of Indiana, to Indianapolis. Back to the Headquarters. Back to the Headquarters, the office, khakis and dress shirts, my fellow consultants Nick and Brock, the mission of NKE, back to Walter LaFaber. Back to the Headquarters—the beating heart, *no*, the central nervous system—of Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity, for a three-day "debrief," three days, where all others will talk of student potential and achievements and I will smooth my pants and nod and keep quiet and hope they don't know a thing about my semester. Back to the Headquarters, yes.

PART III. THE NATIONAL FRATERNITY

Chapter Ten: Headquarters

Summer Training in Indianapolis University of Kentucky East Tennessee State University University of Virginia—Green Valley University of Pittsburgh Weekend Visit with Alumni Shippensburg University St. Joseph's University **EMERGENCY VISIT: University of Illinois** New Mexico State University Texas Tech California State University—Fresno California State University—Highland California State University—Long Beach California State University—San Francisco University of Delaware Marshall University Miami University (Ohio) University of Toledo Central Michigan University University of Michigan **Bowling Green State University** Purdue University Indiana University

Headquarters - Mid-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis)

University of Oklahoma University of Kansas University of Missouri—Columbia University of Nebraska Iowa State University Thanksgiving Vacation Bradley University University of Iowa Headquarters – End-of-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis) Christmas Vacation Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity was founded in 1910 at Carolina Baptist College, the dream of eight young men scattered far from their birthplaces of Charleston, Columbia, and Charlotte. As was typical in those days, none of these students was older than eighteen; five of the eight men, NKE's *Marathon* pledge book tells us, were mere boys, just seventeen, and one was *sixteen*.

A tiny liberal arts college in the northern sand hill country of South Carolina, Carolina Baptist prided itself on its literature and history departments, and the rigorous curriculum was designed to ensure that each male graduate (there were no female students, in those days) could converse extensively on the subject of the classics (European literature, mostly, because "American Literature" was still a fairly fluid concept), could speak seamless Latin, the language of learning, and could call-and-respond for hours with Biblical quotations and British poetry. Fertile soil in which would grow many future lawyers, politicians, professors, and pastors. The college in which these eight students studied was the quintessence of Bible Belt Academia. Not just fertile soil, exactly, but a sturdy, nurturing, thick-trunked tree. Yes, plant rough (but wealthy) Southern boys in the dirt at the tree's base, there in the shade, and after four years of study, watch them emerge and bloom with a newfound sense of culture, etiquette, and, of course, a firm connection to the strong but elusive roots of Deep South Power necessary to earn quick trips into the state Senate, into esteemed law firms, into graduate school at the University of Virginia or Duke or Vanderbilt or William and Mary.

In 1910, a degree from that giving tree of Carolina Baptist College was a golden ticket born of four solid years of scholarship, of study late at night in the humid dorm rooms, reading thick textbooks by the light of the student's lamp.

The campus community at Carolina Baptist, also, featured enough extra-curricular activities for these young men to remain constantly and thoroughly immersed in those Deep South roots of power, that viney underworld of connections which their rich politician-fathers had secured for them at such great expense. The most distinguished of these activities was the campus literary society, The American Men of Letters, and it inducted just three new men each semester and published annually a 50-page book of poetry and of criticism on the contemporary classics of Southern literature. Held in equal esteem was the Carolina Baptist baseball team, which played against nearby Furman, the University of South Carolina, the College of Charleston, and Emory and Oglethorpe down in Atlanta; years later, alumni would claim that the baseball team's overwhelming Southern dominance so scared other universities that the Southeastern Conference passed over Carolina Baptist in the early years of the sports conference's formation. This legend, of course, ignores the obvious fact that Carolina Baptist had no football team, which, as the years passed and the SEC universities grew larger and more prominent, and football became more and more important, sealed Carolina Baptist's current reputation as a tiny, quaint, and mostly irrelevant campus. That powerful tree hasn't fallen in the last century, but it is, without a doubt, leaning now.

Three fraternities also met regularly on campus, though—in the years immediately following the turn of the century—they did not yet live together in fraternity houses. Alumni would wait until after the Great War to petition the college for land on which to build the current Greek Row, a block of pristine white, column-adorned, plantation-style mansions, each complete with porch springs and weeping willow trees. In 1910, these fraternities admitted just three or four new members each term, and as their rites of passage, they did not haze these pledges (many fraternity historians insist that hazing originated as the soldiers of WWI and WWII returned to

college and introduced boot camp tactics into the houses). Instead, each of these fraternities steeped itself heavily in a specific academic subject (rendering them, essentially, as brothers to the campus literary society); one fraternity, for instance, studied Roman history with a passion that would astound many current university faculty members. Professors and dignitaries at Carolina Baptist sat in honorary positions with these fraternities, giving them extra reading assignments as though fraternity life was another class, helping them to organize academic banquets at which poetry was read and grades celebrated. And, of course, the greater the passion that students, alumni, and faculty developed for these fraternities, the more annual traditions and friendly rivalries also developed. Today, Carolina Baptist still holds its Fraternity Wheelbarrow Pull (though the winning fraternity is no longer made to cook dinner for the losers).

An invitation into any campus group, society, sports team, or fraternity, was seen as an instant invitation into that larger network of Southern Somebodies. Admission into Carolina Baptist College was special, certainly, but it was only the first step; membership in a fraternity or a literary society meant that you had *made it*, no worries. You'd latched onto those roots, and now your future could become deliciously intertwined within them, could grow along with them.

The only problem, though, was that the very exclusivity that seemed essential for these campus groups to exist soon worked to their detriment. Carolina Baptist had been slowly increasing enrollment in the early 1900s, and by 1910 reached a staggering 220 students. The fraternities, though, comfortable with their membership numbers, refused to adapt to the growing needs of the student body and chose instead to remain static. Exclusivity became *even more* exclusive, as more potential suitors—from which the fraternities could select at their whim—appeared on campus.

Two blood brothers, Leonard and Jackson Cohen, separated in age by only a year but electing to enroll at Carolina Baptist at the same time, both found themselves—in the Fall of 1910—among the large number of disappointed freshmen not selected by any fraternity as pledges. Leonard and Jackson soon made friends with a student named C. Anthony Croke, and (as legend goes) the three began to dine together every evening, began to watch with hawkish interest the interactions of the other campus fraternities. So infatuated with their own traditions were these fraternities, said Jackson Cohen (the most assertive of the three youths), that they had forsaken all that was meaningful about the fraternity experience. He claimed that fraternity brothers were neither friendly to one another (and certainly not brotherly) nor interested in working together for any common good; they seemed devoted only to pursuing and exploiting that life of power that they had entered. Essentially, he said, *fraternity* at Carolina Baptist had died.

"We shall have a brotherhood of our own," said Jackson Cohen. "We shall have a selfless fraternity of gentlemen more distinguished than they." (These are famous words, constantly appropriated in speeches at NKE leadership conferences.).

And out of this desire for fraternal bonds came Nu Kappa Epsilon, officially established in November of 1910. And the fraternity flowered first on that Carolina Baptist campus, as the rejected or neglected suitors from all other campus fraternities jumped at the opportunity to start something new and different, to start something *living*, to find their place, to secure the companionship that they so desperately craved. To found a fraternity, they believed, *the right way*. Then the fraternity—itself now a powerful tree—spread its seed throughout the Deep South, where many similar colleges and universities experienced the same phenomenon: growing in enrollment but under-served by the over-exclusive campus fraternities. Nu Kappa Epsilon first

received petitions from students at those schools closest, from Furman and South Carolina and Chapel Hill, and then from schools as far south as Stetson University in Florida, and as far west as Ole Miss. Growth slowed during the Great War, but the Roaring Twenties brought a fresh crop of young men to college, and from coast to coast, these men looked to join brotherhoods as strong as those that they had left in the armed forces, and NKE soon found itself with chapters at UCLA and Berkeley and Washington and Illinois.

To keep track of all of these new chapters, these *franchises*, Jackson Cohen proposed in 1921 the creation of the post of "Executive Secretary" and a "National Headquarters." Records would be kept, tradition maintained, correspondence between chapters entered into, conventions held, Supreme Laws voted upon. Like some towering and respected oak in the center of a sprawling woods, the National Headquarters would seemingly watch over and protect the entire forest.

National dues, of course, would be necessary.

And houses? The Headquarters would solicit alumni to help purchase fraternity houses at each campus.

And new chapters? Like an empire establishing colonies, the Headquarters would establish new chapters at schools across the country.

And insurance for those houses, for intramural sports, for legal issues?

And...more staff members to assist the Executive Secretary?

And...a National Headquarters building, of course, of course. 1952.

From a tiny dining hall idea to strengthen friendships at a small college...came a National Headquarters for a National Fraternity called Nu Kappa Epsilon. It seems almost improbable, this development, when I look at the timeline. But it happened.

When I was a kid, my parents used to take me to the Thomas Edison House and museum in Fort Meyers every summer; vacations, my father told me and gripped my shoulder, should be educational. A couple times, we traveled instead to Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, or the fort in St. Augustine. But mostly, it was the Edison House. And I hated the museum, the smell of sawdust in the old cabins, the yellowing note cards describing various artifacts, the moss and algae growing over Edison's "historic" swimming pool behind the house. But, out back in the sprawling yards, there was a giant Banyan Tree that I would spend entire afternoons exploring. From one original trunk, the Banyan Tree had grown and spread to cover more than a full acre of land. Each time a new branch of a Banyan Tree grows and extends, vines drop from the branch and plant themselves in the ground and strengthen and thicken and form into new, sturdy, independent trunks capable of growing their own branches. Over the course of more than a century at the Edison House, the Banyan Tree had consumed the yard, had invaded and ruined some of the sidewalks when the vines and branches ran amok, untrimmed and unchecked. And I'm sure someone knew how the acres-large tree had started, but I wasn't sure which had been the tree's original trunk, and I was fascinated by the tree's lack of origin. It was impossible to sort out. The Banyan Tree was gigantic, an empire unto itself, and unlike all of the scattered pines and palms around it, the Banyan wasn't bending, wasn't going anywhere.

It is the same with the National Fraternity, I think. Those vines, those branches, those roots of power. As the Headquarters has grown its finances, its staff, and its influence, creating new programs and buying new properties, it is no longer simply an independent oak in the center of the forest, keeping vigil. It is no longer simply spreading seed. No, the Headquarters has bound itself to individual chapters, made everything much stronger, more resistant to outside

forces. It doesn't matter how Nu Kappa Epsilon started in 1910, because this system of trunks and branches...it isn't going anywhere.

Now, on a Wednesday afternoon in late October, skies clearing of clouds but still leaving a crisp cold in the air, I leave Bloomington and Indiana University and drive north to Indianapolis for our mid-semester Headquarters Debrief. This debrief—two days of meetings conceived, LaFaber says, to update Headquarters on what's happening "in the trenches"—isn't quite mid-semester. November is just days away. But timing is irrelevant. I'm headed back to the office, back to Headquarters, back to a place where—at any second—I could be confronted with the vindictive aftermath of the Maria situation, or with an extensive catalogue of my own Code of Conduct violations over the past month, or with the heightening hazing scandal from New Mexico State. My first post-college job could end in the humiliating finality of mid-contract termination, any possible continuation with a career in CSP wilting fast.

I finally arrive in Indianapolis on Wednesday evening, my tires making violent and unhealthy noises. I pull off 465 and retrace the familiar roads off a northern Indianapolis exit and find my way to *Founder's Road*, a different sort of Greek Row, far removed from any college or university. Two and three-story office buildings, one after the next, whose facades evoke the styles of fraternity and sorority houses across the country. Here are office buildings with the names of Alpha Xi Delta, Zeta Tau Alpha, Lambda Chi Alpha, Theta Chi...here is a row of Greek Headquarters' developed mostly in the 1960s and 1970s...due to a series of tax breaks that the city of Indianapolis gave to Greek-lettered college organizations to encourage the spread-across-the-country headquarters' to relocate to the heart of Big 10 Country. Twenty-six national fraternities and sororities currently reside in Indy. Many moved willingly, as their "Alpha" (first) chapters were founded and headquartered throughout the North already. Four

chapters, after all, had been founded at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, just hours away. Some, however, like Pi Kappa Alpha in Memphis and Pi Kappa Phi in Charlotte, chose to stay true to their Southern heritage and maintain headquarters in southern cities. Still others, like Sigma Chi in Chicago, apparently chose cities much larger and more happening. Nonetheless, there is a distinct Greek Row of Professionals here in Indianapolis, and each summer the area is bustling with young and excited consultants-in-training. Each Fall, once training is over and the semester begins for colleges, the consultants disperse across the country, and the Row becomes silent, populated only by full-time secretaries and financial directors and chapter services directors and CEOs and such. Blazers.

The NKE Headquarters—one of the last buildings on the Row—is a large gray triangle structure, the sharp point of the triangle facing the road and the window-adorned wings spreading out in the grass behind it; it reminds me of a Stealth fighter, aimed straight for you. On the front lawn is a gigantic set of concrete NKE letters, surrounded by white carnations (our national flower), and a small fountain which only spurts water three months out of the year. Before, it was colorful, but now, it is covered in an icy slush and the flowers and grass are longdead.

The NKE residence hall (a large rectangle building), or "Headquarters Lodge" as most call it, is about a hundred feet behind the Headquarters, behind a smattering of now-bare and sharp trees, barely visible from the road. That's where I'm headed.

I pull past the Headquarters Building—which, since it is 5:20 PM, is completely empty already—and into the back parking lot behind the Lodge, a parking lot of gravel and stringy weeds. My car seems to bounce more than usual, shirts swaying on hangers.

The Lodge, essentially, is a two-story dorm for the three NKE Consultants, and for the set of five undergraduate interns who give up a semester of university life to come to Indianapolis and handle secretarial work under the supervision of Walter LaFaber. When I first step back into the Lodge, I am swept by a blast of nostalgia. *The Headquarters Lodge*. This is where every consultant stays during summer training, where *I* spent two months of this past summer, where I slept and ate and read once our training had finished for the day. Two months. My belongings (the few things I brought from Florida to Indianapolis) are stacked in cheap plastic storage cases in the Lodge basement: some CDs and DVDs, my bed sheets, an extra pillow, some leadership books, and some extra clothes and shoes that I couldn't fit into the Explorer.

After this quick blast of nostalgia passes, though, I realize that I never called this place "home," that I never could. Already, the Lodge walls are covered in different posters than I remember—Linkin Park and Cal Golden Bears—probably because the summer interns have gone back home to their own campuses, and new fall interns have taken their place. Along with these new posters, the new interns have also left books and DVDs and mail littered around the first-floor living area. But despite these few possessions, there is still a feeling of hesitancy about it all, a temporary feeling, because the Lodge is a patchwork project, interns and consultants constantly moving in and out. The living room's three sofas do not match in size or color, and the walls are painted poorly; the television is an old 27-inch CRT monitor with faded picture quality, the kind that was likely gifted to the Lodge when some full-time staffer no longer wanted it; the kitchen is a Goodwill mess of mix-and-match silverware sets, of steak knives and spatulas. The possessions in the Lodge feel *left behind*, accumulated accidentally, rather than purchased purposefully. Thinking of it now, I'll probably leave my unwanted clothes in the basement when I finish with this job. Nobody stays here longer than a year, so the Lodge is never completely cleaned, and never completely lived-in.

I drag my suitcase through the empty living area, bump it up the stairs. This place is technically my "home" while I'm in Indianapolis (Lodge rent is taken from my salary, even though I'm rarely here), but it might as well be a hotel or another chapter house; I still have to unpack when I arrive because all of my possessions are in my suitcases or in my Explorer. Even my bed...I've got to find my sheets in the basement storage, make my bed for this three-night stay. As I lift my suitcase up the last couple steps and push it onto the second-floor hallway (which leads to the "common bathroom" and the "bunk room," where we all sleep), I hear a quick thumping noise, increasing in frequency and in volume, and as soon as I look up, I'm broad-sided, lifted, slammed into the wall and into a bear-hug embrace, and I can't breathe and I'm choking—

"Charlie Washington!" says a bellowing Texas Cowboy voice.

Brock London.

"Ugh," I say.

He releases me and I flop back into a normal stance, catch my breath.

Brock London, one of my two fellow consultants, fits the expectation that *everything must be bigger in Texas*; he's a brown-haired and brown-eyed beast, bred on red meat and whole milk, a childhood consisting of smashmouth sports and hunting and fishing. Face like a hammerhead shark. Brock is the size of a college linebacker, rough and farmboy-strong, but he doesn't work out or exercise. Apparently, there's something in his Texas blood that converts all of the steak and ground beef and bacon into pure muscle. "How the hell are you?" Brock asks.

"Ugh," I say again, huff. "Ugh. Hanging in there."

"Nick's somewhere in southern Indiana right now," Brock says. "Crossed over the border from Kentucky about an hour and a half ago."

"Oh," I say, huff. "Super."

Brock is also the sort of consultant I could *never* be, the sort that came into the job for his own values-driven reasons, and never had to convince himself of any "mission." During his freshman year at Central Texas University (a private 2,500-student school just outside of Fort Worth, another of those campus-machines that pumps rich kids into good fraternities and sororities and then into good jobs), he and his childhood best friend Ashton Simon made the decision to pledge different fraternities. Despite the urging of their parents, Brock and Ashton decided that different organizations would allow them both to meet a variety of new people, rather than confining themselves in college (as in high school) to a small group of friends. Brock chose Nu Kappa Epsilon. Ashton Simon chose a fraternity called Beta Beta Alpha. Initially, their fraternity experiences at Central Texas University were quite mixed; Brock, as a take-charge athlete in high school, had a tough time with the hazing and subservient humiliation to which he was subjected (the campus is known for an event called Pig Love), while Ashton warmed immediately to Beta Beta Alpha Fraternity, becoming as involved as possible, earning the positions of Pledge Class President and Intramural Baseball Team Captain. At the very pinnacle of the semester, just as all was going so well for him, Ashton was forced to drink a full bottle of rum after a Big Brother-Little Brother ceremony (the same type of event for which New Mexico State is facing sanctions), and afterward passed out. That night, he asphyxiated on his own vomit.

Brock fell into a deep depression, withdrawing from all of his classes that semester and leaving campus. The two had known each other since preschool, had played Little League

together. When Brock returned to West Texas the following Spring semester, he was a man on a mission: he re-pledged Nu Kappa Epsilon and took a leadership role, standing up to and rebelling against brothers when they attempted to haze him, tackling and pinning down the soft, spoiled Dallas and Houston brats when they tried to drive drunk after parties, counseling other pledges who were coping with peer pressure and alcoholism in their first year in college. In short, because he had been so affected by his friend's death, Brock cleaned up his own fraternity. By his junior year, he was president, had expelled the chapter troublemakers, convinced the administration *and* the students to ban alcohol in all CTU student housing, and was elected to the Interfraternity Council as the Vice President of Risk Management; he even traveled Texas on a lecture tour with several anti-hazing and anti-binge-drinking presenters for CampusSpeak. He appeared on morning talk shows to speak about the dangers of college alcoholism. He became a celebrity and advocate for values-based campus organizations.

Brock also likes to wrestle, to bear-hug, to fart, to eat six hot dogs in a single setting. But, in all that he says, I can hear a tremor in Brock's voice—the memory of Ashton Simon, the reminder, the passionate motivation for his career.

I could never be the consultant that Brock is. A *real* Marathon Man. The kind of guy who would probably walk into Shippensburg and make the lawless chapter brothers beg for mercy. The kind of guy who certainly hasn't taken a drink all semester. The kind of guy who would pin me against the wall if he knew what I've let so many undergraduate chapters get away with, if he knew what I've gotten away with.

"We haven't talked in weeks, buddy," Brock says, as we both walk back downstairs into the lifeless living room. "You always sound so busy when I call you. Like you never have time to talk."

"Something like that," I say.

"You look tired," Brock says, and he slaps my back. "Do we need to get you some caffeine? Some eats? Grill House has all-you-can-eat on Wednesdays, remember?"

"No, I'm not hungry," I say.

"All right, all right, that's fine I guess," Brock says, and now we both sit on the nonmatching sofas of the Lodge living room. And despite Brock's enthusiasm and attempts at friendship, the two of us will always remain as different as these two couches. "Tired or not, just good to see you. Heard you had it rough, busting up the bad guys."

"The bad guys?"

"Yeah. Charles Washington. Takes no prisoners."

"You make me sound like an action hero."

"I know. Never would have expected that from you."

"Thanks. That's a real compliment."

"No, didn't mean nothing by it," Brock says. "Wasn't an insult. It's just that you didn't seem like a hard-ass during the summer, you know? Always reading those leadership books? I didn't know you had it in you, closing chapters and what-not."

I stare at him emotionlessly, scratch my chin scruff. I don't know what he's heard, who's been giving him his information, but I certainly have never known Brock London to be sarcastic. He honestly believes I've been a model employee. "You didn't think I'd make a good consultant, huh?" I ask and finally smile. "Shows what you know."

"I stand corrected, buddy!" Brock shouts. "So tell me details. Fill me in. Been too long, and I want to hear *every*-thing about Charlie Washington's semester."

Everything. Illinois to New Mexico State to Texas Tech. Oh, that'll go over well.

"You seem to know about my semester, already," I say.

"Naw," he says. "I just heard some things from Walter."

"Let's talk about *you*, Brock," I say. "I don't know anything about *you*. How was *your* semester? Everything you hoped for?"

"Whoo," Brock says. "*Boy*. You do *not* want to get me started. I'm so full of stories that I could write a whole HBO series. You'd have to listen to me all night."

Yes, I probably would. I imagine his stories. Like, maybe he walked into the University of Houston chapter house and found a keg in the living room and picked it up with his bare hands and tossed it outside into the dumpster and grabbed a mop and made the chapter president clean the muddy tiled floors where the keg had sat. "Unacceptable!" I can hear him shouting. Or maybe he stomped into McNeese State University and ripped down alcohol-related posters from the wall, replaced them with inspirational Lance Armstrong posters. Or maybe he roared through Colorado State University's basement and commanded the brothers to sweep the floor, take out the garbage, repaint, stand up straight no slouching, have some fucking respect, act like men, like real Nikes.

"Things you wouldn't believe," Brock says.

I try to imagine the stories he'll tell, but he's still giving me a prompting look, like he still wants me to speak instead. And now I imagine the stories *I* could tell...I have nothing heroic or impressive to say...I have only failures from early in the semester...I have only drinking tallies and hook-ups from late in the semester.

"Actually, Brock," I say. "I just remembered. I have to make a phone call."

"Oh, sure," he says. "Have at it, Charlie. Got some business of my own to take care of, if you know what I mean?" He laughs, heads for the bathroom, and I pull out my cell phone. Since last Friday, when I received the voicemail from New Mexico State's Director of Greek Affairs, I've been considering my options. No follow-up phone call from him, but how do I respond? I told Sam Anderson I'd handle this, and hell, I *have* to handle it or I could go down, too. But do I call the Greek Advisor and praise our fraternity chapter at New Mexico State? Call him and pretend that they're saints, that they would *never* haze? Call and feign outrage at the mere *accusations*? Call and dodge his questions? Call and assert their rights, lawyer style? And now it's Wednesday, 6:30 PM, and I finally chance a phone call, hoping that he's out of the office, that I get his voicemail so I don't really have to say much, and *yes*—

—so I prepare in my mind a quick speech, some quick excuses, and when his voicemail message ends and gives me a prompting beep, I say, "Hey, Donnie, this is Charles Washington. So sorry I missed you on Friday. Crazy week. Lots of travel." I take a deep breath, hope I don't sound desperate or guilty. "Anyhow, looks like you're out of the office now. I'm finally settled back at Headquarters for a couple days, so go ahead and give me a call at your convenience. Thanks a lot."

Excellent. Friendly, not worried. Just one colleague talking to another. And the part where I said, "looks like *you're* out of the office"...makes me look like a work-a-holic, like I never sleep, like *he's* the lazy one. Excellent.

But, as Brock re-enters the room smelling of sprayed deodorant and a burnt match, waving his hand and mouthing "you don't want to go in there" while cocking his thumb backward at the bathroom door, it occurs to me that...I said I was at Headquarters. And now Donnie Ackman will call Headquarters, the 800 number, instead of trying me on my cell phone. And one of the secretaries will answer, will get his name, his position, before transferring him to

me. Maybe the transfer will be a non-issue...but maybe she'll ask the nature of his call, transfer him straight to Walter LaFaber or Dr. Simpson.

"You sure you're not hungry?" Brock asks, rubs his belly. "I'm starving."

When Nick, the third and final of the consultants, bumbles in through the Lodge's front door an hour later, he isn't unbridled energy like Brock. He doesn't lift anyone off the ground, doesn't give anyone a bear hug. Nick is a five-ten California boy, laid-back but not timid, gay but indifferent about homosexual culture or "gay pride": he deplores gay stereotypes because he doesn't fit any, doesn't want to, and he is annoyed at friends who aspire to duplicate the stereotype; Nick doesn't have a rainbow bumper sticker or talk with some conjured lisp, doesn't call himself a "she" or a "bitch." In contrast to his older gay friends, Nick doesn't flaunt it, doesn't want homosexuality to define him (of course, for Brock and me, it does define him, and I sometimes overcompensate to prove that I don't care). He does watch Queer as Folk, and he occasionally reads The Advocate, but-perhaps because his parents support his lifestyle and he has never encountered prejudice or violence-Nick cares about people, about individuals, and not about broad causes. Like me, he is a young man with College Student Personnel on his mind as a career choice. But unlike me, Nick and Brock have pursued both this consulting job and their future careers not out of desperation or limited options, but out of undeniable desire born from formative experience. Like many fraternity men across the country, Nick realized he was gay during college; he was forced to deal with this realization along with the other 55 brothers in our UCLA chapter who shared a house with him. The scenario is not always a happy one, of course: either a chapter accepts this and moves on (as happened in Nick's case), or the chapter is shocked and rejects the gay brother. Because Nick's experiences in college-his early and

formative years as a gay man—were so positive, he told us that he will forever appreciate college and fraternity life as a nurturing time period. Hence, CSP became his career goal: a lifetime of helping young students to realize themselves without the harassment or negativity that they might have encountered in high school or under their parents' supervision.

Right now, he tosses his duffel bag onto the hallway floor, wipes some sweat from his forehead, and oscillates a hard stare between Brock and me, who sit at the dining room table.

"So-ooo..." Nick says. He generally fills silence with drawn-out non-fluencies, with "soooo" and "we-elll" and "o-kaaay." "Good to see the both of you again," he says.

It takes Brock a moment to summon his unrestrained enthusiasm again, but when he does, Nick doesn't stand a chance. "Get your ass over here!" Brock says, shoves himself up from the couch and stomps over to Nick, gripping him in the same bear-hug in which I squirmed just an hour ago. "Aw, Nick," Brock says, tousling Nick's hair and squeezing him tighter, "you look like you're starting to lose that California tan of yours."

"Okay," Nick grunts, prying at Brock's hairy arms and unrelenting grip, "okay, okay. Playtime's over. I get it. You're glad to see me, okay."

Brock finally lets Nick loose, and Nick tumbles toward me, bumping his hip into the dining room table; he stands upright, then, and smoothes his long-sleeve Gap t-shirt, smoothes his jeans. Nick, as always, is dressed like a college student.

"Always some big physical production when I see you," Nick says to Brock, speaking in his usual two-toned voice, the one which wavers between amusement and annoyance. I never can tell which, and sometimes I'm wrong. During the summer, as I ironed my shirts and pants for the coming work-week, Nick would stroll through the room and stop at the ironing board, glaring at the stack of newly washed shirts that lay crumpled in the basket, ready to be ironed. "Look

who's ironing again," he would say, and for much of the summer, I thought he was being sarcastic. How else were my clothes supposed to get ironed? Later, though, I learned that Nick was *really* annoyed; if you're going to dress nice, he says, take your clothes to the dry cleaners; you can always find wrinkles and bad creases on self-ironed pants. An inane situation, certainly, but Nick is one of those "if you're going to do something, do it right" kind of guys.

"You like it," Brock says to Nick. "You like the physical productions."

"You'd like to think that, wouldn't you?"

Brock laughs, but in a way that suggests that he's uncomfortable with gay humor.

"And *you*," Nick says now, glaring at me. "I expected you to be wearing khakis, not jeans. Now people are really going to think that we're brothers."

"You can change if you want," I say, "but I'm pretty comfortable."

"Fair enough," Nick says. Many times, we are mistaken for brothers: the California boy and the Florida boy, dark Caucasian skin and short, black hair, gelled or waxed usually. Over the past summer, though, other Headquarters staffers would describe Nick as the "Laid-Back Brother," as he rarely tucked in his shirts and styled his hair with a bit more wild college zest than I did: I kept my hair conservative. Now, though, except for his two-day-old facial hair overgrowth, we look nearly identical.

"Now that you mention it, Nick," Brock says. "I never seen our boy"—he jabs his elbow in my direction—"never seen him wearing jeans before. What's up, Charles? You take the stick outta your ass over the semester?"

"Ouch," Nick says, and he takes a seat at the dining room table.

"Better a stick than a gerbil," I say.

"Oooh," Brock says, clapping, "bad joke, but at least you got yourself a sense of humor, now." Brock exudes a do-no-wrong, good-old-boy charm, and even his most offensive comments make you feel comfortable and included, make you happy—even if he insults your manhood, your family, everything—that he is making these insults about *you*. But after Brock and I are finished laughing, we both look at Nick, scratch the backs of our necks as though, because he's gay, we've insulted him with the "up the ass" jokes.

And I try to laugh again, just to make it seem like I hadn't just looked at Nick.

Nick doesn't seem to notice, though, is searching through his duffel bag. When he finally finds what he is looking for, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, he gives a relieved sigh and then stares me up and down in my chair. "So-ooo…interesting," Nick says. "You really look like a different man, Charles. What caused this…transformation?"

"Transformation?" I ask. "No, no. Same old Charles."

"Got tired of always ironing your khakis, huh?" Nick asks. "Switched to jeans?"

"Dry-cleaning was getting too expensive."

Nick pops a cigarette into his mouth, but doesn't light it. Not here, not inside. But I get the feeling that, because he's driven all the way to Indianapolis from Alabama today, he's been dying for some nicotine. "So tell me about your semester, Charles," he says, words mumbled because of the cigarette in his mouth. "I heard stories."

"No stories, no," I say, smooth my pants. "Pretty boring, my semester."

"Boring?" Nick asks, and now he's walking across the room, is actually opening the dining room window—cold air swooshing inside—and is lighting his cigarette. Doesn't seem concerned, shocked. "You got to visit LA, my hometown."

"I visited Long Beach," I say. "It's not the same."

"You gonna smoke that inside?" Brock asks.

"Too cold out there," Nick says.

"The Lodge is gonna smell like cigarettes."

"We're only here for two days. It'll be all right." Nick taps the ash of his cigarette out the window, where it likely falls into a patch of dead vegetation. "Jenn get jealous of the California girls?" Nick asks.

"Jenn?" I ask, eyes going wide before I can even control my reaction.

"Whoa, don't get excited, buddy," Brock says.

"Forget to call her today?" Nick says. "Uh-oh. Forget to hit your two-call daily goal, or whatever you had?"

"You knew about that?" I ask. I try to smile, resume my casual and good-humored responses to these gentle jabs. They don't know, that's the thing. For fear of revealing something, anything—from my late nights in Long Beach to my early mornings in Las Cruces— I've kept all my personal details a blurry picture for both Nick and Brock, each time I've talked to them over the phone throughout the semester. Neither knows that I drank with both undergraduates and alumni; neither knows that I essentially allowed my relationship with Jenn to crack apart and fall away, and that—as a result, perhaps—my entire Code of Conduct-centered life structure cracked apart, also. And certainly, neither knows that I slept with a freshman girl to spite Jenn. Both of these guys are good friends, the sort with whom I'd share a dinner, stories from college, even a couple beers, but I'm not sure that either of them values my friendship over their jobs as Educational Consultants. Nick is not as loud as Brock, but they're still similar; he's laid-back, but he's got a mean streak that tears loose unexpectedly, a determination that allows him to stop at nothing until he corrects a problem, fixes a behavior, whatever. So I cough out a quick laugh, smile uneasily, don't tell either of them that Jenn and I are no longer dating...because as long as I am in a relationship, any other rumors can be easily dismissed. "Who, me?" I can say. "I've got a serious girlfriend. I would never hook up with some college girl!"

"God, I'm glad I don't have a girlfriend," Brock says, standing, stretching, then beating on his chest like King Kong, this look on his face like he's accomplished something. "Don't know how the fuck you manage, Charlie," he says.

"It's...you know," I say. "Whatever. It is what it is."

"God, I'm glad I don't have a girlfriend," Nick says. "That'd be shitty for *her*, you know what I'm saying?"

Brock laughs, pounds his fist—backwards—against a wall. Another hearty laugh to indicate that—yes, even *Brock*, the Conservative Texan Heterosexual Meat-Eater—is culturally sensitive now, and can find gay humor funny. Sort of. "What's the matter, Charlie?" Brock says when his guffaws subside. "You don't get it?"

"No, I get it," I say.

"I'm gay," Nick says. "Get it now?"

"Yeah," I say. "I just—"

"So how *is* Jenn doing, buddy?" Brock asks. "You going home to see her over Thanksgiving Break?"

"I've...thought about it," I say. "I just haven't bought tickets. Yet."

"How much is a flight?" Nick asks, taps ash out the window.

"What?"

"Flight from Indy to...Fort Myers, was it?"

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah. It changes. You know?"

"Right," Nick says. "You already spent a shitload, didn't you?" "Sure."

Silence in the Lodge dining room.

"So-ooo," Nick says.

Brock turns to me, shrugs, looks as though he's about to say something—and I can tell, just by the way he's raising his wide shoulders and stretching his face in that curious way, that he's going to ask a question, and it's going to be about Jenn, or about my travels, my chapters, what I've done, *my stories*, how I handled Illinois, everyone's heard about Illinois, about how I take no prisoners, and I head him off again, say quickly, "Well tell us about *your* semester, Brock. We haven't gotten into it, yet. You actually look like you've lost weight."

"Naw," he says. "Put on fifteen pounds, been eating so many hamburgers."

"Yeah, you look fatter," Nick says.

"Thanks, buddy," Brock says. "But you don't want to get me started about my semester." But in seconds, Brock is off to the races, listing his top visits and his worst, unfurling a lengthy narrative of the worst sleeping conditions he had to endure.

Most interesting visit was Southern Mississippi, he says, where he slept in the dorms for a night, was kicked out by an RA who claimed that residents couldn't have visitors, and then spent the next three nights at the president's *mother's* house ten miles away from campus. "Hell of a cook, that woman," he says. He is still wearing a dress shirt right now, and his underarms have gone wet with sweat.

"That's nothing," Nick says, and he shuts the window, takes a seat at the living room table with Brock and me. "When I visited the College of Charleston, nobody was at the house. *Deserted*. I call every number on their roster and no one answers. It's late at night, and I don't know where to go. And this is Charleston, too, and the hotels are, like, 150 a night." And Nick tells us that he drove thirty miles before he could find a reasonable hotel, and he learned the next morning that the chapter had taken a road trip to Florida for a mid-semester break, and he spent three days in an empty fraternity house, and his story is interrupted only with intermittent laughter from Brock, who's nodding and slapping the table with *been there, done that* gusto.

And when Nick's finished and he walks back to the window to smoke another cigarette, Brock's got another story. And when Brock's finished, Nick's got another story: he stole one president's sandals so he could walk across the scummy floor of the UNC-Wilmington shower. *Ha ha!* Brock says. Well, Brock had to take a shower in the community "gang-bang" shower at Texas A&M, and while he was shampooing, the cleaning crew came in and mopped and sprayed and cleaned and stared at him, and they were all women and they didn't even say *hello*! Stories, stories, stories. I laugh, but never too loudly. I keep waiting for each funny story's sequel or subplot, or maybe just a few deleted scenes that will reveal Brock and Nick as Frat Stars, also. Like, did Nick ever get friendly and fraternize with the fraternity brothers at any school? Did Brock allow himself once—just once—to polish off a 12-pack with some good, old-fashioned All-American Texas Nu Kappa Epsilons? *Just once*? Just a couple beers? Come on!

Do they have Juarez?

Do they have Maria?

Do they have Philadelphia International and Texas Tech and Highland and Fresno? Do they have nights they can't remember, mornings when they woke up and thought they must be back home by now?

Did they abandon their goals?

Do they have hangers swaying? Do they have hills they are descending?

Are they staring straight into darkness, knowing that all of the things in their lives are building, packing them in tighter, and that they could crash at any second, and that their careers, their futures, could end suddenly? Boom. Last five years, worthless.

I stay quiet through their stories, because I don't think I can trust them. All that's happened this semester—my own Banyan Tree growing and new branches stretching and shooting out new vines to become new trunks and growing and growing until I don't even know how I got here, where I am, how it all started—and my lips remain firmly pressed together, only a faint smile gracing my face and betrayed by my nervous eyes. I can't say a word, I know that now. For the next three days, my only defense—my only chance to keep my reputation and my future—is silence. And tomorrow, when we are reunited with Walter LaFaber, this will become much more difficult.

Chapter Eleven: Debrief

Thursday morning is bright through the windows of the Lodge as I iron my khakis and prepare to go back to the office. Day one of the debrief. But the sunshine is deceiving; when I step outside and walk across the pavement of the courtyard to the Headquarters building, my still-wet hair feels as though it is crackling into a quick freeze, and my breath spreads from my mouth in a white puff. Though light and clear blue, the Indiana sky is also streaked with seemingly endless lines of cold clouds.

Brock (from Texas) and Nick (from California) both huddle into themselves and hop and make anguished squeals as they run the length of the courtyard to Headquarters, dashing inside as quick as possible. Both have been traveling along the Gulf Coast throughout the Fall; this is probably the *first* morning that either of them has tasted temperatures below 40 degrees this semester. Me, I've *been* dealing with the cold.

Directly inside the Headquarters building—at the vanguard of the "V"—is an impressive lobby, complete with a leather-bound guestbook (pages tied together with gold string); a thick Chapter Book (a three-ring notebook filled with page-sized composite photos from each chapter, slid into plastic sleeves); ten bronze busts of our ten National Hall of Fame Alumni; and a banner the length of two SUVs, draped from the ceiling, cataloguing every "Chapter of the Year" winner since 1975 (Edison University appears on this banner as the 1996 Chapter of the Year. Strangely, the University of Pittsburgh appears the year before.). The carpet of the lobby is a deep Merlot red and the walls a waxy blush color. At the very back wall of the main lobby is a yellowing NKE flag, proportions of 10 feet by 19 (the same, says *The Marathon*, as the proportions of the American Flag), signed in one corner by the eight original founders of Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity. The letters and symbols were hand-stitched onto the dyed cloth by

Marjorie Mayweather, the wife of Carolina Baptist's esteemed President, Edgar Mayweather, who helped the young group in its early years. There are also tall portraits of past Executive Directors of NKE, and framed charcoal drawings of fraternity houses from across the country, and Donor Roll plaques and—

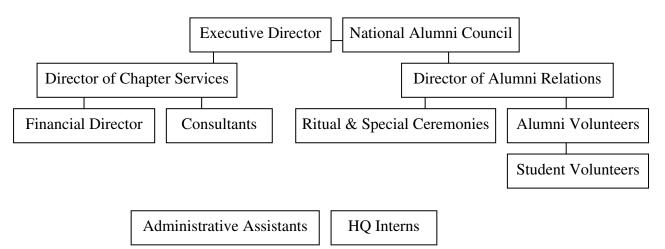
The Headquarters lobby is a showcase of fraternity tradition and history, of the size and scope of NKE, and even the smell (like an old bookstore) brings a strong feeling of pride. From eight young students at Carolina Baptist...to this, a *National Fraternity*, a Headquarters! But it is intimidating, too, this lobby, so focused upon asserting the importance of Nu Kappa Epsilon that nowhere is mentioned the very human bonds of those eight men back in 1910.

Of course, this is only the lobby. The rest of the building is a bit more modest.

Beyond all of this decadence, beyond this formal display of fraternity splendor, beyond a lobby built and designed to perpetuate the sexy view of fraternities as all-powerful national brotherhoods, two doors open—both at opposite ends of the back wall of the lobby—into two wings which compose the back of this triangular-shaped building. One wing, the left, is never opened to the general public because it is a three-floor office building and storage unit of inestimable unimpressiveness: rows and rows of cubicles that rival the *Office Space* set in their monotony, and veritable depositories of filing cabinets and cracking cardboard boxes and stacks and stacks of three-ring binders and plastic crates filled with carbon-paper order forms and then the closets...all of the *closets*! The left wing of the Headquarters, it seems, was built more for closets than for offices. Past one cubicle sits four closets in a row, *four*, nicknamed the Ducks (someone, years ago, mentioned something about having all necessary files in order, like "ducks in a row," and so the name somehow stuck), all overflowing with chapter files, chapter files, chapter files. Here in the Ducks, you can locate (if you've got the time for a thorough search) the

entire financial history of our chapter at the University of North Carolina, including tattered budgets from 1974 and consultant financial reports from 1982. You can find correspondence from the National Headquarters to the University of Tennessee, regarding a hazing incident in 1989 (and, for some incidents, there is a great deal of correspondence). You can find all of this and more in the Ducks, but nothing is easy to locate. Every semester, Walter LaFaber assigns an intern the unenviable task of organizing the Ducks. Every semester, the intern barely makes a dent. It's like scrubbing an arena floor after a rock concert...using only a toothbrush.

The lobby's other door, the right, leads to a wing of a different sort. One that is always available to public viewing. Here are the seven "real" offices of Headquarters, each of which exudes a power and opulence to match that of the lobby; here are two boardrooms and one library, filled with books and binders shelved to eternity and back (alumni directories dating back to 1920, old pledge manuals, university directories, books written by alumni). This is what the hierarchy of the Headquarters looks like:



And in these "real" offices, you will find Dr. Simpson (Executive Director), Walter LaFaber (Director of Chapter Services), Janice Nevin (Financial Director), Dr. Simon Eckstein (Ritual and Special Ceremonies Officer), Brian Hampton (Director of Alumni Relations), Betsy Tucker (Administrative Assistant), and Mildred Rose (Administrative Assistant). Notice the position of the consultant on this hierarchy. And still we are stuffed into cubicles in a storage bin, while the administrative assistants get real offices. When I came through the National Headquarters on a tour during my interview, of course, I was shown only the lobby and the "real" offices, never the disheveled "other half" which exists in a state of constant turnover—interns every six months, consultants every year—and where the only consistency is disorganization.

"I forgot how this place smells," Nick says.

"You're right," Brock says. "Smelled so much beer and piss this semester."

"Smells like paper and reconstituted air," Nick says.

"And you can actually smell Betsy's perfume," I say. "She's not even here yet, I don't think, but it sticks around in the air. Even if this place was abandoned for twenty years, you'd probably still smell it."

Out of the far end of the lobby, a crisp and commanding voice suddenly interrupts and overpowers our short conversation: "Gentlemen, so good to see you this morning."

We freeze, all three of us, hands in mid-air, mouths open, and we stare at the doorway of the right wing, from which Walter LaFaber has emerged. He stands tall, posture perfect, the massive muscles in his shoulders stretching his white dress shirt to the limit. His black hair is combed meticulously into the sort of young professional mold that one might expect from a contestant (a *serious* contestant) on *The Apprentice*. Black pants, thin gray pinstripes, not a single wrinkle or crease. Silver belt buckle, smooth and blank, the size and weight of a Zippo lighter. Walter LaFaber. Cheeks as hard as granite. Ben Affleck good looks, except for the thin scar on his forehead that he earned while playing football for a year at the University of Alabama. He stands like a statue, waiting while we take in all that is Walter LaFaber, our boss,

our Director of Chapter Operations, a man viewed by many in the fraternity world—even in his undergraduate years—as *the* Marathon Man (his face graced the cover of the *College Chronicle* when he made headlines his senior year for leading his fraternity chapter to an unheard-of 3.56 overall GPA...95 men...and an equally jaw-dropping 75-hour average per-man community service hours), the figurehead of Nu Kappa Epsilon. He is a man so focused, with such a list of accomplishments, that it is impossible *not* to admire him. Still, in the last two months, I've wondered how much of the *real* Walter LaFaber I've seen. If I have, at all.

Brock is the quickest of the three of us to return to life, and he lets out a haunting Texas cackle—"Haw! Haw! "—and stomp-runs across the lobby. "Walter, buddy," Brock says and collides with LaFaber (neither moves) and the two of them flex as they embrace, the shirt over LaFaber's shoulders so taut that it looks ready to rip. "Been too long! Been too long!" Brock says.

"It *has* been, yes," LaFaber says, smacking Brock's back. Both smile violently. "I'm glad that you all made it back here safe."

Nick is the next to come out of his trance, and he saunters to LaFaber with his familiar two-toned expression...is it irony or joy? Amusement or annoyance?

"Nick, Nick, Nick," LaFaber says as Nick approaches, and they engage in a firm handshake. No hug. "Good to see you. Is it casual day today? Did I miss something?"

Nick wears a powder-blue polo, untucked, with his flat-front khakis. "UCLA plays USC this weekend," Nick says. "Just wanted to show as much Bruin blue as possible. You know me, Walter."

"I know you, all right," LaFaber says.

And then his gaze slips from Nick and centers directly on me, his smile shrinking as though I've sucked the energy from the room, eyes staring *heavier* somehow, heavy on me. I am suddenly certain that Walter LaFaber knows something, that no amount of silence or evasion can help me. He knows something; he can't hide the fact that he knows something about me. "Charles Washington," he says, smile gone now, and it's a deep, vibrating voice, the kind that best suited as a voice-over in a horror movie trailer.

"Walter," I say.

He walks toward me, Brock and Nick still standing together behind him but now engaged in their own private conversation, barely attentive to either of us. LaFaber's clothes crackle in just the right way as he walks, perfect folds and wrinkles appearing and then disappearing with each new step, lobby's lights lending no shadows over his face.

