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WEENIE BOYS

By

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BA, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, 2012

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Weenie Boys (part 1)

This shit here is about three generations of dumbass dudes, of which I am the third.

What you gotta know:

- I was born in Southern California, to a real pretty and smart and funny and businesslike JA lady and a big con artist of a white guy.
- My dad, because he's a dude and a dumbass, left my mom and me to move back to Montana and stock the shelves of grocery stores.
- I'd go see him in the summers. I'd spend a lot of time at my grandparents' duplex. They had a trampoline out back.
- Much later, my dad, for somewhat mysterious reasons, iced out his parents and didn't talk to them for perhaps eight years.
- I, after growing up in the hot-fire state of Arizona, got into grad school in the town that is also homebase of my dad's side, the crazy white side, of my family. I moved in with my grandparents for what was supposed to be like two weeks while I found a place but I saw how old they'd got and figured I could help, and also no rent.
- Then my grandma died.
- My dad came to the funeral, which shocked the world.

Ok, so that's how me and my grandpa came to be roommates. And that's how, after waking up from a nap I walked out to the kitchen at four in the afternoon and saw him making spaghetti and he looked up from the pot and said, Do you have plans tonight?

And I said, Yeah.

And he said, For dinner?

And I said, Yeah.

And he said, Well why didn't you tell me?

And I thought, Because I don't need you all up in my shit all the time.

But I said, I just found out about it, sorry. Just eat yours and put the rest in the fridge. I'll get to it later.

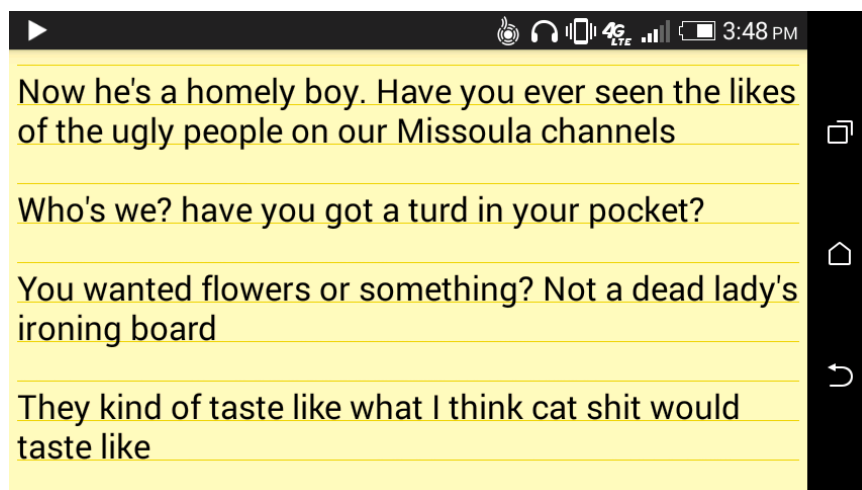
And he said, Ain't going to happen again.

And I thought, I am too damn grown to be getting yelled at about spaghetti.

But I said, Sorry. Then I went back down the hall and put on shoes and loaded my pockets and got through the front door without saying shit and ducked into my car and twisted the key. The rap music therein, was loud.

//

When my grandma was alive she would say some funny shit and I'd write it down in my phone:



A thing about her is she always had my back. Believed me, and believed in me. Would cook for me, and when I told her I was trying to eat better and be less fat she made a real effort of working in more vegetables despite not knowing shit or fuck about nutrition.

I don't like Brown rice I don't like wheat spaghetti.
That's meant for dogs not people. Who likes Brown
rice? who likes wheat spaghetti?

Whenever I'd go to leave and Grandpa would ask where I was going she'd tell him it was none of his business. And I'd smile, and usually tell them anyways, and be out of there and things then were alright.

//

I was on campus, parked up by the ROTC gym. It was after seven and still light out because spring. Engine off and music on, I sat in the car and watched a squad of three deer follow each other around. I didn't have shit to do but didn't want to get home til after 8:30 when Grandpa would be asleep.

I ripped into a pack of sour gummy worms, which I'd buy at gas stations on my debit card when I needed cash back. There was this girl I had a ridiculous thing for. She lived close by, and I thought there was a chance she'd pop down and hang out with me. So I gave her a call.

Reasons why it made no sense that I liked this girl:

- Upon meeting her I didn't even clock her. Was like, White girl, next. I hadn't had a thing for a white girl since I was in fifth grade. And let me tell you, this was one white girl. Like paleness on ten trilli.
- My second week of knowing her, the NWA movie had just come out and I asked her if she'd seen it and she said, NWA? And I said, You know, like Ice Cube and Dr Dre. And she said, Sorry, who? I'm not cool. And I said, You have to know Dr Dre. You have to at least know the headphones. But she didn't even.

- One time we were riding around in my car and I had on R&B and as the dude sang about cheating on his girl she went, Do you think you'd be friends with this guy? And I said, I don't know. Probably not. And she said, I know that liking a person and liking their music isn't the same, but why are all of these guys so terrible? And I said, Because that's real life. Because guys are terrible. And she said, You know there's a lot more out there than bitches, hoes, and diamonds.
- And also she sort of had a boyfriend.

Reasons why, despite above reasons, I liked her anyway:

- We'd run pickup basketball and she'd sneak up on a motherfucker and set some real solid screens. Type of screen make you go, Oh shit!
- She grew up in the Midwest and so was raised to not make fun of people. But sometimes would anyway because it'd make me laugh real hard. She'd do funny voices. She had this character, a girl she went to school with who had an adopted black sister and would reference that like it made her an expert on race relations. Anyway, that my-adopted-black-sister voice was fucking fire.
- One time after a class I saw the light on in her office and I went in there and sat down and talked to her for four hours. We were still in there when the janitors showed up. And I was like, Goddamn how many people is it I could talk to for four hours and not even get bored or anything.

But yeah, she didn't pick up when I called. So I made up an errand to run, to kill the time.

Bought some Gatorade or something.

//

I woke up like I did a lot of those mornings and kept in my room as long as I could. I laid in bed for forty minutes, then looked at the internet in the dark for a while. I had to pee but held off because then my grandpa would know I was awake. The layout of that house made it so he could chart all of my movements. From his chair in the living room he could see down the hall, could see when I crossed it to head into the bathroom, could see me in the kitchen trying to start breakfast before he'd kick me out and do it himself.

Eventually I did come out. Had to. Did bathroom stuff and then walked out and leaned against a corner of the living room wall and made small talk while The Today Show went in the background.

With Grandma there was no small talk. She'd tee off on some wild shit and go. Mostly I'd just listen, laugh, say, Yeah, say, Wow. Grandpa would sometimes try to get her to calm down, which:

Leo you are so shit all stupid

Without her, we didn't work. Too much dead air. I asked him some question, if he was having lunch with his guys that day. He answered in a word. I broke back down the hall at my first opportunity.

//

I got a burger with my dad. Same downtown spot he took me as a kid after I won most improved at the university basketball camp. When I got into town in the fall I saw him a couple times and then quit talking to him—for no big reason, for simplicity. But when Grandma died he

called Grandpa, which was big of him to do, and he did come to the funeral, which fucking destroyed him, so I took up talking to him again.

We sat at the bar, each with a greasy paper plate in front of us and a bag of jalapeño chips to split, ripped down the middle. He asked me if we'd gotten through all the food people had brought.

Most of it. I think there's still some of those Costco sandwich rolls in the freezer.

Must've been a lot of people coming through there.

God, yeah. And I didn't know who most of them were.

Those sisters of his, I still can't keep them straight. They're all just Ettas to me, he said.

Well Maretta I know. The one from Nebraska. Jiletta and Monica and Rita, though, that's where I get tripped up.

Interchangeable. The Ettas.

They all came up to me, at the house after the reception thing, and they all told me to take care of him, I said.

He put his burger down and told me, Listen. That's not fair. That's not on you. You don't have to feel that weight.

This, coming from him, a preeminent scholar in the field of not feeling that weight. Dude could give a TED Talk on not feeling that weight. But still, it was kind of nice to hear.

//

Grandpa used to fill his days out following orders. She'd send him all over town picking things up. Set him off on projects around the house.

I'm not far from getting so hyper that I'll tell you to buy a brush and paint the goddamn sky

He'd joke, in that way where it's halfway not a joke, that he worked harder in retirement than he ever did at the Forest Service.

Well that's a government job for you, she'd say.

Without her he'd just sit and watch bad TV all day. Westerns or the History Channel or he'd doze off in his chair because he was having bladder control problems and couldn't sleep through the night for all the pissing. Very rarely, we'd have a project.

One day we had a project. He bought a thing of poison mix to soak in at the roots of the trees to keep bugs off them. I went out back with him. He sat down on a lawn chair and read the instructions by sunlight. I went around the deck and connected the hose and fed it to him over the railing, like I would when we'd put water in the hot tub. He put the end of the hose in a two-gallon bucket. He told me to turn on the water, but not all the way. So I did. He told me to shut it off, and I did that too.

He poured two oz. of the green shit into the marked lid and dumped that into the bucket. Didn't bother stirring it, and it seemed like he probably should have, but I didn't say anything. He went down the steps of the deck with the bucket and ducked under the branches to get up by the tree. Got to get all the roots, he said. Then, mid pour, he told me to take the bucket and he went for the sliding door back inside.

I got the rest of the bucket out onto that first tree. There was another one like it on the other end, and two more shrub-like joints between them. I didn't know if the mix was just for the two outside trees or all four. I mixed three more buckets of green shit and did them all up. Disconnected the hose, rinsed out the measuring lid and put the cap back on the bottle of poison. Put everything away and went back inside and saw Grandpa coming out of the laundry room.

You got it all?

Yeah, I said.

Both trees?

Yeah, I said.

I had an accident, sorry.

Oh. Doctor didn't help with that?

Evidently not.

Damn.

It's miserable. No control.

Yeah.

//

Up Highway 12, across from a campground my grandparents would take me to as a kid, on top of a big rock that overlooked the pool where my grandma had taught me to swim, I sat with that girl. She came to the funeral. Had met my grandma at Thanksgiving. Afterwards Grandma was like, What's the deal? Do you not like white girls?

It was her idea for us two to go up there. I'd told her stories about it, about how the water in that pool gave my Grandma a flesh eating disease that was 95% likely to kill her, and then when it didn't kill her we still kept coming and swimming there summer after summer.

We'd had to hike partway up a mountain to get to that rock. I walked behind her, embarrassingly winded and dragging my Jordans through the dirt. Once we got to the rock, and sat down, it was alright.

She handed me a little bottle of Fireball. Said, I thought this would be an appropriate tribute.

