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HALF-VIRGIN

by
ALEXANDER GREGORY POLLACK
B.A. Emory University, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of Creative Writing
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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ABSTRACT

POLLACK, ALEX. *Half-Virgin*. (Under the direction of Jocelyn Bartkevicius)

Half-Virgin is a cross-genre collection of essays, short stories, and poems about the humor, pain, and occasional glory of journeying into adulthood but not quite getting there. The works in this collection seek to create a definition of a term, “half-virgin,” that I coined in the process of writing this thesis. Among the possibilities explored are: an individual who embarks upon sexual activity for the first time and does not achieve orgasm; an individual who has reached orgasm through consensual sexual activity, but has remained uncertain about what he or she is doing; and the curious sensation of being half-child, half-adult. Ultimately, I believe, a “half-virgin” possesses all of these traits.

One of the goals of the collection is to scramble the prototypical coming-of-age story into bits and parts and halves. Among the approaches included are earnest memoir (the real and metaphorical costumes a young couple wears on Halloween), character-driven fiction (the life story of Marlow, a college track star who ends up the unwitting inspiration for *Super Mario Brothers*), and narrative experiments (a tongue-in-cheek creative writing syllabus and a bullet pointed resume of sexual conquests).

By exploring the untidy fragments in love, lust, and human connection in these works, *Half-Virgin* aspires to find wholeness through the jagged adventures of growing up.

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PROLOGUE

The city shook, and Anna blushed.

- From “Anna Pollack’s Fart Saves The City” by Alex Pollack

“Anna Pollack’s Fart Saves the City” marked the beginning of my writing life. I was eight years old and excited by my creation and its dramatic conflict (my sister and I participating in a flatulent tete-a-tete at Ruby Tuesday) and inspiring conclusion (Anna’s final fart “saving the city” by extinguishing a bomb produced by my next-door neighbor Drew Hayward). The story was a gift I made for my sister’s fifteenth birthday; she laughed at it then, and eighteen years later, we’re laughing at its memory. The concept may be silly and juvenile, but hell, I’m proud of how I used text to communicate affection and humor, and I’m proud that the communication was received and understood by those who read “Anna Pollack’s Fart Saves the City.”

What I’ve discovered in the years since I wrote my first story is that while I’ve (mostly) moved beyond toilet humor, my motivations for writing haven’t changed all that much. The idea of *truth* might concern me more as a graduate student than as a second grader, but my chief goal as a writer remains the same: I strive to convey affection and humor for the people and experiences I love and/or fear. I think about a line from Nicole Krauss’ *The History of Love*: “Once upon a time there was a boy who loved a girl, and her laughter was a question he wanted to spend his whole life answering.” I write to answer the unanswerable, even though I cannot do so. If I could, why would I need to keep writing?

Mr. Topsy-Turvy was a funny sort of fellow.

Everything about him was either upside-down, or inside-out, or back to front- topsy turvy in fact.

It was all very extraordinary!
- From *Mr. Topsy-Turvy* by Roger Hargreaves

At around the same time I wrote my first story, my mother would buy me a *Mr. Men* book each week. I was attracted to the colorful covers of the series, which featured zany characters like orange Mr. Wrong with a flower pot on his head, blue Mr. Bump wrapped in mummy bandages, and red Mr. Noisy with a mouth so wide it looked as if he could swallow a New York pizza slice in one gulp. While my mother would read to me more mature books before my bedtime (The *Encyclopedia Brown* series especially, during which I would strain my eyes in a Sisyphean task to solve mysteries that my mother had already, frustratingly, cracked), my relationship with the Mr. Men books was different because I'd begun to read on my own. My mom remained the ultimate facilitator in buying me the books I wanted, but I was nonetheless becoming independent in the sense of turning my own pages and engaging in the sweet intimacy between reader and text. Years later, I try not to take that intimacy for granted. I value the words of novelist/professor Joseph Skibell, who was my writing mentor at Emory University. In his essay "Our Love Affair with Books," he wrote, "When your friends are too busy, a book will always go out with you for a cup of coffee. It will walk with you, down the street or to the corner, snuggling against your arm. And it will sit with you, wherever you go, the entire time you're there." A book, as I began to learn with *Mr. Noisy* and *Mr. Bump*, was just like a good buddy in that it could comfort its companion. I knew generally what to expect from the *Mr. Men* series, but I was still compelled to cozy up, witness the hijinks, and learn a lesson or two. As Hargreaves himself wrote, "It was all very extraordinary!"

Take that, Shredder!
Get out of the Technodrome!
- Me to my Ninja Turtle action figures

I didn't read in the playroom. I didn't write in the playroom either, unless you count the black-sharpied "TOY STORE, TURN RIGHT" I had scrawled on the walls as writing. Behind my parents' bedroom, I *played* in the playroom, a low-ceilinged fortress strewn with action figures and crayons. I imagined great wars between the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and their arch nemesis Shredder, elaborate scenarios in which fights would happen on book shelves and action figure bodies would skitter-crash into the rough carpet. (No wonder I enlisted my dad to fix the arms and legs of my turtles, who had their share of plastic amputations.) If someone had spied on me, he would have probably seen chaos, but in my head, I was imagining episodes with plotlines and conflicts and conclusions. I was excited less by the combat I forced between my action figures and more by the run-up to the combat, by the suspense I manufactured in the moments before the strike. When I played, I broke through the walls typically associated with performance, for I assumed the roles of writer, director, actor, and audience. I won't lie; the power was delicious. I explored. I created. I was writing and I didn't even know it.

His past was forgotten. He had arrived.
-From *The Firm* by John Grisham

By seventh grade, I had graduated from a steady diet of Judy Blume and R.L. Stine to my first "grown-up book." John Grisham's *The Firm* exposed me to a foreign world of fancy cars and adults drinking liquor, far from my world of pre-algebra and Capri-Sun. Inspired by Grisham and the popular horror film series of the day, *Scream*, I wanted to translate the tension I felt when

experiencing those works into a work of my own. I set out to write a novel. I was thirteen years old.

“Cover-Up” matches an old, crusty cigar-smoking white detective (think Tom Selleck) with a young, hotshot ladies-man black detective (think Denzel Washington) of the Memphis Undercover Agency. They are on the hunt for a serial killer...who just so happens to have a twin. I wrote forty double-spaced pages on ClarisWorks and read the first chapter of my tome to my middle school classmates at Lausanne Collegiate School. Ms. Wimberly introduced me to the audience as “our lil’ John Grisham,” and I felt a distinct buzz as I began: “He lay in the corner, silently crying. Blood streaked his cheeks, and the smell of Jack Daniels filled the air.” What the hell did I know about blood streaking down cheeks? What did I know about Jack Daniels? I didn’t know much, but I knew enough to convince my friend that his mom, who worked in publishing, just might want to set up a deal with me. There was no deal, but that wasn’t the point. My victory in writing my first “novel” was the joy I felt in the silence in the room as my peers listened to me read. My audience had expanded beyond my family and beyond the playroom. I wasn’t writing about what I knew, but I was feeling the buzz of creation, a creation built on the backs of archetypes and stereotypes of cinema and literature, but a creation nonetheless. I wanted to write; I was hungry to write. “My dream is to one day become a published author,” I wrote in a family history album assignment I completed the next year.

As for me I try to be more low key I don’t think it’s important to walk around acting like you’re some big deal people should just go around being themselves and not make such a big deal out of it.

- From *Tenth Grade* by Joe Weisberg

In tenth grade, my motivation for writing became more closely linked to my perception of social standing. My friends had started to smoke marijuana and to steal stop signs, and they'd started to leave me behind. (I didn't smoke, I didn't drink, and I hung out with my parents.) It was the kind of year many teenagers have: lonely, with the occasional burst of it's-going-to-get-better perspective. I found solace in writing, but my writing at the time betrayed a bitterness that doesn't fit neatly with my claims of writing from a place of affection and humor. I wrote a column about my feelings in the wake of getting a driver's license and finding myself suddenly back with the friends who'd abandoned me before I could provide a ride. "When will my friends be drivers?" I wrote. "I hope soon. In the meantime, I might start demanding cab fare."

"Driving a Teen Cabby Crazy" was published in *New York Times Upfront*, a popular social studies magazine used by high schools, including my own, to teach current events. I received a hundred dollars for my work. It was my first publication, and I wouldn't have landed it if I hadn't been annoyed by Amit Kapadia jumping into my backseat after he'd been a fair-weather friend.

Amit never talked to me about the article, but I think he was offended by it. I didn't use his name or even a characterization of him, but the implications were clear to him, even if they weren't to the general audience of *Upfront*.

Did I contemplate the morality of writing about the people in my life, whether it be through veiled or more concrete representations? Did I think about whether or not it was fair to appropriate a person I knew for unlicensed creative use? These questions I would contemplate years later, but in tenth grade, I was just happy to have gotten published, even if it meant passive-aggressively taking a swipe at people who had hurt me.

I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world's still there. Do I believe the world's still there? Is it still out there?... Yeah. We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I'm no different.

- Leonard Shelby in Christopher Nolan's *Memento*

At Emory University, I majored in creative writing and took courses in fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and screenwriting. My reading broadened; an Early English Novel class introduced me to novels like Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* and Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*. I marveled at the immersive nature of the early novel, and how the very act of writing a fictional narrative not steeped in myth or religion was once considered offensive by some and revolutionary to many. While these novels intrigued me on an intellectual level, the fun-seeking corner of my brain craved an education in film. I gravitated to the accessibility of cinema and its potential to communicate to an audience I thought larger than literature's. My dirty little secret was that I believed screenwriting to be an easier path into writing success than literature would be. After all, in a screenplay, you were responsible for dialogue and occasional scene directions; you weren't responsible for a meticulously-crafted fictional world, for you'd have a director and actors to fill in the blanks.

For my senior thesis, I wrote a feature-length screenplay about a mysterious Ethiopian Jew who causes chaos at a private American university. I slathered attention over each character, trying to make sure their arcs upped and dipped in the right places; I tried to make every twist more shocking than the last. (One character was secretly gay. Another turned from an atheist into a believer. And the protagonist, well, surprise, he's a con man!) What I learned was that a screenplay was not so different from a poem in the sense that every word must have purpose, and

superfluity can bring down the enterprise in a way it might not in a novel or an essay. I also learned that drafting and re-drafting wouldn't do much good if you didn't know what the hell you were trying to say with your story. I spent more than a hundred hours on that screenplay, working and reworking it for three years. I can't even read the thing now. When I confided this to my thesis advisor, Joseph Skibell, he wrote me something I found helpful: "About not being able to read your old work: I can't either, unless I have to, you know, outloud in front of an audience, or something like that. That's why it's always good, while you're working on something, to make sure it's really fine -- because when you encounter it again years later, it's only going to be as good as you last left it."

Skibell also cited the curious intimacy a writer has with his own writing, which provides a neat bookend to his address of intimacy between reader and text in his essay "Our Love Affair with Books." "When you're writing, you're inside the text," he wrote. "When you leave it, and come back to it, you're so far outside of it. It's like trying to have a simple, polite conversation with someone who used to be your lover. It's just not as interesting as all the previous intimacy."

When I considered the work I'd done on my screenplay, I realized how absent it had been of a distinct narrative voice. It didn't sound like *me*; it sounded like the work of someone pretending to be a screenwriter. I had gotten intimate only with the screenplay's structure, not its soul. It was the nonfiction I'd written in college that I felt a connection to. In nonfiction I could more deftly show humor, affection, and self-awareness. During my year teaching English in South Korea, I found the magic and possibilities of text in and of itself, without a silver screen to filter it. The limited English-language sections of Korean bookstores nudged me into reading classics like Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. Inspired by

my readings and my foreign surroundings, I completed a series of observational and investigative travel essays that spoke to an audience of thousands on the web. While I wasn't making money off my work, I was creating a world in which I was in charge. Forget the director, the cast, and the craft service table. I was living in South Korea, but I was back in my playroom.

To avoid the sight of her walking away from me, all over again, I turn and leave her for once...while off in the distance, far beyond the wire-mesh fence, Ferris wheels turn and children shriek and marching-band music pounds the air, a sound so loud that my chest, even from this distance, registers the hollow thump-a-thunk of a brainless bass drum.

- From *Trouble with Girls* by Marshall Boswell

If one were to take a look at my master's program reading list, one would find many novels and memoirs that could be categorized as coming-of-age narratives, from what's well-known (J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*) to what's hip with the young adults of the new millennium (Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*) to what's popular in literary circles (Jo Ann Beard's *The Boys of My Youth*) to more obscure outputs in the genre (Marshall Boswell's *Trouble With Girls*). My thesis, *Half-Virgin*, strives to follow in this literary tradition. It is a collection of essays, stories, and poems about growing up and the pain and glory of pretending to know things that you really don't know. The phrase "half-virgin" initially came to me as I attempted to chronicle my first sexual experience with a once-upon-a-time girlfriend; I wondered what word would best characterize the feeling of going where many men have gone before (first-time sex), but where I most assuredly had never gone. The overall focus of the collection is journeying into adulthood but not quite getting there, and that is what it means to be half-virgin.

"Half-Virgin" chronicles a life lived in bits and parts and halves. I explore this

fragmentation of experience through narrative experiments (a tongue-in-cheek syllabus, a story told through an eye exam, a resume of sexual conquests), earnest memoir * (the real and metaphorical costumes we wear when we're young and unsure of being in love), and completely fictional short stories (a mother wears her recently deceased son's sneakers in the hot glow of a grocery store). "Libertyland" is a flash fiction piece about a man in his mid-twenties who badgers his wife into joining him on a rainy-day trip to an amusement park, only to discover that his favorite ride has been shut down. His wife tempts him with funnel cake, and while he realizes that what he's pining for (childlike innocence, to put it not so subtly) is probably gone forever, his wife urges him to indulge such whims, even if it's for just this once:

"She points her sleeve at a clapboard stand dressed in stars and stripes: Funnel Cake.

'You want some, don't you?'

The funnel cake will chalk my lips white. It will fluff my nostrils in sugar. It will make my stomach groan. I know this. But still.

Jessica pulls a bill from the kangaroo pouch of her sweatshirt. 'Go,' she says, squeezing the money into my hand."

The story strives for a light mixture of humor and pathos. It also marked my first fiction publication, in the online journal *Hobart*.

In my memoir "Chase Me," I intercut "chase" scenes from two very different stages of my life: first grade, and graduate school. In its original form, "Chase Me" was a simple, rather cutesy story about a boy chasing a girl around the playground, and the picked-nose accusations and stolen birthday wishes that tore their relationship apart and ended the chase. While I was working on this essay, my personal life intervened: I met a

woman in the bookstore who made my heart do stutter-steps. And so I began to “chase” her, asking for her name, asking for her number, asking her out on a date. The chase as a first grader ended because Megan told Miss Zeeman I was bothering her; the chase as a graduate student ended because Tatiana told me she was, well, married. In merging these episodes, I intended to find nuance in the romantic chases we pursue, and the similarities and differences in how they begin and end at various points of our lives. It was my reading of a chapter in Robert Root's *The Nonfictionist's Guide* that inspired me to integrate different timelines as I did in “Chase Me.”

In “I Look Forward to Hearing Your Reply” and “Junior,” I confront half-virginity directly: “Reply” is a funny-sad resume of sexual experiences and ex-girlfriends, while “Junior” confronts the day-to-day misery of being twenty-five and living in a mold-plagued noisy apartment and deciding that, hey, buying a VCR in 2010 off Craigslist is not such a bad way to claim something as your own. Throughout *Half-Virgin*, I’ve sprinkled experimental and humorous pieces in between more serious works. (Dinty Moore's playful experimentations with the nonfiction genre in *Between Panic and Desire* encouraged me in some of this experimentation.) “Reply” was published on *nerve.com*, and I felt ambivalent about its publication. On one hand, I was proud; on the other hand, I wondered if my ex-girlfriends would find and read the piece, and think themselves caricatured unfairly:

Lindsey Aria, October 5, 2005 - January 15, 2006 (Age 20)

- Met at her older sister's apartment party and fielded questions from Lindsey like I was a celebrity and she was an investigative reporter. (“What does your dad do? Your mom? When's your birthday? What do you want to do when you grow up? You did the M.C. Hammer move at your middle-school dance? Can you show me?”)

- Refused to let her read my private journal: "What are you writing in there about me?" she asked. (*"I study her figure in the mirror; she does have some fat on her, I think I was denying it earlier. She's still beautiful obviously, but I do wonder how she'd look if she lost ten to fifteen pounds."*)
- Angered her after she gave me a blowjob and asked how it was and I said a little dry, but there were websites with tips: "What do you mean? How could you say something like that?"
- Argued with her over the phone about whether or not she had a right to read my journal.
- Broke up with her the first night back on campus after winter break in front of the gymnasium. "Why do it here, out of all places?" she asked.
- Stopped answering her questions.

Granted, it takes a kind of arrogance on my part to presume these people from my past are still interested in me and how I portray them in writing, but I nevertheless feel troubled by a couple of lines in the piece. What would the real-life Lindsey think to see her bedroom insecurities laid out in a resume bullet point, as a punchline in a story on a sex-writing website? How would I feel if someone portrayed me in my most embarrassing moment? It's one thing for me to write about my failures, for I have ownership over the words and I steer them in the direction of my choosing. How would I feel if someone else was in the author's seat? This is a question with which I'm still wrestling.

I don't know what's next in my writing life; for that matter, I don't know what it means to be a "writer" in 2011. Do you have to have published a book or a series of essays in prestigious literary journals? Do you have to have made money from your writing? If so, could a popular blog define you as a real writer? Or in the end, is what you need a Certificate of Writerly Authenticity, delivered to you by an arbiter with a quill pen and sharp wit?

In my freshman year of college, I attended a creative writing workshop taught by Paul Hemphill, an aging Southern novelist who cancelled maybe half of our scheduled classes. He

was a tall, rather severe-looking writer who wore flannel shirts and carpenter jeans. Despite the forgettable nature of most of the semester, I remember the final day, when Hemphill told the class about regrets and legacy, about how he wrote a baseball novel in the 1970s and a famous actor phoned him to say how much he enjoyed the book. “You’re joking,” Hemphill had said, thinking it was a friend playing a prank on him. Hemphill hung up the phone. The actor, Dustin Hoffman, called back, telling Hemphill he was looking for a film to do after *Kramer v. Kramer*, and that he thought a movie based on Hemphill’s book would do the trick.

At that time, Hemphill was already a fine regional writer, a stylist of the American south, but this, this opportunity would take him to a new stratosphere of power and influence. He could see his life changing, the opportunities that would invariably follow a major motion picture, the praise, the royalties, the respect. He told the class of how he remembered getting off the phone that afternoon and the feel of the lawn under his bare toes as he walked across it to tell his wife the news.

The movie didn’t happen, and Dustin Hoffman moved on to find a new project called *Tootsie*. Through the rest of his life, Hemphill could still taste success in that phone call, in its promise. He remained a steady regional writer, but, he still wondered what would have happened, what would have changed if Hoffman had made that movie.

Hemphill told us that he was still proud to live the life of a writer, that though it was not a life of wealth or ease, he was content knowing that libraries carried and would continue to carry his books into the future. Long after he’s dead, someone, someday, would find him and read him. It wasn’t going to be a Hollywood ending, but there would be some boy or some girl in some library who would pick up his book. That was the dream he shared with us.

Six years after I took his class, Hemphill passed away. A year after his passing, four of his books appeared on amazon.com in Kindle e-reader editions. Hemphill's vision of a traditional library is being tested in the changing climate of publishing, but his words are being adapted to different forms. His words cannot be erased.

And so it is my dream for my own work: to have my words preserved and to connect with someone long after I'm gone. I don't need a blockbuster movie audience; I'll take a someone-somewhere audience.

In the fall, I'm going to law school, where I expect my creative ventures will be set into the margins of my life, rather than in the center. But I know I will keep writing. As I put it four years ago in the opening post of my blog:

“When I go several days without writing, I feel a dryness in my blood, an inadequacy, an emptiness, a hole. I have to write. It's how I make what's messy in my world clean, streamlined, and understandable.”

Does “Half-Virgin” make my world clean, streamlined, and understandable to my readers? I'd like to think that's a simplistic way to view my intentions. Is “Half Virgin” half-messy, half-clean, half-understandable, half-mysterious, half-this, half-that, halved?

You tell me.

*In the nonfiction pieces, some names have been changed.

WHAT IS A HALF-VIRGIN?

A. an individual who embarks upon sexual activity for the first time and does not achieve orgasm.

B. an individual who has reached orgasm through consensual sexual activity, but has remained ? about what he or she is doing.

C. the curious sensation of being half-adult, half-child

half-work, half-play

half-teacher, half-student

half-serious, half-joke

halved

D. all of the above

PRAISE FOR HALF-VIRGIN

“Genius!”
My Mom

“You wrote *what* about me?”
My Ex-Girlfriends

“Alex, did you write about the time you tape-recorded yourself singing the “Doo-Doo-Doo-Doo-Doo Always Coca-Cola” song?”
My Sister

“Why are you telling people these private things?”
My Dad

YOUTH CULTURE

Once upon a time we owned the currency of cool.
We rolled our eyes, laughing at secrets
outside our parents' doors.
The adults, they didn't get it
until the day they did and called the kids home.

But we were already gone.

CHASE ME

I chased Megan Baker across a playground smelling of brown leaves, wet wood beams, and cold. I chased her through a sea of pebbles, our sneakers sloshing and crunching past swings she jangled by their chains to slow me down. Her stringy brown hair bounced in a Care Bears scrunchie and her denim overalls flapped in the wind. My hair sprayed-sticky into exclamation points, I wore a white turtleneck splotched pink by fruit punch and blue jeans blackened by mud. We were six years old.

Miss Zeeman, her blond hair falling in commas over a yellow-and-orange Thanksgiving turkey sweater, belted out a whistle like a birdcall. Megan mashed to a stop and fixed me with sleepy gray know-it-all eyes. "If you keep bothering me," she said, "I'm going to tell on you." As Miss Zeeman assembled us in line, I didn't say anything to Megan. She was smart. She even knew how to tie her own shoes, but she was wrong about me bothering her. I wasn't; I was just being her boyfriend.

It's an air-conditioned afternoon in a college bookstore in Florida, the aroma of hazelnut coffee mixing with the glossy scent of hardcovers. I inch up to a woman sitting on a stool at a long marble study bar, her skin a raw sienna, crescents of dark freckles on her nose and on her cheeks, her eyes a soft milk brown. She's wearing clingy gray sweatpants and a mesh exercise

shirt that, when she stretches, draws in her breasts like a wrapped surprise.

"Can you settle a quick bet between a friend and me?" I ask, sounding confident but casual. I scrape my knuckles against my red beard. "Would you ever date a guy named Christof?"

"Christof? What do you mean?" she says. Her accent lies like maple syrup on her tongue.

"My friend Chris was thinking of changing his name, and we wanted a random female's opinion," I say.

I'm using a line. I'm using a line I learned from a reality show about pick-up artists who teach women-wooing techniques to amateurs who can't land a date. I consider myself neither master nor "average frustrated chump," but I'm twenty-five years old and single, a first-semester graduate student living in a new city with no ties. I'm not above using a strategy to start a conversation.

She smiles. "My cousin's name is Christof."

I no longer hear the clatter of laptop keys or the whirring of espresso machines. I feel an engine in my chest. "Is your name unusual?" I say.

"My name is Tatiana."

Tatiana. God, she's beautiful. I twist the shoulder straps of my backpack. "Are you Russian?" I ask.

I want her to be Russian; my parents are from Belarus. We'd have common ground. We could do away with my make-believe bet. *Please be from Russia.*

"I am from Brazil," she says.

I smile. My mouth cottons. Think, think, think. You don't need lines anymore. Say something!

She looks down at her calculator.

“Nice to meet you,” I say.

“You, too,” she says.

I turn around and let the glass doors of the bookstore close behind me. The world opens up again, as if pushing out of a pinhole. Skateboarders are clopping across a brick-lined breezeway; palm trees are swaying and sweating under a dying sun. My Willy's Burrito t-shirt hangs loosely on my shoulders.

Tatiana.

