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THE DISSOCIATION OF DARREN GREGORY TAYLOR: A MEMOIR

By

DORON DARIN NADLER

B.A., University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, 2008

Thesis Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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lying in nonfiction

*the dissociation*  
*of*  
*darren gregory*  
*taylor: a*  
*memoir*

# The Delivery

i

The ride, however, had been quick, which was pleasant since the weather registered 102 degrees, but the pavement absorbed it all and radiated a more intense blast of heat. In that sort of weather, Darren Gregory Taylor rode his heart out in order to catch as many green lights as possible because the lights were timed for car speed, not bicycles, and it was often that a rider got stopped by red light after red light if he started his trip at an unlucky time. The police station was located close-by, which prevented any seasoned rider from running a red when there was no perpendicular traffic. But he managed to catch a left turn on the first green light just before it shifted yellow, which allowed him a swift ride of the six blocks south to 100 Congress. It was the first delivery of the day, and he knew as soon as the order was placed exactly the location, floor, and person he was delivering to based upon the unique sandwich— tuna on wheat, no sprouts, and add bacon.

Darren pawed off beads of sweat collecting under his helmet. He never removed it because store policy stated that all employees must wear hats during shifts— with the exception of the delivery drivers if they wore helmets. None of the other drivers wore helmets so this uniqueness stuck out; people made jokes about the fact that he'd stroll into any office with the protective covering on his head, and he would play along talking about the dangers of tiles from ceilings while thudding the plastic encasement.

He worked for the sandwich shop for thirteen months now, and the people on his delivery route became recognizable. He visited virtually every floor and every office in the entire Austin CBD, knew the best ways to navigate the alleys for maximal speed, and could change a flat tire in under 5 minutes if necessary with the tools and spare tube he kept tucked in a pouch underneath his Felt road bike's saddle. He even named his bike Adenhardt— after a baseball player for the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim who was killed by a drunk driver. He earned

surprisingly good money for riding his bike all day and relished the fact that he could spend hours exercising with the company of his thoughts.

100 Congress was serviced by two African American security guards on the ground floor. Though other buildings posted security guards and sign-in sheets, few aside from 100 Congress made you register. Darren walked over to the guard desk and made pleasantries as he filled out the sheet. The female guard, probably around her forties, was always happy as she welcomed people into the building. She had black, curly hair, but a face constructed with more masculine features than feminine— stubby eye lashes, long and thick nose, and a thin rug of hair above her lips. The male guard to her left never spoke much unless it was to talk about how he was thankful Jesus allowed him another day of life. For all his love of Jesus, he had one of the longest faces Darren ever saw.

The entire twentieth floor was occupied by a business that dealt with some sort of law or contracts. There was a receptionist, but Darren knew exactly where he was going, and as long as you gave the appearance of purpose in your gait, the receptionist didn't bother you.

2046 was located at the end of the left hallway. The door was always closed. He delivered to that office many times to a man that he only knew by the name of Morgan. Morgan was probably a decade older than Darren, making him early thirties, but he possessed one of those ageless faces and could have been younger or older by a great deal.

Darren never understood why anyone ordered the shop's sandwiches, as he never found them any good— aside from being charged eight dollars for the sandwich alone. Regardless of the person's ethnicity, gender, or religion, Darren felt anyone who ordered the sandwiches had no taste in food, but enough money not to care as long as the delivery arrived immediately. What bothered Darren most about Morgan was that unlike other patrons of the store, Morgan projected

an awareness that expressed he knew about this flaw of taste and viewed it as a symbol of privilege.

Darren rapped on the mahogany door, then heard a voice call “Come in!” from the other side. He opened the door to find Morgan occupied by a phone call. Normally, Morgan paid via credit card, but today he hadn’t. Darren was forced to wait for cash as opposed to slipping the credit card invoice under his hand. This was the most frustrating part of the job. It wasn’t as if he didn’t have anywhere else to go, and the lack of sense for Morgan to ask the person on the other line to hold made his nostrils flare.

Darren thought Morgan was handsome physically, but his perception of Morgan prevented anything more than an admiration of beauty to manifest. He tried to avoid Morgan by looking around the office. There was a frame containing degrees from Texas State University and photos of him, his wife, and their children in staged family scenes of play and laughter.

There was something else upsetting to Darren that had little to do with Morgan, but involved the man nonetheless. Darren stood in his dirty khaki shorts, the pair he wore all week but only washed on Sundays because he reasoned it was superfluous to wash them more if he only wore them a few hours a day. He also wore a store t-shirt, which was a thick, black cotton monster that irritated his skin and soaked up the heat and sweat in the intense July summer. Darren couldn’t see himself, but he knew he looked disheveled and unkempt and probably even smelled a bit. And he knew people treated him like the image he projected— which was to say a sandwich bicycle delivery boy. They didn’t know he had attended a university more respected than their own, received better grades, and was a probably great deal smarter than them. And he never told them because to do so would be to acknowledge that those were truths; and yet, he

was only a sandwich delivery boy, regardless of his reasons for being one. Assuming the lie of dumb sandwich delivery boy was easier.

Morgan finally hung up the phone and began to apologize for the rudeness.

“I forgot my wallet in the rush to work today trying to beat traffic.” He started. “But I bet you know all about that.”

“Not really,” Darren answered. “Bike lanes rarely hit gridlock.”

Morgan gave a small chuckle as he dug through the pockets of his nice navy suit to fish out a ten-dollar bill. The order total was \$9.25, tip not included.

“Sorry I don’t have more to give you today,” he offered somewhat genuinely.

Darren shrugged his shoulders and prepared to leave, but heard the man call out “Wait!” before he reached the door handle. He watched Morgan crouch by his desk and retrieve bottles: one of vodka made from grapes and another of tonic water.

“It’s hot outside, at least have a drink!”

Many of the bartenders on Sixth St. tipped him with five-dollar bills and shots of Patron so Darren was used to drinking on the job it made the day go faster.

Morgan readied the drinks while Darren stood by a chair. He could have sat in it, but he didn’t want to give the impression that he could stay long. Morgan spun around and handed him a glass. It tasted like rubbing alcohol without the lime. Darren had chugged half the drink in the first few seconds and prepared to gulp the other half just as quickly.

“Wow, party boy, eh? You know you’re different from the other delivery *boys*.” Darren hated the way he emphasized boys.

“All the other ones... they’re skinny.”



Morgan realized his comment could be misconstrued for calling Darren fat and stuttered an explanation.

“Not that it’s bad. I mean, you’re... big. Good big. Like you work out a lot.”

Darren felt aware that Morgan was conscious of his body— broad shoulders, protruding chest that revealed developed pecs like small breasts, and very thick legs that continued to increase in size with hours of cycling a day. It was bad enough not to be noticed for any reason by people like Morgan, but it was worse when they did under the pretenses of their children looking outward with mouths open while their father flirted with a delivery boy just because he could. Darren finished the other half of his drink.

“Want another?”

“Thanks, but can’t. Need to get back to work.”

Morgan sighed and agreed as if he forgot they were standing in his office at 10:45 in the morning. The man fished in his pockets once more seemingly to discover a bill for a better tip, but instead revealed a business card.

“My personal number is on there.”

Darren didn’t respond verbally or show any sign of complacency on his face. He took the card as an automatic gesture of politeness and then walked out of the office knowing he’d probably receive a lecture for the length of time the delivery took. He would blame the lateness on waiting for Morgan to finish his phone call. The other drivers would nod in exasperation that they hated when that happened to them. Darren hated being deceptive like that, but on the elevator ride back down to the lobby, what he hated even more was that he knew he’d end up calling because Michael was still traveling in Europe and being alone was hard for Darren.

# *Chapstick*

ii

The only reason I knew where the Psychiatric Ward at the U.C.L.A. Medical Center stood was because my big brother in our fraternity, Joe, pointed it out. The incident occurred while we walked back from Westwood to the fraternity house after an awkward pizza-dinner filled with sexual tension on my part. I joined the fraternity because of him and had fallen in what I thought-at-the-time-was-considered love with him. He didn't reciprocate my feelings. In some gesture of intimacy to show he still cared about me—just not in *that* way— he recounted how he committed himself to the ward his sophomore year. According to the story, a fellow fraternity brother left his date and a Dave Matthews concert in Anaheim to visit Joe after he phoned explaining why he wouldn't be at the fraternity house for a while. I guess Joe meant for the anecdote to convey the importance of brotherhood and picked up on the fact that aside from lusting after him, I was also a depressed freshman who hadn't adjusted to university life yet.

Years later— long after I had given up on Joe ever liking me, long after I stopped speaking to him because he couldn't maintain the little things I needed in a friendship with him— this included knowing better than to invite his little brother out on his eighteenth birthday only because a string of other people had passed up on the extra movie ticket he had lying around— I was senior in college and something very wrong began to happen to my body. None of the doctors I visited specifically instructed me to check myself into the ward. They hinted at it by suggesting that they would refer me to a great specialist there if I needed someone to talk to, and then tossed a pamphlet or two my way on depression, body dysmorphia, and eating disorders. All four doctors I consulted with in the beginning stages of my diagnosis remained firm in their beliefs that I was manically depressed, possibly bi-polar—just short of schizophrenic, but truthfully, I knew better than to divulge the fact I was hallucinating and hearing voices— and most likely a male anorexic who was trying to score steroids. This diagnosis was based upon the

fact that all my symptoms matched those of depression and other mental illnesses. They asked if I had recently moved (I returned months before from my year abroad in New Zealand). They asked if I had undergone a breakup (said lover lived in New Zealand). They asked if I were a senior (yes, I was going to miss college). To them this was a textbook case of elevated depression.

I should preface that I saw the ward every day while returning to my private dormitory on campus. I woke up at half-past seven in the morning regardless of if there were classes or if it were the weekend. I didn't use an alarm. I then crawled to the empty space in my tiny room—the size of luxurious prison cell—and began an alternating series of pushups and crunches. At the zenith of my strength, I performed 80 pushups the first set followed by 50 regular crunches; then 75 pushups, followed by 50 crunch twists to the left; and 70 pushups, followed by 50 crunch twists to the right. The whole routine repeated as an arithmetic series three times.

Working out was followed by a breakfast smoothie in which I massed the ingredients on an electric food scale to ensure that I didn't consume extra calories. 52 grams of whey protein—vanilla-flavored. 75 grams of banana. 30 grams of frozen mixed berries—organic. 220 grams of fat free almond milk. 35 grams of fat free Greek yogurt—plain. One cinnamon stick. As much ice as necessary. It never struck me odd at the time that I continued my day by immediately walking to the gym at nine. Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays were half-weight-half-cardio days (legs, chest and back, arms and chest, respectively, and arc climber for cardio). Thirty minutes at each. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were one-hour cardio blocks. I showered at the gym in same shower after my workout, even if it meant waiting for someone to finish using it while other showerheads were unoccupied.

The nice thing about my senior year was that I actually graduated at the end of my sophomore year, but remained “enrolled” in order to take advantage of a four-year college scholarship I earned that— after tuitional refunds— paid me \$2,500 a year to do nothing but take independent study and creative writing workshops. I was left to my own devices and the occasional interaction with professors via e-mail if they desired to monitor the progress of my two senior theses.

I confess that there was one thing about my behavior that I did find crazy at the time. Not my insatiable need to work out multiple times a day. Not eating a strict diet consisting of raw vegetables, fruits, and tofu for my meals in the dining hall. Not I stopped attending fraternity meetings because I unexplainably lost all interest in the people that were responsible for some of my most memorable times in college. Not when a friend invited me to her birthday dinner, and I remained locked in my room after having a panic attack because I couldn’t find anything to eat that matched my diet’s criteria when I checked the restaurant’s menu online. It wasn’t even seeing the professor who hated me because I wrote a graphic short story about bestiality in his workshop when I was 19; the day that happened I needed to drop off a paper in the English office and bumped into him. He felt sorry as watched me barely exist like a shadow at dusk and asked, like all of my friends and other professors had, if I visited with a doctor yet. When people whom you know have you on their list of those they never want to see again start showing empathy toward your emaciated appearance, you know there’s a problem.

But none of those thoughts, habits, or instances were pathetic to me at the time. Rather, it was every day after my 11:35 lunch ended that I would walk into Westwood for 1.8 miles. Always the same route: down Gayley Ave and cutting across Le Conte to Westwood Blvd to where I’d end up at the Walgreens on Wilshire and La Grange. The point of this mission was

always to buy a single roll of Chapstick. Usually, I bought the cherry flavor—spearmint and the regular black, unflavored tube whenever my accrued purchases consumed all the cherry in stock. The purchase was \$1.07 with California sales tax, but because I swiped my Bank of America debit card to pay, I was refunded ninety-three cents under their Keep The Change program.