Charles Washington, on the other hand, I look like...well, like I *always* look in relation to Walter LaFaber. An amateur. I wasn't able to iron the hanger crease out of my khakis this morning (I haven't worn them in weeks); my belt is scratched and old, a relic damaged during my travels; my hair has grown long and shaggy, and I shaved this morning in a sloppy hurry, nicking my neck four times.

"The consultant All-Star," LaFaber says to me, inches away, sticking his hand out...and I grip it, shake. "You've had a hell of a semester, Mr. Washington. You should see the evaluations we've been getting for you. Students and Greek Advisors alike."

"I can't imagine," I say.

"We've got a lot of things to talk about, Charles."

"Only good things, I hope?"

"Sure," he says and slaps my shoulder. "Some things you'll get excited about."

"I can't wait."

"Of course you can't," he says, and now he adjusts his sleeves, adjusts his tie even though it's perfect. Tighter, so his neck bulges out of his collar even more. His cheeks seem to have gone harder, too, shoulders grown larger. He's breathing through his nostrils, like a bull. "Lots to talk about, you and me," he says again.

"Right," I say, trying to sound optimistic, as though "lots to talk about" means that I will be promoted, that we will spend hours discussing my importance to the organization, as though "lots to talk about" does *not* mean that we will instead spend hours sifting through police-reportstyle accounts of hazing in Las Cruces, or that I will simply spend several quick and uncomfortable minutes in LaFaber's office as he recounts my misdeeds and tells me to clear out, I'm finished.

"Well, it's good to see you," he says, then turns to Brock and Nick. "It's good to see *all* of you. The next two days are going to be long, intense. We've got a whole lot to discuss in the world of Nu Kappa Epsilon, so I hope you're excited."

"You know it, buddy," Brock says and claps.

"For now, get settled at your desks," LaFaber says, "but get ready to talk about everything you've seen this semester. Everything. We've got a big day ahead of us."

< * ×

Here in this office, I try to convince myself that, for the first time in a long time, I feel semi-stable again. Sitting in a rolling desk chair, laptop opened on my cubicle's desk, connected to the Headquarters' network (high-speed internet, print sharing, access to the HQ database, things I haven't enjoyed since the summer). As though my entire life is no longer reduced to endless travel, to packing up and driving, to a crowded Explorer.

But the feeling doesn't stick, not really. After all, I'm wearing a dress shirt and khaki pants, but they don't fit right anymore. And I know that, come Saturday, I'll dress casually again. And on Sunday, the three of us—Brock, Nick, and I—will pack up and drive once again, leave Indianapolis, resume our travel schedules. We'll return to Indianapolis just before Christmas and immediately begin preparations for Spring semester, then pack up and drive again. All Spring. Another sixteen weeks. All so that I can obtain the references I need for grad school, for a career in CSP that will make this past year worthwhile. No, here in the office, there is no feeling of stability. What was once so impressive, as I sat in this same spot over the summer and crafted goal sheet after goal sheet, now feels like dress-up day in high school. And the prospect of today's "debrief" makes my legs shake—sitting quiet for an entire day in meetings, everyone prying information from me—and I smooth my pants, smooth my pants.

The three of us have been given a "Debrief Schedule," an hour-by-hour, day-by-day itinerary for the next two days here at Headquarters. Dress-up day. Two days of pretending I am what I should be, the young man everyone remembers from the summer. The façade of Charles Washington, Educational Consultant, Marathon Man.

| From: | 9:30 AM | Full Staff Meeting |
|-------|----------|--------------------------------------|
| To: | 10:15 AM | Group EC Meeting with Walter LaFaber |
| To: | 1:00 PM | Group EC Meeting with Brian Hampton |
| To: | 3:00 PM | General Update Session |
| To: | 4:00 PM | Catch-All |
| | | |

To: Friday, when each consultant has one-on-ones with Dr. Simpson, one-on-ones with Dr. Eckstein, Brian Hampton, Janice Nevin, and Walter LaFaber.

Now, Dr. Simpson's voice—an old, Southern, Dr. Phil voice—crackles over the office intercom, calls all staff to gather at the Henderson Memorial Conference Room. Without thinking, I rise from my chair, from my would-be-stable work space, and I meet Nick at his cubicle, and the two of us meet Brock at his cubicle, and we weave our way through the mess of boxes and crates and stacks upon stacks of binders and unopened UPS boxes of unclaimed awards and trophies from conferences past and as we walk to the conference room, interns also rise from their chairs unconsciously, join our march, and we look like an assembled *Gangs of New York* mob by the time we trudge through the main lobby and file into the Henderson Memorial Conference Room on the "presentable" wing of the office building, a room dense with donor recognition.

It was in this room that we—the consultants—spent our two months of summer training, learning the "in's and out's of Nu Kappa Epsilon," learning how to facilitate workshops, learning every decimal point in the National Budget and the individual chapter fees and assessments. This was our training room, and I remember sitting at the boardroom table everyday, staring at my reflection in the thick glass tabletop, thinking *I've made it*, *I'm professional*, thinking *Diamond Candidate*, thinking I could be the next Walter LaFaber. Thinking, as I looked at several etched platinum plates underneath the glass—the names of our founders, the names of the first full Headquarters staff back in 1920—thinking that this is my first step to something great.

I remember thinking that these name plaques under the table, and these portraits of NKE Hall-of-Famers around the room...they were the heroes of the last several generations. Legends. Men of purpose. They meant something to the world.

"Good morning, everyone," Dr. Simpson says to the full staff of the National Headquarters gathered here in the boardroom, "and welcome back to our Road Warriors!" Dr.

Joe Simpson, our Executive Director. He stands at the head of the table, wearing his nicest navy suit and French-collar shirt, gold cuff links (just like Dr. Vernon at Bowling Green). I wonder if he likes wearing this suit, those cuff links. I wonder, sometimes, if he even likes the young undergraduate men who currently populate the NKE student chapters. Dr. Simpson belongs to an old school of fraternity thought, to a class of men who went to college when college wasn't something that *everyone* did. Not quite as exclusive as Carolina Baptist at the turn of the century, but still, I sometimes get the feeling that Dr. Simpson—a graduate of the University of North Carolina—expects the same type of student (with the same social status and assets) at Millennialera New Mexico State or Fresno State that he would find at 1950s Duke or Vanderbilt. Dr. Simpson is smiling now, blinding-white hairs matted on his scalp, and he begins a thunderous applause for the consultants, an applause immediately joined into by Walter LaFaber (who rises half out of his seat to put extra strength into each clap), by Dr. Simon Eckstein, by Janice Nevin, by the interns, by everyone.

"We look forward, in the next two days, to hearing everything you have to report back to the National Fraternity," Dr. Simpson says. "Fraternity is a special institution, and it is you three—not any of us in this office—who maintain the fine tradition and the fine vision set forth in 1910."

Applause again.

A month ago, I was waking up in a girl's dorm room, smelling like tequila and vomit and sex. A week ago, I was drinking beers at a bar in West Lafayette. Now, Dr. Simpson is talking about the grand tradition of Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity, about the many man who have come before us, about the legends whose names we view under the glass tabletop. And it goes on like this for most of the morning, eloquent welcomes from each of the staff members,

aggrandizing the mission of the fraternity and the "necessary work" of the consultants, and all the while Walter LaFaber stares at me. Sometimes, perhaps, he looks at Brock, or glances past Nick, but without a doubt he is focused upon me, searching me, seeing through me as I try to give my full attention to Dr. Simpson or Dr. Eckstein and avoid the temptation to meet his gaze. In my eyes, he watches the story of Charles Washington scoring phone numbers at a New Mexico State pledge event, fucking a freshman girl and later asking her over the phone, "what do you want?" as though she's holding my life hostage for no good reason. *What do you want*?

Grand tradition, they are saying. Fraternity legends. It all sounds noble, nice. And I think: all these names under the table, though I see only the legend that has been made of their lives, I can't be the only one who has experiences that will never be emblazoned upon some conference room plaque. I can't! These names, these legends, probably treated NKE no different than the way I treated my four years at Edison University. "Man on campus," some people called me jokingly. "Diamond Candidate," Dr. Simpson called me in my interview. But it would be ridiculous to say that my story is one only of academic awards and accolades. There is the story of a young man who became a pledge in the most successful fraternity at Edison University, yes, but there is also the story of a freshman year brimming with days and nights drunk from hard liquor snuck into the dorms. It makes me feel safe to think that I am not the only one with this sort of past, but when I shift my gaze from the nameplates under the glass surface of the table, and LaFaber is still looking directly at me, I realize that it doesn't matter. For the National Fraternity, real consequences will follow from the hazing incident in New Mexico (if not also from my time with Maria), and the National Fraternity will find it remarkably easy to pass those consequences along to me, rather than absorbing them itself.

I smooth my pants and look into my lap because I am still here, now, and even if Dr. Simpson gets martini-drunk at every donor banquet, even if Walter LaFaber or Brock London has consultant stories no different than my own, even if they have lied as much as I have, these names under the table and these men standing before me, even if they've all hidden some other persona from public view, I know that this fraternity doesn't mind clipping *any* of its vines every now and then to make itself sturdier, stronger.

At 10:15 AM, after a brief bathroom break, we—the consultants—have our "Group EC Meeting" with Walter LaFaber. We slip back into the Henderson Memorial Conference Room, just the three of us and LaFaber, and I try to make myself comfortable in one of the plush, padded black adjustable leather chairs at the boardroom table, it is still difficult to look directly at LaFaber as he speaks. So I stare at the nameplates under the glass tabletop. "C. Anthony Croke," reads the nameplate under my reflection.

"Now," LaFaber says, "is the time when we talk candidly." His voice is warm with understanding, like he knows all of those "Road Horror Stories" that we—*Brock* and *Nick*, actually—were telling last night, like he knows it because he suffered through the same. Because he's one of us. Ten years ago, LaFaber was a consultant. *Before* consultants carried cell phones and laptops, he's always quick to remind us. He's told us that he joined Nu Kappa Epsilon because he knew the empowering potential of fraternity life, and he began working for the National Headquarters because he knew it was possible for all of our chapters nationwide to make the same strides that his undergraduate University of Alabama chapter had. There is warmth in LaFaber's voice that puts you at ease, certainly, but whenever someone sets out to "put you at ease," they've got a motive, right? Something unpleasant.

"Let's get down to business," LaFaber says now, opening a manila envelope and pulling from the inside four sheets of paper; he distributes them around the table, keeping one for himself. This simple act—done silently, without any eye contact—has the feel of ritual. "This is the chapter status sheet, the most important document in this fraternity," LaFaber says, and he sits erect, holding the paper perfectly straight before him, willing us—just through his silence and through his disciplined posture—to appreciate this paper, to regard it as we might a war memo detailing a coming invasion. Even the thin scar on his forehead seems to have faded, its color smoothing from seashell white to a flesh tone nearly indistinguishable from his skin. "You'll see four total columns, four categories, under which are divided the entirety of our 125 undergraduate chapters." He pauses, allows us to look the papers up and down, then says in the same reverent tone: "The categories, I trust, won't need any explanation."

| Acceptable | At Risk | Eliminate |
|---|--------------------------------------|------------|
| Alpha Gamma Alpha Iota Alpha Theta | Beta Zeta Theta Alpha Alpha | Iota Alpha |

These are the categories:

When I see the final column, "eliminate," I fidget and sink a bit in my seat, suck in my breath. It seems so out of place in this room, in this decadent place built upon tradition. It seems destructive. I cross my legs, uncross them, cannot get comfortable as I look over this sheet. Brock, on the opposite side of the table, stares down at his sheet with squinted eyes, fingers stroking his chin, nodding every now and then. And Nick looks at LaFaber, not at the paper, with his characteristic half-smile, the two-toned look that says either, "I don't understand," or "I understand and am amused."

"This report," LaFaber says, "*does not* leave this room. We're looking at a paper that, quite simply, decides the futures of so many young men across the country. Just think about this for a moment. Just think if a chapter should learn that it's scheduled for elimination. The consequences to fraternity property could be disastrous, as I'm sure you know all too well"—and LaFaber looks in my direction and nods—"from the housing situation at Illinois."

"Definitely," I manage, but I never saw what happened to that house when the brothers were evicted. I only heard from LaFaber that we were going to sue for damages.

"What we must also understand about this sheet," LaFaber says, "is that we're all grown men in this room. This is *business*. We don't talk about friendship, about brotherhood, not here. Put personal feelings aside so that we can categorize the chapters as truthfully as possible, for the best benefit of the National Fraternity."

Nick finally looks down at his sheet, runs his finger across the chapters listed in the "Eliminate" column. His face remains unreadable, still hides whatever emotional reaction lay within.

"This is last semester's status sheet," LaFaber says. "Your input today will assist us in preparing next semester's report."

"I always wondered about something like this," Brock says, still rubbing his chin. "If Headquarters made some kind of list."

"Let me repeat," LaFaber says, straightening his own chapter status sheet in front of him so that the text must be perfectly level before him, not even the slightest angle, no. "These are the only copies of this report. These four sheets of paper. This isn't some ranking system, or some fun game; we use this sheet to track the degree of functionality of each chapter. Without this sheet as our guide, concrete decisions are impossible." The futures of so many young men, LaFaber said. Here in this room, far from any campus, we're deciding which chapters to eliminate, to evict, which men may soon find themselves scrambling for new housing, which men may soon realize they've wasted four years (and thousands of dollars) in a fraternity that doesn't want them, that will no longer allow them even to wear an NKE t-shirt. My eye catches the words "Iota Alpha" in the right-hand column, under "Eliminate." Iota Alpha is the chapter name for Illinois...Illinois has already been eliminated, of course, their charter pulled and their chapter closed after the illegal party that I tried to stop. But this is *last year's* status sheet, which means that the decision to eliminate them came *a year ago*...at a meeting just like this, with last year's consultants...before these kids had even conceived their party...and elimination came as soon as any opportunity—the party—presented itself. I look up from the chapter status sheet, find myself staring squarely into LaFaber's eyes.

"Charles," LaFaber says in his gravelly voice. The forehead scar is becoming more prominent now, acquiring the slightest pink. Sometimes, when he is emotional, the scar flares. LaFaber clears his throat, says, "We'll start with your chapters."

"Start with my chapters," I repeat.

"Start at the 'Acceptable' column," he says. "Based upon only the visits that you've made so far, do you see any chapters that should be moved? Any chapters that would be best categorized as 'At Risk' or, perhaps, 'Eliminate.'"

I read the names on the list, and right now, back here in the office, with every chapter codified into its Greek letter designation—Alpha Alpha, Beta Delta, Alpha Xi, Psi Alpha— seeing them all here, lumped together, no indication of the universities that they call home...all of the chapter names appear indecipherable, interchangeable...the details slipped, and I can't

gather myself, get them back...but I do see, yes, Sigma Beta, *New Mexico State University*, "At Risk." I read the names of my chapters, but I can only think of things I shouldn't say. "I drank a bottle of Bacardi with the president at Michigan." "I drank six different microbrews at Long Beach."

"Most of them look fine," I say. "I didn't have very many problems."

"What about Eta Delta?" LaFaber asks. "Fresno State?"

I take a breath as if to say something, then blow it out without speaking.

"Some financial problems," LaFaber says. "I'm curious about your opinion."

Brock is busy drawing arrows on his paper, circling chapter names and scribbling notes and moving schools from column to column. Nick just looks at his, doesn't write anything; he looks down, then looks up at the wall, thinking, then down again.

"They'll be fine," I say. "We talked. Made a better budget. They'll be fine."

"You need to get a little more...detailed," LaFaber says.

"I don't know what else to say."

"Sure you do."

"I didn't encounter any...problems, you know?"

"Sure you did," LaFaber says, "and I want to hear about it." He points to Theta Beta, and I tell him that they're acceptable, sure, and then he asks questions about the condition of their house, if I saw anything suspicious, and I'm thinking that there's something familiar and futile about this, and I tell him some of the truth, that their fire escape had fallen from the house, but not *all* of the truth, certainly not, because I took shots with the Treasurer at Theta Beta, and then LaFaber is asking about Delta Delta, *Shippensburg University*, and telling me that I did an

absolutely "bang-up job" out there, and he thinks we can move them from "At Risk" to "Acceptable."

"I'm not sure about that," I say, and I can't control myself. Suddenly I want to argue with him. Suddenly I feel the same way I did while I slept on James Neagle's couch at Shippensburg, blood filling my head, emotion threatening to take control.

"Bang-up job," LaFaber repeats. "That investment is secure." He holds his giant hands before him, cracks his knuckles. "You saved that chapter. That's huge for us, for those alumni."

"That chapter," I say, "I had all that documentation, all those things wrong."

"And you corrected the behavior issues," LaFaber says. "Maybe not everything, but a massive shift of paradigm? That's what I understand, correct?"

Blood filling my head and I want to say, "I didn't save anything at Shippensburg and you fucking know it!" The investment is safe, maybe, but not the attitudes or lives of the men, not the things that matter. Those assholes can get away with whatever they want because the National Fraternity can't afford the loss of that house. Not at that university, where no new fraternity will ever buy the structure from us. So we let it be, we let them be, we look away. I didn't save *anything*, and that "drinking club" could be the most dangerous group I've seen (even more dangerous now that they know they'll never get in trouble), but I can't say a word. Maybe if I'd truly played the role of Marathon Man this semester, honorable and righteous, maybe then I could stand up and say what really should be said. But that Charles Washington was abandoned in a Philadelphia Airport, and in his place was re-discovered this man, a Frat Star whose credentials are worthless in my current situation. Can I be honorable now? Righteous? If I slam my fist on the table and tell LaFaber that this is all wrong? All of those things I talked about with Dr. Vernon at Bowling Green, I realize, all of the discussion about helping students, developing

students, proceeding with the students' best interest in mind: I *do* care about it, that this—as a career, as a personal mission—has been without a doubt the checkered flag toward which I have been racing since college, just like all those GAs GAs GAs in Dr. Vernon's office, but—again—it doesn't matter now. If I do anything but nod and agree with the better judgment of the Director of Chapter Operations, I expose myself.

"Yeah, they're secure," I say finally. "Move Shippensburg to 'Acceptable.""

"Great," LaFaber says. "Tell me about Sigma Beta, then."

Sigma Beta. New Mexico State. "At Risk," the sheet says. And the ease with which he said it, "Tell me about Sigma Beta, then," the ease with which he chose *that chapter* for me to now discuss—LaFaber knows something, I'm sure of it.

"Sigma Beta," I say. "Those guys were...nice...friendly."

"Remember what I said," LaFaber says. "This is business."

"They're nice kids, though. That should mean something, right?"

"Sure it does," LaFaber says, fingers of both hands pinching the bottom corners of his sheet of paper. Carefully, though, as if he's afraid to make palm-contact with the glass surface of the table for fear of leaving some unsightly skin-oil smudge. "That means we have a group of good kids out there in Mexico—"

"New Mexico," I snap before realizing I said it. I need to say something about this group, something positive but not too positive, something not unrealistic, something that acknowledges weaknesses but keeps the spotlight away. Keeps the spotlight off *me*, especially, until I can defuse the hazing allegations.

"Yes, of course," LaFaber says. "New Mexico. It means that we can work with them, but it doesn't mean that we're prepared to call their work acceptable." "Maybe I wasn't clear, then."

"Okay. Elaborate upon that."

"I meant, they do have good qualities. Even if they're not the total package."

"Great," he says. "Tell us more."

"Their diversity, for one thing," I say. Brock continues drawing, but now Nick has turned his attention to me. "They've got some great diversity. A lot of brothers from different backgrounds. More than I've seen in any other chapter. They're...fulfilling our mission. Making this a better national fraternity." LaFaber still pinches his paper, still stares me directly in the eyes as I talk, and still hasn't changed his stolid expression. It is an unwavering look he gives, unmoved and unconvinced.

"Their numbers don't look too promising, though," he says.

"Which numbers?"

"Recruitment numbers are down this year. And the debt they've accumulated?"

"Debt? I worked out a payment plan with them."

"That's nice, Charles," LaFaber says. "But they're two years—*two years*—behind. How do we know that they'll follow a payment plan instead of just building more debt? This is a definite risk, this group."

"I don't know if I'd call them a risk."

"Numbers alone," LaFaber says. "Closure should certainly be an option."

"Wait," I say. "Closure? Shutting the chapter down? That can't be an option."

"Why not?"

Why not? Because, as goes the chapter at New Mexico State University, so goes Charles Washington. Because Sam Anderson, who would be evicted from the house in the event of closure, who would possibly face criminal charges for hazing if their situation builds...because I am Sam Anderson's best friend now—I can save him, I can help—but if the chapter closes and his life goes to such absolute shit that he no longer needs help, then he will think what any failed young man ultimately thinks: that his failure is not entirely his own, that there are systems all around him that have failed him. And when that happens, I will become the figurehead for his hate.

"Well," I say. "An option, maybe. I mean...just an option. But it's so soon."

"This debt is nothing new," he says. "And it isn't going away."

"But can't we wait just one semester?"

"What happens in a semester?"

"I just...we spent a lot of time on that payment plan, and I know—I mean, I think I made a connection there—I know that they'll follow through."

"You know? Charles, we don't run this business on gut feelings."

"Could we keep them 'At Risk' for just one semester?" I ask. "You'll see."

LaFaber doesn't say a word, just continues staring into my eyes, then says through a sigh, "All right, Charles. All right." He checks his watch, a silver Tag. "We'll talk more in our one-onone. Got to move on." Thankfully, New Mexico State has survived another day, but LaFaber's dissatisfied demeanor suggests that this reprieve is subject to further consideration, further scrutiny.

For another hour and a half, we sit in the Henderson Memorial Conference Room, and we three consultants give quick appeals for certain chapters to slide over to the relative safety of "Acceptable," while others we allow to drop to the shaky ground of "At Risk." A few tumble (all of them Brock's, as he reveals in several diatribes all the infractions he witnessed at various chapters) into the dreary no-man's-land of "Eliminate." LaFaber never loses interest, and certainly never surrenders his sharp criticism of nearly every fraternity chapter. Interestingly, none of *our* alma maters—the University of Alabama, Central Texas, UCLA, and, of course, Edison University—are discussed for more than five seconds, and all remain "Acceptable."

At the very end of the meeting, though, LaFaber abruptly changes the subject. One last order of business, he says, hard cheeks barely moving to accommodate the folds of skin as he smiles. A surprise. I shiver involuntarily because I don't like surprises, but across the table, Brock's face lights up. Nick already had a pack of cigarettes out, was probably looking forward to a quick break, but now he replaces the pack in his pocket. Some very positive news to report, LaFaber says, and the smile seems more sinister than joyful; he enters into the topic of the University of Illinois closure, praising how artfully I handled the party situation last Fall (I accept this praise uneasily, the feeling persistent that all of these compliments that he pays me are artificial, and that-at any moment, when Brock and Nick leave the room-his mood will change, his face will change, and he will reveal a new LaFaber, dark and honest and furious from all that he knows about me), and then he relates a smooth narrative of several months' worth of under-the-table meetings, financial negotiations, and agreements. After I closed the University of Illinois chapter, he says, the National Headquarters immediately created a timetable for a return to campus. The alumni could handle the house dormancy for a short time, and while they were prepared for the closure, the forecast of five successive years of financial drain-until the university would allow NKE to colonize a new chapter-seemed depressingly bleak. Something had to be done. And fortunately, LaFaber says, an opportunity, a godsend opportunity, appeared out of nowhere. An interest group.

I think back to my conversation with the Greek Advisor at Purdue. Rumors about Nu Kappa Epsilon at the University of Illinois. An interest group, he said. And other national fraternities are pissed, losing money because this interest group has stolen the next colonization opportunity at the university. The way the Purdue advisor told the story, this is a national scandal, a betrayal of sorts.

A young man at the University of Illinois, he says, the son of a Chicago stock broker and Nu Kappa Epsilon alumnus, heard of the chapter closure, and after speaking with his father about the way the chapter *used to be* (before the rampant alcohol infractions, LaFaber seems to imply), he rounded up twenty other young men on campus in an effort to resurrect the chapter. An interest group, ready to pick up the pieces of the last group and form a new NKE chapter and move into the house.

"We're *doing* this?" I ask. "We're actually taking this group? What about the other national fraternities?"

"I'm not going to pass up this opportunity," LaFaber says. "No way."

My mouth is open, both palms pressed against the boardroom table's glass surface, and I want to interrupt again, but I don't. Brock and Nick obviously don't understand these concerns yet, and they're both on the edge of their seats. For them, this is exciting. After so much talk of "elimination," a brand-new fraternity chapter!

"So what's the process?" Nick asks.

"We coordinate a *colonization*," LaFaber says, and he describes the concept in step-bystep detail. I'm not sure who came up with the term "colonization," but it is certainly appropriate here, because I can imagine any empire taking a similar path to establishing a new territory. First, the National Headquarters sends two Educational Consultants to visit the interest group;

the consultants conduct a series of interviews with the students, making sure they are men of character (making sure, essentially, that this is a territory that is valuable for the colonizing country). Then, the consultants coordinate a full leadership retreat for the interest group; the young men are initiated into the fraternity, and their "interest group" becomes a *colony* (the country raises its flag on the territory's soil). Finally, the Headquarters stations a single consultant with the colony for a full semester; this consultant assists the men with recruitment and groundwork, and as long as the colony meets certain requirements, they are presented with a "charter" at the end of this semester, and the "colony" becomes recognized as a "chapter." The colonization is complete. The country has expanded its empire.

"The entire semester?" Nick asks. "One consultant stays with the group for a full semester? No traveling?" Most times, it's difficult to identify Nick's reaction, but right now he is clearly imagining himself as the lone consultant assigned to the Illinois colony. Brock took this job for the same reason that a young man might want to become a sheriff: to clean up the fraternity world and punish the bad guys. Nothing makes him happier than barreling through dirty chapters with a cowboy diplomacy approach to their behavior. *Clean up, or you're eliminated*! Nick, on the other hand, relishes the chance to work with students on a one-on-one basis, to coach, to provide guidance. Where Brock is a disciplinarian, Nick is a counselor. This is the opportunity he's waited for.

"Colonizations are very important to the National Fraternity," LaFaber says. "If we invest enough time and enough resources at the start, then this will be a mission-oriented chapter. A chapter that gets it...and *stays* that way."

"So the colonization," Nick says, "when does this start?"

"This Fall," LaFaber says. "We start Saturday."

"Who goes?" Nick asks.

"We'll talk specifics tomorrow, in our one-on-ones," LaFaber says. "But tonight, I want you—all three of you—to think about what it meant to you when you first joined the fraternity. And if you had the chance to start a brand-new fraternity from the ground up, what would be your goals, your ideals? These men are entering a grand tradition, guys. This is an exciting time for Nu Kappa Epsilon."

As soon as our lunch break starts, I clear some room in my Explorer; Nick and Brock cram inside, and I drive us all to a local deli, my vents taking almost the entire trip to finally start blowing hot air. On the equally cold drive back to the Headquarters building, there's a screeching noise from underneath my car. It lasts only a couple seconds. Brock says, "You run over a cat or something?" and the two of them laugh but I can only pretend amusement. Until I come to a stop in the parking lot at Headquarters, I count the number of times my Explorer wobbles unexpectedly, or shakes, or grumbles. Nothing disastrous happens, though. No smoking engine, no flat tire, so I follow Nick and Brock back into the office and back to our desks and try to forget about it.

When I visit the soda machine just minutes later, Janice Nevin (Financial Director) comes behind me, coins in hand for her post-lunch Diet Coke. "Charles," she says, "I've been meaning to talk with you."

"Oh yeah?" I ask. "What about?"

"We're missing some receipts from a couple expense reports."

"They weren't all attached?"

"Not all of them, no. It's only a couple receipts, but you're usually so organized."

"Interesting," I say and pop my quarters into the soda machine casually. "I don't know what could have happened to them." The truth, though, is that I do know what happened to these receipts. I trashed them because I haven't simply been using the NKE credit card to buy my breakfast, lunch, and dinner (I am allotted \$5/\$10/\$15 each day), but also draft beers to accompany my meals, pitchers of beer when I eat with undergraduates, mixed drinks, 12-packs when I buy my "dinner" from gas stations or supermarkets. Hundreds of dollars worth of food and drink that the National Fraternity has paid for (and I've never strayed from that strict per diem allowed for my dining), hundreds of dollars' worth of receipts, cleverly forgotten and omitted from various expense reports in the past month and a half because, although "Hamburger" and "Chicken Fingers" are perfectly acceptable for Janice to read as she processes my reports, "Bud Lt." and "Gin and Tonic" are not. Alcohol is not to be purchased with my per diem, no matter if it is for an alumnus, for an undergraduate, or for me. Forbidden, but only if Janice read my receipts, then alerted Walter LaFaber to my spending habits. So how to explain away these misplaced receipts? Easy. I shouldn't have to explain, I thought. When a receipt is lost, a receipt is lost. Washed in the laundry, dropped on a hotel floor, tossed into the trash can, whatever. Gone now. Bank statements might show "Chili's" or "7-Eleven," but they don't show itemized purchases. And so, a lost receipt from an NKE company credit card purchase is like a clean slate for Charles Washington. No worries.

"Could you look for the receipts, Charles?" Janice asks.

"I'll look through my folders, sure. Maybe I've still got some of them."

"Good, good. We need them to process those expense reports."

"I know. I apologize. Out on the road, hard to keep track of everything."

"I understand. It's just that, well, if we don't get the receipts, we can't process those expenses as your dining allowance."

"Okay," I say, nodding as though this is to be expected, twisting the cap off the bottle of soda that just came tumbling out of the soda machine.

"And we take the expenses out of your paycheck, instead," she says.

I'm silent, hand frozen on the cap.

"There's probably six hundred dollars in expenses you marked to your dining allowance," she says. "So make sure to get me those receipts, okay?"

All afternoon, I stay quiet and pretend to be busy with old reports at my desk, but really I'm looking through my personal bank account (\$556.04, with my next \$250 car payment in two weeks, and my next \$85 insurance payment due right afterward) and thinking of ways to produce false receipts because my next *two* paychecks (ordinarily just \$462 each) could be devastated by this dining allowance situation and my personal credit card is almost maxed out, but *false receipts*? An impossible idea. To pass the time and keep from thinking about it, I read through the old *Chronicle* that the GAs from Bowling Green gave me; I read the article, "How we can help Millennials discover their future," by Dr. Vernon, which tells me that the stress of post-college job searches have caused many young people to descend into a "quarter-life crisis." College graduates with Management or Business Administration degrees, he writes, are working retail or waiting tables because the job market is slow, and sinking into depression because they have been nurtured by their parents, because they have expected, all their lives, to get a good job and make a difference. "The 45 year-old married man, with a solid career and a family, might find it hard to relate to this depression," Vernon writes, "but the tired advice of 'Everything will

work out' is not quite consoling to a young person who believes his or her future is in jeopardy." This knowledge, that others in my generation also face untold stress over career choices, isn't consoling, either. But at least now, I decide, I'll have a well-articulated reason to supply for anyone who asks why I am interested in a career in Student Personnel. "I want to help Millennials discover their futures and avoid a post-college collapse," I can say. Of course, in order to help others, I suppose I must first help myself. I toss aside *The Chronicle*.

And just when I think I've avoided everyone for the day, Nick rolls his chair down the cluttered hallway, past the Ducks, past a row of boxes that earlier today toppled (Brock picked up the mess, straightened up the area without even the slightest complaint), and skids to a stop beside my desk. "Founding a fraternity," Nick says. He seems to appear out of nowhere, and I turn and knock over my Coke bottle. "Can you imagine the possibilities?" he asks.

"Oh, shit," I say, grabbing for the Coke bottle.

"Doesn't it sound exciting?"

"You scared the shit out of me," I say.

"You'll be one of the consultants who gets to interview the interest group at Illinois," Nick says. "It just makes sense. You've already been to the campus, you obviously know your way around there. All the administrators, the alumni, all that."

"Tell you the truth," I say, "I hadn't thought about it." I twirl a pen in my fingers, feign a cool disinterest, but really, Illinois has been the only thing on my mind ever since our meeting with LaFaber. I want nothing to do with that school. All I have to do is get through a couple more months of traveling and consulting, keep silent, manage my mess, stay under-the-radar, and grab my letters of recommendation. As a consultant, life is a clean slate every three days. No worries. I can manage, I'm convinced. Illinois, though? A place where my every action would be

under the microscope? Administrators, students, constant interaction. And my results will be measured in the success or demise of the colony I am building?

"How could you not?" Nick asks. "Starting a brand-new fraternity chapter. Your name on the charter? I mean, it sounds like an amazing opportunity."

I nod. "Yes. Could be very exciting for those kids."

"And for the consultants," Nick says. "I'm not bothering you, am I?"

"Don't worry about it." I look around my desk, hoping I've got some important report to work on, but my laptop screen displays the front page of the Wachovia web site.

"I don't know if we've ever talked about this before," Nick says, "but why did you join the fraternity to begin with?"

"Why did I join?"

"Yeah. LaFaber was talking about our goals and our ideals and all that, what we'd do if we joined now. And I was just wondering why *you* joined."

"Why did I join," I repeat again, still twirling my pen, because I realize at this moment that I don't know. Four and a half years ago, I was in the same position as so many of those freshman students across the country in the midst of Rush Season, caught up in the moment, but I suppose that I've never really considered *why* I decided to join a fraternity. Even then, I don't know that I was conscious of any specific reason. What was the original trunk of this tree? Was I thinking of my resume, perhaps? Piling on the extracurricular activities for some future employer? My father, as strange as it now seems, recommended fraternity life for the business connections. Was I attracted to the fraternity as a social outlet, or to the idea of a leadership organization? My reasons were certainly not as glamorous as the reasons that C. Anthony Croke and Jackson Cohen might have cited as they drafted the Nu Kappa Epsilon brotherhood oath

back at Carolina Baptist, but nearly a century separates our generations. "I don't know," I say. "I don't know why I joined."

"You got to do better than that, Charles. Give me something."

"I don't know," I say. "I've always been involved? All my life? My parents had me in youth sports since I can remember. Soccer, baseball. And all of high school, I was focused on college admissions. So I joined Key Club and the National Honor Society, all that. So once I got to college, I was focused on a post-college resume, you know?"

Suddenly, Brock rolls to my desk in his chair. He's a giant mass of Texas flesh and muscle and fat and Docker's khakis, awkwardly piled into a chair that creaks from side to side—office rodeo—and threatens to spill him off at any moment. "What are you clowns talking about?" he asks. "Heard you yapping from my desk."

"Why we joined the fraternity," I say.

"Right, right," Brock says, chair squeaking. "So what's the verdict?"

"It's not very interesting, I just decided."

"You ain't going to tell me?"

"It's all build-up, no climax," I say.

"You've both heard my story a million times," Nick says, "but I guess there were some things I never realized until today."

"What do you mean?" I ask. We're all three crowded around my desk now, three adult men in the sloppy corridor of the sloppy left wing of an office building; we're surrounded by files and file cabinets and folders and boxes, but far from any real "business" discussions. We might as well be three college kids. For all we know, LaFaber and Dr. Simpson and the rest of the full-time staff have already left for the night. "Back then," Nick says, "I didn't know I was gay, you know? I meet gay brothers in some of these houses, and they put on this big show when they first get bids. Pretend to be straight, and after initiation, they tell everyone they're gay. To prove a point, see who freaks. But they've known all along."

"Does that piss you off?" I ask.

"Sure it does," Nick says. "It's dishonest. When I came out at UCLA, it was genuine. I joined because I wanted a group of friends, and my fraternity brothers helped me through a tough time. That's all there was to it."

"See," Brock says, speaking in low tones, checking over both shoulders as though he's divulging a secret that he must be sure no one outside our space can hear, "I didn't meet a *single* gay man in any of the chapters I been to. Red states, I guess."

"Oh, you met plenty of gay men," Nick says.

"Nope," Brock says, shaking his head. "Not one."

"Honestly, Brock," Nick says. "If you're gay, and a big Texas alpha-male walks into your house, asking you where the best steak houses are, talking about college football for hours on end, you think you're going to tell this guy that you're gay? They probably thought you'd kick their asses."

"No, I'm sensitive," Brock says.

"Right, sensitive. You scared me half-to-death when we first met."

"Don't stereotype Texans," Brock says. "We're not all big dumb animals."

"I'll make a note of it."

Lately, I've been picturing the names under the glass of the table in the boardroom. Leonard Cohen. James Phelps. C. Anthony Croke. Jackson Cohen. Carolina Baptist. 1910. All those names, all those accomplishments, all those motives. Nick's reasons for joining ultimately resulted in some major life changes and, quite possibly, by the time he's finished with his career in higher education he'll have effected socio-cultural changes across the nation. Brock's initial reasons for joining might not seem noble, but after tragedy, his personality was forever altered and he has ever since fought for reform in the fraternity world. These two guys deserve plaques under the glass. But Charles Washington? A Banyan Tree of problems, one gnarled branch for the hazing at New Mexico State, another particularly sharp branch for Maria, one for Jenn, one bumpy branch for my Explorer, for the receipts and for my bank account, for my future career after consulting ends. A Banyan Tree without a beginning, just growing in every random direction, wherever I'm taken, no hint at how my life was taken in these directions, ho hint at why I even joined the fraternity. No start but so many possible ends, and none of them good. I stare at my desk, expecting to see all the names engraved upon the cheap particle board surface: C. Anthony Croke, Jackson Cohen, Dr. Simpson, Walter LaFaber. Men who mattered, who made it. But instead I notice that the voicemail light on my phone-the large black office phone that I rarely use, that I barely know how to use (I don't even know the number to dial out of the office)—is blinking rapidly.

"Oh, look at this," I say to Nick and Brock. "Guys, I've got to make a phone call. Could you give me just a minute?" They both nod, scoot their chairs back to their own desks, and I pick up the receiver and navigate my way through the office's voicemail menu, punching buttons, listening to options that I barely remember from my time in the office this past summer, and I finally end up with the following message:

"Charles, bro, this is Sam." Sam Anderson. *Fuck.* "We got real problems out here, 'kay? Real problems. I thought you were gonna take care of this, bro. Just got a call from our Greek

Advisor, says he couldn't get a hold of you. Says he wound up talking to your boss. Listen. We got problems, and we need to talk. This doesn't look good."

The voicemail has barely ended before I'm dialing Donnie Ackman at New Mexico State University—"says he wound up talking to your boss"—and I can hear the blood throbbing in my head as I press the phone to my ear and try to swallow the tremor in my voice when Donnie answers.

"This is Charles," I say, too quickly, too quickly. "Charles. Charles Washington, from Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity?" And oh shit, oh fuck, my breathing, it sounds like I just finished a marathon. Panting. "Donnie, this is Charles, and I'm so sorry I didn't get back to you sooner, Donnie, listen, it's been crazy—"

"Hey, no big deal, Charles," Donnie says. Calm as a Sunday afternoon.

"No, I'm really sorry, it's just that—"

"Charles, really," Donnie says. "Everything's taken care of. Really."

"What..." I swallow, breathe, breathe, smooth my pants. "What happened?"

"We're squared away for now. I just needed to talk with someone at your Headquarters, get an official statement so that I could relay that to the parents who filed the hazing grievance. So I talked with your boss, Walter LaFaber?"

"You're kidding."

"Tuesday afternoon, actually. Before I even got your message."

Tuesday afternoon? Tuesday afternoon? Two days ago?

He knows, then. I was right. Walter LaFaber knows. Has known this entire time. All about New Mexico State and the blindfolding and the shouting and the hazing accusations. And if he's talked to Sam Anderson and the chapter, that means he knows that *I've* talked to them.

And he probably knows about the Etiquette Dinner, because—if I were Sam—that would be the first thing that I mentioned. To justify their practices and their activities. "The consultant *participated*," I would say. He knows about it all, has known since Tuesday. Knew about this hazing allegation even while I *defended* the chapter in our debrief session! He knows, and he didn't say a word.

I thank Donnie, replace the receiver into its cradle.

Consider calling Sam, but...that wouldn't solve anything. Not yet.

Why didn't LaFaber mention it? All day today, he sported a poker-face and feigned absolute ignorance of New Mexico State. Suggested them for elimination based on debt. But he knew about the hazing.

Tomorrow, I meet with LaFaber for a one-on-one, and he knows.

One more day in the office.

Chapter Twelve: Walter LaFaber

Late on Thursday night, the early November cold seeps into the Lodge, seeps under the windows, seeps up from the basement. Because I unpacked my sheets but unwisely left my comforter in the basement storage bins, I wake up shivering at 5 AM. Was it this cold last night? Across the dorm room, Brock is curled up into himself, his sheets pulled over his head; Nick appears to have ripped loose his fitted sheets from the mattress and has cocooned himself in these, as well as his flat sheets, combining both sets so that the sheer thickness might warm him. None of us, apparently, brought any blankets out of storage for this three-day stay in the Lodge.

Half-asleep, still shivering, and now covered head-to-toe in goose-bumps, I shed my sheets and tiptoe across the room. Someone let the air conditioner run, I decide (we're all warm climate boys, after all), so I've got to crank up the heat. Then...and only then...can I enjoy my night's sleep without constantly grabbing and rubbing my frigid feet. But all throughout the dorm room, I can't find the temperature control. Downstairs, perhaps? So I tiptoe out of the room, through the hallway, down the staircase, through the living room...the kitchen. Nothing. The basement? No, no. At this hour, in this cold, I am not walking down into the basement. But here in the living room, even though all is early-morning dark, I can still see the outlines of the couches...the rich, soft cushions...and the thick Nu Kappa Epsilon quilt draped over the back of the sofa. Teeth still chattering, arms still prickly with a new wave of goose flesh, I bump through the living room and climb onto the couch, pull the quilt over my body—warmth, yes, but still the quilt feels overwhelmingly vulnerable to the Lodge's chill-and something about the couch feels ordinary, natural. And I consider taking the quilt back up to the dorm room, to my bunk bed, but that isn't my bed up there. This couch...this makeshift living room sleeping spot...this is mine. Tonight, this is mine.

Besides, it's too fucking cold to stand up again, to walk around.

5 AM, and in four hours, I'll be back in the office, face to face with Walter LaFaber, and he *knows*. Here on the couch—a quick shiver, a cold reminder, coursing through my body every few minutes—I consider the questions he'll ask me, the responses I can give, the lies and the excuses. If he asks me whether I saw pledges demeaned at the New Mexico State Etiquette Dinner, how can I explain the situation without losing everything? It is impossible, this situation. Everything that happened at New Mexico State...every moment...all of it is damning, now. All I can do, I suppose, is to muddy the facts that LaFaber has received. Create doubt.

By 6 AM, I've imagined—over and over and over, hundreds of times—my Explorer shaking, rattling as I speed down that steep hill, unstoppable, into some pit, into darkness...darkness...and then, like a movie, there is a jump-cut and I see myself pulling up to my parents' driveway in my Explorer, stepping out as my father waits for me on the front porch, his head lowered, one hand in his pockets and the other holding a mug of coffee. It is my father in the darkness, yes, but this image keeps repeating, and sometimes I imagine Dr. Wigginton, instead. Greeting me at the start of the semester as some sort of hero, and seeing me again at the end as an absolute failure with no money and no home, forced to return to the father I defied with a job I couldn't handle. Just another kid in his quarter-life who crashed and burned in his postcollege independence. Over and over, I imagine these things. Shivering, shaking.

And, tonight at least, I wish I could imagine crashing, burning. Fire. Warmth.

* * *

After another morning walk through the frosty courtyard between the Lodge and the Headquarters (and it seems even frostier today, as though each night is like another step on a

staircase leading ever downward into the basement of a painful winter), I slip behind my desk in my crowded cubicle and close my eyes without realizing it.

"You want to get some barbecue for lunch today?" Brock asks from behind me, and I shoot forward in my chair, smack my hip on the desk. "Holy shit, buddy," he says, "you sleeping already?"

"Don't think I was ever awake," I say, rubbing my eyes.

"Better wake up quick, then," Brock says. He stands against a file cabinet of indeterminate purpose, and I realize that this is the first time I've ever seen him wearing a sweater: it is a ghastly brown-and-red-checkered thing, like he spilled minestrone all over himself. He seems oblivious to its ugliness, though, because, like me, this Texas native probably never wears sweaters much, and although this thing is undeniably atrocious, we both know very little about what a "good sweater" looks like.

"Why's that?" I say.

"You're the first to meet with Walter, this morning," he says.

"You're joking."

"No, sir. What do you think'll be the topic of discussion?"

I rub my eyes again; my left eye twitches, and my body shudders all over.

"Cold night last night, huh?" Brock asks and laughs. "Shit, I couldn't take it. Got up at 2 AM or something, walked around, but couldn't find the damn thermostat."

"I did the same thing," I say. "I slept on the couch."

"That why you were awake before any of us?"

"That's the reason," I say.

"So what do you think LaFaber will talk to us about?"

"I don't know," I say and sigh. "Why does it feel like I'm going to the principal's office, though?"

And, just as Brock did yesterday, suddenly Nick races down the hallway and up to my desk in his rolling chair, nearly careening past but grabbing hold of one of my cubicle walls to stop.

"He's going to talk about Illinois," Nick says. "He's going to send Charles to Illinois for the rest of the semester."

Brock must agree, because he looks at Nick for a couple seconds, holds his fingers to his chin, and nods as if giving approval. "Wouldn't be so bad, you know?" Brock says. "You get to stay one place for the rest of the semester. No more packing and driving and packing and driving. Just sit tight somewhere, work with students, actually get something accomplished."

"I don't think it will be me," I say.

"Why not?" Nick asks.

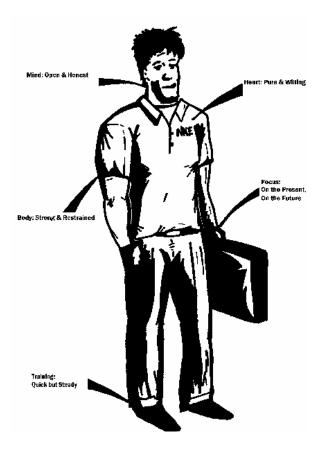
And, along with that nightmarish image of myself returning home to my father, I now have another image forming in my mind: stepping out of LaFaber's office, greeted by both Nick and Brock, who want to know what we discussed in there, if I am going to Illinois...and I think that I just said "I don't think it will be me" because I want to create doubt, save face if I am fired.