Megan and I had a fight in the back of the first grade classroom under a laminated map of Tennessee. We were washing our hands in a giant faucet, letting bubblegum rivers of pink soap douse our palms. From the sticky rack I peeled a brown paper towel, and then I stuck a finger into my right nostril. “Miss Zeeman,” Megan said. She tugged on the stitched snowflakes of our teacher's Winter Wonderland sweater. “Alex is picking his nose.”

“Alex,” Miss Zeeman said. “Stop.”

I brushed my cruddy fingers against my nostrils and stared at Megan. *Traitor.* In the cafeteria, I ate a peanut butter marshmallow square and did not talk to her.

It's after three in the morning. I can't fall asleep. I pick at the squiggles of my chest hair and I lean into the blue glow of my laptop. I want to find Tatiana; I want her to know my name.

Fantasies unfold before my eyes in Technicolor: the two of us in Rio de Janeiro, doing the samba through a thumping drum circle, catcalls from the locals and her in a black ruffled dress, sweaty as I dip her in the crescendo of the thumps, her mouth just open, our lips sticky and touching like two peppermints. How pained my ex-girlfriends' faces would be when they'd see Tatiana in my Facebook photo albums, a shy gaze over her cocoa shoulder, a pink flower in the curve of her ear. Even the way she'd look down at her calculator had turned me on. Elegance, even in sweatpants. I'd dated girls, but Tatiana, Tatiana is a woman. I felt it that afternoon. I feel it now.

Online I click through dozens and dozens of Tatianas, most of them picture-less. I search for "Tatiana Brazil Florida." I search for "Tatiana math Orlando." I send several messages to several Tatianas, dropping are-you-hers like wishes into a well.

Where are you?

I celebrated my seventh birthday at Chuck E. Cheese, an indoor carnival of lights blinking gold, Street Fighter arcade games blaring ka-pows, and the smells of mozzarella and sweat swirling in a tethered ocean of rainbow-colored balls. Because I'd never seen Megan outside of school, I didn't expect to find her at my birthday party, but there she was, in a bright red blouse and a spangled party hat, invited by my mom, sitting across from me at a long table clotted with bits of pepperoni and crumbs of pizza. She was my only girl guest, and I was proud enough of her presence to forgive her for the picked-nose accusation.

On the concert stage beside our table, a shimmering red curtain unfurled to reveal a bow-tied robot gorilla jamming on a glow-in-the-dark keyboard and a suspenders-wearing grizzly

bear strumming the banjo. My fourteen-year-old sister, in a baggy sweatshirt and generous blush, started the clapping floorside, and she was soon joined in song by my entourage: boys who liked dinosaurs and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. "Happy, happy birthday, Alex! Happy, happy birthday!" Megan stared at me with her gray eyes. She was seeing me in the spotlight, me as the star of the show, me on my birthday.

Chuck E. Cheese, a giant mouse alive with saucer eyes, a black button nose, and buck teeth, waddled towards our table. I beamed, ready to soak in another birthday wish, when Chuck E. Cheese looped the corner, leaned into Megan, and smacked his gray mitts together. She didn't flinch. She didn't tell him he'd made a mistake. She didn't tell him that it wasn't her birthday. All she did was look at me, as if to say, "What are you going to do about it, Alex?"

Your name is Tatiana.

I want to buy you a cup of coffee. This is a big campus with thousands of people, so this is my attempt. It works in the movies, and real life isn't the movies...but still.

But still.

areyoutatiana@gmail.com

I will print this flyer. I will post it in the library, in the math lab, and of course, in the bookstore where we met. I'm sick of typing and clicking. That's not the way I met you; that's not the way I will find you. Put a thin mustache on me, call me a stalker, I don't care. I want to feel that engine in my chest again.

Through the brick-lined breezeway I walk in the late afternoon, the sun dipping in the clouds but still hot against my skin. The flyer is folded into my fist, and it's ready to be copied

and posted. I walk past the bookstore and the circular tables outside and that's when my world stops.

I am a loon. I am a loony tune. I walk by your table. Past it. Towards a garbage can. I turn around.

"Tatiana," I say. You look up. Again in sweatpants, but this time in glasses, iron-rimmed glasses, and those milk-brown eyes and I'm telling you, "I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself." You're nodding, you're smiling, you're saying *yes*.

And we talk, me playing with my backpack straps again. I tell you I'm a graduate student, new to Orlando, and you tell me you like it here, that it's quieter than Sao Paulo, your home. "Where are you from?" you ask me.

If you knew the words on the creased flyer I hold in my right hand, would you be spooked or flattered? I decide not to broach the subject.

I tell you I'm from Memphis. And then: "We should grab a cup of coffee sometime," I say.

You motion towards the bookstore window. "Sure, I'm around."

"I should get your number."

You nod.

My fingers are fumbling. They click Calendar, they click Recent Calls, they click all the buttons but the right one. I hand you the phone. "Can you?" I say.

You laugh as you enter your number, for my screensaver is a close-up of me scowling with furrowed eyebrows and vampire teeth. "It's to scare cell phone thieves away," I say.

I have your number. I have your number!

I'm smiling so hard I'm a caricature. I jump across the grass in front of the student union. I don't care who watches me. I jump. I jump!

I chased Megan again, but the sloshing of pebbles under our feet made a harder, meaner sound — my velcro sneakers clopped against her heels and I almost pulled the Care Bears scrunchie out of her hair. I couldn't believe she'd stolen my birthday; she'd never even apologized. And so I chased her, until the one afternoon she kicked into a beeline run towards Miss Zeeman, who was leaning against the swingset in her valentine hearts sweater.

I scampered across the pebbles and found a bunker in the far corner of the playground. Under a webbed platform, I curled into a ball. Through the sun-slit line between my knees I saw little rocks, lots of little rocks and no little shadows. I could hear my breath. I felt safe.

Safe.

Safe until I looked up the peek-a-boo holes and saw her gray eyes peering down at mine. "Miss Zeeman wants to see you," Megan said. I was found. I was caught. She had told on me. I stared at the pebbles, waiting for her to hop off the platform and leave me alone.

My shoes made only a light crunch as I walked towards Miss Zeeman.

I called Tatiana on a Friday and left a voicemail asking her out for a Sunday night dinner. My sister told me I should have waited till Saturday; her fiancée suggested Sunday. I said I didn't care about any three-day rules, that if Tatiana had found me intriguing, she'd get back to

me. She has my number. She knows how to find me.

It's Saturday afternoon now and I'm sitting in a leather chair, surrounded by shelves of the top twenty bestsellers in a chain bookstore off-campus. I'm trying to do my homework and trying not to look at my cell phone. It's been twenty-three hours and forty-seven minutes since I called. Did I overstep? Should I have started with coffee?

My phone vibrates.

Tatiana.

I don't know what to think. I don't know what to say. I -

"Hello."

"Is this Alex?"

I stand, almost tripping over my laptop's wire. "How's your weekend going, Tatiana?" I say, my voice threatening to break but staying steady.

She says it's fine and asks me about mine.

"Oh, you know, doing homework, not so fun," I say, laughing, as if I had just delivered a punchline.

"Alex,"

There is apology in the way she says my name.

"Thank you so much for the dinner invitation -"

I shouldn't have called so soon. I shouldn't have left that voicemail. If only I'd started with coffee -

"My husband, he is jealous," she says with a light laugh, the same one she gave me when she saw the vampire face on my cell phone screen. "So, it would not be a good idea to go out."

Why did she give me her number in the first place? I hadn't seen a wedding ring on her finger, but then again, I wasn't looking for one. I'd never looked for wedding rings. I was used to dating girls.

"But, thank you so much, and I will see you around bookstore?"

I look at the New Release shelf. The titles slur into one big, shiny demand: *pick me, pick me, pick me.*

At recess I dribbled a soccer ball across uneven bumps of sun-baked dirt, crossing over second graders and kicking goals past the twin posts of orange cones. I still saw Megan, of course, but she was only a shadow jumping rope behind the jungle gym; she wasn't my girlfriend anymore, that is, if she ever was.

I liked to think she was watching me, watching me every time I scored a goal, watching me become a soccer superstar. What I didn't know then was she had her own jump ropes to jump or jungle gyms to climb, or whatever it was sneaking into the outskirts of her life, maybe a boy she hadn't yet met, one screaming, "I'm next! I'm next!"

KISS

New Year's Day 2000. All that talk of Y2K and nothing changes but the calendar. The traffic lights blink the way they always do and the clocks don't even skip a second. I wake to a weirdly warm morning, fog encroaching on the streets. My headache is gone. Last night I downed two cans of O'Doul's Non-Alcoholic Beer. Amid the TV glow of Dick Clark, I sipped and chugged, sipped and chugged, my sister cheering me on. By midnight I was in bed and I was *wasted*.

I'm fifteen years old, too short for my age, a high school freshman who really, *really* wants a girlfriend. This is my chance, this first night of the year, stars in the sky, the air cool but not cold. I squeak back and forth on this hammock, Molly Kentz beside me, our legs close to touching but not quite. Sometimes she ties her brown hair into a curly bun, but tonight it's straightened, shining, falling down her shoulders. We first kissed two weeks ago, round one in spin-the-remote, shy tongues turning wet and aggressive. She smiled afterwards. It was my birthday.

"Hey, Jenny," I say, breaking the silence, noticing my friend walking around the pool just in front of us, her eyes down, her body in shadows. She doesn't answer, disappearing back into the house. That's where they are now, about six of my friends, watching that stoner comedy *Half-Baked*. Out here, it's just Molly and me.

"Well, okay," I mutter.

She smiles.

I know what I want to say but the words are garbled in my throat. My lips quiver.

Finally: "Want to go see a movie on Friday?"

"Sure, sounds fun," she says with another smile.

And it happens. Tongues swapping mouths just *because*, no truth-or-dare, no spinning of remotes, just *because*. I look up at the black sky, the clustered stars, and then the second floor window. It's *them*. They're watching us; they're not watching *Half-Baked*. You can't make out their faces, but you know they're laughing and going oh my God. Like celebrities in a cocoon, Molly and I kiss again. My friends are paparazzi; their cameras are pointed fingers and waving hands.

"Want to go inside?" I ask. "It's getting cold."

We slowly make our way around the pool and back into the house, our hands periodically crossing and caressing and separating once we walk into the ping-pong room. We find the paparazzi, cameras now in tow. Jenny is at the computer, the top left of the screen flashing with instant messages. The others are gathered around the ping-pong table. I try to suppress any lucky-me smiles. A blonde girl, Miranda, who denied me a date back in October, wants to talk. We sit at the top of the carpeted staircase, Molly giggling with two girls in another room.

"So, you *like* Molly?"

"Sure, yeah," I say. "Yeah."

"Are you guys going out now?"

"We are." My eyes wander down the staircase. "I think."

“Well alrighty then,” Miranda says, standing with a smirk. “That figures.”

I meet Molly at the ping-pong table. We sit atop it, my hand gracing the small of her back, down toward her jeans. *She’s my girlfriend.* Our legs are touching now, conversation swirls around us. I don’t know Molly too well; really, I don’t know her at all. But I’m fifteen years old, I got drunk off non-alcoholic beer last night, and I really like kissing her. My hand slips under the seat of her jeans. *She’s my girlfriend.*

TENTH GRADE

Friday nights my friends smoke weed
but I stay home, drug-free
because the commercials worked on me.
I stare at the bathroom mirror,
pumping weights and flexing my abs
but I still don't look like the guy in the Calvin Klein ads.
Friday nights my friends smoke weed
in a Jeep Cherokee
on the golf course in a gated community
where the sprinklers rain
and Lenny Cane, on shrooms,
crawls into the sandtrap to lick the grain.
Monday mornings they tell me the stories
and I laugh like I understand
but I'm still thinking about my abs
and about how I can look like the guy in the Calvin Klein ads.

SCISSORS

Fifty minutes before the last shuttle bus departs from Emory University to Oxford College, I feel a threat of a hard-on in my jeans. Calm down, I tell myself, but it's hard to calm down. I'm going down an elevator, my gut turning with each blink of a red number. My backpack feels foul against my arms, as if it's glowing with deceit, so I shift the straps to fit my shoulders. I need to look innocent, like I'm going to the library to study. That'll be my alibi if Jennifer Aria sees me.

Out the elevator. Out the glass doors of my apartment tower. I'm twenty years old and the sun is shining in Atlanta, Georgia on a chilly Friday afternoon. Today, October 7, 2005, is the day I'm going to sleep with Jennifer's sister, Lindsey. Not sex, not yet. But I will share a bed with Lindsey. And maybe I will slide my fingers down, down into her polka-dotted panties, and

-

"You're both good people, so why not?" Jennifer had said when I asked her if she'd mind if I took her sister out on a date. Jennifer knows me. She knows I talk to my mom on the phone every day, and she knows I sometimes put on my shirts inside-out by accident. She even knows I'm a virgin; when her roommate had asked me one night and I'd answered yes, Jennifer had said, "Aww," and "That's sweet, Alex."

I don't want Jennifer to catch me boarding that bus. But damn, I have to board that bus.

I want to see Lindsey, her shiny black hair, her shiny bronze face, her white teeth, her black eyes, her generous breasts, which I like to call “gozangas” because I think the word “breasts” is not dynamic enough. We laugh at the same movies and she laughs at my dorky dance moves. We’ve been dating for three weeks.

I’m walking by Jennifer’s apartment building now, and I’m doing a half-jog half-walk. I’m scanning the scene, from the flowerbeds to the red brick walkways to the parking garages. Just in case. Jennifer looks like Lindsey, except curvier, and with more pop to her walk, as if she’s a film director strutting to her next shot. I jog. Walk. Jog. I don’t want an onlooker to think I stole somebody’s backpack. I have to look casual. If Jennifer finds me, I’ll tell her: German Film midterm, that’s all, I’m just getting an early start at the library. I’m not making a run to Oxford College so I can do naughty things with your sister, a sister you’re protective of, a sister you think is not ready for overnight stays from excitable boys.

Jennifer can always tell when I’m lying or hiding something. When we’re watching *The OC*, a soapy teen drama, and I’m muffling my laughter with a fist, she will tell me, “Dude, don’t pretend to be cool. Just let the laugh out.” And so I do, laughing harder. I don’t pretend to be cool.

Walk. Jog. Walk.

I don’t know if Jennifer had a thing for me. Or has. I don’t think Lindsey knows either. For our first date, Lindsey and I were sharing a quiet moment on the sofa at Java Monkey, and Jennifer and her roommates just so happened to walk into the cafe. They waved at us. It was a coincidence, she said. She didn’t know I was taking her sister there. But. Jennifer had a looky-here grin. I didn’t know if it was innocent, teasing, or meant to embarrass me. Or embarrass

Lindsey. That's why I want to sleep over at Lindsey's, away from the Emory campus, where nobody can watch us or give us a looky-here.

Walk. Jog. Walk. I wonder if Lindsey will give me a blow-job tonight.

Jennifer and I still hang out, but there's a weirdness to it, something unspoken. I used to tell her about my crappy dates with girls from my English classes, how one was pretty, another wasn't, and another was something in-between, or how one wouldn't ask me questions and another would ask me too many. I couldn't tell Jennifer those kinds of stories anymore. Now I have a secret world that belongs only to Lindsey and me, a secret world of open mouths and nibbled ears, a world without Jennifer.

Before I can board the Oxford shuttle, I have to get on a six-minute bus to Emory's main campus. I climb aboard and in the back and shit, black hair, is that Jennifer!, but she lifts her head and no, no it's some Indian girl with an iPod. If Jennifer calls me this afternoon to get together, I won't pick up my phone. I'll claim it was dead. I'll lie, not an extravagant lie, but a harmless lie.

When the first shuttle grunts to a stop in front of the student union, I realize I'll be early for the Oxford bus. The doors open and I walk down the rubber steps and fake Jennifer brushes past me. I have that elastic feeling in my heart, like it'll snap like a rubber band. I let myself smile. I have a girlfriend and I am going to spend the night with her. The sun is bright and the wind is cold but it feels good against my neck. It tickles. The charcoal leaves of autumn crunch under my footsteps. My breath still feels fresh from the toothpaste. I'm fresh and clean and ready.

As I approach the Oxford shuttle, I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I imagine

kissing Lindsey, liberated from her sister's looky-here. Anything goes. No guilt. And my fingers, my fingers ready to go places they'd never gone before. My fingers will be musicmakers. I look down at them.

Oh, no.

My fingernails. They're too long. They're curving up and out and over my digits, black-pink ugly. Like daggers. Or knives.

How did I forget to clip them? What's wrong with me?

I can't slide these fingers into Lindsey's panties. I can't. I need a pair of scissors. I need a pair of scissors now. I look at my cell phone. Twenty minutes left until the shuttle departs for Oxford. That's twenty minutes left for Jennifer to run into me. Where can I get scissors? Can I run to CVS? No, no, that'll take too long. I can call one of my old buddies from freshman year, but I haven't talked to them in months. I deserted them for Jennifer's friendship, and later, her sister's romance. I can't call my old friends now and say, "I know we haven't hung out in a while, but I really want to finger my girlfriend. Can you bring nail clippers to the bus stop?"

And then I see it. Of course. Of course! The library!

Fifteen minutes.

A spread of math students sits at the long oak tables, punching calculators and talking in low voices. They're thinking about calculus; I'm thinking about other things.

"Can I borrow a pair of scissors?" I ask a bored-looking guy in glasses at the help desk. I feel like I'm asking the clerk at Walgreens for a pair of condoms, and my face blooms when he smiles and says, "Here you go."

I walk with them in my right hand, not wanting to stray too far from the computer

carousels, not wanting to elicit suspicion. I turn into the long aisle of periodicals and stride towards the copy machine. I open the scissors wide, a gaping metal mouth close to my hand. Two of the math students walk past me in the aisle and whisper. I smile and close the scissor blades. I am not crazy, I mouth to them.

Bathroom. That's it. I pocket the scissors. I hike up to the second floor. Turn back and forth, a girl with long black hair and an emerald earring. Shit. Jennifer.

Not Jennifer. God, I am going crazy.

Into the bathroom. Handicapped stall. Door. Latch it closed. I turn the scissors at a sharp angle towards my fingernails. I'm a surgeon; the handicapped stall is my operating room. I hear a toilet flush. Here we go.

Clip, clip, clip. The blackened shards tumble off my fingers, flakes falling into the porcelain bowl. This is for you, Lindsey! My backpack is hanging off my shoulder, as if it wants to watch the show. Clip, clip, clip. I hear the *ssss* of faucets and the *ooo* of the blow dryer. Clip. I flush the toilet.

I am fresh and clean and ready.

“Thanks,” the help desk guy says when I hand him back the scissors.

“No,” I say, smiling like a Good Samaritan. “Thank you.”

Three minutes. The shuttle. It's long and white, with blue stripes and the blue, regal Emory logo on the side. When I approach, the door shutters open. The driver nods at me, bored. He has no idea.

I sit in the back. I'm the only one on the bus. My heart beats every time I see a flash of

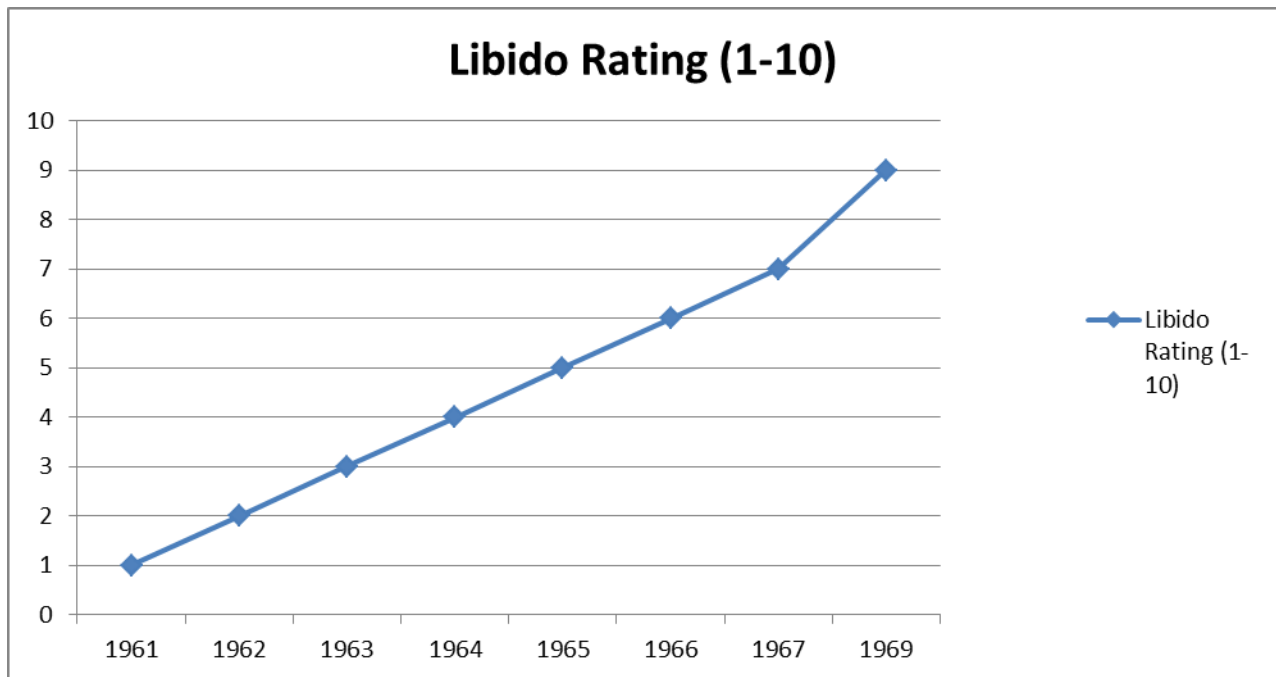
color outside the window, but Jennifer doesn't walk by the bus. The doors close. I breathe. I text message Lindsey and tell her I'm coming, I'm coming.

Lindsey tells me my hands are cold.

They are. The shuttle driver had the AC cranked to meat freezer temperatures, turning my fists into balls of ice. Lindsey tries to warm them up with hers, rubbing back and forth. She's wearing a navy-blue Lacoste shirt and faded jeans and we're kissing on the grassy quadrangle of Oxford College and I'm feeling myself press into the crotch of my jeans and it's Friday afternoon and I'm smiling and I know Jennifer might text message her sister and me, and I know I might lie to my friend. I know this but I don't care because I'm holding Lindsey's hand and my fingernails look spectacular.

UNCLE BORIS TEACHES ME A LESSON

Do you know there was a time when my hair was long, my arms were strong, and my libido was off the charts?



Read the chart again. What year is missing?

If you said 1968, you are correct.

That year, my libido was too spectacular to be measured. With some things in life, no matter the tools, no measurement will suffice.

Q: So what do we do?

A: We study what's in between.

DANCING WITH GIRLS

It was the night of my eleventh birthday and I was ready to party. With my mom. In the dimly-lit living room of my house, my birthday present, the *Space Jam* soundtrack, wailing through our stereo speakers with song by the Quad City DJs. I cranked up the volume knob. The bass thumped and boomed, and the swirling, slurring voices on the track told us this was our chance to do our dance at the space jam. With a smile on her face my mom swayed her hips and let her hands massage the air. “Come on, Alex!” she said, waving me on to join her. I smiled sheepishly. That night I stood four feet, eleven inches. So skinny my ribs showed. My glasses were too big; my nose crinkled beneath them. I wore a Chicago Bulls t-shirt, multi-pocketed Bugle Boy jeans, and Air Penny basketball shoes. Eleven years old. What would my friends say if they saw me dancing with my mom? What would I tell them to make it sound cool?

“Good song!” my mom said, still massaging the air.

Juiced up on Cherry Coke, I shrugged these doubts away. Who cares? I wanted to dance. And so I joined her.

On the parquet floor of our living room, my mom and I sweated all the way through the *Space Jam* soundtrack. I had my own dance: I would stand straight and still, then *jump*, left leg crossing right, *jump*, right leg crossing left. Jump, cross, jump, criss-cross, over and over and faster and faster. Then I’d do the Hammer, then *jump*, cross, jump, criss-cross, Hammer, and then a three-hundred sixty degree spin. My heart pumped and my feet kept moving. This was

my dance. More cross and criss-cross and more Hammer and more spins. I wasn't even thinking about my friends and what they'd say; I was just dancing, free and fast. With my mom. On my eleventh birthday. I was unstoppable.