My grandma, before I knew her, was a legit alcoholic. Dating dudes to borrow their cars and drive them drunk over sidewalks, through mailboxes. So, yeah, appropriate.

I took the Fireball from her, having never tried alcohol, and took a sip. It tasted like pure cinnamon booty hole. I said, Nope, and passed it back to her. She took a swig and passed it back to me. I poured the rest of it out, off the rock. Like it was a 40 and we were in the only hood movie ever shot on a rock in Montana.

This is nice, right? I said.

What if we never go back? she said.

I think it'd be ok. We could probably get jobs in the bar or restaurant.

Probably make more than we do teaching.

Definitely we'd make more than we do teaching.

She said, Hold on, and flicked a tick off the sleeve of my ASU hoody.

It's weird being up here, I said.

But you're glad you came?

Yeah, I think so.

//

It was early, like six. I came out as Grandpa was coming in from a cigarette on the deck.

It's 67 in here so I won't make a fire, he said.

Are you good on wood? I asked him.

Yeah, should be for a while. Thanks for chopping that kindling.

No problem, I said. He'd made it back to his chair and I stayed leaning on the corner of the wall. How was yesterday? I asked him.

Well I got it taken care of. What a rigmarole that turned out to be. Guess what her death benefits came out to.

No idea.

\$255.

That's hardly nothing, I said.

Hardly nothing is right. But that's what the government allows for someone on social security that dies.

I shook my head, said, Wow.

That was the biggest farce. I put it in my GPS to find the place. It was on American Way. I must've drove by it four times. Then I got out and asked a guy mowing the lawn and he said turn around.

You were there.

I was there. There's a guard at the front and they search you and give you a number. I thought that's how it might be but you don't know. Just seeing the death certificate blew my mind a little bit.

Yeah, I said.

It's going to be hard making it on one check. Have to cut back on a lot of things.

1% of my income wouldn't buy me dairy queen

I'd already put the motorhome up on craigslist for him, and it sold, but that all went to funeral costs.

For 15 years I've worn the same shirt for driving
licence, passport

Why

So they think I'm poor

Why

Because we are poor

I took some flowers out, he said. Those same flowers she nursed all those years.

That's nice.

Yeah I think she would've enjoyed it. But they still don't have the sod down or anything out there.

That's messed up.

Who knows what they're waiting for.

//

So I don't know how it came to be that me and her were playing one on one at a middle school by the headlights of my Accord. We did though, after eleven on a Friday night.

She'd pull up for jumpers and miss, and laugh. Said, Mother of pearl! Said, Fuck!

I posted her up a little, busted some step backs. All moves I'd learned the footwork of on YouTube and practiced by myself with headphones in.

Beat her to five. Said we'd play again, to one, and she could start with the ball. She took a dribble and drilled a seventeen footer into the chain net. Said, And I did that in two-inch boots and a strapless bra.

I laughed. Congratulated her. Talked about how hard that L was going to be to come back from. We walked to the car.

Where do you want to go? I said.

I don't care, she told me.

So we drove up Blue Mountain Road, way up it. An owl swooped down in front of the windshield. I said, Oh shit! She said, Succubus attack! We hit a fork and had to turn. Kept going, all the way out of town. Halfway to Idaho it felt like.

When it came on, I sang along to the one part in Pyramids. The part that starts, Pimping in my Convos.

Turned again, vaguely back toward town. We popped out on a road that I knew, on Mullan. We've been here before, she said. I pulled into Sunset Funeral Home. I drove through the parking lot and down the road that snaked through the graves. I stopped the car, near where the Hearse must've. Where me and the other pallbearers circled around the casket and each gripped up on a handle.

You trying to get into some spooky shit? I said.

She laughed weird. Said, Only if there's something you really need to say.

I looked at her in the passenger seat. I smiled. I put the car in drive and pulled back onto Mullan.

That was a lot of driving we did that night and a lot of talking. When I asked her what her plans were for the summer and found out that her long-distance halfway boyfriend would be in town for a lot of it, I got quiet. She changed the subject, made some joke.

I had to decide that wasn't shit going to happen there. I took her home and then went home myself. Sat in the hot tub and listened to weird R&B.

//

My dad invited Grandpa to dinner. They hadn't talked at the funeral or the reception. My dad kept his distance. In a text that he sent to my grandpa, who doesn't text, that I read to him off

his flip phone, Dad said he would be there but that he wanted to grieve privately, and that people should respect that. So, yeah, first face-to-face in nearly a decade. I wasn't part of the plan initially, but day of both of them asked me, on their own, if I'd come. So I came. So we returned to the Mo Club.

Just before, in the living room, I had to help Grandpa with his suspenders. They'd gone weird and sideways. This is something Grandma used to do. He got a little flustered as I struggled to make sense of what was supposed to attach where, but when I got it he thanked me. He said, Well. And we got in the van. He wanted to drive.

He found a pull-in spot on the street and noted the electronic parking thing that'd replaced the old coin meters. What the hell, he said.

Don't worry about it. After five.

That's right.

When we got in the bar Dad was already sitting at a table in the back, by the Big Buck Hunter machine. He was texting. We sat down across from him. He asked us what we were having. We told him and he went up and ordered for us.

When he got back and sat down, Grandpa said, Haven't been here in a while.

Not us, I said.

Oh that's right, Grandpa said. How've you been?

Oh, you know, my dad said.

You still with the same outfit?

I don't know which outfit it is you think I'm with. Probably not.

Ok it was weird. It had to be that. They churned through some small talk, about an article in the paper on a football recruit. I didn't do much to facilitate. I knew that the silences were as important as anything.

The burgers came, and were good. Tasted familiar.

It all picked up a little when they got to talking about Grandma. Telling stories we all knew. The one where she went to throw an apple at my teenaged dad, at velocity, and he ducked, and my grandpa came strolling into the kitchen and took it in the face. My dad and grandma, seconds after being ready to kill each other, fell down laughing together. My grandpa said, You goddamn Lowrys are ruining my life, and left the kitchen.

They talked about the funeral, about how my one uncle went on too damn long and how she would've hated that. About how they were both proud of me for having talked. About how neither of them would've been able to.

Grandpa said, Sorry, and got up from the table and made for the bathroom.

Can he drive? my dad asked.

Not in the dark, I told him. I'll get us home.

Damn he got old.

Yeah.

Grandpa got back from peeing. An older woman with a blanket on came up to our table. She stood by Grandpa. She told him that she noticed him walking by and that she liked older men and that she lived at such-and-such nursing home and was always running away from the guys there.

Well, you better keep running, Grandpa said.

I put my hand up to the side of my face for a shield and looked at my dad. I didn't laugh but my eyebrows probably went way up. Grandpa and the lady went back and forth a little bit, and he wasn't rude to her. When she left I started laughing and my dad leaned back and smirked at him. Well I hope you jerks enjoyed that, Grandpa said.

Dad paid for the food and we made plans that we'd do this again. Handshakes and Dad got into his company car and Grandpa handed me the keys to the van.

We got in. I figured out where to turn the headlights on. I backed out of the space and we rolled toward home.

I guess that went ok, I said.

Yeah ok, he said.

It got a little better towards the end.

You will tell no one, he said.

Who would I tell?

Just drive, will you?

//

In the morning, he made me pancakes and told me that he'd be up in Kalispell looking at places with my aunt and my cousin. I don't know if it'll work out, he said, but I know I don't want to stay in Missoula. We've been here so long and I just can't do it anymore.

Ok, I think that makes sense, I said.

I want to be close to them up there. I want to stay close with you, too. It just isn't working.

It'll be good, I said.

I didn't know if it would be good. I tried not to worry about it. I thanked him for breakfast. I went to my room and put on my shoes and tucked the legs of my jeans behind the tongues. Grandpa nodded at me as I passed through the door and I told him I'd see him later.

I got in the car and rolled out of the cul-de-sac with the front two windows partway down to let some air in, feeling, for a minute, like I might could start living my own life.

Funeral Potatoes

Anna Plaster was found dead in her bathroom. She was eighty-one, so nothing to lose your mind over. Here's a photo of her best friends:



Also, my grandparents. Them two, much older than pictured, pulled up to Anna's house on a Saturday. I was there with them. Anna's CRV was in the carport. Most Saturdays, like almost every one until that one for fifty years, Anna and my grandma would go to lunch. The last few years they'd go in that CRV, and my grandma would complain about the pissy smell of it and Anna's slow driving and her shortlist of acceptable restaurants. Anna would drive and my grandma would bitch at her and they'd wind up at Country Harvest or Perkins or China Garden. Anna's favorite: China Garden.

We went in through the kitchen. Grandpa led me over to a side room that had a wall-to-wall four-foot pile of randomness—Frosted Flake boxes and googly-eyed dolls and loose stretches of colorful fabric. Not even room for a footpath, just a tall wave of shit. He shook his head and we got to work. Grandpa sat at the table and went through all the kitchen envelopes.

Grandma kind of floated around, halfway going through things. I went room by room, jamming trash into bags and stuff into boxes. Put the bags in the back alley and the boxes in the bed of Grandpa's truck. The bedroom was thick with books—mostly Reader's Digest compilations and LDS material. As instructed, I thumbed through every one of them to make sure there wasn't any cash hidden between the pages. Got sprayed in the face with dust each time. All I found was some bookmarks. Grandma followed me into the bathroom, where Anna was found dead on the floor with the sink running. I opened her washing machine and it was loaded with badly soiled clothes. Grandma said: What would be really sad would be to lay here for three days rotting in your own shit. That would be terrible.

Yeah, I said and started throwing mildewed wash cloths into a trash bag and set aside the unopened cases of Quilted Northern to be put in the truck and taken home.

Grandma sat down on the couch, looked around slow and said: Last time we went out to lunch she told me she'd live to be a hundred and I said dream on. But I do feel bad about it now. Now where will I go on Saturdays?

//

On funeral day, after sitting through the ceremony in the church, after driving out to the cemetery and helping a bunch of old dudes haul the casket to the drop zone, after driving back to the church for postgame lunch, I saw probably the least expected basketball hoop I've ever. It just hung there, over the carpeted floor:



I dished up, took a little of all three varieties of funeral potatoes so as not to offend any of the church ladies responsible for the spread. Got a slice of ham on a roll and a couple colors of the Jello salad and sat down with my grandparents, wearing my Grandpa's suit and feeling dumb about it. The arms weren't long enough. A few people—church or relatives I don't know—were struggling with a DVD player on a wheelie cart. Grandma said, in a voice she thought was low: I'd be glad to tell those people off with this Mickey Mouse hillbilly shit. One of my uncles, an airline pilot, went over and got it sorted out. He walked back to his table expecting a hero's welcome, like you have to graduate flight school to work a DVD player. So the slideshow of Anna pictures played over some sad/uplifting music. I was in some of the flicks as a young kid. I don't remember interacting with her a whole lot. She was around, though. Usually sunk into a couch and not saying much. I know she liked me because I don't fuck with alcohol. She was way into that. Said she was proud of me that I respected myself enough to make good choices. I was like, Thanks.