I did apply quite a bit of Chapstick to my lips, but never used up the plastic cylinder in less than two weeks. After three months, I filled an entire drawer in my room with unopened packages that I'm still working through. That autumn the sun shone strong until December, even for Southern California weather. But I knew that Chapstick was important. I once attempted canoeing on the Colorado River a week before Christmas—without the aid of the protective lip wax— and came back with my first cold sore: that is what started my Chapstick love.

The first doctor was not convinced that there was a tangible cause to my problems. I was positive that if I requested to meet with a different figure that the outcome would change. After the fourth doctor reiterated the concerns of the other three, I let the issue drop. They continued their battery of tests and detected nothing. All the while, the muscle and weight on my body dissolved, regardless of how much in vain I struggled to maintain them through constant exercise and proper diet. I never deviated from regimen because I convinced myself that salvation lay in repetition of a model existence, and one morning it would all start working as it should on paper if I were indeed sick— I tried not to think about how that the failure for these habits to better my health was further evidence of my ailments being psychological and not physical. Though it was mid-November and it seemed futile after three months to believe that any of my routine would work, nonetheless, I was determined to believe the lie and devoted another hour of my day to working out and ate more vegetables because that is what healthy people do.

Walking back to my dorm would be followed by throwing my Chapstick into a drawer, working on one thesis until 2:45, twenty-minute nap, a revision of my thesis work, dinner at 5:35, and overhearing Alton Brown on The Food Network as I lay in bed pretending to read advisor-recommended books for my theses, as if there were someone else in the room that I needed to convince I was working. But on the walk back from the city, I had to pass the wing of the Ronald Reagan Medical Center— ironically-named since he cut both the education and health budgets while governor— where the ward was housed. It seemed important I take this route, convincing myself the whole time that I should surrender and check myself in for two weeks, perfectly prepared with a tube of fresh Chapstick to last the duration of my incarceration. That I should listen to all the doctors and accept the fact that there was nothing medically wrong with dropping over fifty pounds in several months from what used to be described as a stocky build into an accurate joke expressed that I resembled a skinny lesbian. That my transformation into a recluse and xenophobic dealt with some internal doing in my subconscious. By the time I persuaded myself to walk through the entrance, I would've already missed it by a block. Regardless of how much sense it made to turn back, I knew better than to break habit and take extra steps in either direction. No matter; there was the inevitable Chapstick run the next day to try again.

*The Magical*

*Threesome That Did*

*Not Happen*

*Part I*



indent start italics play end italics period iapostropheve had two threesomes in my life period they both occurred when i was twentyhyphentthree period i love that about myself period itapostrophes a sign period in both of those cases comma michael was there period he hates it when i talk it to other people period paragraph break start italics rewind end italics colon vegas period it was the last time i every saw him period i was actually on my best behavior period we didnapostrophet fight period on one of the night comma he and i went to a gay club period there was this tall finn in the corner period because we were open quotation officially broken up comma end quotation we gave each other permission to flirt period in reality it was just a game to see who could make the other person more jealous period paragraph break none of the guys that i thought were cute were talk to me semicolon i say that because i canapostrophet approach guys for some reason period iapostrophet never had that sort of confidence period but michael did and he guy the finn in the leather jacket talking period michael spoke norwegian so they bonded quickly period i was jealous and started to dance in hopes someone who notice period paragraph break aki turned out to be a great guy period we walked over to the flamingo and ordered dollar burgers open parenthesis itapostrophes some special they do between two and six in the morning close parenthesis period i just had the waitress make them modified grilled cheeses and ordered two of them period paragraph break aki came back to our hotel room it was a weird room because we were upgraded at checkhyphenin comma but the upgrade ended up converting our one queen bed into two period michael and i fucked in one bed and slept in the other comma and then we would switch the order the next day period we were drinking period we went online and looked at stupid videos on youtube period because it was so late when we finished we let aki crash in our other bed period michael and i quiet discussed whether to invite aki to join us period we decided yes and michael made some lame line about how our big was

big and enough room to join us if he wanted to period paragraph break i wanted to fool around again in the morning because aki didn't postret blow me period he only blew michael despite the fact that i went down on him period i felt cheated period the second time i got what i wanted period paragraph break start italics rewind end italics colon los angeles period it was the last night were in town period michael had tried to make a move on me comma but i committed to the philosophy that we were broken up because michael was the one who ended things period i was a prophet about to let him have it both ways period but the truth was i wanted him dash not necessarily sexually comma but i wanted to hold him period paragraph break start italics rewind stop italics period colin was my friend period i met him when i was a sophomore period i remember the day well because that was the year ucla had played really well and they were playing usc that saturday semicolon there was talk that we could beat them period anyways comma colin had asked if i wanted to go hiking with him and his dog period i don't remember why i can't remember the dog's name because that's something i remember period start italics pause end italics colon i want to say it's something i remember comma but i'm not sure why period i think i might be conflating that dog's name with the dog of another guy period start italics play end italics ellipsis paragraph break at the time colin comma who was about ten years older comma was dating this guy at ucla named adam period he didn't tell me anything about him except that he wanted to go to law school period adam was closeted period so we rode to the mountains where we walked around and his dog comma a white lab purchased for an anniversary present comma chased ducks into a pond period i was falling in love with the guy period i think he could tell period it was hard for me not to kiss him but i didn't period he dropped me off in time for the game that ucla ended up losing poorly period paragraph break start italics fast forward

stop italics period almost two years later i have just come back from new zealand he and adam  
broke up period he said adam was crazy period i asked about the dog and he said he gave to a  
friend because colin lived on a boat period the conversation was awkward  
thishyphenwashyphenmyhyphenlifehyphenwhenhyphenyouhyphenwerehyphengone period he  
asked if i wanted to go hiking period paragraph break we drove to the santa monica mountains  
period there was the same tension between us sexually comma but this time there was no  
boyfriend period we kissed on one of the trails period start italics pause end italics period though  
this has nothing to do with the story comma the best part about the hiking adventure was how i  
got us both lost period we got bad directions from a hiker and ended up going too far on the trail  
semicolon the sun was setting quickly period in order to make it out of the canyon i took us on a  
path that i thought was a shortcut period the tail died halfway up the mountain along with the sun  
period we couldnapostrophe find our way down period for two hours he searched in darkness  
and eventually i called my boss to let her know i was stranded period she asked if she should call  
search and rescues period i told her i only meant that i might be late to work tomorrow period  
eventually colin and i found our way down period in the car he was surprisingly friendly comma  
which was odd because if anyone had gotten me lost on a mountain i wouldnapostrophe be  
period though neither of us mentioned it on the mountain comma in the car i commented on how  
i was surprised we didnapostrophe run into any mountain lions or rattlesnakes as we were  
perfect targets to be attacked or carelessly encounter one in the darkness period he laughed and  
said he thought the same thing period i treated him to pizza for dinner and he came back to my  
place period start italics play end italics ellipsis period paragraph break in my room colin and i  
showered and went down on each other period i found a tick on my computer screen and had him  
check my body for bite marks period he never say any period paragraph break start italics fast

forward end italics colon itapostrophe three in the morning and colin is on his way to our hotel room period michael has had several threesome and a foursome open parenthesis with girls close parenthesis so he isnapostrophe nervous period i remember feeling the same twinge in my gut as the first time i was going to have sex period i felt as if i were going to cross some inappropriate line that i shouldnapostrophe be period i told myself that common logically comma there wasnapostrophe anything different between having sex with someone else or two someone elses comma but it felt different period paragraph break start italics rewind stop italics period two days earlier colin met us at a bar in venice called roosterfish period i hadnapostrophe seen him since that hiking fiasco even though i tried period he was just hard to get ahold of on a boat period we had recently reconnect via myspace and i told him iapostrophe be flying in from missoula for thanksgiving period he wanted to meet up and so did i period paragraph break michael was jealous the whole time comma but he calmed down when my flirting with produce managed to get us into molly ringwaldapostres house period she was gone for the holiday and the producer was housesitting period molly had recently given birth to twins and her placed looked like it period thatapostrophe not how i wanted to picture her period we ate her cookies and drank her beer period michael was particularly proud that he blew ass in mollyapsotrophes bathroom period at the end of the night colin asked if he could see me again period paragraph break start italics fast forward end italics

*Murder— She*

*Wroteth: A Film*

*Review*

For anyone who slept-in last Saturday morning and missed the screening of *Anne Perry's Interiors* at Missoula's 2010 Big Sky Film Festival— if your Fridays nights are anything like mine— your failed attempt at the bar to pick up middle-aged mountain men who have recently gone through messy divorces was far more productive and entertaining.

To be fair, the subject of the documentary is theoretically interesting: Anne Perry, birth name Juliet Hulme, and her best friend conspired and murdered her friend's mother in Christchurch, New Zealand back in 1954. Both were fifteen at the time of the crime. If any of this sounds familiar that is because Peter Jackson directed a far superior, based-on-actual-events version called *Heavenly Creatures* in the late, early 90s. But this documentary is not concerned with the horrific but fascinating past of Perry. Ms. Hulme grew up to become a prolific Victorian mystery novelist under her new name. She is considered quite popular in the U.S., but I cannot say any of her books' titles rush to mind.

But for however long the film lasted— I lost track after five minutes— all the audience is presented with is one of the most boring depictions of a killer ever rendered. Perry occupies a large house that for all the money she has earned looks as if the house were decorated by a blind and drunk fraternity boy who furnished it courtesy of your local Good Will. Perhaps this is because Perry has converted to Mormonism— yes, there are Mormons in Scotland (several actually), and they all wish you would leave Anne Perry alone! I understand the Mormons are not fans of the gay community, but surely they could have made an exception for an interior designer to be welcomed on the premises.

And what goes on in this house? According to the film a lot of writing and even more not writing. Perry is a traditional writer and can only compose her works by hand. She then pays an older woman, a fellow Mormon, to type up her illegible writing. Yes, we get a few— because

one would have not been sufficient— scenes of this woman and Perry trying to figure out an indecipherable word. I suppose you could count that as the dramatic tension missing in the rest of the film....

There are several other occupants of the house, too. One includes a best friend— intense female friendship redux the Pauline Parker sort, which makes you wonder... who lives in a house across from the garden and main house free of charge in what the film implies is the gift one receives for being one of Perry's few friends.

The most interesting character— aside from an adorable dog who occupies every scene in constant hope that someone will play with him— is Perry's younger brother who works for her as a secretary, researcher, and general grade-A bitch. His most redeeming moment on camera involves a quick dismissing of Mormonism and virtually all the others in house for their beliefs (taken in the larger sense).

And this is what the film is about: the slaves of Anne Perry. A film exploring the murder would be quite compelling, but that's not the focus of this work, nor could it be since Perry refuses to discuss the matter and doesn't feel comfortable lying about it— though one might consider deflection a sort of lying. The premise of the work is to detail Perry's ongoing, but more interesting are the people who willingly live around her and cannot see their own demise.

A rare, fascinating moment arrives when the aged transcriber breaks into tears, confessing how much she loves her friend and cannot die until her friend has found happiness, presumably in the company of a man. The devastation of a woman so devoted to the happiness of a killer such that she cares nothing about the enjoyment of her own life and will live in a miserable existence is powerful to no end. The same can be said for a ten-year old boy whose sister is the most infamous killer in New Zealand and decides to relocate across the globe to

deliver a summary of her daily e-mails over fifty years later because he couldn't find work back home at the time. The only people who surround Perry are people who are too afraid to ask questions, to disagree, to have their own lives. How she manages to bring people into her favor is unknown because she comes off rather deflating in her daily routine. But I suppose subtlety is the key to subjugation.

The problem with *Anne Perry's Interiors* is that all of this interesting material occurs in less than five minutes of footage. The rest of the film is constructed of watching Perry mull around her dull and secluded life with cuts to interviews of her friends that only seem to consistently explain that they know nothing of her past because Anne does not like/let people bring that up. And really, none of this is the fault of Perry or her collection of droid servants; this is not their film, only a film about them. The great shame here needs to be cast on the director, writer, editor, and whoever decided that ten-minute stills of empty rooms was appropriate.