I rewound the tape and played it again.

A few months later, it was springtime, a Friday night at the Pickering Community Center, D.J. Steve's tabletop spraying rainbow-colored lights and Right Said Fred's "I'm Too Sexy" blasting in stereo. This was the fifth grade dance, where girls with messy hair whispered into each other's ears and guys in Umbro shorts and neon t-shirts jabbed straws into the bottoms of Capri-Suns. A few parents scattered in the back of the linoleum-floored room were watching, pointing, and smiling. They were the ones having fun.

Meanwhile, I was hiding in a dark spot at the edge of the dance floor, right by my best friend Andy Ishi. For fun we'd typically quiz each other on state capitals, but we never really talked about too much else. Andy didn't even want to dance. Probably never did, I thought, not even with his mom. But all that night I hadn't danced either. No jump and cross and criss-cross. No Hammer. A few times I almost did my dance but then I'd look at those giggling girls in jeans. They loomed over me like mountains. I felt like a little kid.

The lights dimmed and the *so sexys* faded. There was whispered buzz among the crowd. From the speakers came the soft tinkling of a piano chord. A slow song. My eyes darted across the room, past the darkened corner of parents, past the refreshment table, finally landing on Bricelyn Carter and her long sunstroked brown hair and her twinkling hazel eyes and her toothy smile. She was beautiful. My stomach turned over on itself.

D.J. Steve called out two names to get things started, because there was no way a pair of fifth-graders were going to start slow-dancing on their own. The victims were Lindsay Tolson and John McManus. Lindsey shouted "No!" racing into a wall of her girlfriends, trying to escape, trying to disappear. Mariah Carey hit a high note and finally, finally Lindsay succumbed and grazed her hands against John's shoulders. She glanced back at her friends and at her mom in the corner. John just stared at his toes the whole time.

"Snowball!"

They separated quickly and looked for new partners slowly. There at the edge of the circle was Bricelyn. I had talked to her only twice before: the first time was in gym class after a relay race, the second time was when I borrowed her pencil in class. That was enough for a crush, but dancing with her? Dancing with a *girl*? Still, John McManus approached Bricelyn and just like that, they were dancing. How? How in the world did he do that? My feet refused to move.

"Capital of North Dakota?" Andy asked me.

I didn't want to play the state capital game. Not then. The game of snowball had accelerated; there were now five couples swaying to Mariah Carey's falsetto. And in the thick of it was Bricelyn, talking to all the boys with whom she danced, little laughs between them, like it didn't mean anything, like nobody was nervous and nobody was scared. Snowball was called again and Andy and I remained on the sidelines, waiting to be asked to dance or maybe just waiting to go home. My eyes began to water, just a little. Snowball again.

"What's the capital of North Dakota?" Andy repeated.

The dance floor was filling up, D.J. Steve was bobbing his head, the parents were

nodding along to the music. Some guy with a crew cut and a Starter jacket asked Bricelyn to dance. She smiled. My glasses felt heavy on my nose. Could not move. Scared. I was too scared to walk up to any girl, much less Bricelyn. My throat tightened as if swallowing a marble. I turned to Andy.

“Bismarck,” I said.

Two years later it was bar mitzvah season, parties every Saturday night in hotel ballrooms and country clubs. And I was dancing with girls. Three on a bad night, seven or eight on a good one. My hands on their hips, their hands on my shoulders. Swinging back and forth like pendulums, sometimes even making eye contact. I wore contact lenses now, no more clunky glasses. Parted my wavy hair to the left. I was still short, but as Rabbi Danziger had told me on my bar mitzvah day, I was a man.

Kim Friedman’s bat mitzvah party was held in a wood-paneled ballroom on a Saturday night in late January. There was a huge projection screen in front, Will Smith skating from side to side in a pink button-down and leather jacket, telling us to get jiggy with it. So far it was just another bar mitzvah party, the same loop of Puff Daddy and Spice Girls videos, the same chips-and-salsa refreshments, and the same girls in the same shiny blue and black spaghetti-strapped dresses. Most of the guys wore Polo shirts, khakis, and dress shoes. The cool ones grinded behind the girls of teased hair, too much eyeshadow, and breasts, and the rest bopped in friendly two-foot proximity to the closest girl. Having danced to almost all the fast songs and a couple of the slow ones, I walked into the outer hallway and sat against the wall across from Amanda Cowell. In English class, Amanda would write little messages in my notebook about how *The*

Wrinkle in Time or *Hatchet* was kind of boring. In seventh grade terms, that meant we were friends.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Not much, I just wished they would play some Ben Folds Five,” she said. “Are you having fun?”

“Oh yeah!” I said with just a touch of sarcasm. After all, it was not too cool to say you’re having a blast at a bar mitzvah party, even if you were.

“That’s cool,” she said with a smile. “I just want them to play a good song.”

A few steps down the hallway Amanda’s friend Caitlin and my friend Chris chatted and flirted. When *Getting Jiggy With It* ended, Caitlin seized Chris’ hand and took him back into the ballroom. Amanda and I sat there and watched.

“Let’s go dance,” she told me.

The country ballad *Strawberry Wine* swooned from the speakers as Amanda and I made our way through the pendulum-swinging couples and into our own little spot. A single yellow light crested against half her face and faintly shined on her soft lips. She was wearing a beige dress with a soft fabric outline of birds across her small breasts. It was the usual bar mitzvah slow dance until I inched closer, my hands resting a little more firmly against her hips. She followed suit, her hands smoothly moving past my shoulders and landing on my back. Did she really just do that? More sad guitars from the speakers. Amanda wasn’t tall but to me she was a giant. On my tip-toes I could only reach her neckline. Cautiously my sweaty hands wrapped around the small of her back. Slowly we pulled each other closer. I could smell her perfume, something fruity, strawberry maybe. Was this happening? I snuck a look up at her face and her

eyes went everywhere but at me. A few scribbled notes in English class, and now boyfriend and girlfriend? The song changed and now my face was at the outline of the birds' beak on her breasts. I should ask her out to a movie, I decided. That Spice Girls movie was PG-13; it looked bad, but so what? I could buy her popcorn. At my side I saw Chris and Caitlin, their bodies close to one another but not as close as Amanda's and mine. We were so close and so sweaty but we didn't care or at least I didn't. What was she thinking? Did she like me like *that*? This had gone way beyond pendulums.

Suddenly, the main lights sprang on with a fast rap song. After a few fleeting moments, we backed away from each other, distant smiles as if we had just woken from a dream. Across the dance floor I searched for Chris, wanting to tell him about Amanda, to ask him about Caitlin. Was this the night we'd finally get girlfriends?

To the back of the ballroom I looked and there, standing right there, was my mom.

My mom.

She had her purse at her side. She was waiting for me. I couldn't approach Amanda now, not with these lights so bright and not with my mom in the audience. It was over. It was all over.

"Did you have fun?" my mom asked as I approached her.

"Yeah," I said, distracted. Sure enough the dance floor was emptying. Again on the projection screen appeared Will Smith in his pink shirt and leather jacket, another round of getting jiggy.

"Ready to go?"

I looked back at the floor but there was no sign of her. Maybe she was in the restroom, gossiping to Caitlin about what happened or what hadn't. Or maybe she realized that when the

bright lights came on, we couldn't have each other anymore. I didn't know, and maybe I didn't want to find out. Maybe.

“Yeah, I'm ready,” I said.

My mom gave me a kiss on the cheek.

Atlanta, Georgia. A night in early May. Faint sounds of pulsing bass: *boom-ka-boom-ka-boom-ka*. A sliver of college students stand outside an illuminated nightclub. Waiting, waiting, waiting. The air sweats beer and cologne. Short-skirted girls yell into tiny cell phones, and guys in silk shirts and black pants exchange complicated handshakes. I shift and squeeze through the *stop-pushing-me* crowd. It's been six years since bar mitzvah season. I'm nineteen-years-old now, a college freshman. “Dirges,” I call out, spotting some friend-of-a-friend like a face in *Where's Waldo*. He's nursing a Sprite bottle, label ripped to white, a murky brown liquid sloshing about inside. “What's in that?”

“Tastes like shit but it'll get you fucked up.” He talks too close and too loud. “Want to try some?”

A twist of the cap, a sniff, a grimace, and finally a labored gulp.

Boom-ka-boom-ka-boom-ka. Goes down like pineapple-tinged gasoline, a little earthquake in my lungs. Another grimace. I nod thanks and return the bottle. Tonight's the last party of freshman year. I'm waiting in the line to Club Eleven50 with my friends from Turman East dorm: Vijay, Amrit, Arun, Ashish, Deepak, Sandeep, Steven Tam, and Eric Li. I'm the token white guy from a dorm lovingly nicknamed “Browntown.” My friends are drunk and I'm trying to join their stupor.

Finally our hands are marked with Xs and we're in. Through the tiled foyer we walk past a crying girl, mascara seeping down her face: *boom-ka-boom-ka-boom-ka-BOOM-KA-BOOM-KA*. Eleven50 is all high ceilings, plush sofas, rainbow strobe lights, so many people you can barely move. I bump into some sweaty-haired dude; "Excuse me man," I say, but he just ignores me. The parquet of the dance floor is buried beneath a sea of shuffling black shoes and high heels. I try to muscle onto the floor but the sea of shoulders refuses to part. Where are Amrit and Ashish? Steven and Eric? Deep in the mass of bobbing heads, that's where they are, swallowed by the crowd of dirty dancers and lone drunk guys half-heartedly shaking it like a Polaroid picture.

With a plop I sink into one of those plush sofas. A warm Corona and a sip of Dirges's drink is the only alcohol in my system. Not enough to dance without a conscience. The strobe lights intermittently flash on faces: a girl with Rapunzel hair and a beer in her hand; Ashish, huge smile, snaking around a caramel-skinned beauty with big eyes; Dirges in his white button-down, rubbing sweat off his neck.

"Alex, yo, why you not dancing?" Deepak hovers over me, armpit sweat making two distinct splotches on his shiny blue shirt.

"I'm coming," I say, rising from the sofa to follow him through the tangled throngs on the dance floor. The strobe showers us in pinks and purples and greens. Up two steps and we're on a stage, the music bruisingly loud here. And there's space to dance.

A Thai girl in a flowery low-cut blouse palms her knees and swerves her hips. She appears in front of me, back turned, gyrating into my lap. I do my thing: head bob, right elbow up, left elbow up. Like that she's gone, just vanishes into the crowd. Just like that. I bob my head

to the lispy surround sound of Biggie Smalls. I wave my hands in the air like I just don't care, except I do care. I throw one elbow up and then the other. This is my dance. Here comes the lightning-quick slide to the left, a hard stomping of the right foot. A step back and then a step forth, chest bending, a step forth and then a step back, chest rising. This is my dance. I'm going through its motions but I can't stop wondering if I'm being watched, if I'm being desired afar, maybe from a woman I haven't yet met.

"Hey, Alex!" It's Ashish's friend, this Bollywood-beautiful girl with gold specks on her forehead. Pulak. She's walking toward me. "Do you like this song?"

"No, not really," I say, my shoulders swaying to the music. "Do you?"

"Yeah!" Her face shutters on and off with the strobe lights. Separated by two feet, we kind-of-sort-of-but-not-really dance with each other. Five seconds of that and then, with a smile, she walks away. She doesn't call me Big Poppa.

I watch Eric Li's hand brush against the Rapunzel-haired girl's hip before exploring the rose-tattooed small of her back. They don't even look at each other, somehow both involved and isolated, bodies teasing and touching but minds in whole other galaxies. They are *in it*, whatever it is.

I escape from the nightclub and into the tepid May air, leaving behind the faint trail of boom-ka boom-ka boom-ka. Sure it's the last party of the year, but it's the same as all the others: sloppy kisses between strangers and puking girls and boys in the bathroom stalls. I gaze up at the glowing Eleven50 sign. All year I've roamed these nightclubs with friends, searching for that perfect moment with the perfect girl. But do I really think that I'll find it, or her, on a humid dance floor?

“Where *are* you?” moans a sideways-walking girl into her cell phone. “I’m hella-fucked up, Stacy! Hella-fucked up!” She brushes past me and trips over her heels. “Where *are* you?” she repeats. I finger the button of my red silk shirt and scratch at the black X on my hand.

The line in front of Eleven50 is still long and winding, the girls still shouting on their cell phones, the guys still talking to each other too loudly, their foreheads sweaty, their smiles drunk. Maybe the perfect girl hates nightclubs; maybe she’s studying for finals on the third floor of the library; maybe she’s singing to herself in the shower, or maybe, just maybe, she’s dancing in her pajamas, alone in her dorm room. She could be anywhere, but one day I will find her.

And we will dance.

I tell Madeline I love her. Two weeks ago I told her this for the first time, us lying face-to-face on the pink sheets of her twin-sized bed, our hearts beating beating beating. She’s nineteen, a sophomore, concerned more about music theory midterms than job interviews. I’m twenty-one, a college senior, months away from a question-mark future.

"Would you like anything to drink?" asks our blonde-bearded waiter on the patio of Taverna Plaka, a festively Greek restaurant where inside the belly-dancers shimmy across tiled floors and the patrons toss napkins into the air like confetti. It’s a night in late September. Madeline and I are both virgins, and tonight we will have sex.

"What do you recommend?" Mad asks. She's soft and curvy in a sexy-classy black dress, the kind that lips above her breasts and below her ankles. Her hair is French-toast brown and her teeth are solar-powered white. Her fingers are tethered into mine under the table.

"Biblia Chora is a fine choice," says the waiter. "It's dry, crisp. Has a mineral quality."

Madeline squeezes my fingers.

"Sure, sounds good," I say, not knowing what sounds good when it comes to wine, but pretending anyway. I'm wearing my pin-striped black shirt, khakis, and black loafers, too. I'm not used to dressing fancy, but it feels right to at least look the part of an adult when I'm ordering wine for my girlfriend.

"Right away, sir," says the waiter.

I think: I am a sir.

A belly dancer, all bronze skin and bushy eyebrows, shakes her rump near us, a few scattered dollar bills tucked in her bedazzled beltline. We wonder how old she is; Mad says thirty, I say I'm not sure. I'm nervous. I think Mad is, too. We both know what will happen later tonight; we can hear its promise in the breaths between our words. I find her hand under the table and squeeze.

After that fifth grade dance, I'd sometimes spot Bricelyn Carter in the hallways of Farmington Elementary. She'd flash that toothy smile of hers and my stomach would cave in. When I graduated from elementary school, I thought I'd never see her again, but a year later, I saw her at the grocery store, where I was wearing contact lenses, a collared shirt, and nice pants without a belt. I looked cool. I thought I looked like a grown-up. I wanted her to see me and be impressed. I don't know if she saw me.

After Kim Friedman's bat mitzvah party, Amanda Cowell and I no longer swapped notes in English class. Because she switched schools, I didn't talk to her until a few years ago, when we stumbled upon each other at the Borders bookstore back home. Amanda's at Penn; she's smart, but kind of pretentious. Her voice has a sharp lilt to it, as if she's a U.N. diplomat. I

didn't hear it when we danced to *Strawberry Wine*.

These girls, these memories, they hover over my head and dissipate into the cool air of the patio of Taverna Plaka. I watch Mad smile and slip a dollar into the belly dancer's jangling belt. Before long Madeline and I are drinking the Biblia Chora, and I'm ordering dinner for the two of us. I'd heard once from her father that, contrary to contemporary thinking, the gentlemanly thing for the man to do was to order for the lady. I don't know if Mad agrees, but she doesn't seem upset that I'm taking her father's advice. Her fingers are still locked into mine under the table, and we're still smiling, maybe too much. We're toasting, too. "To the future," I say. "To us," Mad says. We clink and sip, clink and sip. On this night, with napkins flying in the air and European disco music blaring around us, we don't know that our relationship will end, that there will come a time when we will be no more than each other's memories. On this night, we make plans: for trips to the mountains of Lake Lurie, North Carolina, to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, to the volcanoes of Hawaii. We make plans to bring our high school friends together, our families together.

Later we're dancing. I hoist my fists and shake them, as if I have maracas in my palms. A row of bemused Greek men on stools watch Madeline as she thrusts her arms into the air and yells, "Yeah!" I close my hands over hers and turn her sideways, away from them and into me.

COUNTY FAIR

Rain drips through the slits
of a gazebo at the county fair,
pitter-pattering plump-lipped tomatoes
and a lonely browning pear.
Corn on the cob sweats beads
into the gulch of the wood crate,
and I smell mulch, pastures of grass
the wind pulls straight.
My love unbelts her sandals,
and her left foot, pink and nude,
ribs across my toes as if testing piano keys
for a tune.

COSTUME

The policewoman dabbed black soot against the fireman's face. They were a team, her navy-blue cap dipping over her brown eyes, his crimson jacket bunching up against his wrists. When he kissed her, she kept her eyes open, as if excited it was real, or afraid that it wasn't. She smelled like rain and skin.

As they walked across the parking lot, he inhaled a scent of leaves and burning. It was fall, the sky an alka-seltzer pellet dropped from a cloud. They were going to a party.

There, tissue light bulbs bathed them in an orange halo. Cobwebs stuck to the ceiling, red handprints to the walls. A hippie, a priest, and Osama Bin Laden negotiated next to the bathroom door. By the kitchen counter, a carnivorous plant nibbled on a chocolate chip cookie, her vines lopping into curlicues around her belly. When the policewoman stopped to talk to the plant, the fireman found Jessica Rabbit sitting by a punch bowl rimmed with gummy worms. Her glittery dress hugged her hourglass figure.

“Hey,” the fireman said.

“Oh, hi,” Jessica Rabbit replied. “I didn’t see you there.” The curls of her wig almost fell into the punch bowl.

They had met before, on a night long before this one. She had rubbed the faded denim under his ankle. She had called him a “soulful person.” He had wanted to kiss her, but she had

someone else in her life, and so had he.

“This party is fun!” the policewoman said, appearing at the fireman’s side. She kissed him hard on the lips.

Back at my apartment, Madeline peeled the fireman cap off of my head. She threw her cop hat to the carpet. “Happy Halloween,” she said, unzipping my jeans.

I couldn't get it up.

“It feels forced,” she said.

We kept trying.

“I don't want it to feel forced.”

“I'm sorry,” I said.

Once upon a time, I'd told her about my teacher-student fantasy, how I'd be the teacher and she'd be the student and we'd know what we were doing was wrong, so wrong, but we'd do it, anyway. She'd said she could play the part if that's what I wanted, but why couldn't we just be ourselves instead?

RECYCLING

If before we go to sleep tonight,
I whisper you a story I told three women
I lost,
would you know that I use the same inflection and same words
to tell of the time I held a blind Korean boy's hand
and walked him through a museum touching dinosaur bones?
Would you laugh between splayed fingers
and lay your head against my chest?
Or would you hear the syrup under my voice
and know nothing I tell you is a secret.

I LOOK FORWARD TO HEARING YOUR REPLY

OBJECTIVE: Twenty-something man seeks woman with gentle smile, contagious laugh, and Zen-like understanding of past.

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

Melissa Katz

December 15, 1999- February 18, 2000 (Age 15)

- French-kissed during spin-the-remote celebration of fifteenth birthday; tongue swished against her braces like toothbrush.
- Engaged in dry-humping sessions on leopard-print bed under poster of *The Exorcist*.
- Denied accusation that I was dating her only because two other freshman girls had turned down my invitation to see *The World is Not Enough*.
- Suffered dumping by Melissa's friend over telephone: "She says you just want a girlfriend, any girlfriend."
- Gave Melissa three carnations and strawberry Ring-Pop on Valentine's Day.
- Resumed dry-humping.
- Became angry at friends who alleged Melissa was stupid because she asked geography teacher what the capital of Africa was.

- Watched Melissa play with aluminum foil wrapper of Wendy's hamburger, folding foil into little pockets and staring at her ketchup-stained origami with deliriously toothy smile on her face.
- Heard rumor that Melissa, in fits of laughter, had chased her friend around the kitchen with a steak knife.
- Dumped Melissa by telephone.
- Denied rumors she spread about "small penis"; did not spread rumors of her kisses tasting like chicken fingers.

Masturbation

1999- 2003

- Masturbated.

Tara Mills

April 20, 2003-June 2, 2003 (Age 18)

- Slow-danced with Tara at my senior prom after our original dates had collapsed into a Smirnoff-scented embrace.
- Lost myself in the mole on her upper lip like the tip of a Hershey's kiss.
- Touched her belly button ring with my thumb.
- Fell asleep with her on the couch at friend's poolhouse and woke up with hand on the perfect small of her back.
- Comforted her after learning her first boyfriend had pretended he didn't hear her say "stop" the first time they had sex.
- Learned she wished she was still a virgin, like me.

- Rubbed hard against her until I came in my boxers just as her panties had started to get wet.
- Turned speechless when she told me she talked to her father about blowjobs.
- Answered "Next week," when asked if I'd like to finger her.
- Got dumped by her the next week.

Masturbation

2003-2005

- Took brief sabbatical to vote in 2004 Presidential Election.

Lindsey Aria

October 5, 2005-January 15, 2006 (Age 20)

- Met at her older sister's apartment party and fielded questions from Lindsey like I was a celebrity and she was an investigative reporter. ("What does your dad do? Your mom? When's your birthday? What do you want to do when you grow up? You did the M.C. Hammer move at your middle school dance? Can you show me?")
- Refused to let her read my private journal: "What are you writing in there about me?" she asked. (*"I study her figure in the mirror; she does have some fat on her, I think I was denying it earlier."*)
- Angered her after she performed a blowjob on me and she asked how was it and I said a little dry, but there were websites with tips: "What do you mean? How could you say something like that?"
- Argued with her over the phone about whether or not she had a right to read my journal.
- Broke up with her the first night back on campus after winter break in front of the

gymnasium. “Why do it here, out of all places?” she asked.

- Stopped answering her questions.

Madeline Weiss

April 20, 2006-April 22, 2007 (Age 21)

- Laughed at how she bounced as she walked, her glistening blue cello case bobbing like a tortoise shell on her back.
- Stared into her maple syrup eyes until mine watered.
- Bought her roses not for a holiday, but just because.
- Told her, with my heart beating beating beating, that I loved her.
- "Made love" to her on carpet of basement den of her parents' lakehouse. (Realize "make love" sounds cornball, but hopes exception can be made for soft touches and rug burns on legs.)
- Thought she might be pregnant when her period came late; contemplated plunging into my \$2,000 savings from teaching summer tennis lessons to support whatever decision she'd make.
- Told her that, since I was a college senior, didn't see myself going to Mexican restaurants anymore with her sophomore friends and their spilled margaritas.
- Wondered whether she understood me or was just pretending when she'd laugh at my jokes in a ha-ha-he-he way.
- Made unfunny quips just to test her, just to see if she'd giggle.
- Apologized when she told me she felt like some kind of analysis project for me, and that

she didn't look at me that way, she just took me for who I was.

- Contemplated telling her I not only “loved” her but that I was “in love” with her; could not say those words.
- Cried into her breasts.
- Broke-up-made-up-had-sex.
- Quit buying her just-because flowers.
- Split up before graduation; she ended it, but said she had to, because I'd stopped trying.

I am ready to try again. References are enclosed.

Thank you for your consideration.

NICK BUTKOVICH AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL DANCE

Behind a DJ's booth flashing rainbow strobe
and booming bass,
Nick Butkovich sits cross-legged on a squeaky gymnastic mat,
pushing his dirty glasses up his skinny nose,
on his lap, a *Star Trek* paperback
he already knows.

Through the falling confetti he watches her frown,
her lips angry purple,
her eyeshadow corduroy brown.
She doesn't want to dance
but neither does he,
because he is black socks at gym class
and *South Park* quoted in snotty glee.
"I want my cheesy poofs!"
He's the guy
they locked in the bathroom
on the charter bus to Biloxi in sixth grade,
and when he slapped the thin door
and said "Let me out!"
They waited
until he begged to be saved.

*Why is my name Nick Butkovich?
Why can't it be Nicolas Vichy?
Then she'd think I'm Italian
And we'd drink wine
And eat spaghetti
because we were Italian
And French kiss
even though we were Italian.*

Tonight he won't talk to her
but one day,
when his voice deepens,
when his armpits meet deodarant,
when his chin harbors more than three hairs,
he will.