I could see Grandma eyeballing Anna's brother and his wife. Being family—by blood rather than decades of riding for each other—they got into town after the news broke and started

running shit. Their plan was to flatten the house and sell the lot. Grandma didn't like that: That's where she lived. She cared about all of this.

Grandma, it's just stuff, it's not her, I said.

Well yes I know that, she told me. But all the same it's not right.

//

You know where I almost peed? Grandma said, rocking back in her recliner. Down at the mortuary in the cigarette butt thing.

I laughed, said: Yeah, weird day.

When we die we're dead get over it, Grandma said. There's no going to the spirit world and become whole again. She looked across the room, over at the far end of the couch. Said: That will always be Anna's spot, won't it? Now I know her clothes were all full of shit.

Jesus, Judy, Grandpa said from the kitchen.

What? That's why the water was left running. She shit herself to death.

Well wait and see what the autopsy shows, Grandpa said.

Autopsy? There's not gon' be one. You'd think they'd want to know if it was something could be passed down. But they're cheap let's face it that's why they're rich.

Evidently, Grandpa said.

You know I always was glad when somebody died, because Sherri would bring that Texas sheet cake. They're like no brownie you ever had.

What happened to the sheet cake? I asked.

Well Sherri died, too. Everyone is dying, Lou, it's just you and me left. We've got to be next.

I'm ready! he said. Be a hell of a lot less work.

If I die before next Christmas people are going to think I'm crazy for how I packed those decorations away.

If I die before next Thursday I won't have to haul out to Victor for another load of wood.

If they tell me I have cancer I'll say bring on the marijuana and smoke til I die. I think it'd be great. I'd sit and smoke and eat my Ho Hos in my marijuana daze.

I think you should do that even if you don't get cancer, I said.

//



is how Anna's house looked when I pulled up to shovel the walk. Wouldn't have to bother with the driveway. The CRV sold and there wouldn't be anybody coming through. I pulled on these neon gloves that I'd got at Wal-Mart in the work section and grabbed the fiberglass shovel out of my backseat. Not a wide lot so there wasn't a ton of sidewalk to deal with. You'd think her neighbors on either side could each tack a half of hers onto their own and call it good, if they knew she was even dead. I got to shoveling and wondered if this was something she'd been doing on her own. Didn't seem like she would've been able. Her back was jacked up and she

walked all hunched over. Grandma would always complain about this when they ate out at places where you had to carry your own tray. She'd say how she couldn't believe Anna's food didn't wind up dumped on the floor. A lot of what was on the sidewalk had frozen hard and wasn't coming up as I pushed along. I got to attacking it with the shovel blade, slamming against the edge of the iced over parts. I could feel the impact through the gloves, in my palms. I could've trusted the neighbors not to slip, just left it and it'd all melt away. But the work of it felt good. Satisfying when I'd break through and the ice would bust off in sheets.

//

I walked out to the kitchen with designs of filling up my water bottle. Heard Grandpa go, Oh! Saw Grandma halfway out the backdoor, trying to turn away from me to hide the cigarette she was working on. I kept my head down, filled the bottle, got out of there.

Course I knew she was back smoking. Didn't care. The world had been trying to kill her for decades. If snagging one of Grandpa's Marlboros and thinking she was real smooth in her secret smoking of it felt good to her in any kind of way, then, yeah. But she didn't want me to know. So I let her think that I didn't.

When I came back out to the living room Grandma was in her chair and adjusting the brace she'd had to wear since her last hand surgery. Well I don't know that looks like shit, she said, twisting her arm so she could inspect the Velcro. The sad thing is I'm so used to pain and surgeries it just rolls right off me. Six more weeks with this on. And if I quit wearing it I doubt that quacky hand guy would even notice, with his belt up around his belly. Leo could you believe how he wears his pants?

He has a certain shape to him.

He must be shit all stupid. Don't have to take the brace off to see these fingers are still crooked. Maybe I should quit bitching about it. Should I?

None of us know what you go through, Grandpa said.

Who?

You.

I don't go through anything I'm a lazy piece of ugly shit.

//

On a Saturday, we all three went to the China Garden. Fish tank:



They sat us at a table more meant for two with a third chair pulled up on the side. When the waiter came to ask for drink orders and how we were doing Grandma said: Crowded.

Grandpa did an uncomfortable laugh, said: It's a small table. The waiter offered to move us but they said no because we were already here.

We didn't have to crack a menu. Grandma talked about how much Anna liked the wonton soup. When time came Grandpa ordered for us, family style, two Cs between the three of us. We knew I'd be doing the bulk of the eating, and that there'd be too much. It's over-big portions at the China Garden, and my grandparents weren't up to much eating those days past splitting a two pack of Ho Hos or some plain tortilla chips poured into a plastic bowl of pink or blue.

Wonton soup came, then the egg rolls, then the sweet-and-sour pork and the almond chicken. They both made it through the soup fine but were just kind of picking at the egg roll they'd split. Grandma turned her head toward Grandpa, said: You look like death warmed over. You're too thin.

Used to be I was too fat, he said, and pulled some egg roll cabbage out of his mustache.

Eat. Or are you trying to get your girlish figure back?

I can't get anything back.

Well you've got no butt, so fill it up.

Food's good anyway, I said.

It is that, Grandma said. I guess that's why we came here. Do I look ok? This hair is like a wet dish rag.

We told her she looked good but she wasn't trying to hear it.

Grandma said: I look in the mirror and am good looking. I look in pictures and I look like shit, like a dead dog. And then take off my bra and my boobs hang past my belly button.

Judy.

The only reason I'd want to get breast cancer is so both of my boobs could get cut off. Could you pass me that? I wish they'd put the noodles on top instead of bottom. They get soggy on the bottom. Next time I'll ask for them on top. But then I might get some spit in there, too.

Like that idiot brother of yours asks for the cheese under the pizza sauce. I'll bet he's eaten all sorts of things. That rude man.

Don't be badmouthing my family.

Well, it's alright.

Every Saturday I used to go out. Imagine? Now when's the last time I left the house other than for a doctor's appointment or to get my teeth adjusted? Oh how Anna used to look forward to it. And I'd cancel on her because she drove slow and had the walk of a hunchback. That's a regret I have.

Doesn't matter, I said. You were good friends for a long time.

It was a long time, she said and forked at an egg roll.

//

Grandpa wasn't in the house and his truck was in the driveway. That meant he'd be in the garage or outside working on something, and time's like that I'd go out and see if I could help. I found him in the back field, crouched down over a spot of dirt he'd cleared the snow off of. He had a grip of white cloth in his hand and I asked him what he was doing.

Anna's temple clothes, he said.

Oh. That she had on?

Always had them on, he said. He laid them down in the dirt, piled up some newspaper and sticks around. Took a lighter to it. It didn't catch right away but eventually got to burning.

Got to be a little pile of ash. He put his fingers through the snow and pushed off to stand upright.

Said: I don't know if this is how the church would want it but I think we've done right by her.

Yeah.

We came back inside through the garage and Grandma asked what we'd been doing out there.

Like you asked, Grandpa said.

//

Making dinner, Grandma dumped a cooked pot of carrots and broccoli down the sink because her post-surgery wrist was too weak to carry it. Grandpa got out of his chair and rushed over in a panic. I would've helped if they'd have let me but they wouldn't let me. My grandparents, they were still alive.

Me and Ethnic Comrade vs. The Ivory Surge

1

The Sunrise Saloon: a place where I stand and think, if the race war pops off it's me and my half-Mexican friend against these seven hundred cowboys.

2

We've got on Jordans.

Different colors, same style, bought same day on deep discount in the dumb mall.

3

Does Michael Jordan make a cowboy boot? Hat? Flannel shirt?

Being honest, I'd wear a fucking lederhosen had a Jumpman on it.

4

People are dancing. That's why they're here.

Why are we here? That's what we don't know.

They do a lot of goddamn twirling around.

Ponytail man picks shorty up like they're figure skating and she does some shit with her legs.

Ethnic comrade says, "Hey, get a less weird hobby!"

5

We know people here, is I guess why we're here. Because they were. But when we walked in and edged around all the miscellaneous cowboys and saw the makeup of our squad—saw the dudes wasn't mentioned in the text—we almost bounced. Like talked about it. Like should we? Probably should.

But didn't. Walked up said hey.

6

Little homie has on a vest, though. Seem like some shit a dude would recommend in a book he wrote about how to get females to talk to you in places like this. Like put on a vest and she'll ask about it and you'll say some shit and if she touches her hair at any point during this interaction that means you're definitely in there, buddy.

7

Rest my elbow on the table and it's sore. Because fell and busted my ass in a parking lot.

Because one time people thought to settle in a region where the ground gets ice on it and a hundred fifty years later I decided I'd up and join them.

Suggestions

Man on youtube said to clench your asshole while walking on ice because it raises your pelvic floor and that's nice for balance.

Other man on youtube said to walk like a penguin.

9

Yo, the band: I don't give a fuck what Jenny's phone number is.

10

Conversation about places we've been worse than Sunrise Saloon.

Mormon funeral: better, we decide, because free food. Because Jell-o salad in four distinct colors.

Supervised drug test bathroom: better too, because quiet enough to hear yourself piss.

At 10:24

Ethnic comrade says if nothing changes by 10:35 we bounce.

You're trying to stay that long? Is what I ask him.

12

Outside on the curb we walk away like penguins. The Js, though, still look fresh.

Cold Spaghetti Sandwich

One time you wrote in a birthday card you were sorry you weren't around more. One time.

What Earl Sweatshirt said: *I'd like to send a shout to the fathers that didn't raise us*

A thing you did teach me was the cold spaghetti sandwich, and I thought that was great. A cold spaghetti sandwich always looks insane. Always with that rogue noodle, just hanging off the bread.

You did not teach me how to shave, or do up a tie, or jumpstart a car. These things I learned from YouTube.

Do the YouTube how-to makers know how important they are? Do they know that if it weren't for them and the single mothers this country wouldn't go anymore?

Shit, do the single mothers know how important they are? They must. Otherwise, how?

What Jermaine Cole said: *How you gon' look in your son's face and turn your back? Then go start another family, dawg, what type of shit is that?*

I call them brother and sister even though I don't know them and they look nothing like me.