"Because I don't have your stories," I say. "I told you yesterday, I just joined the fraternity in my freshman year because...it was the thing to do. If some kid wants to start a new chapter of Nike, the last thing he wants to hear is some national representative telling him, 'I just sort of joined.""

"He'll choose you to go," Brock says, "because—from everything he keeps saying you're a kick-ass consultant. You know the mission inside and out, buddy. You know all those

leadership books, the Do It! program and all that, you know it all like the back of your hand. You know what people in the office are saying, right? The interns, the directors? LaFaber calls you the ideal Nu Kappa Epsilon. Marathon Man."

The thought that I could look like *this* is preposterous:



"That sounds like a joke," I say.

"Just wait for your one-on-one," Brock says. "Not joking. Guy loves you."

* *

LaFaber's office is unlike the cramped and temporary spaces in which so many Greek Advisors across the country reside; there are no boxes, no stacks of paper, no plaques, no photo albums created by students, no undergraduate fraternity or sorority paddles, no college or university paraphernalia (pennants, football posters). While most Greek Advisor offices are occupied (and look like they are occupied) by recent college graduates, LaFaber's office is an open and impersonal room befitting an ultra-successful guru at the top of his game. The most impressive office I visited over the semester, Dr. Vernon's office at Bowling Green State University, glimmered with awards and symbols of achievement, from plaques to expensive furniture, but it was also warm despite its opulence. LaFaber's office, on the other hand, is a cold beacon of modernity: a glass coffee table supported by a silver frame (books on the table: How to Win Friends and Influence People, Band of Brothers, and Fortune and Architectural Digest magazines), two erect and stiff black visitor chairs supported by thin silver legs, a triangular throw-rug the color of arctic water, black wire-frame bookshelves lined with university alumni magazines from every one of our schools and with several collections of quarterly psychology and leadership periodicals (all of these seem to have the same blank white spines, giving the impression that all material on the inside of each magazine is exactly the same), and LaFaber's desk itself: L-shaped, glass-topped, a mesh steel wall attached to the front to shield visitors from viewing his legs. And on the walls: only two metal-framed pictures, one of which is the College Chronicle depicting LaFaber on its front cover, and the other is a photograph of LaFaber shaking hands with Dick Cheney at some gala or banquet or another. Otherwise, the walls are an untouched industrial gray, blinds pulled down over the single window on the far wall.

When I step inside and take a seat at one of the oddly-shaped visitor's chairs, squirming and trying to get comfortable but finding it impossible to do so, I am struck once again with a feeling (carefully coordinated by LaFaber, with this interior design scheme) that I am not welcome in this office. That Walter LaFaber is better than me. Tired as I am from last night's bout with the cold (and eventual concession to an early-morning sleep on the couch), I again look far worse than LaFaber. Yesterday, he just seemed better "put together" than I did; today,

though, he scores a total knock-out. He is clean-shaven, and I am not. His indigo dress shirt is crisp, and my NKE polo was pulled from my suitcase, the folds and wrinkles prominent. His hair...my hair...his eyes...my eyes...his voice...my voice...not even fair today...

"Good to see you this morning, Charles," he says. "Sleep well?"

"Not really," I say. "But I'm used to bad sleep."

"I always sleep well," he says, "when I know I've worked hard."

I smooth my pants, cough.

Whatever he says, I will be unclear. That's my plan. Like the White House press secretary, I will only answer the questions I am asked, including no other information that might be necessary or helpful. And even then, the truth will remain hidden. What he already knows, I am uncertain, but I will give him nothing else.

"How would you rate your semester, Charles?" he asks.

"Good? It was good?"

"Hmm," he says. "Not your experiences this semester. What I mean is, how would you rate your performance this semester as a consultant?"

"Good? I don't know for sure. I guess I should let the student evaluations speak for me, right?"

"No. I'd prefer if you rated yourself."

"Um," I say. "All right? Like, on a scale of one to ten?"

"Nothing that arbitrary. I want a full evaluation. I want you to get as nitty-gritty as you can. I want to know everything. Every success, every failure. A *full* evaluation."

"Of myself?"

"Of yourself, Charles."

"Well," I say, "I'm not really sure how to answer this."

"Don't look at this as a question," LaFaber says, staring at me with a numb but patient expression, like he's a reporter who has been given the runaround a thousand times and so he can *wait*. He can wait for me to crack and say it myself because he knows the truth and the truth isn't going anywhere. "Look at it as a prompt."

"I guess there is one thing that's bugged me for the longest time."

"What's that?"

"I wasn't able to do anything at Illinois."

"At Illinois?" he asks. "That's an interesting perspective to take."

"At some places, I think I made a positive impact. But Illinois? I didn't do *any*-thing." And he looks at me with squinted eyes now—*finally* some emotion, finally something to make sense of—like...like he can't believe that I'm tackling this topic, that I'm turning my most commended accomplishment from this semester into something negative. And maybe this is a mistake, but if I can simply keep the focus on this issue, if I can detract from the obvious, from New Mexico State...so I tell LaFaber that I tried, I really tried at Illinois, that I met with the alumni and I stood in the backyard with Adam Duke and...I was powerless to create change.

And then...nothing from LaFaber.

"But, you know," I say, "that's just...hindsight."

Nothing.

"Well, I'm glad to hear your enthusiasm," he says finally.

"Enthusiasm?"

"I'm glad to hear that you're *challenged*, Charles. That you like challenges. Because, obviously, we've been given another chance at Illinois." "Right," I say. "The interest group."

"And you're going to be the lead consultant on the Illinois colonization."

Lead consultant.

Lead consultant. Illinois colonization.

And I have no idea of the specifics of a "lead consultant," but I do not want to go back there, back to the University of Illinois. I can't.

"It's no secret that I'm impressed with your work, Charles," he says. "You're the consultant prototype, in my opinion. You listen to what I ask, you adapt your own philosophies accordingly." *Philosophies*? "Each time I've given you some new directive, you've responded," he says. "You seem to understand, more than most consultants, that the decisions are made here at the Headquarters, and they're made for a reason."

And he keeps going like this, praise praise praise, tells me that he knows he can trust me, tells me that I'm his "top guy" and that he's positive I can steer this interest group at Illinois toward greatness. Lead consultant. It doesn't seem possible, any of this. It doesn't seem possible that I am receiving this praise, and it doesn't seem possible that I am going back to Illinois. Everything that I imagined, everything about this moment, was so different. LaFaber knows something, but for some reason, he's not saying it.

Brock will continue consulting, LaFaber says, but Nick is coming with me, and we are meeting with the interest group *this weekend*...and if everything looks like a "go," then we are moving forward with a full-scale colonization for the rest of the semester and all of Spring. "I chose to speak with you first because, well, Brock is a great consultant, very dedicated," LaFaber says, "but he's a bit headstrong. As much as I admire his determination, I need someone who can...cooperate with me. A colonization requires a lot of resources, both financial and staff. It

takes almost a full semester, plenty of blood, sweat, and tears. But the University of Illinois is *big* for this fraternity, Charles."

Of course it is. The house is worth millions. Unoccupied, falling into disrepair, it's draining the Alumni Housing Corporation's bank account. NKE *needs* a chapter at Illinois. For the house, but also for the alumni: it's a proven statistic that alumni donate more money when their undergraduate chapter is active and successful, when they have somewhere to go back to during Homecoming.

"There's a lot on the line, here," LaFaber says. "Big-time."

"You're sure you want me on this?"

"I know that I want you."

"It's just that, well, if there's so much money—"

"You were a Finance major, right?"

"That was my minor. Organizational Communication was my major."

"Right, whatever. You know money, Charles. I'm looking for my best chance at success for Illinois. We're investing a lot in this colonization, and I need it to work. This works, you know, and you have no idea the opportunities that will open for you."

"It's just—so much money," I say again.

He nods and gives a look as though he is impressed by the magnitude of it, too, but that wasn't the feeling I was trying to convey. So much money, I wanted to say, and I don't want to be responsible for it all because things can only go wrong for me! I've got a semester left, and I don't want to be set up to fail! But something else also occurs to me now. "What do you mean, opportunities will open for me?" I ask, and suddenly there is the tiniest flicker of hope, that perhaps LaFaber doesn't know about New Mexico State, or—at the very least—about *my*

involvement with that chapter. Suddenly I am thinking of primary letters of recommendation, of references for graduate school for CSP. Suddenly I am thinking that I'm clear, that what Brock said—"Guy loves you"—is the truth.

"For now, we focus on the task at hand," LaFaber says. "But if all goes well at Illinois, then we'll have some important discussions. Just nail this task, and you won't have to worry about a thing."

"All right," I say. "I guess that sounds good." And I can smile only hesitantly, and even then, the smile—maybe because I'm still so tired, so sore—hurts my face.

"One other thing before you leave, though, and then you can send in Nick for his one-onone," LaFaber says.

"Certainly."

"What do you know about New Mexico State?"

"New Mexico State," I say, and my throat now feels constricted. I swallow, know that LaFaber has just seen a giant lump travel up and down, the length of my throat. He's been setting me up, that's it. *Get comfortable, Charles*. Putting me at ease.

"I talked to their Greek Advisor," he says. "A fellow by the name of Ackman. Young guy, seemed like a push-over. He told me he talked to you, or he received a message from you, something of that sort? So I assumed you knew of our situation there. I wanted to wait until our one-on-one to talk about this, of course."

"Of course. I did...talk to their GA, yeah."

"And what did he say? What did you say? Tell me everything."

"It sounded like there were some issues out there? Something to do with pledges and blindfolds, but nothing serious. That's really all I know. If you'd like me to talk with them? They know me. I could handle it."

"Won't be necessary," LaFaber says.

"It'd only take a second. I'm sure I could—"

"New Mexico State hasn't turned out the way we wanted," he says. "Take a look at all the pieces in that puzzle out there. Poor area, low admission standards, high military population, high probability of hazing. And the proximity to Mexico, that can't be safe."

"It sounds bad, I guess."

"Did you go to Mexico?" LaFaber asks.

"Did I go? I mean, I crossed the border, you know? Cause I wanted to-"

"When I was a consultant," he says, "back when we first colonized the New Mexico State

chapter, we had a consultant who went with the brothers to Mexico. Went to a massage parlor.

Charles, I've never seen someone get fired so quick. That chapter is a dangerous investment."

"Is dangerous a little harsh? I mean, they're nice kids."

"Considering the money involved? The liability, the lawsuit potential."

"So what are you saying?" I ask. "Are we closing them?"

"I want to learn a bit more," LaFaber says. "But that's looking like an option. While you were there, did you find any evidence of hazing?"

"Nothing," I say.

"No photos? No incidents? Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"There had to be some indication, Charles," he says, and he's smiling in this wry, justbetween-the-two-of-us way. "Anything."

"I don't think I saw something," I say. "I could let you know if I remember..."

"Right, that's good," he says and sniffs. "Just let me know if you think of anything, then. I've got to make some decisions before I speak with their president again, and I'd like to have some solid input."

So, perhaps, LaFaber doesn't yet know all of the details? For the moment, inexplicably, all remains dark and safe. For the moment, he does seem to trust me. I don't understand it, but I won't question it. Why risk exposing myself? For the moment, I am the same Charles Washington who left Headquarters this past summer with so many goal sheets, on a quest to become the next Walter LaFaber. I rise from my chair to leave.

"So what's this I hear about your receipts?" he asks before I get to the door.

"Oh, that," I say. "A little disorganization on my part, is all."

"Well, take care of that, Charles," he says, and he looks back down at his computer, at his Outlook calendar or email. "You're going back on the road. To Illinois. Lots on the line. You need to think of a better system to organize your documents."

"It won't happen again."

"You got a lot of extra packing to do for this colonization, you know."

"I do?"

"Lots of additional materials to take along. We'll brief later."

"My Explorer's pretty tight, already."

He laughs, clicks something else on his computer, barely seems to be paying attention to me as I stand at his door. "Trust me, Charles," he says, "as long as you can breathe, you've got room. We can always pack it tighter."

When I return to my desk after lunch, I find a black three-inch binder, heavy, stuffed with papers and plastic sleeves, sitting atop my chair. A yellow post-it note is stuck to the black plastic surface of the binder, words written across the note in thick Sharpie: "Charles, this is your Briefing Packet for the Illinois Colonization. This took several months to compile, so I trust that the material contained herein should be all that you need. Good luck! – LaFaber."

I remove the post-it, toss it into my trash can, and flip open the cover of the binder. Beyond an initial "welcome letter," in which Walter LaFaber writes that he has "prepared the groundwork and laid the foundation" and now "we have the important task of building something great at Illinois atop that foundation," this Briefing Packet features no less than fifteen tabs. All are straightforward: "Interview Protocol & Questions," "Living Situation," "Alumni Contacts." The first tab, "UIUC Overview," includes more than fifty pages of information about the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, from key statistics on the school—the enrollment, the undergraduate and graduate programs, in-state and out-of-state tuition, National Merit scholars, square footage, average SAT scores for incoming students—to maps and restaurant reviews.

So much information, and I become lost in the Briefing Packet, learning that I will be staying all of November and December in the "newly renovated Nu Kappa Epsilon fraternity house." Any renovation is news to me. I try to remember what the inside of the house looked like, what damages those evicted fraternity brothers could have made, what scars may be left over for Nick and me to attempt to bandage or repair. Renovation. Does this mean, then, that I'll finally get my own bed to sleep in? For two months? For all of next semester? The idea seems both appealing and disconcerting, as couches and go-go-go travel have become more comforting to me, strangely, than a stationary and stable life. Just last night, for instance...sleeping on the couch instead of staying in the dorm. And when Brock drove me to lunch today, I felt helpless leaving my Explorer behind in the parking lot (just as I had when I left it behind at the airport). I become so lost in the Briefing Packet, swallowed in so much information and so many questions, that I don't realize that Nick has been standing behind me for quite some time.

"You're late for your meeting," he says, hands in his pockets.

"Meeting?"

"Your one-one with Janice."

"Oh, shit," I say. "It's 2:00 already?"

"Yep," he says. "So-oooo...what are you reading?"

"Take a look," I say. "We get our own bedrooms at Illinois, I think."

"Still no sign of those receipts?" Janice asks when I sit down in her office. Janice Nevin, our Headquarters Financial Director, is one of very few women who works at Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity, and anytime an undergraduate fraternity brother speaks to her over the phone, emails her, or meets her at a conference, he is always surprised that a woman could oversee all financial operations for an exclusively male organization. Was she initiated into the fraternity? they ask. Does she know the secret meaning of the letters? The handshake? Is she an NKE brother? No, no, no, we tell these young men; Janice merely earned her MBA from Indiana University and applied for a "Financial Director" job posting that she saw in her campus career center, a job posting for which every male candidate (Nu Kappa Epsilon fraternity brothers, all of them, who likely thought that their membership in the organization entitled them to this position) had neither the skill sets required nor acceptable GPAs. This has never been the case for the Educational Consultant position: applicants must have been fraternity members.

But, after seven years at the Headquarters, Janice understands fraternity financials better than any NKE fraternity man, and—though she was in neither a fraternity or sorority in college—she can now speak for hours on such pressing "Greek Life" concerns as rising insurance premiums, lawsuits and liability, membership dues, and housing costs. She is a short woman, has the look of a lean long-distance runner, the kind you know to be strong but who somehow looks easily broken; this deceiving look of frailty might also have its roots in her soft voice, but Janice is anything but fragile. She is remarkably meticulous, brilliant with spreadsheets, and persistent in ensuring every number is inputted where it should be, every form is signed, and every receipt is accounted for.

"I know I had them," I tell her. "I don't know where they could be."

"This isn't good," she says. "I need those receipts."

"I know, I know. I didn't plan on losing them. Is there anything else we can do? Any other documentation?"

"Like, what else?"

"I'm not sure," I say. "But this is a lot of money."

"I wish I could make exceptions, Charles."

"I won't have money for my next car payment," I say. "Anything, Janice."

"This isn't college, Charles. There's no extra credit. We need those receipts to process the expense reports, no matter how much money is at stake for you personally." "But if they're gone, the credit card statement isn't good enough? It shows where I made the purchase. Applebee's or Chili's or wherever."

"I know that," Janice says. "This isn't my rule, though. I just enforce it."

"Whose rule, then? Who made this rule? Can I talk to anyone else about this?" It's difficult for me to even ask this question. Suddenly, I've become no different than the undergraduate fraternity men who call Janice Nevin and complain about late fees for their insurance bills or their national member dues, unable to accept that a *woman* can impose the financial punishments in *their* fraternity.

"This has been one of Walter's ironclad rules since I took the job," she says.

"Walter?"

"Apparently," she says, "they used to have problems with consultants using the dining allowance for alcohol. Drinking with undergrads, buying rounds of beers at restaurants, that sort of thing. I know that's not the case with you...but like I said, I can't make exceptions."

Throat feels constricted. No exceptions. No paycheck. "Yeah," I say. "Right."

"Are you all right?" she asks.

"Hmm?"

"Your legs are shaking, Charles."

Much of the remaining Friday afternoon is spent in "catch-all," completing reports that various staff members have dropped off at our desks, responding to hundreds of emails from alumni, volunteers, and university administrators who have all been notified (in a mass email from LaFaber) that we are off the road, in the office, and available for their every need. Outside, the sky grows dark with clouds, then turns to a soft white during the sun's last hours above the horizon. Online weather reports confirm what everyone in the office, through our windows, can see developing: mid-November snowfall. Unexpected, some of the reports and forecasts say, but not unusual. Like mid-Spring, when a sudden snow can kill the blooming flowers, temperatures for the month of November are prone to severe inflections, but an early freeze—or a cold front and a snowstorm drifting in from Canada—is more likely than beach weather for Thanksgiving. Or so the meteorologists continue saying. My first snow ever: and I picture white snow blanketing the ground like puffy pillows. A winter wonderland. Candy canes.

Before he leaves the office, LaFaber stops by the cluttered left wing of the Headquarters to say goodbye to the three of us. He stands a fair distance from our cubicles, from the mess that overflows from the hallway and spills into our work spaces, as though we created all of this disorder and he refuses to become entangled within it; he holds his coat—a thin and sleek Banana Republic-style jacket—over one shoulder, his pose more akin to a model than an office executive.

"It was great seeing you all again," he says.

"Great being back," Brock says, pushing himself from his chair.

"No, no, not another hug," LaFaber says. "Just wanted to tell you guys how much we appreciate the sacrifices you make for the good of the fraternity. The organization needs young men as dedicated as you three."

Brock sits back down, nodding, satisfied as LaFaber continues extolling our work and the mission of Nu Kappa Epsilon. This is the last we'll see of LaFaber; tomorrow, we leave Indianapolis. I'd never really considered how Brock would take the news that both Nick and I were traveling to Illinois together, and he alone would be packing up and driving every three days for the remainder of the semester. But at this moment, seeing his jaw set and his eyes still

gleaming with that strong purpose of his, his knuckles knocking against the surface of his desk in approval of LaFaber's words, I know that he actually prefers the tough, head-knocking work of consulting to which he has committed himself.

"Charles, Nick," LaFaber says, "I've got the utmost confidence in the two of you. We've got a whole lot riding on this colonization, but it's the two of you—the *two* of you, let that sink in—who are going to determine the future of one of our most important chapters. If we create our ideal fraternity chapter at Illinois—responsible, mission-oriented—at the largest Greek community in the nation, what will that tell the world about Nu Kappa Epsilon?"

Nick nods, and so I do, too.

"Safe driving, all three of you," LaFaber says. "Don't hesitate to call and ask advice, all right? And hey, listen, we'll see each other soon enough."

"December," Brock says, voice still rich with enthusiasm.

"For these two guys, a little earlier than that," LaFaber says.

"Earlier than December?" I ask.

"I'm coming to Illinois."

"You?" I ask. "You're coming with us?"

"Not with you," LaFaber says. "I'll be there in two weeks. For the leadership retreat,

when we initiate the men of the interest group. I've already got the flights booked. Dr.

Wigginton will be coming, as well."

"Excellent," Nick says.

"But we don't even know anything about the interest group yet," I say. "If they're good kids. If they're a bunch of goons, like the old chapter. And you've already bought plane tickets for their initiation? And Dr. *Wigginton* is coming?"

"I'm sure everything will work out," LaFaber says. "This is a big investment, Charles. The entire Greek world will be talking about it, so failure isn't an option. I've got confidence in the two of you."

Walls closing in. World swaying, rattling.

When Nick, Brock, and I walk back across the courtyard to the Lodge after business hours, the wind is piercing—my ears, my entire head, hurts after only a couple seconds outside but the snow is sporadic, melting as soon as it touches the ground. All is cold and wet on our final night in Indianapolis. What I thought would be a pristine white wonderland is instead a sleeting gray dusk. When we drive to dinner, Brock doesn't dare go past 25 or 30 miles per hour, as his car continually slides in the building mounds of dirty ice and slush.

To make room for all three of us in his car, he has taken down his own backseat clothing rod. No shaking hangers in *his* car. But in the morning, I will leave for Illinois. In the morning, I will drive the icy roads. I will slide on the roads, the hangers in my backseat shaking, and I will slide there at Illinois. This is like a suicide mission for me, running into a burning building to save some child on the top floor, but knowing that all of the infrastructure is already damaged, collapsing around me, on top of me.

I can't become the old Charles Washington again, the one from this past summer; I can't find that old professional façade because I know it is just that: a facade. It is critical now to find that façade because this is the career I want—student personnel—but I can't pretend anymore to care about this national fraternity, about an organization whose values I know to be questionable.

I will fail. It's inevitable. As Nick watches, as LaFaber watches, as an entire group of young men watches, as the world of Greek Life and Higher Education watches, Charles Washington will be exposed as a failure.

"You okay back there?" Brock asks when we arrive back at the Headquarters parking lot after dinner, watching in his rearview mirror my reflection, a sullen Florida kid in the darkness of the back seat, a pseudo-professional with a fading tan, some extra fat puffing out my cheeks and my chin, overgrown hair, a giant pizza sauce stain dribbled over my collar—and fuck! I keep forgetting that this shirt is ruined, *and I keep wearing it*. You okay back there, Brock asks. Fine, fine. Shooting downward, but fine.

"You park in a pothole, Charles?" Nick asks.

"Me?" I ask. "What are you talking about?"

"You, yeah," Brock says, and we pull into a parking spot fifteen feet from my Explorer, crunching over all the new snow that is obscuring both the painted parking space lines and the curbs. "Your car looks tilted."

"No," I say. "No, I didn't park in a pothole." No, I didn't, but my Explorer—from my view through Brock's backseat window—certainly does appear to be lopsided, the far side sinking closer to the ground. I don't wait for Brock to come to a complete stop, opening his door while he is still coasting forward, dashing through the snow and slush to my Explorer, dashing around to see why it looks as though my car is kneeling, falling, why it looks as though someone has taken out the right kneecap of my fucking Explorer.

And at first, it is so dark in the parking lot that I'm not sure what I'm looking at.

And all the world is black and silent for...I don't know how long.

"Fuck," Nick says finally, and I realize that both he and Brock are now standing on either side of me, probably have been for the last several seconds while the shock rendered me immobile and unresponsive. Now, I'm finally processing the world around me, the darkness lifting just enough so that I can make out an image. The passenger-side of my Explorer has sunk because both tires have gone flat. Both tires have gone flat because my wheels have finally cracked or collapsed or otherwise become fucked, the stray and twisted strips of metal—effected from that pothole encounter back in Pennsylvania—poking both upward and downward and not only puncturing the tires but also rendering the wheels beyond repair. I remember thinking, after the tire went flat the first time, that the damage to the wheels looked like a fork, if someone had rammed the prongs of the fork into the ground and bent them out of shape. Where there once was smooth and circular order to the wheel, there was now sharp metal in every direction. And now, months later, after I decided that I didn't have enough money to buy new wheels, it has become even worse.

"That's from your accident, isn't it?" Nick asks.

"Finally gave out, those wheels," Brock says, then pats my back. "Least it didn't happen while you were driving, buddy. Whoo, boy."

"Wheels and tires are replaceable, as long as nothing else is damaged," Nick says. "But they're fucking expensive," I say.

"Well," Nick says.

"And I just bought new tires," I say.

"Well," Nick says again, exhales, runs his hand through his hair.

"What's your deductible?" Brock asks.

"Too much," I say.

"Let's get inside," Nick says. "It's freezing out here. Let's get inside, get you a drink or two."

Brock has his arm around me, steers me toward the Lodge front door. "We'll call you a tow truck, buddy," he says, "get this taken to a shop tonight. Easy operation, replacing wheels and tires. Get you good to go by tomorrow night, you'll see."

As I step up the front steps and through the doorway, I risk one backward glance at my Explorer, my office, at the windshield, beyond the windshield, at the backseat, at the rod stretching from window to window in the backseat, at all of the hangers and all of the shirts on those hangers that, because the rod is now sloped downward, have slid its length and—though they haven't shaken loose and fallen off—are bunched together in a thick lump at one end of the rod, pressing against one another, struggling to breathe, looking just as suffocated and doomed as I feel.

Chapter Thirteen: Back to Illinois

Summer Training in Indianapolis University of Kentucky East Tennessee State University University of Virginia—Green Valley University of Pittsburgh Weekend Visit with Alumni Shippensburg University St. Joseph's University **EMERGENCY VISIT: University of Illinois** New Mexico State University Texas Tech California State University—Fresno California State University—Highland California State University—Long Beach California State University—San Francisco University of Delaware Marshall University Miami University (Ohio) University of Toledo Central Michigan University University of Michigan Bowling Green State University Purdue University Indiana University Headquarters – Mid-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis)

University of Illinois – Colonization

University of Oklahoma University of Kansas University of Missouri—Columbia University of Nebraska Iowa State University Thanksgiving Vacation Bradley University University of Iowa Headquarters – End-of-Semester Debrief (Indianapolis) Christmas Vacation Saturday afternoon, pack up and drive. Indianapolis to Champaign-Urbana, the University of Illinois. Nick in his car (a Nissan Altima), and me in my Explorer, both cars packed once again as tight as they can be. Except now we have been given boxes and boxes of additional materials and supplies for our colonization effort. That image I keep having...of my over-stuffed Explorer, topping the hill...has never seemed more real than now, as I stare out my rearview mirror and see only boxes piled high in my back seat, and—like Brock last night— as I drive, I swerve in puddles or in patches of black ice.

Earlier this morning, I watched as a tow truck driver wrapped chains around my Explorer, lifted it onto a flat-bed, and hauled it off to an auto shop a few miles away. The mechanics were able to fit my wheel and tire replacement into their morning schedule, because—as they told me—the previous night's snow had discouraged the usual swarm of Saturday morning oil change customers from making a trip across town. "You're lucky we can take care of this so quick," the cashier told me. "Last time we had to replace a wheel, we had to put it on special order. Guy had to wait a week."

"I've got all the luck, you're right," I said.

Each tire cost about \$130, and each wheel cost over \$450. Not including labor. Well beyond the dwindling sum in my bank account, and just touching the very tip of my credit card limit. And when I spoke with my insurance agent over the phone, he made it clear that he wouldn't be able to send an adjustor out to check the damage until..."Wait, wait," he said. "What are you doing out in Indianapolis, anyway?"

"I work here," I said.

"You work there?"

"Right. In Indianapolis."

"You live there, too? You've still got a Florida insurance plan."

"No, no," I said. "It's...I travel, actually."

"Business travel? Your insurance plan doesn't cover business travel."

"Of course not. No. I'm just...this is a job *interview*, actually."

"I see."

"Nothing permanent. I'm just trying to get home. Like, as soon as possible." "Yeah."

"And the accident didn't occur under...business conditions...you know?"

"Listen, Mr. Washington," he said. "Why don't you give me a call back later? Sort this out and call me when you know for sure, all right?"

And I didn't need him to tell me. In fact, my agent had been more polite than he needed to be. My insurance wouldn't cover this unless I came up with a fantastic series of lies to explain my presence in Indiana (even after I'd already told my agent that I'd originally damaged the car in *Philadelphia*), and even if I convinced him that this was personal travel, not business, the insurance adjustor would have to travel to visit me in *Illinois*. Hangers swaying in my back seat, so many boxes piled high all around me, hard to breathe, and I didn't need insurance fraud added to my problems. So I took a deep breath as I looked over the \$1535 bill at the auto shop, and I split the charge between my checking account and my credit card. And now I've got \$20 left in my checking, \$15 cash in my wallet, \$23 spending limit left on my Visa, and a Nu Kappa Epsilon credit card whose statements Janice Nevin will certainly monitor with additional zeal, now. And probably four weeks until I finally earn another paycheck.

Saturday afternoon, pack up and drive.

Over the snow-dusted, slushy heartland of America. Over salty highways and exits. Past cars splashed with mud and with melted snow that has re-frozen on the cold metal of their cars. Through gas stations and rest areas where travelers rush from their cars—leaving the engine running, of course, so the heater doesn't stop—bundled up in layers (always dress in layers, everyone tells me) to the inside shop or restroom, breath rising from their mouths. Heavy exhaust coughs from every tailpipe. Much of the snow still seems to melt as soon as it hits the pavement today, despite a night colder than expected, but the farmland on both sides of the highway absorbs the snow a bit better, and it accumulates atop some patches of dormant land and atop sheds and bails of hay and stacks of firewood.

The Midwest Winter. Brand-new to me. But apparently it has also come as a surprise to all of these Midwesterners, unexpectedly early. With each new stop we make, with each set of surprised parents herding their children quickly from restaurant to car, I get the feeling that the start of winter—no matter when it comes—always comes *too* early, and that each year, everyone holds their breath and crosses their fingers and hopes that maybe—*just maybe*—this is the year that winter won't come.

When we finally finish the drive through two hours of dead and ever-whitening farmland and pull off I-74 onto the University of Illinois exit, an odd sensation (is it nostalgia? or once again, a feeling of semi-permanence, the same I experienced when I entered the office?) courses through me. This is the first campus I've re-visited, and instead of feeling "new," like every other visit, this is all familiar terrain. In two or three days, most Educational Consultants will understand a college and a fraternity chapter better than most students can in four years; we observe with investigative interest; we gather information even when it is irrelevant. But here, nothing seems new.

After Nick and I pull into a Shell station and grab a couple hot coffees, I cram myself into the front seat of his Altima, and we consult the Briefing Packet for the specifics of our stay. The second tab in the three-ring binger is "Living Situation," and although we've read through much of this, the reality of life in a new place can never be fully understood until you've physically arrived in that place. "Dry heat," after all, was just an empty term before I visited New Mexico. "For the next three months," the Briefing Packet tells us, "you will have the full use of the Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity house, located at 1231 W. Chalmers. The house is completely vacant, as the brothers were all evicted and forced to remove all personal items during early Fall semester, and in anticipation of your arrival, the house has been newly renovated."

Nick and I draw arrows on the campus map that LaFaber has provided, and I cross off certain roads I know to be one-way or under construction. The route to the NKE house was difficult, I remember, so I want to take no chances this time around.

Unfortunately, however, we discover a small problem: the alumni—in an attempt to save whatever money they could off this empty house—rented the parking lot to the neighboring fraternity house. In Cham-bana, the parking is cutthroat, and the town is a mess of meters, of rented spaces. Most students, I heard, don't even bring vehicles to campus—even if they live in an off-campus apartment over a mile away from classes—and instead use campus shuttles and then take the train back to the Chicago suburbs for the holidays. Thus, the Briefing Packet informs us that we will not be allowed to park at the house's paved lot. "At considerable expense," LaFaber writes, "the Headquarters has managed to procure a two-month UIUC Visitor Parking Hangtag for your use."

But we realize, just before we leave the gas station, that we have two cars and only one hangtag. As is made explicitly clear in the packet, this two-month parking tag cost over \$300

(another reason students don't bring their cars to campus), and the Colonization Budget does not allow for the purchase of another.

"We'll figure it out," Nick tells me when I open his passenger-side door and climb out. "If we call LaFaber and tell him about this, he'll just tell us we're not resourceful enough, that we can tough it out. He'll be like, 'what can I do from Indianapolis? Look what I've done already. You guys can handle this.""

"Nice impersonation. I didn't know you thought that way about Walter."

Nick is silent for a moment, staring at me unflinchingly, hands rising from the map in his lap to the steering wheel, which he grips lightly. He let that last comment slip; I'm sure of it. And now he's considering what he just said, if it was as bad as it sounded, and he's contemplating how to backtrack.

"Well, shit," Nick says finally, "We need to get going, right? Close the door. You're letting the cold in."

"I hear you," I say, and I shut the door and return to my Explorer.

After we drive through town, past banks whose marquees display temperatures in the mid twenties, we discover yet another problem. We pull up to the Nu Kappa Epsilon chapter house on W. Chalmers, park our cars along the curb in front of the house, pop a few quarters into the street-side meters, and survey the surrounding lots and streets from the high snow-spattered mound upon which the fraternity house sits. The air is death-cold and, as I stand on this high ground with few obstructions in any direction, the Midwestern plains winds cut through my peacoat, cut into me. Nick and I huddle close on the front yard mound, both of us hunched over and trying not to shiver as we speak, and we search in the distance for any noticeable UIUC

parking lots. Nick has even unfolded a map, has it clenched and shaking between pale fingers. His travel territory was the Southeast: no need for gloves down in Georgia.

"I didn't think about this," he says, teeth clenched to keep from chattering. "We're about a half-mile from the university. Closest parking is there," he says, alternating glances between the map and the horizon, and he points to a large concrete garage so far away that it is blurry behind falling snow.

"So?" I say, and with each inhalation, my throat goes colder.

"That's the closest we can park," he says, and now his hands are stuffed back in his jacket and he simply head-points at the garage. "Even with that 300-dollar hangtag, that's the closest place we can park without getting a ticket or getting towed."

Seconds later, heads frozen and ears stinging, we scurry onto the house's front porch. The steps and the boards make crackling noises, and I hope it's just the snow and ice beneath our shoes. I know this place, this fraternity house, but instead of radiating a Rush Season glow as it did in early Fall, it is now abandoned and forlorn: the first-floor windows are boarded-up, the front door covered with locks, the exterior coated in wind-blown white as though someone vomited vanilla milkshake across the house. Beneath the accumulating snow and ice of the front yard are chunks of frozen garbage—Frito's bags, Dasani bottles, newspapers—that will likely remain where they lay until Winter ends and the Spring thaw releases them. And in the far corner of the porch, hidden from the view of passing cars, is a brown-yellow couch buried under heaps of blankets and comforters.

Nick digs in his pocket, searching for the front door keys. "Fuck it all," he says. "This is what they mean by 'wind chill.""

"Nick," I say, but the wind is rock-concert loud. I nudge him.

"Can't feel my hands," he says, holding the key and pressing it into his flesh.

"Look," I say softly, pointing at the couch. "The couch, over there. I think someone's living on the front porch."

"What?" he says.

"Under all those blankets. I think there's a bum on the porch."

Nick squints his eyes, shivers intensely, then gives me an eyes-wide, eyebrows-cocked expression. "I just saw the blankets move," he says.

"Should we do something?"

"Yeah," Nick says. "Let's hurry up and get inside. I'm fucking freezing, here."

"Newly renovated," the Briefing Packet says of the Illinois chapter house, and I remember an impressive structure from my first visit. I remember large, open rooms and staircases and wood-paneled walls. I remember a fireplace and a mantel. I remember a coat rack (strange that this sticks with my memory, but I'm not sure I'd ever *seen* a coat rack before). I remember the sort of overwhelming and old-fashioned opulence that is only possible of a mansion that has stood for more than fifty years and has housed a family whose numbers reach into the thousands. The fraternity brothers had cleared the main rooms of their furniture and portraits for the coming party, of course, but still the house felt like the physical manifestation of the mansion from *Clue*. LaFaber mentioned that the brothers had trashed the place after they'd been evicted, so "newly renovated" is reassuring, but I can't imagine severe damage to that sturdy house I remember from Fall.

After we close the heavy front door behind us and enter into a sealed chamber of darkness, though, we flip the lights and nothing happens. I take a few steps, knock into the stairs that lead from this entrance "lobby" and up into the foyer; Nick moves about also, and a clanging sound rings out (he banged into the coat rack, I'm thinking). The house is dark, still, and cold, and Nick and I bump into each other a few times as we scatter and search for another light switch.

"Found one!" Nick screams a minute later, from upstairs somewhere in the pitch-black cavern of the foyer, and I hear him flipping furiously, up-down-up-down, but again...nothing happens. "You're kidding me," he says. "You're kidding me."

"Do you think the *lights* don't work?" I ask. "Or do you think there's no power?"

"Probably both," Nick says, and he knocks into something else, which shatters on the floor. "Newly renovated, but no power?"

"Should have expected this," I say.

"We're fine, we're fine," he says. "This is nothing. Let's get back to the cars."

Back in Nick's Altima, with the heat turned up high and blowing out of the vents so hard and loud that I can't even hear my teeth chatter anymore, the car is becoming furnace-hot...and that's still not good enough. My fingers are still stiff and aching. Nick sits in the driver seat, rubbing his hands together so hard that I expect to see sparks fly.

"I'll call LaFaber," Nick says. "There's got to be some mistake. If we're going to stay in that house, we *need* power."

"And about the bum on the front porch?" I ask.

"Yeah. That also doesn't seem promising."

"If we get the power turned on," I say, "how long before the whole house heats up? Because it was worse inside than outside."

"We'll see, we'll see," Nick says, and he's got his cell phone out now, and he's dialing, holding the phone to his ear, and still shivering. "We'll see," he says again.

LaFaber says the power will be running again by tomorrow morning, Sunday—the alumni didn't want to waste a penny, apparently, on a day when we would only be spending a few hours in the house—and he says that we should just "tough it out" tonight, that we don't have the budget for hotel rooms. "It's *freezing*," Nick tells him. "How do we tough it out when our blood is freezing?" It's a question for which LaFaber has a catalogue of answers, and none of them are "grab a hotel room for the night." Stick to the budget for the colonization, he says, and Nick closes his eyes and rubs his forehead, sighs, looks as though he's struggling to contain something inside himself.

"There's also a homeless man on the front porch," Nick says.

I can hear LaFaber's response from several feet away: "How did he get there?"

"I don't know. He was here when we got here."

"Did you tell him to leave?"

"No. Should we have?"

"Call the police," LaFaber says. "Have them escort him away. That house is going to be your *office*, your headquarters, for the duration of this colonization. You don't want a homeless man hanging around."

"I know," Nick says, eyes closed again.

"You two have a meeting tonight, correct?"

"Oh, right," Nick says. "Yeah. A dinner meeting."

"Give me an update tomorrow," LaFaber says, and he says *tomorrow* with the sort of emphasis that lets us know that we should not—under any circumstances—bother him again *tonight* with our concerns.

"He's not very sympathetic," Nick says to me after he hangs up.

"He never has been," I say.

"Let's not get pessimistic, though," Nick says. "It's already been a rough day, Charles. I need...I need to stay positive."

So I park my Explorer at the curbside meter (since it's Saturday, I don't deposit any quarters into the meter, letting it flash "EXPIRED" over and over, hoping they don't give tickets on the weekend) and Nick drives us away from the fraternity house...to where? Anywhere where the power works, apparently. We find a Super Wal-Mart, where we buy thermal, heavy-duty, good-for-camping-in-Canada sleeping bags, and we spend the late afternoon store-andrestaurant-hopping in order to stay in the heat. From Wal-Mart to Barnes & Nobles. From Barnes & Nobles to Starbucks. Thirty minutes in the heat. Bundle up and scamper through the cold to the car. Drive to a new location. Thirty minutes in the heat. Bundle up and walk to the car. We call Patrick Macintosh, with whom we are scheduled to have a dinner meeting this evening. Macintosh is the University of Illinois student, the son of a Nu Kappa Epsilon alumnus, the Public Administration major, the young man who decided to begin a new chapter of the fraternity here at Illinois in the ruins of the old chapter, the young man who assembled twenty friends to form the "interest group" that brought us here to begin with. He checks his schedule (he's got a schedule? this kid? for his Saturdays?), and agrees to meet us at 7:30 at a restaurantbar on Green Street called Legend's.

It's only 6:00, but Nick and I drive out to Legend's anyway, grab a booth, order an endless basket of chips and salsa and a couple sodas, and spread the Briefing Packet on the table before us. It's a restaurant that seems to be made entirely of wood, from the booth's table to the booth's seats to the bar at which we order (no servers, apparently). But although it *looks* warm inside Legend's, college football plays on a big-screen TV near the front of the restaurant, so the front doors are constantly opening and closing with new swarms of students cycling through as the games begin and end, and this sends bursts of cold air through the entire establishment. Strangely, although the clientele is completely composed of students (maybe forty or fifty kids in all), only half of them appear to be enjoying their Saturday. Drinking, watching the Michigan game, talking on their cell phones. The other half sit in the dim back corners of the restaurant, far beyond the bar, and they—like Nick and I—have spread out their books and their folders and their note cards on the tables before them: study groups in a bar.

"So-ooo," Nick says after we flip to the tab in the Briefing Packet marked, "First Week Schedule," and he points to the official first day of our colonization, Sunday. "Tomorrow night, we're supposed to meet with Patrick again, but he's supposed to bring everyone in the interest group to the house for a presentation."

"Hopefully the power will be back," I say.

Nick stares at me with squinted eyes and his signature half-smile. Joking or serious? Joking or serious? "You don't trust Walter?" Nick asks.

"Of course I do," I say.

Nick nods, doesn't drop the half-smile.

"So that's all we have for tomorrow, right?" I ask. "The presentation?"

"It's important, this presentation. It's when we're supposed to whet their interest for the fraternity. Really sell the concept."

"You already read the entire Briefing Packet, didn't you?"

"I'm excited," Nick says and shrugs. "Stayed up until 2 last night, reading it. Smoked half a pack of cigarettes."

"LaFaber's that great of a writer?"

"This isn't just a formality, if I understand correctly," Nick says. "This interest group, they don't *have* to become Nu Kappa Epsilon. Like a U.S. territory deciding whether or not it wants to be a state. They could decide against us. Really fuck up our plans, make us look like a couple douchebags."

"So the power *better* be on. The house *better* look good."

"You sound so cynical."

"I'm not cynical. I'm just saying."

"All right, all right," Nick says. "Point taken, of course. The power *better* be on."

Nick positions our two-week schedule on the table so we can both see:

| Week One: | |
|---|--|
| Saturday: Sunday: Monday: Tuesday: Wednesday: Thursday: Friday: | Arrive, Meeting w/ Patrick Presentation Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews |
| Week Two: | |
| Monday: Tuesday: Wednesday: Thursday: Friday: | Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Final Prep Final Prep Leadership Retreat & Initiation Ceremony |

Illinois Colonization - Schedule

Once the week begins, the Briefing Packet says, we have a full day of meetings with administrators and alumni on Monday. Then, come Tuesday, our entire week will be consumed with individual interviews, assessing whether each young man in the interest group is "fit to be a Nu Kappa Epsilon." All week, we're supposed to be "Shirt-and-Tie Ambassadors of Nu Kappa Epsilon" (even though, tonight, we're chapped, shivering, and wary...tonight, we're just hoping that the house showers will work tomorrow, that there will be hot water). In addition to meeting with the students, we must also meet with the Greek Advisor, with the Campus Housing Director, with the Director of the Illini Union, with the IFC and Panhellenic Presidents, with key student organization presidents and representatives (Student Government, Resident Advisors, Campus Democrats and Republicans, Irish Illini, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, ROTC, Campus Crusade for Christ, Hillel, and the list goes on), so that all the campus knows that NKE has returned and that its doors will be open during Spring Rush. Next week, assuming all goes well with the interviews, we will spend the entire week planning for a two-day Leadership Retreat at the conclusion of which the "interest group" will become a "colony" and the young men will be initiated into Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity as "brothers."

And next Thursday (two weeks away) Walter LaFaber will come into town to personally meet the interest group and to help facilitate the weekend-long retreat. Walter LaFaber, *here*, with us, at Illinois. The Briefing Packet tells us that several key alumni will be in attendance, as well, from district representatives to prominent Illini. Dr. Wigginton, for certain. A tremendous amount of money is spent for this Leadership Retreat, transforming an ordinary group of guys into an NKE chapter, and a tremendous amount of money will be spent on the Spring semester, when that NKE chapter is taught all aspects of fraternity life, is *molded*—for sixteen weeks—by a single consultant. A remarkable investment, and it all starts with us. Tonight. At this dinner meeting.

"So what do you think this Patrick Macintosh will look like?" Nick asks.

"Two possibilities," I say in a mock LaFaber voice. "Either he's a guy that *gets it*, or he wants to start a *drinking club*."

Nick laughs, but not very hard. "That's funny," he says, "but it's probably true."

"You think we'll know him when we see him?"

"That's what I'm worried about. Lots of people, in and out of this place."

The bar at Legend's Bar & Grill sits in the center of the room, a wooden ship in the middle of a great wooden sea, booths lining the walls to the left and the right, tables smattered in the dark distance beyond the bar at the back of the restaurant (where students study under muted light); the big-screen television has been set up at the front of Legend's. Over Nick's shoulder, I watch four girls enter through the front doors, cold air rushing inside, and they look around for a

moment, then select the booth just before ours and scoot onto their wooden bench-seats—oh, and what a nice potpourri of women, too...two blondes, one brunette, and one with dark black hair—and all four are talking and coming to some consensus, and they send the brunette out of the booth to go buy the beers at the bar, and the brunette looks at our table for just a second as she rises—just a *second*, looks up at me, *eye contact*!—and then she's gone but I'll see her when she slides back into her seat, I'm sure.

That familiar stirring...college.



But I can't ruin this, also. This is it, this interest group. Hundreds of thousands of dollars on the line; the talk of the national fraternity world. This is my career, my future.



Focus. Stop shaking.