RABBIT MAN

One bar. Five foxy ladies. Nickster's getting laid tonight.

Nick recited this mantra again and again, feeling its prophetic pull like a halo above his head. He looked good, damn good in his apple-red suit with the lightning-white tie, his hair a spiky fern of black, his lips come-hither curled. It was singles night at Club Whiskey in downtown Chicago, and sixteen thirtysomething men were hustling for sultry glances from five foxy ladies. As he swaggered towards the dull glow of the bar, the man in apple-red dismissed the odds and the ratios. If anything, he'd be the selective one, for not just any woman "got" Nick. He had standards. He had gusto. He had balls. *Nickster's getting laid tonight.*

"I like your purse," he said, easing into a stool beside a platinum-blond woman, her eyeshadow electric purple. Her purse was bulky and black, hardly distinguishable from any other purse in the room, but Nick knew what he was doing. "It's classy." He unlocked his come-hither lips. "Classy like you."

"That's cheesy as hell." She let out a throaty laugh. "But I'll accept the compliment."

Smooth. He offered to buy her a vodka and tonic and she said yes. Impossibly smooth. He moved right to the question he popped to every prospective lady. The litmus test.

"What is the deal with rabbits?" he asked, his tone nasal but not too-nasal, cresting and falling.

"Excuse me?"

He coughed, readying his voice for another go. He thought he'd nailed the inflection, but maybe he was off-key. Or maybe she didn't hear him right.

He thrust his palms towards the ceiling. "How many carrots do you have to eat until you

just say NO!"

The bartender squinted hard at him, scooting the vodka and tonic toward the edge of the countertop.

"Is that supposed to be an impression of somebody?" she asked Nick. Her eyes got small, concentrating on the furrows of his brow.

She didn't get it. He nailed it, and she didn't understand. He could never be with a woman who didn't understand.

Nick's Three Step Seduction, as of 1/8/2011

1) Perform Jerry Seinfeld imitation.
2) Wait for joyful laughter; if none, continue impression.
3) If she laughs, just follow your instincts. You got this! If she doesn't understand, move on!

"Forget it," he said. He unfolded a twenty from his wallet and dropped it on the bar.

"Have a nice night."

As he wandered towards the lounge and its candlelit tables, he overheard her telling a linebacker of a man, "Something about carrots? I don't know. He was weird."

His competition was nothing special; all the men were mirrors of each other in their khaki slacks and button-down dress shirts, their CK cologne, their Old Spice. Huddled and secretive they scoped the girls, like National Geographic photographers in the bushes, playing it cool but not really. *Four foxy ladies left.* But Nick put himself out there. Nick had big balls. *Nickster's getting laid tonight.* And that's when he saw two curly-haired brunettes in glossy charcoal tops,

arms locked, wrists dangling with gold bracelets, jeans molded on legs like skin. They had the same green eyes and the same dramatic dimple on the chin: they were probably sisters, and they were staggering his way. "The mint guy in the bathroom?" one said. "I didn't notice."

"Come on, Marcy. His eyes were all over your ass."

"Shut up!"

"He thought you were a college girl." They laughed hoarsely, Marcy's hand balancing against the other's shoulder.

Nick stepped defiantly in front of them, as if reporting for duty. "Hi, ladies."

They stopped, surprised, eyes twinkling. "Hi."

This time there'd be no foreplay. This time, there'd be shock and awe. "What is the deal," he said, enunciating the words with the conviction of Moses, "with rabbits?"

He waited for the knowing smile, the grateful laughter, the tender hand on his shoulder.

"That's a very soulful suit you got," Marcy said. "Very red."

"Are you a reverend?" asked the other.

He felt dizzy, knocked between the eyes, Tweety-Bird style.

The women whispered into each other's ears, Marcy's lips twisting like a joker's. Nick never let a woman, much less two, walk away from him, so he set off past these ladies and their jangling gold bracelets, past the platinum-bob and the linebacker at the bar, past the man-mirrors in their slacks and dress shirts, and towards the front door. *Two foxy ladies left.* He needed some air.

"You're the rabbit man."

Nick turned to find one of the man-mirrors, this one grinning, cocky. "Word's been

spreading about your game, rabbit man."

"Rabbit man?"

"The bartender overheard your carrot joke, and then I told Cindy." The man-mirror nodded towards a redheaded pixie of a woman by the streetside window. She gabbed into her cell phone, but when she spotted the man-mirror, she blew a kiss. "It was the perfect icebreaker. Got us both laughing. I owe you one." He offered his hand but Nick just looked at it and scowled. They didn't get it. Nobody got it. *One foxy lady left.*

The sidewalk buzzed with the easy warmth of a summer evening, the foot traffic a nightlife all its own, nattily-dressed pedestrians and their colognes and perfumes mixing with the wood-smoked scents from the nearby Italian restaurants. Nick watched the insistent glimmer of street lights, while the echo of Lady Gaga thumped relentlessly back in Club Whiskey.

He had one more chance, and there she was, an Asian girl in a plaid skirt, her eyelashes fluttery, the ash of her cigarette burbling orange. A paper heart the size of a penny was clipped against her freckled cheek. She finished her smoke and snuffed it with a pink heel.

He approached her and introduced himself. She smiled wide. And then he did his impression. The joke wasn't funny-funny, fine, he knew that, but it was his delivery. It was all in his delivery.

"Bugs Bunny?"

"You know that's not it." He didn't want to be coy anymore.

"Is joke on TV?"

"No, the joke is stupid, forget the joke. The voice I did, that's the joke!"

"On TV?"

"On TV? Yes, on TV, the voice was on TV."

She mouthed his words silently, paper heart crinkling against her cheek. Gently but firmly, she touched his elbow. "You are Jerry Seinfeld."

He remembered sixth grade science and the diagrams of kinetic energy, all twisting orbs of blue, pulsing, constantly in motion. He felt that swirl in his stomach, right then.

She touched my elbow.

"You ready to go, Sumi?" A nervy man came to her side, hasty, in a rush.

"I am ready." She sank her hand into his. "Bye-bye, Jerry Seinfeld."

And so Nick watched them walk off, hand in hand, hurtling across the street before the Walk sign expired.

Back in his Wrigleyville loft, Nick figured all he needed was a little practice. He cranked open his bedroom window, listening in on the Cubs fans down below, drunk off losing and Milwaukee's Best. "What...is the deal with rabbits?" he said.

A little more practice, and maybe a girl like Sumi would touch far more than his elbow. "What is...the deal with rabbits?"

Down below, a stumbling bald man in a Prior jersey heard Nick. "Hey, buddy," he shouted.

"What?" Nick bellowed back.

"Kiss my balls!"

Nick frowned. He slid the window shut and crawled into bed, mashing his feet against silk sheets.

That night he dreamed of little blue orbs, swirling, pulsing, alive.

EYE EXAM

You're going to feel a little puff in one, two, there it is. Surprised you a little, didn't it?
Keep your chin still on the strap please. There you go. That's it. You've got the right idea.
Do me a favor and read that next line.

A F J K L P Z

Good. One more.

F Z L O N O S Z

You're a champ. Now just the left.

I A M G E T T I N G

Now the right.

A D I V O R C E

Okay. Both eyes now.

MY WIFE IS DATING AN ORTHODONTIST

Lower.

HIS NAME IS STEVE

And-

FUCKING STEVE

Last one.

I WANT SOMEBODY TO MURDER HIM

Alright, we're done. Oh, *that?* Don't worry about that! That was just me cracking wise. I'm feeling good, feeling great, feeling fine! You know me. What do you mean? Of course you know me. Dammit, I'm your optometrist! You let me into your eyes, don't you?

And God bless your heart, my friend. You can see. You can see!

THE SYLLABUS

Class: Creative Writing 101

Classroom: The Professor's Kitchen (So To Permit Easy Access to Snacks, Little Debbie Not Excluded)

Office Hours: Students Encouraged Not to Visit During Office Hours. Please Call Your Mother and Discuss Problems With Her.

Prerequisite: One Semester of Admiring Professor from Afar; Tertiary to Sophisticated Knowledge of Fox television series *The O.C.* (2003-2007)

Course Goals and Purposes

Writing is difficult. To find the right words, the right phrases, and all together the right language to capture the import of a moment, whether real or fictional, is a challenge to which most writers spend a lifetime aspiring to.

Fortunately, you will not be one of those writers.

As a student in this class, your principle goal will be to compliment your professor at regular intervals: his hair, his arms (he's been working out), and his intellect.

Depending on your appearance and gender, you may be occasionally asked to sleep with the professor. While not required, such behavior will be rewarded.

Though mastery of the writer's craft is impossible, your best opportunity for success is to closely study the work of a singular expert, as determined by the required texts.

Required Texts

Professor's blog

Professor's Facebook status updates, 2007-2010

Professor's Twitter feed

Policies and Procedures

Attendance, participation, and punctual completion of reading and writing assignments are a must for success in this course.

* Writing assignments must include at least five (5) favorable references to professor's hair, arms (he's been working out), and intellect.

Major Assignments

Writing exercises/quizzes/homework/participation

10 points

Purchase of Little Debbie snack goods for kitchen

15

Personal Essay about *The OC*: Did Marissa's lesbian storyline in Season 2 reek of desperation?

25

Enthusiastic Delivery of High-Fives to Elevate Professor's Mood

50

Total *potential* points

100

Attendance Policy

* If the professor doesn't care much for you, failure should be expected regardless of absence or presence or in-class performance.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is typically grounds for failure unless student copies professor's sentences and follows each with a winky emoticon as seen below

;)

If you have any questions about the syllabus, any questions at all, please keep those questions to yourself.

Regards,

Your Professor

SUPER MARLOW

It's been thirty-one years since the night I sang karaoke in Fukuoka, Japan, and the president of a video game company changed my life forever. I never told the story from start to finish. Maybe it's because I've been scared of Dr. Yamatoto, or his lawyers, or just scared of hurting Yuki even though I haven't talked to her since 1986. But my kid should know. He should know who I was, who I am, who I could have been, too. Whenever I see a poster or a t-shirt emblazoned with the red hat, the long mustache, and the overalls, there's this funny feeling that builds up inside me. It happens when I walk past a video game screen at Target or Wal-Mart and see him somersaulting, cartwheeling, and jumping, his head banging the ceilings of stone fortresses. I'll scratch that little pink bump on the top of my head, and I'll know the truth of where he came from, the guy who goes "Wa-HOO!" as he leaps through mushroom worlds.

That guy came from me.

It's the morning of June 15, 1979, and I'm running around a river surrounded by cherry blossoms in Fukuoka, Japan, a city of about a million, where the men in circle-rimmed glasses and business suits and the women with sun umbrellas hiding their pale skin watch me run, thinking there goes that sweaty, hairy American with his shiny yellow shorts and his yellow suspenders. Where is his t-shirt? Why is his mustache so bushy? Do we really need to see that black fur rising from his belly button to his chest? There goes the beast; there goes King Kong.

That's what the schoolboys, in their sailor uniforms, call me even when I'm wearing a t-

shirt. If they want King Kong, I'll give them King Kong in *Mork and Mindy* suspenders.

Last month I graduated Rutgers with a 2.7 GPA. I have an administrative job lined up for August at my uncle's plumbing company in Newark, New Jersey, which isn't such a bad thing in the middle of a recession so bad most of my track team buddies are still looking for work. But the thing is, I'm not worrying about jobs. I'm thinking about the U.S. Olympic Track & Field Team and next year's Games in Moscow. Because I let my training lapse when things got serious with Yuki, I'm what you'd call an alternate for the Men's 10,000 Meters. Ask Craig Virgin (the "best" we got on the team, and yes, his last name really is Virgin) and he'll tell you I'm centimeters away from his ass. I want to be known, and I will be known. They'll watch me run on televisions from Bangladesh to Boston. I got my eyes on the prize. And on Yuki, too.

I've come to Fukuoka to stay with her for the summer. It was a big deal for her to invite me, and what did I know, I just went, fuck it, I'll go to Japan. I've been here for ten days. My ma said I'd miss her ziti, but I don't miss it yet. Well, maybe a little. It's the only Italian thing she cooks. She moved to America when she was seventeen to follow my dad, American dream shit. They did it, my pops a corporate lawyer, my mom a homemaker. Me? I'm a future Olympian who can run 10,000 meters with a belly full of beer.

I sleep on a floor mat in the den of Yuki's house, where a black-and-white TV at my feet plays Clint Eastwood movies dubbed in Japanese. She's at school most of the day, finishing up her credits to graduate. After my morning runs, I come back to the house and her mother serves me odong, these hot noodles, and she leaves a lid over the bowl. It's always sitting there at noon and six and her mother is always in the other room with her door closed. Yuki says it's because her mom is shy around foreigners, but I think it's because she thinks it's strange that this man

dating her daughter has come across the world with only his backpack and his running shoes.

Yuki bullies her mom around. Maybe it's a child of divorce thing, I'm not sure, but she will start lecturing her mom in English, knowing she won't understand a word. She says, "Mother, mother, you are not my master!"

I'm running harder than usual today. By the time I finish my sixth mile, I stop, breathing heavy, my arms resting on the rails of the bridge that crosses the Naka. I've gotten used to the strange looks. I am a one-man carnival. The hairy foreigner! Look at me!

"Hello, how are you?" he says.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead and look to my left to find a small man in a green Polo shirt and white khakis. He's wearing glasses with large, rectangle beige frames, and his black hair looks like a Japanese version of John Ritter's from *Three's Company*, half-banged in the front, half-mullet in the back.

"Hi," I say.

"You. Very fast. I see you run." He talks slowly, deliberately.

"Thanks," I say. Every couple days, a Japanese person will approach me on the street and want to practice his English. Usually the conversations are short, but this man doesn't seem in a hurry to leave.

"You. No shirt?" he says.

I laugh. "No shirt," I say.

"Ha, ha," he says. "Ha, ha." He mimes his hands against his chest, pulling something imaginary.

"Ah, suspenders? Yes, suspenders," I say, noticing I'm starting to imitate his voice. It's

contagious. “Okay, sir. Take care.”

“I am Dr. Yamatoto,” he says. He extends his hand. “It is pleasure.”

“I’m Marlow,” I say, shaking his hand. “I have to get going.”

“Where do you go, fast man?”

“Girlfriend,” I say.

“Ah, very good,” he says. “Ha, ha. Ha, ha.”

I break into a sprint. The wind tosses the scent of cherry blossoms my way. I don't expect to see Dr. Yamatoto ever again.

Yuki has left a note under my sleeping mat. She always leaves notes there. I'm not sure if her mother reads them.

Karaoke tonight?

Love,

your little peach

Peach. I call her that because when I kiss her too hard, my mustache scratches pink and orange against her nose, against her cheeks, against her chin. Like a peach. Yuki works hard on her English, and it makes me feel a little guilty that I don't work harder on my Japanese but it is what it is. The plan is she'll come back with me in the fall when I train for the Olympics, but I sometimes wonder if she's using me as an experiment, part of some “great American college experience.”

We met at a Halloween party at Rutgers last year, where she was studying abroad for the semester and living with her father, who runs a struggling sushi restaurant in Newark. I was

Mork from *Mork and Mindy* (yep, same suspenders) and she was Dolly Parton in a bright pink dress with balloons in her bra. She'd introduced herself with a "How-dee!" with so much emphasis on the "dee" that it just about threw me from my chair. She told me she loved Dolly, read every interview with her, wanted to be like her. "Strong woman, self woman," Yuki said, whatever that was supposed to mean. And what big boobs, I said. Yuki responded by scratching a circle into my elbow with a long pink fingernail.

By the end of the night, I'd peeled off her blonde wig and was brushing my finger against the sprinkling of moles on the back of her milky-soft neck.

She wants to work at the United Nations one day. As for me, I don't think much about life after the Olympic Games. The truth is, I want to tell my uncle thanks but no thanks, I don't need your plumbing job because I'll be too busy filming Wheaties commercials. (No joke. Eyes on the prize.)

The noodles are cold by the time I get to them. I hear a door open with a papery crackle. It's Yuki's mom, long black hair, long-sleeved white blouse, long woolen skirt. She must be sweating. I'm still sweating from my run. The windows are open.

"Home?" she says.

This is the first word she's said me since the "hello" she offered ten days ago.

"Yes, home," I say. "Arrigato for the noodles."

"Home," she repeats.

I don't know what she's trying to tell me. I hoist my chopsticks, like I'm toasting her.

"Home sweet home."

"You go America when?"

A noodle dangles from my lip. "Oh, I thought Yuki told you," I say, confused but trying not to be disrespectful.

"Yuki told you?"

"No, I mean," I say. "August."

"You go America soon?"

I let the noodle drop back into the bowl. "Well, August was the plan," I say, smiling.

"One week, good? Go America?"

I can't read her expression. Her eyebrows are arched, I think, but maybe that's how they always look.

"You buy ticket, good? Go America soon? Good." She nods firmly, as if to say that's that.

A papery crackle and she's back in her bedroom. My noodles are cold.

Yuki does not want "to do the hanky-panky" at home. I understand; her mother never does leave the house. What we resort to is going to the karaoke room and using it as our personal honeymoon suite. I give the man at the desk extra yen. I think he knows what we're doing. They have security cameras.

At the karaoke room that night, on a white sofa with The Beatles' "Hey Jude" scrolling white text across a black screen and rainbow lights from the ceiling spraying us in technicolor, I tell Yuki about the conversation I had with her mom. I expect her to be upset, to vow to curse her mother in a delirious stream of English and Japanese. After all, her mother is not her master. And Yuki does get upset. But not for the reasons I expect.

“Mother wants to introduce me,” Yuki says.

I usually tease her for saying “mother,” because it makes her sound like Norman Bates from *Psycho*. But this time I just say, “Introduce you to who?”

“A gentleman from company.” She says the words in a hushed tone, as if they might break if she speaks louder.

“What gentleman?”

“Gentleman, just gentleman.” She's looking down at her knees. She's wearing a short skirt with small Hello Kitty! emblems. “From Pocky company.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I say.

She looks into my eyes. Hers are watery. “He is well-established businessman.”

“Pocky? The candy company?” I say.

Yuki looks away from me again. “Hey Jude” is rising to its rollicking climax. I suddenly smell the waft of spilled sake from the floor of the hallway outside the door. I need a drink.

“Mother thinks it’s good idea,” Yuki says.

“So all of a sudden you’re listening to your mother,” I say, not asking, but telling. I can’t believe it. I’ve come to Japan for her, sacrificed a summer of more serious training with Craig Virgin and the guys, and this is how she’s repaying me. “Seriously. Pocky? Who are you dating? Willy Wonka Nagasaki?” I know it’s a stupid joke but I don’t care.

“Marlow, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“Jesus, Yuki,” I say. I reach to touch her knee but stop myself. I don’t know what to do, whether to comfort her and stop her from crying, or whether to scream at her and ask her why she’s turning on me.

“I do not know,” she says quietly.

“What, Yuki? What don’t you know?”

“I do not know if I can marry a plumber.”

My face grows hot. I really want that drink now. “I’m not going to be a plumber, Yuki.” I feel that by saying her name, I sound more serious, more real.

“What will you be, Marlow?”

I stand up from the sofa. Yuki tugs my hand but I pull mine back. “I’m going to run,” I say.

She hesitates. “My mother wants me to have good future.”

“Fine,” I say. “Then do what your master says.”

I walk out of the room before she can respond. A businessman from a fucking candy company? Yuki had always told me Japanese men bored her and insulted her, that they looked down at women, that they wouldn't accept a wife with “Western ideas.” I know what Yuki wants and what she needs. She needs a man who doesn't give a shit about society expectations, a man who wears suspenders shirtless around a Japanese city, a man who'll let her wear balloons in her bra on Halloween.

Outside the karaoke room, waiting to go next, sit three Japanese businessmen on a long wood bench, a tablecloth next to them topped with glasses of sake and beer. And, what do you know, in the middle sits Dr. Yamatoto.

“Fast man!” he says. His friends stop their conversation as Dr. Yamatoto rises and surprises me with a hard hug. I smell the liquor on his breath. His face is red. “You? Girlfriend?”

“Yes, with my girlfriend,” I say, the words feeling rubbery against my tongue.

“Sing good song? ‘Dancing Queen?’” Dr. Yamatoto breaks into the twist, sashaying his hips, back-forth-back-forth-back-forth.

I laugh. It feels good to laugh. “What do you guys do?” I say.

The other men look at each other. Dr. Yamatoto is their spokesman. He is still doing the twist. “We are in company. Software development.”

“What the hell is software development?” I say.

“It is job of future. What is your work?”

Future: That annoying word. “I’m a runner,” I say. “In the Olympics.”

“Ah? Olympic?” says Dr. Yamatoto. “Your job Olympic?”

Dr. Yamatoto then speaks in a fast burst of Japanese I don’t understand. His friends, or colleagues, whoever they are, laugh. “What is your profession, fast man?”

Fuck it, I decide. I smack my fist against my chest. I want Yuki to hear me from where she’s sitting in the karaoke room, to hear my ridiculousness and feel guilty. “I CLEAN DIRTY TOILETS!” I say. “I’m a plumber!”

“Ah?” says Dr. Yamatoto, not laughing, but nodding as he’s deep in thought. “Plumbers usually fat, yes?”

“Usually,” I say, “but not this time.” I don’t tell Dr. Yamatoto that I sometimes see a fat kid in the mirror, even though I run all those miles a day. I don’t tell him I used to be a chubby kid with chipmunk cheeks. Marshmallow Marlow, they called me.

“Drink?” says another one of the businessmen.

“We all drink? Join you and your girlfriend?” Dr. Yamatoto looks hopeful. He stops

doing the twist.

This is it: I'm going to show Yuki what her future husband is going to be like. I'm going to show her the drunk businessmen types who will greet her when she leaves me.

“Na-nu, na-nu,” I say, doing my best Mork. *“Let's do this.”*

I'm jumping. I'm drunk. I'm drunk and I'm jumping and I'm jumping and I'm drunk and I'm singing “Obladi Obladah” with Dr. Yamatoto and he's jumping and he's drunk and I'm singing loud and I'm jumping high and the rainbow lights look delicious in my vision.

“Stop, Marlow,” Yuki is saying. Dr. Yamatoto's friends keep touching her and she keeps pushing them away. I'm glad they're touching her. That's what she wants, isn't it? Watch me jump, Yuki! Watch me jump!

I jump!

“Super Jump!” says Dr. Yamatoto.

“Let's go home!” says Yuki.

I stop jumping. I feel the sake slosh through my brain. “Peach,” I screamed. “Stop being a princess!”

The Japanese men laugh. “Princess Peach,” Dr. Yamatoto says. “What a beautiful name.”

I jump! Higher. If I could, I would jump over Yuki's mother's head and squash it like a mushroom. I would jump over Craig Virgin and finish in front of him in the trials for the 10,000 Meters. The sake makes me jump sideways but I don't care.

I jump high again but this time I jump so high I crater the ceiling. White shrapnel rains down on me. Seconds later, the song ends and the screen turns to static.

"Are you in good health, friend?" Dr. Yamatoto asks.

Yuki looks on from behind.

I touch my sweaty, curly mop of hair. "No blood," I say.

"No blood?" Dr. Yamatoto says.

"No blood."

They cheer. Now they are jumping. Behind them I see the door open. Yuki is leaving.

"Like superhero," says Dr. Yamatoto slapping my back hard.

"Marlow," I say, patting my chest, confused and a little woozy. I'm not sure if I'm going to throw up or not. "I am Marlow."

"You are Super Marlow," he says.

I don't remember what happens next. I probably complain to Dr. Yamatoto about the idea of working at my uncle's company, and how I don't want to work side-by-side with my cousin Louie, who is a nice enough guy but wastes most of his time playing Atari games. Dr. Yamatoto and I may have hugged, or maybe just shaken hands, or bowed, but Yuki wasn't there. The next thing I know I am vomiting in her mother's cherry blossom bushes, and then peeing on them, and then walking back in the house, where I say, "I'm home. HOME!" really loudly.

A light flicks on behind a paper door and I sober up like *that*. Yuki's mother, face like fire. "Where is she?" she asks.

"Who?" I say, which is probably a stupid question.

"Where is Yuki?"