Their mom is white like you are, of course. Being brothers or sisters with somebody is about shared experience. What kind of an asshole goes to their decade-younger half siblings on some, *Hey what's it like to not have Dad bounce on you though?*

Was it a mistake for me to drive across the country and enroll at the university that's in the town you moved back to when I was four? Yes probably, is the answer to that question.

Are you deluded enough to think that proximity to you wasn't on the con side of that decision making process?

If you're wondering, a hint: I really hate paying rent and I did not move in with you. Didn't even consider it.

Do you think this can be salvaged? Do you think what you did can be undone?

Here's what I think: Nah.

School's going alright. I figure I'll make it through. You know, get at that degree I'm seeking.

Campus has probably changed a lot since you were here. Time does that. It makes shit different.

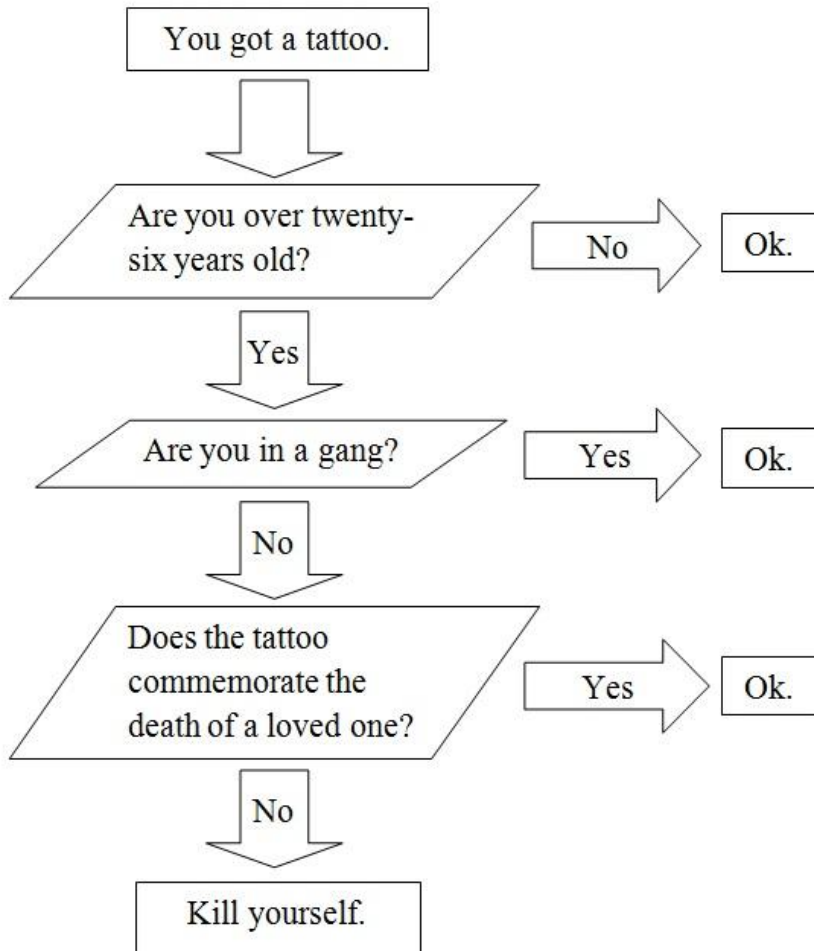
Compare: the rush you felt when you dropped out of college // the rush you felt when you skated on your little family.

I think we all secretly love to bail on plans. Easier to breathe afterward, ain't it?

A stupid thing I did recently was agree to go to a game with you. I had better shit to do, and it took eight hours because of all the fucking tailgating. It was cold and it rained. Still though, you wore a pair of shorts to show off your new tattoo.

So you weren't really a father to me, and you're never going to make as much in your job as you think you deserve, and you're already too old to care about most of the shit you care about. But I guess now you'll always have the football team's current logo inked on your upper calf. I guess can't no one take that from you.

I made a flowchart:



Bruh

So I haven't really felt like me since you moved to Seattle. The sound of my own name still hits my ear wrong if it's not followed by *and Eric*. And it's weird that once you left, I did too. Weird that I moved to our dumb dad's hometown. Weird to be doing shit, like in society, like meeting people. Even weirder is how that's actually going kind of alright, but the people I've met up here, not one of them know me. They can't, because they don't know you.

Some of the shit they don't know:

- The only reason I can get people to laugh sometimes is I spent our whole lives making fun of you.
- bachelor rules [bach-uh-ler rools] – noun – 1. standard dinnertime procedure for two brothers, imposed when their mom is working late and her boyfriend instructs them to microwave some shit up and eat it wherever:
Bachelor rules are in effect, dudeness; I'll be up in my room.
- The glow of a scorpion when you've waited til all-the-way dark and swept a blacklight over the backyard rocks.
- For twenty-three years you've been the only person on Earth I actually know how to talk to.

Never really told you how fucked up I was that summer you left. I was acting like some traumatic shit had gone down, when all that happened was you got a good job out of state. Like I'd start walking toward your room, make a couple steps, and have to catch myself—*hey, dumbass, he gone*. Do you know how much goddamn depressed Football Manager I was playing? I was playing so much Football Manager that actual managers of football, making bankable European currency, were probably managing less football than I was pretending to on

the computer. Did get Aldershot Town FC all the way up to the Premier League, which is insane, but whatever. I came out of it. Sometimes these days I don't hear from you for a while, and it kind of freaks me out. I know, though, that you're just busy up there. You have a little Mom in you. That way you both sometimes communicate with people like you're robots. The distance makes it worse. But that's alright and I'm not complaining.

One thing though: you got to stop falling in love with these girls and being such a rookie about it. You got to stop buying them expensive shit. You're making good money up there and I'm proud of you for that. I think it's tremendous. Doesn't mean, though, that every time you kind of like a girl you have to cop a pair of Seahawks playoff tickets. Here's what no one tells you: rich dudes get rich by being cheap stingy fucks. Pad that checking account. Send Dad a screenshot of your Wells Fargo and tell him to eat shit.

When I was cleaning out Mom's hoarder room for the last garage sale I found an old picture and pulled it out the chaos. Still got it. Sometimes I even look at it. This shit is pretty fucking cute. Like if I showed it to a girl she'd probably run into traffic. In it is us, on the cloth backseat of some sedan that I've forgotten. I'm smiling between my big ears, cocking my big head. Looking way more Asian than I do as an adult. Behind me is a crumpled Burger King kids meal bag. Next to me is you. You've got a Jurassic Park pillow tucked under your arm and your fist wrapped around the legs of a red Power Ranger. Your right eye is shut tight and your mouth is scrunched up. This look like, *Yeah motherfucker I'm three but I got a gang of plastic swords back at the crib. What?*

You know my stance on pictures. This one, though. This one's who we are.

Gold Honda Odyssey

I answered the home phone, because it was still the days of those, that and it rang. It was my mom's boyfriend, this idiot named Jeff, and he said, Hello, Walgreens?

I said, No. Where are you calling from?

What's that store, that drug store on Sixteenth Street?

Walgreens?

That's where this phone is. In the parking lot.

What?

Big guy, is that you?

Yeah it's me. What do you want?

Oh listen dudeness, could you do me a solid and come pick me up? I'm at that drug store by the house. What's it called?

I was eighteen and freshly licensed because I didn't really take driver's ed and failed the test my first try. Mom was very much asleep, so I pulled her keys from her purse and got in her red Explorer and drove five minutes to the Walgreens on Sixteenth Street.

There was Jeff, on the bench by the payphone and watching the automatic sliding doors do their thing. I said his name to him and he looked at me. Said, Oh, dudeness, you're here.

We got in my mom's sport utility vehicle and Jeff asked if his van was at the house when I left. That van was a gold Honda Odyssey that his parents had bought to cart his fat brother around when he was ill, because it was easier for him to load into the back seat. That brother died so Jeff got the van. But anyway that van wasn't at the house when I left and was in fact nowhere to be found.

Let's go find my van, he said.

You don't know where it is.

I have a few ideas.

Let's look tomorrow, I said. He couldn't really argue with that, and had been awake for many hours in a row. So we went home.

The sun rose purple and orange over Phoenix. I found Jeff in the kitchen, studying his own belly by windowlight. He said to me, Hey there, big guy.

Let's go.

We got in the Explorer and went a-looking. He wasn't sure where the van could be, or how he wound up so confused after leaving his buddy's house the other night. Of course I was annoyed. How could you not be annoyed by an almost-old man smoking a cigarette in the passenger seat and telling you questionable facts about the boring classic rock on the radio and who also is sleeping with your mother? After Jeff ran out of ideas I began doing random maneuvers behind the wheel, taking unsignaled rights and lefts down residential drives that couldn't have had any idea we were coming. The houses we passed had square front yards of dead grass or rocks, sometimes rocks painted white so as to look unnatural. We ventured deep into the grid and got lost in there. I said, We've been driving for an hour and we aren't any closer.

No one knows how but twelve minutes after that we came upon the van. Just sitting on some street neither of us had ever seen, golden and still.

Clown Show

Years after leaving the game behind, your single mother is going to start online dating. Be cool about it. Help her set up her profile. Act like you believe she's still in her forties when she lies about her age. If she wants to date white dudes, let her date white dudes.

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This will be a grind, bruh. Know that. Don't forget that every man she's ever been associated with was a scrub of varying degree. This won't be as easy as the TV spots would have you believe. The white-haired love scientist will not be available to rattle off compatibility stats when she's in the kitchen, drunk and wondering why she even fucking bothered.

/

This part is important: You will be there to listen to her talk herself through this shit. Why you? Because who else. Just remember that you want her to be happy. Sounds easy, feels corny, but it's true. That's all this is.

/

Granted, it's your default to be untrusting of men. You know that for the most part we're bird-chested gym class students, squeaking across a parquet floor and praying we don't get pegged by a red rubber ball. That doesn't mean there isn't somebody out there who could be good for her, net-net. Maybe it's shitty odds, but it's your job to clear out and let her take that chance. You're grown. It's time for you to get the fuck up out of her house. You don't want her to be alone in there when you do.

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At first she'll be hesitant. Will say, This guy sent me a message but I'm not going to read it. Ask her why. She'll tell you that if she reads it then he'll know that she read it. Say, Isn't that the point, though?

/

Eventually she'll get brave and start clicking on things. She'll comb through the pages of taglines and profile pictures and, from your room, you will hear her say things like, Oh my god! Things like, Shit!

Figure out that the added volume means she wants company. Enter the kitchen all nonchalant, like you're getting a snack. She'll be at the table, pointing at the screen with one hand and holding a glass of wine in the other. Go over and behold the clown show, the men of the e-dating circuit.