I'd also like to know more about the message that the film was tailoring. *Was it if you kill someone in your youth that you can grow up to be a successful writer with vast amounts of money and a coterie of close friends who die by your side? Or was it if you kill someone in your youth you end up unloved and always trying to erase a past no one forgets while living out the remainder of your life in tedious solitude?* Because there's nothing out of the ordinary about Perry or her current life, it is hard not to picture yourself on screen and replace her sins with your own. After the film, I wanted to call up a boy I hurt and tell him there were other people in the world who did worse things than I did, that they could even live successful and at times happy lives depending on how you edit the footage. But I was afraid if I did call him and say those things that he'd tell me he wished I would move on with my own life and find happiness in that small manner, then hang up the phone. I would've given this film a better review had Perry



talked about how she learned to forgive herself or even believe others could too, perhaps even offer some tips to do so. That gesture alone would've made sitting through this boring film worth it.

*Kirby*

v

Depending on you how define “sex,” I lost my virginity at fifteen, about ten minutes after I had my first kiss. I wanted to start this next sentence with the word “ironically,” but there’s nothing ironic about having been sexually active before your first kiss. That is, sex that doesn’t necessarily get defined as sex a la Bill Clinton. And that is also to say, I find the idea of that sentiment (not the oral sex isn’t sex but the order in which all those things happened) funny. In a lot a ways I think I have to.

I know this because this is the sort of thing I remember without having it written down—even though it is, and I don’t mean this. It was Halloween. I was a sophomore in high school. Nathaniel was an abdominal-chiseled and goofball of a guy that I constantly joked was confused for thinking was African American, from Seattle, and Jewish; I teased him that it’s only possible for a person to be two of those three things at most. He was in the same grade and I had met him during my very first class in high school when I was a freshman. It was Gym. We would run the track and he’d make fun of the fact that I shaved my legs for swim season. He and I would both end up auditioning for the school’s dance company, which brought us together for the remainder of our high school careers. That day in October he followed me as I walked home.

I don’t remember per se what made me realize Nathaniel was gay and that he was following me home because of that, but I did. I was out by that point so that’s how he knew about me.

No one was home; I invited him in. We talked at some point and it became clear that he wanted to fool around; I wasn’t sure about the idea, so we ended up played Super Smash Brothers on my Nintendo 64. What happens next sounds as if it’s the plot of a bad porno, but I swear it happened and that I thought of the whole thing:

At some point I change my mind, but I'm not sure what that means. I challenge Nathaniel to a battle royale, where we each have twenty-five lives. I tell him that if he can get me down to ten lives, I'll show him my dick; if he can get me down to five lives, I'll jack off with him; and if he can kill me, well... Bill Clinton. The best part about this is that Nathaniel, though he professed to playing the game all the time, totally sucked ball at it— and not in the way he wanted. He kept desperately tried to outmaneuver me, and it was really fun to watch the frustration on his face because he too had never done anything with a guy before. I mean you offer a fourteen-year-old (or was he fifteen at the time) a chance to have “sex” for the first time based on the outcome of a video game, and the you're just asking for amazement. If Nathaniel had played Super Smash Brothers like he professed he did, he would understand that while Link is a great character, it takes practice to become good with him because his has limited jumping abilities. Compared to my Kirby, I could just float in the air and watch the stages knock him out for me. I think I won with nineteen lives remaining.

I know what you're thinking because I already told you that we did it. In the end, I relented and decided I would show him my dick as a sort of consolation prize because I couldn't stop laughing. Eventually that led to jacking off, which I became bored with, then mutual masturbation, which seemed boring too, until I told him he could just blow me. As I felt his mouth over the skin of my head, a feeling I had wondered about for a long time, I couldn't suppress the narrative in my other head of what had transpired, and did my best to keep from doing more than smiling.

Between that and the time I lost my virginity, there was one other guy. His name was Ben and I still see him when I visit Los Angeles. In fact, he and his partner are great, and aside from

the fact that I suspect he's running a pyramid scheme where he's trying to bilk \$150k from me, I think he's awesome.

Him I can explain briefly. He was once of the first boys I "loved." I met him at the end of my freshman year, which was his senior year. He was the only other out kid that I knew. He was tall, a pot head, and a classically pianist. Other tidbits about him included that he was smart and was a former Jew too. It wasn't until the Christmas break of his first year at UCSB that we hooked up in the backseat of his parents very old Volkswagen parked in an alley at the convergence of Beverly Hills and Los Angeles suburbs. It was New Year's Eve. He got blown two or three more times that night. It was a good night to be a democrat.

And then there's Shane. Joshua Shane Hendry to be precise. If I tell you stuff about him, you're going to laugh. That I ran across his blog (though they weren't called those back then) accidentally while trying to find gay porn. That he lived in Mississippi and was five years older than me (I was thirteen at the time). That he wrote bad poetry and the theme song to Forrest Gump played on his website. That he wrote a rhyming poem in quatrains where the only part I still remember is the opening couplet of the first stanza of *Have you ever loved a boy/but knew he didn't care*. That I mistakenly IMed him after adding him to my buddy list (back when people still had those and used AOL instant messenger... back when there still was AOL), which I never thought I'd have the nerve to actually go through with, and only did after confusing his screen name for someone else's. That he responded and that's how our relationship began.

You'll laugh because it is funny. Like how I spent a whole month trying to call him on payphones with a phone card I bought at a 7-11 because I didn't want the call to show up on the phone bill before I finally got a hold of him. We spoke for two minutes as he was driving through a forested part of Mississippi with a guy named Beau and the signal cut out. I remember

the spot: Culver City High's swimming pool located at a public park. I had an hour before my race and wandered off to make the call. I remember the accent in his voice and how it melted me (I was fourteen at the time). I also set my personal best in both the one-hundred-meter breaststroke and freestyle that day. That's how much I was in love.

And though it's funny because it is funny, it's not funny in the way that I can laugh at what transpired between Nathaniel and me or Ben and me. That's because they were isolated moments: I can look back and laugh. But with Shane I have never been able to see the laughter because what surrounds the moment of him is too dark. Despite how you see the situation, I can only recall a scared boy that was struggling with his sexuality and knew no gay people. That the fact that he could fall in love with a boy in Mississippi speaks not to the comedy, but to the absolute loneliness in his that there was nowhere closer to reach out to.

And frankly, there's a lot that happened with Shane. Just to give you an idea of how poor things were, I tried to convince my mother to let this random guy that Shane in Mississippi knew adopt me so that I could leave. The idea is ludicrous on its own, and don't even tell me how crazy it is that I actually approached my mother with this plan. But the truth is I believed in this plan and did tell her and spent moments trying to get her to agree because this was shortly before the second time I tried to kill myself. And I didn't try to take my life because she said no, but because my life was so awful back home that I was willing to runaway to the South and live with a stranger just to be near a boy I met on the internet. I understood the farfetchedness of the plan, that it put me in danger, but I recognized the more present and immediate danger of staying home. That was my life when I found Shane, and no matter how funny parts of it seem, I still can only view those memories in that light.

So I'm not going to go into the whole story about him because it's depressing and you'd grow tired of it. But what I will say that is in March (maybe it was April), he flew from Mississippi to see me. It was a Wednesday; he was scheduled to fly out that Saturday. I met him at the Roxbury Park, located across the street from my high school. He was six-foot-something (on the short end of that mark), short blonde hair, and blue eyes. I loved him in person just as I loved him in his photos or on the phone.

We caught a taxi to his hotel, the Ramada Inn, in West Hollywood. I remember I was wearing this weird, sea foam/teal-shaded cargo pants (it was the time was that stuff was fashionable). He took me to his room and we talked while *Star Trek* played on the room's television set. I was mesmerized by him, by actually having him in front of me. It was a year-and-a-half after we had first chatted, by accident no less, and here he sat by my side. And it was all because he wanted to visit me. The only way I could rationalize it was love.

And it was because of that love that I had never let Nathaniel kiss me in the subsequent times that we fooled around—or anyone for that matter. Physiologically, I don't see much difference between the first time some puts his lips around your dick as opposed to against your own lips, but I didn't see the former as anything that needed to be special. I wanted my kiss to be, and I want the moment I lost my virginity to be. So I let Shane kiss me, which was surprising because I somehow knew what I was doing when I reciprocated (and did it well). And when he took off my shirt and reached for my pants I didn't stop him because in my mind this was as special as it got. At some point *Star Trek* turned into *The Weakest Link*, and I even answered one of the questions with my dick in Shane's mouth. He responded by shutting the British woman up with the remote. When we finished, I stayed in his arms for as long as I could until I had to catch

the bus back to school because it was college fair night and my mother would be there looking for me.

I didn't see Shane the next day, but I did return to his hotel room that Friday. We made love, which didn't seem the same as fucking, and then walked to a movie theater where we became two of probably the only five people in the world who saw *The Time Machine* with Samantha Mumba. I can't explain what either of those things means; you had to live through the time to get it. The movie hurt my neck because I kept trying to lean my head on his shoulder—something I had also dreamed about just as often as my first kiss. But the way the seats were built couple with Shane being taller made it uncomfortable. Still, I did it because I wanted the experience. As we walked back to his hotel room and the sun set, I tried to loosen the knot in my neck while Shane explained why he greatly enjoyed the film. That made him the only one of the five people.

When we arrived at his hotel room, I gathered my things. I needed to get back home. In my list of ticking off items from my romantic bucket list, I was left with one desire: to know what it feels like to fall asleep in someone's arms and wake up the next day with him. But there was no way I could. I contemplated what life would be like if I said screw it to the world, and boarded that plane to Mississippi with him, but I didn't. Logistically it was impossible for many reasons. Besides, I was in love and had waited patiently for Shane to come to me; I could wait for him to return. As I stood beyond the lintel, I searched for how to say goodbye, but didn't know what to say or do. That is when he took from the chin.

*I want to leave you softly.*

Shane kissed me. It was an unremarkable kiss for many reasons. It was short, I didn't kiss him back, and it was entirely closed-mouth; yet, it's the only kiss I remember him by. As I rode



the elevator down to the lobby, a cute guy tried to make conversation with me. I don't think he knew I was fifteen. I would later find out my mother had hacked into my e-mail account and knew of this (though how much I can't say since much of it occurred by phone). She seemed poised to cry when I walked in just after nine. It seemed as if she didn't think I'd be coming home. She didn't say anything, and I went to bed and slept in a neon yellow t-shirt Shane had given me that first day in his hotel room. It was for DJ Storm, and it looked like a soccer jersey. That was Shane's DJ name. It smelled of both the ozone of the hotel room, cigarettes (Shane smoked), and his body, which must have come from rubbing against the rest of Shane's clothes in his luggage. The next morning I was supposed to attend the state speech tournament, but I slept in.

Third-Degree

Burn: A Letter

Addressed to Two

People

If this is Matt, then their bodies are the ones I like— lean and athletic, slightly cut in the right places. You'd jump the one on my right. If this is Michael, then you're not going to like either of their bodies or what I have to say about them so you should stop reading. You'd choose my body over theirs because that's what you like. Big boys. The muscles. Even hints of fats justified by bulkiness. Yo Matty, sat down middle up [full] front-al. Yoboi. Michael, where else do you expect me to sit in a crowded room? How many times do I have to explain it: my writing workshop went to see two nude models at a painting class and we were told to write notes about them— remember, it was for the class.

The older one (early thirties?) sat on the left. Bam. Legs open. Dick. I mean, you're supposed to look at other stuff, but come on Matty! Dick. Dick. Dick. You'd get duct tape and tell him to behave. You never like boys who spit delicately. Michael, you pretend to agree with Matt, but we both know I speak that way. And we know you like Matt's body better than mine. His biceps measure twenty-something cantaloupe inches. That's fine. You would have fucked him if you could've and you probably don't believe me when I said I didn't— fuck him that is— and really I had no reason to lie since the only time the two of you met was at that diner after you and I already broke up but were stupidly trying to salvage things. I introduced Matt to you as that college friend I had all those crazy adventures with, but never went into detail as to what occurred.

Lefty has a name and I heard it a few times, but wasn't big enough in my mind to remember. Sorry Matty. But I took notes on him! Said... "lemons for arms..." "hands like a Carver story—big and dough fingers..." "opens gaze like a fresco, but keeps shifting his glare..." "hair glazed the navel all shallow and small like the iron in an etch-a-sketch running happy trail to flower pecs while Muse moaned..." "short brown hair— light." Diggin' the poetry,

eh? And dick! Like his hands. Sac bloated like those fingers over what was somewhere between a grower and a shower. Hey, it could be cold and nerves....