Just minutes later, a young man walks through the front doors of Legend's, alone, wearing a blue-striped dress shirt, a tie, and a thin khaki jacket (all of this sprinkled with ice and snow), and carrying a portfolio notebook. This ensemble makes him look incredibly out-ofplace, but not as much as his shining blonde hair. Much of the college crowd surrounding us, watching the Michigan football game on the big-screen and downing \$4 Bud Lite pitchers on their Saturday evening, wears baseball caps and hoodies and jeans; most of the hair I see is dark (Chicago hair, Italian, Greek, Asian). The girls in the booth behind Nick, having removed their windbreakers and Gap jackets, are wearing torn jeans and sleeveless shirts, exposing a bit more skin than any of the male college football fans, and they shiver every time the front door opens. Only the brunette, with whom I make quick eye contact again, still wears her jacket (white, form-fitting, very trendy). But this kid, the blonde-haired kid, wears shirt and tie. In *here*.

He sees us right away—two guys hunched over a table and a notebook, staring at the new arrival in Legend's, both of us wearing NKE polos with our jeans—and he makes his way through the crowd (who regard him at length, in his shirt and tie, and he certainly doesn't take notice, doesn't care, just walks forward purposefully).

"Charles Washington? Nick Bennett?" he asks when he arrives at our table, his voice deep and bass-heavy...but also soft, as though he's taking great care to rein in the power of those masculine vocal chords, taking great care not to shout, despite the din of the bar. "So nice to finally meet you guys. I'm Patrick Macintosh."

After Nick and I both shake his hand and introduce ourselves formally, Patrick brushes off a bit of snow from his shoulders and from the golden poof of hair atop his head. If this wasn't central Illinois, I would have sworn that this kid was a Hollywood comedy's depiction of a California surfer boy, a modern-day Zack Morris; he looks more *California* than Nick, who *is* Californian. Patrick pulls a chair to the end of our booth, slides off his jacket and hangs it from the chair, and then sits.

"Still snowing outside?" Nick asks.

"It just picked back up," Patrick says. "Just a little flurry. Nothing big." "We're both from sunnier climates," I say. "We've never lived in snow before." "Not me," Patrick says. "I'm from the suburbs, like everyone else."

"I've always wanted to have a snowball fight," Nick says.

"Yeah, well," Patrick says, voice still soft, a tone that lets you know that—with his deep voice—he could become the booming center of attention, but he doesn't want to be. "You see a lot of snowball fights after the first snow. I actually just got attacked by some of my residents. Do I still have any snow on me?"

"In your hair," I say. "A little."

"Attacked by your residents?" Nick asks.

"I'm an RA," Patrick says. "A bunch of guys from my floor, God bless 'em, caught me walking out of the residence hall, pounded me with snowballs. My girlfriend, she's also an RA, she's already gathering the girls on her floor and devising some sort of retaliation. Grown men and women, they turn into kids again when the snow comes."

"I'm excited about it," Nick says.

"It's fun for a couple weeks," Patrick says. "But trust me. If you're around come February, it gets *really* old." He runs his hands into his blonde hair again, shakes out some tiny bits of ice.

Nick closes the Briefing Packet, pulls it toward his side of the table, and says, "Well, Patrick, we don't want to give you the whole Nu Kappa Epsilon presentation tonight. We'll get into the specifics of Nike and colonization tomorrow night, but we figured that tonight we'd just get to know you a little, get your feelings and your ideas on why you wanted to start your own fraternity chapter."

"Certainly," Patrick says. "I'm excited about this, so I've been telling everyone about my ideas. It almost feels like a speech, by now." Constantly, Patrick runs his fingers through his thick blonde hair as if it is the well-groomed fur of a beloved and attention-craving house cat, and he must ensure that the pet is appeased; frequently, the girls in the neighboring booth become transfixed in the hair, staring for thirty seconds before one of their friends smacks their arm and tells them to snap out of the trance. Something about Patrick Macintosh scares me a little: this immaculate blonde hair of his...this restrained voice. He seems like the kind of student who is too old for his age, who has matured past college already (even though he's got a full year and a half before graduation) and who is ready to grab his diploma and hit the Chicago job market. Something about Patrick Macintosh makes me uneasy, but—and now the brunette is staring at him again—maybe this is because he simply *has it together*.

He is everything I am not.

"Are you hungry?" I ask. "We could order some food."

"No, no," Patrick says. "I already ate at the caf." He pauses. "The caf. Like, cafeteria. The meal hall."

"Ahh-hhhh," Nick says. "So we were told that your father was a Nu Kappa Epsilon, here? Back in the '70s?"

"Late '70s," Patrick says. "He's an odd character, my father. One day, he'd be telling me how much fun he had in his frat, how much they drank, how much they smoked—and he never talks about this stuff, about drinking, aside from when he talks about college. It's like he had four years that no one can hold against him. One day, he'd be talking about how reckless he was, how much he enjoyed college, all that."

I smooth my pants and suppress a smile and stare down into my lap and try not to look across the table at Nick, try not to let anyone see what I'm thinking. Enjoy college, right. Clean

slate, once your four years are up. Party like a Frat Star for four years, pack up and drive, clean slate, I'm wishing.

"One day, my father would be telling me to pledge Nike, party my ass off," Patrick continues, "but the next day, he'd be telling me to *stay away* from fraternities."

"Really?" Nick asks. "Why's that?"

"It's this weird protective side of him, I guess," Patrick says. "All my friends' parents are the same way. So odd. The second we hit college, it seemed like they all started going out to *bars* again, or moving back into the city—"

"Chicago?" I ask.

"Yeah, Chicago. We lived in Naperville my whole life, and then, my senior year, they get a condo up on Lake Shore? And my dad's talking about getting drunk and smoking pot? Ridiculous. All my life, they're model parents. 'Just say no,' curfews, all that." Patrick shrugs, runs his hands through the thick blonde hair that furls upward at the back of his neck. "Then, all of a sudden, I'm 18 and my father tells me to have fun and drink and join a fraternity, and then he tells me to be careful, they're dangerous. I just...was never really sure what to think about his advice. Parents, you know?"

"Well," Nick says, "what have been *your* experiences on campus? Let's talk about you, cause you're the one who will start the fraternity, not your father."

"Certainly," Patrick says again. And he recites his resume, but with a warmth and humanity that I was unprepared for. Quite simply, he has it *all* together, and it is difficult to listen to. I hear real conviction behind his every word, soft though his voice may be. He's a Public Administration major, with a Communicative Disorders minor. He's been a Resident Advisor since his sophomore year, he says, because he wanted to assist incoming freshmen with

the jarring transition from high school to college; he wanted to be a mentor figure for them, helping them to find clubs and organizations that would best fit their interests and lifestyles. Nick leans over the table, nodding and agreeing with all that Patrick says. "I'm going to be honest," Patrick says, fingertips sliding through the hair above his ears, girls at the next booth hypnotized once again by the many shades of gold shifting around his fingers, "I've always told my residents to stay away from fraternities. I've always warned them, warned them, warned them. In two full years as a Resident Advisor, only three of my residents have left the halls and joined frats."

"Why?" Nick asks. "Your father said some conflicting things about fraternities. But did you ever personally have a bad experience?"

"My father came from a different time. So I can't really take his opinion into account too seriously when it comes to my residents here, now. But yeah, I guess I have had some bad experiences. Or...I've seen what can happen to a student."

"What do you mean?" Nick asks.

"My freshman year," Patrick says, "I roomed with a guy who joined a fraternity. I can't lie, you know? I thought about joining. There were a lot of really attractive possibilities. And I know, deep down, my father would have been happy."

Nick nods. Patrick doesn't look in my direction, but I nod, too, just in case.

"There'd be nights when my roommate never came home, but then there'd be nights when he came in, smelling like beer or piss or God knows what. One night—and I'll never forget this—he came home covered in Kool-Aid powder and...syrup, I think...and he stood in the doorway at 3 AM, just staring at me. This mess of a kid, standing there. I thought he was going

to cry, but he just fell into his bed, curled up in his sheets—Kool-Aid mix and syrup and everything—and slept until the next afternoon."

"That's awful," Nick says.

"Do you still talk to your roommate?" I ask.

"No," Patrick says. "He failed out of school."

"So this has been your impression of fraternity life?" Nick asks.

"Not entirely," Patrick says. "I have other friends who joined. Some positive experiences. But the thing that's always stuck with me is: what if I join the wrong fraternity? There's more than fifty of them on campus, and they all have huge houses, money, and they can all be really nice, tell you that you're going to have the time of your life, all that. But if I took the bait, joined the wrong fraternity...and then failed out a semester later?" He shakes his head, the waves of blonde hair flopping as he does. "I've worked too hard to just throw it all away by hanging out with a bunch of drunks."

"And that's why you want to start your own fraternity?" Nick asks.

"No matter what anyone says, I'm not doing this for my Dad. He pushed me and pushed me. The second he found out that his college fraternity was closing down, he was on the phone with me. 'What a great opportunity for you,' he said. Over and over again. But I know what he was really thinking, what all those alumni were thinking when they took me out to eat in July. All they cared about was themselves. Knowing they still had a fraternity to come back to at Illinois. For football games. Shit, if they'd really cared about me, they would have taken me out to dinner when I was a *freshman*, talked to me about the benefits of joining *back then*. But when the fraternity closed, they wanted it back."

"July?" I ask.

"Yeah. They took me out to eat way back in July. Me and some of my friends. Kept saying that we'd have a huge house, we'd have a charter on the wall with our names on it, we'd be founding fathers and we'd be able to start our own traditions. But see, I don't care about any of that. The only thing I care about is, I want there to be a small fraternity on campus of good friends with good values, that people can always turn to, you know? So when a student comes into this university, he doesn't have to worry about whether he's going to get hazed or he's going to have to binge drink. With *my* fraternity, a freshman doesn't have to worry about failing out. He can see this fraternity...and it's just a group of friends, a family, you know? Guys he can study with. Guys he can hang out with. I don't care about sororities and I don't care about alumni events, none of that. I care about the students that are going to be involved with the fraternity. That's what I want to start. That's it." Patrick's face is red with enthusiasm, eyes are glassy with the possibilities he's dreaming.

"Holy shit," Nick says, "that was the most incredible thing I've ever heard." He turns to me. "I love this kid already."

Patrick laughs, taking this as a joke...but he obviously has no idea that Nick is gay. Actually, even if he knew, I still don't think that Patrick can tell the two of us apart yet; just a couple minutes ago, he called me "Nick." And I wonder if I should even *think* about Nick being gay, about that word, "love," if it should matter, if thinking about it makes me a homophobe, and then I realize that I've got to register my pleasure, too, so I look Patrick in the eyes and say, "If the guys in your interest group have the same vision as you, I think you're going to make one hell of a fraternity."

Patrick laughs again, unable to contain the excitement of having two national representatives—the men who ultimately decide whether or not his group will be welcomed into

the arms of Nu Kappa Epsilon—gushing over him. "I'm so glad to hear you say that," Patrick says. "There's so much crap out there"—and he motions with his hand at the campus landscape beyond the front doors of Legend's—"and I was so worried that other people, like, *nationally*, didn't care." We talk for awhile longer, Nick asking questions about the university (my curiosity concerning the "key facts" of the University of Illinois having already been satisfied by my early-Fall visit and by the gigantic collection of statistics that LaFaber provided in the Briefing Packet, but my curiosity about its attractions—about Legend's and about the bar next door, Murphy's-growing by the second), and Patrick still speaking in that low voice, revealing excited traditions and secrets about the campus. The dance of Chief Illiniwiek! The haunted YMCA building! The Hawk winds that tear apart the campus every winter! The largest library in the country! I become a prop, a background interviewer. One booth down, the group of girls has polished off their second pitcher, and two girls stand...and shit, they're going to leave...but no, they're just heading to the bathrooms, and then the brunette stands, and we make eye contact again and I let myself drift into a slight smile, which she reciprocates, and then heads to the bar to grab another pitcher.

Seconds later, (about forty-five minutes after he first sat down) Patrick tells us that he's got to meet his girlfriend for a movie, and he shakes our hands and tells us that he's so excited and can't wait for the presentation tomorrow night, and he takes off.

"Amazing kid," Nick says after he leaves.

"Definitely," I say. "Our job is done for us."

Nick smiles, shakes his head. "Charles, Charles, Charles," he says. "I still can't get over how much different you are, now, than in the summer."

"I'm not such a stiff anymore."

"Yeah, that's part of it."

"What do you mean? Part of it? I changed that much? Good or bad?"

"Listen," Nick says, and he looks around the bar cautiously. I recognize this motion, this paranoid "who's watching me" gesture; it's the same way that I behaved at Philadelphia International Airport, drinking with Ben Jameson; it's the same way that I must have looked to the brothers at New Mexico State during their Etiquette Dinner. "The USC-UCLA game is going to start in half an hour," Nicks says. "No power at the house. You want to stick around and watch it?"

"Sounds like a fantastic idea," I say. "You want to drink? I really need a drink tonight. The tires and everything."

"Sure," Nick says and nods. "You know what? It's on me, tonight."

So I scoot out of the booth and head to the bar, glancing back at the table full of girls (all of whom, however, are locked in conversation). I order two beers from a female bartender with a black ponytail and I tell her to start a tab—they're tall beers, too, the kind that come in glasses so large that, when she thumps them down on the counter, all other glasses along the bar seem to shake—and I realize, as I'm carrying these two massive mugs back to the table, that Brock *never* saw me drink, and that Nick has only seen me drink two or three times. Beer with dinner. Over the summer, I pretended to hate alcohol. Not only did I equate drinking with "college" and with a lack of professionalism, but Brock's personal history made alcohol consumption seem…insensitive. Sitting here in a bar, surrounded by college students and college football and college drinking, I didn't even hesitate to buy these beers, to entertain thoughts of getting wasted tonight, just moments after our meeting ended. I was so worried while at the Headquarters, but I *rushed* to the bar, here, without even considering what Nick might think.

"Holy shit," Nick says when I slide the beer before him. "I said I'd take a drink, not the whole keg."

"My bad," I say, then take a chance: "It's a Saturday night, though. And I wouldn't mind getting a little tipsy."

"We've got to be careful. You never know who's around."

"What do you mean? Spies? Come on. We're the spies."

"I'm just saying, that's all."

But Nick, despite this meek protest, does drink his mug, and another, and shows no signs of slowing when UCLA goes down by three touchdowns to the mighty Trojans of Southern California. The beers come easily, then. And I get a glimpse, perhaps, of the Nick Bennett from six months ago, prior to his graduation, and he looks quite a bit like the Charles Washington of that same time. Literally. Because, when Nick asks the bartender for another round, she doesn't hesitate to simply put him on the same tab. We are mirror images, the two of us, except in attitude. While my life has lately been built around deception and elaborate lies, Nick's life is a solid construct of unflinching honesty. He hides nothing, makes it no secret that he is pursuing a career in higher education because he is gay, and because it was higher education professionals and student organizations that made his coming-out a positive experience. Nick and I look almost exactly alike, but I'm rarely even honest about why I took this job.

Just as Nick returns to the table with a new round, my cell phone rings. I pull it from the pocket of my jacket, check the caller ID—*Maria*—and cough uncontrollably and tell Nick I've got to take this call outside. I'm shivering, muscles clenched, before I even make it out the front doors of the restaurant.

"I don't like your voicemail message," Maria says to me when I answer.

"My voicemail? When did you hear my voicemail?"

Here on the sidewalk outside Legend's, students pass by in packs, pressed together, hands stuffed in pockets, headed to one bar or another on this cold Saturday night. The air is filled both with tiny vapor puffs from the combined breathing of each pack, and the echoing cackles noises seem to travel farther, last longer, here in the cold—as each small group makes jokes to distract one another from the temperature.

"I called your office phone," she says.

"My Headquarters line? Why would you do that?"

"I thought you were in the office," she says. "That's what the web site says."

"Maria, this is...I don't know what to tell you. You're calling my office? I don't know what to do, here, what you want from me."

"Oh, don't worry, Charles. I'm not one of those psycho college girls who can't go over a relationship."

"We didn't have a relationship."

"Exactly. See?"

"So why are you calling me? I told you, I'm sorry. I feel like an asshole. But I can't see you again. Hell, I don't know if I'll ever be out in New Mexico again."

"That's not why I'm calling. I told you, I'm not a psycho stalker."

"Okay?"

"I don't care if I see you again. I just called to see if you got my email."

"I haven't checked. I'm in Illinois, now. I don't have power or internet."

"I sent you some goodies," she says.

"You sent me a virus or something, didn't you?"

"I sent you pictures, asshole. Way to ruin the surprise."

"Pictures, great. Thank you for the pictures."

"Don't you want to know what the pictures are?"

"I'm pretty busy right now, Maria," I say. "How about I call you or something, when I check my email?"

"Do whatever you want, Charlie," she says.

"Right," I say. "Enjoy your Saturday." I flip my phone shut, inhale and exhale a few times, shakily, and then head back inside and slide into the booth seat across from Nick. "Phone call from the girl," I tell him, and I shrug, but I'm sure I look rattled.

"Girls. Thank God I don't have that problem," he says.

I make myself chuckle, and then we clink our beer mugs and take long gulps. The football game continues on the Legend's big-screen TV, and, although I'm not quite sure why, I don't let Nick slow down with his drinking. Part of me seems concerned just a bit, because—"*I love this guy*," he said, and "*Girls, thank God I don't have that problem*"—I'm having drinks with a gay man; no, I'm purposely getting a gay man *drunk*, and we're going home and sleeping together, and, regardless of how "diverse" and "accepting" our fraternity mission claims we are, "sleeping with a gay man" doesn't sound good, not to the people I have to impress...I still picture alumni, Ben Jameson back in Pittsburgh and Dr. Simpson in Indianapolis, Dr. Wigginton maybe, my father, squirming when they hear the words "gay brother," squirming away from me when I tell them about my night out with Nick. During our consultant training this past summer, when Nick, Brock, and I lived together in the Lodge, there was always an overwhelming precariousness to everyone's conduct in the office whenever Nick was around. Shake his hand or hug him? Use ambiguous terms like "significant other," or accept Nick's sexuality and get more

realistic with terms like "boyfriend?" Actually ask Nick if he has a boyfriend? No, no, too much. All summer, I realize now, it was the same sort of feeling that I had after I hit those potholes in Pennsylvania, when I drove on a spare tire and cracked wheels, fearing that—at any second—the entire undercarriage of my Explorer could suddenly collapse under me. So many of the older employees seemed unsure of how to act, what to say, and so they simply ignored or disregarded Nick. The administrative assistants, gray-haired women, both of them, spoke to Nick as if he were weak or sickly, asking either Brock or me to help move boxes or materials whenever they needed physical help. The directors (LaFaber and Dr. Simpson and Dr. Eckstein) even pulled me aside at the start of the summer and asked if I had any reservations about living with Nick. "No," I said, "why would I?" "Just wondering," LaFaber said, and at the time, I figured it was some test of my "acceptance of diversity." But no matter what these old men say, I'm sure they would rather hear that a consultant banged some freshman girl than simply learn that a consultant is gay...Hell, I wish all of this didn't come to mind; I wish I didn't care what it means when someone hears that I'm drinking or living with Nick. I wish. But I also wish I hadn't told the brothers at New Mexico State-so condescendingly-how diverse they were. I wish I didn't have to force so much in my life.

But while I'm concerned about the "gay thing," there's another part of me that has a sort of plan with all this drinking, however hazy in my mind; of the three consultants, Nick is the likeliest candidate for graduate school, and for him to be drunk validates my being drunk. So, yes. Forget about gayness. Get Nick drunk. Try to relax.

Soon, we both finish our fourth beers and become consumed in college-football-talk, discussing everything from the over-glorification of SEC football to the greedy system of the Bowl Championship Series, and—*fuck*, even though I've been through hours and hours of high

school and college and NKE diversity workshops, sensitivity training—now that I've thought about Nick being gay, all because that fucking comment, "I love this guy," I can't stop thinking about it, and everything he says is something a *gay man* would say, and every time one of the football players bends over, I wonder what Nick—the *gay man*—is thinking. Is he enjoying the sport, or is he enjoying the way the players' calves are so ripped you can see three individual muscles popping out? And I wonder if he's staring at me too long as he talks, if I'm staring back too long. And, of course, I continually slip and make insensitive comments. At one point, Nick yells—as a UCLA safety drills a USC wide receiver—"Nail that fucker, *yeah*!" Before I realize it, I respond with, "Looks like he's mounting the guy," but Nick doesn't seem to notice.

And the longer we drink—four mugs, then five, and I'm encouraging him always to grab "just one more round"—the conversation inevitably shifts from college football back to "Road Horror Stories," and I let *this* comment slip: "Anybody find out about you at the houses?" My mind is a slippery slope, though, because as soon as I think this and say this, I'm not simply thinking of, say, the brothers at the University of Georgia concluding that Nick is gay...no, I'm thinking of Nick casually revealing his sexuality to one of the brothers, to all of them, maybe trying to convince some kid that he's "closeted," maybe even hooking up with a repressed brother at Tennessee or Valdosta. And my mind, slipping...I'm thinking that a gay consultant sleeping with a chapter brother *must* break more rules than me sleeping with some random girl. And now I'm thinking of Maria again. Slipping, slipping.

"What do you mean?" Nick asks.

"Nothing," I say. "Like, did anyone see you drink?" And this was the dumbest back-up question I could have possibly used, replacing sexuality with alcohol consumption, oh brilliant brilliant!, and I'm starting to wobble a bit now, and the comments are all coming out of my

mouth before I can stop them, and so I try my best to remain silent, again, to allow Nick to tell more of his Road Horror Stories, and to guard my own, to reveal nothing. But, of course, Brock is not around this time to hog the conversation, so my silence is much more apparent.

"I drank a couple times," Nick says. "You know me, Charles. I always thought that the drinking rules were a little unrealistic."

"A little unrealistic?" I ask. "You want to be a higher-ed professional."

"The Code of Conduct rules over-reach. Personal life is personal life. So-ooo...you answer the question, Charles. You drink at all this semester?"

So quickly, he's dismissed the standards by which I'd once organized my life.

"Maybe I did," I say, and I have to force myself not to say anything else, and Nick doesn't force me to say anything, either, probably because so much of what I have already said tonight has been...well, regrettable. I drain the last of my beer, wait for the brunette at the next table to finish hers, and I time myself, walk to the bar just *seconds* before she slides out of the booth and walks to the bar, too, and when I order another round of beers for Nick and me, I consider telling the bartender to pour another pitcher for the girl behind me, to put her on my tab, and I picture myself turning around and introducing myself and telling her to come back and have a seat with me at my table and, in my mental picture, Nick has disappeared, of course, and it's just the two of us, me and this brunette, leaning over the table, faces close, and we're both drunk enough to make my favorite sort of mistakes, and it's all right...this is who I'm picturing:



But when I grab my beers from the counter, turn to head back to my table, I stare at the floor and avoid eye contact with the girl, and she steps past me and orders from the bartender, and I know that I'll never say a word to her. I can't go back to what I was in Las Cruces, I can't drop my worries anymore. There are consequences *everywhere*.

"USC just scored," Nick says when I return to the table. "Touchdown pass. With their fucking third-string quarterback."

By my sixth beer, as it becomes apparent that UCLA has not only lost the game, but also has no realistic shot at competing for a Pac-10 championship anymore, Nick chain-smokes several cigarettes, then actually chugs—chugs—the rest of his beer and says, "Fuck it all"...and he doesn't care that I'm watching him chug...Nick Bennett has no worries...and I get a headache just thinking about the past semester, bottling it all up, and I know I should say nothing, stay safe, but Nick doesn't care, right? Nick doesn't give a shit about the Code of Conduct. Nick's a gay man on the road, surrounded by fraternity men; surely he's done worse than me! Hell, he's a chain-smoker! One bad habit begets another! Certainly he's been drunk, certainly he's got secrets! So instead of keeping quiet-my head light, the wrong decisions much easier to make because they don't feel like they'll have consequences—I unleash an uncontrollable flood of one-sided conversation. "Let me tell you something, Nick," I say and I know it's a bad decision but I tell the entire story of my time at Shippensburg before I can stop myself. The party, the infractions, the documentation, and the ultimate irrelevance of it all. How pointless and powerless it made me feel! How jaded my opinions toward the Headquarters eventually grew because of this single incident. How backwards the logic that LaFaber used to justify it all, how wrong it all seemed! And as each new scene of my story builds upon the last, I finally feel justified in my actions of the past Fall... I drank alcohol with students? I allowed some kids to do

some painless hazing? I slept with a girl? I woke up in her dorm room? That's nothing. Why should any of it matter when the national mission—the *national* mission—is a farce, and the Director of Chapter Operations enforces it only when financially appropriate! I've chosen the right story, I think, because I am sympathetic here. Whatever he might learn of my later exploits, in this moment at least, I am *sympathetic*!

Nick looks at his beer for the longest time, for minutes it seems, visibly swaying, then meets my eyes. I think he's going to say something emotional, something profound. But in this silence of his, this long and agonizing stare-down in which we've engaged, I realize that there is no hint of empathy. I realize that I've actually said the words, "slept with a girl," that I've told him about New Mexico State. I realize that all of it has come out. *All of it*. And I remember that I'm talking with Nick, who—although he might disregard certain office protocol by dressing casually, or by drinking at a bar here in Cham-bana—believes in the power of the higher-ed professional to shape lives. "Charles, man," he says eventually, "that's a lot of shit you just told me."

"Shit," I say. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to-shit-unload like that."

He's silent, still.

"That look in your eye," I say. "You're going to report me, aren't you?"

"Charles, we're friends," he says. "But I hope you understand that I'm not going to lose my job, my career, covering for you."

"I wouldn't ask that."

"This isn't good."

"I know. It's just that a lot seemed to happen all at once."

"Seems that way."

"I didn't plan any of it."

"Well *shit*, Charles, I know that. You were LaFaber's golden boy over the summer. Shit, until three days ago, I thought you were a fucking robot."

"I just...things changed. It was, like, total frustration."

"You're a consultant. And you fucked a freshman girl. You have any idea how bad that looks for the entire organization? Our credibility, all of us? We employ role models to go out and take advantage of 18 year-olds?"

"You're the only one who knows," I say.

"She knows."

"Right. But she's not telling anyone."

"Not yet, you mean."

"Never. She's bothering *me* a little, I guess. Calling *me*. But this isn't that big of a deal that she could go to the *New York Times* and get coverage. We're both adults, for God's sake. Maybe it isn't ethical, but I'm not fucking depraved. This isn't Enron."

"It doesn't have to be Enron. All that has to happen is that she turns this into scandal. Soon as that happens—and it will, because fraternities make fucking headlines, Charles—the whole national fraternity gets dragged through the news, and everyone who works there gets labeled a certain way. Especially in the higher-ed world."

"It was sex, Nick. She's not going crazy about this."

"Maybe, maybe not. You knew this girl for how long?"

"She's not. Come on. Let's just...I'm sorry I said anything. I'm not asking you to cover for me, but just...forget I said anything."

Nick exhales. "I don't know," he says. "I just don't know. I can't forget."

I'm silent for a second, hold up my beer as if to take a sip, but it's empty. I place it back on the table, on the same wet ring of condensation from which I removed it just moments ago. We're two guys in matching polos, Nick and me, two guys who look nearly identical, two guys with empty beers, sitting and staring in complete silence, upset for different reasons. The front doors open and close, and a violent gust of cold air strikes. The girls in the booth behind ours hold their exposed arms, shiver and swear, then grab their jackets, and seconds later, they're filing out of Legend's without a backwards glance. A wooden table full of empty glasses and pitchers, left behind.

"Charles, listen to me," he says. "Did you see that kid we were talking to? Patrick? Did you hear the things he was saying? Right here, we have the opportunity to do something good, something right."

"I know, Nick," I say. "I know, and I'm not going to fuck this up for you."

"For me?" Nick asks. "Me? This isn't about me, you know. And this isn't about LaFaber. I've never put too much stock into all the bullshit PR of those national brochures. The mission. You were the one, in case you've forgotten, who tried to do this consulting thing by-thebook...by the fucking letter. I don't care about drinking at a college bar, as long as I'm not acting like an asshole. What does it matter? And I don't care if this interest group becomes Nu Kappa Epsilon's perfect fraternity, but I *do* care that *these students* have the opportunity to create what they want. That I *do* care about."

"I misspoke," I say. "You're right. I care about all of that, too."

"I do things, I do them right. I'm not here to fuck around because this isn't about me." Nick pauses, and now *he* looks into his empty mug. "I'll stay quiet, Charles. I won't open my mouth about you. Just don't pull that shit, here."

Seconds—minutes—pass in silence, both of us staring at ESPN highlights.

When we stand up to go back to the bar, my head is spinning. We have another round and we try to regain the same back-and-forth banter that had come so naturally for us minutes before, but conversation with Nick now feels just as shaky as it did back in the office. Now, however, it is no longer *Nick's* sexuality that has caused the two of us to deflate, to grumble slowly and carefully over the words we say to one another; now, strangely, *my* sexual activity has caused the damage to our tires, the dents in the wheels, the gashes, the discomfort.

* * *

Soon thereafter, I'm at the bar looking over Nick's shoulder as he pays the tab and I'm calculating the tip and thinking the bill is more money than I've got to my name, and I try to hand him a five dollar bill but he waves it off, probably because all day I've told him that I'm broke as a joke, and then I'm calculating how much beer I drank, but to do that I need to know how many ounces were in each cup, and the bartender is telling me, so I guess I asked aloud, and they're 32 ounces each, times six mugs, so that's almost *sixteen* ordinary-sized beers over the course of four hours, and I feel like shit, and Nick doesn't look good, either, and then we're outside in the parking lot and grabbing the sleeping bags and pillows out of Nick's car and then we're in a cab and then we're in the absolute dark cold chamber of the Nu Kappa Epsilon house, on the floor, and I zip the sleeping bag over my head and for the first time in days, the world is finally fucking hot.

When we wake up in the morning, the house is still icy, and when I—with my sleeping bag still draped around me like protective body armor—shuffle into the Main Foyer and flip the light switch, nothing happens. "The power," I scream across the room to Nick, a poof of cold fog shooting out of my mouth. "The power's still not on!"

"Did you check the Thermostat?" Nick yells back.

"Still thirty-five degrees in here."

"I feel like shit," Nick says. "Back hurts from that floor."

I run my hand over my facial stubble. Everything on my body feels grimy, like I'm waking up on a couch the morning after a house party. Breath smells like sour milk. Brain feels like it was pulled from my skull, kicked around, and re-inserted into my head. Lips are chapped beyond repair, but still sticky with Chap Stick. Nose is running. I feel exhausted even though I haven't done anything, like my body used every spare calorie I've consumed over the past month just to keep me warm and alive overnight. In a strange way, though, last night's sleep was no different than Central Michigan or Green Valley or any of the other fraternity houses where I slept on something—bed or otherwise—that felt as unforgiving as the floor of this Illinois house. (I realize now, of course, that had we simply purchased a couple flashlights and candles, we could have made our way upstairs to the dorm rooms and set up our sleeping bags on some of the bare-mattressed bunk beds.).

Our presentation for the interest group isn't until 6:00 PM tonight, but I can't spend another day in this house. Not like this. I check my cell phone for the time, but it's shut off, either from expended battery life or extreme cold.

Still draped in my sleeping bag, I shuffle to the nearest bathroom that I remember, bits and pieces of...plastic?...glass?...crunching under my feet as I walk. Because the windows are boarded up, all is still deathly dark in this house. I can't imagine what I'm stepping on. Old wallpaper that wasn't thrown out after the renovation? The first-floor bathroom of the Illinois house is a tiny unisex unit—only one toilet, a sink, and a cabinet—just to the right of the front doors, so I can actually hear the winds outside screeching past, causing heavy metal street signs to wobble. When I unzip my pants, I'm not exactly sure where I'm aiming; here in the dark, I can see the outline of the toilet, but I think I'm actually pissing on the seat more than I'm pissing in the bowl. My head still spins, also, which doesn't help my aim. And then I close my eyes, squeeze them shut as tight as I can, try to focus, make the world right itself—

And suddenly something in the house clunks to life, and a humming noise—starting slow, then building, building—reverberates throughout the bathroom, throughout the foyer, throughout the basement and the dorms, *everywhere*, I'm sure. The power! The power! It's impossible to contain my joy, but when I open my eyes and revel in the fact that the lights have come on, I discover—*shit*—I've pissed in the toilet, yes, but I've also pissed across the floor and in the trash can.

But that's the least of my worries.

The overhead light, a single flame-shaped bulb glowing in a hanging gold case which dangles from the ceiling on a thick gold chain, appears to be untouched and in fine working order, but the mirror...the mirror is cracked down the center, cracked all the way from left to right. The cracks look like a compass of destruction, pointing in every direction, which—after I zip up my pants and toss a couple paper towels over the spreading puddles of urine on the floor—turns out to be fairly prophetic, not simply for the bathroom, but for the entire house.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Nick (also walking about in his sleeping bag) is already at work on the thermostat, pumping the temperature up as high as it will go, but when he sees me, he runs his hands through his hair and shakes his head. Yes, electricity pulses here in the Main Foyer, and all is illuminated by a ceiling fan light high overhead, but our problems are not *solved* by the electricity, but, rather, *revealed* by it. The only reason we have the benefit of light at all, I think, is simply because the fan is out of easy reach; were it a bit lower to the floor, the light—like everything else—would probably have been destroyed, too.

Nick and I both stand absolutely still for minutes, unsure what to do.

The walls...that rich wood paneling...is scuffed mildly in some lucky places, but peeled or scalped or punctured in the (more frequent) unlucky places. Long black drag marks stretch from end to end of the foyer, from the back wall to the stairwells on either side of the large, open room. The black visqueene—from the party, the night I visited Illinois in September—remains stapled to the wall in some places, torn down in others, lays across the floor and unfurls into the stairwells. The bare wood of the floor is littered with broken glass—beer bottles, neon signs, ketchup bottles, remnants both of the party and of the individual members' mini-fridges, no doubt-and aluminum cans and rotting chicken drumsticks that have left frozen discoloration in the wood. NKE flags and banners lay in shredded disarray on the floor. Trophies and awards have been smashed, tossed here and there. The fraternity house looks like a pillaged home in Who-ville, a left-to-rot dwelling ransacked by the Grinch: only things left are some boxes and some wire. And all the mud! mud! Footprints. Dumped-out trashcans. Nick and I walk around the first floor like soldiers emerging from a foxhole after a devastating firefight. Unsure what the extent of the damages will be, who and what has survived the chaos. Some of it is just the sort of left-behind trash one would expect when a college student moves out of an apartment, but much of it is coordinated, symbolic. The trophies and banners, for instance: these had all been in storage during the party, so the brothers-after they learned of their eviction-must have

purposely brought these out of storage and destroyed them. The only encouraging sign in this disaster of a foyer is that the furniture is nowhere to be seen; perhaps, because the brothers also hauled the furniture all the way to storage for the night of the party, the couches and the chairs required too much effort to lug them back out just for defilement.

Nick and I make our way downstairs and first enter the Library, which had before been a stunning collection of leather-bound books, trophies, and signed portraits. Now, the portraits have been removed from their frames, bent, and tossed onto the floor beside cracked or dented trophies and the balled-up, crumpled white pages of alumni directories. Old books, part of some expensive collections...the classics, *Don Quixote*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Ulysses*, even some encyclopedias...most are missing, now, or are—we find as we continue our walk-through—floating in toilets or shaving-cream-filled sinks.

The cafeteria appears unharmed, and the kitchen, thankfully, is locked. This fraternity house kitchen was operated by caterers, and the brothers never had access except during Monday-Friday meal hours, so at least two rooms of this house are spared.

The basement "Chapter Room," however, gives us our most telling glimpse into the absolute anger and heartbreak of the University of Illinois brothers who were told to vacate their home and disband as a fraternity. This room, which before had exuded a warm early-20th-century professionalism, feels exactly the same, initially. The giant desk remains in its same spot. The fireplace is still tall and impressive, and nothing has been burnt or discarded in the ashes. Only one spot in this room feels out-of-the-ordinary: above the mantle, a hook pokes out of the wall, but there is no portrait, no frame.

On the desk, I notice a moment later, is the University of Illinois charter, that document signed in 1921 by the original founders of the chapter. Still framed. Glass is still in one piece.

The charter is a tall piece of yellowed paper (which looks like some sort of ancient scroll or parchment), the vision of those original founders written in a deep ink, the letters and words elegant and smooth, calligraphic. It is this fraternity's version of a Declaration of Independence, but it would probably be more appropriate to call it a "Declaration of Allegiance," since it bound—for eighty years—the Illinois chapter to the National Fraternity. And it has now been signed, in various colors, by those brothers evicted just two months ago. The words at the top of the charter, "Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity," have been crossed out and replaced with "Fucking Hypocrites."

"Doesn't the Briefing Packet say that this house is supposed to be renovated?" I finally ask.

"It does," Nick says.

"LaFaber told me that the brothers got destructive when they were evicted," I say, "but he was happy about it. He said we were collecting money from a lawsuit, or something. He said *newly renovated*, for God's sake. How the hell are we supposed to live in this fucking place? How are we supposed to hold a presentation tonight?"

"The good news, I guess," Nick says, "is that it really doesn't look a whole lot worse than some of the fraternity houses I visited this Fall. This is pretty fucked up, this house, but we can still make this work."

"Ever the optimist," I say; I stoop and pick up a fountain drink cup with about six ounces of slushy Mountain Dew at the bottom. "I'm not a maid. I didn't graduate college to clean houses."

"Neither did I," Nick says. He picks up a gallon jug of half-frozen milk, holding it far away from himself, then launches it into one of the industrial-sized trash cans down the hall.

"But we better get to work," he says. "As soon as this house heats up and all of this shit thaws out, it's going to smell like a restaurant dumpster in here."

Chapter Fourteen: The Interest Group

| Illinois Colonization - Schedule | |
|---|---|
| Week One: | |
| Saturday: Sunday: Monday: Tuesday: Wednesday: Thursday: Friday: | Arrive, Meeting w/ Patrick Presentation Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews |
| Week Two: | |
| Monday: Tuesday: Wednesday: Thursday: Friday: | Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Final Prep Final Prep Leadership Retreat & Initiation Ceremony |

It's the middle of November at the University of Illinois, a dark Sunday evening, and in every direction the landscape is a gray sour-milk color. Although the snow has stopped, the cold front hasn't blown past Champaign-Urbana; it lingers all around us—bears down—with the same smothering intensity of a humid Florida summer. Nick and I stand in the long shadows behind the Illini Memorial Union (the center of the Illinois campus, a massive building whose architectural design is a cross between a turn-of-the-century luxury hotel and a train station), both of us buried beneath heavy jackets, every few minutes hopping from foot to foot, clapping our gloves together, saying something like, "It's fucking coo-*oold* out here!" Warm weather wimps, both of us.

The back of the Memorial Union, where we stand and wait for Patrick Macintosh and his interest group to arrive for tonight's presentation, opens into a sweeping half-mile Quad,

surrounded by historic classroom buildings that have likely stood since the school's initial enrollment (Davenport Hall, Noyes Lab, Lincoln Hall), and the Quad is criss-crossed by salty sidewalks. In the early Fall, I remember, the Quad was alive and bright with green grass and full trees, with students laying out on beach towels, jogging, playing Frisbee, reading on benches; tables were set up everywhere around the Quad, student organizations disbursing flyers and stickers; a van was parked at the front of the Quad, distributing football tickets to a long line of students. Now, on a Sunday night in November, just weeks before these students head home for Thanksgiving Break, the Quad is dark and lonely and, save for me and Nick, completely empty.

We stand outside the Illini Union and wait for the interest group to arrive, and when they do, we'll head upstairs to a reserved conference room where we'll deliver our presentation. We've told Patrick that we had to change the location of the presentation for "logistical reasons" ("There's just not enough parking here at the house," Nick told him over the phone, early this morning, "but it works out, cause the Union has better A/V equipment for our presentation"), but honestly, we could not have hosted anyone at the ransacked facility in which we woke this morning.

Beside me, Nick talks with LaFaber, holding the phone at a distance from his ear because the metal and plastic are so cold. "Yeah," Nick says into the phone. "Yes. I know." He stares at me and rolls his eyes, shrugs beneath his thick, black coat, as if to tell me that the conversation is going about as expected.

"You want to talk to Charles?" Nick asks. "All right. Here you go."

"Wait," I say. "Wait, no."

Nick passes off the phone to me, then says, "I'm going inside to thaw out for a minute, use the bathroom. Let me know how it goes."

"Charles," comes the voice on the other end.

"Walter," I say. "How are you this evening?"

"Excellent. Tonight's the big night."

"Yeah," I say. "That's right. We're"—and I pause to keep from shivering and stuttering in the cold—"excited about the presentation."

"This is distressing news about the house," LaFaber says. "Nick tells me that it isn't renovated, as the alumni promised. Is this true? Is the house in disarray?"

"That's a euphemism," I say. "The house is fucked."

A heavy silence. "Charles, I understand you're upset. But, please…watch your language. I expect more from you."

He says this last part in the same tone as my father, as in "you've got a lot to learn about professionalism," and I know I do. But something about this moment, about the cold, and my hands are shaking...I can't stymie the things that I've been waiting all day to say. I can't grow mad at Nick, after all, because (first) he's got nothing to do with the condition of the fraternity house and (second) he's just too damned optimistic all the time. So, perhaps for the first time this semester, I'm prepared to let LaFaber have it. Let him fucking feel my frustration, yes. I can stand up for myself, I can.

"This is *not* acceptable, Walter," I say, but my voice is undone by my shivers. "I slept on a wooden floor. In a fucking freezer. I feel like shit today. My whole body. And the house *smells*. There's rotting food in that house, for God's sake."

Silence. Silence for a moment as I stand and shake.

"Charles," he says and sighs. "I don't know what you want me to say. It distresses me when you allow yourself to be so overcome by emotion—" "Overcome by emotion? You're kidding me, right?"

"Listen to me, Charles," he says. "Think about this rationally."

"I'm rational."

"Are you?"

"I'm rational."

"I've apologized about the situation," he says. "Other than that, what else can *I* do? I'll speak with the alumni about the renovation, but at least the power's back on *now*, right? What's the sense in being angry? We've got a job to do."

And, of course, I've got a thousand responses, but somehow—like always—he manages to cut them down and render them irrelevant before I can speak, so that my anger seems silly. Hell, I feel like Maria now. Hundreds of miles away, angry, but what can I really expect LaFaber to do but apologize? "You'll be rewarded for your efforts, trust me," LaFaber says. "But right now, you've got to tough this out. You've got to remember that these small sacrifices are for the greater glory of the National Fraternity. This is non-profit, a labor of love."

"I..." I start, and now I can't even think of any response. A cold cynicism has frozen my blood today, transformed my heart to ice. But Nick, even when he disapproves of something, handles it so well that I seem unreasonable by comparison. So, in the end, I hold my tongue, and I eventually tell LaFaber that, yes, I am up for a challenge, that there's no way I will let this colonization end in anything but a rousing success, that he'll be so proud when he arrives next week for the Leadership Retreat.

Of course, all the while I'm thinking of the many unavoidable disasters that loom in the dark pit below me, as my Explorer careens out of control on its bumpy descent. The house is already fucked, I'm thinking, and so our presentation tonight will be, also. We'll lose the interest

group. Or maybe they'll be drunks or stoners or all-around assholes. Or, even worse, they'll be fantastic, Boy Scouts, over-achievers, a group of Patricks, and they'll immediately *buy* the mission and I'll feel like a liar, selling them something I know to be flawed. It is a cold day in Illinois, and my cold blood was made colder this afternoon, when I finally checked my email from Maria, and—through some horrible twist of fate—received a phone call from Jenn just an hour later. When Maria called last night, I'd assumed that she was indeed finished with me, that she had finally realized how little she had to gain by calling me. I'd assumed that she'd realized (and accepted) that I am in the Midwest, she is in Las Cruces, and while I lied and played a persona just to play her, her need for something—to have a relationship with me? to tell me off? to exact some sorority-girl revenge?—was nearly impossible, given the distance between us. Why not just let it go? This was Maria, after all, the girl with the body that's built for fucking, and I've got no doubt that she could have any guy on that campus that she wanted. But what I never considered was that a girl that can have anyone *doesn't ever get played*.

"Ahh, memories," her email read. Two quick words, no extended commentary about how much of an asshole I am, how I should burn in hell, etc. Initially, it seemed encouraging: if she had nothing more to say than "Ahh, memories," then maybe she was over the whole thing. Just two quick words. But also five .jpg attachments. She didn't need to write anything, I realized as I opened the attachments, because she'd emailed me a series of digital photos, and they cut far more deeply than any obscenity-laced email rant ever could. These photos promise far more damage than any silly threat Maria might have made over the phone. Five photos, all taken on an early Fall evening, each working with the last to construct a clear story of Charles Washington's experiences in Juarez. The first four photos are high resolution, the product of crisp digital camera technology and expert Photoshop touch-ups. Some are candid: Charles dancing with

Maria, a dynamic action shot worthy of *Sports Illustrated*, sweat slinging off my forehead and neck, one of my hands motion-blurred as I perform some inane, drunken move. Another photo, though, is a staged shot: Charles in the center of the picture, surrounded by Maria, Shelley, Sam, and Jose, my left arm hanging over Sam's shoulders and my right around Maria's. All of us holding drinks and standing just inside the front doors of the bar. There is another photograph in which I kiss Maria, and another in which I am chugging a Corona with Sam. And aside from the dance-floor photo, I seem cognizant of the camera in each shot...at the time, I must have *known* that someone—Shelley, perhaps?—had brought a camera along, that someone was documenting our night. I knew it, and didn't care. Didn't even remember the next morning. I was so drunk, so intoxicated by the *idea* of drinking and becoming a college student again, that I must have forced myself to forget where I was. To forget all worries, all consequences. And now I've got this email, these photos, this visual reminder.