Yuki's mother is not shy anymore. I know this because she is poking me in the chest. I am walking backwards onto the porch.

"Go, get out of here!" she says.

She slams the door shut. I have to pee again, so I pee on her cherry blossoms again.

I wake up with Yuki's toes in my eyes. And sunlight. And pollen from flowers. I sneeze. I'm lying crooked on the front lawn of Yuki's house. It might be the early morning or the late afternoon. I don't know. Yuki says a lot of things in Japanese and I don't understand a single word. She refuses to speak English. Her face is unrecognizable. A stranger's. I should have learned more Japanese.

I get a hotel room near the airport that night and fly home the next morning. After I tell my Ma what happened, she whips me up a baked ziti and takes me to the hospital to take a look at the bump on my head from the jump. That bump. They say it's a mild concussion. They say I'll be okay, but that I shouldn't bang my head against ceilings in the future.

The future. Yuki may not want to talk to me now, but she'll want to after seeing me in the Olympics. I got my eyes on the prize.

It's June 15, 1983, and I'm at this bar off the Jersey Turnpike called Benders with my cousin Louie. He's four years younger than I am, but he plays better pool than I do. I'm just horrible. I clink the sides of the balls. Scratch. I always forget the rules and I call the game "Billiards" in an Australian accent that makes sense to no one, myself included.

It's been almost four years since the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and Jimmy Carter threatened a boycott of the Olympics. I didn't believe he'd go through with it; I thought he was just posturing. But when it happened officially, I said fuck it, it wasn't meant to be. Craig Virgin started training for the 84' Games, but I began to lose my mojo when I had no choice but to work for my uncle.

I was miserable at my job as an administrative assistant. I couldn't work the phones. Too many buttons. My uncle wanted to fire me, but he took mercy and switched me "to the field," so I could learn how to be a plumber. That's what I do. Have you ever seen a water tank safety valve hooked into a hot water line? I have.

Fuck. What the hell am I doing with my life?

At Benders I eat too many hot wings and onion rings. I've gained weight, too much. I tried exercising to the Olivia Newton John VHS, but her body reminded me so much of Yuki's that I pressed eject. I'm a regular at Benders; I know I am because every waitress knows my name. It's embarrassing but I don't want to admit it is embarrassing; I just want to eat hot wings and onion rings and watch the girls take my order.

"Can I borrow a quarter, dude?" Louie asks.

"What do you need a quarter for?" I wipe the cue with my palm. I don't know if I'm doing it right but I saw somebody doing it on television once.

"You didn't see the new game they installed over there?"

"Arcade? I don't do that Atari shit, cousin."

"Come on," Louie says. "You should check it out."

I follow him into the corner of the bar, and there it is, the arcade game, in a large

rectangular oak case under a neon Budweiser sign. *Mario Bros.* reads the banner over the system, and on both sides of the banner are images of rounded faces with big noses and bushy mustaches. Green plumbing tubes decorate the edges of the black screen.

“Quarter, dude,” Louie says.

I hand him the quarter and watch him swish the joystick. Scurrying across the screen is a man in overalls, jumping over turtles and bumping his head against plumbing tubes. He seems unfazed by bumping his head; in fact, he runs even faster afterwards.

“They’re Italian plumbers,” Louie says blankly. “Sounds ridiculous, but it’s really fun. Want to play, Marlow?”

“No,” I say. “I don’t want to play.” I think to myself: No, it couldn’t be. You’re imagining this.

I pick up the *Newark Star-Ledger* the next morning and find an article on page A8 about the president of a video game company who’s the creator of Mario Brothers. There’s a black-and-white picture of the man; he’s smiling, proud, his hands on the joystick.

“I can’t say any one real man inspired Mario,” says Dr. Yamatoto, relaxing in his Tokyo office. “What is the phrase in the United States, toot your horn? I do not wish to ‘toot my horn’, but he is a creation from the mind. A jumping man in overalls who cannot hurt his head. He is a little superhero and he’s got a nice mustache!”

I cannot stop looking at the picture of Dr. Yamatoto. At first I don’t believe it’s him, but then I recognize that unmistakable John Ritter hairstyle and those beige glasses.

I wish I could say that I snapped into action right away, that I called a lawyer, that I made some kind of case, that I did something to become rightfully known. But I did nothing. I mean,

it looked like Dr. Yamatoto had based Mario on me, and Luigi on Louie (Marlow and Louie-> Mario and Luigi), but video games tended to fizzle after a while. I'd read some article that the industry crashed every few years. Some people thought it would eventually collapse for good.

But I was wrong. Soon people were playing *Super Mario Brothers* in their own homes, and I kept working as a plumber for my uncle. I didn't tell anybody the truth; it wasn't the way I'd wanted to be. I mean, I was supposed to be an Olympian, and Yuki was supposed to see me on TV, the real me, not this cartoon with my mustache and my almost-name. The goal of the game? To find his Princess Peach (his Yuki), of course. He was everywhere; even Johnny Carson was making jokes about him on *The Tonight Show*. Out of all the questions I had a peculiar one would creep up on me at Benders whenever I had too much drink: why, why, why did Dr. Yamatoto have to make Mario so fat?

I'm drinking the night I try the pay phone at Benders with my international calling card. Of course I can't get through at first, but after a few tries, I learn the name of Dr. Yamatoto's secretary: she's Kuroda. She seems sweet, even flirtatious. I down a shot of Jack Daniels and attempt my bad Australian accent with words other than billiards. I pretend I'm the Australian Prime Minister and that my name is "Ralph Sampson" (I've just watched the 1986 NBA Finals.).

"Putting you through to Dr. Yamatoto, just one moment," she says.

Through the crackle of static, I hear Dr. Yamatoto's voice. "Mr. Sampson? Is this Mr. Sampson?"

I cough. "It's me," I say.

"Excuse me?"

"It's me, Marlow. From Fukuoka? Do you remember?"

There is a pause. I can't tell if the line has disconnected or if Dr. Yamatoto is just thinking. Behind me I hear the clap of pool balls.

"Do you remember?" I say again. "You met me on the bridge and we sang karaoke later with my girl, with my peach. Remember?"

The pause lengthens but Dr. Yamatoto isn't hanging up.

"And, you called me Super Marlow. Do you remember?"

"I know who you are," he says finally.

This gives me hope. "Remember how I jumped?" I say. I look down at my stomach. Like a sandbag, it flops over my beltline. Matthew said I'd started to look like John Candy, except less funny. "Remember how there was no blood? Do you remember that?"

"What do you want?"

"I want a lot of stuff." I slur over "stuff," but I still surprise myself with the velocity of the words. Maybe the alcohol is helping. "Five percent stock in Nintendo and you take me on Johnny Carson and we tell the real story."

"I appreciate your inspiration, Mr. Marlow."

"Great, you should." I look over at the pool table but Louie's not playing tonight. He's stopped joining me at Benders. He says he doesn't want to "enable" me. "Dr. Yamatoto, let's meet in New York City and we can get everything hashed out."

"I'm not going to New York City, Mr. Marlow."

"What?" I said. I'd thought my speech was solid in its logic.

"I must tell you your inspiration was no different than how, say, a sunset inspires a

painter.”

His English has improved dramatically. I press the phone harder against my ear to block out the bar's calls for more hot wings.

“What do you think? Does the painter compensate the sunset for the privilege of its painting?”

“No, he doesn't,” I say. “But everyone sees the sunset. It's common. I mean, I'm a real person. I should be known.”

“You're as known as you're ever going to be, Mr. Marlow.”

A tinge like acid fills my throat.

"If you're considering a lawsuit, I suggest you don't bother. There are thousands of Marios around the world. You're just one of them.”

Another clap of pool balls. I hang up the phone.

I wish I could tell you that my life was like a Hollywood montage after my talk with Dr. Yamatoto. I wish I could tell you that I immediately stopped drinking, started losing weight, and found Yuki at the U.N. Building and kissed her and made her my peach again. But things don't work out like that in real life.

On Christmas Eve 1986, I rammed my car into a telephone pole. I wish it were a sexier story, I wish it were more unique, I wish it was something superheroic. But it was a fucking telephone pole and I was fucking drunk. That's when I finally got help, finally stopped going to Benders. When my uncle got sick, he gave me another shot at administration and this time I understood the phones, understood the buttons. I worked hard. I kept writing to Yuki. She wrote

me back two or three times, telling me she'd married a Korean man who worked for Samsung. Her letters were short and polite. They sounded like they were written to a pen pal your teacher sets you up with at school. She didn't want to talk about the video games; she didn't seem to care. She'd realized her dream as the U.N Ambassador for Japan. Dolly Parton could stand looking up to Yuki as a "strong woman, self woman."

It's not that I still loved her after all those years; the truth was, I was so damn young, I don't know if I ever did love her. I missed her, sure, but I missed being twenty-two more. I missed the time in my life when my biggest mistake was my 2.7 GPA. I missed running like King Kong across the riverfront in Fukuoka, feeling like I was destined to become a United States Olympian on a Wheaties box. I missed my mother's ziti. Rest in Peace, Ma. My A.A. sponsor said it was normal to get nostalgic after you quit the drink. He told me I had to keep moving forward. "Don't sit down," he'd say. "Jump!"

"Honey, did he really say jump?" she asks.

It's June 15, 2010, and I'm sitting at the kitchen table with my wife Marla and my twelve-year-old son David. Marla's drinking a guava pineapple smoothie; it's her "fastfest," the word she likes to use instead of "breakfast." She's getting ready for her Zumba class, this Columbian dance-exercise thing that she teaches to a room full of forty and fifty-year-old women. Marla's still a lean, coiled-legged health nut, just like she was when I met her at my cousin Louie's wedding twenty years ago. She was the one who encouraged me to start running again, and to stop bothering Yuki. I tend to say that she saved my life, but she says that's a little overboard. She's right. She didn't save the life I already had; she just gave me a new one.

"He did say 'jump,'" I tell my wife and my son. "That's why I end the story there."

"Important question," David says. He's at that age where sarcasm is a badge of cool, but when he gets interested, he can't pretend to be anything less than genuine. "Can I tell my friends at school that my dad is Super Mario?"

I laugh and rub my hand through my son's floppy brown hair. "If you want," I said. "But I don't know if they'll believe you."

David has a light mustache coming in, but it's frail. It'll get bushy in a few years, just like mine did. He even wants to try out for the middle school cross country team. When he trains, I can run with him, because I've been running with Marla over the past few years. I don't have that sandbag stomach anymore; I got my eyes on the prize again. A couple months ago, Marla and I ran the Boston Marathon. She was happy because she had a faster time than Valerie Bertinelli in the Women's 45-49 Age Group, and I was happy because I finished ninth in the Men's 50-54. You can even see me in a picture in the *USA Today*. My face is blurry because I'm in the waxy distance behind six or so runners, but you can see me if you look hard enough.

With a milk carton in my arm, I'm standing in the middle of a Target Superstore. I have to be at work in ten minutes, but I can come later if I'd like. I'm managing my half of *Marlow and Louie's Plumbing* well enough to send David to private school. He's a good kid and he appreciates what I do, but he still wants a "kick-ass" present for his thirteenth birthday.

In the electronics section, I see a boy in a baseball cap playing a video game. I watch him hurtle the newest Mario from planet to planet. Mario somersaulting, Mario cartwheeling, Mario going wa-hoo!, Mario jumping, Mario running and jumping. And jumping. And jumping. I feel

the bump on my head. It's still there.

The little kid is called away by his mother, and I walk towards the screen. I pick up the controller. It feels sweaty in my hands. I see Mario. He is me. He is not me. He has never been and will always be me.

I press start. And I play.

PRANK

Wayne couldn't remember the last time he was so excited. He'd been tired: tired of being in between jobs, of draining hours on Craigslist, of empty afternoons with nothing expected of him. But today, as he parked his car in front of a Walgreens on a brick-laden road in Providence, Rhode Island, he felt as if he'd grown young again. *iPad*, he thought, grinning. *Why don't I deserve a free iPad?*

The breeze outside was gentle but electric with promise. Wayne savored the air. He was sporting a short-sleeved button-down red shirt, khaki pants, and loafers. Even though he was middle-aged and bald, he imagined himself a teenager playing hooky in the quiet of a weekday afternoon. Wayne was beating the system.

That morning, he'd talked to a pleasant fellow named Jim who'd posted a Craigslist ad offering a free iPad, the sleek Apple tablet that typically sold for five hundred dollars. Of course there was a catch, but Wayne thought it to be a reasonable one: he'd make an unpaid appearance on a hidden-camera reality television pilot. The details were sketchy, but Jim promised to tell more once Wayne arrived at the address. Wayne wasn't much of an actor, but maybe he could do the job well enough. Besides, it's not like he had any other plans for the day.

As he walked past a Mexican restaurant and a wine bar, he called Jim, who told him to take a seat at the front of a café called Pane E Vino. With a comfortable plop, Wayne sat down at the white-clothed tables. The streets were quiet and narrow, the cars lazily parallel-parked. It was too late for lunch, too early for dinner. From Wayne's point of view Pane E Vino looked empty

but for a valet-parking attendant standing under a blue awning. "I'm here," Wayne said into his cell phone. The table cloth fluttered in the wind.

"Okay," Jim replied. "For this first scene, we have a prop car set up, black car; you walked by it, in fact."

"Okay," Wayne said.

"There should be some spare chairs next to you?"

"Some what?" Wayne asked. He wondered where the cameras were.

"Some spare chairs," Jim said.

Wayne looked around the table. Yes, he told Jim, he saw chairs.

"It's going to be like a fit of rage," Jim said. "You're going to walk up to the car, the stunt car, and you're going to go ahead and break the passenger window."

Wayne felt a curdling in his stomach, as if he'd eaten too many pancakes. "Are you sure about this?" he asked.

A prank is not only an act, but a way of thinking sandwiched between the sometimes dueling, sometimes conjoined forces of humor and malevolence. The idea of pranking has evolved over the past fifty years, and its implications and reach have been affected by the rise of various forms of media. Intrigued by pranking's rich history and unclear future, I've set out to answer several questions: What makes a "good" prank? What makes a "bad" one? When does a prank cease being a joke and turn into something sinister?

In 2005, *The Economist* published a light-hearted article about the history of practical jokes, and in it, paraphrased 1960s radical Abbie Hoffman's categorizations of pranking: "'good' pranks

were amusingly satirical, 'bad' ones gratuitously vindictive and 'neutral' ones surreal and soft on the victim (if there was one)." My own research led me to observe the hijinks of *Candid Camera*, a television show that aired during Hoffman's life and emphasized pranks of the "good" or the "neutral" kind. One 1960 episode addresses conformity by surrounding a man on an elevator with five people turned backwards. The man, noticing he's the only one facing the elevator doors, eventually turns backwards too. An episode from the 1970s features country star Dolly Parton faking an ankle injury and letting a bevy of eager men carry her through a parking lot to find her car, a four-door sedan in a parking lot full of identical four-door sedans. The men in the clip are all smiles, and though they're not exactly in on the joke, they seem to find joy in the peculiarity of the situation. Under Hoffman's definition, this would be a neutral prank, surreal and soft.

But I hear a hardness in the very word *prank*: in the impatient pop of its lone syllable, in the thumb-tack *cuh* of the k at its rear. *Prank* is sudden in its sound; it prickles against your ear and your tongue, leaving in its wake a consonants' echo. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a prank as a "practical joke or mischievous act" with usage of the term dating back to the early sixteenth century, when it referred to a "wicked deed." The word's definite origin is, perhaps fittingly and cryptically and maybe even a little wickedly, unknown. Pranking is a sensibility that thrives on a victim's unknowingness, on the power of the prankster to surprise, to trick the prankee. I browsed twenty-seven dictionaries and found a recurrence of adjectives used to define prank: *silly*, *mischievous*, *childish*, *ludicrous*, and *grotesque*. Words I didn't find included *funny* and *humorous*.

"Totally sure," Jim said. "It's a stunt car. It's been sitting there all day."

Wayne stood up slowly. Jim told him to remain on the phone throughout the scene, that it was necessary for the staging. At that moment, in a blur of blue and green, a police car sped by Wayne. "This is legitimate now?" he asked, his voice hurried. "There's cops here."

Jim assured Wayne that the cops were all part of the scene, that everything, in fact, was part of the scene. As Wayne lifted up a stray chair, he wondered if there was a script and if he should ask Jim about it. But then he figured the faster he followed Jim's directions, the faster he could get his free iPad and go back home to Attleboro. Maybe all actors felt the same pancaked stomach feeling, Wayne thought. His walking stride turned slow and crooked. Past a bicycle, past two orange cones. "The black car?" he asked.

"Yes," Jim said, sunny and sure, like a hotel room wake-up call.

The black sedan was glimmering in the sunlight. Fit of rage, Wayne remembered. Fit of rage. The problem was that he wasn't an angry guy. Nervous maybe, jobless fine, but enraged?

"Alright," Wayne said with a huff, nearing the curb and the car. He raised his wobbly arm and nicked the window with the chair. It made a loud *clack*.

"Whoa!" said the valet parking attendant. He emerged from under the blue awning and started shouting at Wayne.

"What is it now? I'm getting yelled at," Wayne said into the phone.

"Did it break?" Jim asked.

"No."

"Go ahead and try again."

"No...That's alright. I'm getting yelled at." Wayne's stomach had a different feeling now, as if it was a blender of slowly churning toxic juice. The valet attendant, hands stuffed into the pockets of his shorts, was walking towards him.

"Yelling at you?" Jim said. "That's all part of the scene! Keep going! He's an actor!"

"We're filming a movie," Wayne told the valet attendant, whose mouth was an open O, as if he was a silent film star. Was that the way to act? Was Wayne underplaying it?

"What?" the valet attendant said. "I'm going to call the police."

Wayne didn't know what to think, much less what to say.

"That's all part of the scene!" Jim said.

The sun fell in in crisp lines, but to Wayne, the afternoon suddenly felt damaged, like there were holes in it.

Prank phone calls, once recorded on cassette tapes and swapped amongst sound engineers and media insiders, gained national notoriety in the 1980s and 1990s with the *Howard Stern Radio Show* and the Jerky Boys comedy albums, respectively. The Jerky Boys, a duo from Queens, New York, would make calls to mechanics, roofers, pizza places and the like, usually impersonating prospective customers or employees with complaints (i.e. "My family is throwing up from your pizza. What kind of pie is this?" or "The two Mexicans who fixed my roof don't know what the hell they're doing!"). The calls turn salty and end with confused hang-ups or insults from the other party. There is no gentle laughter from a studio audience, but rather increasingly loud voices interrupted by dialtones. As for *The Howard Stern Show*, I have to admit laughing in disbelief at how *Stern* pranksters would phone into live news channels

pretending to be reputable freelance reporters, only to fool on-air anchors with ridiculous punchlines and shouts of “Baba Booeey” (the comical nickname for Stern’s producer). In the 2000s, an influx of reality-prank shows, MTV's *Punk'd* being the most prominent, continued a pop culture sea change towards Hoffman’s “bad” kind of prank, the kind that would fall under “gratuitously vindictive.” While it would be short-sighted to cite a recent era as the most extreme, there is a distinction to be had in a broadband Internet culture where the pranks of the past are archived for anyone to find, motivating a new generation to make their schemes more and more daring and less likely to field the question, “Does this go too far?”

Wayne was still holding the chair, but he was walking without direction. “Where are you right now?” he asked Jim.

“We're still rolling! It needs to be authentic!”

“Well, this guy doesn't want me to hit his car again.”

“Can you hand the phone to him?” Jim asked.

Wayne told the valet attendant that Jim wanted to talk to him. Wayne felt as if he were on an amusement park ride and that the best way off was to follow directions from whoever was giving them to him. The valet attendant, upset and confused, was talking to the police on his cell phone. Wayne wasn’t angry; he was just unsure. He had never been an actor before, and if this is what acting was, this would be his first and last performance.

The valet attendant said he didn’t want to talk to Jim. “Why would you hit my car with a chair?” the attendant asked, more incredulous than angry. “Why would you do that?”

"Where are you, Jim?" Wayne said into the phone. He didn't want to share this scene with the attendant. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know his lines.

"Wayne, listen to me, that's an actor. It's all part of the scene."

"He doesn't look like an actor to me. He's very pissed-off right now."

"The script says, 'Fuck you, I don't give a shit about your car.'"

Wayne didn't want to say that. He tried to tell the attendant that he was on the phone with the director, but the attendant said, "He doesn't know me."

With a spray of light, the first cop car came to a stop in front of Pane E Vino. The Providence Police were on the scene.

In the first episode of the show *Punk'd*, Hollywood trickster extraordinaire Ashton Kutcher preps his viewers for a sneak-attack on a young pop star. Kutcher bounces in his chair and jousts his finger towards the camera. "We're going to go into Justin Timberlake's HOME," he says. "I'm going to bring in the Tax Enforcement Agency to seize all of his property and Justin, this is really going to piss you off. It [the Tax Enforcement Agency] doesn't even exist, bro."

Kutcher uses the shorthand for "brother" to describe Timberlake, which seems to suggest the forthcoming joke will be in good family fun. Even Timberlake's mother is in on it: "Nobody ever gets him," she says, smirking into the camera. "So this is a big opportunity for all of us to get him."

The viewer is shown footage of orange seizure signs and a litany of large boxes dotting Timberlake's palatial estate. His guitar is wrapped in cellophane and his Cadillac Escalade is on

a tow truck. Several agents in blue jackets circle the premises. These agents have come to claim not only his personal belongings, but his house.

Cue the arrival of Timberlake, buzz haircut, gray gym shirt, and his mouth half-open as he wanders up his driveway. One of the agents (it's comedian Dax Sheppard, but Timberlake has no idea) approaches the singer with a handshake. "We're owed some back taxes to the tune of \$900, 000," Sheppard says.

In the production truck sits a beaming Ashton Kutcher in headphones. He's in on the joke; he has the power. "We're going to start taking his shit!" he says with a cackle.

Timberlake is scratching his head. He looks nothing like the parking lot men carrying Dolly Parton on *Candid Camera*; he looks shell-shocked. He invites the "agent" into his house, but is rebuffed and told his home has been seized and it is now property of the United States government. There's no smirk on Timberlake's face, no hint of recognition. "You're telling me there's a possibility I won't get my stuff back?" he says softly.

"It's okay," Sheppard replies. "This happens all the time to good people."

Timberlake clutches his forehead. He sighs. He calls his mom. She tells him she's coming.

"You're a young, handsome man, you can make it up later," Sheppard says. "It's not like you're eighty years old."

"Are you saying personal things to me now?" Timberlake soft-shouts. What could be fighting words come out strained, as if buried under a pillow.

"I'm just saying you're not Willie Nelson," Sheppard answers.

The *Candid Camera* jokes were quick, snapshot affairs. This is a story, an arc, a noose tightening. They claim the Escalade is worth only twelve grand. Timberlake laughs and says that's wrong, but it's a hard laugh, a nervous laugh, a what-the-hell-is-happening-to-me laugh.

And then the agents start fake-destroying his guitar. Timberlake's hands are fists now; he doesn't know what to do. He doesn't get it. Back in the production truck Kutcher is laughing.

And then, up the driveway walks Kutcher. Timberlake notices. He starts smiling with his hands still on his face. It's a plastered smile.

"Asshole! Asshole!" Timberlake yells. "Did he really break my guitar?" He tussles with Kutcher, shoving him in the stomach, but then he shakes his hand and bows to the actor-agents. He regains his persona, his self-awareness. Because he can go back to feeling his power, to being the superstar, all is forgiven. "That was funny and everything," he snaps at the camera, "but put that truck down and get off my property."

When a second Providence police car arrived, Wayne remembered how he'd gotten here. Had it really only been fifteen minutes since he'd sat in front of Pane E Vino and waited to hear Jim's first instruction? Time had stretched like an elastic band, but after the valet attendant mimed the way Wayne slammed the chair against the window for a police officer, things started happening fast and blurry. Wayne had tried to explain that he was only following directions for a free iPad, but the cops seemed to be only half-listening. The attendant wanted four hundred dollars for the scratched window; Wayne didn't have that money. If he had, he wouldn't need a free iPad.

He still held his phone against his ear. He was losing faith in Jim, but Jim was the one who had gotten him into this mess, and Jim would have to be the one who'd get him out.