Michael, if we were still dating, then we'd probably fight over whether this is considered cheating, which is why I can tell you all of this now. If we were dating, then I'd just keep quiet. There's a lot I never said at the time because it mattered not to at the time.

Couldn't see cock on right. Shame, I know. And yeah, that was the first thing I noticed. Negative space is crackin'! Heard the painters talk how he (Justin) needs to be introduced to some other dude 'cause this kid is an actor/"graduate to be" (cereal on the quoties) at the university. Second thought: fools needs ta get hisself to lalalalalala and be working on bein' happy on his knees. Shit. The details! Notes, notes, notes... "our age and by that I mean tres plowable..." – a thought: why do "artists" always take off their clothes and then hah! I caught Lefty looking at me—"he's über thinker Rodin in posture but the fingers get lost with chin..." "eyes glassy blue from here and living room lighting caught at the wall..." "pecs coming like crescent moons of swoll and no handles to hold with the beaming headlights of shallow light aburst." On that last, can I get an amen, playa?

Even though he isn't your type, you'd like him. That time you let me borrow your computer I found all your porn—retro Corbin—and it honestly made me feel fat. That if you're going to pay for porn at least watch dudes with marmoreal abs instead of bears with paunches. The way those guys lacked definition... and I imagined you beating off to them and how before you'd cum you'd lean into my ear and whisper "You're so fucking sexy." I hate your standards for sexy.

Not a place to be on my parts. Do pants and tie on my part? Nah. Forget that class can be dress to impress now that Cali is sold out carnitas cart for the day. Shoulda pulled a sorority girl

and done the makeup and heels to 8 A.M. Intro to Western Civ. I looked shitacular, yeah. And the last time I saw you Michael, you basically said the same thing. Told me I look better with short hair—the absolute truth, but as I said I am doing Locks-of-Love again so please stop telling me that—and I hadn't been to the gym in weeks; and despite all of that, in a Las Vegas hotel room you'd whisper— with me sandwiched between you and the panting Finn you picked up at the club— how sexy I still was... and this time you'd already cummed and I stared at the empty companion twin bed several feet away wondering why I didn't bother to leave you and the Finn alone.

Both had better toes than mine. Yeah, I dig minutia shit. Righty might pack ass, but he's sitting on it so aint no way to tell. Two people argue over an elbow and where it should be— swear on In-N-Out secret menu style you can't make up poetry like that! Then Lefty smiles. Yeah, I noted. Righty seems to be holding something but then his ears (but I wrote "eyes" in my notes) distract me 'cause they're m & m small and make his head balloon. Stacks hairless with faint, light scatter and that could be manscaping or just good genes— again, not me— and Lefty is darker, but can tell he just gave me the bird for staring at his junk! Shit. It's just there and you know they're both gay and if they're not they've at least slept with men.

Now I'm callin' blue on Lefty and Righty is brown for eyes and hair (dark though). It was actually rather sweet in a sad way. Justin seemed so nervous. His feet bounced from *releve* to *en pointe*. Watching anyone naked and nervous makes me feel the same no matter how much clothes I have on. Michael, maybe that's why sex with you was always so soft; you had no shame in your body so I had none in mine. He breathes quickly and more often than his friend, something I'm sure the art class isn't watching because you can't capture that— later one of the

models would say it's different because writers respond immediately and catch all the small changes. It's true.

So Righty is all hah-hah-hah in the chest like he's stroking then clenches his cheeks. Lesson learned? You can't hide a body under light. Lefty pretends he enjoys the attention but aside from a knee that goes turkey he's statue. Yawns even. I know you can't help that shit but imagery fool! I remember at the spas you'd be busy 'til 4 in the morning and me in the room or hot tub yawning wanting to get back to bed. You and your ass.... I love shadow over skin and how the two models conjoin at knee and elbow. Michael, you really need to reflect on that: how knees and elbows are mirrors, are synonyms for movement.

Dick hasn't moved on Lefty (and that's important!). They say they're fine, no breaks. I gotta get up but don't. Always said that too when you asked if I was down for company to the bathhouse. Righty got veins spidering his feet and nips the sort of perk that you pierce 'cause you can. Shoulder raise like triangles of skin to neck of lift while Lefty shrinks his torso like AIDS like that guy who asked if I would fool around with him in the sling who we both knew had bug(s) and who said O.K. 'cause he was French (Canadian actually) and the place was dead for forty bucks and it was just head.

The guy on the left is talking and flirting with me: I'm convinced of this. But then again, we both know that I think any man who suggests an interest in me is gay. I try to turn my gaze away and ask myself whether it is rude to look at the clothed people in the room. I wrote my notes in red and chewed on my pen (I hate being obvious) when Lefty looked and Righty pretend x-rayed the plaster away. Actors, sheeshes! There's a blip on his pec and Lefty burrows his brow old man style, the precipice to distract 5 o'clock happy hour still on shadow.

The left one retracts his fingers and crosses paths with my line of sight again. He smiles a lot and it makes me wonder if we have some sort of inside joke, that maybe we're now telepathic. I love pretending everything— if the lamp suddenly broke (I forgot why I wrote this, but I think I was referring to the lighting fixture suspended overhead and that if it crashed it would kill the two of them). Sex and death are acronyms for names of people I fucked. I guess you can tell pretty easily if a naked man is flirting with you. Still, I'm pretending. You and I were making plans to see each other over Labor Day weekend and Halloween, neither of which actually went through. That was pretending, though I didn't know it at the time. I move my toes like the model does and I can't tell if he just *grew*. "What wonderful power this is for the both of us!" I think.

My socks don't match. Snow. Yeah. Again with the not thinking. I haven't gotten this Missoula winter down. Not like we practice winter weather back home and learn how to dress appropriately. Khakis need serious suds after a bike storm. Standing Lefty shines abs and a leaf tat on back. Everyone is too serious and I take off my sweater. When Righty is not in profile in breaks his teeth are braces or vampire. And when they return I want to tell Lefty his dick isn't in the right place—he's "up." Details! Joyce would have noticed! They seem smoother after talking with us—I feel my flabs would roll and I see a guy adjust his hair in a mirror. For Righty with Oprah microphone time: what's the point of going all Greek if you don't flash your tools? My ~~writing~~ not makes them nervous.

And suddenly they're not nervous. Because they're no longer attractive, white males I would want to cook an overly complicated dinner for featuring stuffed acorn squash, homemade ciabatta, and ginger poached pears. They're Black. Female, too. An aunt and niece. Matt or Matthew (possible names that I overhear from the painters for the left one, not symbolism—

consciously at least) smiles and scrunches his face, turns Easter red and no one is complaining about the elbow anymore. I want to ask them if they would recognize me without my clothes anymore than I would if they put some on. Michael, would you recognize me at 3 A.M. on Sunday morning meandering the cul-de-sac maze of the Hollywood Spa? I've fallen in love with the man on the left and would too with the right if he would bother to look at me. And I'll forget him by Monday (it's Thursday now). You know that's the only way I love. Yes, I think you were an exception until things changed. Men don't pierce their ears anymore, the music is looping, see my word painting of your ribs— these are actually questions that I don't ask out loud, but instead use to test my newly-developed psychic abilities. I take every gesture of his body as a yes, even the dropping of a sheet.

5 more minutes and now freestyle the way. They're dicks again. But the tat on Righty's ankle, actually a scar or burn that he wants me to touch. Lefty obliques as I ask a cat wandering the room if she wants wine 'cause Lefty is allergic to cats now. And Righty thinks breakfast— there are so many egg whites and what do you make of a grin? I sat up front middle because that's where I has tabe! So you know this is about me— it's always about me. Something Homer Simpson like in Righty and there's a dog too I hear— wanna tell 'em don't act when you're acting! But would settle to grip. Lefty has a son he will tuck in and tell he was fighting fires when asked where daddy was all night. Then it's a daughter in the morning. Righty has baseballs in his mouth all night.

Matty boi is business and crackin! The jump-off biggie and sweet. One dick aint bad. Invite to another. Puh-eice! And Michael knows how I liked you at first, but that after six years if I were going to make a move I would've, that for all our sexcapades in paying for anonymous sex because we'd be the hottest guys in there, that we still wore our towels while changing in the



locker room as we separated and drifted down the corridors looking for eye candy, the models better than any we'd find most nights. You and I were and are the definition of platonic. And Michael knows about it all, and not just the parts I don't want him to or never told him, because in my mind I've now decided I've always been genuine with him so none of it was untrue if I said it, and if I didn't say it, then it never happened to begin with. Like how I said I never did anything, just sat in a hot tub while you found love in the crawl spaces. And that was absolutely true a lot of the times. But not the last time I saw him and it was right after Christmas and he had asked if I hooked up with people in LA before coming to Austin and I said no even though I had with five separate men (different occasions, most old flames, over 3 weeks) including the man at the spa who was in his forties and his lips tasted like cherry gum or Chapstick. That I didn't tell him because I think it's better to lie to people when the truth isn't their business and it's better in the long run. That never happened. But you know that. You know this whole thing or any part of it could be a lie. You know for it truly to be nonfiction that I would have to lie to make me be real in it. You know that these yous are mes and the models are yous and if I close my eyes long enough I never even showed up to class that night. See, Michael, this is your voice— but I'm addressing Matt in it.

Matt, if there's something I've learned up in Missoula it's that I'm starting to figure out why I loved him so much and still he left. That I can simply say the models were ugly and I didn't hurt him that night left me and I'm actually doing great at the moment. That I will call him after I finish writing this and celebrate our four-year anniversary. That tomorrow will be the six-year (I hate odd numbers). That now he's absolutely gone and that means I get to rewrite the whole story, even the parts that happen after the fact. That we have three kids (two boys and a girl). That we also have a Mastiff and a Daschund in the backyard of our house in Melbourne.

That I went to Le Cordon Bleu for patisserie and he teaches economic anthropology at the local university. That our lives are busy, but very fulfilling. That at thirty-something he is killed by a drunk driver and leaves me destroyed and a single father. That I don't like that ending and decide I'm back in my twenties living in Montana for the moment. And Michael, while playing god with a reality I'm realizing I inhabit as a coping mechanism for acknowledging truth, I noticed the cat finally stopped maneuvering the room, sat in my view of the left model's dick, and licked her fur. That's the most satisfying ending I can offer, and even that didn't happen in that precise sequence of events.

What I Learned

From Mona

Simpson

vii

There's something I don't follow with the short story form. Poetry for all its turns and possibilities makes sense. Screenplays and plays, though uncomfortable to produce, are things I don't struggle with. Even my crack at the novel yielded a respectable result and comprehension of its macroscopic structure, especially for being fifteen at the time of writing it. But I can't seem to nail the short story.

And it's not that I haven't written stories; I've composed dozens of pieces ranging from micro-fiction to novella-length. The problem is none of them are what I'd consider "completed." No matter how many drafts or revisions I undertake, no story has ever resolved itself to a clarity that I have always read in the stories I most admire.

But I did get close once. I was a senior in college, and it was my final quarter at U.C.L.A. As part of the individual major I invented in order to bypass taking Chaucer, but to force the department to let me enroll in all of the creative writing workshops offered, I had to complete twelve workshops from six genres. By my last quarter, I completed eleven of those, but left to fulfill the requirement was one fiction workshop.

By that time I notched two fiction workshops onto my belt. The first occurred with an Iowa writer named David Wong Louie, a skinny Asian man in his thirties, under whose direction I wrote a graphic story about two straight men who have a not so straight tryst as a metaphor for the invasion of Iraq. That story was followed by a work that tested the reader's discomfort ala Albee's *The Goat... Or Who Is Sylvia?* During the workshop for the latter, he yelled at me in front of everyone for pedaling smut to the rest of the class. I remember talking to him one-on-one about it in his office hours, and he explained someone could've complained to the department and fired him for allowing such an obscene story to be presented. I also remember before I

walked into his office hours that I could overhear him through the cracked door discussing my character as a person with another student in the class. Neither knew I was waiting outside. I wasn't trying to fire anyone nor did I think the story would be as poorly received as it was; I was nineteen, in love writing, and wanted to push the boundaries of the relationship between reader and work because I grew tired stories where characters were repulsive— but only to the world they inhabited. I wanted to dismantle the fourth wall that separated the reader from the emotion embedded in the writing. It was a genuine attempt that backfired and its lessons scarred me to the point that I didn't enroll in a fiction workshop for two years; I wrote nothing during that time. The only remnants of those failed experiments are the no bestiality and no sex scene workshop rules at U.C.L.A, which I still don't tell people were both inspired by me.