The final photo file that Maria sent me is less detailed, less focused, fuzzier than the others, and it is actually the only picture that I remember being taken. Just before I left Maria's dorm room that Wednesday morning in Las Cruces, she grabbed her cell phone and took a quick photo of me. Grainy picture quality, but the image is indisputable: I am in the middle of a girl's dorm room, Alpha Alpha sorority posters hanging on the walls, Sam Anderson standing a few feet behind me, laughing. I am bending over, looking for my clothes, a confused grin on my face as I stare at the camera, a grotesquely under-sized baby T-shirt barely covering my torso and a pair of torn boxer shorts hiked up high on my thighs and exposing my hairy legs.

With this fifth and final image, the narrative is complete. But really, when I saw this last image, I knew that someone would only need to see this single photo to grasp the full story. Charles Washington, caught on camera, unsuspecting and half-naked. The embarrassing, perhaps

devastating conclusion to my silly journey for identity. Embarrassing for me, personally. But devastating if these pictures are circulated.

I responded to Maria's email with what I hoped was tact and brevity, thanking her for the photos and, yes, the memories. And, most important, a quick request that she keep the photos off of her Facebook page, written in a tone suggesting that I'm not particularly worried. The email took me half an hour to write, though, and I struggled over my closing for another fifteen minutes. I wasn't going to write "Love, Charles," obviously, but how to end a letter with someone who hates you, who—you suddenly realize—seems to be holding your future over the balcony of some high-rise, ready to release at any moment and let it drop and crash. "Sincerely?"

I settled with "Talk to you later – Charles" because it didn't feel like a lie.

My phone call with Jenn, just thirty minutes later, was a different experience entirely. Rather than a reminder of my semester, Jenn's call reminded me of all that I left behind—and haven't thought much about, lately—in Florida. My old life. Hell, I've moved around so much since we broke up—Illinois to Philadelphia, to New Mexico State, to Texas Tech, to Fresno State—that I've barely thought about her. I've dismissed her. Living a life so scattered, I've dismissed all my relationships back home.

"I was worried about you, a little," she said. "I wanted to see how you're doing."

"Good," I said. "*Great*, actually." I tried to sound cheerful, actually found myself imitating Nick as I did so. "Things are fantastic. How's EU? How are you?"

"Hanging in there," she said. "Tired of my internship."

"I told you," I said. "Internships are the worst."

"No kidding. Unpaid. Time-consuming. Stupid errands all day."

"It's good for your resume, at least, right? Look on the bright side."

And Jenn must have heard it in my voice, this forced excitement, and she didn't buy it for a second. When we first started dating, I might have won her over with my conjured "Big Man on Campus" image, but Jenn observes the world sharply—she's a Broadcast Journalism major and she had me profiled perfectly after only a couple weeks. "We're the same, the two of us," she said to me one night when I took her out to Wine Bar. "You're not a 'Man on Campus,' and I'm not a 'Woman on Campus.' We're only involved because we've always been that way. Ever since we were kids. We just wouldn't know what to do if we weren't in fraternities and sororities, or Student Government." Jenn has always been able to correctly read me, despite whatever I say to give a different impression. And I always forget this distinct quality of hers. We talked for only ten or fifteen minutes today, and I didn't realize until I'd hung up that she knew all of my excitement was phony.

We ended the conversation the same way we began, surprised I think, that we were actually talking, surprised that we were still concerned about one another, and while I have no hopes that we will talk again soon, it is nice to think that, maybe, I do not wreck all that I touch. I *can* be positive. Unfortunately, I've accumulated too much baggage to just slam the brakes, make a u-turn, and drive back up that hill, away from the fast-approaching darkness.

"I want to wish you guys good luck with the presentation tonight," LaFaber is saying now, a blast of wind screeching across the Quad before me, shaking loose some of the remaining snow from the treetops. "But Charles, now that I've got you on the phone, I've got something important I want to discuss with you."

"Something important," I say, and—just in case the conversation is going to take a dramatic turn into New Mexico State, just so I can give the appearance that I'm not constantly thinking about it—I'm quick to add: "About *Illinois*, right?"

"About Illinois, yes," LaFaber confirms. "Tell me. How is Nick?"

"Good," I say, a cloud of fog spreading out from my mouth, drifting skyward and dissipating in the orange light of the lampposts lining the Quad's sidewalks. The better Nick looks, actually, the better *I* look, so I revise my statement: "Nick's doing *great*, in fact. Why do you ask? Did he say something to you?"

"He's said a lot to me throughout the semester."

"I don't know if I follow."

"Nick's a great young man. Very good heart. He genuinely cares about the students, and I'm sure he genuinely cares about the organization."

"I agree," I say. "He hasn't complained *at all* about the house. And honestly, we've got plenty of reason to complain. I mean...not to you, I guess...but Nick has been really good, even with sleeping on the floor and everything."

"I understand that," LaFaber says. "He's got an incredible attitude. But I worry, sometimes. Is he just a little bit soft?"

"Soft?"

"For all your outbursts, you, at least, display real fire, real energy, Charles. Do you think Nick can be...aggressive enough at this colonization?"

"Nick's not soft," I say. "No, he just cares."

"He keeps calling with these petty gripes, after all. Then he hands the phone off."

"I think he's just concerned."

"California boys," LaFaber says. "Maybe I'm stereotyping."

"No, you're not stereotyping," I say, but I wonder what LaFaber's really worried about: Nick's work ethic or Nick's sexuality. "I'll keep an eye out. Maybe I'm, you know, missing something."

"Yes, keep him on task," LaFaber says, and I picture him standing at the window of his office, parting the blinds with two fingers, peering out, searching the snow-covered landscape for us, and I'm out of the office, but I'm still not too far away, am I? Indianapolis to Champaign-Urbana? Close enough to see, to hear, everything.

Minutes later, Nick comes back outside, tells me I should go inside, get some heat, set up the room. He'll wait out here in the cold.

Inside our reserved room in the Illini Memorial Union, a conference room colored in warm reds and built to hold more than 50 presentation attendees, I wire our National Fraternityowned LCD Projector and laptop with the equipment provided by the university, drape an NKE flag over a front table, arrange brochures at every audience chair, load the PowerPoint presentation on the laptop, and wait for Nick to return from the cold Quad outside, and for the room to fill with the men of the Illinois interest group. But the room remains empty and quiet for quite awhile. Fifteen minutes, maybe, after the scheduled start of the presentation. So long that I think that maybe Patrick Macintosh learned what I already know: that founding a new fraternity might sound like a great opportunity for a student leader, but—like me, descending in my packed Explorer—Nu Kappa Epsilon is an opportunity heavy with baggage. And if Patrick bails out and the interest group disbands, then our entire colonization fails and tens of thousands of dollars are wasted. This is it, and here—where I am responsible for everything—any failure will be viewed as *my* failure.

Here in the conference room, I sit and smooth my pants, but I imagine Nick standing outside, his attitude unaffected. And all day today, he was the same. After the power came on early this morning and the house began to heat, he clapped his hands and set about cleaning the foyer with a "Hi-Hooooo" Seven Dwarves enthusiasm. After a short cleaning stint, Nick suggested that we walk back to Legend's to reclaim his car (and, even though it is night now, and dark, it seemed much colder in the morning as we made the mile-long trek), and he pulled his Altima behind my Explorer at the road-side meters outside the house. Still pulsing with positive energy, he began unloading everything from his car and suggested that I do the same with my Explorer. I held my back, complained of soreness from last night's sleep, and shuffled in and out the front door of the fraternity house with loads of storage boxes from my Explorer, with suitcases, with duffle bags, with all of the clothes hanging from the backseat rod. Nick finished unloading his car much more quickly than I did, seemingly sprinting back and forth from car to foyer. And after we finished lugging the contents of our cars indoors, Nick and I both spent several minutes simply staring at the insides of our cars as though we'd never actually seen or known that there were floor mats and seats under all of that stuff we've been hauling around the country. Nick laughed as he looked inside his car, touched his back seat as though it had just appeared; I didn't smile, just leaned in the passenger-side doorway of my Explorer and stared at the driver's seat. Empty. And it didn't seem right.

My mood was—has been, all day—irrecoverably gloomy. The conversation with Nick last night, the email and photos today, the awful sleeping conditions. But the return of the house electricity, coupled with the sudden disappearance of the bum (despite a festering couch

remaining on the house porch), was enough for Nick to forget that our Illinois living situation had been worse yesterday. His body rebounded perfectly from a night's drinking and a poor night's sleep.

When I visited the University of Illinois in September, I saw nothing more than the basement and the main foyer, and even then, the house had been rearranged and redecorated for a party, so I've never seen what the house was supposed to look like. The second floor, I learned this morning, features a gigantic community bathroom and approximately twenty-five bedrooms (all of which are still freezing cold and are post-apocalyptic in their condition, papers strewn about and unwanted belongings discarded everywhere). The third floor is dedicated to a long "cold air dorm," with rows and rows of bunk beds (a quick count reveals that the room could hold eighty brothers). Presumably, this dormitory was intended for underclassmen, while the upperclassmen received the second-floor bedrooms.

In my only victory of the day, I convinced Nick that, because we have no practical use for the second or third floors of the house, it would make sense to simply clean and heat the main foyer and the basement.

"Let's hold off on upstairs," I said, fingers at my pounding temples, "until we absolutely need to go up there." Still, we spent much of the day sweeping, mopping, carrying torn posters and cracked particle board desks and shattered mirrors out of a single second-floor bedroom so we'd have a place to sleep tonight.

After an entire morning of cleaning, we spent several hours in the afternoon unpacking the many boxes of "Colonization Supplies" that Walter LaFaber gave us before we left Headquarters. Much of the supplies are to be used for next weekend's retreat, but several boxes are for immediate use. We've been given a stack of press releases, the headline of which reads,

"Illinois Students Found a New Fraternity Based on Ideals!" The body of the release is dedicated to a discussion of the National Fraternity mission, rather than any specific mention of Patrick Macintosh or his interest group. All of this was written, planned, weeks—*months*—ago. Other boxes are packed tight with marketing materials, with flyers and posters and brochures, all of them printed on bright fluorescent paper. The Briefing Packet tells us that, once the interest group has been initiated and is "on board as a permanent chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon," they are supposed to staple and tape these posters to bulletin boards in dorms, classroom buildings, local restaurants, bus stops, anywhere, everywhere. The men of the colony are supposed to recruit as many other students as possible to their new fraternity. "Found Your Own Fraternity," the flyers read, "...the *right* way." And then the same boilerplate type about leadership and social development. And then, of course, my name. Contact Charles Washington, it says. My name in the bottom right-hand corner. Lead Consultant. Hundreds of these flyers will circulate around campus. Hundreds.

In another box: NKE pens to give out.

In another: NKE buttons.

In another: rolls and rolls of NKE stickers.

In another: an NKE flag and a banner.

"This must have cost a fortune," Nick said.

"Not a word about Patrick Macintosh," I said. "It's all so generic."

"They probably didn't have time to personalize all of these materials."

"Are those business cards you're holding?"

"A whole box of them, yeah," Nick said. "Customized for the colonization."

Nick passed the box to me, and I lifted the lid, pulled out a small stack of new business cards. Every single one of them featured my name and my name only: Charles Washington, Illinois Colonization Lead Consultant, printed across the front. No mention of Nick Bennett, no mention of Patrick Macintosh. I flipped the card to the back, expecting the same blank white space to which I'd grown so accustomed with my old business cards; these new cards, though, are different. No blank space. Instead, the back of the business card looks cramped, the slogan "It is the mission of Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity to develop our members into the socially responsible leaders of the next generation" splashed across every available square centimeter of cardstock.

"I don't like this new design," I said. "Front and back. It's too busy."

"Give it a chance," Nick said. "It'll grow on you."

"I know, I know. It's just... I need space, you know?"

"Charles, don't take this the wrong way. But sometimes you worry too much."

And maybe I do, but here in the conference room of the Illini Memorial Union, I finally sport a smile, because a tall brownhaired guy—blue jeans and a bomber jacket—appears in the doorway, three or four friends behind him, and then Nick squeezes past them all and motions for them to come inside the room, actually leads them to seats, says, "And this is Charles Washington, the other consultant who will be working with you guys," and another couple guys stream in, and Patrick Macintosh, too, and they're moving inside with the sort of expressions that I remember from all the over-excited adults at opening night for the new *Star Wars* movie, 35 year-old men who had seen the original *Star Wars* in theaters and had waited 20 years for *Episode One*'s release. And Nick is so casual and he nods at me as he weaves his way through

the seats and joins me at the front of the room and it's impossible not to be excited, I suppose, for these young men who want to—as the flyers say—found a fraternity "the right way."

"Well, let's get started!" Nick says, and claps once.

Many of the front rows have filled with young men. Fifteen or twenty of them. Blue jeans and brown jackets. University of Illinois baseball caps. Some of the men are flipping through the brochures that I placed on the seats, reading the short message from Dr. Simpson. Patrick Macintosh stares straight ahead at the blank projection screen, brochure in his lap as though he's read the material a thousand times and couldn't possibly digest another byte of information from those printed words.

Nick flips the lights, and I hit the "enter" button on my laptop to start the PowerPoint presentation; I say, "Thank you, gentlemen, for taking a leap of faith and considering the idea to found your own fraternity."

In this suddenly dark room, the LCD projector flashes just three white letters against the screen—"NKE"—against a solid black background. A moment later, a date emerges from the darkness, appears below the letters: "1921." I again hit the laptop's "enter" button, and a new slide appears, white type on black background just like the others: "University of Illinois, TODAY."

Nick stands beside me and says to the gathered interest group, "Founding your own fraternity." His voice is heavier than I've ever heard it, stripped of playfulness. All of the young men in the room seem to lean forward in unison; the brochures they'd been flipping through just seconds ago now sit flat in their laps. Their conversation has ceased; their smiles have disappeared. "Very few students have the opportunity," Nick continues, "to found their own fraternity. To decide their own rules, to create their own traditions. To work together, as brothers,

and plot a mission that will strengthen not only their personal friendships, but also the community around them." He pauses, and when I look out into the crowd, all faces are transfixed by Nick's opening. Only Patrick, I note, is smiling (albeit subtly) as he looks around at his friends; his face displays the satisfied delight of a young athlete who has hit his first home run or scored his first touchdown. "When you found your own fraternity," Nick says, "you know you can come back for a Homecoming game twenty years from now, and you can visit the house with your kids, and you can point to the charter on the wall and say, *'I started this.*' You craft the organization into your own idea of what 'fraternity' should be. *You*. You defined your own fraternity experience."

"That's what college is all about," I say, according to our script, and I hit "enter" on the laptop so that a new slide projects onto the giant screen. It is a photo of four young men, all wearing NKE polo shirts, studying in the library of the Georgia Tech chapter house. This photo was taken at a shoot three years ago. "College is all about learning, growing, and changing," I say. "Becoming men. Preparing yourselves for the Real World. And by starting your own fraternity, you know that you're going to do it right."

The men, all twenty of them, sitting in these chairs in this rented room in the Illini Union, their faces have gone from youthful excitement to serious interest, as though they are now considering possibilities, imagining scenarios, envisioning futures.

The next slide shows a picture of an older gentleman, a forty-something family man, standing at a football game cook-out with his wife and his two kids (one boy, one girl), and the man is flipping burgers and wearing an NKE polo, and three other men stand nearby (two young, one old), laughing and conversing, and you get the impression from the photo that *this...is...fraternity*. A lifelong brotherhood, a lifelong community of companions and

connections. Just months ago, in fact, my own vision of my future was formed primarily from photos just like this one. NKE polo, right? Jenn at my side? Successful in my Real World job, back at the EU chapter house for the Homecoming game? A series of staged images coloring my future, a series of staged images that I thought *would be* my future. But now the photos have changed.

I exhale, look back down at my notes and try to continue without a shaky voice. Nick speaks from memory, but I need these notes, and now I've lost my place. "We're glad that you're all, you know, interested in starting a new chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity," I say. Searching for the right bullet-point on the page. "We talked with Patrick the other night, and...he's great, you know? We, like, get a sense that you're aligned with our national mission?" I search the notes. "To build our members into the socially responsible leaders of tomorrow?" I look back at the projected photo, can't look away.

Khaki shorts. Burgers. Chapter house in the background.

"This is *fraternity*," Nick says eventually. "If you decide to found a Nike chapter, this is your future."

I exhale, nod, trying to give the impression that this was all intentional.

And as Nick takes over, discussing the opportunities that await for all chapters of Nu Kappa Epsilon—the National Headquarters resources! the network of more than 200,000 alumni and 125 undergraduate chapters nationwide! a fraternity house on-campus here at the University of Illinois (in need of just minor renovations)! a national outreach partnership with the American Heart Association! the Brothers Assisting Brothers alumni program, scholarships! traveling Educational Consultants who visit your chapter every year to assist you in your growth as a fraternity!—as Nick scrolls through the PowerPoint slideshow, highlighting the values of the

National Fraternity and narrating recent chapter success stories, I want to believe all of it. I want to have the same optimism as Nick, to say these words and mean them and believe that they will come true for the men gathered in this room to believe that we're helping these students for *their* sake, not for LaFaber and not for the National Headquarters. All of it sounds so noble, and I want once again to be convinced—intoxicated—*driven*—by that mission, by the Code of Conduct I was given in the summer, by my goals...with that sort of structure and meaning, my life would be so much simpler. My future—a career in Student Personnel—would seem not only possible, but perfect.

After the presentation ends, we take a few minutes to speak one-on-one with some of the interest group members, most of whom claim to be "blown away" and "fired up," and we have each of them sign up for an interview during the coming week where we can get to know them a bit better, and where we can answer any individual questions they might have about the fraternity and about the process of colonization. After twenty minutes of this sort of scattered chatter, only Patrick remains in the room with Nick and me, and he tells us that he's even more excited to "get the ball rolling" now that he's seen the whole presentation.

"You remember those old Cub Scouts presentations, back in elementary school?" Patrick asks. "I don't know if they do these presentations everywhere, but at my school, they'd assemble all of the boys, and some scout leaders would come and talk about how much fun you'd have as a Cub Scout."

"I remember," I say. "And they'd have slide shows, right?"

"Right. Kids shooting bows and arrows. Camping. White water rafting. All that. Made Cub Scouts look like some kind of adventure club."

"I actually joined Cub Scouts because of those presentations," I say.

"Me too," Patrick says. "All my life, I don't think I've been as excited after any presentation as I have after that one. Until now, actually."

"We're great presenters, huh?" Nick asks. "Thanks for the ego boost."

"A couple weeks ago, this just was an idea," Patrick says. "But now? I feel so cheesy saying this...but it really feels like some kind of adventure."

"It'll be a hell of a time, no doubt about it," Nick says, looking over the list of names on the interview sign-up sheet. "But it's also going to be a challenge. That's the best part about founding a fraternity. Pushing yourself. Seeing what you're capable of." Nick closes his eyes, looks as though he's making a mental calculation, then opens his eyes and looks at Patrick. "Twenty guys signed up for interviews? That sound right?"

Patrick nods. "Twenty men in the group."

"Did you ever get to play with the crossbows?" I ask. "Or go rafting?"

"In Cub Scouts?" Patrick asks. "Oh, I don't think so, no. We just tied knots."

"Yeah, knots," I say. "Did you stick with Cub Scouts?"

"I don't think so. Until fifth grade, maybe. Why?"

"I quit, too," I say. "I always thought it was going to be an adventure club, but we only wound up doing arts and crafts."

"Speaking of adventure, actually, I've been meaning to ask," Patrick says. "How long are the two of you going to be in town?"

"Two weeks," I say. "Then we leave for Thanksgiving. Then one of us comes back to campus for the rest of Fall, and for the Spring semester."

"Well," Patrick says, and slides his arms into his jacket, zips the front, adjusts it over his torso, "I've got to make sure you both see the town, right?"

"See the town?" Nick asks.

"So far, all you've seen is Legend's," Patrick says. "How about I give you a call on Tuesday, after your interviews, and I'll take you on a tour of Cham-bana."

"Sounds good," I say, but Nick looks hesitant.

"Don't worry," Patrick says. "I won't get you into any trouble or anything. I'm over twenty-one."

The next morning, Monday, I wake early because our cleared-out bedroom on the second floor of the fraternity house is still cold (the thermostat shows 60 degrees and it appears to be climbing, which is better than yesterday, but it still chills my flesh as soon as I slide out of my sleeping bag). Because we sleep on the stiff floor, my arms and legs all feel as though they've been stretched in the wrong direction for far too long. I slip into my dress slacks; today, Nick and I are shirt-and-tie ambassadors, meeting with the Greek Advisor and with other university administrators to discuss Nu Kappa Epsilon's strategic plan for success on campus (I'm hoping Nick will do most of the talking). And, for some reason, I wander downstairs and open the front door to test the temperature outdoors. A blast of wind sweeps through the door, through the foyer, and I shut the door quickly.

But...from that split-second that I stared into the Illinois morning, an image is burned into my memory. Our cars sit at the curb of the fraternity house. Our cars. At *expired* parking meters! I open the door again, expecting tickets on our windshields, or grumbling tow trucks turning the corner of the next street, or (at the very least) meter maids inching ever-closer to these flashing beacons—"EXPIRED! EXPIRED!"—of ticket-worthy lawlessness. I close the front door, run upstairs.

"Get dressed," I say, and push Nick's sleeping bag until he groans. "Nick, get up, get dressed. We've got to go."

"Charles," he says. Finally, his head slides from the opening at the top of his sleeping bag. "Charles, what the fuck? What time is it?"

"6:45 A.M.," I say.

Nick groans again. "We don't have to leave here for another hour."

"The meters are expired," I say. "They start ticketing in fifteen minutes."

Nick doesn't say a word, doesn't even open his eyes. His half-conscious rationale seems to suggest that, if he continues sleeping, the problem will go away.

"Get dressed, Nick," I say. "We've got to move our cars."

And for the first time since we arrived, Nick glowers, looks as shaken as I usually do. Face white and besieged with worry lines, hair messed and unhappy. We both use the slimy bathrooms of the fraternity house, prepare ourselves as best we can (as quickly as we can) for our day, and rush outside to our cars. Nick drives his Altima to the UIUC parking garage, for which we have a single hangtag parking pass, and I follow him in my Explorer; I pick him up after he's parked, and then we scour the campus and the town for a free spot to park my car. Somewhere, anywhere. Daily parking lots cost ten dollars, a cost I can't afford (especially not everyday for two full weeks). We finally find a public park about a mile from the fraternity house, and even farther from the university.

"I don't want to park here," I say. "This isn't safe."

"It'll be fine," Nick says. "We'll switch up next week. I get the garage this week, you get it next week." "There's a baseball field right there. What if some kid smashes a ball through my windshield?"

"It'll be fine," Nick repeats.

"This is my car. This is my life, Nick. It's all I have. This is my car."

"I know, Charles."

"I don't like this...leaving it here. I don't like it."

"We'll check on the car, Charles. Every night. We don't have any other choice."

"We can find somewhere else. Let's keep driving."

"It's either here, or those ten-dollar daily lots. You got the money for that?"

And as we walk out of this public park, this brown field of dead grass and wind-shaken swing-sets, I stare at my Explorer, the lone vehicle in a gray and empty parking lot. I again have a sinking feeling, but now I'm imagining something new, different. Something that I never expected. Constantly, with each new mile-market and pothole I pass toward disaster, I've been picturing myself pulling into my father's driveway as a complete failure. But now, I picture myself in the passenger seat of Nick's Altima, pulling into this parking lot a week from now...and finding only icy-black pavement where my Explorer once sat. And then I picture myself waiting at the curb of the Fort Meyers airport, waiting for my father to pick me up and take me back to his house.

The clouds have broken apart and the day has warmed slightly by the time I walk past the Altgeld Hall bell-tower (which catches me off-guard when it clangs to signal the change of hour and the change of classes, and I actually *jump*, startled, because so few campuses have actual bells) and make my way to Turner Hall. The day is warmer, sure, but only when I stand directly

in the sun's path. When I walk through a stretch of shadow, the temperature seems to plummet once again to freezing. Though Nick and I spent most of our morning together, walking over a mile and a half from the public park to the coffee shop inside the Illini Union—where we both held the hot paper cups in our hands and breathed in the steam and hoped our runny noses would go away before our meetings started—we've now separated. Nick's off at the weekly meeting of the IFC (the student members of the Interfraternity Council) and I'm on my way to a meeting with Dr. Jacobs, the Greek Advisor at the University of Illinois. LaFaber hasn't given us any indication of Dr. Jacobs' opinion of the colonization, if she approves, or if she disapproves, if she will take every measure possible to ensure our failure. All I know is that Dr. Jacobs, despite her awkward social skills and frightening grin that I remember from September, is an important woman in the world of Greek Affairs nationally. Just like Dr. Vernon at Bowling Green. And I do *not* want to piss her off.

"Oh my God!" a woman says in a shrill voice, the second I walk into the third-floor lobby of Turner Hall. "Charles Washington!"

"Who—?" I say, genuinely confused...what girls know me here?

"How's your semester been?" she asks, and I realize that the source of the voice is ten feet in front of me, rising from her chair and her desk, a girl in a bright brown turtleneck sweater and tight khaki pants. The graduate student! The Greek Life assistant! The one who told me, months ago, that I looked tired! What was her name? Sally? Samantha? Sandra? "Sandra," the nameplate at her desk confirms. *Sandra*!

"Good to see you, Sandra," I say.

"Tell me about your semester, Charles," she says. "We have to catch up."

"We do?" I ask. I don't remember that we ever became friends, that I made any sort of impact on this girl at all...she just talked and talked and talked, that's all I remember..."It's been more than I ever could have imagined, I guess."

"How exciting!" she says. "Have a seat, have a seat."

"Oh, I've got a really busy schedule, Sandra," I say.

"Ha! Don't we all!"

"Right. But I need to see Dr. Jacobs. Can we talk afterwards, maybe?"

"Oh," she says, still smiling. "Oh, sure. Sure. You're in *that* phase of consulting. Well. She's ready for you."

"Um, right," I say again, and seconds later, I'm back in the cramped office of Dr. Jacobs, where (just the same as in September) even though her bookshelf is impressive and her awards are displayed prominently on the walls, boxes are stacked high throughout the room, as though Dr. Jacobs still thinks that—maybe, just maybe—she will get a promotion or another job, and she won't really ever have to unpack all of her things. Better days, better university jobs ahead. Even though she's held this post for four years.

School to school, Illinois to New Mexico State to Texas Tech to Fresno State, and the Greek Advisors have blurred together, to where I remember a balding grad student as a Greek Advisor out west, but I'm not sure if he belonged to Highland or Long Beach. Greek Advisors are so temporary, so eager to leave the position, and I've encountered only two exceptions to this rule: Dr. Vernon, at Bowling Green, the Godfather of Greek Advisors...and Dr. Jacobs, here at Illinois, the woman who has reportedly been moved around the university, from position to position, because, although she is unbearable, it has been too hard to find a reason to fire her. Only in the position of Greek Advisor, Lafaber told me, has she grown comfortable (possibly

because she holds such disciplinary clout). Seated here before me, she displays an impatience with her job and (already) with my presence. She seems older than I remember, black hair in need of a cut, jewelry hanging off her wrist and clacking as it sways and hits the bone in her wrist.

"Hello, Mr. Washington," she says through a curled upper lip and gritted teeth, and this is it: this is the horrible, haunting smile. She extends her hand, shows more of her teeth: "So good to finally meet you."

"We met in the Fall," I say.

"Oh, did we?" she asks, finger tapping her chin. "My apologies. Yes, I remember, yes. Have a seat, have a seat. I suppose we must talk."

"You do remember what fraternity I'm with, right?"

"Of course, of course. The Nu Kapps, of course. Sit."

Hesitantly, I sit, try to make myself comfortable, but the smell in this office—a cross between cardboard and my grandmother's over-ripe perfume—makes comfort impossible. And the leather chair into which I've attempted to settle...it makes deep, violent noises each time I move, and I'm not sure if it is simply the slickness of the leather against my slacks, or if I am actually hurting the material, ripping it because it is so taut and inflexible. "How have things been?" I ask, mustering all of my charm. "The last time we talked, you know, we were about to close our chapter on campus, so it wasn't...the best of circumstances."

"Yes, well," she says, "we've had to close two more chapters this very semester." "Really? What for?" "Financial reasons," she says. Upper lip curled, teeth gritted. "Yours was the only fraternity closed for a blatant rules violations. These other fraternities, their membership numbers were so low that the alumni were losing money on their houses for years."

"That's too bad."

"Closures sometimes work as a benefit for our office," she says. "They make this gigantic Greek Community more manageable."

"I guess that's a nice way to look at it," I say, and when a lengthy silence falls upon the room, neither of us speaking because it is obvious that she has better things to do than speak to me, and it is obvious that I am merely fulfilling a formality, I move in the leather seat, and a tremendous noise—like a car getting crushed—tears through the room, so I stay still. This is the office of an administrator who works with spreadsheets and writes journal articles, not an advisor who works with students. I remember a similar feeling in September, listening to this woman recycle her higher-ed theories, the articles she would write, the books she would pen, but never with any feeling of humanity. Almost as though she preferred the predictability of text to the surprise of conversation, the way in which letters formed words, words formed sentences, word processors allowed edits, and full-text documents explained theories that could be either proved or disproved with evidence and case studies. Human interaction, sometimes nervous and sometimes volatile, never predictable, seemed not to come naturally for her. Strangely, it is at this moment that I notice, on her desk, a book titled *The Millennial Enters College*, by Dr. Harold Vernon. A thin volume, its dust jacket a bright blue.

"Do you know Dr. Vernon?" I ask, pointing at the book.

"I certainly do," she says. "An amazing mind."

"I met him earlier this month. I read one of his articles, but never his book."

"This is his third," she says and slides it from the far edge of her desk to the center, so that I can more easily read the note on the dedication page when she flips the cover open. It is, of course, dedicated to Dr. Vernon's "esteemed colleagues," one of whom is none other than Dr. Jacobs. "He's brilliant, really," she says. "The work he's done at Bowling Green is astounding. The *order* he's kept. I only wish we had a smaller number of fraternities and sororities, and then we could attempt these same ideas."

"The Millennial Enters College," I say. *"He talked a lot about Millennials. Servicing today's students. Actually, he suggested that I pursue a career in CSP."*

"Well," she says, letting the word linger as though it is a word of irrefutable disagreement, and I see that a vein has popped out on her forehead...at first, I didn't realize it, thought it was just another flap of wrinkled flesh, but now it twitches every couple seconds, throbs. "Studying under Dr. Vernon must certainly *sound* like an attractive idea," she says. "Bowling Green has very competitive admission standards, however. You must have stellar references from your travels?"

"If I can do a good job here at Illinois," I say and force a tired laugh.

"You could do no better than to study under Dr. Vernon, but you must understand that he veers into extreme idealism. He believes, for instance," she says, eyes rolling back into her head and eyelashes fluttering, "that the young generation—these Millennials, as Howe and Strauss have termed them—are a generation groomed for heroism and good deeds. He believes that we, in higher education, must work perpetually to provide them with programming, with resources at their every disposal. To quote, 'arm them with weapons for their future battles.' This is all from the book, here on my desk."

"I guess you don't agree?"

"Oh, I believe that Millennials are sheltered, over-protected by their parents," she says. "I agree that they have all the potential in the world. But I do *not* agree that they are going to be a Hero Generation. I believe they will exhibit more wasted potential than any other generation in our nation's history."

"Is that a bit harsh?"

"No, it is not," she says. "I agree with Dr. Vernon that this generation must be kept in constant programs. But you've been to campuses nationwide, haven't you? Yes. We *need* programs and restraints to keep these young men and women busy, to keep them from self-destructing and taking all of us with them."

My cell phone vibrates in my pocket, and I slip it out, hit "silence." Sam Anderson, my caller ID says. *Fuck*. I slip the phone back into my pocket, give a good-nature shrug, but Dr. Jacobs just shows me her jagged teeth.

"Well," she says. "This day already feels as though it is dragging. Please. We have a meeting, yes? You have questions to ask me? Some, I hope, that regard matters other than your profession of interest?"

"Oh, right," I say. "Sorry. I guess...the reason I need to meet with you, well, I guess, is that..." And that phone call, and my hand is shaking again, and I forgot what questions I was supposed to ask, and I should have read through the damn Briefing Packet but we were in such a hurry to leave the house this morning and move our cars, and I feel just as lost as I did at the presentation and now this woman across the desk from me—this vacuum of compassion—she knows Dr. Vernon, knows anyone of any merit in the world of student personnel, probably thinks I'm some stuttering idiot. "I mean," I say, "Nu Kappa Epsilon is starting a new chapter? And the

first thing—before we get this thing going—is, like...we want to know what was the reaction on campus to our fraternity getting, you know, kicked off a couple months ago?"

"I don't know," she says. "I don't talk to these students. Not if I can help it, at least. That's not my role, as I see it."

"Do you have any ideas, then?" Smooth my pants.

"I suppose there was anger, in terms of the IFC meetings I had to attend, perhaps even a sense of fright among these young men, as though they could be evicted at any moment. It harkens back to my theory of House-Centrism."

"House-Centrism," I say. "I think you told me about this during my last visit." Oh, please. Please, no. Smooth my pants.

"It's recently been published," she says. "Reading up on this theory could probably explain much of what you're looking for, from a student perspective."

"I guess I'll have to read up on that," I say. Hands shaking in my lap.

Dr. Jacobs pushes her hands together, brittle skin touching (and I feel sorry for both hands as they touch one another), jewelry jangling, and she grits her teeth again. "The reaction on this campus is unknown to me," she says. "On a national level, a purely national level, I *do* know that you have stepped on many toes."

"Us? Oh, no, no," I say. "This is an interest group. It formed without any of our direct participation."

"You asked your question, and now is my turn to speak," Dr. Jacobs says. "We have several national fraternities waiting in line to colonize new chapters on this campus. Like I said, we just closed two chapters this semester alone. And generally, the waiting period for recolonization is at least five years, sometimes longer. For our students' sake, so that these national

fraternities aren't constantly hounding them about founding a fraternity, we allow only one colonization per academic year. Your group closed just two months ago, but suddenly you're trying to skip a five-year waiting list."

"We're just responding to the interest group, though. The students."

"Yes, yes," she says. "The exception to the waiting list is if an interest group forms and petitions a national fraternity. When this happens—and it is rare—the desires of the students are taken into account first. The waiting list is disregarded. And as a result, many national fraternities lose a great deal of money."

"I'm not following. Why does it matter?"

"Date-specific posters and flyers and banners were already pre-printed for the next fraternity colonization this Spring," she says. "Entire colonization budgets have been wasted. However much money your Headquarters has invested here—thousands upon thousands of dollars—another fraternity has spent the same money for Spring. They followed all procedure, filed all paperwork with the university, dropped tens of thousands of dollars into housing renovations. Re-wiring the house. Hiring a new kitchen staff. With the confidence that they would begin to see a return on investment this Spring. And now we will ask them to wait until *next* Spring, to continue to pay the mortgage on their empty house, to buy all-new materials a year from January." She taps her finger together, grits her teeth harder. "All of that money wasted because of your little interest group."

"But this is the students' choice, you said that yourself," I say. "The interest group asked us to come."

"Did they?" she says. "Your Headquarters had no role in putting it all together?" "No," I say, but I know we did. "I mean, I don't think so." "I know more than you think, Mr. Washington. You skip the waiting list, you doom another national fraternity." She taps her fingers again, then scratches her dry, taut neck; I shiver at the sound of fingernail against flesh. "Many national fraternities see what is happening here," she says, "and they are not pleased."

"We didn't make these students do anything."

"You are isolated in that single fraternity of yours," she says. "No sense of the big picture, of the order you—you—are defying."

"Come on," I say, hands on my knees, gripping my pants. "That's not fair."

"We've achieved a balance on this campus, and throughout the nation. How many millions of dollars are donated each year to fraternities and sororities? Not nearly enough, you might counter, because *you* have seen some dilapidated houses, am I correct? But this campus alone sees at least one fraternity each year embark upon a multi-million dollar housing renovation. So much competition among these groups for the students who scamper across this campus. For bodies, for dollars. And we have achieved a balance, here, despite a tension that threatens constantly to knock all groups off the balance beam. We all walk carefully, choose our words carefully, never deliberately bumping into any others, stepping on any others' toes. And now, so many houses sitting empty for an extra year because of your fraternity, so much money running dry...tell me that *this* is fair. When I am deep in emails and phone calls with irate alumni and offended faculty members and distraught deans, tell me that you 'didn't do anything.'"

"I don't want to cause a problem," I say. Fingers digging into my dress pants. Stay calm, tap the brake pedal. Calm, calm. "We just want to do what's right."

"There is plenty of time for that, still," she says. "Discourage these men. Shut down this interest group. Show that you care about the welfare of this Greek Community here, show that you care"—and she points her long finger in my direction, shakes her finger—"that you *care* about the students on this campus. Then, and only then, when you understand the way that things work, will you have a successful career in this world."

"I just want to do what's right," I repeat. "That's it. Really."

"I trust you," she says. "Yes, I trust you, Charles Washington."

I can't smile, can barely manage a cordial handshake. *Close* the interest group? But she is right, of course. All of this has been planned...the Chapter Status Sheet from last Spring that showed Illinois as scheduled for elimination, the alumni meeting with Patrick Macintosh during the summer, the chapter closure in the early Fall, the emergence of an interest group in the late Fall, and now...a full-scale colonization. LaFaber has simply been moving us around, sending me here, sending me there, positioning students and alumni to make this an efficient closure and rebirth. "You define your own fraternity experience," we told the interest group, but they have nothing to do with this colonization. This is a business decision that has been planned for over a year, and they're just bodies to be moved.

As I wait for Nick outside the Illini Union, standing just past the gigantic shadow that it casts across the sidewalks and positioning myself directly in the sunshine, I receive a phone call from Sam Anderson at New Mexico State University. The second call in less than an hour. All of these phone calls lately—Donnie Ackman, Jenn, Maria, LaFaber, Sam—each one delivers a greater jolt than the last, and I feel powerless each time I talk, each time I hold that cold plastic to my ear and try to picture whoever is on the other end, and attempt to duck the avalanche that I started. I expect Sam to be angry at me, that I could not keep his secrets from LaFaber, but he is only frantic, asking for advice about what to say in a student judicial hearing. "The Greek

Advisor's breathing down our necks, bro," Sam says. "The fucking police came to our house the other day. The school keeps talking about expulsions. All because of blindfolds!"

Calm down, I say. We'll get this sorted out. The National Fraternity has lawyers, and we'll make sure your rights aren't violated, and we'll make sure that you don't lose your house; we have your *back*, I say. But that's not true. Not at all.

"It's not just the campus that's after us," Sam says. "Some guy named LaFaber called me. Told me that there was a pending investigation, that we could be shut down."

I try to speak, but a sudden resurgence of Midwestern winds causes me to stutter, and Sam starts to say something else, but I interrupt him: "That's just procedural," I lie, speaking through teeth on the verge of a violent chatter. "We've got to, you know, investigate matters. But the last thing we want to do is just take away your charter and kick you out of your house. That's not good for anyone."

"You were there for the Etiquette Dinner," Sam says, and the hair on my arms stands up because I think he finally realizes the *power* that he holds over me, the power to have me fired. But he says, "You were there. You know that we're not crazy or violent or whatever this investigation is making us out to be, man. You gotta say something."

"I'll do everything I can," I say. "Don't worry, Sam."

Minutes later, I watch Nick trudge toward me along the slushy sidewalk from Lincoln Hall, where his IFC meeting was held. When he first steps out of the building, a hundred yards down the Quad from the Union, his walk is tall and his steps are long; by the time he reaches me, however, he has hunched over, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and his steps are quick shuffles. "It got cold again," Nick says. "Shit, I thought it was warming up." The clouds—which before had streaked the sky in thin white lines—have thickened and clumped together now, blocking the sun. I can still see the sun shining behind all of that icy gray in the sky, a white-hot dime so distant that it's more white than hot; but the clouds have conspired to deprive this Illinois morning of any warmth.

"It was nice while it lasted, right?" I ask.

"I could never live up here," Nick says. "Never."

"Except for the wind, I'm starting to get used to it."

"You're a tougher man than I am."

"Maybe I'm a masochist," I say. "Maybe I actually enjoy sabotaging myself. And the cold makes it that much easier."

Nick laughs, but it's an unexpected and high-pitched gurgling noise that I'm sure he didn't mean to make, and because the early-morning foot traffic outside the Union has slowed between classes, the shrill laughter echoes from the hollows of the granite and limestone buildings surrounding the Quad, echoes from the doorways, and his smile disappears. If he could take back his laugh, I think he would; judging from his eyes, from the way they've glossed over and sunk back into his skull, there is nothing funny in Nick's world, right now. He tries to straighten up, but he falls back into a slouch.

"How did your meeting go?" I ask.

"Super," Nick says and tries a smile, then gives up. "Awful."

"What happened?"

"I don't know if it's important," Nick says. "In fact, it's just petty jealousy, you know? It's just 19 and 20 year-old kids who don't see the big picture. Selfishness. That's all it is." And he again tries a smile, holds it, as though by appearing happy he's settled the matter and his IFC meeting—which he told me just seconds ago was "awful"—is no longer relevant. But all he needs is a bit of encouragement to tell the story, and so I ask three or four quick questions ("Was it that bad?" "Were they assholes, or did they just not understand what we're doing?"), and Nick spills the story of his entire morning.

The Interfraternity Council (IFC) meets once every two weeks on campus, and comprises a single representative from each fraternity (usually, it's the chapter president) and a board of elected IFC officers. The purpose and the power of the IFC varies from school to school, but generally the council simply exists to decide the rules of the fraternity community, from social events to Rush regulations, and to provide all fraternities with a friendly forum for voicing opinions. Because the University of Illinois has such an enormous Greek Community-more than 50 fraternities, and more than 5,000 Greek students-the IFC meeting that Nick attended was held in a crowded auditorium-style classroom in Lincoln Hall, where more than 75 representatives and interested visitors and IFC officers and committee chairmen shuffled out of winter coats and wedged themselves through packed rows to find seats. Though the world outside had been windy and cold, this room, with so many bodies and so many sweaters and jackets and scarves, had been hot and stuffy. The IFC President, Nick tells me, was a spikyhaired Sigma Chi who spoke in an almost-caricatured Chicago accent ("I expected him to start talking about Da Bears and Da Bulls and Mike Ditka," Nick says), and he led the assembled council through opening remarks and officer reports and a half-hour of Old and New Business. Finally, at the end of the meeting, the IFC President called out for any guest speakers in the room. Nick, always excited, shot up from his seat and made his way to the front of the room. Standing before 75 fraternity guys in hoodies and baseball caps, Nick introduced himself with this hyper, I-just-drank-a-Red-Bull-and-I'm-glad-to-be-here delivery that he's adopted lately, and the response from the crowd, he says now, might as well have been cricket chirps.

"T'm happy that you've given me the opportunity to speak today," he said, undaunted. "Along with another Educational Consultant from our Headquarters, I'm going to be on campus for the next couple weeks, laying the groundwork and recruiting the men to colonize a new chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon." He listed the key bullet points of our organization's mission, a timeline for our colonization, and thanked everyone several times before "opening it up" for questions. "I did everything I could," Nick says now. "I made our fraternity sound like the greatest thing ever."

Despite Nick's impassioned presentation, though, the Interfraternity Council was not impressed. Without raising his hand or even looking at Nick, one attendee in a black White Sox hat shouted out, "So, hold on, Nike's coming *back* to campus? Yo, that's not fucking right. They just got kicked off."

Nick says that he almost laughed, the comment sounded so comical. But the rest of the audience appeared just as surprised by the idea that Nu Kappa Epsilon was returning to campus less than two months after the chapter was shut down. Even the IFC officers, ten men seated at a long table at the front of the room, nudged one another and mouthed "I don't know" to the gathered delegation. Nick stared at the officers, then at the 75 men seated throughout the auditorium in rows that rose into darkness, and he expected someone—there had to be *someone*—to stand up and come to his defense.

"We're bringing another fraternity on campus?" someone else yelled. "We never voted on this. Don't we have to vote?"

"Isn't there some rule?" someone asked. To Nick, staring out into the black far reaches of the auditorium, staring into a spotlight that seemed focused upon him, all of these voices seemed

to come from a massive clump of darkness. "Don't you have to wait five years to come back on campus if you get kicked off?"

"I know some Nikes that got kicked out of the house," someone else said from the darkness. "This is messed up. That Nationals can just close your shit down and evict you and then come in and start over? It's, like, not ethical."

Nick finally interrupted the melee: "I hope we have something new and unique to offer this campus"—groans from around the room—"and that we won't take anything away from you all"—more groans—"and that a new group will strengthen"—groan groan groan—"the Greek Community, and we want to thank you for allowing us to come back into your community." But it was over by that point. Representatives were already calling for motions that would prevent Nu Kappa Epsilon from returning to campus ("Our house is half empty!" someone shrieked—I ask Nick if he really *shrieked*, and Nick says it again, *shrieked*—and then said, "These fuckers are going to come on campus and steal all of our Rushees! We can't let that happen!"), and even though the IFC President assured everyone that it was illegal for a university to block a new student organization from forming ("Freedom of assembly," he said, "it fucking blows"), the motion was seconded, and Nick excused himself from the room amid a crashing swell of jeers and "points of order" and "motions to vote" and "pro con" and he tries again to smile as he tells me this, and I know I shouldn't be happy right now…but I think I'm glad, at least a little, that Nick knows what it feels like to be crushed.

Chapter Fifteen: The Colonization

| Illinois Colonization - Schedule | |
|--|---|
| Week One: | |
| Saturday: Sunday: Monday: Tuesday: Wednesday: Thursday: Friday: | Arrive, Meeting w/ Patrick Presentation Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews |
| Week Two: | |
| Monday: Tuesday: Wednesday: Thursday: Friday: | Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Final Prep Final Prep Leadership Retreat & Initiation Ceremony |

Monday passes in a haze of campus meetings with administrators who all seem to wear the same dress shirt, tie, and blazer, who all seem to speak the same and hold the same opinions about everything. Student personnel, I'm thinking. My career. This—these systems, this monotony—this is what I've come to *hate*. But this is it. This is life. I don't have a degree in Engineering or Computer Science or Athletic Training; I've plugged myself into this system, this profession, and I'm resigned to this life. But when Monday has passed and Tuesday arrives, my days hold a greater promise of excitement. All day Tuesday (and Wednesday, and Thursday, and Friday), we hold interviews with each member of the interest group. We talk with actual *students*!