"What you're going to do for the next scene is assault the police officer," Jim said.

"No, I'm not going to assault the police officer."

"No, Wayne, it's all a part of the scene!" Jim's voice broke higher. His even-toned professionalism was breaking. "Well, Wayne, if you don't, you're going to go to jail because you need the money to pay for the window."

Wayne felt suffocated. He couldn't even manage to raise his voice when he said, "For Crissake, this is ridiculous."

"The stress and emotion you're showing right now is perfect! This is very genuine!"

Wayne looked across the street at a Jeep. Was that where the cameras were? He told Jim he wasn't going to make another move until one of the directors showed up.

"We have our director coming up," Jim said. "The woman in the police uniform."

Wayne asked the woman in the police uniform to talk to Jim, but she refused. So did the valet attendant. Nobody was giving Wayne a nod or a wink. Nobody was breaking character.

"You're getting me in more trouble than anything," Wayne said.

One of the cops approached Wayne and felt in his pockets. Wallet, keys. They told him to get into the back of the police car. If this were *Punk'd*, Ashton Kutcher would have emerged from the production truck by now. But this was not *Punk'd*.

There's something disquieting about an aborted prank. It's like looking at a plump water balloon and holding yourself back from making it go splat. It's a water balloon; it's supposed to splat.

In high school, my one-time girlfriend told my classmates that my penis was “tiny,” even though she had never technically seen it. I began to execute my vengeance by attaching a picture of a handsome, well-dressed man in his twenties to an email addressed to my ex-girlfriend. I wrote that my name was Carter, and that I went to a popular local high school, and that I'd heard great things about her through a friend of a friend. I put the message together and sent it from CarterT2000@yahoo.com. She responded quickly; she definitely wanted to meet “me.”

What she didn't know was that a boy named Carter lived next door to her ex-boyfriend Alex, and that this Carter was a kindergartener. From the safety of my parents' second-floor bedroom window, I wanted to watch Carter's mom open the door and hear my ex-girlfriend say, "I'm here for Carter." Then, out would walk the five-year-old in his denim overalls and grape juice on his lips. "Sorry, there's been a mistake," my ex-girlfriend would say. She would race back to her car in a trail of tears. That would show her to talk about my penis!

I didn't go through with it. My lack of action was less because of any good-heartedness, and more because of the pity and superiority I felt in knowing she'd been already been suckered. When I recall my scheme, I don't laugh. I think about my own adolescent confusions and tadpole identity, how I liked the idea of pretending to be the handsome Carter in that picture, the Carter my ex-girlfriend wanted to meet. I liked the feeling of being a puppetmaster, of being powerful in the shadows.

Wayne was sitting in the back of the police car. The hidden camera thing didn't make sense anymore, unless there were cameras here in the backseat. There weren't any cameras here, were there? He didn't think so. The cops, three of them, stood outside the door. They hadn't taken his cell phone away. He still had Jim on the line.

"Can you come over here please?" Wayne asked him.

"It's all a part of the scene!" Jim said. He told him the cameras were in the roof. "Start banging on the window," he said. "Say you have to pee."

"They think I'm nuts already," Wayne said. "I need someone to come out and talk to them. I can't afford it."

"Wayne, I will come out there if you tell me you love me."

"I love you," Wayne said. He didn't care if Jim was teasing him. He didn't care if this hidden-camera show was some kind of joke. He didn't even care if there would be no iPad at the end of this. He just wanted to get out.

"Tell me you'll be my husband," Jim said.

"I don't have time now," Wayne replied. "Can somebody come?"

"I can't come out to your car."

"Why not?" Wayne said.

"Because I'm a figment of your imagination."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm a figment of your imagination."

Wayne didn't want to acknowledge the possibility that Jim was putting him on, but the truth was he couldn't be sure of anything at this point. "This is how you get your kicks with people?" he asked.

"Wayne, I'm not real."

Wayne looked out the window. The cops were chatting with each other, as if it was just another day.

"Where does that leave me?" Wayne said. "Up the creek without a paddle?"

The afternoon was turning into early evening. Young couples were walking towards Pane E Vino, men in slacks, women in long skirts. They walked with ease, in control of their night. Wayne watched them from behind the smoked glass of the police car.

What Abbie Hoffman didn't (or perhaps couldn't) predict with his definition of three classes of pranking was that there'd come a day when the lines between his categories would not only be warped, but be blown to pieces. Wayne was a victim of Pranknet, a group of internet pranksters who've been labeled "telephone terrorists" by the New York-based online watchdog group The Smoking Gun. Rather than Jerky Boys shouting matches that climax in goofy wordplay, Pranknet's most popular scheme reaches more convoluted and dangerous heights. It involves pretending to be a front desk clerk named Richard Burns, calling a stranger's hotel room in the middle of the night, and convincing him that a gas leak has permeated the building, and that he must bust out a window with a toilet lid to get oxygen into his room. This routine has proved convincing enough to cause millions of dollars in damage to hotel chains across the United States from a Motel 6 in Amarillo, Texas, to a Holiday Inn in Orlando, Florida. Before a Smoking Gun investigation unearthed several of their identities, the pranksters were all but

anonymous, using the online calling system Skype and the chat service Paltalk to broadcast calls that, at their worst, wreaked psychological torture in addition to economic damages. (“A bizarre July 20 prank ended with a hotel worker actually sipping from a urine sample provided by a guest at a Homewood Suites in Kentucky.” –TSG) In late 2009, The Smoking Gun celebrated the arrests of James Tyler Markle and Shawn Powell of Texas, two active Pranknet participants responsible for several of not only the famed hotel pranks, but also hoaxing fast food employees into thinking they’d received a corporate office call ordering them to “engage the fire suppression systems” in the restaurant. This escapade led to the employees dousing themselves in fire extinguisher fluid, undressing themselves, and shutting down the restaurant. A few grew suspicious when they were told to urinate on each other to purify any extraneous, toxic fluids on their bodies.

More recently referred to as Prank University or PrankU, the group has continued their reign even after The Smoking Gun publicized the aforementioned stories and the home address of the organization’s reputed ringleader, Tarik Malik. Malik is twenty-seven years old, lives in Windsor, Ontario with his mother, and is reportedly unemployed. In terms of political inclinations, he is neither like the leftist pranksters The Yes Men who dupe Wall Street bigwigs, nor like the libertarian Bureaucrash who target liberal activists. Malik’s modus operandi is that of anarchic humiliation done via satellite from the safety of his mother’s house. He preys on the gullible and the unassuming, lulling his targets under control through a clerical voice that could easily belong to a manager or a doctor. (Various online commenters have linked the obedience of those pranked to that of the test subjects in Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram’s study on how reasonable people can do unreasonable things as long as they’re encouraged to by an authority

figure. From the study, Milgram concluded that, “The results as I observed them in the laboratory are disturbing. They raise the possibility that human nature cannot be counted on to insulate men from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority.”) Depending on whom Malik’s target is, his professional voice eventually splinters into a malevolent storm of racist, homophobic, or sexist invective. The Canadian Malik has claimed that calling American phone lines would make him invulnerable to prosecution. While several states are mulling charges that would make him come to a United States courtroom, Tarik Malik has not yet been formally charged with any crime.

“I don’t want them to eat shit anymore, because apparently that’s bad for you,” announces @dex1x1, the microphone icon illuminated next to his highlighted screen name in the Beylux chat room PrankU. It’s a Saturday night in late January 2011, and I am digitally undercover in the PrankU chat room, the reputed lair from which The Smoking Gun uncovered damaging phone calls in 2009 and 2010. It wasn’t difficult to enter this chat room; I created an online handle (ChaosForte) backed by a fictional email address, downloaded the chat room software, and I was in. Nobody knows who I am, and I want to keep it that way. I don’t want the denizens of PrankU to turn their phone calls to my house.

I’m here to see how the room operates in the wake of the Smoking Gun investigations; I’m here to see if Tarik Malik is up to his old tricks again. Rather than lying low and inconspicuous, Tarik Malik, aka Dex, or @dex1x1, is holding court for one hundred thirty-six listeners in PrankU on this Saturday night. He’s reminiscing on past pranks, one of which ended in a former Iraq war veteran eating his own waste after becoming convinced that he might have contracted the H1N1 virus from his hotel bed sheets. Malik had played the role of Dr. Jeff

Anderson, instructing the guest to move beyond the “incubation period” through increasingly absurd steps. “That’s his voicemail,” Malik says, broadcasting the veteran’s outgoing message. “He doesn’t pick up the phone anymore. That’s the guy who ate his own shit.”

Realizing that Malik becomes suspicious of those who are quiet and “lurking” in the room, I’m trying to blend in with the group. Though I feel relatively safe behind a keyboard, I don’t want to be singled out. Like the others, I contribute commentary in praise of the “epic” pranks Malik is remembering. (Epic is the gold medal adjective affixed by PrankU chatters to the most extreme pranks.) “Shit mann,” I type. “Sounds insande.”

I want Malik to comment on a prank I watched a few weeks ago via YouTube, where a poor guy gets duped into smacking a chair against a car window in front of an Italian restaurant. “Jim” had requested Wayne’s appearance at Pane E Vino specifically because the restaurant was in full view of what looked to be a live city webcam positioned across the street. In the YouTube comments under “Fake Television Pilot,” a user named PrankUniversity claims that no report was filed on Wayne, and that the car window received only a light scratch. The implication seems to be, “No harm, no foul,” but I remember hearing Wayne’s voice and the way it shrank. While first I’d shaken my head at his naivety, I later felt bad for the guy. Why did he deserve that damaged afternoon? How did he feel when he drove home that night?

In a 2008 article in the *New York Times*, Benedict Carey cites an optimistic-sounding perspective on prank consequences from psychologist Neil Roese, who notes that a person might better himself after falling victim to a prank. The idea is that, after getting burned, the victim becomes more keenly self-aware of his susceptibilities. I don’t think, however, that Jim teaches Wayne much of a lesson, for it stands to question whether the “Fake Television Pilot” captures a

prank, the good kind of which Carey calls “a simulation of a crisis but not the real thing,” or a crime.

“just saw the utube fake television pilot so insane!” I type into the chat room. “Does anyone know who did that one?”

“Dex does all the pranks chaos,” someone types back.

I wonder if that’s true. I wonder if Malik is Jim. From my research, I know there’s a veritable army of pranksters, that Malik is only the head of the caterpillar. But before I prod further, Malik himself responds on his microphone to my note. “Oh yeah,” he says, delight building in his voice. “The fake television pilot on YouTube. ‘Don’t worry, Wayne, it’s all part of the scene. It’s all part of the scene!’”

I recognize his timbre and his tone. Malik is Jim; Jim is Malik, the PrankU puppetmaster, the man whose phone calls have triggered millions of dollars in damage to American hotels, the man who convinced another man to eat his own shit.

Tonight, Malik is playing around with a webcam over a snowbound street in an unidentified city. We can see what he sees if we right-click on the camera icon next to @dex1x1. One chat room participant types out a question asking what city the camera’s in.

“Why does it matter what city it’s in?” Malik snaps. “So you can ruin it?”

The participant apologizes, and Malik begins to field suggestions for what kind of prank he should pull. Depending on the mood in the chat room, Malik’s speech vacillates from that of an easygoing PrankU professor to that of a paranoid, angry lecturer who doesn’t trust his disciples. As an administrator, he bounces people out of the chat room, sometimes because he believes they’re lying about their age (to maintain an “adult” atmosphere, he wants PrankU

participants to be 18+) and sometimes because he's miffed by their unwarranted bravado. One chatter hungers for a prank in which "somebody would die...that'd be awesome...I wouldn't even be upset!"

Malik responds on his microphone: "Bullshit, you think that'd be funny now but you'd be crying like a little bitch in the courtroom."

The chatter agrees and shuts up. What's telling is that Malik does not denounce the idea of a prank ending in death, but rather the idea of the chatter's arrogance at the prospect. What's next? is the question lying in the belly of the PrankU chat, which has already seen Malik not only conjure mayhem inside hotel rooms, but also in their hallways, where fictional rapists hunt for women at Holiday Inns, women who are quickly led to believe the rapists in the corridors are real and not a figment of Malik's imagination. What could be more "epic" than what PrankU has already accomplished? The stakes have been raised beyond *Candid Camera*, *Jerky Boys*, *Punk'd*, and even beyond hotel destruction and criminal humiliation.

What's next?

Two days later, I return to the PrankU chat room. It's a Monday afternoon, and there are about sixty people here. Malik is talking about banned users from the chat, chiding Billy_Mays, asking him why he said his age was eighteen when he'd earlier said that he was twenty years old. As ChaosForte, I'm joining the conversation later. I don't know the backstories, but something compels me to participate. As Malik berates Billy_Mays for dishonesty, I type in, "maybe he's a Smoking Gun narc?" I wonder if my tactic will have the same effect it had on Saturday night, when I provoked Malik into discussing the Wayne prank. This time, however, he's suspicious.

"Who are you chaos?" he types into the room.

I hesitate. I didn't expect him to single me out. "Sam," I type.

I'm quiet, and so is the room. I decide to X out of the chat, and join it again a few minutes later.

Malik is waiting. He sends me a private instant message: "Please click this link and verify who you are." I think about it, and then I click. It brings up an error page. Could the link have contained a virus? Why did I click? Maybe I'm just being paranoid, or maybe I'm worried about turning into sucker, about turning into Wayne.

I close the chat room and leave PrankU.

A few weeks later, I'm spending the night in a Holiday Inn hotel room in Washington, D.C. Before I fall asleep, I imagine how I'd react if my phone rang.

"Sir, this is Richard Burns from the front desk. We have an emergency situation."

"What's the situation?" I would say. I know my heart would thump. I know my thoughts would race.

"There's a gas leak in the hallway, sir. Please lock your door and come back to the phone."

"Got it," I would say, following the directions.

"For your safety, we need to make sure air is circulating properly, so you're going to have to break the glass of the window."

"You want me to break the window?" I'd say. I'd be nervous, but I'd know. Deep down, I'd know.

"Yes sir, it's standard protocol, we've already done it for four rooms."

My skin would tingle. I would feel something like Wayne felt on that early afternoon, when he thought he'd be getting a free iPad, except I would know the truth.

"Okay, sir," I'd say, keeping my voice clipped.

He would then tell me to grab the lid of the toilet tank and smack it against the window. He'd want me to put the phone close to the action. "So we can hear the impact, sir," he would say.

I'd feel sweat in my undershirt. I would act scared but I would feel exhilarated. I would race to my laptop and pull up "Breaking Glass Sound Effect" on YouTube. I would wait. I would ask him, "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, sir. You need to do this. This is an emergency situation."

"I don't know," I would say.

"Sir! You have to do this now!"

I would slide my phone against my laptop speakers, and then I would play the clip. *Smash, smash, smash!* I would press my ear into the phone, to see if I could hear his reaction. I would probably hear laughter.

"Now, sir -"

And then I would interrupt. "I want you to know my name," I would say, frenzied. "In case I don't make it out okay, so you can tell my mom. I want you to know my name!"

He would stifle a laugh. "Excuse me?"

"I want you to know my name! Please let me tell you my name!"

"Fine, sir. We'll make a note of it in our records."

"Will you contact my mom?"

“We will contact your mother, sir.”

I would breathe slowly into the phone. In, out. In, out. Then faster. In out in out in out in out in out.

"Sir, what is your name?" he would say.

“My name?”

“We don’t have much time, sir!”

“Fine,” I would say. In, out, in out. In out in out. “My name, my name is Tarik.”

“Tarik?”

“Tarik Malik. But you can call me Dex.”

I would wait for the hush on the other end of the phone. And then I would hang up.

I don’t know what they’d say in the chat room, if they’d call my work “epic,” or if they’d get angry. I like to imagine this scene, the rush I would feel, a rush probably not so different from the one they feel. I would do it for me. I would do it for Wayne. I would make the water balloon go splat.

But it wouldn’t be enough to stop them from calling another room.

JUNIOR

Carla Sue from Craigslist wants to sell me a VCR. Cash. Twenty bucks for the player, a rewinder, and a dozen tapes, including *Junior*, which features Governor Schwarzenegger as a pregnant man. I say fifteen dollars for just the VCR. Carla Sue says *deal*. I'll meet her Saturday morning in the parking lot of the Wal-Mart on Alafaya Trail in Orlando, Florida.

In my defense, I'm just somebody who wants to tape a Reggie Miller basketball-player-as-superhero documentary and have something to watch in my apartment with its roaches and its thin walls. I make \$869.56 a month. Rent is \$565. At four in the morning, every morning, I hear my neighbors blasting *Training Day*. I slap the walls with the palms of my hands. My neighbors slap back. I want something that's mine.

On Saturday morning, a water restoration company tarps off my apartment because mold has been detected in the air vents. The tarp doesn't part to my touch. I'm trapped. I cannot leave. All I hear is the whir of a fan. I smell paint. It might be toxic. "Hello?" I say to nobody.

I cannot leave.

Carla Sue calls me. She sounds pained, as if Governor Schwarzenegger had climbed out of *Junior* and taken a seat on her shoulders. I tell her I'm trapped. I tell her I'll give her not fifteen bucks, but twenty-five. I tell her I'm not a bum.

With the tarp still on my front door, I read an email from Carla Sue: "Pay me 20.00 for the VCR and rewinder and we will call it even okay??... I will look forward to meeting you on Monday at 10:00am at Wal-Mart... and this time... do not be late (I am kidding)..."

Carla Sue's looking forward to meeting me.

Monday morning comes, and I park at Wal-Mart. On time. Here comes her car, a gray

Civic with Virginia plates. Her daughter emerges from the other side of the car and hands me a heavy cardboard box. "Enjoy," she says. Carla Sue's older than I expected. Gray hair. Old gray sweatshirt. I give her the twenty-dollar bill. I wanted her to be more impressed that I came here. That I beat the tarp.

I buy a VHS tape for my new-old VCR. I'm excited. That Reggie Miller documentary? It's on tomorrow afternoon when I'll be at work. I can tape it. I try to hook up the VCR, and that's when I find something wrong.

Cable cord.

I don't have the right cable cord.

I'm not going to spend nine more bucks on a fucking cable cord.

My neighbors are blaring *Training Day*. I see an ant on my wall. The tarp is off, but I want to find it and put it up again. I will burn this place down. I will burn this place down to the ground.

AND THEN

We stood beside the plaster columns of an old town courthouse in Middle-of-Nowhere, Countryside, surrounded by dust and a single-lane road and the spraying of stars in the midnight sky. We were giddy on red wine and marble cheesecake and an earnest conversation about whether or not pine cones could be used as currency. I said the very thought was ridiculous, and she asked me what I had against pine cones.

I tapped one of the courthouse columns and a smattering of white flakes tumbled down. It's nice to see a big empty building once in a while, I said, and she said she prefers a big mountain to a big building any day, but this, this was kind of nice. "No, really nice," she said, lightly touching my wrist, "I like it here."

Then - silence. Even in the darkness I could see her brown eyes. The wine I could smell on her breath, or maybe it was on mine. I didn't know and it didn't matter. I brushed my thumb against her wrist and she sidled my hand into hers.

And then she burped.

"Excuse me," she whispered, turning away. I wanted to laugh but I just smiled instead.

Chipped flakes of paint trickled down from the roof of the courthouse. The place was falling apart, but to us it kind of looked like it was snowing.

HALF-VIRGIN

Under the silver strobe lights of Club Ska in Seoul, South Korea, I bob my head to the *thump-thump* from the sound system. It's an April night in the neon-bathed college district of Hongdae. Outside, the air smells of pollen and cherry blossoms and beer and bad decisions. Inside, it's sweat from Canadian English teachers in maple-leaf jackets, and fruity perfumes from tee-heeing Korean women in Mickey Mouse shirts and bedazzled denim. I've lived in Seoul for six months, but this is the first night I've gone to Hongdae without my co-workers from the *hagwon* academy, without the women who help me find my scarf in the backs of cabs and the men who fix my collar when it's crooked. I'm twenty-three years old but I have a look, an arched-eyebrow mischief and untucked-shirt fashion that makes everybody think I'm their little brother.

But not tonight.

I've come to Club Ska with a group of expat Americans I met on iluvKorea.com. I don't know them very well. I don't know where they are now. This does not bother me. I unbutton the top three buttons of my green dress shirt, revealing a crescent of tanktop underneath like a Superman's S. I lift my elbows like pulleys and churn butter with my fists. This is my dance. I grin at a pair of Korean women in frittered blouses. "Join us!" they say, waving my elbow-pulleys towards the one in their group I haven't seen, the one in a slinky white t-shirt that at once exposes her left shoulder, tanned and glossy as if oiled, and clings to her slender torso. Strobe lights blink across her face. She's petite but not young. Her cheeks are stroked by little acne

scars, and her neck smells of a blueberry musk. An older woman's smell. I ask her for her name. She shakes her head, her shimmery black hair squiggling like question marks. I lean into her right cheek. I feel its warmth against mine. "What's your name?" I ask.

"My name is Yoon-Mi! What is your job?"

I smell rice liquor *soju* on Yoon-Mi's breath. "I am *sungsangneem*!" I say.

"Ah, English teacher," she says, as if that's all she needs to know. She tells me she's a fashion designer. I celebrate this by churning butter with my fists.

"Do you like this song?" I ask.

"I love music!" she says.

Our faces inch closer. She touches the orange bristles of my three-day-beard. I'm usually a coffee date guy, a let's-take-it-slow guy. But not tonight. I lean into her blueberry neck. She lets me. My fingers brush her cheek. Heat. We kiss, sloppy, wet; she tastes like *soju* and spearmint. We kiss again.

From the driver's seat, my mother turned to smile at me. She was wearing a polka-dot dress, and her peach-brown hair was tied into a bun the size of a Slinky. She smelled like flowers. Her hair used to be black, but she had taken to coloring it brown, she said, so that it would look more like mine. I thought that sounded silly, but my mom was my best friend. She never lied to me. She even convinced me that I had power over traffic lights, if only I would point and shout at them long enough.

"Sashenka, you're the only one who can make the light turn green," she said.

I pressed my palm against the backseat window and watched the bloom of my fogged

imprint, and then the dollops of rain splitting into twos and threes, streaming down to the bottom of the sill. I was wearing a cookie-dough brown jumper with 1234 written in checkered red and green on the front. Mosquito bites pocked my knees and I picked them with the same finger I used on my nose. Inside the back of my mom's Oldsmobile, I was safe and dry and four years old. "Turn green!" I threw my small fist into the air. "Right now!"

"Try again, Sashenka." Sashenka was my Russian name. She and my dad were from Belarus, but I only knew a few words in Russian. Sashenka was one of them. Sashenka was me.

"Right," I said, jutting my finger forward. "Now!"

It worked: the light turned green.

Before long, my mom's Oldsmobile clunked into our garage. I didn't want to miss *The Three Stooges*, which came on at noon, so I turned on the TV ten minutes early. On the parquet floor of the family room, I sat below the screen and flapped my legs as if they were butterfly wings. I had to go pee, but I didn't want to miss a minute of the *Stooges*. So I held it. My mom brought me three pieces of hard salami on a white plate. Lunch. My dad was at work; my mom told me he was being a doctor and saving lives. My older sister Anna was at the mall; my mom told me she was being a teenager and buying purses. Larry, Moe, and Curly came on the TV with their big black eyes and big white foreheads. Moe smacked Larry's head with a shovel. Outside it was still raining and inside I was still safe. My mom leaned down to me and kissed my head.

"You look very young," Yoon-Mi says, touching the speckled stubble of my chin and studying it in the candlelight. We're slouching against Aztec-patterned pillows among a circle of Koreans in slim-rimmed glasses and Americans in purple-striped Fanta hats. The scene is a

hookah bar with low ceilings and little waterfalls, and we're a United Nations of whispered drink orders and cherry-flavored smoke. It's the Saturday after Yoon-Mi and I have met. She hasn't seen my apartment yet.

"How old do I look?" I ask her. I'm baiting her, testing her.

"Twenty-eight?" she says. She lets go of my chin.