My second workshop paired me with Columbia's crown jewel, Mona Simpson. Mona was a classy woman and beautiful for her age. She had children and spoke about them from time in workshop in a way that made you forget she was anything more than a devoted mother. But behind her poise, her grace, her intimidating charm that made me thirsty for tea for unknown reasons, she was a powerful writer known for her craft and intelligence when it came to discussing other people's work. Some people are born to be admired, and Mona is one of those people. How else can you explain the story of her brother, her ex-husband, her every studio in Hollywood must be trying to buy the movie-rights-to-her-life-story world? I knew of her rock star life and that any fiction writer who hoped to make it big like herself had to befriend her or at least her agent. She waltzed in Chang Rae Lee, Wole Soyinka, Joan Didion, Deborah Eisenberg, Amy Hempel, and Michael Cunningham for special craft talks only offered to the twelve undergraduates in her workshop. You can imagine the difficulty being in the presence of a Nobel Laureate and then asked to present your own short story. All I could manage to squeeze out was

a story about a cheerleader who didn't feel like cheering as her small town Mississippi football team was losing homecoming and a second-person account of a boy who was possibly molested by his father at a pool. Having accepted the notion that I could never be talented enough to be an invited guest to a Mona Simpson workshop, I reenrolled in her workshop so that I could at least be around those fantastic writers and complete my degree.

It was during that third workshop that I wrote the short story I'm most proud of. The title was "Mastectomy," and it was a first-person account of a woman after said procedure. Like any piece of fiction I write, the plot has to be more complicated and depressing than that. It involves this one-breasted woman who becomes a recluse because she identifies her worth as a woman through her feminine features and now cannot face the world. She throws away her clothes, her makeup, her anything that is supposed to draw attention to her body and spends entire days in her father's old sweatshirts.

And there's more. Craving some connection with the outside world, this woman stumbles upon an idea that if she could adopt a three-legged dog, then it would solve so many of her problems. She finds one and expects the dog to commiserate with her. But that doesn't happen. The dog doesn't understand he's supposed to have four legs, doesn't see himself as anything but a dog. This unnerves the woman to no end. So the story actually consists of her drunkenly sitting in her backyard with a gun pointing at the dog and her debating the merits of ending the life of this creature who can do what she cannot.

I was proud of that story. For the first time, I thought I created a work that was original, odd, devastating, cruel, and affecting all at the same time. I thought I captured a woman's grief and sensitivities. I thought this could be something publishable. It wasn't long into the workshop that I abandoned those thoughts.

The class, including Mona, loved the premise of a three-legged dog keeping a one-breasted woman company. What they didn't love were all the plot holes. Why didn't she have reconstructive surgery or at least purchase one of those gel boobs? How did she find a three-legged dog? Why didn't she just give the dog back instead of shooting him? They were all valid questions and once again a short story slipped through my palms because I couldn't remedy how the story could exist without someone questioning its plausibility. A sensitive girl in the class wrote a memorable comment on the top of the draft she handed back to me: *Why do you hate dogs?*

I don't hate dogs. In fact, I've owned four of them in my life. The story was more about me than the dog. It was also during that senior year that I became afflicted with an incurable and inoperable debilitation of the brain that is a cross between an idiopathic diagnosis and cancer. The doctors "knew" what was wrong and posed hypotheses about what caused my ailments, but they couldn't find the tumor to excise or the virus embedded to treat, whichever it were. So, I was labeled idiopathic secondary hypogonadic, and because they couldn't remedy the cause, the best they could offer was amelioration of the symptoms. One of the symptoms of the disease was impotence, which wasn't limited to erections. I no longer felt attractions toward people; in fact, I couldn't even stand in a room with strangers for more than five minutes before I broke out in a panic attack. The disease had destroyed my pituitary gland and as a result my body disintegrated without the hormones necessary to maintain muscle, want sex, and suppress psychosis. My identity as a man, as a gay male, and as a person withered away with my weight, which dropped below 130 pounds that November.

My second dog, Gingie (a Hebrew term for someone with red hair), was a behemoth. He was a mix between Golden Retriever and Irish Setter and tipped the scales at just over a hundred

pounds. He was my dog for ten years. When I was thirteen, he contracted a liver disease. I remember in his final week how he would lay on the special bed I had prepared for him, unable to hold his bladder or eat. I remember the first time I became intimate with those effects as a result of my own disease. I remember how sad I was to watch him waste away, thinking that my special bed that he soiled constructed of pillows and blankets stripped from my own bed would magically fix him before his final appointment with the vet. I remember him panicking in the vet's office and me a mess as I stroked his back and said goodbye. I remember they asked if I wanted to see him now that he was sedated. I remember crying, but managed to clearly say, *No*, because I wanted my last memory of him to be alive, even if it were of him raging against the dying of the light. I remember lying in bed one weekend because I was too weak to get up, and had a friend not used the spare key I kept under my welcome mat to drop by unannounced to borrow a book, I might have died of dehydration. I remember assuring him I would be fine once he brought me a bottle of water by convincing him that the doctors prescribed a strong medicine resulting in extreme fatigue, and that this sort of incident happened all the time to me. I remember he said he would return the book tomorrow, obviously a means to check on me. I remember writing that one-boob-dead-dog short story that weekend to keep me from crawling back into bed until that book was once again in my possession. No, I don't hate dogs.



*The Magical*

*Threesome That Did*

*Not Happen*

*Part II*

indent start italics play end italics colon this story is going to make me sound obsessive period  
and i mean that not in the ihyphenthinkhypherahyphenlothyphenaboutthyphensomething way  
because letapostrophes be honest colon thatapostrophes everything in this book period no comma  
i mean that in the obsessive is a euphemism for stalker way period like all my stories comma this  
one too is about a boyemdash and like even more of my stories comma it involves a boy i  
havenapostrophe really met in a story youapostrophere arenapostrophe going to believe  
happened period his name is darrin wright period and itapostrophers only made worse by the fact  
that i have this inexcusable habit for attaching to people who share the name darrin comma as if  
thereapostrophes this innate bond between us even though i donapostrophe go by that name  
period like i said comma obsessive period but hereapostrophes the kicker colon iapostrophem in  
love start italics in end italics him period i say open quotation mark in close quotation mark  
instead of open quotation mark with close quotation mark because darrin isnapostrophe a person  
in my mind colon heapostrophes a representation of the things iapostropheve always wanted start  
italics in end italics myself period paragraph break start italics pause end italics colon i was a  
dancer period thatapostrophes weird period itapostrophes weird to hear myself say that because  
on paper i was a dancer colon there are photos comma videos comma and even a degree from u  
period c period l period a period that proves i was in fact a dancer at one point in my life period  
the problem is that i feel that iapostropheve conned people into thinking iapostrophem one period  
paragraph break start italics rewind end italics i grew up being light on my fight open parenthesis  
not in the gay way comma though i am ellipsis so eh question mark close parenthesis period my  
mother would take me to israeli dance gatherings because she wanted me to be israeli period  
iapostrophem not sure how the two translate well comma especially since israeli dance is the

equivalent of country line dancing to hebrew pop songs comma but she did period paragraph  
break whatapostrophes interesting about the form is that itapostrophes all about speed period a  
good dancer will never leave the ball of his foot period the steps are simple open parenthesis  
grapevine comma box step comma yemenite comma etc ellipsis close parenthesis with the idea  
that anyone should be able to dance them colon the founders of the country wanted a community  
dance form that didnapostrophet relegate the art to those who were gifted movers period as a  
result comma the ability to dance well involved being able to move quicker comma turn faster  
than anyone else period the dance in short is about presence period paragraph break start italics  
fast forward end italics ellipsis i hated gym in high school period iapostropheve never liked  
running and somehow i was placed in the track and field class comma which mean half of all we  
did was comprised of running laps period the only way out of it was to take up a sport period that  
wasnperiodt so bad because i swam at clubs for three years period my father was a flyer and i get  
my broad comma flyer chest from him period start italics pause end italics iapostropheve never  
told him that the things that make guys want to fuck me are from him period my broad shoulders  
comma my hair legs comma my penis is roughly the same in girth as in lengthendash and  
iapostrophem not sure my any meansemdash and gay guys are all about thickness period  
sometimes when i recall him throwing me headfirst into that wall comma i can't help but wonder  
what he was thinking period did he understand that he was the one who gave me this body  
comma this body that other men want question mark paragraph break start italics play end italics  
ellipsis the problem with swimming is that itapostrophes a winter sport comma which meant at  
the end of my freshman year i had to either take gym at the start of my sophomore year or find  
another sport to play period the choices were football comma cross country comma and dance  
period cross country doesnapostrophet make sense given that i already told you my feelings with

running period football comma though i actually am a fan of watching comma is stupid for me to play colon i wasnapostrophe going to try to be the gay on the team period but dance at my high school was considered a sport period with my limited training i successfully audition for the schoolapostrophe company because i was a good mover and they needed men period dance companies are always short on men so they take what they can get period paragraph break pause italics rewind end italics period at this point i should probably tell you that this company was actually a big deal period itapostrophes produced famous dancers and has featured the likes of nikka costa comma alicia silverstone comma and monica lewinsky open parenthesis she didnapostrophe actually get in comma but she took some classes or something end parenthesis period in the studio comma posters line the walls of the past dancers in the companyapostrophes history colon iapostrophem not featured on any of them period but guess who is colon darrin period three of them in fact period and this is what i mean by obsessive period paragraph break darrin graduated six years before i did comma so he was still talked about by the director period he was her star male pupil period i knew everything about him because of that period i knew that he was just a tap dancer comma but had amazing ability and quickly picked up ballet and modern period i knew that one time in this über important dance scholarship that he shouldapostropheve won that his hearing aid open parenthesis heapostrophes deaf in his left ear or something close parenthesis fell out in front of the judges and they still wouldnapostrophe give him the prize because he was white and they only give it to minorities open parenthesis unofficially close parenthesis period i knew while he was a junior he was picked to dance in the final tour of the bella lewitzky company comma so he finagled this deal where the school let him leave for a semester period paragraph break actually comma this doesnapostrophe sound stalkerish period it reads as a cover blurb i know certain other things about him comma but theyapostrophe

random period maybe what i mean by obsessive is that i know these things about him without ever having met him or without ever having tried to learn them period i knew them and still know them because i remember wellemdash the colloquial nickname for me in the company was the guru of counts because i could remember all the counts in a twohypherhour dance concert not only for me comma but for twenty other dancers period i guess thatapostrophes why i was a good mover period i could learn the material quicker than those who could actually dance it comma so for the shortest time it seememdash to everyoneemdash that i was the one in the room to remember period

*Being Robby:  
My Life / My  
Death*

ix

I tell everyone to call me Robby despite the fact that it's not my real name. I'm not one of those my-real-name-is-Robert-or-Bob people. Robby bears no resemblance whatsoever to my real name. The two aren't even a part of the same language. A lot of people feel tricked by me when they learn this. I understand that feeling. Being Robby is probably the biggest lie I embody.

And I don't tell people my real name for the same reason that I don't tell people my birthday; instead, I tell them excuses, such as it's near-impossible to pronounce correctly in English... well, that's actually true. The "r" sound in Hebrew doesn't exist in the English language and most people incorrectly use a French "r" to say it. But even the "r" aside, the rest of the name is not pronounced as it appears to be spelled in English. I tell people it's easier to call me Robby, which it is and that's what they do.

But a good amount of people will ask me to pronounce it anyways, as if I were performing a trick for them. *Roll over Robby! Now say your real name! Good boy!* I don't understand the fascination with this. Maybe there's something exotic about foreign names that I don't process. Maybe people want to hear my accent. I usually oblige them with this request, but only after failing to change the conversation. And I know they mean no harm in asking because that's what you do with people: you ask about their names, their *real name*. Despite the fact that I understand they don't know my reasons for my alias and probably wouldn't ask me about my real name if they did know the back-story, I feel justified in being upset with anyone who inquires because knee-jerk anger isn't logical by definition. Otherwise, I try to be a nice guy.