The Briefing Packet suggests that we hold each interview at the fraternity house, which is a fine setting in theory. Surrounding a young man with the decadence of fraternity life, the woodpaneled walls and the portraits and the bookshelves and the trophies. Giving him a taste of the world he could enter. Intimidating him *just enough* so he knows that, in this house, there is power and purpose. But the fraternity house, despite all of the clean-up that Nick and I conducted, is still in no condition for visitors; hell, the bum is probably back on his couch on the porch. So we've rented out a boardroom for the entire week—using a substantial portion of our budget—in the Illini Union. Like the boardroom at NKE's Headquarters, this room bursts with donor recognition, with framed portraits on the walls (old white men, every one of them, bald and dissatisfied-looking), with plush leather chairs, with end tables topped with "Memorial Bouquets" of pink and white and yellow carnations.

"A list of sample questions for the interviews," Nick says, thumbing through the Briefing Packet as we sit in the boardroom and wait for our first interview. "Listen to these. 'What was your perception of Greek Life here at the University of Illinois, prior to hearing of Nu Kappa Epsilon?' 'Do you have any family members in fraternities or sororities?' 'What are your strengths and weaknesses?' 'Define Leadership.'"

"Define Leadership?" I ask. "Sounds like an essay exam."

"Pretty intense," Nick says. "Oh, here's a good one. 'What is your mantra?""

"I don't know if I've ever used that word, mantra," I say. "I don't know if I can ask that question with a straight face."

"You've got to," Nick says, and his tone is suddenly serious. One hand holding his place in the Briefing Packet, the other pressed against his forehead—fingers splayed—as though he is concentrating...stifling emotions, feelings. Gone is the cheerful optimism that colored his attitude from our first day or two at Illinois, the attitude that allowed him to smile despite power outages. Now, Nick is gripping the last tattered remnants of any optimism, cheerful or otherwise.

Gripping hard, certainly, but hopefully, it's not very long until he slips and slides toward the same dark pit as me. "We've got to stay positive, Charles," he tells me, but he sounds like he's trying to convince himself.

Just minutes later, the first interviewee arrives and stands at the door in regular blue jeans (no holes, no rips, no rock star shreds or "pre-worn" lines or sandblast detail or paint splotches), a brown Old Navy jacket, and a Jansport backpack with a strap running across his chest. The epitome of "student." Middle-class suburban student. Marty McFly, from *Back to the Future*. The kind of guy who clashes with the Ultra-Abercrombie guys and the Designer-Purse girls who imitate Ashton Kutcher and Paris Hilton and struggle—despite their personal income level—to look upper-class.

"How's it going?" he asks. "Kevin Daniels." And he speaks in a soft family voice, waits to be invited into the boardroom. "So nice to actually meet you guys."

Nick motions for him to come inside, and they shake hands. A week ago, Nick seemed laid-back, casual, his handshake firm but never aggressive; now, his smile is so determined that it looks as if it is hurting his face, and I wonder if he is gripping Kevin's hand too hard. Nick looks like a man who has been drinking gallons of coffee to maintain his tenuous sanity. It's great to watch.

"Have a seat, Kevin," I say. "We'll keep the interview as painless as possible."

Kevin smiles and Nick laughs hard and humorlessly. He still hasn't released Kevin's hand.

The process for the interviews works like this: Each PNM ("potential new member") on Sunday night signed up for a time to meet with Nick and me, and while it is a time for these young men to ask questions and have concerns addressed, the interview is mostly our screening

process to assess the PNM and ensure that he is fit for the fraternity. Not a carbon copy of the men we just evicted in September. Today, we interview eight PNMs, one right after the next, here in the boardroom, and another twelve on Wednesday and Thursday; Nick and I afterward discuss each PNM, compare notes, and, LaFaber told us, that barring any unforeseen troublemakers among the interest group, we will then present each man with a Bid Card (an invitation to become a founder of the new chapter). "What do we do," I asked LaFaber, "if we find anyone who isn't…how do I put this?...a suitable choice for the new fraternity?"

"Simple," LaFaber says. "You tell him that he's not *what we're looking for*, and maybe he should check out some other fraternities on campus. But I don't expect that to be an issue, if what you've told me about Patrick Macintosh is true. Why would he associate himself with anything but other quality men?"

And so I sit at the head seat of the long wooden boardroom table, now, leaning back, rocking in the leather reclining chair as Nick exchanges formalities with Kevin, our first PNM. I look over the sample interview questions again. "What is your mantra?" "What career goals do you have?" "Define leadership." And it sounds so much like a job interview that I can't help but strike out a prompt, Define Leadership, and write in, "What do you like to do for fun?" and "Which sports teams do you root for?"

"What'd you think of the presentation on Sunday, Kevin?" Nick asks, a smile so wide that it doesn't look natural, that it twitches under stress.

"Exciting," Kevin says, and he slides off his bag and takes a seat in one of the leather chairs opposite me, his movements smooth and unhurried. Nick moves stiffly to his seat, accidentally knocking his portfolio notebook to the floor as he does so. "The presentation really opened my eyes to what fraternities could be," he says. "Tell us more," Nick says.

"Well, I'm a sophomore and I never joined before," Kevin says. "All I ever saw was this, like, binge drink bonanza. You know what I mean? They invite you to parties and try to get you drunk enough to join. I'm, you know, not like that."

"This could be your opportunity to create something different, then," Nick says, "something better."

"Define your own fraternity experience," I add because I've said so little

"Right," Kevin says. "All these other fraternities, they don't really care about bettering anyone's life. But that presentation last night...the focus on leadership, on community service. I mean, that's what I'm into. That's what a fraternity should be."

And I can already see Kevin's face—that shaggy brown hair that falls over his forehead, neither combed nor *needing* a combing, those clean-shaven cheeks and neck, the brown eyes that speak of family and community—on an NKE brochure. Right beside Patrick's photo. They could be standing together, a team of do-gooders too good to be true. Kevin tells us that he's studying Criminal Justice, that his father's a cop and his uncle's in the FBI, that too many kids are going to college and majoring in General Business, thinking they're going to make six figures after graduation. "These kids think that the business world is *Boiler Room*," he says, "fast-paced, high stakes, quick millions, but they're all going to wind up in cubicles. I wanted to do something that matters."

So familiar, so naïve, and it feels too easy convincing him that Nu Kappa Epsilon is everything he wants it to be. I feel dirty, in fact, like I've already grabbed Nick and have dragged him into my Explorer to descend with me, and now I'm grabbing Patrick and Kevin and all of these young men. Pack as many of us inside as possible. "I just think that this is the opportunity of a lifetime," Kevin says. "To do something good like this. To leave a legacy."

"It is," I say. "It is the opportunity of a lifetime."

Because morals don't matter, values are irrelevant. I need this job, now more than ever. I need my paychecks. I need the letters of reference to start a career.

Several more interviews pass, boom boom boom, and each is as mind-bogglingly uplifting as Kevin's. "This is going to work," Nick says before we leave the boardroom on Tuesday evening. "I feel good about this. I feel good. These kids…it's a dream, that's what it is. This is the *ideal*, these kids. This is going to work, I can feel it."

At the end of Tuesday evening, with all of the interviews finished, we walk out the back of the Illini Union and into the empty Quad; the sun has set and the November sky is dark, just as it was when we waited for the interest group to arrive for our presentation several nights ago. The wind seems to have died, too, and the world is quiet. In the distance, occasional car horns or tire screeches ring out. Laughter. Bass, blaring from the open windows of apartments and dorms. "Toxic," I think I hear. Britney Spears again. "Don't you know that you're toxic?" Nick has studied the maps of the university and the town, and has discovered a new route from our current spot at the Quad, through a series of one-way streets, twisting around a shopping center, that will bring us back to the fraternity house quicker than the path we've been walking. Nick's car remains in the parking garage, halfway between the Union and the NKE chapter house, and my car remains miles away in a public park, and so neither has really been useful since we've arrived in Champaign-Urbana. Walking has been our only option, and so, on Tuesday evening after our interviews, we walk back toward the house. "Nike Nationals," someone shouts from somewhere, just moments after we pass a couple restaurants, Panera Bread and Starbucks and Quizno's, and my ears are so cold, the hollow words seem to come from the crevices of every building around us, from the fraternity houses across the street, from the restaurants, from the towering and barren trees all around us that make the dark night even darker.

Nick punches me in the arm, motions for me to look to my left. "Fuck," he whispers. "I knew this would happen."

Three hooded guys (sweatshirts bearing the "NKE" letters) are approaching. They've just stormed out of Panera Bread after watching us pass by the window; they walk with the invincible swagger one might expect of a Division I-A college football powerhouse about to take the field against a puny Division III squad; they look thick, hulking, but I'm hoping it's just the clothes. Perhaps I look the same under my own jacket. Perhaps. But if these guys know who we are, who *I* am, they know I'm not thick.

"You guys having fun so far?" one of them asks.

"Let's go," Nick whispers.

"How do you know who we are?" I ask.

"Charles," Nick says. "Let's keep walking."

"We're having a great time," I project to the three. "Have we met?"

"We have," one of them says—the one in the center, wearing a navy scullie and shuffling his hands in the front pouch of his hoodie. He removes his hands, rips the scullie from the top of his head, and even though it's dark and the tree branches overhead leave jagged shadows across his face, I recognize him immediately. The sharp, spiky black hair, the rock-hard cheeks, the expression of absolute calm. Adam Duke, the president of the former Nu Kappa Epsilon chapter on campus. "Last time I saw you, though," Adam says, "you were practically crying, begging me to stop our party."

"Fucking pussy," one of the others says.

"You had us evicted," Adam says. "Really fucking bold, coming back here."

"I didn't do anything," I say. "I tried everything I could."

"Phhh," Adam says, elbows the guy to his left. "Tried really hard, huh?"

"We've got to go," Nick says, turning to walk.

"The least you could have told us," Adam says, "is that we were going to be thrown out of our house. That's the least you could have done. Things would have been different, then."

I don't turn and follow Nick, just hold up my arms in a "do something" motion. This feels ridiculous, juvenile, like a fifth grade playground fight, but here in the cold, here where every breath hurts and every surface is hard and scraping, here where I sleep amid garbage...here, now, I can't, won't back down and admit responsibility for Adam Duke's eviction. I know what I've done. I know the mistakes I've made. And I had nothing to do with this. When I stood in the backyard with Adam, pleading with him to stop the party even as he drank his Anchor Steam, I was trying to do something positive. Maybe that was the last time in the past two months that I cared or wanted to matter, but that night I *did* try. And he won't take that away from me.

"Starting a new chapter?" Adam asks, and walks casually forward. The other two trail behind him; one takes a look through the Panera windows, as though he still has a half-eaten sandwich waiting for him back at their table. "That's why you're here on campus, huh? Looking for some douche-bags to fill the house you kicked us out of?"

"We've got an interest group for a new chapter," I say.

"Did you like what we did to the house?"

"We've got lawyers," I say. "Just because you were evicted doesn't mean that you aren't liable for what you did."

"You can't *prove* we did anything," he says. "And you can't prove who's going to break another window tonight, asshole."

Another window.

"Nobody's going to join the fraternity," he says. "Everyone on campus knows what happened to us. What you guys did to us. *The Daily Illini* did a whole article on how fucked up it was. The sororities...they still love us. They won't want anything to do with some new Nike group. This is fucking pointless. You know that, right?"

"I tried my best, back when I came in September," I say. "You didn't listen."

"Tried your best. Like this fucker"—pointing at Nick—"walking away."

But Nick doesn't turn, is almost out of sight now, a black shape moving in and out of the light of the streetlamps farther down the sidewalk.

"Is this going to be something?" I ask, placing my hand on my chest and then holding out my hand to indicate him. I don't want to stutter anymore, to shake. "You're good at talking shit," I say, "but are we going to do anything besides just standing out in the cold? Cause if not, I've got a busy night ahead of me. No time for bullshit."

"Yeah, this is going to be something," he says.

We stare at one another in the dark, both of us lit only by orange streetlamps.

"It's fucking cold," one of the other hooligans says. "Let's just go back inside, Adam. What are you gonna do, you know? Fight him? Come on."

"Fuck you," Adam says to me, then louder, pointing his finger: "Fuck you!"

Blood in my head, throbbing, ready for a greater confrontation. But somehow, I know that I've already won. I stand without slouching, fists stuffed in my coat pockets, eyes unblinking, and *yes*, I feel like Brock London, commanding, unwavering, and the three former NKE brothers stare back at me for another few seconds, then shake their heads and give up and—without any pause for deliberation or conference—walk back up the winding sidewalk to the Panera Bread. Back inside. Before the door closes, Adam says over his shoulder, "You'll be seeing us around," and two months ago, that would have stayed with me, but at this moment, the threat sounds hollow. *What are you gonna do, you know*? his own friend asked him. I stand on the sidewalk alone, Nick a block away already, and I don't want to let this moment go…this chance moment when I actually stood up with the slightest glimmer of some noble purpose.

But it has passed already, and I run to catch up with Nick.

He barely looks up at me when I approach, and he doesn't speak to me.

Later in the night, after Nick and I drop off our notebooks at the fraternity house, after we change into jeans and casual shirts, we meet up with Patrick on Green Street for our tour of Champaign-Urbana. We haven't eaten dinner yet, so we start with thin-crust pizza at ZaZa's and watch from the restaurant's second-floor window as Green Street slowly fills with students, filing out of their dorms in groups of four or five, filing out of fraternity and sorority houses, filing out of nearby apartment buildings, converging upon the restaurants and bars in this central social district of the University of Illinois. Girls in tight black pants, in scoop neck shirts, in flair skirts, girls with Paris Hilton hair. *College*.

"These girls, someone get them a jacket," Patrick says, pointing to a pack of girls scurrying past in spaghetti-strap shirts and short skirts, all of whom clutch their cold upper arms. "I feel like a father sometimes. But they're all going to be sick tomorrow."

From our spot on the second-floor, we witness a sudden bottle-neck at the door of Murphy's, a bar-restaurant a block away, as the security guard at the door checks IDs and issues wrist bands and draws permanent-marker Xs on each hand; soon, the line is fifty feet long, but still the bouncer doesn't hurry, and everyone in line shivers and holds their exposed flesh and huddles up against one another and waits to be let in.

Here in this pizzeria, Patrick remains as excitable and conversant as the day we met him, still runs his hands through his blonde hair every few minutes as if to remind the world how full and remarkable it is, asking how all of our campus meetings have gone, how all of our PNM interviews went. "Not all of these guys are my best friends," Patrick says, "but I wanted to put together a group—a *small* group—of guys with good character, you know? I could have just grabbed fifty random guys, but the bigger the group gets, the bigger the chance that you won't know everyone."

I wait for Patrick to order a beer with his pizza, but he sticks with Sprite.

Nick answers as many of Patrick's questions as possible, many times cutting me off before I can speak more than a sentence. And Nick takes only sporadic bites of his pizza so that he is always available to speak, so that he won't get caught with his mouth full. I suppose that he's coming to terms with his opinion of me: Charles Washington, the guy who—at the start of the semester—was bound to goals and to the Code of Conduct:



But also the guy who—just three nights ago, drunk—admitted that he broke every rule in the book and slept with some freshman girl:



Who am I, to Nick? And now...now *this*...Back at the house, just an hour and ago, he broke his silence and told me that he couldn't understand why I would stand my ground against the old Nike hooligans instead of simply shrugging them off. "Why would you take a chance like that?" he asked me. "What were you going to accomplish, besides some stupid fucking fight?"

"I wanted to be assertive," I said. "Do what was right."

"Assertive? It was stupid, Charles. I'm having a tough time with this."

Patrick, though, doesn't notice that Nick seems to take and hold deep breaths every time I actually make conversation at the table, every time I ask about the atmosphere of Illini football games or about the most popular venues on Green Street (and I even say "venues," not "bars"). When I answer Patrick's questions (always projecting such positive energy that he *beams* as he listens), I leave out my conversation with Dr. Jacobs, Nick's experience at the IFC meeting, and our encounter with Adam Duke, just as we've been hiding the condition of the Nu Kappa

Epsilon chapter house. But still Nick shifts in his seat when I speak, exhales when I've finished talking.

After ZaZa's, we walk like tourists down Green Street, Patrick pointing out each establishment and its significance to the campus community. At the corner of Green Street, just beside the bell-towers and across the street from the bookstore and ZaZa's, is a statue referred to as the Alma Mater. It is the deep, crusted green of old bronze and depicts three robed women, one of whom holds her arms out in a symbolic embrace of both the university's students and its returning alumni; on its base is chiseled the message, "TO THY HAPPY CHILDREN OF THE FUTURE THOSE OF THE PAST SEND GREETINGS." "Legend has it," Patrick tells us in a hush-hush voice, as if he doesn't want the statue to hear him and come to life, "that the Alma Mater will drop her arms as soon as a virgin graduates from the university." Nick laughs a bit too quickly after the joke, as though he would have laughed *regardless* of the joke, and Patrick says, "Of course, when we're giving campus tours, we don't tell parents that legend."

"You're a *real* tour guide?" I ask.

"I volunteer," Patrick says. "It's funny, actually. I became a campus tour guide because...well, this was last year sometime...I saw this girl, this amazing looking girl, showing all these high school kids around the Quad." He didn't want to meet girls at bars, he says, because what's the chance that it'll work out? A *bar*? At least when you share a common sense of community, a common passion, you can be certain that there's a chance your relationship can work. So Patrick became a campus tour guide, and not only did he meet her, he says, but they began dating, and she remains his girlfriend to this day.

"You're a regular Man on Campus," Nick says.

"I don't look at it that way," Patrick says. "I just want to be a part of something."

"Oh, to be young again," I say. "All the girls in the world."

"One girl for me," Patrick says. "You know when everything clicks? Everything about her. Like, we both know the exact condo we want to live in near Wrigleyville."

No, I don't know when everything clicks. I'm stuck with the same feeling I had when I first met Patrick: that he's somehow managed to understand everything in life that I haven't. Patrick walks us past Murphy's, where he watches Cubs games in September ("I watched them in October last year," he says, "but that doesn't happen very often"), past a used-video store that, although the windows are plastered with posters for Spider-man and Pirates of the Caribbean, is the hive for a thousand rumors. Pornos, gambling, prostitution, whatever. "Never seen anyone go in," he says, "and I've never seen anyone come out." Patrick walks us past Brother's, which he tells us has "Quarter Wing Night" on Wednesdays. "When my father comes down for gamedays," Patrick says, "he'll only eat at two places. He'll eat wings at Brother's, and he'll eat deep-dish pizza at Garcia's." Stores with great deals on fountain drinks, stores that are supposedly haunted, stores with great Greek food. And everywhere, students stream around us as we walk. It is only a Tuesday night, but this late in the semester, with mid-terms over, Tuesdayrather than Wednesday or (God forbid) Thursday-has now become the start of the weekend, the night to unwind and release. Soon, when Thanksgiving Break comes, Monday will be the night to go out, and then, when Winter Break comes, Sunday night, and by Spring semester, all will be corrected and the weekend will just be the weekend again, and students will study during the week, party on weekends.

We eventually wind up at Brother's, and, while Nick uses the bathroom, I find a table and Patrick orders a pitcher of Miller Lite. I didn't expect it, and when Nick sees the filled beer glasses on the table, he makes a sucker-punched face. As though I am responsible. But what is

alcohol to Patrick? Without the rules imposed by a National Headquarters, without the Circles of Danger program, without insurance and liability and a Code of Conduct, this is just a pitcher shared by three friends, all of whom are 21.

"I've got a confession to make to the two of you," Patrick says, after we've emptied a pitcher, and he holds his mug and swishes the beer around. "I wanted to make sure you guys saw the university at night," he says, "but I guess I had an ulterior motive for taking you out. I've been...I don't know how to say this...dishonest with you?"

"What?" Nick asks, and his eyes are wide and his mouth is tiny. Sucker-punched again.

"I joined a fraternity in my freshman year."

"You joined a fraternity?" Nick says. "Wait, you joined a fraternity? Here?"

"You can't tell anyone else in the group," Patrick says. "Please."

"So what? I ask. "Why is that an issue?"

"I never lie," Patrick says. "My two things are *honesty* and *community*. That's my life. But I don't know if I felt comfortable telling you guys when we first met." He finishes his beer, stares into the empty glass, then looks back up. His eyes remain crisp and commanding. "I told you guys that I had a roommate my freshman year? That he came into the dorm room covered in Kool-Aid powder and syrup? That was me," he says. "I joined a fraternity my freshman year. I dropped out halfway through the semester, but only after these guys hazed me to all hell. My father was up in arms, tried to get the university to crack down, tried to get the police involved."

"That's awful," Nick says. "Don't feel dishonest. These are serious issues. I'm just glad you're telling us."

"You don't know the half of it," Patrick says. "That was the moment when all my opinions on college changed. The moment when my father got angry? Cause he wasn't angry that I had been hazed. He was angry that it wasn't *Nu Kappa Epsilon* hazing me."

"So why now, then?" Nick asks. "You've been meeting with alumni since July, you said. What's changed?"

I flash him a "what the fuck are you saying?" look. Nick Bennett! The fucking counselor! Is he trying to tell this kid that he's making a mistake by trying to start a fraternity? Great strategy for failure, Nick! And I'm the reckless one? I defend myself against fucking hoodlums, and I'm the reckless one?

"Why is a fraternity going to be different now?" Nick asks.

"We're starting something new," Patrick says. "It's just like you said in the presentation. We're doing it *our* way."

"Right," Nick says. "But your father is still involved. I still don't understand."

"Nick," I say.

"Charles."

"Oh, I see what you're saying," Patrick says, nods, blonde hair shaking across his forehead. "Even though we're starting something new, my father still told me about this opportunity? And if there are alumni involved, why would I want to do this? That's what you're getting at, right? Listen, the national fraternity has obviously changed in the last twenty years, right? That's what you guys keep saying. A new focus on leadership development, a new mission, all that? So we can end those bad traditions that keep getting passed on. Start with a clean slate, start it the right way."

"Definitely," I say.

"Screw those alumni," Patrick says. "I'm not doing this for them. I'm doing this for other students, for my kids someday. I'm doing this to right all their wrongs."

"All right, I see," Nick says finally, and I exhale.

There is an excruciatingly long stretch of Journey songs that blare from the bar's jukebox—"She was a small town girl! Living in a lonely world!"—during which Patrick reiterates his personal mission, reiterates his honesty. I'm not concerned, of course, and neither is Nick, but Patrick is afraid that he has given us the wrong impression of himself. "Dishonesty breeds more dishonesty," he says, "and I just want to make sure you guys can trust me." I'm tempted to tell him that I understand, that no one is perfect. The things *we* haven't told *you*, I'm tempted to say, and there is a sinking feeling in my gut. The things *you're* about to get involved with. And eventually Patrick takes off, has to get some sleep before his morning class, and I ask Nick if he's ready to continue the tour.

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea. We've got interviews tomorrow."

"We're already out," I say. "Don't you want to see the rest of the town?"

I know he doesn't want to go out, that he certainly doesn't want to drink. But I can't stop myself from asking, not when I've seen the crowds of students, the college excitement outside on Green Street. I want to lose myself in all of that again. I want to stay away from the house, those wooden floors. I want to forget what I'm doing here, forget that I've been giving these presentations, scrutinizing these young men in "interviews," showing them such crisp photos of fraternity men in khaki shorts, grilling burgers in front of white-columned houses. I want to forget that I'm lying to Patrick.

Nick holds up his palms, shakes his head in a surrendering manner. "Fine," he says, and it is as though he's ready to give me another chance, to forget all that I've told him, to concede that my near-fight with that group of old NKEs wasn't that big of a deal. "But we can't get drunk," he says. "Not tonight."

I drag Nick to a bar called Kam's, which smells of discarded lemons, orange peels, spilled beer, and demon piss. A couple beers at Kam's. Then we head next door to C.O.'s; we wait in line for the door, wait outside in the Illinois night, and I am huddled in my jacket in the twenty or thirty-degree cold, and everyone around me is working hard to appear as though they don't care about the violent wind chill. Grown men wear short sleeves, pale skin broken into goosebumps that they try to hide. Attractive girls wear short skirts and low-cut strapless tops, shivering and rubbing themselves, but making comments such as, "I'm so glad I didn't bring my jacket." When I get to the door, I have to pay someone five bucks for "coat check," something I've never done before in my life.

After Kam's, I drag Nick to a bar called Clybourne's, where the drink specials are as follows: \$1 well drinks, \$5 wine bottles, \$7 champagne bottles. "We need to get some sleep," Nick says after awhile, and I realize that he isn't drinking, that his bottle is still full, and that the bottled wine I'm drinking tastes like spiked Hi-C and I can't bring myself to take another sip. The two of us are leaning against the bar, watching the steady progression of intoxication all around us; we haven't moved in ten minutes probably, because there's no reason to move...we've got no one to talk to. Some students drink champagne—cheap gas station champagne—straight from the bottle, chugging, and they grimace. Three guys shuffle past, two of them carrying the third (who looks as though he has been knocked out in a fight, but has probably only drank a bottle of wine). "We've got an early morning, Charles," he says. "We've got a lot to do."

"I want to stay," I say.

"Here? You want to just stand here?"

"Why not?"

"This is fun for you?"

"This is it, right here," I say. "This is the real deal. I'm going to stay."

But my head's spinning from all the alcohol, hangers swaying again, and I feel like I'm going to throw up, because both of these ideas—

and





—they're both empty, and I don't want either of them anymore, the past or the future, because college—exciting, right? and free of consequence? those were the reasons why I wanted to go back?—college is only fun if you know it's going to end someday, if you know life will begin afterwards and to hell with a carefree lifestyle if you know you're capable of something, if you know you can find a position in society somewhere and you can work to some purpose, you can accomplish something. But what if all you're doing in a post-college career is working through years of facades until you unveil the truth: whoever is in power only cares about keeping power, and that's the only purpose you've been working toward all those years. That's all I'm doing right now, isn't it? Keeping the traditions of Nu Kappa Epsilon alive and well, resurrecting the house that all of those prominent alumni hold so dear in their memories. And lying to twenty young men in order to do it?

"You look like you're going to puke," Nick tells me. "We need to go."

"No, it's...I'm just thinking," I say, and I'm swaying.

"You're a mess," Nick says.

"Listen, if I'm a mess, you're a mess," I say, but that came out *way* wrong. I was thinking of something more profound. I try to backtrack, say what I meant, but I don't even know what I meant anymore. "We're so much alike, I mean."

"You're drunk."

"Did I ever tell you my theory about you, Nick?" I ask.

"Your theory?"

"That we're, like, mirror images?"

"Oh, this sounds promising."

"You going to finish your wine?"

"A second ago, you told me it was disgusting."

"Well," I say.

"Take it," he says.

"This is my theory," I say and tilt the bottle back. "We look alike, you know? We're mirror images? But, like, on the inside we're different people. See, you're gay and you can be what you want? But me, I'm...I can't be? There's nothing that's, like, that important to me?"

"Insightful, Charles. Thank you for sharing."

"I'm a thinker."

"Right. Well, listen, we're leaving," Nick says. "Fun as this is, I'm getting sick of it. It's time to fucking go."

When I zip up my sleeping bag later, I'm still thinking of what I wanted to say.

By Friday, we've finished all of our interviews and have issued bids to each individual PNM. All twenty of them accept the invitation to join and to start the new chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon. But outside of the boardroom, Nick barely speaks to me. Especially not in the fraternity house. I spend time alone in the basement, where I've hidden the "emergency" bottle of Jack Daniels that I brought along in my suitcase. I call LaFaber to relay our progress.

"All the guys are on board, right?" LaFaber asks.

"They all accepted their bids," I say.

"We're on course for a twenty-man group, then," LaFaber says. "Good, good. That's a nice start. We'll triple that in the Spring."

"Triple that?" I ask. "These guys keep talking about how much they like having a small group. It's their fraternity, you know?"

"Yes, it is *their* fraternity," LaFaber says. "But it isn't *just* theirs. It's yours. It's mine. There's a *big picture*, here. We've got a house to fill this Spring, Charles."

"It's just different than I expected," I say.

"We've been over this," LaFaber says. "Can't run a business with a house and a meal plan and insurance and consultants, without warm bodies paying dues." He pauses, and I hear papers ruffling on the other end. "By the way, we booked our flight to Illinois today, for next weekend's retreat. I'll email you the itinerary so you can pick us up."

"Us?"

"We're flying Dr. Wigginton in from Pennsylvania, remember?" he says. "And ten brothers from the University of Iowa are driving into town to facilitate the initiation ceremony. The house is all set for the retreat, correct?"

"Um, yeah," I say. "The house is all set."

"We've got a week, Charles," LaFaber says. "This is it. This is your big moment. Can't say anything final just yet, but we've got big plans for you if everything clicks."

I don't know what he means. A contract extension as a consultant? Or perhaps he's talked to someone at some university—maybe he's talked to Dr. Vernon or Dr. Jacobs?—about a spot in their CSP graduate program. And yes, that's it. That *must* be. Shrewd as LaFaber is, and as connected as he is, he's found a spot for me in a graduate school, perhaps even as a Graduate Assistant for a Greek Affairs office or (at a smaller school) a Greek Affairs Director, and this is the sort of arrangement that LaFaber would definitely dream up...an arrangement (having a loyal Greek Affairs Director as his puppet to enforce rules or to ignore them) that would benefit Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity perhaps more than it would benefit even me.

Before the conversation ends, LaFaber says, "You might want to give Brock a call. Wish him luck."

"Okay. What for?"

"We shuffled his schedule, too. We're flying him out to Las Cruces for the week."

"Las Cruces," I say. "He's going to New Mexico State?"

"Hazing investigation, all the things we talked about," LaFaber says. "Shouldn't come as a shock to *you*, of course. But really, it's all a formality. They think it's an investigation, that they've got a chance." LaFaber pauses. "Wish him luck out there. Because he's going to Las Cruces to shut that chapter down."

Later on Friday night, when Nick leaves the house to grab some take-out, I walk to a convenience store a quarter-mile away, cutting wind making my ears ache, and I buy a 12-pack and some gritty beef jerky with the NKE credit card. All of my cash is gone, and if I have to lose

this receipt, too, then I will. I've drained my bank account, and now I'm slowly sucking away at all of my future paychecks.

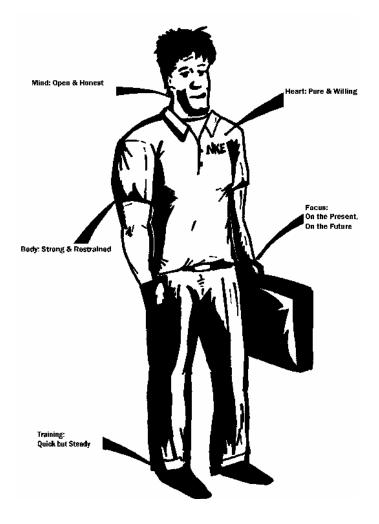
I decide that, instead of simply returning to the house with the beer, I will walk the rest of the way to find my Explorer at the public park. Drive it back to the house, park at the meter for the weekend. It's been so long since I've seen it.

And I sit in the car, heater on, and I drink a beer. Then two. And I think about pulling out of the parking lot, driving somewhere, just to be driving, just to feel like I'm leaving this city and this campus, drive the salty two-lane roads and then hit the highway, and hell, I could just drive home, so easy, I could drive back south, drive through Kentucky and Tennessee and Georgia and surprise everyone and *clean slate*, back in Florida! Leave it all behind, the university and the interest group and the job! Return home! Clean slate! But is it that simple? What becomes of me, if I leave? No career in student personnel for me, certainly, and so a year of experience goes down the drain. Meanwhile, my friends back home will be a year ahead of me in the job market, moving into offices while I'm settling into a cubicle, making important decisions while I'm stuck performing assembly-line tasks. I will be entry-level forever, never rising to significance. And there is no clean slate if I go back to Florida. Let's be honest with yourself, Charlie, because now there are parents who know that you've failed and know that your friends have advanced and why couldn't you just make your life into...*anything*!

So I stay? And then what? I could be honest with these students. I could take Nick's approach; Nick thinks with the students' interests in mind, ignoring what he *knows* will happen to the group, that they will be forced to abandon all their own ideas and interests and instead use the model that the National Headquarters will give them. Or that they will be harassed by Adam Duke and the old chapter, or by Dr. Jacobs and all the other angry campus fraternities. Yes, I

have the option of honesty, of telling the students the truth. But that will get me nowhere. The group will disband. I'll be finished.

My other option is not nearly so bleak. I choose the National Headquarters, once and for all, and finish a successful colonization. I choose Walter LaFaber. I choose all that I thought I'd abandoned in a plane over middle America, two months ago, drunk and convinced of my independence. I tell the students what the National Fraternity wants me to tell them, make them believe what the National Fraternity wants them to believe...convince them to live in this house, to trust their alumni, to follow national policy and risk management guidelines...convince them that this, *this*—



—this is the man they should become. Just as I was convinced. I sell, sell, sell. This is my only option. This is all I've got—assume the determined mentality that *business* demands, *fuck being a counselor*, these kids are *adults* and they can make their own decisions—this is all I've got if I am to keep this job, keep from clunking back to Florida as a failure...this is all I've got if I am to earn my letter of recommendation and graduate school and a spot as a Greek Advisor ,or whatever LaFaber has planned...whatever, I don't care...I want a job, a fucking job! *Look what I do*! I want to be able to say. I am officially a professional, I officially matter. You see this? That's it.

No, I don't have to *be* the Marathon Man to be professional. I don't have to plot my goals on a bar graph. No, I don't have to believe a fucking thing. I do the job my employers want. I sell the Marathon Man instead, and I collect my paycheck, and when I'm not wearing my NKE polo, I can believe whatever the fuck I want.

It's a choice I've got: listen to the students and help them to found the little fraternity they want, or act with the interests of the Headquarters in mind.

It's a choice, sure, but it's not—even—*close*.

Chapter Sixteen: The Second Week

By the end of our first week in Champaign-Urbana, my black dress shoes are coated with a residue of mud and salt and scuffed to murky gray. From daily walks of three or four miles, the once-polished tops are now etched with deep worry lines like you'd see on some stressed-out stockbroker's forehead. The cuffs of my silver-black Ralph Lauren pants are speckled in a color that looks like Wendy's Frosty, and it doesn't wash off with hot water and a towel. Throughout our first week in Champaign-Urbana, Nick and I attended meetings in every imaginable building at Illinois, in every faraway corner of campus. Every morning, we hunched over into the crisp pre-Thanksgiving air; we buried our hands in our pockets, aim our heads squarely at the ground to avoid the vicious wind blasts that seem to immediately numb our faces and freeze the snot in our nostrils. On Saturday night, the world is at its coldest.

After the sun sets, Nick asks me if I want to go grab some pizza with him for dinner. Sure, I say, and while he's upstairs taking a shower, I slip down to the fraternity house basement, to the library, and I sit on a cracked wooden desk and finish the last few beers that remain from my 12-pack last night. It isn't out of some need to get drunk, really, nor am I drinking to feel like a college student again. Not anymore. It's just that I'm trapped, that's all, trapped by LaFaber and Sam and Nick and Maria and Dr. Jacobs and Patrick, and I can't even make the choices I want to make anymore, the choices I know I should make, because so much depends on my every word and every action, and this—drinking a couple beers in the basement—feels like the only way I can say "fuck it all," forget it all, feel in control. I push the empty bottles against the wall in a long row next to a bunch of other garbage, and when Nick walks in quicker than I expected, dressed and ready to get dinner, I am still holding a Miller Lite bottle and it's difficult to pretend that the other three bottles—condensation still fresh on the glass—are not mine. "Don't you think this is a bit much?" he asks. "You're pushing it, Charles."

"A bit much of what?" I ask. "Pushing what?"

"This drinking."

"It's Saturday night. It's just me and you."

"Exactly. You're drinking alone, Charles. You're hiding down here."

"Hiding? What else am I supposed to do? I can't drink with students around."

"Yes, you're hiding," he said.

"Who the fuck are *you*?" I ask, and my head is hot and it is swaying from a nice beer buzz, four bottles in thirty minutes, and I'm suddenly furious. "Who the fuck are you to tell me that *I'm* hiding? You don't know anything about it."

"Calm down. I'm just looking out for you."

"You're the one that's hiding, Nick," I say, and I'm sliding off the desk now and pointing at him. "Who the fuck are you to criticize me? You haven't told a fucking one of these guys that you're gay. Not one. And I'm hiding? You smoke cigarettes, you drink, and you want me to believe that *I've* got some sort of problem?"

"I didn't say you had a problem," Nick says.

"This is just a job," I say. "If I want to drink on my Saturday night, I can. You're poisoned by these alcohol workshops we facilitate. Like, anyone that drinks in a non-social setting is a fucking alcoholic. I don't tell you when you're allowed to be gay and when you have to stop, all right?"

"Calm down, shit. I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"It has to do with everything. With you, everything comes back to being gay. Everything comes back to telling people or not telling people, hiding or not hiding, helping someone discover themselves. It's fucking exhausting, Nick."

"I don't know what to say. I wasn't aware..."

"I'm sick of the fucking morality," I say. "I get it."

Nick looks at the ceiling, then at the empty beer bottles. "Whatever, you're right, whatever," he says, and then he leaves me alone to finish my beer, opting to shrink out to the porch and smoke Marlboro Lights and call his friends back in California. Shortly thereafter, he tells me that Patrick and a few guys from the interest group are joining him for pizza, and he leaves me in the house alone and I tell myself over and over that there was some point to my anger, that Nick's the same as I am, dishonest and full of secrets, and that he just hasn't accepted it yet, and we're mirror images, the two of us.

Because LaFaber told me on Friday night that Brock London would be shipped to New Mexico State, I decide to call Sam Anderson later on Saturday night, give him a head's up. "You can't stop him from coming?" Sam asks, and it's tragic and ironic, but his voice now carries the same desperation that pricked the voices of that entire pledge class during the Etiquette Dinner, when each stood on the chair to be humiliated.

"The decision was made at the top," I say. "I tried all I could."

"An investigation, *fuck*. What do we do?"

"I want to help you," I say. "But I need to know what you have to hide." "Nothing. I mean, I told you everything." I'm picturing my own investigation back at Shippensburg, creeping through the chapter house, opening drawers, opening closets, looking through trashcans, scrutinizing receipts, taking photos. The only thing I was missing was first-hand testimony. "The Headquarters wants to shut down your chapter," I say. "And the guy they're sending is a brute, a big fucker, not as laid-back as I was. He'll scour your house, he'll scare the shit out of everyone, and before you know it, he'll have tape-recorded statements."

"Oh shit," Sam says. "Oh shit oh shit, Charles. Oh shit, what do we do?"

"Simple," I say, and if I can't make the right choice here at Illinois, if I can't choose the students over the Headquarters here, I'll do what I can for New Mexico State. "Lock your doors," I say, "and don't let him inside your house."

By Sunday, the start of our second week, the central Illinois temperature rises and settles in the low forties, warmer than our first day in town, but heavier wind gusts make up the difference. The creaking fraternity house is filled with the noises of violent winter, and a profound and equally violent silence between Nick and me. We avoid one another, don't even say good morning or make eye contact.

But the house, like some screaming baby, upset or hungry at all hours, demands our attention, will not let either of us alone. "The house *will* be ready," LaFaber tells me over the phone on Monday morning. "We have no other option. It *will* be presentable for the Retreat on Friday and for occupancy in Spring."

"I understand what you want," I say, "but there are larger issues. Structural issues. Fire code issues. I can vacuum a floor and take out the trash, but I can't replace floorboards and toilets and ceilings."

"Find temporary solutions," LaFaber says.

"There are holes in the walls, holes in the support beams. And mold. I think the wood is rotting."

"I'm not asking you to be a carpenter."

"Temporary solutions?"

"The house was livable in early Fall, so it's livable now with a little elbow grease," LaFaber says. When I don't respond immediately, he says, "Did I ever tell you about our colonization at Florida State? Ten years ago? I was a consultant back then, and we had to fix up the house for a new chapter. Same sort of situation. Broken windows, sticky floors. We had to spend almost a full week getting down and dirty. It's exhausting, Charles. I won't lie. No gym workout can prepare you for this kind of labor. But by the time you're finished, you feel good about yourself, and you see *results*. Tangible results." And I picture him at his office window, inhaling slowly and watching his massive chest rise. Turning his arm away from his body, flexing his triceps, admiring himself, admiring how quickly he was able to conjure a convincing story for me.

"What was your temporary solution at FSU?" I ask.

"We bought large carpets to cover the floors. Painted the walls."

"You painted? Was there anything wrong with the walls?"

"Some damage. Chips, gashes, water stains. No holes, though."

"We can't paint these walls," I say. "It's too much."

"You'll think of something," LaFaber says.

So Nick and I are forced to speak again, though all our conversation is relegated to to-do lists and quick questions about our schedule and strategies for house clean-up. I pretend that I'm not sorry, that what I said was fair.

We spend much of Monday gutting the main foyer and basement and second-floor hallways of trash and broken furniture, and the house feels lifeless with so many hollow, open rooms. We concentrate on the basement and the foyer because they are the two most visible areas of the fraternity house; upstairs, we simply lock the doors to the disheveled bedrooms and the extra bathrooms so that none of our visitors can gain access. We collect broken bedposts, old Big Gulp containers, broken Corona bottles, clumps of brown matter, wadded paper, smashed cork board, and we create piles of trash throughout the foyer. When the piles grow to waistheight, we scoop the trash into heavy-duty bags and drag the bags out to a dumpster a block away. No matter how much we clean, though, the piles never seem to diminish. We always find new Big Gulp containers and new crumpled posters and new deposits of shattered glass. Occasionally, I even catch Nick standing outside the locked bedroom doors of the second floor. Just standing. Perhaps wanting to see what is beyond the doorways, the absolute catastrophe left for us, and perhaps wanting to sneak inside and clean it, too. On just one occasion, Nick catches me doing the same, except that I have a bag of trash in my grip.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Just cleared some stuff out of one of the rooms," I say, but really I was planning to open the door, drop the trash inside, then shut the door and lock it. Walking all the way to the dumpster—back and forth, back and forth—has become exhausting.

On Tuesday afternoon, when the homeless man on the porch disappears for the day, we lift his couch down the stairs, carry it down the sidewalk, wedge it between the dumpster and the

thick elms nearby. We carry his sheets, his blankets, the scattered clothes littered about the porch, toss it all onto the couch there in the foul shade.

Make it presentable, LaFaber said, and because we have no other method to fix the cracks and the holes, we simply hide it all in the same way that Adam Duke and his evicted chapter brothers had when I visited Illinois in September. Nick and I cover the walls. But instead of the black, party-ready, plastic sheeting that they spread over every wall (and covered in spraypainted graffiti), Nick and I buy white bed sheets in bulk, and staple and pin the sheets to every inch of the foyer and every room in the basement until we feel as though we've been sucked into a cloud.

"It isn't clean," Nick says, "but it's fine for a one-night retreat."

All of the whiteness makes me dizzy.

"It doesn't feel real," I say. "I can't stop thinking about the walls underneath."

Because we need a large, open room in which to conduct the Initiation Ceremony in the final hours of the Leadership Retreat, and because the foyer will be used for all of the goalsetting workshops, we clear out the old cafeteria in the basement (the kitchen itself remains locked), pushing the long, wooden dinner tables against the walls, stacking them to clear as much room as possible. Our Initiation Ceremony requires plenty of floor space, a feeling of absolute calm, so we drape white sheets over the stacked tables, too, and finally the cafeteria looks like some sort of snowy mountain valley, a cold concrete floor surrounded by the jagged white peaks of sheet-covered tables. It is here, in this dark, windowless space, where even the overhead lights are now obscured or covered by the tall stacks of chairs and tables that reach as high as the ceiling, that the "boys" of this interest group will become the "men" of Nu Kappa Epsilon Fraternity in a ritual that has been passed on from brother to pledge, from chapter to chapter,

since 1910. They will say an oath; they will kiss a Bible; they will swear themselves to the fraternity for the whole of their lives.

Throughout this second week in Champagne-Urbana, Nick and I alternate our duties, which further prevents us from speaking to one another. During every waking hour, one of us cleans the house, but the other attends meetings at the university.

The meetings with administrators grow more tedious than ever before, but—as often as we were able—we take Patrick with us to meet with office after office, department after department, director after director, working slowly to re-establish Nu Kappa Epsilon as a campus organization. We meet with the Office of Student Activities to learn the guidelines for social events, for university funds disbursement, for constitution and bylaws requirements and Code of Conduct requirements and all the fucking forms and on and on until we can't keep straight the difference between one department's policies and another's and sometimes they overlap and sometimes they contradict and *all at once* everything (the existence of a simple campus organization) seems absolutely impossible, and this could all fail despite all my efforts. What student, after all, would want to spend so many hours and days and weeks working endlessly to create a new and different organization that (by the time it is molded by the many administrative offices) has such a slim chance of being different, when he or she could simply join a preexisting group and skip the hassle of university paperwork? But Patrick never allows himself to grow disheartened for even a second. "I'm going to be a social worker," he tells me while we're in the Office of Diversity Initiatives. "I'd better get used to bureaucracy."

"Patrick," I say, "you're a better man than I."

Each new form, each new meeting, seems to fuel Patrick's enthusiasm for the new fraternity. "As soon as we fill this packet out," he says on Wednesday afternoon as we eat lunch

at Pita Pit, "we can field an intramural basketball team in the Spring. That's a big step for a new fraternity, participating in sports."

"Big step," I say, and we still haven't mentioned the house yet. That he will *have* to live in the house. That he has no choice. *Choose the students*, some part of me screams, *tell him*! But instead I say, "You should get a block of seats for Illinois basketball games, too. As a fraternity."