I grin. If she thinks twenty-eight is young, how old is she? Thirty-two? Thirty-three? Older? I don't tell her I've fantasized about older women ever since I was in the tenth grade, when TV introduced me to Sela Ward, the forty-five-year-old star of *Once and Again*, my mom's favorite show. In Sela, I'd found sexiness given texture by years, a been-there-seen-that smile, bikini-worthy curves, and ecstasy in the impossibility of the very idea: me, fifteen, no facial hair to shave and no growth spurt to speak of, with her, forty-five, paragon of elegance and Hollywood glamour. I don't tell Yoon-Mi that she might be my Korean Sela. I don't tell her that she has the power to overwhelm the memory of my sweet, too-sweet college girlfriend Madeline, that she maybe has the power to make me feel like a man.

"Twenty-seven?" she says.

"Maybe twenty-seven," I say.

I don't tell Yoon-Mi I'm twenty-three, and she doesn't press the issue. Even though the "traditional" Korean woman seeks an older Korean man, maybe Yoon-Mi's not at all traditional. Maybe that's why she kissed me last Saturday.

We're sinking into the plush of the pillows. I explain how my coming to South Korea was difficult for my mom, but I don't go into details. Yoon-Mi tells me about the time she visited Paris last year, and how she wanted to stay longer, but she couldn't. She doesn't go into

details, either, but she does tell me the first time she saw me, she thought I was a Frenchman.

Around us I smell smoke and wine and hear the stutter-switch conversations of English and Korean. There's something I want to ask her, something that's making me harden underneath the fabric of my jeans, and something that's pounding like a watery drumbeat in my head: *how old are you how old are you how old are you?*

"I'm bored, Mom," I said.

I was sitting at the kitchen table, kneading my knuckles into my forehead, a twenty-two-year-old college graduate living in his parents' house in suburban Memphis and working part-time at a used bookstore. My mother was the one who'd clipped the BookTraders posting from the newspaper and pinned it to the refrigerator. I wouldn't even have the bookstore job if it weren't for her. "Nothing is going on," I said.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Sashenka?" She was peeling potatoes over the kitchen sink. In her tie-dye peace sign shirt and jeans, she looked younger than fifty, maybe because she took dance in the mornings, played concert piano for grade school ballet classes in the afternoons, and tended to a backyard garden of purple orchids in the evenings. She never stopped moving. "It's temporary. You know it's temporary."

My sister had done it differently, moving to Chicago after she finished college. It had taken her a few years and a few messy credit card bills, but she had found herself: she was studying to be a teacher and dating a lawyer boyfriend. My mom didn't have to worry about Anna.

"When's Dad coming home?" I said.

“He's working late. Are you hungry?”

“Kind of,” I said.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes.” I released my fist from my forehead. My friends were beginning new lives: in Atlanta, in Seattle, in Mumbai, in London, lives I eavesdropped on in their Facebook photo albums. They were living by themselves. They were taking care of themselves. They were growing up.

“How about chicken fingers and fries?”

I studied the tablecloth and its plastic sheen pattern of shiny apples and pears. “Chicken fingers sounds fine,” I said.

When Yoon-Mi doesn't reply to my text messages, I fear that she's decided I'm not worth her time and that I am a boy, not a man. But then, after a few days, finally, I hear from her. I am still in the game. She still wants me.

Atop a hill of yellow wildflowers at Seoul Olympic Park, we sit on a bench and hold hands.

“And I tell them, 'no, that is wrong to cancel my service,' I tell them, but they don't listen. They make me feel so miserable,” she says.

Yoon-Mi's angry at her cell phone company. They'd cut off her phone; that's why she missed my text messages. She's also started a new job at a design firm, and she's been exhausted by long hours, her voice plodding and heavy, as if there's sand in her teeth. With my thumb I circle the deep, weathered lines of her palm. I'm relieved she's talking, because for the past

fifteen minutes we've walked the park in silence. I don't know if Yoon-Mi preferred the quiet, or if it bothered her.

Behind us the sun sets in a flourish of reds and purples, the air cool but still ripe with yellow dust, a problem the Koreans blame on the Chinese and their pollution. "Let me take a picture of you," I tell Yoon-Mi.

She covers her face with her fingers. "No, it will not be beautiful."

I pad across the stiff grass, nearing the walking trail where middle-aged women *ajummas* in nylon jumpsuits and UFO-sized visors are swinging their elbows, exercising against the sunset. They are older than Yoon-Mi, but how much older, I don't know. I wait until Yoon-Mi drops her palm from her face. "Say kimchi," I say, the Korean version of "say cheese."

I return to her and hand her the camera. She rubs the knee of my jeans and we look at the picture together. In it, she looks harder-featured than she does in real life, I think, her wrinkles creasing the bridge of her nose and lifting her cheeks at a sharp angle. She's smiling her jagged smile, her teeth slightly crooked in the top row.

"It's cute," I say.

"It is okay," Yoon-Mi says. She turns off my camera.

We leave the park and cross the street to Lotte, a giant Western-style department store with a food court. Yoon-Mi orders a fish with its eyeballs still in, with sides of kimchi and seaweed soup; I order a Sweet Onion Chicken Teriyaki from Subway. Aside from the predominance of Korean customers and Korean food, the atmosphere of plastic forks, chain restaurants, and recycled air is not so different from that of a shopping mall in Memphis, or home as I used to call it, and sometimes still do.

Yoon-Mi quizzes me about *American Idol*. I laugh; she frowns. "Silly show, no? When they cannot sing, they are very rude when judge says they are bad." She wonders if most Americans are like that, thinking they are the best at everything even when they have no reason to be proud.

"How many Americans have you met?" I ask.

Two, she says: me, and some other guy. She doesn't look at me when she mentions him.

"Was he nice?" I ask.

Yoon-Mi jabs a chopstick into her fish. "He was pale."

"Pale? How do you mean?"

She looks at my shoulder, as if looking for somebody behind me. "Just pale."

Who is this pale person? If I ask Yoon-Mi a follow-up question, her answer might make both of us uncomfortable, and we've had enough silence on our date already. It'd be a better idea to keep the conversation focused on us. I wipe sweet onion sauce from my lips. "Am I like the Americans on *American Idol*?" I ask her.

She laughs a little, a titter between her teeth. "You are different," she says. "You are more sweet."

My mom stood in the yellow light of the doorway outside the den, her brown hair matted flat like a wig, her body quivering in a white bathrobe. "I think I'm having a panic attack," she said.

I was lying on the sofa, lit by the faint gray light of the TV. It was two o'clock in the morning. "What happened?" I said, startled.

“Is it okay if I come in?”

I sat up on the sofa. She'd hesitated before opening the door because she probably thought, with it being so late, that I'd been masturbating. I hadn't been, though. In fact, I had a yet-to-be diagnosed bilateral hernia. My testicles felt like watermelons, and they hurt me even when I sat.

My mother lay down on the adjacent sofa, hand on her forehead, telling me it felt like a bucket of cold water had been splashed against her face, rousing her from a deep sleep. Earlier that day, my father had shown her a world map and, with a black marker, he'd arced through oceans and continents to show the distance between Memphis, Tennessee, home, and Seoul, South Korea, not home. She said that's what made it real. That's what made it real.

"Don't worry, Mom." I tried to smile but *damn this pain in my pelvis*. "It used to be the other way around, me hanging by your door when I was little, scared somebody might rob the house. Remember?"

She didn't laugh.

"Come on, it's one year in South Korea," I said. "Just one year. I'll teach, I'll make money, and I'll come back. It's not forever."

My mom looked at the TV screen. It was playing a rerun of Bill Maher's HBO talk show, and his guest, hip-hop artist Mos Def, was talking 9/11 conspiracy theories, claiming terrorists didn't bring down the towers. Mos Def. The New Stooge.

"Who's that?" she asked.

I told her.

"I will always hate his voice, because it will always remind me of this." Her hand didn't

rest on her heart; rather, it fell there. “I don’t want to be that crazy Jewish mom, Alex. You know this is not me.”

It wasn’t her. She’d always protected me, but I’d wanted her to protect me. When I was five, she’d let me skip out on swimming lessons because I didn’t like the smell of indoor chlorine and didn’t like how Coach Han told me to do the backstroke “like Joe. Do it like, Joe!” When I was fifteen and my friends started smoking pot and stealing stop signs and stopped hanging out with me, my mom comforted me and told me I’d be fine, just fine. When I’d wanted her to leave me alone, she’d done that, too. She’d indulged my ninth-grade spin-the-remote parties. Sure, she did tell me she “didn’t want any hanky-panky going on in this house” but she did buy me the purple light bulb that set the mood for me kissing Savannah Newsom with tongue. My mom wasn’t the crazy Jewish mom; she was my mom.

"Do you understand me?" she asked.

I leaned over the couch and hugged her.

“Do you understand what I’m feeling?” Her voice was brittle, a chicken bone ready to snap.

I wanted to understand, but I wasn’t sure if I did.

A week later, I had hernia surgery. In the aftermath, my mom made me tea and kissed my head. She was taking care of me again. But as my departure date to Korea drew near and we tried to watch *Friday Night Lights*, a television series we once enjoyed, she told me, "Go to your stupid Korea. You sitting here and smiling makes it worse."

“Come on,” I said. She trembled when I hugged her, her thin shoulders quaking in my grasp. “Relax.”

“Don't touch me,” she said. “I need to detach myself from you.”

“Mom.” I felt my voice straining for the right volume. Hadn't she and I already had this conversation? “It's one year.”

“I know, I know. It's a good decision,” she said, as if it were a memorized line. On the TV screen, Coach Taylor was in a locker room, shouting encouragement to his high school football players. Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose, he said. My mom drummed her fingers against her knees. “I feel like I'm dying.”

“What?”

“I can't go to sleep, Sashenka,” she said.

I looked at her. Her oval face, usually so tan and vibrant, looked snowy and skeletal. Bloodless. Any worry about her health I may have had, however, was consumed by the anger needling up my spine. Why wasn't she thinking about me? I was moving to a foreign country where they spoke a foreign language and ate strange foods. What about me?

“You're being selfish,” I said. I liked the taste of the word “selfish.” It felt like the perfect thing to say to strike an enough-already tone.

I could feel her looking at me. “If I could control my feelings, I would,” she said. “This is beyond me.” On the TV, the football players were huddling and smacking each other on their helmets. “Sashenka, I haven't been sleeping. I just want you to understand what I'm feeling.”

“It's like you're rooting against me,” I said. I had emptied my gasket of it's-going-to-be-okays. “Like you're actively rooting against me.” Maybe this was what my mother deserved.

Snap out of it.

She laughed a hard laugh. “Have I ever rooted against you?”

“Not in the past.” I folded my arms to prove the point. “But it feels like you are now.”

“I’m going to take a bath.” She got off the couch. “If you want cereal, it’s downstairs.”

I watched her in her white gown, floating out of the room.

I counted down to Korea. Ten days. Nine. Eight. Seven. On six, my mother paced back and forth across the kitchen tile. This time, my father was home. “Stop it!” he shouted. “You’re being selfish!” He was repeating my words, a tea kettle, anger rising like steam through his ears, his nose, the dome of his bald head, anger at my mom, anger at himself for not being able to make her calm down.

She tried to explain that it was a panic attack. That it was a medical thing. My dad was a doctor. He didn't want to hear it.

"Do you not think I'm a strong person?" she said. "I can't control it." She stared up at me. “Alex,” she said. “Say something. Please.”

I was sitting on the carpeted steps above the kitchen, watching the scene unfold like it was a Tennessee Williams play. My dad would listen to me if I told him to leave Mom alone; he still called me *ripka* (little fish) and *milenke* (little boy) and he didn’t like to see me upset. I could have told him to stop screaming. But I didn’t.

“Sashenka?” my mom said.

I didn’t recognize her, looking so helpless, looking so weak. This was not my mother. I let my father scream and I let my mother take it. I didn’t say anything, but I watched. I watched.

They would visit me in South Korea, but six months felt like forever away, and I wasn't thinking about whether or not I would miss my mother. I just wanted to get the hell out of that house.

"I want you to have a girlfriend, someone to take care of you," my mother says. She leans into a cherry blossom and inhales its pink scent. "But where did you find this one?"

"Just out and about in Seoul. She's pretty. A little older than me, I think."

"How old?" my mom asks.

With my dad jet-lagged and lumbering behind us, my mom and I are walking through the Yeomiji Botanical Garden in Jeju Island; with its green plateaus and black boulder beaches, it's known to expatriates as the Korean Hawaii. I still can't believe my parents have come here. They are following me around in my new world, where I know the rules, the survival Korean phrases, the value of *won*, and how to read Hangul off a dinner menu. ("Samgyeopsal, Dad. That means pork belly meat.") I'm in control over their well-being. I have power.

My mother's been taking a pill for the past seven months. I don't know what the pill is, Prozac or something. A doctor prescribed it to her. I don't like thinking about it, but I'm glad she's feeling better. We don't talk about the days before I left. It's as if those conversations are packed in a suitcase, and my mom's left the luggage at home. She's gotten excited about the knuckled kick of chicken *dakgalbi* and this garden, where we lose ourselves in giant green ferns and yellow sunflowers with petals so long they have a personality.

Minutes ago, I told my father that I'd been seeing an older woman. He said, "Go for it, my son." He says, "Go for it, my son," whenever I mention any woman.

My mother is more discriminating; still, I feel no reason to lie to her about Yoon-Mi. In a way, I'm proud. "I don't know how old she is, exactly. I mean, I guess it'd be rude to ask?"

"So, what does she do?" my mom says.

“She's a designer. Fashion. Purses.” I try to think: What else do I know about Yoon-Mi?

My father takes a labored seat on a bench surrounded by yellow, and my mother and I walk through the sea of blooming greens and reds and purples, the air rich with their pollen. My phone vibrates. It's a text message.

Rainy in Seoul. Rain, rain! Have you seen cherry blossoms? Are they beautiful?

Yoon-Mi and I will have sex soon, I think, and the possibility of this makes my fingers buzz as I type a response into my phone, telling her I can't wait to see her. Her reply comes quickly. It's three words.

I miss you.

I smile at my phone and clap it shut. "Take a picture," my mother says, posing next to a fuchsia splash of petals. "This is the most beautiful thing I've seen in my life."

"Really?" I say. "In your whole life?"

My mother has seen flowers before; she has a whole garden at home. What makes these so special?

"Take the picture," she says.

"Okay," I say. I turn on my camera and find my mother and the flowers in the center of the frame. There's tiredness in her smile I haven't noticed before. Maybe these past six months

have aged her. Maybe. I don't like thinking about that.

I take the picture.

"Are you cold?" Yoon-Mi asks, her fingers tapping the lip of her cup of coffee.

We sit on the patio of Frankie's, a deli joint in a faux-European square of faux-European cafes in Jeongja. It's Buddha's Birthday, a national holiday in South Korea in which fluorescent red globes dangle on telephone wires and street signs. My parents have gone back to America, or they're on their way anyway. They visited me for two weeks, and only after I hugged my father and kissed my mother's head did I realize they were leaving me.

With one hand, I eat a beef burrito wrap, and with the other, I palm Yoon-Mi's knee. I want to get her back to my apartment. I want to get her there fast. My parents are gone, and I'm alone in a land fourteen hours ahead of my old clocks, night there, day here, me shivering on a patio, eating a burrito, thinking of undressing this Korean woman in front of me, in her tight jeans, sipping coffee, in her tight jeans. I tangle my fingers into hers. I don't finish my burrito.

"How old are you?" I ask her. We're lying on my bed. Our clothes are still on. She's finished nibbling on a coffee popsicle, leaving the remainder of it at the bottom of my freezer. On my bed, I tense a finger up her bare shoulder.

"I am old," she says.

"Tell me," I say, looking into her black eyes.

"Old."

"Come on."

She looks at my forehead. "Korean-age," she says, "I am thirty-nine."

I press my nose into her shoulder. I smell her armpit sweat. I don't want her to see my eyes. Koreans count birthdays by the lunar calendar, so on the American calendar, she's thirty-seven years old. Fourteen years older than me. When she'd been a teenager enjoying her first or second kiss, I'd been sitting on a parquet floor, watching *The Three Stooges*, waiting for my mother to bring me a purple popsicle.

Green light: her raised spine, lower back, soft breasts, hard face, black eyes. You're taking off the pants of a thirty-seven-year-old. You're rubbing hard against a thirty-seven-year-old.

She whispers. I can't hear her.

"What?" I say.

"I want you."

"I don't have a condom," I say.

"You don't?"

I don't have a condom. I'm the guy who forgets his scarves in the backs of cabs, who wears his collars crooked, who doesn't prepare himself adequately for sex.

I roll off her and stand up, like a soldier called to the battlefield. "I'll be right back."

Blood rushes in confused Xs through my brain. I take the elevator down to the second floor, where there's a GS 25 convenience store. Everything there threatens to slow my momentum, to dampen my hard-on: the metal jangle of the bell as the glass door shuts, the fluorescent light, the *ajumma* cashier's blue vest, everything. I grab the first pack of condoms I find, and then I grab a Gatorade, as if I'm planning to have sex with Yoon-Mi after a round of

ultimate frisbee. The way the *ajumma* rustles the condoms into the plastic bag shakes me.

I'm back in the apartment and I'm thinking too much. My penis is flaccid. It's dead. Yoon-Mi takes it into her hand and plays with it as if it's silly putty. "Little boy," she says. "Cute little boy."

I don't know if she thinks that will turn me on, but it doesn't. It makes me D.O.A.

"We do not have to do this thing," she says, pulling her hand away. She sits at the foot of my small bed. "We can just talk."

We just talk. About random connections, about how weird it is that someone in your past might be thinking about you in this exact moment. Right now. I think about my college girlfriend Madeline and how far away she is from me. How I'd found her too excitable, too sweet. How she had the always-on energy of, well, a child. Who Yoon-Mi is thinking about, I'm not sure. Outside of a glowing 37 wrapped like a garter belt around her waist, I don't know who she is.

Through the windows the night is purple, Koreans in jackets and light scarves, bodies in motion outlined by the dancing neon of restaurants and PC Cafes. Yoon-Mi and I have ordered eel sushi and Cajun chicken salad at a California-style sushi joint. "Do you like the salad?" I ask her. "It reminds me of Chili's back in America. You guys don't have Chili's here, do you?"

"What is Chili's?"

It's hard to believe I was a crumpled erection away from sleeping with Yoon-Mi a week ago, for the hand I now reach for across the table feels like a first date's.

"What are your hobbies?" she asks.

I already told her my hobbies. She knows I like to play tennis, read books, watch movies. What about her?

"I like thinking," she says.

"What do you mean?"

"Thinking. It is my hobby."

I stare at her. "We all think, Yoon-Mi. I mean, a hobby is something you do for fun."

"I have a lot to think. I think all the time."

"What else do you like to do?" I ask.

"Only thinking."

K-Pop, all rhythmic bleeps and bloops, starts playing from the speakers overhead. I tap my chopsticks against the edge of the table. I mouth the song even though I didn't know its Korean words.

"You act like little kid," she says.

And I laugh. I laugh like a little kid. What the hell am I doing? What the hell is she doing? We're poking at eel sushi on a purplish Saturday night in South Korea, me twenty-three, a kid who lost his virginity barely a year and a half ago, and her, a woman who's lived enough life that thinking of everything that came before and might come after is a hobby.

"What is funny?" she asks. Her lips are tight.

I point at her, at me, as if this would make her understand, but I can't get a word out.

"Please, no more laugh," she says.

We follow dinner with Beer Garten, a German bar where goblets of brew are kept frosty in iced cupholders on oak tables. Yoon-Mi and I drink our beers and don't talk. We don't touch

hands and we don't touch knees. She looks at the wall and she plays with the plump cushion on which she sits. I squeeze into her side of the booth and massage her shoulder, asking her what's wrong.

"Maybe if it was a couple years ago, we would have fun times, but now, I don't know."

From the ceiling speakers trickle the doot-doot-doot strains of Paula Cole's "I Don't Want to Wait," the theme song for *Dawson's Creek*, a 1990s American teen soap opera. Why this song? Why now? I start thinking about America and high school girlfriends, about anything but what's going on in front of me and inside of me right now.

"So, you don't think we should do this anymore?" I say. Part of me feels relieved, knowing that Yoon-Mi and I won't have to struggle at conversation anymore.

Tears appear in the corners of her black eyes. "I am old," she says.

Walking to the subway, we hold hands, our grip surprising me in its strength. We're probably violating the rules of break-up etiquette, but neither of us pulls away.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"For what?"

We stand at the top of the yellow-corrugated stairway to Seohyeon Station. It's getting cold.

"I left camera card, in your apartment," she says.

My head aches from the goblet of beer I drank, and I have to go pee. But I want to be an adult and end an adult relationship in a mature way. "Okay," I say. "Let's go."

Still holding hands, we start the longer trek towards my apartment. At a crosswalk, I tuck

a wisp of her black hair behind her ear. I feel liberated by our break-up, like I can do anything now and she'll let me. The pressure is gone. As three Korean teenagers in black-framed glasses walk past us, Yoon-Mi's lips touch mine. I taste the salt from her dry tears. "Sorry," I tell her, feeling a rise in my pants. I let go of her hand. "I have to go pee."

With the criss-cross legwork of a little leaguer, I waddle towards a public bathroom in an alley. Yoon-Mi waits for me, arms crossed in the cool breeze under the bright, blinking neon of a *hof bar*. Her jagged teeth pinch her lower lip. I return to her and it's as if we've passed through a fog, our Beer Garten split on one end and a stolen crosswalk kiss on the other. I feel the wrinkles of her hand in mine, the criss-crossed lines, and the soft firmness.

Yoon-Mi and I don't talk much as we step into the elevator. What can we say? What have we said to each other in the past? I strain my mind. I can't remember.

My apartment. Dark. The small red light of an alarm system I never learned. We slip off our shoes. She sifts her hands across my computer desk and finds her memory card. She slides it into her purse. We hug. Good-bye. We kiss. Good-bye. Again. Tongue. A rise. Kiss. Another rise. My hands pad down her slim torso, lifting the slight white fabric of her blouse. My head aches from that beer, but I'm distracted by the pain with a swirl of this-is-happening.

"I cannot do sex," she says. "I'm on my period."

"Okay," I say. Thinking hasn't done much for me with Yoon-Mi, so I stop thinking.

"Okay," I say again.

On my bed we don't kiss. The neon sign from the *jimjibang* sauna next door beams through my curtained window, illuminating her black hair. Her black eyes. I feel a stronger rise.

She peels off my boxers. I harden. Down she goes. Down up down up down wet wet wetter.

Feels wrong and right and wrong and down up down up Oh my God Yoon-Mi.

"Thank you," I say. My head hurts.

"It is late," she says. She sits on my bed in a long t-shirt. My bedspread looks silly. Provided by my academy, it's dowdy green and imprinted with noodled flowers. It doesn't spell post-coital bliss as much as it does grandmothers and baby powder. "I sleep over?"

I stand above her, scratching the lines on my forehead. God, why does one beer make my head hurt?

"He used to live in this same area, you know. Sunae Station."

"Who?" I say.

"Him. Before he left."

She looks at her knees. He too was an English teacher; he too was younger than she. The pale American. She loved him, she says. Maybe still. She came back from Paris to be with him in Korea. He told her he had to go to a friend's wedding in the States, but that he'd return in a month or two for a new teaching job. For her.

That was four months ago.

"You remind me a little of him," she says looking out the window at the sauna's insistent light. "It is getting late."

I don't want Yoon-Mi to sleep over. My head hurts and I don't know what to say to her, there lying on my bed. "You'll find that person," I say. "Not everybody's a jerk like him."

"I don't think so," she says. "I am old, but I am stupid. I am stupid."

"No, you're not," I say. "We all have tough relationships." The cliché sounds false

against my tongue. Yoon-Mi is fourteen years older than me; in her eyes, I see sadness I don't understand, sadness that shatters the glass of my Sela Ward fantasies. I can't give her what she needs. I don't think I'd want to even if I could.

"I do like you," she says. "We still see each other, maybe?"

I look at Yoon-Mi. "You'll find that person," I say.

When I decide to ask out a younger woman, my mom says go for it. From a webcam seven thousand miles away, my mother's face appears on my laptop screen, pixelated like an impressionist painting. Her image freezes in a blur of beige and white. I talk to her forehead.

After months of discussing everything but, my mom finally asks me why, why, why I couldn't understand her in those weeks before I went to Korea. She had panic attacks; she couldn't control them, and I didn't stand up for her when dad yelled that night. Why couldn't I understand?