There was some study I read about how the name you give your child can influence who he/she becomes. Something along the lines of unique names are associated with creative people who grow into the power and strangeness of those names. I can appreciate truth in that. And

maybe you don't even have to keep that name— simply owning a name that third-graders struggle to pronounce is enough to plant the artist's seed of isolation into memory. What blossoms is a vine that remembers the stigma of not being a Mark or a Charlie. Perhaps that's why when I started asking people to call me Robby at age fourteen that its blandness couldn't alter my morose nature or artistic proclivities.

And you have to understand that anyone who returns after summer break to his sophomore year of high school and insists that the name he went by the entire year prior is no longer appropriate is mentally unbalanced. A lot of people didn't understand, but they went along with it and soon enough I was referred to as Robby by everyone.

Depending on who tells the story, the name Robby has different origins. The common tale is that I was attending an Orthodox Jewish middle school, and in the fifth grade there was a substitute teacher for a science class who wasn't Jewish. She read over the roster at the beginning of class, but couldn't pronounce my name despite my attempting to teach her several times. She asked if I had a middle name to go by. I told her Darren/Darin/Derrin (the spelling on my birth certificate is different than the spelling on my social security card and my passport, and I never learned which one I was supposed to adopt). The other kids in the class laughed. They never considered I could be a Darren— the spelling I prefer. After class the kids joked about it. One of the more clever ones said, *You know, he really looks more like a Robby than a Darren.* Then a different boy agreed with him. Then another. Soon enough, they all thought it was the funniest joke ever devised and they called me Robby for the rest of the day. I expected the joke to stop being funny the next day or the next few at the latest, but it didn't. They were relentless with the nickname. After a certain point, I resigned the urge to correct them and accepted that I'm a Robby.



I prefer the telling of that story. It's one of the happier versions. Another story is that I named myself after a friend of mine who overdosed on cocaine at the age of sixteen. He was the first boy I loved. He was my closest friend— though I only thought that because I had few friends to begin with and in reality he probably didn't care much for me. He used to be a great kid and tremendously smart until his parents sent him to an ex-gay therapy camp; he came back with a drinking habit. He once told me they turned on a fire hose and sprayed it over him while he slept if they thought he wasn't making enough progress, that they would have him watch gay porn while electrodes were attached to his dick, and if he sprung an erection they'd shock him. It's hard to fault a person, much less a kid, for turning to drugs after an experience like that. I was devastated by his death. A month later I decided I wanted his name. I remember his parents asked me to dinner and I went because I felt they were lonely and needed to be parent to any kid for at least one meal. I remember Robby's dad drinking a bottle of wine during the dinner, and when he drove me home later, he mentioned how he didn't think it was an accidental overdose. He asked me what I thought; I told him the sky looked as if it could hail. I never heard from his parents again.

There are other versions, but I don't tell them often so I've forgotten most. The truth of the matter is that those stories aren't necessarily lies. There were substitutes who couldn't pronounce my real name. Many people think I look more like a Robby than a Darren/Darin/Derrin. Yes, I did have a friend— named Robby— who passed away shortly before I renamed myself.

I think one of the reasons I manage to get away with the lie of false identity is that I play the part well. For instance, English is not my first language. I do my best to hide my accent and am successful for the most part, but if you pay attention to my lips when I talk, you'll notice my

mouth drags to the left because I fight to hold the natural inflections of my tongue. The same goes with my enunciation— that it's either too precise or that common words escape me to be confused by people for a lisp. Americans don't like to hear foreigners speak their language better than they can, so they're more inclined to believe in my native-ness.

And I say that as if I'm not American, but I am. I was born in Los Angeles. I grew up in Los Angeles. But I tell people I was raised in New York and Israel and that I'm half-Israeli. That's true though to a certain degree. I did live in New York for quite a bit of time when I was younger and in Israel, but it was my mother trying to avoid my father and I cannot say how much time I really spent outside of L.A. because at that age it's too easy to conflate a month with a year. I know entire summers took me from home, and at a very young age I was pulled out of school and found myself in Petach Tikva, Israel, but can't say for how long.

The lying begins with my mother. It's something I'm convinced I inherited or was at least taught by her before it became a defense mechanism. She was the one who liked to postulate that we're relatives of Bob Dylan. True: her maiden name and his original surname are identical. True: they both have family from Poland. That aside, there's nothing else to anticipate my invitation to his family reunion; that never stopped her from telling us when we were young that we couldn't deny the possibility. After a certain point, I believed it.

Like the way I believe I'm half-Israeli. Though it's true I'm only half-American based upon my parents' origins, Israel is not technically the other half. It's Poland. My mother was born in Poland in a town she told me the forgettable name of once and only because it was required for a financial aid document for college. She doesn't like talking about Poland. I tell her I qualify for EU Citizenship if she turns over her birth certificate. She asks me why I need such a thing. I lie and say *I want to work abroad* when in reality it's my backup plan for if I cannot

secure health insurance. She doesn't talk about Poland outside of the context of the Holocaust—but she likes to talk about that. After she explained how my grandfather's family was killed in Auschwitz, including a boy who would've been my uncle— then age seven— when I was only five, and showing me the picture of the boy, I learned never ask about Poland the way I don't like to be asked about my name. My mother always said I resembled the boy in the photograph, but I never saw similarities.

As a little girl, her family relocated to Israel soon after it became a country. The story of their escape from Poland into Israel post-WWII is harrowing, but I'm sure parts of it are figments of her imagination. Nonetheless, she grew up there and has dual-citizenship. Because of that, I have dual-citizenship. It's not exactly a lie then to say I'm half-Israeli.

I'm not sure at what age my mother gives birth to my half-brother, but I think it puts her around eighteen. It's the same reason I'm not sure why she and her first husband move to New York or why they divorce. I'm also not sure how my own parents meet a decade later, but it has something to do with a plane or being on a kibbutz. And I don't know what they saw in each other considering I never recall them getting along; I would never believe my parents were married had I not grown up seeing that they were— a form of true-lying in itself.

Part of the reason they never seemed in love was that my father didn't want to be party to the lies that being in my family suggested. He laughed at many of my mother's stories and often treated me to McDonalds after an impromptu Holocaust recounting during a family car ride. These lies were larger than the house we rented, but were told to tell our friends we owned if they asked.

My life began and ended with the lie of the Orthodox Jew. My father had been raised Reformed, but he enjoyed his religion and became more and more Conservative, which is the

equivalent of moving from Unitarian to Episcopalian. My mother, though she contends being raised devoutly Orthodox, always practiced a Conservative lifestyle while I was alive. She frequently ate un-kosher food, used electricity on the Sabbath, and didn't abide by many of the rules of Orthodoxy that she then sent her children to a private Orthodox school to learn.

Despite what we were at home, we were instructed to portray the illusion of being Orthodox. We were deeply embedded in a community and risked social outcasting if they knew otherwise. The odd part was that most of the families in the community were as lax about practicing as we were, but they too adopted the façade.

When I was four, I remember my mother picking me up from school on a Friday afternoon. As we walked to the car, I asked her who created god. It wasn't a mean question, but that's how I felt it was taken by how she responded. I was curious and genuine in that manner. I simply reasoned that if god made everything then something had to make god. In my head I pictured a genie in some giant lamp rising from a plume of pink smoke and inventing god. It didn't occur to me that something needed to have fashioned the genie first. She told me never to ask that question again; I felt embarrassed as if it were an obvious answer and I were stupid for not knowing it.

With that experience in mind, it came naturally that I didn't tell my parents I was gay for years after I knew. I was seven when I first recognized my feelings for the same gender. I was at summer camp and the male head counselor was a man— though he was probably twenty at the time— named Matt Saile. It wasn't sexual, but I dreamed about him. How my entire family would be killed in a car crash except for me, how he would then adopt me and I would live with him in his apartment. It wasn't a perfect life. He was a struggling, single father and there were always problems to deal with, but he loved me. We were happy. I was too young to know how

gay sex worked, so it didn't occur to me that two men could have sex. All I knew is that I wanted to be around him. At seven I accepted that meant I was gay; I also recognized I could tell no one. This was the time in the nineties when simply coming out as bisexual to your family was risqué enough to book you on all major talk shows and AIDS was commonly believed in public perception to be transmitted through touching. I remember watching all those programs and how poorly families accepted the news. No, I couldn't tell anyone. There was the time while I was still young when I sat up in my bed in the middle of the night: I repeated for several minutes to myself that I was gay in some form of personal assurance. I don't think I woke my brother who shared a room with me; if I did, then he never mentioned it.

Part of realizing you're gay at a young age means developing an obsessive need to please people. Like the way dogs can sense fear, adults— at least in mind—could sense deceit. They might not know what you were hiding from them, but they knew it was *something*. And the way this was remedied was to give them no cause to suspect you or at least appease them enough that they left you alone. I was the über polite kid. All my teachers and parents' friends knew me as a respectful— up to a brownnosing point— child.

My mother likes to tell people how it was obvious when I was a child that I was gifted the way I formed sentences and carried on long conversations about matters beyond my age with any adult who'd entertain me. I don't remember this. She also claims she had me tested and I was declared a genius. I don't remember that either, but I did qualify for Mensa when I was fifteen. In reality, my mother was a typical Jewish mother in that she bragged about anything she could, even if it weren't true. She also latched onto anything she could force her children into against their wishes if it meant recognition.

It was that neurosis that ruined our family. Aside from maintaining a false depiction of our religious life, there was tremendous pressure to perform well at everything. It was unacceptable if I received an A- on a test, and I had to join the synagogue's choir despite the fact I don't sing well only because other boys in the community sang in it. My mother would tell me how much I hated those boys and shouldn't let them overshadow me, but I didn't hate them. Sure, they were mean to me at times, but in the way boys are often mean to each other at a young age and then move on. We generally left each other alone. She was convinced I was at war with them and must out-sing, outperform, and outsmart these enemies of mine that didn't exist outside of her fantasy.

As you can imagine, if a mediocre test grade were enough to set my mother into a rampage, then consider what would manifest after learning that I was gay. I never disliked being gay and I never feared for my life in the real world for being gay, but I did at home.

I want to say I understand where my mother is coming from, but I don't always believe I do. It's like the time over Thanksgiving dinner when she attempted to justify the killing of Palestinians. If your family were killed in the Holocaust and you relocated to Israel, a country that had been attacked from its conception, you too would always be too taut in anxiety to breathe. I know it's out of this fear that my mother's hate for people she perceives as threats culminates. She earnestly believes she's doing good, that she has always done good.

I also attribute her abuse to this embedded fear. I never asked my half-brother why our mom and his dad divorced, but I assumed it was for the same reason my parents did, the same reason my half-brother stopped speaking to her, and the same reason I stopped speaking to her. Within our family, she was constantly fighting for control as if we were trying to usurp her

imaginary throne. There was never a day she didn't yell, and there were never reasons for her to raise her voice.

It began with my father. She would pick fights over anything. How he would read too much. That he spent too much time with the cat. He worked too long of a day despite the fact she didn't work herself. He was passive aggressive at his best only to revert to an explosive power—one that helped him win an NCAA title in crew— when truly enraged. I never saw him hit my mother— though I knew she hit him and he was ashamed to acknowledge it— and he wouldn't because he'd never lay a finger on a woman. That was how he was raised. His children though weren't as lucky as she. It wasn't a constant violence, but if my mother set him in a bad mood and he had caught us doing something that rubbed him the wrong way, he would show little restraint. I remember being six and him pressing my head into the carpet with the force of his hands and body weight: I was sure at that moment that the human head could split like a watermelon if enough pressure were applied. To this day I don't know what triggered his attack; however, I do know that the spot in the living room where this attack occurred is also where my father slept at night before the divorce. I never believed his reasons about how he had a bad back and that sleeping on the floor was the best thing for it.

My parents divorced when I was thirteen, shortly before my bar mitzvah, but they hid it from everyone, including my aunt who flew out from New York and stayed with us, until a month after the rite. I know a lot of kids react poorly to their parents' divorces; I was not one of those kids. I thought getting a divorce was the best thing they ever did for their marriage. I thought that this might finally fix things in the house, end the screaming and torture, destroy the ceaseless charade.

It doesn't sound like it now, but up until that point I was on my mother's side of the arguments. She raised me to be on her side. And because most of her transgressions were originally directed toward my father and his toward me, I despised my father and wanted nothing of his side. I believed my mother when she explained he cheated on her. To this day, I'm not sure if he did or didn't. I know when it would've happened, I know the woman it would've happened with, and I remember contemplating my father's possible infidelity before I was told that he committed it because I hated him enough to believe he would do that to my mother as an alternative way to punish her because he couldn't bring himself to strike her physically. But I also know my mother and her jealousy and her propensity to declare anything she construes as real. Still, I'd like to know the truth, but I never pressed either for the information. I don't think I ever will.