The only thing that matters here is that you agree with her. You might feel tempted to stick up for some of these fools. You might feel tempted to ask her if her requirement that a guy still be taller than her while she's wearing four-inch heels is fair. Don't, though. You're on her team, dummy. If she believes that she belongs in a different bracket, it's because she does.

/

Each month that goes by without her having found someone is another month she has to pay the membership fee. She'll end up going on some dates. Probably they won't be anything special. Probably the guys will all be boring. If it's a first date, make sure you're around when she gets home. To hear about how she told dude to his face that she didn't think they were a match. To remind her that it could've been worse.

/

She might get catfished and it might take her a long time to figure that out. He might claim to be temporarily out of the country on an oil job. Might feed her all kind of sweet bullshit over email about what their lives will be like once he gets back to the states. Might send her a love poem with his name on it that you secretly Google to see the website he pulled it from. Definitely he'll tell her that he's coming home soon. Soon never comes. Your mom isn't tech-

savvy or date-savvy but she's smart. She'll figure out it's a scam before he's even asked for money.

She'll take it pretty rough. Not in a heartbroken way. Mainly she'll feel stupid for having wasted all that time on the emails. Don't treat it any different than the other guys who will let her down as she moves through this process. Just listen to her. Say, Yeah. Say, I don't know either. Say, That is messed up. You won't know whether any of that helps but after a while she'll be alright.

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It is objectively funny for your mom to be dating a professional bowler that she met on the internet. And even though he takes her bowling on all of their dates, you're not allowed to make any jokes.

When she texts you that they're at the house and asks if you want to join them for dinner, you've got to just drive home. You've got to roll past his white Mercedes hatchback and pull into the garage.

When you see them standing in the kitchen—her in a top that makes you uncomfortable, him pretending to pay attention to the dog instead of you—you've got to shake his hand. Give it a little gas but don't try too hard.

Dinner will be weird. A lot of talk about life on the PBA tour. You'll barely be there. She'll ask the questions and he'll answer. Try not to appear visibly disturbed when you see her leaning up on him some, rubbing his arm.

When you wake up the next morning and his white Mercedes hatchback is still outside, don't panic.

A few days will go by and she won't hear back from him. When she tries to reach him she'll get texts back that he's busy. One night you'll hear her on the phone with your aunt, saying that he slept over but that nothing happened. It's ok for you to feel relieved about that.

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Answer your phone when the neighbor lady calls. Her car will be parked along the sidewalk out front. Your mom will be in the back seat. The neighbor lady will look at you through the tinted passenger window and mouth, Sorry. When you open the door, crane your head in and thank them for driving the hundred yard gap. Tell them to have a nice day. Help your mom out of the car. It will still be light outside and she'll be pretty wobbly. Walk with her to the front door. She'll tell you she's fine and she'll head for her bedroom.

Know where she keeps the Ambien. Get to the pill bottle before she does and pocket it without her noticing. Tell her goodnight and to yell at you if she needs anything. Go to your room.

When she busts in and asks where her sleeping pills are, tell her that you haven't seen them. When she accuses you of taking them, and starts going through your shit, and repeatedly calls you an asshole, just tell her to go to bed.

The next morning, when you see her in the kitchen and she tries to apologize, act like you don't know what for.

/

She will try to get over the bowler and get back on her grind. She will look for new matches. She will find the least threatening of all, this unbelievable nerd. Don't diarrhea shit on him. Don't talk about how if you saw him in real life you'd want to stuff him in a locker. You can allow yourself a few good-natured jabs, but that's just to make her laugh.

His handle is Desertdweller61 and in his picture he's on a camel in front of the Pyramids wearing a plaid blazer and leopard-print Vans and lime green Harry Potter glasses. You will find his whole deal oblivious and attention seeking, but you won't say that. You will encourage her to reach out. Anything to push the bowler further out of focus. You'll figure that a couple dates with Desertdweller61 could lead to some funny stories of him being an awkward mess. He'll do his clown act and your mom will tell him that they're not a match.

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Before you know it, you're going to be shaking Desertdweller61's hand and he's going to tell you that his name is Kirby.

/

He will become a fixture on the weekends and you will be amazed at how interesting he thinks he is. No matter what he's talking about, he'll figure out a way to reference his time as a grad student at Harvard and namedrop his professors like he expects you to know who they are. You will play a game in your private mind as he tells his fifteen-minute stories, where you retell them in as few words as possible. You'll come up with things like: I went to Korea once, so I bought this grill. Or: Iowa State is sometimes pretty good at basketball.

Times like these you'll look over at your mom and she'll be sitting there nodding along and eating up every boring word. You won't understand. You don't have to.

/

The whole him and you thing will be awkward. It has to be. You will catch your mom trying to set booby traps that are designed to force the two of you to bond. Just go along with it. Don't ever say anything sideways to him. You and him will both know that you'll never be friends, but also that that doesn't matter. Just figure out how to act when he's around and trust that he'll do the same.

As annoying as you'll find every aspect of his personality, you will have to acknowledge that your mom likes him and that he's good to her. All he has to be is somebody she can count on and hang out with once you're finally gone. Your whole job is to understand how important that is. To get out of the way.

/

When it's a year later and they're still together, decide in an official capacity that this shit is for real. Prepare accordingly. Figure out how to do your own laundry, to cook food not in a microwave.

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So what's left? You tell her that you're happy for her. You start looking at places closer to campus and feel out potential roommates. Talk to her about all of it and make sure she's with you. This should feel like something that everyone wants to happen, because it is. She'll ask you if you're ready and say that it's fine if you need to stay a little longer. Tell her, It just feels like a good time right now, you know? She will.

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When you've got all your crap into your new place, rearrange it til you like how it feels. Once you're satisfied with the layout, pull your phone out and give her a call.

When she asks how it's going, you'll know what to say.

Mom Nakazawa

When I talked to you on the phone the other day, you said it was a miracle that we've turned out alright, me and Eric. You said you were lucky that your laissez faire parenting style hadn't led to anything bad.

I thought it was weird that you said that, because laissez faire is some very fancy shit to say. Also French, and you're not so good at languages. How many people could grow up in the actual barrio, west of the Westside, Tolleson, AZ, and still not know that a double L in a Spanish word sounds like a Y? It might just be you, Mom. In all the world.

But then, how many people could've gotten out of there? You, the daughter of WWII internees, in that little house on Washington Street, with next-door Angie and her crime-scene living room and her twenty eight eternally-breeding pit bulls out back barking through the chicken wire. You, sweating through swamp-cooled summers and putting in shifts at the Tastee Freez. You, paying your own way through ASU and getting a good enough job to keep two kids fed and clothed and flush with video games all the way through, with no help beyond some bullshit child support checks that came light if they came at all.

One day I'm going to ask you how you did all of that.

Things I won't ask you:

- Why our dad? Like, of everybody floating around in the gene pool. Him?
- Why did you link back up with your fuckup of a college boyfriend and let him live in our house for ten years?

Like I said, I'm not asking. You did what you thought you had to do. And it's not like I'm going to fault you for being bad at finding a good dude. These two and a half decades I don't

know if I've even seen one. Never been around one long enough to know for sure, anyway. We men are trash people. We are weenie boys. What's the point of us?

I also won't ask you what it was like to lose both parents and two siblings, because I've only really got one of each, and if something happened to either of you

There are some things I won't have to ask because I know. I know that you've got a selection of Grandma's ashes in a little urn shaped like a heart. I know that one afternoon I was in the back shocking algae out the pool, looked in, and through two windows saw you at the kitchen table, holding that thing up to your ear and shaking it maraca style.

I don't want to know what you heard.

/

Sometimes I get too caught up with the shaky lineup of adult males that've run through my life to remember that you made up for all of them. I've got to stop doing that. You took up all the slack in your little hands and didn't let any of us get tangled in it.

So laissez faire or not, that shit worked. I don't even think it's weird that you never said I love you and we've only ever hugged in airports. You know who said I love you? My dumb fucking dad. He said it from 1181 miles away and it didn't mean shit.

You want to know a time I knew you loved me? When you got off the phone with my high school attendance dean and slammed the receiver into the cradle and called her a bitch even though you don't ever badmouth anybody.

It's ok that a lot of the time you talk like a business email. I didn't mind when I got accepted into the grad program at Oklahoma State how you took a beat and said,

Congratulations, I guess. I knew that you weren't slighting the accomplishment. I knew that the *I guess* in that meant you didn't want me so far away, in a weird land amongst the tornadoes.

When we talk on the phone, since that's a thing we have to do now, I know you miss me even though you don't say it. I also know that you're ok down there even though I don't ask. I wouldn't have left otherwise. I'm glad you found that dude on the internet. And yeah, I think he's annoying, and awful to talk to, and in general just an abject cornball. That doesn't keep me from seeing what he means to you. How he's better to you than any man's ever been. I understand how important it is that you to have somebody to watch Netflix with.

Ok? I get it. All of it. I do.

Diarrhea Spray

He never felt weirder than when he checked into Phoenix Children's Hospital at seventeen. Weird that on Monday he wouldn't be home from school playing Halo, he'd be laid up in a robot bed wearing a thin cotton dress. Weird that his grandma had died a week before and it was pretty obvious that his mom had waited for that to happen before she checked him in. Weirdest that the first thing they did to him once he got in the building was take him to a little room and have a lady doctor feel up on his balls. She made some reference, before contact, that she knew what an uncomfortable thing this was. He thought, yeah fool, I know that you know that. She was looking for testicular torsion, she said. He didn't know what that was. But when she got done yanking around down there, she said his balls were A-ok.

What wasn't ok, the main reason he had ninety-one absences on his record and got kicked out of school, was his inability to eat food and then shit that food out and have that shit come in any form other than Super Soaker diarrhea spray.

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He'd be eating only through a tube that got snaked up his nose and would drip white chalky formula direct to his gut. The formula sat in a clear bag on a hook next to the plastic machine that he could hear pumping the stuff into him. Wasn't bad for white noise when he was trying to sleep. Did a little to drown out the other sounds of the hospital, the ones that weren't as close to him. The over-enthusiasm of a staff member, or worse, a kid crying out of what he could tell was real pain.

The nurse had installed the nose tube. Didn't hurt going in but was really uncomfortable, like he had to sneeze the whole time. He got used to it, though, and even when the pump wasn't running the tube would stay in, disconnected end of it tucked behind his ear and flopping around.

When he was hooked up to the machine he'd have to drag it with him to the bathroom. Every time he pissed he was instructed to do it into a marked container, make a note of how much, and dump that in for flushing. Then he'd drag the pump back to his bed and take down the time and how much of a piss it was and lay down. Sometimes, though, maybe once a day, he'd get into the bathroom and say Fuck it and go straight into the toilet like a normal human. Some secret peeing. That way he felt like maybe they didn't know about every move he made in there.