"Do you get it now?" she asks. "Can you try?"

In front of that computer camera, alone in my studio apartment with the *jimjibang* sauna light against my windows, I tell my mom I am sorry, that I was wrong for being mean, for calling her selfish, for staying silent that night on the kitchen steps. What I don't tell her is this: that the boy in me still feels betrayed, that he thinks he deserves to be the one who's taken care of, because he's the son and she's the mother and that's how it should work always. That's what the boy in me believes. I don't know when I'll leave that boy behind, or if I have already.

I have a memory of Farmington Elementary, of a cafeteria smelling of spilled milk and kitchen cleaner, of me as a tiny kindergartener crumpling a paper bag lunch into a wet ball.

Inside the bag, still in its foil wrapping, was a gummy worm ribbed like a tortoise shell, like a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. A couple of days before, I'd sat on the webbed underside of a grocery cart when my mother, looming in her polka-dot dress, dropped the treat into the cart. She hadn't asked me if I wanted the gummy worm, because I was five and my mother knew everything I could ever want and how to grant me that everything.

Ms. Zeeman told us lunch was over, and I decided that I didn't want to eat the gummy worm. It looked too slippery, too slimy for dessert. And so I flung it into the trash compactor, and I watched it get gnashed and mauled by giant metal teeth. A blackness entered my stomach. I should have pocketed the candy. I should have saved it. It was a little gummy worm, but I felt it go. I feel it go.

A LETTER TO MEMOIR

Who are you to turn a real person into a character? How would you feel if you were just a character in somebody else's story?

Just a character in somebody else's story.

Just a character in somebody else's story.

Just a character in somebody else's story.

How would you feel?

TGIF, 1993

I'm eight years old. I like chicken nuggets and pepperoni pizza and I'm so skinny my ribs show. Because I can't tie shoes, I wear velcro sneakers. My third-grade teacher is Ms. Morris. She wears too much makeup and her hair is yellow. I don't like her because she pretends not to see my raised hand when I have to go to the bathroom.

Every morning my mom cakes my hair with spray but two little strands stick up anyway. She tells me not to touch my hair but it's wet and crunchy so I can't help myself. It's October 14, 1993. Tomorrow is Friday, new episodes on ABC of *Family Matters*, *Boy Meets World*, *Step by Step*, and *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper*. My mom and I will share a bowl of popcorn and watch the shows. But first, I will get mad at her when she misses most of *Family Matters* because washing dishes in the kitchen is, apparently to her, more important than the TGIF line-up. I'll lock the door of the den to prove my point that she is wrong, but then I'll let my mom in and I'll forgive her for washing dishes. My best friend at school is Michael Widener, but my mom is my very best friend.

On Thursday night, she lingers in the driveway, her body bathed in the orange halo of the lamp above the garage door, her back turned to me. A phone call is how she hears that her grandmother, my great-grandmother, is gone, the woman who fed her when she was little, clothed her, raised her, loved her.

I watch my mom from the garage. Before it happened, my parents would whisper to each other: I need to go see her, my mom would say. Alex has soccer practice, she told my dad, you'll

need to take him to soccer practice.

I don't want my mom to go anywhere for any reason. Maybe she won't leave now, I hope. I don't think about the funeral. I don't think a lot about my great-grandmother, a person I don't know enough to mourn the right way. I just think about my mom leaving me.

The next day she flies to Omaha. She assures me everything's going to be fine, just fine, that I can watch my shows alone. My stomach feels heavy and empty at the same time.

Boy Meets World is funny because Corey gets a bad haircut but still gets to kiss Topanga. On *Step by Step*, J.T. sells bogus book reports to the football team and on *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper*, Coop' is a Driver's Ed instructor and he almost runs somebody over. I laugh and my heavy-empty stomach feels a little better. Mom is at her grandmother's funeral, but I'm not thinking about death or what it means, nor will I for many years, because on this TGIF night, everything's going to be just fine.

DEFENDING YOUR CASTLE

I pick up a copy of *Shooting Times Personal Defense* from the bottom shelf of the Special Interests section at Barnes & Noble. Amid the glossy covers of flexing athletes and airbrushed fashion models, *Shooting Times* stands out with an image not of a celebrity superstar, but of a pajama-panted everyman with a beard. He's a suburban dad, strong in a way that's less about muscles and more about status: as the man of his house, as the defender of his castle. Looking fairly but not gravely concerned, he's crouching in the purple darkness of a kitchen. He's also holding a rifle.

The audience for *Shooting Times* (a monthly publication that releases the *Personal Defense* edition) has a median age of 42 and an average household income of more than \$88,000 a year. While the magazine doesn't match the circulation of a *Sports Illustrated* or a *Cosmopolitan*, it does send over 152,000 subscriptions to readers in all fifty states, not to mention the District of Columbia, Canada, and several international locales: that's a lot of people in a lot of places interested in protection via firearms. For every one female, the publication has more than one hundred male readers. *Shooting Times* is a man's magazine; I am a man, but I do not fit the profile of the typical *Shooting Times* reader. I'm a twenty-six year old graduate student who makes less than \$10,000 a year, and the only trigger I've ever squeezed has been a paintball gun's. Unlike the man on the magazine cover, my suburban-dad father has never owned a gun and most likely never will.

I want to write a review of *Shooting Times* from the perspective of an alien. I want to

explore something outside of myself, outside of my common frames of reference. When I review *Shooting Times*, I hope to be insightful and maybe even humorous, but not snarky or unfair. I want to learn about a subculture that's foreign to me, a subculture that espouses preparation for the most dangerous day of my life. But before I do that, I need to ask myself: what the hell do I know about self-defense?

Funplex, Memphis, Tennessee, 1992. My mom would tell me later that Drew Hayward, my next-door neighbor, he of the spiky hair and the love for pickles, had been jealous of my birthday presents: my Darkwing Duck cassette tape, my *Thin Ice* board game, my BLAMO! pistol, my check for \$8.00. I didn't care about Drew's motives; I cared about the way he'd grabbed my shoulders and launched from his lips a teaspoon of spit that crash-landed onto my chin. Spitting was a villain's move. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles would never spit on anybody; their arch nemesis Shredder, on the other hand, might. So what did I do? I spat right back at Drew. And then he spat at me. We didn't have the wherewithal to fatten our saliva with mucus, so we didn't strike any wet bullseyes. Finally, my sister, teenaged and bored, separated us with her splayed elbows. "Be nice," she told us. "Stop fighting."

"He started it," Drew said.

"He started it!" I countered, covering my eye, as if I couldn't bear witness to the indignity. It was Drew who'd falsely accused me of asking my sister for a second slice of pizza, and it was Drew who spat at me first.

When my sister turned her back, I charged to where Drew sat, cocky with his pepperoni pizza. I punched him in the shoulder. I'd successfully defended myself.

My father had videotaped the action, just as he'd filmed my Taekwondo tournaments in which I'd kicked the red-helmeted heads of boys bigger and taller than I was. In those tournaments, there were rules for attacking and defending, rules I'd obeyed to notch three first place trophies in green belt sparring. In training, I would always stand up straight at attention, slapping the sides of my hips to tighten my pose. "Courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, indomitable spirit, sir!" I'd yell in unison with my fellow fighters to my sensei. My father was proud of me, proud of my Taekwondo achievements and proud that I wouldn't let Drew push me around.

A few weeks after my eighth birthday, Drew kicked me in the balls. We had been scrambling after a Nerf football in the grassy yard between our houses when I'd seen his eyes narrow and his leg flick up. It was no accident; he'd meant to do it. The pain felt like a cough erupting from the jelly of my stomach. I didn't cry, but I didn't fight back either. This was not Taekwondo; there was no referee's whistle to signal a violation. I just went home.

When Drew would knock on my front door in the days after, my mom would answer and say, "No, Alex cannot come out to play." She'd obliterate Drew with a stare so severe that it could rip the Earth from its orbit.

"Nobody messes with my baby," she'd say, kissing my head as I played Sega Genesis in my bedroom. Whether it came from my mother, my father, or my sister, a warm hug or a casual kiss on the cheek was the norm rather than the exception in our house. Self-defense was an extracurricular activity. Warmth was where I lived; I lived in its cocoon.

"Take an honest look at yourself. If you never watch the news because you don't want to

hear about the negative stories...you're probably someone who walks blissfully unaware of those patiently waiting to pop your safe little bubble."

Eric Pool, Editor-in-Chief of *Shooting Times Personal Defense Magazine*.

Most of the articles in *Shooting Times* make ample use of the second-person point of view. Reading Pool's note, I could feel the *you* raising the stakes in each of his sentences. It's one thing for a stranger to be "blissfully unaware" that his "safe little bubble" is about to be popped, but it's quite another if *you* are the one who's ignorant, if *you* are the one who lives in the bubble. The *you* is a challenge Pool dares the reader to meet, but I don't know exactly who he means when he mentions "those patiently waiting to pop your safe little bubble."

Who are they? Where are they waiting?

From my childhood bedroom, I once heard a clicking sound outside my window in the middle of the night. *Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap.* I thought it was the sound of a man dressed in black, his face covered in a skull cap with eyeholes. A burglar. *Clack clack clack. Clack clack clack.*

My dad was at work in the hospital. That meant my mother, my sister, and I would be at the burglar's mercy. I tip-toed through the dark hallway to the master bedroom, creaking open my mother's door with apologetic slowness. I heard her sleeping, breathing in and out, soft but insistent like a breeze off a shore. I knew I shouldn't wake my mom up just because of a hunch, but I did want her to wake up on her own and tell me not to worry.

I stood at the doorway. Just before I turned back, she huffed, as if spitting out the water

from a dream. “Alex,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

When I heard her voice, I knew there were no burglars outside my window.

A couple of years later, my father would take me to watch college basketball games in downtown Memphis. A pediatrician at the Children’s Hospital emergency room, he was sturdily broad-shouldered and professional-looking with his doctor’s beard, heavy glasses, and woolen pageboy cap. He knew his way around downtown in a city with one of the highest crime rates in the country, and so I followed him through the stadium parking garage, past the headlights, the honking, the low gray ceilings that leaked rain or urine or both, and the strangers shouting with their breath reeking of cigarettes and beer, some of them ballcapped fans on their way home, others simply homeless. Things never got like this in Germantown, forty-five minutes east and the suburb in which we lived. It was almost 11 o’clock.

“Do you think it’ll be hard to get out of here?” I asked. “There’s so many cars.”

I heard a succession of honks. The garage felt so small and so crowded, and I felt so far away from home.

When we got into the car, he told me to take off my shoes and relax.

I took off my Penny Hardaway sneakers. I lifted my feet onto the dashboard, and my toes flexed in my socks. Closing my eyes, I saw the reflections of lights turn purple, black, and orange behind my lids. I heard the whoosh of my father’s car, and I heard his tires grind and shimmy around a tight corner. Then the *thunk-thunk* of a speed bump and the *thunk-thunk* of another.

By the time I opened my eyes, I noticed the street signs changing to ones I recognized. We were in Germantown again.

“Dad, you’re a really good driver,” I said.

He patted my socked left foot and smiled.

James Tarr, who has worked on security surveillance teams for more than twenty years, is the author of “The Perils of the Parking Structure,” one of the feature articles in this particular issue of *Shooting Times*. Tarr describes his job as a lot of hiding out and waiting, waiting for something, anything to happen. Occasionally he takes a break and urinates into a water bottle, and then it’s back to waiting for action that will probably never come. The low likelihood of a parking garage attack, however, is not the point of Tarr’s article. (If it were, he would probably not cite an episode from the fictional cop drama *Magnum P.I.* to serve his argument.) Above all, Tarr is concerned with one creeping question: “What if?”

What if you’re alone in a parking garage? To paraphrase the author:

1. Stay away from walls and columns.
2. Stay off your cell phone.
3. Take off your earphones.

His final piece of advice calls back to Eric Pool’s editor note about the “moment of time in your life” when danger strikes. Tarr’s decades of surveillance expertise have brought him to a conclusion that, to this reader, seems shocking in its obviousness: “If the time comes, yell, scream and fight like your life depends on it, because it may.”

The message is clear: the time will probably not come for you, but will you be ready if it does?

I wasn't home on the hot August afternoon when my father drove to work and clutched his chest, a seizing in his heart, not an attack but something like it, something close. I was teaching English in South Korea, a post-college job I'd found to delay the "real world" for a little bit longer. On the day a surgeon clumsily inserted a pacemaker into my father's chest, rupturing walls, causing internal bleeding, causing my mother to walk down the hospital corridors, saying the hallways were cold, too cold, I was drinking *soju* and beer and flirting with a Korean secretary, turning her in balletic pivots in the rainbow lights of a karaoke room. I had no idea what was happening to my father.

Days later, my mom told me some of the details, but not all of them. We were divided by oceans and hours, their morning my night, my night their morning. I only knew that it was serious, and that I couldn't hug her. That I couldn't see him. I couldn't protect them or be protected by them.

When I came back to America, I found my father different than I'd remembered him. He didn't exercise with the same intensity he had before, and his smile seemed more guarded, more careful, as if he'd discovered a fragility he could understand but couldn't speak. On my twenty-fourth birthday, he brought me a chocolate chip cookie cake with sky-blue frosting. It was my favorite dessert, and he'd reminded my mom as much. I tried to toast him. "Dad," I said. My voice broke. "You," I said, but I couldn't push out any words. My eyes wet, I hugged him, my face buried in his shoulder.

A year and a half later, the two of us went to a pizza place for dinner. We were talking about the future: I was considering law school, and he was thinking about how much longer he and my mother would stay in Memphis. Mom wanted to get a condominium in Chicago to help

out my sister, who was planning to soon have a baby with her husband. My father suddenly got quiet, noticing something through the window.

“What are you looking at?” I asked.

“I think that’s Drew Hayward’s family outside,” he said.

I followed my father’s view and saw that indeed it was Drew’s family, our old next-door neighbors, at the patio of the restaurant. We hadn’t seen them in maybe fifteen years. Drew’s father, his mother, his sister, and his brother were laughing over pizza and beer. It was a beautiful spring day.

“I can’t imagine,” my father said.

“Yeah,” I said.

We didn’t want to talk to the Hayward family because we didn’t know what to say. It had been seven years since Drew had died in a car accident during the spring break of his freshman year of college. My mother had read the story in the newspaper. She’d gone to the funeral, too, and said that Drew was memorialized as a sensitive, funny guy underneath the façade of a muscular varsity wrestler. He’d been young and healthy and strong, and then he was gone.

These things didn’t haunt me all at once, but in increments, in what-if questions I’d start but never finish. What if my dad...what if my mom...what if my sister...what if there comes a time when my little bubble pops for good?

If one were to draw a theme from the advertisements in *Shooting Times*, it would be one of assuming control. On the inside flap of the magazine is an ad from Taurus with a picture of a pistol and the tagline "The New Public Defender." There's a sense of ownership implicit. That

and self-determination. The local policeman might be a nice guy and all, but what do you do when he's not around? Turn to Taurus. The New Public Defender. You're in charge.

“Defending Your Castle” is the final story in *Shooting Times Personal Defense Magazine*. It is a back-page article, a spot many magazines reserve for first-person point of view stories. Because it features a dark blue picture of a man who, through his window, spots the approach of a shadowy intruder, I presume the story will be about someone’s experience of humbling a burglar. But I’m wrong. The article is in second person, and it asks what if? What if?

“You get up and peek out the window to see what it is,” writes Harry Fitzpatrick. “You see two men in dark clothing standing there with guns drawn. What do you do? Are you prepared?”

I know there will come a day, whether I get a gun or not, when I will have to defend my own castle. But rather than be prepared, I choose to close my eyes and let the reflections of oncoming headlights turn dim behind my lids. I live alone, but still I listen for the whoosh of my father’s car, carrying me home through the darkness and the light.

ATTENTION SHOPPERS

Matilda was wearing her dead son's sneakers. They didn't fit her right; they were high-tops with blue-jelly soles that lit up with each step she walked down the produce aisle of Murphy's Groceries. It was Tuesday afternoon, the sun shining spectacularly outside, dappling the sea of luxury cars in the parking lot with a golden hue. It was the kind of day you live for.

Had it been five days since the accident? Six? Seven? Fifteen? She hadn't been counting. Her husband, Harry, he was the one who counted. He was on the last leg of his day shift at the ER. He wanted her to stay home and relax. He'd gone for groceries on Sunday; they didn't need much of anything. But Matilda was taking a stand.

Milk. She and Harry drank 2%, but Sonny swore by Whole. He said it tasted like a milkshake. And so, with a plop she found satisfying, Matilda dropped a gallon carton of Vitamin D into her shopping cart. Again and again, the toes of her high-tops stubbed against the wheels of the cart. It was hard to walk like this, her son's shoes so clownishly large. Sonny was only eight years old but he'd been growing fast. He'd wanted to become a professional basketball player. "They'd call me Beastman!" he'd say, growling, his blonde hair flopping like a jump rope as he'd shoot a three-pointer over Harry's outstretched arms.

She recalled a summer's evening two years ago. Sonny had been sick, allergies maybe, but nothing serious, a stuffy nose, periodic sneezing. She wouldn't leave his side. She was tickling Sonny's neck, his belly button, his neck and his belly button until he was sneezing and laughing at the same time. "He's fine," she had said. "He's my healthy boy." Sonny had been wearing purple-and-gold Los Angeles Lakers pajamas, his blonde hair lying limp on his forehead. "Sonny is my son is my sun," Matilda said, to which Harry called her cheesy and then

said, “But I kind of like the sound of your cheese.”

Matilda awoke from this memory to find her cart toppling-over full, laden with all of Sonny’s favorite foods: Spicy Nacho Doritos, Pepperidge Farm Softbaked Snickerdoodle Cookies, Murphy’s Peanut Butter Pretzels and Buttercream Minicake, Tangy Original Sunny D, Old El Paso Burrito Dinner Kit, Hamburger Helper Crunchy Taco, Murphy’s Small and Fluffy Marshmallows, Smoked Cheddar Cheez-Its, Nutter Butter Bites, Chef Boyardee Spaghetti and Meatballs, Warm Delights Molten Caramel Cake, Pillsbury Funfetti Premium Cake Mix, Krispy Kreme Original Glaze Doughnuts, Frosted Wild Grape Pop Tarts, Smorz Cereal, Cinnamon Teddy Grahams, Candy Corn Candy, White Fudge Chips Ahoy, Otis Spunkmeyer Blueberry Muffins, and Michael Angelo’s Meat Lasagna.

In the past Harry had called it all “junk,” and she’d agree with him. She'd only get one dessert for Sonny, but she’d been waiting around too long to start being conservative with her purchases. Tonight they would have a feast, she thought. She’d save a slice of cake for Junior, just in case he’d come back.

Matilda turned her cart with a squeak into the magazine lane. There, a young blonde boy was sitting folded-legged on the linoleum tile, looking down at a basketball magazine. He was chubbier than Junior, and his hair was longer. But he looked to be about the same age.

“Hi there,” Matilda said.

The boy scratched his ear but didn't look up.

“What are you reading?” she asked.

“Basketball,” he said.

She looked back and forth. “Where’s your mom?”

With a chocolate stained finger he turned a glossy page.

“Did you lose your mom?” Her voice caught on *mom*, like a woolen rope snagging on barbed wire.

The boy wouldn't look up. He scratched his ear again.

“I'm asking you a question.”

“What?” he said.

“Look at me, Sonny.”

Finally. His eyes. Flecks of green and blue. “Who's Sonny?” he said.

“Sonny,” she said again, feeling a warm fluid inside her, something heightened, drugged, like happiness inverted, not sadness, but happiness inside-out. Her son's name! Her son's name! How sweet it sounded! How sweet!

At that moment the boy's mother appeared with a shopping cart of her own. “Trent,” she said. “Stop bothering that lady.”

“I wasn't!” Trent said, standing up, the basketball magazine tumbling from his lap. “She was talking to me!”

The mother, raven-haired, apple-cheeked, mouthed a *sorry* to Matilda. Trent walked away holding his mother's hand, turning back one time to look at Matilda's shoes.

Matilda looked down at her cart, at the Hamburger Helper Crunchy Taco. She flipped open her cell phone. Harry picked up on the fourth ring, sounding agitated. It had been a hard day at work, he said. “Never mind that, honey,” she said. “I felt him today!”

There was silence on the line, then a sound of nurses arguing in the background. Matilda continued, “Harry, can you hear me? I felt him!”

“Matilda, where are you?”

She closed her eyes. She felt a darkness pressing in on the edges around her body. A feeling she couldn't name. She curled her toes. She was wearing his shoes.

“I'm here,” Matilda said.

LIBERTYLAND

My wife says I'm too old for rollercoasters. Maybe she's right. I'm twenty-five, I'm balding, and I have a weak beard. But I still want to go to Libertyland.

"You'll buy a funnel cake," Jessica says, "take two bites, say it's too sweet like you always say, and throw it away like you always do." She's mad about last night, when I microwaved a hot dog wrapped in tinfoil; it left a blur of electric blue and a trail of *Back to the Future* flames.

We live in a two-bedroom house in midtown Memphis. Our toilet leaks. I want to fix it, but my plumbing know-how starts and ends with the Mario Brothers. "The can is like your dad," I tell Jessica, "a cranky bastard who doesn't work."

"He's retired," she says, "and that's a clunky analogy." She'd know; she scored Highest Honors on her literature thesis: "I made William Faulkner my bitch."

Jessica teaches eighth-grade English at White Station. I work on the phone, selling printer cartridges for a company out of Olive Branch. After we first got married, we'd spend our Tuesdays and Thursdays at Billy Hardwicks, Jessica hitting strikes and spares, her burnt-almond hair bobbing in pigtails, her purple pajama pants low against her waist, and her checkered pizza parlor bowling shoes flopping—two sizes too big. "You're dressed for a slumber party on hallucinogens," I'd say. She'd fix me with her green eyes and a little curl of a smile, creasing the constellation of freckles over her nose like a secret whispered: *Save this*.

Listen to the *chh* against the windows. With this rain, we won't have to wait in line for

the Zippin Pippin.

“Are you serious?” She jangles the rusted lever of the toilet. “We need to buy a new microwave.”

I crouch and study the water valve. I twist it clockwise; I don't know what I'm doing but I'm doing it.

"If I get this thing to stop leaking," I say, "we go to Libertyland. If I don't, we get the microwave."

She wipes tile grime off her jeans. "You've got a deal, bub."

The water dribbles in tiny, persistent droplets. I turn it tighter. And tighter, until I can't turn it anymore. "There."

"How long do we wait?"

"Let's say a minute."

Please don't drip.

She crosses her thin arms and gives a sideways glance at her slip of a watch.

Please don't drip.

The air conditioner clanks.

Please.

"You win," she says.

"Put on your sexy clothes, your purple pajama pants, your bowling shoes. Let's go nuts."

“I hope you don't think my bowling shoes are sexy.”

Her lips do the little curl and I kiss them; she tastes of salt and sweat.

The rain falls like a mist. I'm wearing a yellow poncho and Jessica tells me I look like the man from *Curious George*. I slosh through puddles on the concrete pathway leading into the park, my blue jeans turning black at the ankles. We see the Zippin Pippin, its empty red carriages under a low-hanging canopy, its wet wooden spirals stretching up into the foam sky.

Closed.

A black man in a khaki hat approaches Jessica and me and tells us Libertyland is tearing down the ride, selling it, moving it to another town. "What you should do is play my pop-a-shot game," he says, "and win something for your girlfriend."

Her palm is slippery as it sinks into mine. "I guess I'm your girlfriend now," she says.

The balls are puckered blimps in my damp hands. The hoops are too small, but I want to defy the laws of physics for my wife. I miss. Rain beads down Jessica's freckled nose. I look at the ring on her finger; it's a white band with a winking diamond. "Let's go home," I tell her. "This place is dead."

"Wait." She points her sleeve at a clapboard stand dressed in stars and stripes: Funnel Cake. "You want some, don't you?"

The funnel cake will chalk my lips white. It will fluff my nostrils in sugar. It will make my stomach groan. I know this. But still.

Jessica pulls a bill from the kangaroo pouch of her sweatshirt. "Go," she says, squeezing the money into my hand.

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