After my father moved out, my mother's anger intensified. She expended two husbands and one son, and it never occurred to her that she was the reason for those failed relationships. The minutia for which she attacked my father transferred to her children. It's hard to say which of the three of us she went after most, but I don't think I'd be wrong for saying it was me.

I don't have a background in psychology, but it seems her reasons lay in insecurities—a problem with power and maintaining control over the impossible world she imagined in her mind. If I stepped out of line with that world, I would be punished. The abuse was mainly verbal in the form of long shouting matches with herself. I'm sure the neighbors heard the daily commotion, but they never acknowledged it if they did. There was physical abuse in the form of hitting, which I could've prevented had I hit her back, but I took my father's stance on hitting women; however, I convinced myself at fourteen that pushing my mother away to the ground or grabbing a wrist as she tried to land a blow was self-defense and not the same as hitting.



Sometimes people see me and they assume something is wrong when all I'm doing is thinking about what to make for dinner or some other trivialness because there's a plaintive stare glued to my face. I forget that I often wear that look as a relic of my childhood the way rubber stretched too far will not reset itself. On my twelfth birthday, I locked myself in the bathroom and drank cleaning fluid. It was the first of three times I would attempt suicide before I graduated from high school. The details are fuzzy, but I recall coming home from school excited and my mother managing to ruin my celebration in a way only she could by turning my birth into a day about how much I disrespected and shamed the family. I've never celebrated a birthday since. I don't expect to celebrate another birthday, and I make sure of this by telling people fake dates when asked when it is. They become annoyed when they discover the lie and confuse it with coyness. This is a lie I think people would forgive me for if they knew its context.

The one thing about my mother that I retained an advantage over was that she wasn't intelligent— though she often claims otherwise. In fact, I started beating my father in chess at age three, and it wasn't many years later that I became the most intelligent person in the house. I used this intellect to throw a monkey wrench into my mother's plans. When it came time to apply to yeshivas, I didn't bother to look over the applications. By the time my mother realized this, the deadlines all passed, and she had no choice but to enroll me in a public high school. My plan to break away from the community succeeded, but this was the most embarrassing scenario for her. She had no idea how she could face the community. Her rage and battles with me grew.

My decision was predicated on more than the fact that I had grown weary of yarmulkes. Around puberty, students move away from stories of Noah and his Ark and begin to study the parts of the Old Testament where god explains the great sin of homosexuality. I sat through class after class of rabbi after rabbi ranting on the evils of gay lust as if there weren't a possibility of

any students being gay sitting in the desks before them— or if there were, then their words would ameliorate any desires. I was instructed that it was a choice, but I knew otherwise. I couldn't say that, but I knew. It became clear that I needed to choose between my god and something innate the way my mother almost a decade before described the existence of god as when I posed my question to her. To me, this desire, which bloomed from simple cohabitation with men to wanting to experience the totality of their bodies, was a god I believed in. I wanted to pray in the muscled arms of a man and feel fullness, to taste the love of a personal god on my lips as stubble from his face rubbed against my chin and rug-burned into it as proof of his love for me being real the way I imagine my mother accepted the sun rising every day as proof of god's love for her people. This love: a belief I could be devout in.

I should note that it wasn't as if I were slumming it by attending a public high school. We lived in Beverly Hills because my mother wanted to tell people we did, that we possessed money when it was obvious from the old, yellow Volvo station wagon she drove that we didn't; however, the city was renowned for its education, which resembled a magnet performing arts school district more than anything else. Years later my mother would accept that I made the right decision to forgo yeshiva, but that was only under the influence of her seeing me named top-scoring student in the state's Academic Decathlon and the full-scholarships I won along the way.

I should say it was during high school that I came out to my parents or rather that they knew after rummaging through some of my e-mails. I should also say it involved me in a police station and her coercing an officer into making me confess my sexuality. It was also the time she called my father over to the house. That was when I said I refused to talk about my life in that regard, and he yanked me out of a chair by my shirt and dragged me across the house. I grabbed onto a door frame and cried that he was choking me and had to let go of my shirt. I'm not sure if

I passed out or if the shirt ripped first, but I remember coming to in my room as my father lifted me by one arm with hideous strength so that he could strike two jabs to my stomach before throwing me headfirst into a wall. I remember waking up on the floor and my father's leg pressing into my ribcage like a photo I saw of Ernest Hemmingway posing with an animal he just killed on safari. I remember my mother watched all this happen and showed no remorse or protest against my father's actions. There are stories to explain those events, but I'm not going to tell you them. I'll say the abuse only increased and culminated when I begged my mother to accept me, and she spit in my face then slapped me. She said she'd always choose her community over me.

The odd thing is that I never managed to stop loving my parents though I know I have reason to. It was also during high school that my mother went into cardiac arrest. The doctors said it was rare given her age (forties at the time), but given her diet, inactive lifestyle, and rage that circulated her every breath, I wasn't surprised her heart finally revolted from all the stress.

It was an odd time because it was only weeks before my sophomore year of high school was coming to a close. I made plans to attend an arts camp over the summer. When I'd return, I'd move in with my father in El Segundo, whom I had recently begun to speak with. The call arrived during my last class on a Wednesday in May. It was an English class and we were learning about metaphysical poetry. Ms. Goler said the attendance office had requested my presence and that I should go with all my stuff. I didn't think much about it until I saw my father and knew something very wrong had to have occurred for him to be standing there.

We spent thirty minutes looking for my brother because he was ditching a class. I told him during the car ride to the hospital that if she passed away in those thirty minutes that I'd never forgive him. At the hospital, my mother's religious friends were waiting with my aunt.

One of the men approached me, called me by my real name, and said we must to pray— an indirect way of stating they needed a minyan and were short a few men— but I kept on walking to the waiting area. I want to make it clear that I didn't cry up to this point. I wasn't stoic, but it was hard for me to feel for this woman who had yelled at me that very morning that I was going to burn in hell.

One-by-one immediate family entered her room where she was treated in the ICU. I was the last to see her. As I rose from a plastic purple chair that smelled like rubbing alcohol, my father explained I didn't have to go in if I didn't want to. But I did. I knew goodbye was important even if only one-sided.

It's difficult to describe my mother in that room because she didn't look like my mother. Her face and chest were bloodied and bruised from a face-first fall onto the ground. She wasn't breathing on her own while her body wretched and spasmed under the influence of a respirator. She looked like a rag doll a child had taken poor care of, her hair dead dry from the cheap peroxide she bleached it with in an effort to pretend to be blonde— a synonym for young. To her left were her shoes placed in a Ziploc bag. Leave it to a gay boy to notice his mother's shoes. They were the ugliest fucking shoes I've ever seen—a cheap, gold-worn “pleather” with a low-cut that resembled a cross between a high heel design and slipper. There were holes in them and they were dirty. She wore those to work where I would later learn one of her patients at the rehab facility operated by Chabad performed CPR on her. Years later she let him stay for a week on her couch until he could find a job.

I couldn't help but look down at my own shoes. They were relatively new. A pair of skater shoes that cost sixty-dollars. And in spite of all my hatred for my mother, I couldn't suppress the guilt of standing in those shoes and then looking at what she wore as a sacrifice so

that she would have the money to provide for my needs— though I'd later remember my father bought those shoes for me. And for the first and only time I cried. I walked over and kissed her on the mouth and said I was sorry. In truth, I know I had less to apologize for than she did, but she was my mother.

That night I was ravenous and ate a whole pizza for dinner. Nothing ever tasted so good and filling. I slept well even. I was at peace. The only thing that lingered in my mind was my aunt on the way out of my mother's room made a point to show me the dying man in the bed a few curtains over from my mother. We both knew what she meant when she said it was my choice if I wanted to end up like him.

I would like to say things were good from then on, but I'd be lying if I did. My mother recovered but never fully and used her health as a defense for when she became abusive. Sound familiar? She's still as viral in temperament, but now she has lost her short-term memory and won't remember anything she screams at you— or so she claims. In recent years I've learned to scream back, which I suppose is fine because she doesn't seem to remember those moments either— or she does a very good job at hiding it.

It's convenient to blame my mother for a lot of things. There's so much I can't explain for you— like how her personal vendetta against my father's side of the family prevented me from seeing any relatives on his side until after my parents divorced. None of her family lived within 3,000 miles of Los Angeles and the closest in age was a cousin fifteen years older. This blockade against my father's family occurred while I had grandparents who lived three blocks away that I hadn't seen in a decade. I remember when my grandfather died, one grandkid was supposed to speak on behalf of each of his children's families at his funeral. It was odd how I could only address him as my grandfather while all the other grandkids referred to him as Papi in

their speeches. I never knew him by that name because I never knew him. When my sister helped my grandmother clean out their house after the death, said she found boxes with pictures of us up to age five. That made up for him being a millionaire and my dad's kids being the only grandchildren left out of his will. That's also something I cannot forgive my mother for.

But it's just as easy to indict my father. I can even cast the rod of blame at my half-brother for refusing to surface during my mother's ailment, an act of treason even I didn't consider after all I had been through with her. And though I know there are two sides to every story, I don't know what I could've done that was bad enough to justify any of the years I lived with those people.

I've never lived at home since I started college—not even during breaks. I don't plan on staying with them ever again, even for a visit. When I do drop by town, I rent hotel rooms and meet my parents for meals at restaurants I can afford to pay for myself, as if they were clients of mine I needed to maintain but despised beneath our transactions.

It's been a while since I attempted suicide. And I know there's a lot of psychological research about the importance of dealing with trauma in order for it to leave the body. But I also know the human mind evolved to create repression as a means to discover reasons to live. There's more to this story of how I became Robby—much of it more unsettling than what I've shared—but I don't remember it or at least I pretend that I don't. This is because I don't remember I have such a troubled history until I sit down and think about it—say when someone asks me about my real name or why I changed it. And as if my body knows the potential that exists to destroy it with its own hands if I'm ever too conscious of my past, in my mind when I listen to my breath, each exhale sounds like a chant that repeats as a prayer to be allowed to experience tomorrow: *forget, forget, please forget....*

The best way I knew how to accomplish this forgetting was to shed my identity from that time. So I changed my name to something anti-Jewish— Robby is rooted in German. I give false birthdates. I reconstruct my past and lie about much of it. I think the reason people dislike my lying so much is because they believe the lying involves them. Yes, they're being lied to by me, but the reason for the lie is more on me than it's on them. I lie because lying means I don't have to remember what Clorox tastes like.

It's a strange power parents retain over their sons. They choose to circumcise them. They choose their names. I can't reclaim my foreskin, and I'm not sure I'd want to if I could. I do, however, believe in the right to claim your existence as your own. That it's my right to tell or invent my history in the manner that best lets me live. That it's my right to stand naked in a field and shout into the darkness how much the moon must obey me by any name I choose to be revered by.

Million-

Dollar

Wound



I remember being twenty-one. I remember graduating valedictorian of a Top 25 university. I remember I fought with my family after the graduation ceremony and refused to eat dinner with them that night even though we had reservations at a restaurant I picked. I remember moving to Austin the day after I gave a commencement speech on how to get yourself dismissed from jury duty. I remember doctors saying I would survive the year, but that my body was symptomatically relapsing. I remember my family never knew there was a time bomb in my brain and it had been detonated. I remember I was given a timetable for how many years I had left to live. I remember I multiplied that best-case scenario number by 365 and it still seemed small. I remember being determined not to depend on my family in that they didn't know I was leaving Los Angeles, they didn't pay a dime to cover the cost, or they didn't get my address in case they wanted to visit because I didn't want them to see me growing sick.

I remember there were no what-I-thought were considered "real jobs," where I wore a tie to work, owned seven suits with at least two of them colored blue, and earn a minimum of fifty thousand a year. I remember that my health insurance was going to run out in three months and that my medicines cost thirty dollars a daily dose. I remember applying to over twenty restaurants, coffee shops, and fast food establishments after I became desperate. I remember none of them gave me an interview because my education level rendered me overqualified. I remember that it never occurred to me that I could lie or simply not fill in the college attended section of those applications. I remember it was late June and the intense heat with humidity never abated at night, upsetting my mood. I remember not knowing any people in this new city aside from a person whom I met during a scouting trip to Austin that wouldn't return my calls now that I relocated a few blocks from his apartment. I remember I once sat outside his door on a Sunday evening until he came home. I remember he told me I had spunk, and I never saw him

again. I remember my savings account never dipping below a thousand dollars throughout college. I remember when four digits became three, and I still had no job.