Patrick even asks if I can make an appointment for him to meet with Dr. Jacobs at the Office of Greek Affairs. "Too early, too early," I say. "Wait until after the Leadership Retreat, after we've helped you to select your officers." I picture him walking into her office, full of hope and optimism, sitting in that cold visitor's chair as she licks her lips and gives him that frightening, toothy smile. I picture Dr. Jacobs tapping her fingernails together, looking him up and down, and then snapping with quick, crocodile viciousness: "*End it*! End your little fraternity!"

"Too early, too early," I say, and later that afternoon, I meet once again with Dr. Jacobs, alone, a quick middle-of-the-day conversation to gauge her rancor.

Strangely, she smiles when I enter her office, extends her hand to give me a clammy handshake and asks me if I've heard of MGCA. "Midwest Greek Council Association, right?" I ask. "So many acronyms, sometimes I get them confused. Huge student conference, right?"

"It is," she says. "Thousands of students. Over a hundred schools represented." And she beams as she shares the news that she will be the keynote speaker in Spring at MGCA. "And I've just the speech for the occasion," she says. "I take issue with Dr. Vernon's flawed theories about the Millennial Generation."

"But it's a leadership conference, not an academic panel." And because she is the sort of woman who, I've decided, loves to feel like an authority, I add, "Right?"

"Oh, this is something every one of these students should understand," she says. ""The Entitlement of Millennials,' that is my speech. Just imagine the following: a child today—any of these Millennials here on campus—suddenly faced with the Great Depression. Faced with extreme poverty. No job. No food, no money. No technology. What would this child do? My guess, Charles, is that these Millennials would destroy one another rather than endure hardship. Why can't someone take care of them, they'd ask. Why can't someone provide them with a house, with food? It is a generation so nurtured that it is spoiled, you see, and so spoiled that it feels entitled to all the world. Whatever it wants. And I can think of no better case study, Charles, than this interest group."

"These students? What do you...you can't use these students."

"Why not?" she asks. "Your National Fraternity is using them. These students believe they are *entitled* to a fraternity, regardless of the disruption it causes to the university and the greater fraternity world. Oh, think of the uproar my little speech will cause." She pauses, looks into her lap casually, runs her dry fingers over her sleeve. "Of course, I always have time to change my topic if this interest group...disappears."

"It won't," I say.

She sighs, jewelry clacking as she let her hands drop onto her desk. "How disappointing, Mr. Washington. How very disappointing."

Not all the administrative meetings are quite so tense, but several other offices express concerns about our colonization. Thankfully, in a relief from all of the campus meetings, Nick and I also spend much of the week in casual meetings with most of our new pledges in the interest group. We listen to their ideas for new traditions as a fraternity chapter, for community

events, for alcohol-free "brotherhood" activities. "This is what it's all about," Nick says, again and again. "These kids have every opportunity to start a fraternity the way they want it."

We spend much of our Wednesday evening with Patrick and several other pledges at the sports bar Legend's, watching Illinois play a rare mid-week football game at Minnesota. Patrick also brings his girlfriend, a lively brunette who cheers for the Golden Gophers because she grew up in St. Paul, and she and Nick talk for much of the afternoon about higher education; apparently, she also has aspirations of graduate school, and she wants to someday run a Student Housing office. Over the course of four hours at Legend's, we probably see every pledge, all twenty, in and out. At one point, when Illinois scores its lone touchdown, these young men all release bottled-up cheers, then look around and realize that there are fifteen of them in this bar, *that this is fraternity*, a college family enjoying the game together. "These other groups, they've got it all wrong," Patrick says. "150 brothers in a single chapter house? No, no. We're going to do this right. A small fraternity, the way it's supposed to be."

"Right," I say.

* * *

On Thursday, I finally call Brock and ask how everything is going.

He had to book a hotel room for the duration of his visit in Las Cruces, he tells me, because things with the chapter have already grown so volatile. "These guys are out for blood," Brock says. "Won't let me in the chapter house, slammed the door in my face. They threatened to kick my ass. Shit, son, I'll take any of 'em in a fistfight, but they seem like the types that'll come up on me, all at once." I can't respond; it takes all my composure to keep from dropping the phone. I expected...what did I expect, exactly? Civility from Sam Anderson? I picture New Mexico State, that dark chapter room after the Etiquette Dinner, the Wall of Brothers shrouded in darkness, the Pledge Clump. Or did I expect Brock to just give up and go away, as I might have? "It's just one alumnus owns the house," Brock says, "and he don't want this investigation, so he's claiming that I'll be trespassing if I step foot on the property. I don't know how I'm going to conduct an investigation if they're not letting me anywhere near the house."

"Have they told you anything?" I ask.

"Naw. Bunch of military kids, tight-lipped like they're POWs or something. I'm out here for a week, but this investigation will be rough if I can't *talk* to anyone."

"That's a shame. They were nice guys when I was out there."

"Right. You stuck up for them, didn't you?" Brock asks.

"Stuck up for them? When?" I ask, but I know exactly what's he referring to.

"The Chapter Status meeting with LaFaber? You said they were good kids."

"I wasn't conducting an investigation," I say. "So it was a different experience."

"This whole deal is rotten. Something rotten out here."

"I'm surprised about it all," I said. "Really, I am."

"I might have enough alcohol infractions documented," Brock says. "For a one-year suspension, at least."

"What do you know about the hazing allegations?"

"At first, all we had was the parent's complaint," Brock says.

"There's more now?"

"Pledge testimony. Two kids that quit the fraternity."

"Pledge *testimony*? You're joking. What are their names?"

"Jimmy Lopes and Michael Garcia."

Michael Garcia? Spiky-haired Michael! He quit...and he gave testimony!

"You know either of them?" Brock asks.

"I do, yes," I say, and even though I pause before I speak again, I know exactly what I'm going to say, and I know exactly why I'm going to say it. Ignorance won't work. The brothers have stalled Brock's investigation, but the pledge...Michael Garcia...he will tell everything he knows. If he quit the fraternity, he'll want them eliminated from campus for his humiliation. He'll take everyone down. Sam Anderson, Jose, *me*! I have to tell Brock something. So I lie. "He was a little prick, Michael," I say. "I don't usually talk that way about students, Brock. You know me. But this kid was constantly causing problems. I wouldn't trust a word either of those little pricks say."

I sit in the basement as I talk to Brock, surrounded by the white sheets we stapled to the walls, and all is so blindingly white and I close my eyes and try to forget where I am, who I am, and I'm dizzy and there is that sinking—*plunging*—feeling in my stomach again.

Chapter Seventeen: The Leadership Retreat

| Illinois Colonization - Schedule | | |
|---|--|--|
| Week One: | | |
| Saturday: Sunday: Monday: Tuesday: Wednesday: Thursday: Friday: | Arrive, Meeting w/ Patrick Presentation Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews | |
| Week Two: | | |
| Monday: Tuesday: Wednesday: Thursday: Friday: | Meetings/ Interviews Meetings/ Interviews Final Prep Final Prep Leadership Retreat & Initiation Ceremony | |

On a gray Friday morning in mid-November, thick fog blanketing the dead Illinois countryside and curling up the sides of distant silos, I drive to the Champagne-Urbana airport to meet Walter LaFaber and Dr. Wigginton. Two weeks have now passed since this colonization began, and tonight we hold our all-important "Leadership Retreat" at the Nu Kappa Epsilon fraternity house. Tonight, with the entire interest group assembled, with Walter LaFaber and Dr. Wigginton and several prominent Illinois alumni, all of us gathered together at that house...tonight, after hours and hours of workshops and presentations, the young men will sign their commitment to become an official "colony" of NKE, and will pass through the NKE Initiation Ceremony to become "brothers" of the fraternity.

The Initiation Ceremony. No turning back, at that point. These students will be initiates, will surrender any opportunity to join another fraternity, their destiny forever intertwined in the

roots of the Nu Kappa Epsilon National Fraternity. They probably don't know it yet, but there is no quitting a national fraternity. Just as Adam Duke and the other expelled brothers still call themselves "Nikes" and still wear NKE t-shirts and jerseys and hope to return to the house for some distant Homecoming, so will Patrick Macintosh; even if the colonization ultimately fails, or is he later expelled and evicted, some part of him will always think, "I am an NKE man."

I drive alone to the airport because I need the full space of my Explorer for LaFaber and Dr. Wigginton's luggage, but I also drive alone because Nick and I barely talk anymore, our priorities so polarized that conversation is now impossible. All of my car rattles as I bump over a pothole, the door panels and handles seeming to loosen from the frame like a baby tooth in a child's raw gums; nothing breaks, nothing pops off, but nothing seems secure, either. The pieces of my car look weary now that the car is empty, and I can see all of the damage inflicted from so many boxes, suitcases, snapshut cases, from so many miles.

With little effort, I find a parking spot at the long, open lot directly outside the airport's entrance. The spots on either side of mine are empty, too, save for puddles of melted snow, chunks of gravel, and scattered salt. Next week, perhaps, cars will crowd the parking lot when students fly home to Chicago and Detroit and Milwaukee for the Thanksgiving break. But right now, all is empty.

The Champaign-Urbana airport is just two stories, and the first floor comprises only two baggage claims, a short counter of three ticketing agents, and an escalator which leads to a gift shop and the security checkpoint upstairs. It feels like an under-developed mini-mall. When I walk through the front entrance, I am greeted with a long blue banner that reads "Welcome to the University of Illinois!" as though no one travels to Champagne-Urbana for any other reason than the university.

Nobody notices me when I push through the front doors. The ticket agents lean against the counters, talking on their personal cell phones. The security guards sit on the long plastic tables, toying with the tubs that passengers dump their metal belongings into before passing through the x-ray machine. At the gift shop, the sales clerk reads *Vanity Fair*. I sink into a bench near the baggage claim.

Two weeks, Nick and I have spent here at the University of Illinois, leading us to this inevitable Friday morning, to my inevitable reunion with both LaFaber and Dr. Wigginton. And finally, after I sit for thirty minutes in the empty silence of the airport, a plane lands. LaFaber and Dr. Wigginton are on that plane, and now...after all this, Kentucky to East Tennessee to Shippensburg, *after all this*, it comes down to a single night in the foyer of a close-to-condemned fraternity house at the University of Illinois, and a single choice: the students, or the Headquarters. The students or my career.

Walter LaFaber—dressed in a solid black suit with a black tie and a silver shirt, carrying a black briefcase in one hand, a black carry-on in the other, and a charcoal coat draped over one arm—doesn't *walk* out of the upstairs security checkpoint but instead emerges, as if he is on stage, as if a curtain has been drawn and a spotlight centered on him. He looks to one side, then the other, as if acknowledging an adoring audience. Dr. Wigginton trails behind, just as dignified, but where LaFaber wears all black, Wigginton is once again weighted down in browns and deep reds, with a brown fedora like I've seen only in movies about 1930s gangsters.

I stand immediately, as though I'm greeting royalty.

"Walter, Walter!" I say and shake his hand vigorously. "Dr. Wigginton!"

"Ah, yes, Charles Washington," Dr. Wigginton says. His hand, as I shake it, feels heavier than LaFaber's, as though in old age it's become dead weight that he's got to try harder to hold up. "I trust your travels have been kind to you. You look well."

"I feel great," I say.

"How's the prep work gone?" LaFaber asks, and he smoothes his gelled black hair, glances around, taking in the ticketing agents and the gift shop, a slight snarl at play on his lips to register his condescension at such a second-rate operation as this airport.

"You won't be disappointed."

"What does our schedule look like for this evening, Mr. Washington?" Dr. Wigginton asks. "My bones already ache in this weather."

"The Retreat starts at 5 PM. Pizzas are coming at 8:00."

"Great," LaFaber says and places his hand on my shoulder. I can feel the vise-grip strength of his fingers; he's got running-back hands, the kind that have been conditioned to never drop a football no matter the tackle, no matter the pressure. "Perfect. We'll have a little schedule overview when we get back to the house."

"Are you sleeping at the house tonight?" I ask and his grip tightens

"We got a hotel room," LaFaber says. "We're old men. We need good beds."

"The bones, ha!" Dr. Wigginton says. "I sleep in a bad bed, I might not wake up!"

"You'll have to drive us back to the hotel after the Retreat," LaFaber says. Still a stolid expression, as though he is refusing to smile. "So we can sleep."

"Late night?" I ask.

LaFaber nods. "Have you spoken with Brock lately?"

"Oh," I say. "Out in New Mexico? Oh. Yeah, yeah."

"Brock's encountering a lot of resistance in Las Cruces," LaFaber says, traps flexing as he lifts his suitcase from the baggage claim carousel, swelling. "We might have to get aggressive out there."

"Ha ha!" Dr. Wigginton says. "Walter, you are a big boy."

LaFaber turns back to me, smiling finally. "Discipline," he says. "In the professional world as well as your personal life. Discipline and structure ensure success."

Sometime in the early afternoon, after Nick has taken Dr. Wigginton and LaFaber out to lunch, four dirty, salty pick-ups grumble to the front of the house, idle for a moment, the figures behind tinted windows pointing and motioning. Because I parked my Explorer at one of the meters (rather than driving it all the way back to the public park), the trucks coast around the corner and all settle at parking meters a block away; the engines shut off, and no less than ten men emerge from these trucks, gather in the street, and lumber toward the front steps of the Nu Kappa Epsilon fraternity house. I stand just outside the front door, holding one of the few remaining bags of trash that I've got to drag to the dumpster down the street, and upon first glance, all of these men—wearing NKE hoodies and baseball caps—look just like the hooligans I met on the dark sidewalk last week...Adam Duke and his posse of pissed-off former Nikes. Once a NKE, always a NKE, they're thinking. And they've organized an assault. They've somehow learned that tonight is the Leadership Retreat, the night when we pass on what used to be theirs—the house, the fraternity itself—to a new group of young men. They've learned of it, and here they are, ready for some 1950s rumble.

But it isn't Adam Duke.

"Charles Washington?" asks the young man who leads the nine others behind him. He wears blue jeans and a black University of Iowa hoodie, holds a red apple in one hand, and it registers now who these men are. When I nod, he says, "Donovan Martin, President of the University of Iowa chapter. We're here to perform the Initiation Ceremony tonight."

"Oh shit," I say and exhale. "You scared the living hell out of me."

"You think we were a gang or something?" Donovan asks, chomps into the apple. "Bro, this is Central Illinois. Not Compton. I think you're safe."

"It's that kind of day. Let me show you guys inside, help you get settled. You've got the entire basement to work with for the ceremony."

Our Initiation Ceremony, a scripted affair through which each pledge passes individually (and so it will take all night), features no less than ten speaking roles. In the event of a colonization, when a chapter has *no* initiated brothers to perform the ceremony for the pledge, the Headquarters arranges for a regional chapter to travel into town.

"It's going to be a long night," Donovan says, takes another bite of his apple. Wipes away a tiny chunk that dropped to his chin. "But I'm stoked. Ready to go."

Just an hour later, a thick fog settling once again over Central Illinois and muting the glow of the already-weak November sun, we all convene in the main foyer of the fraternity house. We're finally gathered together, all of us, in a circle of metal foldout chairs, a ring of men too large for these stiff chairs. Dr. Wigginton sits at the head of the circle, one leg crossed over the other, hands folded in his lap, lips pursed, listening to everyone else's conversations, never really participating except to agree when someone asks his opinion: "Oh yes, certainly, certainly," he says, or just "Ahhh…" as if coming to a realization he's been debating for years.

Walter LaFaber sits beside Wigginton, his black suit standing out against a backdrop of white sheets, a single storm cloud pulsing in the center of a white sky; he shuffles papers in his lap, preparing to call this pre-retreat planning meeting to order. I sit beside Nick, and beside the ten brothers from Iowa, but the interest group will not arrive for another hour or so. Also present are six middle-aged alumni from the University of Illinois. I recognize one of them, a gray-haired man in a navy blazer, as a lawyer who advertises on WGN during the daytime. Another of the alumni introduced himself to LaFaber as "Stephen Macintosh," and I don't quite know why, but I couldn't move across the room to meet him myself. Am I afraid he'll give me some new insight into his son, that a two-minute conversation will completely change my perception of Patrick? Am I afraid that I won't be able to control what I say to him? I've packed Patrick into my doomed car with me, sure, but this fucker—*Stephen*—convinced his own son to join this mess, to place himself at the center of our tug-of-war in a perfect position to get ripped limb from limb.

"These floors are scratched up," LaFaber says, running his foot over a deep gash.

"We could only do so much," Nick says.

"These walls, these sheets," LaFaber says to the group, gives a sigh-laugh and shrugs. "Guess we're going to have to pretend that we do this for all our retreats, huh?" The alumni laugh, but LaFaber commended Nick and me earlier for the idea of the sheets. *Great idea, this works, good thinking*, he said.

I smile and disregard LaFaber's criticism. I've almost gotten used to it.

"Any other ideas on how we were supposed to hide the holes in the walls?" Nick asks, edge of his seat, fingers digging into his dress pants, obviously more affected than me. "Since there wasn't any renovation, like we were promised?"

The gray-haired lawyer shifts in his seat, rubs a finger over his mustache.

"We'll make it work, don't worry," LaFaber says. "We're big boys." He claps. "All right.

Let's get started. This is our last meeting before the pledges arrive. I've done more of these retreats than you can imagine," he says, "and I'm not exaggerating when I say this night...this *single night*...can determine a fraternity chapter's long-term success or failure. If we energize them and help them set the right goals, they could be on their way to becoming an incredible group. If not," he says, eyes closed now, somber, "we might have wasted a valuable opportunity here at Illinois."

First, we talk schedule. LaFaber passes around this sheet:

Leadership Retreat Schedule

- 6:00 Interest Group Arrives, Ice Breakers (Nick Bennett)
 8:00 – Pizza
 8:30 – Official Welcome (Walter LaFaber)
 9:00 – National Fraternity, Mission and Purpose (Walter LaFaber)
 10:00 – Brotherhood-Building Activities (Dr. Wigginton)
 11:00 – Chapter Goal-Setting (Walter LaFaber & Charles Washington)
 12:00 – Initiation Ceremony (University of Iowa)
 5:00 AM – Estimated End of Initiation Ceremony
 8:00 AM – Debrief and Donuts
- 9:00 AM Discussion of National HQ Fees

LaFaber is talking, standing, drawing some sort of chart on a makeshift easel (one of the many items unpacked from my car). I stare at the schedule, at 6:00, less than an hour away, and at 5:00 AM, and 8:00 AM, and 9:00 AM, and holy shit, a full semester of travel, plane flights and popped tires, and now I've got an entire day where I have to prove myself, an entire night, an entire morning, no breaks, no brakes.

"Charles?" LaFaber is saying.

"Yeah?" I say. "Sorry. I was just thinking about something."

"Charles," LaFaber says again, "you're going to be my right-hand man. Everyone has a role tonight, but you'll lead the Chapter Goal-Setting." He passes around a sheet of paper. It moves from Dr. Wigginton to the Illinois alumni, each person glancing at it as it makes its way from hand to hand around the circle, closing in on me. "You've got a lot of experience with these sorts of workshops throughout the semester," he says. Nick holds the sheet, looks at it, appears stunned, hurt..."Chapter Goal-Setting," the sheet is titled...this is what he wanted, the chance to help the group create what they wanted...he looks down at the sheet, the paper flimsy in his soft grip, unwilling to pass it.

"Here you go," Nick says finally, voice raspy, and hands it to me.

"You think you can handle this, Charles?" LaFaber asks.

This is it for me, tonight. Help the students create what they want? Be honest to them? Or choose the Headquarters, choose a career. I look at the sheet. There are no less than twenty goal categories, with little numbers or word typed in brackets after each category. A quick survey of the first couple statements looks like this:

| RECRUITMENT GOAL: | [75 Men] |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| ALUMNI EVENT GOAL: | [4 Events, 25 Alumni Per Event] |
| GPA GOAL: | [2.90] |

"We'll have about an hour for the Chapter Goal-Setting breakout," LaFaber says. "Critical. In our hands, we have the opportunity to influence every chartering goal that this chapter will set." Similar, again, to the standards a U.S. territory must meet in order to become a state, the chartering goals are the standards that these men—this colony—must meet to attain status as a fully chartered chapter of NKE. In other words, they will need to recruit another 75 men to help this house break even for the alumni, so we must convince them to set the specific goal that we've *already* printed in these brackets. "We have to aim high with this, Charles," LaFaber says. "Run the workshop like an auction. Start the bidding high, with 100 men, but don't let them go lower than 75. Push it higher. That's the only way we're going to get quality goals out of this."

"No problem," I say, and all the world is quiet as I speak. This house, this room, empty of all furniture and life except for these cold metal chairs and these men in shirt-and-tie, these white walls, and my voice sounds hollow and weak because I have a choice, but I say it again: "No problem at all, Walter."

Following our meeting, Nick and I work with the brothers of the University of Iowa to make the final preparations for the Initiation Ceremony in the basement of the house. Those ten brothers (Donovan eating another apple) spend their time in the cafeteria, arranging flowers along a table at one end of the white-sheeted room, placing stones on the floor to evoke an earthy feel, and lining candles *everywhere* throughout the room. On the floor, on the sheets that cover the towering stacks of cafeteria tables and chairs. During the ceremony, there will be no light but the candles, and—with this much medieval flickering in the dungeon of the fraternity house each initiate will feel as though he has been transported back to some European castle for a true freemason ritual. The Initiation Ceremony is a lot like a haunted house, actually, a dramatic firstperson exercise lasting perhaps twenty minutes per man; the initiate is led around by robed and costumed figures; he watches short monologues and exchanges between these characters, participates when prompted, and ultimately undergoes a symbolic death and rebirth as a brother of Nu Kappa Epsilon. At the end of the ritual, the young man repeats the NKE oath of brotherhood and learns the secret meaning of the letters, the secret handshake, and finally fastens the pin of the fraternity to his breast. Because the ceremony requires so much space, the Iowa brothers are using the entire cafeteria here in the basement.

"Is it supposed to smell so bad in here?" Donovan asks, chomps his apple.

"Smells like Febreeze, right?" Nick asks. "We sprayed everywhere."

"Smells worse," Donovan says. "Like yard waste or something."

"It's probably the mold," I say. "There are some holes in the walls down here, and God only knows what's started to grow in them."

"It's almost enough to ruin my appetite," Donovan says, wipes his mouth, examines his jagged, half-consumed apple. "Almost," he says and chomp again.

One of the other Iowa brothers lays a garment bag flat on the floor, unzips it, and slides out a brilliant set of silk robes, each of them a different color: yellow, red, green. These are the "ritual robes," the costumes worn during the ceremony, and they look like church choir robes, except that each is branded with the letters "NKE." The Iowa brother slides into the robe; the end grazes a floor candle as he does so, and someone rushes up quickly and stomps it. "Singed my sock, fuck," the kid says.

"Yeah, careful with those candles," I say.

"This smell, I'm going to vomit," Donovan says, chomps again, and now the apple is just a core, a piece of garbage. "All night, we're down here."

Nick tells him that we've become desensitized to the smell, and I slip away into the chapter library, down the hallway. It is here in the library, under one of the sheets, that I have hidden my half-empty "emergency" bottle of Jack Daniels. I pop the top, look back over my shoulder to make sure no one has followed me, and take a burning gulp. All at once, the world

seems to stop shaking. I take another gulp because yes, Donovan is correct, it's going to be a long night, and I don't want to think.

No, I just want to do what I have to. I just want to get by, survive.

This library is also used in the Initiation Ceremony, and so the walls—top to bottom—are also covered in white sheets. Sheets stapled or pinned to the wood and the drywall, our temporary solution to the damaged walls that actually causes additional damage to the walls. For the night, we refer to the library as "The Thinking Room": before each pledge begins the ceremony, we lead him into a quiet room where he can contemplate the lifelong commitment to the fraternity that he is about to make. Each pledge spends twenty minutes in "The Thinking Room," staring at the candles and at several framed photographs of the founders from 1910. And he is presented with a heavy journal called "The Reflection Book," in which he is asked to write his "feelings" and his "reasons for entering into the brotherhood." He can also read what generations of others have written in this thick volume, because the Reflection Book is massproduced by the same company that publishes our Marathon pledge books, and contains fifteen pages of "original manuscript" reflections from our Carolina Baptist founders. The cover is a rich coffee brown, the pages gilded in gold and colored a shadowy parchment yellow, but it is all show, reminds me of the laminated Declaration of Independence replica that I got in the summer after sixth grade when my parents took me on another "educational vacation" to D.C. Each NKE fraternity chapter is required to purchase a Reflection Book, as well as a set of robes and Initiation scripts. Total cost exceeds \$1500. Tomorrow morning, probably, the young men of this interest group will be notified that they must purchase all of this equipment by the end of the Fall semester.

The library door creaks open behind me—*Nick*!—and I kick the sheet to cover my bottle, hope he didn't see my flailing foot.

"I brought more candles," Nick says. He's holding a box.

"Oh. Oh, good."

"That sheet's falling down." He points. "You might want to staple it again."

"Right," I say. "I'll get it." And I stand atop the desk in the center of the library, lean over with the stapler in my hand, press my hand against the sheet and try to reach and pop a few staples into the sheet and into the wall, but I'm unwittingly yanking another sheet down as I do so, and this isn't working out the way I wanted. Below me, Nick arranges several candles on the floor, dotting each with a flame.

He doesn't speak, doesn't offer to help. I manage to secure the sheet, but now another is falling, so I step to the very edge of the desk, lean, desk shaking under me, almost fall, pop another few haphazard staples into that sheet and it doesn't look secure, but I'm not going to risk a broken leg over this.

"Pass me the staples," Nick says.

I climb off the desk and toss him the stapler. He misses my throw and the stapler is absorbed in the white sheets at the back of the room; it slides to the floor just inches from the Jack Daniels bottle. Maybe hits the bottle, because there's a *tink* noise. Nick stoops to pick it up, and I think that he heard the noise, that he's going to investigate, but he stands tall and turns away to shoot a couple staples into another sheet that is close to falling. All of the sheets, in fact, look like they could fall under the slightest pressure. They seem to ripple in our wake as we walk past them, as though our mere movements were strong winter wind gusts.

"These photos got smudged," I say, examining the glossy, black-and-white photos of our founders that we have displayed on the desk, just beside the Reflection Book and a candle arrangement that—accidentally—looks like a menorah.

"Can you at least pretend to care tonight?" Nick asks.

"Pretend to care? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I get icebreakers," Nick says. "You get the goal-setting. You—the guy who doesn't give a shit about any of this—you get to decide the future for these kids."

"Don't give a shit, is that what you see? After all this?"

"Listen," he says, "all I'm saying is that you need to think with the students' interests—"

"Fuck that," I say. "I told you, I'm sick of that. This is a *job*, Nick."

"This is *more* than a job, don't you see that?"

"More than a job," I say, "fuck that. This is a couple college graduates working for a paycheck. This is Walter LaFaber deciding what's going to make this a profitable fraternity chapter, and this is *me* selling them that idea. You want to believe something more, that's fine, but I'm finished with thinking like that."

Nick, still holding the stapler, raises both hands to his hair, runs his fingers (and the stapler) through the waxy black spikes. He seems ready to pull it out, smash himself with the stapler. "I just..." Nick says and takes a step backward, heel touching the sheet. "I don't know what to say to you. You're un-fucking-believable."

I look down at the ground, at Nick's feet and at the sheet-covered wall; Nick probably assumes that I'm hanging my head in deep thought, but really I'm just watching to make sure he doesn't step back into my bottle. He's close. Very close.

"Fuck LaFaber," Nick says. "I hate that man."

"That's probably not what you want to say about the guy who'll write you a letter of recommendation for grad school."

"What do I care about LaFaber? I've got five letters lined up from my professors at UCLA. Fuck LaFaber. I don't need him."

"I don't understand you," I say. "You want me to care. You call me critical."

Nick shakes his head. "I'm easy to understand. I tolerate LaFaber because he's my boss, Charles, but I don't like him. He told me—can you believe this?—he told me today that I couldn't tell these students that I'm gay."

"The kids in the interest group?"

"I'm only leading icebreakers. You think that's an accident? He doesn't want me talking tonight. He's worried that I'm going to...what?...scare away these students because I'm gay? I mean, *really*. All this talk about diversity, social responsibility. And you've got the fucking balls to tell me I'm hiding?"

"You need to watch out," I say. "You almost knocked over that candle."

"I tolerate LaFaber," Nick says, still pacing, shoes grazing candles and sheets and my bottle. He's not just pacing the room, though; he's walking a line, teetering, ready to crack...I know, because I've been there myself. "But I will not idolize him," he says. "I won't drink his punch. I won't adopt his leadership techniques just cause he says that's what makes someone a good professional. I have my own values. I have my own goals, and I don't fucking need him to do what I want to do."

"You think I don't have goals? You think I don't want to be something?"

"End of summer, you *were* Walter LaFaber," Nick says. "We meet back up two weeks ago, you're someone different. And now? I don't even think you know who you are, Charles. What you stand for."

"Stand for? This is business, Nick. I just want to do my job. Like anyone else."

"Do whatever you want, Charles," Nick says. "You can even keep thinking that I'm hiding something from you or from these kids, or that I'm obsessed with my sexuality. If that's what you want to think, fine. But these guys have the opportunity of a lifetime. Just like the founders who wrote in that Reflection Book. That's the stuff that matters, Charles, not recruitment numbers and financials. Help these guys to make *their* decisions, not LaFaber's."

The fog grows thickest at the same time that the young students of the interest group appear on the front lawn of the house, all twenty of them wandering forward on the cold, soggy dead grass, mumbling nervously with one another and forming the same sort of Pledge Clump I remember from New Mexico State University. They wear shirt and tie for tonight's retreat and initiation, and even though our "Initiation Ceremony" involves no hazing—it is all recited oaths and theatrics and pinning—still these young men shiver in the yard because they don't know what is coming. In fact, this is the first time that they'll be allowed to enter the house.

They are indeed perplexed when I lead them inside...sheets, sheets, *everywhere*, a house of white linen...but we have them take a seat in the rows of folding chairs we hauled upstairs from the cafeteria. Four rows, five chairs each.

Nick stands at the front of the room, introduces LaFaber and Dr. Wigginton and the five Illinois alumni who have come into town for the retreat and the ceremony. The brothers of Iowa are still down in the basement, preparing, practicing, memorizing the Initiation Ceremony script.

Then Nick says, "Let's get the blood pumping, guys! Let's stand up!" Icebreakers. Because I'd given up on workshops in the last month of my semester, I'd also given up on the cheesy icebreakers we use to begin the workshops. Nick, though, has a three-ring binder filled with "get the blood pumping" activities.

Patrick Macintosh stands first, stretches; he wears the same shirt and tie that he wore when we first met him, but now he has his thick blonde hair combed back and it sparkles with some sort of hair care product. The rest of the interest group-Ryan Felker, Joe Graffeo, Kevin Daniels, all these kids we interviewed—stand, push their chairs (those perfectly organized rows) to the walls. And it is a Clump reformed, here in the center of the room. "Okay," Nick says, super-excitement, the voice of a man who has very little time to speak, "clasp hands with the man to the right of you," and it looks like a broken chain of men trying to shake hands but failing, "and now with the man across from you," Nick says, and they do, and everyone is now connected. "Step forward," he says, "step back," and these men in shirt and tie are a mess in the center of the room, a tangled mess of limbs. Someone shrieks, then laughs. My foot! My arm! My eye! The "human knot," this exercise is called, and part of me hopes for injury, for frustration, for anger. For the dissolution of the group and a reprieve from my role in the colonization. Get out of the house, get out of my packed car, let me crash alone. But no luck, because when Nick says, "Now we've got to work together to get out of this knot and form a perfect circle, without ever losing grip of anyone," the chaotic screams and laughs cease, and Patrick calls out, carefully, voice finally booming the way I knew it would if he didn't restrain his vocal power, "We'll start slow, so make a note of whose hands you are holding," and soon they swirl about and some men duck while others climb halfway up backs and onto shoulders, and it takes more than twenty minutes, but they untie the Human Knot, a ring of men still

clasping hands, and they release and slap one another on the backs. Teamwork! Teamwork! they're saying.

Then Nick leads an icebreaker called "Trust Fall," where one brother stands atop a chair, closes his eyes, folds his arms over his chest, counts 1-2-3, and falls backward off the chair, straight back, straight down, *caught* by a clump of trusted brothers who will not let the man crash to the unforgiving ground. So similar to the hazing activity that Sam Anderson planned at New Mexico State, out on a tiny wooden bridge in the middle of a pecan farm.

Then an activity called "Two Truths and a Lie," and every man must tell two interesting facts about himself, and one fabrication, and everyone must guess what is true and what is untrue. I learn that Patrick owns a model train set in his basement back home, takes up the entire basement. I learn that Nick has a collection of old Matchbox cars, loves solving puzzles as stress relief. I learn that Bailey, a stout Irish kid from the South Side, is a nationally ranked Ultimate Frisbee player. I learn that Joe Graffeo won the state championship in 3-on-3 soccer, and that Tanner used to live in Saskatchewan. It is a collection of odd facts, and I want to believe it's all pointless, this icebreaker, but soon Eddie tells us a story about how his mother died, and these young men grip his shoulders as he cries, and someone—James or Joe or Jason—says he's kept a secret all his life…and *Nick*…Nick is expectant, hopeful about this secret…but no, I misjudged Nick. Nick is not hoping this kid is gay…he is just hoping that this kid has gained the courage to say—that he is now in an environment where he is comfortable, in a place like family, where he can tell us that he once ran away from home to escape abusive parents…

In hours, these young men will become a colony of Nu Kappa Epsilon.

After the icebreakers, Nick walks reluctantly to the back of the room and joins me where I lean against a sheet-covered wall. "Good job," I say to him, but I say it much too loud because I had more Jack Daniels than I thought, and suddenly the dim room, with these rippling white walls, feels like it is swaying, and I cover my mouth because I didn't have dinner and the smell of JD is heavy on my breath.

"Thanks," Nick says, but doesn't pay much attention to me.

Walter LaFaber takes Nick's former place, front-and-center before the seated men of the interest group. He stands impressively, the Marathon Man, his silver dress shirt tight over his gigantic torso, his tie perfect as it stripes the center of his chest, and everything about him begs attention and respect. Pants are not dirty, like mine. Shoes shine like the waxed hood of a brand-new Corvette.

"Gentlemen," LaFaber says, and the men in the room suddenly glow with deep pride (he loves to say this word, "*gentlemen*," because everyone who hears it feels well-regarded, as though they've earned something, they've made it, this ex-football star thinks they're *all right*), "you've taken your first step on the path to the rest of your lives." He stands with palms pressed together, fingers making a steeple. "You have entered the grand tradition of Nu Kappa Epsilon. And I want to be the first to congratulate you. Give yourselves a round of applause." He claps, long and powerfully, and the entire room takes his lead; but even though there are twenty men clapping, I can still hear LaFaber's hands smack together with a cracking helmet-to-helmet intensity. When the applause ends, Patrick sits on the edge of his seat as one might in the exciting moments preceding a band's emergence from backstage at their sold-out concert.

"I talk about grand traditions, but fraternities themselves have a long and sorted history," LaFaber says, and I already know what he's going to say because this is a speech I've heard

before. "Back in the 1800s, the very first fraternities engendered controversy for their exclusivity, but ultimately they were accepted and became quite popular at most universities." LaFaber moves from one side of the room to the next as he speaks, words weighted with bass when he speaks of tradition, words light and encouraging when he speaks of opportunity, never a false step, never a stutter in his voice, never an "um" or an "uh." He speaks for thirty minutes, forty minutes maybe, with the energy of a keynote speaker at a Fortune 500 company's annual awards gala, taking Patrick and Tanner and Bailey and Kevin through the history of fraternities and highlighting NKE's unique contribution and bright future. Selling the concept for any men that remain unsold. There have been three major movements in fraternity history, LaFaber says. First was the Popular Movement: in the early to mid-1800s, fraternities are new and popular, so students are quick to found their own groups. Next is the Revolutionary Movement: in the late 1800s and early 1900s, fraternities grow too exclusive, so splinter groups result, students revolting from the norm, starting something new. This is where NKE fits in, LaFaber says, and we're proud of this, of not being some arrogant monolith. Part of the grand tradition, he says, but willing to *adapt* to meet the needs of our students! The final movement is Multicultural, and LaFaber speaks with a well-rehearsed respect as he tells the group that even we—a group on the cutting-edge of diversity programming and social awareness-fell victim to race-exclusivity a century ago. As a result of discrimination, African-American fraternities formed, then Latino and Asian groups, and recently Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender groups. "The past century wasn't always pretty for fraternities or for Nike," LaFaber says, "but we have separated from the pack because we have always *adapted*." During World War II, for instance, NKE led a nationwide campaign to convince other fraternities-low on members, since most men were fighting

overseas—to share houses and meal plans, and lend out empty houses as barracks for the military.

"In the late '60s and early '70s," LaFaber says, "during the so-called Consciousness Revolution, recruitment numbers dwindled. Rebellious teens didn't want the structure of fraternity life. They wanted to burn flags and protest war. But we weathered that storm, too, and during the '80s, fraternities exploded in popularity." Due in large part to the late '70s release of Animal House, however, the incredible growth in fraternity membership (over 200 men per chapter, at some schools) led to wild parties and wilder hazing activities, which then led to an era of litigation. Lawsuits resulting from deaths, drunk driving accidents, emotional trauma, all targeting the National Fraternity HQs, whose bank accounts had ballooned. And the early '90s, LaFaber says, "when I was graduating from Alabama," was the beginning of a Rush Recession; Nirvana played on the radio incessantly, and Generation X had arrived on the college scene, bringing with them a cynical takeover of popular culture. The counter-culture, in fact, became the popular culture. Many national fraternities dried up, died. What had fraternities become by that point, after all, but drinking clubs? Joining a fraternity meant that you were part of the establishment, sure (which was already not hip), but it also meant that you could get hazed, beaten, killed, or that you could get sued.

"To recover from that era," LaFaber says, "Nu Kappa Epsilon took it upon ourselves to spearhead a fourth movement in fraternity history. We call it the *Leadership* Movement. Starting in 1994, when I took over as Director of Chapter Operations, we have been redefining the way that people look at fraternities. We have been offering more leadership seminars and workshops and programming than any other men's organization, Boy Scouts probably included. We are *reclaiming* fraternities from those who would destroy them," LaFaber says and he holds out his

hands to the room, to his transfixed audience. "I need to hear it from you all," he says. "Are you with us in this mission?"

And this is the same speech that LaFaber gave during the summer to us three consultants. If I had any doubts in my mind about the job then, they were dispelled. I was sold; I wanted to be LaFaber, yes. I believed in all of this. This entire marketing push. The Leadership Movement. And now, Patrick takes LaFaber's cue and stands and applauds, and LaFaber high-fives Patrick in the front row, high-fives several other men in the second row (each man unable to match the cracking power with which LaFaber's hand delivers contact), and I know—*know*—that they've been sold, too. That I couldn't change their minds, now, even if I tried.

Dr. Wigginton stands, tries to hide what are surely sore muscles and creaky joints from sitting so long in a metal fold-out chair. He brushes one sleeve of his deep brown blazer, then the next, as though he's spilled crumbs all over himself. He walks—stiffly, stiffly—to the front of the room, and it's difficult to gauge the reaction of the interest group when Dr. Wigginton first smiles; many of them flinch or shift (possibly because the smile produces so many new wrinkles in the doctor's already-rubbery face), but still the residual effects of LaFaber's speech are energetic and respectful smiles.

"Gentlemen, it is time not to talk of tradition, but to learn tradition," Dr. Wigginton says, straightening, stiffening. "It is time we stand and do what so many generations of Nikes have done before us." He says "stand" with a slight strain, perhaps thinking that standing is as difficult for these 20 year-old as it has become for him. "Gentlemen...it is time to bask in brotherhood...it is *time* to *sing*."

Patrick, in the front row of metal chairs, seems to suppress a laugh, looks over at Richard, who is already looking at Tommy to confirm that they've heard correctly. Sing? Bask in brotherhood? But this is one of Dr. Wigginton's signatures, his attempt to somehow infuse the current generation with some remnants, some fragments, of a bygone era when fraternities sang, literally sang, stood in wood-paneled chapter rooms and practiced hymns and brotherhood songs and serenades as though they were a Glee Club. These were *Leave it to Beaver* days, when college men really were Boy Scouts whose older brothers had just returned from World War II, when all of America was supposedly pure and innocent and galloping along toward the coming Camelot, in the days before fraternity singing meant the drunken "Ya-ho" chant ("I put my hands upon her toes, ya-ho! ya-ho!"), or the cheer of "Here's to brother Charlie, brother Charlie, brother Charlie! Here's to brother Charlie, who's with us tonight! He's happy, he's jolly, he's fucked up, by golly! So drink motherfucker, drink motherfucker, drink!" This singing, this is Dr. Wigginton's attempt to return to that innocence-songs, brotherhood songs. Imagine NKE national conferences and symposiums, imagine the doctor asking five hundred representatives from chapters across the country to stand. Imagine Jose and Sam from NMSU, James Neagle from Shippensburg, Adam Duke from Illinois, all of them, 21 year-olds with gangsta rap or punk rock bumping in their brains, asked to stand up tall and project: "Nu Kappa Epsilon, my brahhther-hood, Nu Kappa Epsilon, my fraahh-terrr-niteeee, how I love thee-eee, how I love my brahh-thers." Imagine the men squirming as they stand, mumbling, and Dr. Wigginton at a podium before this gigantic congregation, in an auditorium, arms raised just as he has them now in the main foyer, believing he has figured out how to *crush* the cynicism of the youth. *Song*! Erase all that they listen to, 50 Cent and Eminem, all that they watch, South Park and Jackass, all that they've seen, Clinton and Monica, the Columbia shuttle, 9/11, the mad proliferation of it all

through CNN and Fox News and the world wide web, erase it all with song. And return to the days of his own happiness and innocence.

"Repeat after me," Dr. Wigginton says now, "God bless my brothers. Okay, just this half of the room. Ahh, yes yes. Okay, now this half of the room, God bless my brothers. Yes! Okay, now together. Great, great!" And he is conducting the group, pointing to this man, to that man, to Patrick, to Tommy, and I'm hoping that their smiles are ironic, that they don't lose their cynicism, their critical edge, that maybe this will tip them all off—*get out while you can*!—and it won't be my fault...it will be Wigginton's fault. But Patrick gives an "awww, what the hell" laugh, hams it up, nudges Tommy, and they're absolutely terrible singers, dying cats, but they're loud and they're fun and they aren't sarcastic and—*fuck*—they might as well be 1950s Boy Scouts. "God bless my brotherhood, all together!" Dr. Wigginton says, raising his hands until they're in a testify, touch-the-sky position.

I stand in the back of the room; I stare at backs, at the gleaming, gel-hardened cowlicks; I register disbelief, but no one sees me. "Charles," someone whispers beside me suddenly, and it's LaFaber and—*shit*—I didn't even know he was in the room, and he says, "Could you come downstairs for a moment?"

I nod, follow LaFaber out of the foyer and down the stairwell to the basement, and seconds later, we're both standing in the dark, flickering hallway, stacks of sheet-covered chairs and tables reaching the ceiling. Candles lined everywhere, flames dancing, making this hallway—which leads both to the library ("The Thinking Room") and the cafeteria, where the ceremony will take place—look like an airport runway at night.

"I love when Dr. Wigginton sings," LaFaber whispers. "Don't you?"

Head pounding. All my world feels shaken. He can smell the Jack on my breath. I'm not even drunk, but he can smell the Jack. Face is a shadow, black eyes. He *knows*.

When I nod, he says in his deepest voice, "Listen, Charles. We've got to talk."

"We're in the middle of the retreat," I say. "I have to...I have to facilitate the chartering goals discussion in a couple minutes."

"That can wait," LaFaber says. "Dr. Wigginton will keep them singing for awhile, don't worry. They've only gone through one song."

"We don't...you know...need to be up there?"

"No. We have to talk."

"Well," I say, "well."

"Charles," he says, places that bone-crushing hand on my shoulder again.

"I just want you to know," I say and hold my hand over my mouth, feel the smell of liquor seeping through my fingers, feel all of my secrets seeping out, "that I appreciate all the opportunities you've given me, you know, this semester?"

"Charles," he says. "We want you to be the new Director of Chapter Operations."

From upstairs, there is a low chant of, "My braahhh-therrs," Gregorian and sad.

"Charles."

"What?" I ask. "You want me to what?"

"We've talked at length about this, the Alumni Council and myself. I am succeeding Dr. Simpson when he retires this December, which, as you know, will leave open the Director of Chapter Operations position. We would prefer to hire from within."

"Me? What about Nick?" I ask. "What about Brock?"

"Truthfully," LaFaber says, and the shiny scar on his forehead is reflecting the candle light, glowing amidst the shadows, "they make nice consultants, but they're hardly the kind of men I can count on at the Headquarters. Nick is soft, and Brock is headstrong. I could never convince Nick to close a chapter, for instance. And I could never control Brock. He'd become a monster, tearing up the countryside. Charles, simply put...and I'm not trying to be sentimental." Hand squeezing hard on my shoulder, and it's impossible to argue with him because I *know* it could get tighter. And I know that face could emerge from the shadows, and I don't want to see his eyes. "I know I can trust you," he says.

This doesn't seem possible, any of it.

"Working at the Headquarters, you're already part of a grand tradition, those plaques on the wall, those names under the conference table," he says, "but imagine it. Imagine the responsibility, the role you'll play. Director of Chapter Operations."

I smile roughly, and I worry that my face looks more damaged than happy. This is what he's been hinting at for the past several weeks. A job, a real job. A salary in the 40's...the 50's...perhaps even the 60's. Lafaber is well-paid, wears fantastic suits, owns a condo in downtown Indy, takes several vacations a year. The 70's, the 80's? Consultants aren't paid shit, but directors? This is LaFaber's life...a life that is going to become much better now that he'll make close to 200-grand as the Executive Director of the National Fraternity. Since taking the job, LaFaber has re-invented Fraternity for a new generation, and even if there is so much inconsistency in his vision...a permanent job, my own office—an office, no fucking cubicle and absolute control over 125 chapters of NKE, over my own batch of consultants. Money, respect. And I don't have to believe in a thing...just be a good business manager, run the

numbers, treat the fraternity chapters like franchises. And the job security. Keep the franchises alive and keep the job.