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His mom would stop by after work most days and sometimes bring his brother. Them two had always been close as anything, but they couldn't talk in there. He didn't like being seen that way and could tell his brother didn't like it either. As the week went on it started just being his mom that came, and he was good with that. She would harass the doctors whenever she caught a sniff of them. He always got a little annoyed with how she did this, how she couldn't just sit back and let them do their jobs. Well has that been working? she'd ask him. I have to be your patient advocate. You have to get better.

When there weren't any medical professionals around she'd sit in the chair by his bed and try to make normal talk. She'd have on the warrior face. She'd crack jokes and ask if he wanted her to bring in anything from home. He did feel bad, how she had to go straight from burying her mom to putting her oldest son in the hospital. He didn't say anything about that. Just wondered when he was getting out of there. She asked him about the homebound program they'd started him on and if he'd been able to get any schoolwork done in there. Yeah, yeah, yeah, he said.

//

His roommates: the first, a real little kid that would cry all night while his sister sat on his bed and rubbed his back and watched South Park on his TV. That little kid hurt a lot. From the other side of the room he could tell it was real for how soft the kid's crying was. There was no theater in it. The kid's parents didn't speak English. One of the nurses would have to translate between them and the doctor. Nobody ever seemed satisfied or confident after these exchanges. The kid got better, he guessed, or at least got out of there, which was all he was trying to do himself.

He had an empty bed next to him a couple nights before the other roommate showed up, on a helicopter from Yuma. Like fourteen or something and his appendix exploded. It was a close one, he heard the kid's dad say. The kid, though, didn't seem too bothered. Just slammed many tubes of Gogurt and watched the shit out of some Spongebob.

//

One night he had his laptop out and was reading for an online class he'd registered for, history or something. This baldheaded nurse came in to check on him. What are you doing? You said homework? That's boring. The nurse then tried to show him a website that streamed free movies. He typed in what the nurse thought the site was called and nothing came up. Huh, I'll try and figure that out for you, the nurse said, and left.

//

A woman came to his room in the middle of a day. Not a doctor or nurse, but somehow hospital affiliated. Dressed kind of fancy, like for business. She was asking him if he'd heard about the Teen Room on the third floor. He had. She asked if he'd been. He hadn't. Why not? He didn't know. He was alright in there, in his room. He didn't need anybody else looking at him,

nobody beyond all the people already coming up in there and asking him questions and reading his chart and monitoring how much he peed every day.

She said ok, but that he should really check it out some time. That it was really a cool place.

//

The bald movie pirate nurse came through again, asked him if he'd checked out any movies, apparently forgetting that the site he suggested didn't exist. He told the nurse that he hadn't, but that he would. The nurse, who must've gone through nursing school to chase moments like this one, pulled up a chair by his bed. The nurse told him about when he was in high school. He'd played sports, blew off his classes, talked to girls, all that cool high school-esque shit. I was the man, he said. The nurse looked at him sitting up in the bed, with the tube tucked behind his ear. He knew that the nurse was trying to connect with him, trying to get some special shit cooking between them, but he wasn't sure how anything the nurse was talking about was supposed to get that done. What do you say to that, when you're seventeen and in a hospital bed and getting fed formula by a machine? Congratulations? Good shit, my dude? How many yards did you rush for over your career? I'm sure your high school girlfriend was very pretty? Unplug me real quick and I'll do a couple laps around the parking lot? So he just sat there and looked at the nurse.

//

Another nurse came in his room, late night, not one of the usuals. The room was dark. She set a paper cup on his bedside table and said, The doctor thinks these would help you. My stomach? No, just help you feel better and be happier. Do I have to take them? No, but the doctor

thinks you should. I'm alright. You're sure? Yeah, I'm alright. Well if you change your mind let someone know.

//

The lady in the business clothes, the Teen Room ambassador, returned to ask him about the Teen Room. He just really wasn't that interested in going, is what he told her. Yeah, it sounds great, just not for me. She asked him if he had any problems with who she referred to as the Ra-Ra Nurse. No, he said, he's fine. She'd heard that that nurse's style might've bothered him. No, he said, I'm fine. Ok, she said, but people around here are getting concerned about you. It's a good thing to get out of your room if you can. Here's what he thought about that: Fall Out Boy was some soft-ass shit to listen to and foosball was a dumb thing to do with your hands and that if they had any video games in there they'd definitely be rated E for Everyone and probably at least one console generation out of date. Here's what he told the lady: Ok I'll think about it.

//

His dad showed up, fresh off an eighteen hour drive. Probably the biggest shit his dad ever did for him, but also, like, seemed unnecessary.

Hey son, his dad said. He sat down, crossed his legs and leaned back, wearing a baseball cap that said what year the college he dropped out of was established—1893. You feeling any better?

I don't know, maybe.

Can we get the game on here?

Yeah.

So they put Monday Night Football on the fifteen-inch hospital TV—Jaguars Colts—and the MNF theme song came tinny out of the speaker built into his bed remote. A pizza

commercial came on. He could see the steam coming off the cheese. He could hear the pump churning formula.

The Ra-Ra Nurse came by, shook hands with father and son. Later, his dad would ask what kind of wild secret handshake they'd worked out. There was no such secret handshake. His dad had imagined it, because that nurse was a black man and his dad came from Montana and to a dude from Montana any black man is Shaft.

//

His back-problem-having dad slept, tried to sleep, on the real little bedside couch. Maybe he wanted to be close, probably he didn't want to pay for a room. SportsCenter on the TV.

His dad hadn't believed he was really sick, had said so in a phone call. Just thought he didn't like going to school. Which, his dad was right about one of those things. Sometimes he wondered, the sick kid, if maybe it was all in his head. Then he'd sit down in the bathroom and hear the shit liquid blast the toilet water and think, yeah, but that sounds real.

His dad turned as far as the microcouch would allow him, jammed the airplane-esque pillow deeper into his armpit. Said, You up?

Yeah.

You cured?

No.

Kind of sucks in here, doesn't it?

Yeah.

Any word on when you're getting out?

Said maybe a few days.

We can make that.

Yeah.

Earlier that day a woman from a medical supply company brought in the pump he'd be taking home with him, packed up in a black zipper bag. They wouldn't let him check out until he figured out how to insert the nose tube himself.

//

It was dark outside, and quiet. His dad had said he had to go take care of some things and left the hospital. For the first time in a couple days, he was in the room alone.

A nurse came in. An intense lady, weird hair, eyeballs trying too hard. She had with her a plastic tub full of all the tube stuff—guidewire, stethoscope, syringe, tape, lubricant, the tube. She asked if he wanted to give it a try tonight.

He said alright and she explained the process. She said he could sit or stand and that some people liked to stand. So he stood. For a start he had to get out the tube that was already in him. He just pulled on it, pinch over pinch, until there wasn't any pulling left to do and it slid up and out.

She showed him how to measure a length of new tube—from his ear, to his nose, to down past his ribcage. She made a mark. He'd have to push until that mark met his nostril. She had him put some lubricant on the end of the tube—just like K-Y Jelly, she said—and she got a cup of water ready with a straw and put it on the table. She told him to pump some water into the tube with the syringe and he could start when he was ready.

He started really slow. Inched the thing up, afraid it was going to snake up into his brain somehow. She said, Good, good so far. She held the cup of water up to his face and told him to drink while he pushed. He felt like he had to sneeze but also that sneezes were impossible. He kept pushing. His eyes weren't all the way open, just cracked, twitching out. Ok, great, she said

when he got to the mark she'd made. She told him to pump a little more water in to help with the wire. She said to pull on the wire and it should slide right out. It didn't. She said that was odd and she tugged on it a little. He coughed and she apologized. She said, Wow it's really in there. She kept yanking on it. He spat up some snot-blood. She said the wire must've gotten kinked somewhere and that they'd have to pull the tube out and try again. So he pulled the tube out and she handed him some tissues to clean himself up.

She said they could try again tomorrow if he'd rather. He didn't know whether he wanted to do that. She said she'd come back in five minutes and he could decide then. So for five minutes he sat down in one of the visitor chairs and when she came back he said ok and stood back up.

They ran it all back, did it all over, and that time it worked. He pulled the wire out, primed the tube, stuck it in place with a square of tape to his cheek. He put his hands on his knees, breathed hard, and he looked to his left at the window. He couldn't see the sky or anything under it. Only the weak reflection of the room he stood in, superimposed over black glass.

Dumb Butt

The three of them are starting down a trail by the dog's neighborhood in Lolo. For the next month she's set up to get paid thirty bucks a day to feed it, pee it, poop it, walk it. He isn't getting paid shit but he's along. The dog living half an hour from town makes the whole thing double inconvenient, and since he's out here pro bono he's really feeling it. The house is pretty nice but there aren't any good snacks in there and, unbelievably, no hot tub out back.

Goddamn, I'm not gonna make it, he says, already winded.

Yes you are, she tells him. She has on a fanny pack provided by the dog owner with a water bottle and a can of bear spray holstered in its cup holders.

Uphill walking, man. People do this for fun.

You're ok.

The complaining is part of my process. I need you to understand that.

She does understand that. Understands how, when they watch TV he always lets her sprawl out on the couch and put her feet on him while he sits upright on the far end. Also how, every once in a while, when she gets back from the bathroom or the kitchen she will find him trying to take the couch over for himself. In those moments they both know that he'll sit up and slide over before they unpause the show, because the first time it happened and she asked him, Really? Why tonight? He told her that if she was always going to win he had to at least feel like he'd put up a fight, for self respect. In her private mind she probably thought that was some foolishness, but out loud she accepted it.

It's not so bad right? I mean, we can do this, she says.

Yeah I guess so, he tells her, and wipes a whole face of sweat off onto his sleeve.

Tell me what you were like in high school.

Ok, well you know how I dress now? he asks, meaning basketball shorts and bulk-bought solid-color T-shirts.

That's how you dressed then?

Yeah. And you know the stuff I'm into now? he asks, meaning rap music and basketball and smart action movies.

She nods, says, I feel like I've changed so much.

Well yeah I've changed as a person. Like my confidence is way up and I'm better at social things. I just like the same stuff because I was already into timeless shit.

Here's what I liked in high school: Christian rock and ska, men's corduroy pants and T-shirts from the cute side of Hot Topic, eating SpaghettiOs with chop sticks because I thought it was weird and cool.

He has to laugh at the SpaghettiOs.

I was such a nerd. I don't think you would've liked me.

Oh, I wouldn't have even talked to you. I didn't talk to anyone.

Hey, Dumb Butt, she calls to the dog. It comes running from off the trail, back through the tall grass. Everyone hates you. You're a walking turd, she says in her talking-to-a-dog voice.

He laughs at that, too. They do hate the dog. How it'll drop its slobbered-on ball in their laps while they're trying to watch cable. How it jumps in the bed and wedges itself between them, twisting and breathing. How their days get interrupted each time they have to haul back out and give him an anti-seizure pill.

Are you looking at my ass? she asks.

Yeah.

She looks back at him halfway disapproving but does a little shimmy.

What am I supposed to be looking at? The fall foliage?

It's August.

It is August, and hotter than fuck. They'd known each other for a year but only became a thing early that summer. All their friends left town, so they started hanging out every day—Like it was my fulltime job, he'd tell her later. They'd go bowling and pancake eating and would rifle through the discount DVD bins at Walmart. He was having fun. Seemed like she was too. He knew it wasn't normal, how much time they were spending together. He didn't know if she'd be into it. He hoped she would be, thought she might be. But you never know til you do.

Are you ok? he asks.

Yeah, I'm ok.

He keeps looking at her as they walk along.

I just feel like, I wonder if I'm doing the right things. If I'm managing my time right or, I don't know.

You're doing fine, he tells her.

I think I'm going to ask for more money. With both of our schedules, and all the commuting, the gas, it feels like maybe it's not worth it.

That's reasonable. She's rich. What's she gonna say?

I just know if I try to ask over the phone I'll give in.

You don't have her email?

No. I also feel bad, like, that it's just as disruptive for you but we aren't splitting the money. I just really need it right now.

No, you're ok. Just keep getting the gas and we're good. I get to hang out with you in these fancy houses. It's a good deal for me.

There's a four-foot stack of rocks off the side of the trail and she says, Look, somebody made a cairn.

That's dangerous.

What? It's beautiful.

Some kid will walk up to that and try to do Jenga and it's gonna avalanche.

I see beauty and you see a safety hazard.

I care about the kids.

You do. You care, she says.

Last week they were in her boat-interior-esque apartment and about to have sex. She was down to her underwear and she paused kissing, pulled away from him, ripped a fart so loud the neighbors probably heard. They went insane together laughing about it. He looked at her, on the grounded mattress, and he said I love you. It was the first time he said that. Not just to her, at all.

They sit down on a rock. His shirt is all-the-way soaked through with sweat. They take turns on his water bottle til it's empty.

You know you could've stayed at the house. I wouldn't have been upset, she says.

Solidarity, he tells her.

I don't want to drag you up here if you're going to be miserable.

I'm just tired. It's good for me.

The dog rolls around in the dirt.

No rollies! she says, but the dog keeps on.

A dog just doesn't give a fuck, does it? he says.

She laughs, tells him, I'm glad you're out here with me.

They had driven an hour and a half to a lake he'd been to as a kid. When they pulled up it was crowded with families but they found a spot up and away. They laid a towel down and she dominated him at cards—this game she taught him, Egyptian Rat Screw. He took to calling it Egyptian Fuck Rat and lost at it always. Quick dip? she asked. It was still early in the summer and the water was cold. Colder water than he ever would've gotten into on his own. He followed her all the way out to a buoy. Shit, my legs are cramping out, he said. She treaded water and rubbed on his thighs as he gripped on the buoy. Is it helping? she asked. I think so, he said. When it was time to get out she had him grab onto her shoulders and she swam them both in.

They get up from the rock and start working their way back. The dog has found a big stick and trots along with it jutting out either end of his jaw. They're out of water but this bit of the trail has gone shady and it's easier going down than it was coming up. The canister of bear spray gets jostled with each step she takes but stays secure in the pack.

He says, Hey, no bomb on an airplane or whatever, but did the lady say if she ever saw a bear out here?

I don't know if she's seen one, but they've been seen. That's why we're on this trail. After we went over the fence, if we'd gone the other way, that's where they see bears.

Man if there's bears over there, there could be bears over here. If my ass can make it up, so the fuck can a bear's ass make it up.

Oh, are you scared? she says with a put-on speech impediment.

Hell yeah.

So what's our plan then? she asks.

He tells her a story he'd heard from his dad, about a hiker that shoved his fist down the throat of a grizzly to trigger its gag reflex.

That's the contingency? You'd try to punch it inside of its mouth?

Hell yeah, he says. It's fun for him, to say so, but he knows he wouldn't be able to do shit. Just the sight of one, the eyeballs of it, would freeze him right up. Best case he'd buy her and the dog enough time to get clear of it. It wouldn't be nothing heroic. He'd just be standing there. So in this moment, he hopes—that they make it out of the woods without getting their faces ate, that when they get back to the house Spike TV is showing Bar Rescue and not the tattoo parlor show, that they wake up tomorrow and still know how to make each other laugh.

He starts walking a little faster, to keep pace with her. He isn't worried about the bits of gravel getting jammed up in the grooves of his sneakers. He's sure that he'll be able to find a junk drawer, a flathead screwdriver. It'll pop those suckers right out.

Weenie Boys (part 2)

So that was the end of this story—where I ended this story. It was the end, when, on a Sunday night, parked up in the lot across from an employment office, I texted her that I was three minutes away from her house and asked if I could come over and talk to her real quick. She replied instantly. Said, For sure.

Texted when I got there. She told me to come up. I knocked twice and she opened the door. I posted up next to it, in the kitchen. Her dog was all over me. She offered me a glass of water. I said I was ok. She stayed by the sink. So what's up? she said.

Alright, I told her. I wrote a thing and submitted it to workshop today.

She just looked at me.

And the reason I'm telling you, is you're in it.

Ok, she said.

It's supposed to be fiction and I didn't put your name but I think people could figure it out. I thought it would be weird if I didn't tell you.

Now I feel important.

You should, I said. I looked at her. She was waiting, knew that I wasn't done. I put my hand down on the dog to keep it from jumping. I said, I like you, you know? You know that right?

She nodded.

Yeah, well it goes into that, I told her. Her computer started ringing, because of course, right then, her boyfriend was trying to get her on FaceTime. We both pretended we didn't hear it. Her dog jumped up and tried to tongue my face.

She'll love you unconditionally, she said, meaning the dog.

Yeah, I said. Look, I said. I'm not trying to make this weird, or put you on blast, or whatever. It's just this semester has been really crazy for me, and you've been a part of it.

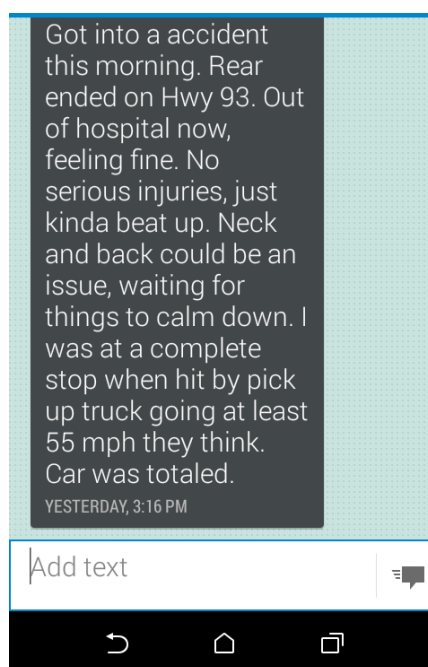
She nodded.

I was just trying to make some real shit.

And that's all. She asked me no questions. We small talked for a couple minutes, until I said, Alright I'm going home. I heard her say, Good talk, as I pivoted toward the door and got through it.

//

I was at the Fort and had just started shooting when I got this text from my dad:



I saw it right away, because I shoot with headphones in and I have to pull my phone out to change songs. Usually I shoot for an hour, and I decided to finish up like normal before getting back to him. He said no serious injuries. Car was totaled, but it was a company car. Didn't feel great about it but I had to get my shots up.

After hitting enough jumpers in a row to be satisfied with the session, I went and picked up my water bottle and my keys and walked back to my car. I popped the trunk and threw the ball in, walked around and got down into the seat. Started it, put the air on, turned the music down to two, and called him.

Hey son, he said.

Hey. You alright?

Yeah I'm fine. Been home from the hospital a few hours. It's just this neck brace they have me wearing. I can't stand it.

Glad you're ok, though.

Yeah, it was the weirdest thing. All I remember is a woman came up and opened my door and I jumped out saying, Where are my sunglasses?

What? I said, and kind of laughed.

I must've been in shock or something, but yeah the only thing on my mind was I had to find my sunglasses. I tried to get into the backseat but of course I couldn't. That all got crunched down.

So you were at a light or what?

Well I had to stop on 93, more sudden than I wanted to but the tires didn't squeal or anything. Then he just hit me, I guess.

Doing 55?

That's what the cops thought.

Man.

Then we're riding in the ambulance, me and the guy, and he's taking a selfie of his head all bandaged up.

Wow.

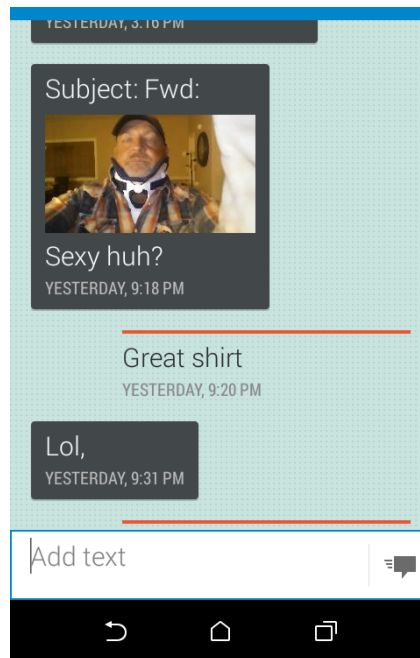
Right?

Hey do you want me to come by?

No, no that's alright. I'm all drugged up still I'll probably sleep.

Ok, well let me know.

He thanked me for calling and we hung up. I got another text from him that night:



//

I pulled into Lolo and took a right at the first light. It was raining pretty good and I needed new wiper blades. I drove all the way up the hill to my Dad's post-second-divorce condo. I had left at 6:30 to take him into town, to St. Pat's for his surgery. They'd be cutting into his throat and moving his voice box aside to get to the vertebrae in his neck.

The door was unlocked and I climbed the stairs into his living room. He was leaned forward in his maroon recliner and holding a folder full of papers. He said hey and I made fun of

the decorative fake books that the woman at the furniture store had talked him into buying. We went down and he locked up and we got in the car.

I backed out of his driveway and twisted the music down to seven—low enough to talk but loud enough I could still hear it a little. I told him that 93 looked a little backed up going back into town.

Well shit, he said.

I don't think it's too bad, but I just noticed on my way out here.

That's the problem. When something happens on this road you're stuck. That's how everyone found out about my accident. They couldn't get into town. Fucked up a lot of peoples' day.