"In order for this to work," LaFaber says, "we need total honesty between us."

"Of course," I say.

"I need to know where *this* came from," LaFaber says and pulls out his PDA from the inside of his black suit jacket, clicks a button, and a picture of *me* covers the entire screen. It is the picture of me at New Mexico State, in my boxer shorts in Maria's room. It is the picture that Maria sent to me over email: LaFaber has it now, has it downloaded as an image file on his PDA, and the two of us—in this dark hallway in the Illinois basement, lit barely by weak candles on the floor and tall candles atop stacks of sheet-covered tables, and upstairs, the Retreat goes on, the singing and chanting—stand no more than six inches apart, squinting into the glow of the screen, soaking in the photo and all that it says about me. "About a week ago," he says, "I received an email from a sorority consultant at New Mexico State."

"A sorority consultant?" I manage.

"Alpha Alpha sorority," LaFaber says, still business-like. No emotion. "She claims to have received it from an irate young woman at the school who told her that this was—pictured a Nu Kappa Epsilon Educational Consultant."

"Fuck," I say before I can stop myself.

Fuck. I just said fuck.

"The picture quality is poor," LaFaber says. "Poor lighting. Pixilated. It's a cheap camera phone photo. That face, staring into the camera, it could be anyone. But...this young woman has a long and involved story that a consultant named Charles"—he pauses, looks me in the eyes, lets my own name sink in—"took her to some bars, got her drunk, and came back to her dorm

room where the night progressed sexually. The young woman asked the sorority consultant if this was a violation of any national rules, a fraternity Headquarters employee sleeping with undergraduates. What do you think the sorority consultant told this girl?"

"No dating, no drinking, no drugs," I recite softly.

"Correct. If the story was true, there would be major consequences. I thanked the sorority consultant for calling me, for notifying me. Who did I send to New Mexico State, Charles? Who was the consultant that traveled to Las Cruces?"

I stare into the photo. "That was me," I say. "I went down there."

"Interesting," he says.

"Are there..." I start, and can't stop myself. "Are there other photos?"

"The consultant sent me several images," LaFaber says. He scratches the back of his neck, the fingernails leaving red lines on the raw flesh recently shaved in a haircut. "I haven't looked through them all because I wanted to speak with you personally. This image here, this could be anyone at any time. I'm willing to believe that. But here's your big test, Charles.

Honesty. Trust. What's the story? Is this you?"

Singing upstairs.

Candles flickering, casting shadows.

PDA before me. *Me* before me.

"The story is," I say, "I had dinner with a girl cause it was the chapter's Etiquette Dinner." I break eye contact, look into the screen, into the photo. I'm trapped. Packed in and trapped.

"You fucked her, didn't you?" he asks.

Singing. Jack on my breath, and I don't breathe.

Grip on my shoulder again, fingers clamped down.

"Ha ha!" LaFaber says. "You should see your face, Charlie! You should see the look on your face!"

I look up, look into LaFaber's face, and his eyes are bright and he's smiling. This is, perhaps, the first time I've seen real delight—not just a performative look—in LaFaber's face, and his scar is shining still, and it looks like he's just gotten away with murder, and delight looks more frightening than any other emotion he's ever displayed.

"You got a little action down in Mexico, didn't you?" LaFaber asks.

"I...we had dinner?"

"Stop it, stop it, Charles, you're killing me," he says, hand still on my shoulder. "It's all right. I was just fucking around. I did look through the other photos, actually, and my God, I didn't know you had that kind of pull. Good for you."

"You looked the photos," I say. "You saw everything?"

"Yo, Charles," someone says from the cafeteria, down the hall. It's Donovan, already dressed in his initiation robe, and once again chomping an apple. "Any pizza left over? We're hungry as hell. Didn't get to eat."

"It's, uh," I say, "it's cold."

"We'll take whatever we can get," Donovan says. "Heat it over the candles."

"Help yourself, then," I say. "There are a few boxes left in the foyer."

Donovan disappears.

"It won't be mentioned again," LaFaber says. "Pictures deleted, forgotten. I'm just glad to know that you've actually got a set. Good for you, good for you. Got a little ass out on the road." Hand on my shoulder, steering me toward the stairwell. "So now, when we go upstairs for your presentation," he says, "I want to see sparks fly. Because you aren't just a consultant anymore. You'll be here on campus with this colony all Spring, and after that? Big things for you." I'm picturing those new business cards, "Lead Consultant," front and back covered completely, no white space, no opportunity to imagine something else. I've lost all control. He knows everything, and he wants me to know that he knows, and he'll keep those photos, yes. He is the Executive Director, and he needs someone who will do what he's told. "You're somebody now, Charles. Director of Chapter Operations. You're my top guy."

Minutes later, I'm upstairs, I'm in the main foyer, and I'm in my shirt and tie and the cuffs of my pants are still dirty, shoes still scuffed but I don't care, just look out into the audience—the interest group that I must fashion into a fraternity chapter. They just sang for forty another?"-so I look down at my chapter goal-setting sheet, at the numbers, and here, now, is when I should finally tell them GET OUT! But I can't let myself think like that. Business, business. Career. This is it, I'm thinking, my life, my college degree and my professional experience, it's all led to this moment, and I say, "Now for the moment you've been waiting for, gentlemen," and they wait, and I say, "In just a few short months, you're going to be a chartered chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon. In the next thirty minutes, we're going to set the goals that will get you to that point." And I'm consumed as I deliver the presentation...consumed...the words, they come easily, and I don't see individuals before me, just a smudge of faces as I speak, blank like pencil erasers, one giant mass. These men all wear dress shirts, and soon-after initiation-their dress shirts will be adorned with glints of gold, the brotherhood pins, and then they will all live together in a single house. A team, where before there had been only individuals, that sounds

nice, but at some point I realize I'm speaking above them, looking not at their faces but at the ceiling, as though I'm gazing heavenward or somewhere equally impossible, because it isn't that they're a team, it's that I don't want to see their faces, but the words come so easily, and the smudge of the room trusts me, nods as it listens.

"We hope that our passion as a National Fraternity matches your own," I am saying, and the second I realize I am talking, I nearly slip, stall, and I look at faces, but all I have to do is *yes*, stare beyond them into the whiteness of the walls and the words roll, like I've re-inserted the keys into the ignition, *turned*, and now the groaning car is running smoothly again, going back up the hill and not downward toward the black cliffs, no worries, and I'm saying but barely conscious of it, "We hope we share your passion in creating what will quite possibly be the best fraternity on campus. Already, we've got a room full of top-quality students, highly involved. The next step is to set those goals that are going to take you there...take you to the top."

Let me tell you about our mission, yes. Let's talk about goals, yes.

So intoxicated by these ideas, these kids agree with all I say.

"75 men is a great recruitment goal," I say, and they nudge one another, nod.

Yes, yes! 75 men!

"We can be a great fraternity," I say. "Gigantic and great."

Gigantic, gigantic, yes!

"Let's fill this house by the end of Spring," I say. Yes, yes!

And it's so easy. They let me set their goals.

Breakthrough moment. Oh, I might not be genuine about anything anymore, but I'll be a fantastic Director of Chapter Operations.

* * *

After my goal-setting workshop, I stand inside the library, the Thinking Room, all white sheets and candles, the Reflection Book at my feet; the Initiation Ceremony will begin in minutes, and Nick has walked upstairs to grab Patrick, to bring him down here, where Nick will knock three times and I will open the door and invite Patrick inside to write in this book. All according to script. Point of no return. Once a Nike, always a Nike.

I've got to stand here and wait. My head has gone achy now, pounding-shaking-worldaskew compression, and I have only minutes—*minutes*—so I creep to the back of the room, lift the white sheet and expose—ah yes!—the bottle of amber JD, and I grab it and pop the top and all night I'm going to be in this basement, supervising the Iowa brothers, and I need to stay loose, so I take one fiery sip, then another, cough, hear footsteps outside, shove the bottle back under the sheet...wait...*nothing*! Grab the bottle again. Chug. Replace it under the sheets. Silence. I stand. Silence. My head isn't perfect now, no, but it doesn't feel smothered, at least.

So I wander around the room, finally settle at the Reflection Book; I flip the cover, flip past several laminated pages of reproduced 1910 reflections, come to a blank page where Patrick will be asked to write his reflections. It's been years since I looked at the Reflection Book, and I can't remember what I wrote. Two weeks ago, I could barely come up with an answer when Brock and Nick asked me why I had joined the fraternity. Grand tradition, LaFaber said. Name plaques on the conference room table. Those are things that kept me around, that made the job attractive, but not reasons why I joined.

Head wonderfully light now.

Blank page in the Reflection Book. Wonderfully light.

I flip back to the reproduction of C. Anthony Croke's page, and all is written in a stilted, turn-of-the-century prose, special care taken with the handwriting so that it nearly achieves

calligraphy. "The very core of a man is his search for family," Croke begins. And yeah, that probably sounds similar to what I wrote, except mine (as a freshman in college at the turn of a different century), might have been phrased differently: "It's so fucking cool to have brothers!" Nearly a century separates our college experiences, sure, but all of those basic needs that they wanted to meet by creating a fraternity were probably the same as mine: companionship, a family away from home. As exciting as the freedom of college can be, absolute independence for the first time is intimidating.

"A man mustn't brave these unkind elements alone," Croke writes.

Head is light, but clear now. Absolutely clear. Well, Croke, I don't know much about the daily lives of eighteen year-old college students in early 1900s South Carolina, but I do know that when I left for college in 2000, I didn't know shit about "unkind elements"; I knew how to dump my clothes into a laundry machine, drop a couple quarters into the slots, drip a cup full of detergent over the clothes, close the lid and hit "wash," but I didn't know why my old baseball shirt shrank, why my jeans felt so rough, why my black "EU" shirt seemed to immediately fade. I do know that, because I lived in the dorms my freshman year and ate at the campus meal plan, at age eighteen I knew more about mixing drinks than about cooking chicken. I do know that, because the dorms had cleaning crews who scrubbed the mildew from the community showers and vacuumed the crumbs and candy bar wrappers I left on the floors, I had no concept of "housing accountability." Because my parents enrolled me in study skills seminars as a kidduring *elementary* school—and because I took a mandatory "Freshman success" workshop at EU, I knew more about good test-taking tricks than about how to actually learn. Oh shit, the things I could write in the blank pages of this Reflection Book now. College life is a Banyan Tree of unending roots, vines, and branches, endless resources for the students who grow with it. Everything is within walking distance, from health centers to restaurants and meal halls and study centers and bookshops and coffee shops and computer labs and copy centers and gift shops and hair cutteries. It is a world where all basic needs are met effortlessly, so all that's left to worry about is companionship. Forget about "unkind elements."

At 1910 Carolina Baptist, no one flashed those young men a glossy, 10-page, nationallyproduced Nu Kappa Epsilon "Rush Brochure." No one promised *them* 125 chapters nationwide. No one promised *them* a National Headquarters. National leadership conferences. Educational Consultants and alcohol workshops. Regional conclaves. When I joined NKE at Edison, an hour from my hometown and separated from high school friends who had all chosen FSU and UCF and UF, Nu Kappa Epsilon promised me companionship, but I didn't join for *just* that, I realize now. With this fraternity, I wouldn't need to search out new friends: they were provided. I wouldn't need to plan my own social life: activities were arranged on a daily, weekly, monthly basis, just like high school. And when I moved out of the dorms, I wouldn't need to find an apartment and learn how to take care of myself: the fraternity house was provided. I wouldn't even need to search for a job: it would be provided. Everything provided, provided, provided. The structure of my world depended upon this. This is why I joined a fraternity.

And look where it got me. All of us, look where we're at because of the endless resources of college and fraternities. The whole fucking Millennial Generation that Dr. Vernon writes his articles about. We're all programmed and programmed to achieve and compete, we're all super-educated in technology and team sports and social activities...we've had all our basic needs provided for us, all our lives...but where's our direction after college? We can create a wireless network through our house that connects printers, televisions, computers, and cell phones...but damned if we know how to fix a toilet that won't stop running...damned if we know enough

about "basic skills" and "unkind elements" to ever be independent, to ever be self-sufficient, to ever really know what's going on around us and to ever form our own values and to ever be worthwhile. We fall into temporary jobs which will fill our days with the same structure that has controlled us all our lives. We join fraternities that have existed for centuries and unquestioningly believe manufactured concepts like the Marathon Man, participate in dangerous decades-old hazing traditions. We are controlled—*I* am controlled—by these institutions because we don't know what else to do.

"A man mustn't brave these unkind elements alone," Croke wrote.

And, as I scan Croke's calligraphic text in the Reflection Book, I come to the famous line which actually serves as the title-page epigraph in the *Marathon* pledge book. Legend maintains that, at a clandestine meeting behind the stained-glass windows and heavy oak walls of the Carolina Baptist College Chapel in December 1910, the eight young founders of Nu Kappa Epsilon met, wearing the white silk robes of the church, and discussed everything from possible fraternity mottos to possible initiation rituals. It was at this meeting that the white carnation was chosen as the flower of the fraternity, as it represented the purity of mind that each brother must exhibit. Founder C. Anthony Croke, the son of a wealthy Charleston family whose fortune included lands from Carolina to Kansas, proposed the design of the brotherhood pin that all members of the fraternity—from that moment forward—would wear throughout their lives. Preserved in this replica of Croke's 1910 reflections are these now-historic words: "What I envision is an emblem, a badge, to be worn by our brothers with pride. It should sparkle with the radiance of a decision well made. It should be a proud symbol of the new family to which that young gentleman has willingly entered."

Croke went on to become a Dean at Northwestern University in Chicago, where he never attempted to start a new chapter of Nu Kappa Epsilon. Perhaps the concept of a fraternity grew beyond his imagination. After all, in that historic address, Croke used the word "family." And now, all of these years later, the pledge pin is manufactured at an international "favor" company in Columbus, Ohio, the same company that manufactures pins for seventeen other national fraternities and ten sororities, the same company that specializes in slapping together the bright and useless prizes that one would claim with 150 tickets from a night of ski ball at Family Fun World. The clasps on the pins often break. The painted surface of the pin is often sloppy, colors outside the lines. But every member of the fraternity is required to buy and wear a pledge pin. With each new pledge pin purchase, the National Headquarters earns \$2.50 in pure profit from this Columbus-based company. The requirement, the profit, helping to sustain jobs for Walter LaFaber and Dr. Simpson and Charles Washington. Fraternity as business. From the simple idea, a century ago, of "family," we have created *the need* for houses, for workshops, for programs, for conferences, for conclaves, for alumni advisors, for insurance, for a National Headquarters, for consultants; we have created the need for ourselves, and in order to continue existing, that need must be sustained. And so it is required.

These structured lifestyles I drift between, they masquerade as "nurture" or "protection" or "resources" or "programming," but they are just systems of dependence that have kept me from making any of my own decisions, from becoming truly human. And now I've just done the same to 20 other men who did have a real opportunity to break free. I should have chosen students over Headquarters, values over bottom-line, whatever the consequences, because then, only then, will I be…human. But this…this *real* breakthrough moment…has come too late.

And I grab the bottle of Jack Daniels again, chug hard, and I close my eyes and hold the bottle and run one hand through my hair and nothing's shaking right now because all I see is darkness.

And then there are three heavy, wooden knuckle-knocks at the library door.

I drop the bottle, a mighty glass-on-concrete clank, but only the stem of the bottle chips, and while a massive spurt of whiskey shoots onto the floor, I'm able to sop it up quickly with the sheet. I shove the bottle underneath the sheet, also, stand and scan the room and make sure I haven't done anything stupid in the past couple minutes—head light, very light—haven't accidentally tripped over any candles or bumped into the carefully arranged framed photos of the founders. One candle has burnt awkwardly, the wax melting down far on just one side, and it looks unstable. But it's fine.

I go to the door, open it.

Nick stands in the doorway with Patrick Macintosh, whose combed-back blonde hair seems to be the only source of real light in this dark, flickering basement; his tie is tight at his neck, and he's got a look on his face that is a cross between elation and fear, the sort of look that is only possible when you know that you are about to enter into a lifelong oath. I'm lost in that look, can't even remember what I'm supposed to do now.

"I present to you a pledge in our fraternity, ready to become a brother," Nick says.

"Right," I say. "Right. Is it of your own free will that you seek brotherhood?" According to script. I nearly burp as I say it, have to hold my hand to my mouth for a moment. This is one of only two lines that I speak in the Initiation Ceremony, one I will repeat twenty times over the course of the night, as each young man enters the Thinking Room, and somehow I nearly forgot it.

"It is," Patrick says, voice booming in its full power. His hands are crossed before him at his belt buckle, one clasping the next, and they shake gently. For just a moment, a split-second, he rises on his heels and takes a deep breath, expending nervous energy. "It is," he says again, "definitely."

"If it is of your own free will," I say, hold out my hand to indicate the Reflection Book, "enter the Thinking Room, and record your reflections here, where every other brother of Nu Kappa Epsilon writes his thoughts on the eve of initiation." This is my second (and final) line, and my head is so light that I try to wonder whether I should have done this, or if I should have sabotaged the ceremony, because I made a mistake and now I can correct it—oh, like always, I'm making the *wrong fucking decisions*—

"We'll leave you to reflect," Nick says from the doorway and motions for me to follow him out into the hallway. "We'll be back in fifteen minutes. And if your mind is pure and your thoughts unchanged, we will then take you to be initiated as a brother."

* * *

Nick and I stand outside the library in the candle-lit basement hallway; twenty feet away, past this airport runway of candle flames and these valley walls of white sheets, the ten brothers of the University of Iowa wait in ritual robes in the hollowed-out cavern of a cafeteria. Upstairs, we can hear faint traces of activity from the other 19 members of the interest group, many of whom will wait in the main foyer all night until their names are called and Nick walks them down to the Thinking Room.

"You smell like bourbon," Nick says.

"I can't imagine why," I say.

"So none of this bothers you, does it, Charles?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say, because maybe an hour ago, I should have listened when Nick talked. But it's too late, now.

"You just read from a script," Nick says. "You read a print-out of some Headquarters goals, and *poof*, there's their fraternity. What's the point?"

"So you didn't get what you want. Welcome to the club."

"You got something you wanted, though. Didn't you? Director of Chapter Operations?" I must look shocked—how *did* he find out so quickly?—because he says, "You really think I didn't know? So fucking obvious."

"Okay, yeah," I say. "LaFaber offered, and I guess I took the position."

"How that happened, I'll never know. Why you agreed, I'll never know."

"It's a job," I say. "I wanted a job. A salary. A real professional job."

"Good for you, then."

"My own apartment, Nick," I say. "Job security, too. Shit, I don't even *need* grad school. Boom, straight out of college and I've got a job making, what? More than most of my friends, probably. Boom. Do you understand how big this is for me? This is big. I mean, this is what you *go* to college for, Nick. Not to change the fucking world. To get a job, that's why you waste away in classrooms and cubicles, Nick. And I've got it. A job. And it's not a shit job, either, not a boring, mind-numbing monkey job. This is big."

"Congratulations," Nick says. "You think it's an opportunity, I think you're stuck." A staple pops from one of the sheets on the wall.

"Stuck, whatever," I say. "Stuck, *fuck* you. Why are you on my case?"

"Stuck as LaFaber's little bitch, forever," Nick says and points at the stairwell. "He asks you to go upstairs and tell these kids to tear down this house and build a new one, and you would do it. A little *bitch*. Your whole life, now, you'll sit in your office and wait for him to tell you what to do. You're stuck, Charles. This is it, and you *are* going to waste away. Tomorrow morning, you know what you have to do? You have to tell this group—this colony, by then—all about their financial responsibilities. Their insurance fees, their initiation fees, their rent for this house, which—by the way, they have no choice about this—they've got to fill in Spring."

Strong, clicking footsteps on the stairs, dress shoes against wood floorboards.

"What are you two doing down here?" Walter LaFaber whispers, full shadowy frame filling the black opening of the stairwell. "Arguing? I can hear you from upstairs. This is their *Initiation* Ceremony. Keep your voices down."

He steps out of the stairwell, comes closer, and now we three stand in a circle in the basement hallway, Nick's eyes small and his face hard, my eyes wide and my face putty-loose. We've just smacked each other around, and we've both come out as losers. But LaFaber is tall as always, thick as always, imposing in black and silver. Not just a boss in name only, but so large physically that he is my superior in that respect, too. All three of us stand like this for a moment, unsure what to say or do, and all is quiet; the whiskey has made my head light, yes, but I can hear the blood thumping in my head, faster faster, the thump of my tires against gravel? No, no, I'm airborne, I thought I was driving back up the hill but instead I've driven my Explorer off the cliff already, I'm flying over the dark pit, that's why I can only picture blackness—I'm *in* the dark pit, here in this basement—and I'm light but I'm heavy, I'm going to fall, I'm going to crash, all is dark around me, below me, falling falling, my stuffed Explorer no longer shaking, just falling in darkness, but soon there's going to be a mighty fucking explosion when my Explorer meets the jagged valley floor, fire, and there will be light then, won't there? Plenty of it. Falling, falling, and a sheet is falling, just feet away from the three of us, a white sheet's staples

have just popped off at the top and it is falling halfway down the wall but Nick notices and grabs it before it touches a series of tall candles, and LaFaber has his hand on my shoulder, tight, and is saying, "Focus, Charles, this is a long night," and he has my other hand stretched out and is placing a brotherhood pin in my palm, and I am supposed to walk into the Thinking Room and give this pin to Patrick, and LaFaber is saying, "Charles. *Charles*. Focus."

"What I envision is an emblem," Croke said about this brotherhood pin I hold, and it is an emblem, but it doesn't quite symbolize what Croke intended, no. This pin, this piece of slapdash jewelry, this will mark the start of Patrick's life in the Nu Kappa Epsilon family, but the \$2.50 profit for the Headquarters will mark the start of a business arrangement that he may never escape.

Long night. Falling, falling.

Long night, darkness, long night, long life, slipping, and no, I am not stuck.

Not stuck in this falling Explorer.

That image—pulling up to my parents' house, father in the driveway—might still become a reality, but it will become a reality because I decided to make it so.

I have been stuck all my life, but I am not stuck now and I will make sure these young men are not stuck either, and I brush LaFaber's hand off my shoulder with much effort, open the door to the library, the Thinking Room, and as Patrick turns to face me, his pen still in his hand and his scrawl in the Reflection Book unfinished, I drop the brotherhood pin on the floor. LaFaber might be following me, might not be, but I'm not about to let him stop me now.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I ask Patrick.

Perhaps thinking that this is scripted, he places the pen into the center of the Reflection Book, stands, crosses his arms respectfully before himself once again, and says in his restrained deep voice: "I do." He glances down at the pin in the middle of the floor, then steps forward to meet me at the door, which I am holding open, and then looks as if he is about to reach down and grab the brotherhood pin.

"No, I mean it," I say. "Are you sure? This is supposed to be an opportunity for *you*, not just for a National Fraternity with bills to pay."

Patrick doesn't respond, doesn't seem to understand, looks beyond me to-

"You heard him, Charles," LaFaber says from behind me. He puts his arm around my shoulder, his gigantic arm, and pulls me out of the doorway. Yanks me backward effortlessly, fingers entrenched in my flesh. "He's made his decision," LaFaber says as the door closes slowly, quietly, Patrick's face and bright blonde hair visible, then only half-visible in the slit of the closing door, then nothing, and then—when the door is shut—LaFaber says under his breath, "What the fuck are you thinking?"

"This is all wrong," I say and grab for the door.

"Charles," LaFaber says in the sort of voice a father would use when reprimanding a child for pissing on the toilet seat, and although he's said only a single word, it immediately infuriates me. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"It's not me," I say. "All of this is wrong, what we're doing. These goals."

"I don't think I understand, Charles," LaFaber says and although his eyes are squinted in concentration, I know that he does understand what I'm talking about, that he understands that I could say anything right now and that he can't silence or control me and that I've finally snapped and become human . "We have certain standards we strive for," he says. "I know this is the first colonization you've been a part of, but trust me...do you want this job, or what? Don't ruin a good thing."

"Trust you?" I say. "This is not right, Walter. You know it."

The library door opens and Patrick has followed us into the hallway, stands motionless, watching the two of us, confused. Maybe this is an act, he's thinking. Maybe this is part of the initiation ceremony. Hell, he's seen a thousand infomercials. Maybe he thinks I'm trying to haggle LaFaber down by twenty bucks, and throw in a free fraternity house bean bag. Certainly, he hasn't heard our every word, but our loud voices have been enough to draw Donovan from the cafeteria. He stands at the far end of the hallway, dressed in a green silk robe, and Nick is running down the hall to meet him, to perhaps explain away my behavior.

"Charles," LaFaber again says in that annoyed father voice, "this discussion is not appropriate here and now." Voice softer: "Act like a fucking pro*fess*ional."

I have a feeling...maybe two weeks ago, two months ago, I would have said "um" or "uh, okay" or something similarly gutless, but the tone LaFaber uses now, the *tone*, as though I am not a college graduate, as though I have not spent an entire semester on the road, traveling, as though I have not pored over the financial numbers for every chapter and for the National Headquarters, as though I haven't thought about this at all, stood up to Adam Duke just a week ago, as though I am simply some nuisance of a freshman frat guy...no, two months ago he would have let me believe it, that I am dependent on him, but not now. Two weeks ago, I would have looked at the beer spattered across the ceiling fan blades and across the ceiling itself, and I would have smoothed the paint brush over the chunky stain, allowed myself the comfort of a temporary solution, but my head is clear now, and I will not paint over the stain and watch as something gruesome and monstrous grows and evolves under the paint. Now is the time for soap and water. Now is the time to clean, to think long-term. And so, when I finally speak, I am no longer simply speaking for the benefit of Patrick Macintosh and the other young men in this house, but also for

my own. "Forget this," I say to Patrick in the doorway. "Forget this whole fucking thing. Don't play into this, Patrick. You're too good for this."

"You've lost your mind," LaFaber says to me, and his voice is different now that he knows we're being watched. He turns to face Patrick. "Maybe it would be best if we took a break. Charles, you can grab a soda, grab some fresh air. I think something's come over you. Cabin fever in this house." Hand on my shoulder, still, moving me—

"Something's come over me?" I say. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Charles, please," LaFaber says, "watch your language."

"We've deceived them, Walter. You, me, the entire National Fraternity."

"How many times do we need to go over this?" LaFaber says softly, from the back of his throat. "To function as a National Fraternity, with all of the resources we provide, you need to fulfill certain numerical objectives, cold as that may sound."

"They never asked for this house," I say. "They never asked for those resources. We're the ones who come in and make sure they learn our traditions, who make sure they get out of their dorm contracts so they can move into the house. We're just using them, same way we're using kids all over the country to preserve this fucking fraternity like some museum of memories. Wasn't college good enough for you, Walter?"

"You've gone crazy," LaFaber says, and there's something about his voice. That fatherly fucking voice. So I push him, push his hand off me and push him in the chest. Takes all my strength, and he barely budges, moves about a foot and a half, but I'm free of his hands, and I have room to breathe.

"What was that?" he says. "Don't touch me."

"Fuck you," I say and before I can even finish that simple sentence, his arms have shot forward and he's shoved me back and I stumble backwards ten feet and bump into the wall and I nearly drop but I spin to keep balance, my foot tangling in excess sheet. Amazingly, though, I don't fall to the floor; I stand tall and I kick the sheet from off my shoe. Just yards away, Patrick is watching all of this, but he's gone immobile. How can he make sense of what he's seeing? How can he even form a reaction? He knows LaFaber only from the presentation he watched earlier in the night, and until moments ago, he thought I was the Marathon Man, that I believed in the mission I was selling him. "I want you to see something, Patrick," I say, and we lock eyes. "I want you to see what's underneath these sheets. I want you to see what we've been hiding." But I can't tell if he knows that what I will show will be devastating for the future he's imagined for himself. I can't tell if he wants me to stop, if he'd rather paint over the stain.

I grab hold of the white sheet behind me, a full clump of linen in each of my closed fists, and now I look at LaFaber and I've never seen him like he is now, traps flexed, armpits of his dress shirt damp, eyes like those of a linebacker hunting a quarterback, and he stalks toward me. There is a ripe smell of anger on him, I think, an empty smell, as though the once-opulent scent of his cologne has been consumed by fire and sweat. And I tear this single sheet of white linen loose and expose the scarred walls, the wood paneling that has been chipped and scratched, a gaping hole rising up from the floorboards and then thinning into a crack which travels all the way to the ceiling and beyond. "Here it is," I say to Patrick. "This place should be condemned, and we're telling you that this place is immaculate. We're telling you to move right in."

And now LaFaber is just inches from me and he raises a hand—he could break my nose, break my eye sockets, my whole face, in one quick punch, and I just *shoved* this guy—but he isn't looking to punch me, just grab me so that he can escort me upstairs or outside, so that he

can smooth all of this over and pretend that I'm just some recluse employee and the show can still go on now that I'm gone, and so I don't flinch or duck, just back away from his grip, almost trip over the bunched-up sheet on the floor.

"Where are you going?" he says, his hand stretched out for me. "Get back here."

"Don't touch me," I say and I back down the hallway but now I am losing my balance, and LaFaber nearly trips over the sheet, too, but he still lurches toward me, gigantic fingers spread. Somewhere in the hallway, I hear Patrick say, "My God," because another sheet has fallen, and then another, domino-effect-style, and I think he's realizing the full extent of the house damages, and I know now that LaFaber isn't just grasping for *me* anymore. I can see in his shaded face-that clean headshot that has been printed in so many leadership magazines, lightning bolt scar on his forehead shining—an accumulation of the many places he's been, ten years as an influential figure in Nu Kappa Epsilon, first a consultant, then a director, now the Executive Director. I can see the University of Illinois in the shadows, in his anger, but I can also see the many other leadership retreats he's facilitated, the many initiation ceremonies over which he's presided, the \$100-a-plate alumni banquets at Cornell and the box-lunch afternoon workshops at the University of Arizona, the presentations and lectures he's given before the hundreds of undergraduate members who gather at our massive annual conferences. I can see my own schedule, Pittsburgh to Shippensburg to Saint Joseph's to New Mexico State to Texas Tech, all connected like some NKE map in the blood vessels at the outer edges of his eyes, all the world in LaFaber's darkened face, all his world, and I can see it so clearly as he steps toward me quicker now, quicker, sheet under my feet catching on my shoe, slithering along with me, something hot on my ankle, and I can see all the world that LaFaber has constructed...the suspensions, the colonizations, the hush-hush, the wink-wink, the money, the empire over which

he is set to take the throne when Dr. Simpson steps down and fades into the history books, all the world, the mission that LaFaber himself crafted with Dr. Wigginton, the "Leadership Movement" as he called it, the idea of the Marathon Man, the "Do It!" program and the Circles of Danger, the workshops and programs he wrote as simply as he did my travel schedule, the bureaucracy he pieced together to make himself relevant and indispensable to an organization that was once so tiny, intimate...the empire of Nu Kappa Epsilon in his eyes as he grasps for me, and I slap his hand away and the black seems to overtake his eyes, and there is no dream in those eyes, no flashes of promise lighting his face as I'm sure C. Anthony Croke must have had...no glimmer of selflessness, as there is in Nick Bennett's eyes...just LaFaber's black face and jagged scar, and now a thick crunching grip on my shoulder as he tries to hold me because I still take steps backward, sheet dragging along with my foot.

Fingers deep in my shoulder, and all *my* world is moving jerky-quick, like I'm watching a scratched DVD, moments missing, and I am no longer in the Thinking Room where the world was ponderous and I had time.

But I'm slipping now as I step backwards more quickly, slipping in the tangles of sheets that I've dragged along with me for ten feet, twenty, and my back is almost against the wall, no escape, and LaFaber still grips my shirt, very nearly holds me up, but I stumble and my weight is too much—

-and I freefall-

-and I spill onto the floor-

white sheets collapsing around me because so many of them fell after I tore down the sheet for Patrick's sake, but I've accidentally yanked so many more of them free of the weak staples that bound them to the walls. I've yanked them from the stacks of chairs and tables, have been yanking them as I backed away from LaFaber carelessly, and all I can see is white, sheets over my body and sheets over my face, but there is a growing heat on my ankles, on my pants...

Here on the floor where I've tumbled to a rest, a boy in a cocoon, the white sheets are everywhere and LaFaber is just a dark image, a smudge, somewhere out there on the other side of the sheet that covers my face, and the figure backs away from me now, and someone is saying, "Stomp it out! Stomp it out!" and they can't be talking about me, stomp *me*?, and when I thrash my way out from under the sheets, hot hot, all I see is red, now, not white, because my pants cuff is glowing, and down the hall, Nick is kicking at a ring of fire that's appeared on one of the white sheets that still covers a stack of chairs.

A hole appears in the middle of the ring of fire—the sheet has literally been consumed and the ring grows outward greedily, sheet disappearing, and LaFaber says, "Where's the fire extinguisher, for Christ's sake? The sprinklers?" And even though I am kicking my leg about, pressing it against the floor, trying to end the flame's progress on my pants, I am comforted to know that order has slipped from LaFaber's grasp.

Red red red. But order—structure—is slipping everywhere.

I kick my burning leg against the wall, against another sheet, and my pants still sizzle, smoke, but the flame has died. The wall behind me, though, is burning, as is the wall across from me, and the sheets that cover the floor. The room has now fully bloomed into flame, in every direction, several candles having been knocked over as I backed away from LaFaber, as the sheets were torn from the chairs and tables, as all the basement was seemingly rearranged, and

now the fiery hole in the center of one sheet, having spread outward in every direction, has just spilled onto another sheet, and puffs of smoke issue from the fire immediately, and the Iowa brothers scatter out of the cafeteria because the fire has spread inside there, too, and they stomp and stomp, but there is too much red, too much smoke; I stand and immediately begin coughing, and I see Donovan tear away one sheet from the wall, but there is another, and a fresh puff of hot, stinging smoke. Sheets sizzling, pieces of flaming sheets drifting throughout the room, floating, specks of fire falling into thick fire, and soon the basement is all smoke and coughing and glowing bed sheets, a valley inferno, and the fire is climbing walls and taking shape on the stacks of wood tables and sneaking into the holes in the walls where we can't see it anymore, and there is no hope for this basement, and we all hurry to the stairwells, hurry up the stairs, bumping into one another because the smoke is heavy and we can't see.

Then, as I climb the stairs, the world goes from smoke-gray and fire-red to yellow, muted yellow, the overhead lights of the main foyer, and it hurts to open my eyes so I keep them closed and cough, and it's bodies pressed against one another, ties and dress shirts and blazers, and I'm holding onto someone and it might be Nick or it might be Patrick, but it sure as hell isn't LaFaber, and the foyer is humid with sweat and close bodies, with brothers from the University of Iowa and the interest group members from here at Illinois, and Dr. Wigginton and LaFaber and all of the older Illinois alumni who have shown, hot breath filling the room as so many men scream that the house is on fire, someone call the fucking fire department, hot, and I cough—

—but seconds later, somehow, I'm standing outside of the house in the cold Illinois midnight, and what had before been cramped quarters is now an open front lawn, everyone spread out, some crawling, breathing heavy, panting. Cuttingly cold air.

Someone yells about his suitcase. Second floor, second floor, he says. My cell phone! someone else yells. My wallet! All my stuff! Stay back, stay back, someone says. You fucking stupid? I lean against something. I try to open my eyes, but can't.

I cough and try to breathe, minutes passing.

Finally, I open my eyes and keep them open and it doesn't hurt. I am leaning against the parking meter at the edge of the sloping front yard, coughing, staring at the dead, half-frozen grass below me. There are forty or fifty of us out here, I see when I raise my head, most of us in shirt and tie, Dr. Wigginton in the heavy brown coat that he never took off, and many of the Iowa brothers in the smooth silk Ritual Robes. I cough so hard that my lungs seem to rip, and I put my full weight against the icy metal of the meter, hands clasped at the plastic top. Underneath the plastic, the word "EXPIRED" flashes over and over.

Smoke seeps out of the cracked windows between the basement and the first floor of the fraternity house, snakes out the open front door. Gray puffs of smoke, rolling outside as though the house is coughing in quick bursts the same as I am, and the puffs rise into the black sky, spreading out and thinning and obscuring the stars before finally dissipating.

This isn't a cinematic, up-in-flames movie fire, the type that would take CGI to illustrate on-screen, the type that satisfies theatre audiences who just spent ten bucks on their movie. This isn't an intense visual. It is mostly smells and sounds: the mold in the basement taking flame and sending out a rotting-corpse smell, the shattering glass of windows and mirrors (and bottles) in the basement, the horrifying odor of all the stuffed trash bags we hid behind closed doors, the plastic melting and shrinking, inner garbage finally incinerated. And the smell of the food in the locked cafeteria crisping, curling, blackening. Popcorn, steak, chicken tenders. But out here, we see very little *fire*.

As I grip the plastic of the meter and struggle to reclaim a steady breath, it occurs to me that I can't remember the last thing I said or did, even how much time has passed since I spoke to Patrick, since I confronted LaFaber, since I fell into the sheets and the candles...since I facilitated the workshop...since all of the interest group members filed into the fraternity house to begin the Leadership Retreat. I have no idea how long has passed, only that, somehow, I finally shiver because my body is beginning to register all that has happened...I am feeling the cold of the November night, really feeling it on my skin, and the voices all around me are sharpening, the far-off sirens sharpening.

"What happened?" a familiar voice asks.

I cough, double over and hold my stomach, and when I open my eyes, I see LaFaber standing just fifteen feet away, corralling Dr. Wigginton and several of the Illinois alumni, saying in an unraveled voice, "Everybody's out?" Then he says something about candles, about sheets, and whose bright idea was this anyway?

When I finally stand tall, he turns and notices me, stares me in the eyes.

"How could this happen?" LaFaber asks from the middle of the gray yard, young and old men all around him, rushing this way, that, forming into clumps, holding one another back from charging into the house, patting backs, exchanging jackets. "How could this—you tell me, Charles," LaFaber says, "how this could *fucking* happen?"

He comes quickly toward me and again I back away before I even realize I have, *back away* from the parking meter until my back touches the car that has parked at the curb. Cold metal on my back, now, and I shrink as LaFaber approaches.

"Look at this," he says.

"I don't—" I say.

"Look at this," he says, pointing at the smoking house.

I cough, hunch over again, and now LaFaber seems even taller.

"Look what you did, Washington," he says, and this is the first time I've ever heard his voice so uneven. The highs and lows fluctuating, up down, crackling along with the basement fire just a hundred feet away. And if he frightened me in the Thinking Room, if I thought he was going to hit me then, his face is so twisted now, lined with such unyielding hate, that I'm not sure he'd stop at just a punch. "Oh, don't be such a little pussy," he says, this hulking blazer-clad mass, and he tugs at his tie, runs a hand through his clean, dark hair. "Don't flinch. Stop that. I'm not going to hit you. Stop that, Washington." And he turns to once again take in the smoking fraternity house, inhales at the same moment that the boards over a first-floor window snap. "I just want you to tell me what you see, that's all," he says. "Just look. *Look*. Tell me what you see. Describe it to me so I know what just happened, here. So I know that you understand."

"What do you"—cough—"what do you want me to say," I say.

"Tell me," he says, "what I'm looking at. Don't flinch. Just tell me."

Cold car metal at my back, "EXPIRED" flashing on the meter in front of me, and I face LaFaber and his black eyes. My palms pressed to the metal at my back, to the door handle, to...my Explorer. My office. My home. I parked my Explorer here at the meter when I came

back from the airport and unloaded LaFaber and Dr. Wigginton. My Explorer, at my back. My life, all semester.

"It's a house fire, Walter," I say.

"Oh, fantastic," LaFaber says. "I'm glad you can fucking see, Washington. There's more, though. Tell me what else. What else is burning right there?"

And I'm aware suddenly, that others are staring. What before had been a yard and a street of scattered individuals, coughing and catching breath, now are a series of shoulder-to-shoulder clumps, the Iowa brothers here, the Illinois kids there, Nick and Dr. Wigginton and the Illinois alumni over there, all staring at LaFaber and me.

"I'll tell you what I see," LaFaber says. "There's a lot that's burning right there, Charles. This fire you started."

"I didn't start—" I say. "How can you say that?"

"That is the dream of these young men that you have ruined," LaFaber says, louder and more authoritative because he knows that we have gained an audience. "Starting a new fraternity without a house? That's like colonizing a new country without any land. Their dream!" He backs away from me. "That's your career that you see burning. You *do* realize that, don't you?"

"That place was all candles and sheets, rotting wood," I say. "What did I do?"

"Their dream," he says and looks at Patrick. LaFaber is confident now, knows that the men staring back at us have no idea how any of this started, knows that they will be angry when the smoke lifts, knows that he must blame this debacle on someone. Already LaFaber is working the court of public opinion, clearing himself, pinning me. "Their dream. Eighty years of tradition, about to be doused by fucking firehoses."

"I didn't do—"

"I know things about you, Washington," he says softly. "More than you can imagine, and I was willing to give you a chance. But trust me when I say that you will *not* work with Nu Kappa Epsilon any longer, and you will *not* work in higher education." He turns his back to me, walks up the lawn, puts a hand on Patrick's shoulder, whispers something to him, and now Patrick turns his back to me, and the two of them stare into the smoke, into the ember glows behind the basement's boarded windows. Patrick's father leaves the other Illinois and joins the two of them, and they all stare together. *Their dream*, LaFaber said. And yes, maybe everything is lost in that conflagration, the house and the new fraternity chapter, and maybe I am responsible.

But here against my Explorer, I breathe unburdened. The coughing has stopped. Something feels reassuring about all of this.

And as the sirens close in on the house, and Dr. Wigginton folds his arms over his chest and shakes his head at me, I finally say to LaFaber, and it's weak—the equivalent of one thirdgrader calling another "stupid" or "dumb"—but I have nothing else to say, and I will not let the night end in silence: "Guess that housing renovation didn't come with new sprinklers, huh?"

He turns, regards me as I'm sure he would a disappointing son, eyes narrowed, disgusted at my existence. But it feels good to disgust him.

"Guess the smoke detectors didn't work, either," I say.

And this time...this time...I could swear I see *him* flinch. And Patrick notices the flinch. So I give another jab. Boom boom.

"Hell of a lot of structural damage with that fire," I say. "Could be expensive."

He shakes his head, eyes still narrowed, eyes that say How dare you?

"Hope your insurance covers that," I say.

LaFaber stares at the house, at the growing clouds of smoke, tugs at his right sleeve, at the left, trying to pull them down to cover the exposed skin of his wrists and his hands, as though all the world—all his world—has grown colder.

"Wait," I say. "Wait, don't tell me. The house wasn't up to code? The house wasn't even livable, was it? We probably weren't even supposed to be *in* there."

"That's enough, Charles," Nick says from a few feet away. He leans against his own car at the meter directly next to my own. "We're good. We're good."

The world will grow colder for me tonight, too, without a doubt.

After all the police reports have been filled out, I will drive my Explorer to a hotel on the edge of town. And tomorrow, with no money, with only a company credit card that will surely be canceled by then, I will begin the drive back to Indianapolis, then to Florida and to my parents, and I will have to admit to everyone that I was an absolute failure in my first professional experience. When the fire sizzles to its inevitable end, though, I know that I can leave behind all those smoldering, blackening boards, all that rubble, all the old structure. Maybe Walter LaFaber will find another vacant fraternity house on-campus to purchase with alumni money; maybe the National Fraternity will expand and expand and Walter LaFaber will be seen as a legend, his name emblazoned on plaques in every house, and a thousand Patrick Macintoshs will get wrapped up in the vines and roots of Nu Kappa Epsilon. I can change none of this. Charles Washington, though. I have total control of him, and I can rise from this and decide my own values. I can drive away from Illinois with an empty Explorer, lighter, no shirts swaying on hangers in my backseat. The fire in my own life is extinguished, and in the ashes, just as there is in the darkness at the bottom of the hill and on the blank side of my old business cards, there is opportunity and open space, and this is not something to be feared.

The Midwestern air is cold, but I can breathe, at least.

Across the yard, Patrick has shrunk away from both LaFaber and from his father, and he now stands once again with the other nineteen young men he convinced to help him found a new fraternity, and yes, they are a Clump, brown hair and black hair and Patrick's shining blonde hair, but they have faces again, not indistinguishable smudges, and they are not intimated by the Wall of alumni at the other end of the yard, LaFaber and Wigginton and the elder Macintosh and the lawyer from Chicago and several others, all of whom point at the house and point at me and yell and then lapse into crushed silence, over and over, a rage they don't care to contain. The Iowa brothers have already scattered from the yard, are back at their cars and probably considering what—if anything—is really compelling them to stay here any longer.

And just ten feet away from me, Nick smokes a cigarette, his back to his car door, and he absorbs the spectacle of it all, the house fire and the Clump and the Wall, and he focuses on the alumni, nods to himself, and then he sees me staring at him and in just a quick, silent moment between the two of us, we both seem to understand that we could think of no better image than what is before us to truly capture all that the institution of the national fraternity has become: Two recent graduates stand on the outskirts, glad they've escaped, and in the yard, a young man speaks to his friends without panic, a voice under control, a voice fresh with the possibility of youth, even as the national fraternity's Executive Director tells so many gray-haired men just thirty feet away that there's so much salvageable in the house, still, and the financial situation has not quite rendered the colony an impossibility and the interest group just needs to be reassured.

There in the yard, I don't know exactly what Patrick is telling his friends, but I hope he's letting them know that they don't need this house and they don't need one hundred years of

tradition and phony values because they know who they are and they don't need someone else to tell them. And in my mind, I delete the text that once composed my travel schedule, delete Pittsburgh and delete Shippensburg, and I erase the dark black lines that once limited who *I* was and I don't know what new image will come, but I do know that it's better to hold a blank page and be lost for awhile and start from scratch than to follow directions I know are wrong.