Well it's not like yours was too good either.

You've got a point there, son.

We hit the jam, crept along in single file. He kept looking at the time on his phone. Asked, Did you see how far up this goes?

I don't think it's too much further, I said, and was right. We passed a semi on the shoulder and eased back into normal flow.

Should be in good shape. I thought it was going to be like that all the way in, he said.

Oh, yeah, no.

We had passed the fancy looking gym and were rolling up on Walmart, on civilization. He pointed out the skid marks just ahead of us and told me that was where he got hit. Said, I still get nervous right here. I wonder how long that'll last.

Yeah, crazy, I don't know.

We rolled through town and were mostly quiet. I turned into the hospital and he told me to let him out by the front entrance.

I can park and come in if you want, I said.

No, that's ok. They'll call me back and you'll just be stuck in the waiting room for four hours with your dick in your hand.

You sure? I've got a book.

Yeah, you get out of here and go back to bed. Thanks for the ride, he said as he slung his backpack over one shoulder and shut the car door and made for the automatic sliders.

I drove home in the rain. Came in through the front door and Grandpa was sitting there like always. What are you doing here? he asked me.

I just kind of looked at him.

What, you didn't stay?

He didn't want me to, I said.

You should've.

Yeah, well he told me not to.

Do you always do what he tells you?

I let a breath out. Went down the hall and shut the door.

//

My ex-stepmom texted me that the surgery had went well and that her and the kids—my half brother and sister—would be visiting him that evening. I told her I'd come by after class.

I parked, went in. Talked to the lady at the desk and she told me which hallway to go down. Stopped to pee on the way. As I was washing my hands Grandpa came in, wearing a long-

sleeve blue shirt under a black fleece vest. We made eye contact in the mirror as he walked behind me but I didn't say anything and left the bathroom.

My dad was sat up in bed with a gown on. There was wall behind him and curtain on either side. Past the foot of his bed was open hallway. My stepmom and my eleven-year-old brother and my high-school-freshman sister were all in chairs around him. My brother got up to give me his seat and sat on his mom even though he was way too big for that to be comfortable for either of them.

Dad, voice gone from the surgery, whisper yelling, said, Hey you just missed your roommate.

I saw him in the bathroom.

Oh.

So it went good?

Yeah, that's what everybody's saying.

I nodded at my stepmom, smiled at the kids, small talked with them a little. I always liked the kids but never could feel that close to them.

My sister went in on Dad, making fun of him like she always did when I was around. It never failed to delight me, is why. In the time between the accident and his surgery he was just laying around bored and would send dumb texts to her throughout the school day. He kept calling me fam and asked if my bio test was lit AF, she said.

So we did some more of that. Light stuff you could laugh about. It was a school night. I hugged my stepmom and said bye to the kids and then it was just me and Dad. A nurse came around and asked what number he was on the face chart and he said a six. She asked if he needed something for the pain.

If I'm due for some more, he said.

That's not how we take medicine, remember. We don't take it on a schedule. We take it when we need it.

I think I'm fine, he said.

She nodded and went on to the next bed.

Everything ok at the house? When he heard you were on your way up he was ready to go in a hurry.

I don't know. It's been weird.

How's that?

Now he's mad I didn't wait with you for your surgery.

What? I was fine. You would've been with me for ten minutes. That's ridiculous. I'm sorry.

It's ok. It's just always going to be something with him, you know?

Yeah, he mentioned how you pee too loud. I'm like, man, if a guy can't even pee right you know something's up.

Yeah, I said.

Another nurse came by. He started asking her how he was supposed to shave if he couldn't take the brace off for six weeks. She leaned over his bed and readjusted his blanket.

Oh, jeez, he said.

She mouthed I'm sorry and left.

Shit I'm flashing everybody that walks by here.

I'm sure nobody was looking.

Well she was, he said.

Do you care?

I guess you're right. Want to take a walk?

He called a nurse over to unhook him. He was supposed to do X amount of loops around the hallway. I walked beside him, figured if he started falling over that he'd grab for me or something.

Fuck, it hurts, he said.

Yeah I bet.

Let's stop for a second.

He leaned on the nursing station, probably twelve feet from his bed. Ok, he said, and we finished the walk.

When's the magazine come out? he asked. I'd got an email about some Montana writing contest and submitted a thing I wrote about my grandparents. I won \$500 off it and they sent me a dumb trophy I put in a drawer.

I think in a few weeks. They said they'd send me one.

Well let me know when I can get a copy. I swear I read your story six times and cried like a big fucking baby. It really impressed me, son. You brought my mom back to life for me.

I just kind of laughed, said thanks. Knew it must've been the drugs making him all corny and weird.

//

I ended up sending her the story. She texted me some stupid shit about how she was glad her game-winning jumper would be memorialized and wished me luck in class. I was pretty pissed off about that but didn't text back. Just like, paced around eating Grandpa's bootleg

Oreos. Wrote up a big email draft and deleted it. Spent the next week kind of halfway avoiding her. Decided I'd better just talk to her.

So I did. Caught up with her on her way out of a bar where a dude from school and his band had been playing. She stuck around for the whole set, which I never would've if I didn't have designs of ambushing her with a big dumb talk.

On the sidewalk, I asked her if she had a minute. Of course, she told me. So we walked around downtown.

And I asked her, Are we just never going to talk about shit?

Do we have to?

Nah, is what I should've said. Just, Nah, and got into my car and went to Chipotle and had a burrito about it. But I didn't. And it's not like I had any designs of this conversation turning the whole thing around. I knew what it was. I just fell for the trap of thinking that there's stuff you can do to make yourself feel better. Like, if I can just get my shit out in the air then I won't have no more shit to say and no more shit to think about saying. Just spill my guts and be done.

I told her how I was frustrated. How I had put myself out there and she still hadn't even really responded. She said she didn't want to because she thought it was all small potatoes. I got kind of annoyed, about the small potatoes thing. She reminded me that I knew her dude existed. I didn't bother pointing out how she only ever referred to him as her Friend, and how that shit sends a certain message. And it just went around like that. By the end of it we said we'd just try to be not weird about it and resume as normal. I knew that wouldn't happen, and she had to too.

She did say one thing. That these things happen all the time, and that they unhappen too. Right then on the sidewalk I thought that was a bunch of bullshit. Turns out though, she was all-the-way right.

//

I had just woke up and went across the hall to pee and then went to get back in bed and Grandpa yelled at me from the living room, Get in here. We need to talk.

So I came out shirtless and in basketball shorts and sat in Grandma's chair. I read your article, he said.

I just waited for him.

Who gave you permission to use our names? Did I give you permission?

No. Look, I'm sorry. I guess I didn't think about it. I just wrote that for a class. I should've been smarter.

When it came in the mail yesterday I was so mad I was about to throw all of your stuff out on the grass. But I decided somebody had to be an adult.

Yeah well thanks, I said.

What gives you the right to use my name and put it in a magazine? You're the most selfish person.

I got up from the chair, not to leave, but just to not be sitting there. Sit down, he said, and I listened to him I don't know why.

We give you free room and board and you don't care about anyone but yourself. You don't even care.

I get that you're upset and I understand some of why, but if you read that thing and think that I don't care then I don't know what to tell you.

Your grandmother would be rolling over in her grave if she read that.

No she wouldn't.

Oh yes she would.

That's not true.

I'm going to call that editor and raise hell. I'm going to war.

Yeah, you're going to war with me?

If that phone rings one time from somebody that read that trash, I swear. There's nothing fiction about it.

Look, I don't have to be here. I'll be gone today.

Fine, he said.

I went to my room and threw my computer and some clothes in a bag. On my way out the door I told him, I understand that I should've been more sensitive to your privacy and that you're upset and I'm sorry for that. But there's a way you could've handled this that would've been a lot better for both of us.

He just kind of shrugged.

I texted my dad if it was ok if I came by. He said of course. So I drove to Lolo.

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It was after midnight and I came out of my little brother's every-other-weekend bedroom and saw my dad still up in the living room. He was watching DVR'd golf and yanking on the bottom of his neck brace.

Hey can I borrow the truck? I asked him.

Sure. I think the tank is pretty low. I can get you some gas money in the morning.

I was going to go now.

Oh, tonight? You're crazy.

Yeah I just want to get it done and I don't want him to be awake and looking at me the whole time.

I understand. Keys are in the cup holder.

Thanks, I said.

I gave him a call this afternoon.

Yeah?

I think I might've went a little overboard, he said, and grinned.

Sounds like you.

Yeah, you know, I tried with him. After all that time, making an effort seemed like the right thing to do. And it was fine, getting dinner with him. Mostly surface level, mostly bullshit, but it was fine. I'm done now, though. I told him you'd be coming by to get your things and that he'd better leave you alone.

Thanks.

I'm sorry that it happened this way but I'm really glad you're here. Obviously you're welcome to stay as long as you want.

Thanks. Hey, I really appreciate you having my back on this.

Yeah, of course.

Alright I'm going to go do that.

Yep, good luck buddy, he said and unpaused the golf.

I went down to my car and pulled a CD out of the book before climbing into my Dad's big white F-150. I ejected his Zac Brown Band from the six-disc changer and filled the cab with

rap music, looked between the white Griz paw decals that flank his rear window and backed out of the garage.

Felt like a bonafide Montana dirtbag pushing that truck down 93, sitting up so high. I pulled into town and crept through, roads mostly to myself. I turned the music low as I pulled into the cul-de-sac and parked behind Grandpa's van.

I went to pull the door open and it was locked. It was never locked. I had a key though so got in.

Went down the hall and saw his bedroom door was cracked open. The TV was still on because he didn't understand sleep timers. I pushed his door shut as stealth as possible and went in my room. Cut the light on and started throwing shit on the bed. Had a few big Amazon boxes for the loosies. Put drawer clothes in trash bags and pulled all the closet clothes out and threw them in the back seat of the truck. Ended up stealing the hangers.

I went fast. It was weird being in there, unwelcome. Felt like a low-key criminal. I spent every summer of my childhood in that house, learned how to walk there. And now was removing my shit from it, by the box, under cover of darkness.

I'd get the stuff outside and just lay it on the grass rather than loading it in the truck straight away. I'd save the Tetris for last. Just wanted to get it all out of that house, was tired of going back in and back in.

Once I'd cleared everything I did a once over of the room. Jimmied the key off the ring and left it on the counter with a note. I wrote that anything I'd left could be thrown out. I told him I was sorry about the story. I acknowledged that him losing Grandma was a terrible thing. I reminded him that there wasn't any excuse for the things he said to me. I knew that between my

trash handwriting and his bad vision he'd really have to study that thing to make any sense of it. I don't know whether he did or not.