I remember being on an awkward date one Sunday afternoon with a much older man who bought me drinks and was the head of the local Mason chapter. I remember he took me to his lodge office and we had sex there simply because I could then tell people I had sex in a Masonic Temple. I remember before we left the bar an older woman strolled in. I remember my date saying I needed to meet her. I remember he introduced me to her as the lady in hats. I remember she liked my face and gave me her business card. I remember my date joking that she owned a male-escort/strip service. I remember the lady in hats preferred her own phrasing as *Concierge in underwear*.

I remember not wanting to do it. I remember my pledge not to depend on my family's help. I remember I had only a month's supply of medicine left. I remember deciding you can be the valedictorian of a Top 25 university and that doesn't mean walking around in your underwear while men stick dollars into the elastic waistband is beneath you if it means survival. I remember I called her on a Wednesday evening. I remember she called me back with my first booked job the following Friday morning.

I remember the gig was dancing at Charlies, a gay bar built in the shadow of the Capitol Building that was known for being serviced by older men of mixed races, but there were never more than two dozen patrons at the busiest of times. I remember guys my age never frequented the bar, and I had little to worry about in terms of people in town recognizing me. I remember wondering why anyone came to that run-down dump equipped with a pair of rhinestone-covered cowboy boots that twirled over an oak dance floor. I remember I later found out one of the largest cocaine rings in town operated there. I remember the cocaine dealer being fond of me. I

remember on my twenty-second birthday he placed hundreds of dollars of product in my underwear. I remember him being angry that I refused to keep it. I remember he gave me his tattered St. Louis Cardinal's baseball cap as a consolation gift, the one he always wore. I remember him leaving me alone after I put it on.

I remember his name was Michael. I remember he was of Sicilian descent and hailed from Brooklyn. I remember he partnered with a short, brown man, named Jason, who was both Filipino and Jewish. I remember Michael invited me over to have a threesome. I remember him saying he doesn't pay for sex, but will cook an amazing breakfast in the morning consisting of sausages, Belgium waffles, and omelets. I remember making up the name of a current lover to change the conversation. I remember he wouldn't accept this answer and kept asking anyways.

I remember once he drunkenly told me based on the first night I showed up that he didn't think I'd last a week because I was too pale, my body out of shape from the medicinal treatments, and I didn't even own the right underwear. I remember he placed a bet with the bar about how long I'd last. I remember he lost over a thousand dollars on the bet. I remember working myself into the body I needed. I remember taking over 20 injections and supplements a day on top of my regular medications. I remember the FDA issued a recall for one of the supplements I took because it caused liver failure. I remember finishing that bottle of pills after I learned about the recall because if I couldn't make the money to buy my medicine then I wouldn't live long enough to die from a bad liver. I remember I soon owned an underwear collection valued over two thousand dollars.

I remember there were always two dancers per shift. I remember Guy, my dancing companion, was a tall and chiseled straight guy several years older than I was, paying his way through Texas State in San Marcos for Engineering. I remember him flirting with the rare

straight girl group who meandered in during a bachelorette party. I remember he liked to talk about blowjobs from girls. I remember he kept telling me I had to try pussy. I remember changing in the backroom after my first shift, and he cornered me. I remember I went for the bowie knife I kept on my key ring. I remember before I could reach the knife he put an arm on my shoulder and said I reminded him of a kid he picked on during high school. I remember him saying he always felt bad about teasing the kid. I remember he said if I wanted to survive there then I had to avoid pissing Michael off. I remember being curious why and he wouldn't tell me what Michael did for a living because the less I knew in this job the better. I remember this was before I learned about the cocaine. I remember after learning the truth that my original distaste for Michael turned into fear. I remember learning ignorance, even if only feigned, is salvation in many cases and that was the only way I finished shifts when he was in the bar. I remember asking Guy about what happened to that kid in high school, and he said he hanged himself from a football goalpost the day before homecoming.

I remember that I stopped telling people I went to college. I remember guys never tipped you if they thought you were smart enough to do better with your life. I remember none of the guys with more than enough money to give away ever tipped me. I remember that Michael aside, I met the nicest men on Earth in those bars and clubs. I remember being booked in Houston, Oklahoma City, and New Orleans. I remember hating Houston, but the guys loved me, and I could walk away three hundred cash a night. I remember that is where I met the Boeing engineer who described my ass as the quadratic equation, then introduced me to his family for Sunday Southern brunch. I remember in Oklahoma the men paid for all my meals and one lonely guy in his early thirties drove me to where the bombing took place. I remember him saying his father was in that building, and then I realized why he looked so lost. I remember it was Halloween in

New Orleans and there were ten thousand people who dropped by the bar. I remember an old flame from high school recognized me, but I didn't go back to his hotel room because it was obvious he was positive. I remember that no matter where I traveled to that I enjoyed myself and left being thankful that I heard those terrific stories that I'd one day try to tell them.

I remember one night Ronnie and Patrick, my two favorite admirers in Austin, were in their late forties and drunk for sad reasons. I remember going over to talk to them. I remember they each tipped me five dollars, something they did every time they saw me. I remember asking what was wrong and them insisting I wouldn't understand. I remember asking again and they told me. I remember when they finished talking about how Patrick's mother was sick they were still crying. I remember I told them of my own experiences of my sick mother. I remember them saying the reason every guy in the bar liked me despite the owner insisting I be fired because I didn't have a six-pack like the other dancers was that I didn't make the customers feel old, ugly, and unwanted the way the other dancers did. I remember they never touched me and would hand me the money in my palm. I remember they thanked me for listening. I remember that there were two, gentle souls raised in old Texas that were alone and drunk before seven o'clock on a Thursday, and it made me sad. I remember I gave them each a hug. I remember they tipped me another ten dollars each.

I remember whenever Michael was around I wished Ronnie or Patrick or any of the other guys who would intervene when he become too loud would magically appear to deflect his path toward me. I remember everyone was somewhat intimidated by him, but the regulars felt that it was their duty to protect me. I remember being so grateful for that loyalty despite the fact I never thanked them for their help. I remember I closed my eyes and held my breath to bear Michael's whiskey breath as he whispered insults and come-ons in my ears, both about fucking me. I

remember reminding myself this was all to survive and pay for graduate school applications so that I could get out of Austin, back onto my father's health insurance, and lead the life I had the talent to lead. I remember Patrick called me once when he became a vegetarian a few months after the owner got tired of my lack of abdominal definition and fired me despite the patrons continuously asking for me back. I remember calling Patrick back to thank him for being so nice the week I was accepted into graduate school in Montana. I remember thinking of how great it would be to leave the people who knew this part of me and hide it from everyone else. I remember how much I came to feel for people whose livelihood depended on the generosity of a dollar and that I ate, paid my rent, bought my meds, and applied to school with those green kindnesses. I remember the other dancers had their own reasons for dancing. I remember running into one a few weeks before I left Austin named Quentin, a straight boy in his mid-twenties. I remember asking how his baby was doing after the operation he financed through dancing. I remember tipping him five dollars and wanting to hand it to him. I remember he insisted I put it in his briefs and said the baby was great.

I remember missing it. I remember being thankful to be done with it. I remember one day while I was still working I dropped into the local army surplus store. I remember I bought a pair of combat boots. I remember I bought real dog tags with other people's names on them. I remember I bought a cap from Desert Storm. I remember these were all accessories to match the new camouflage print briefs I was going to dance in. I remember those briefs cost me seventy-five dollars. I remember the getup was supposed to make me lots of tips. I remember Michael seeing me in it from afar and moving toward me. I remember I could smell his skin seeping alcohol from its pores all the way from the other side of the bar. I remember praying in my head that he would go easy on me. I remember he stopped and stood and stared at me from a few feet

away and did so for the first time without any interest in my body as if I were diseased— which I was, but he didn't know that. I remember how he said the week before this incident that I had become his favorite, and suddenly, I felt awful that I had disappointed him despite how much I feared interacting with him. I remember he finally approached, and when I dropped to my knees to meet him at eye-level, he yanked me by the silver chain of the metal-beaded necklace so that my ear would sit by his lips. I remember him saying *You didn't earn those*. I remember him saying it again.

# Logan

xi



We'd been in Wyoming for fewer than twenty minutes when a tire went out. I want to say it was surprising, but we mentioned the possibility several times before leaving Missoula, and I even offered my own car's tire jack and iron if Sara's car weren't equipped— a form of foreshadowing I suppose. The blowout wasn't felt. While moving in the passing lane, the car started to produce a dragging noise as if we were driving over the ribbed barrier markers— but we weren't. The car's flat tire alert light lit up over the dashboard, and we gently pulled off to the left in a stretch of un-mowed grass and weeds.

It was odd, since I don't usually think of writers of being handy— and had I been riding with any other of the students in the MFA program my belief would have been founded— but among Kerry, Brian, and myself, we were able to change the flat in under ten minutes. Sara was the only one unsure of what to do, but it was her car so we didn't mind since she was the one with the flat— not us.

We went to work removing our luggage piled over the spare located in the trunk's trap door compartment. Kerry began to loosen the bolts to the flat, but I took over when a few proved too stuck for her. She moved the carjack into position, which Brian didn't notice and began to reposition it incorrectly until she showed him where the car was built to accept the upward force. Brian set to raising the car and Kerry then pointed out a way he could maneuver the rod's spinning without having to rethread each half-revolution. She said she changed many flats on her own Civic and it showed.

While I unbolted the tire, another car pulled up behind us to check if we were O.K. A man stepped out of the SUV. He was a guy in his late twenties, thick in the face, but attractive in that homegrown way. His wife— or whom I took to be his wife— sat in the car. As Brian attached the spare and I fastened it, Kerry began asking for directional advice. Buffalo was up

ahead and Sheridan was only ten miles behind, but it was already 7:20, and we didn't know if any shops would be open at this hour.

The unnamed man recommended Sheridan because it was larger and if we had to spend the night the bars were fuller there. Apparently, Wednesday is country western night. This sort of bad luck usually upsets me, but I remained surprisingly resigned to the situation because it wasn't anyone's fault; I also became better at managing my mood-swings and panic attacks with the help of a new round of medication. He mentioned one specific store that might be open. We said thanks as he turned around.

The spare was undersized so we could only hit thirty-five without causing another blowout, but in that time we called the tire store after finding its number on the car's GPS system. They were open until eight and even at thirty-five miles per hours we'd arrive in time. As we drove, I wondered to Kerry about what caused the flat, which shredded a good section of the inner tire. She said we probably ran over something some miles back and it weakened the tire's tread; the thing probably overheated the more we drove and eventually gave out. I believed her, not because she seemed knowledgeable about this sort of thing— which she definitely was— but because I knew her explanation to be true about people too.

I'm not good at describing small towns. Missoula is a small town to me so Sheridan seemed like another spot built off the highway with a series of seafood and chicken fast food stops, gas stations with regional candy I never heard of, and a Wal-Mart. The tire place was easy to find.

We climbed out of the car and I moved inside the shop looking for a bathroom. Brian was giving the guy behind the register his info to pay for the job when I walked out. But the kid said Brian didn't have to pay until the job was done. Brian nodded and proceeded back to the garage

where Sara and Kerry were watching the mechanics handle the repair, or at least that's what I guessed they were doing because I couldn't see them from inside the store. I stayed partly because there was a flat screen mounted on the far wall and partly because I thought the kid was cute. He was tall to me— about 6'2— with a skinny face, but the sort you find on a basketball player. I think lean is better word than skinny to describe him. I couldn't see his hair because he wore a hat, but judging from his eyebrows, I took him to be blonde. Something seemed delicate about him like looking at a giant glass window that you know would not just break, but just shatter with the right rock and the right amount of force. His name was Logan, or at least that's what his name tag on his maroon uniform read.

“So ya'll from Missoula?” he asked.

I figured Brian mentioned who we were in his chat. I smiled because it gave me a chance to speak to him.

“Yeah, we are.”

“Are you guys students or something?”

“Yes. Well, three of us are. Graduate students. The other guy graduated a year ago.”

“Oh, so you're like doctors?”

I laughed with my teeth showing, the sort of laugh that every man who ever complimented me has enjoyed. It was Michael's favorite thing about me. By the end of our relationship when I was symptomatically relapsing, he'd be speaking to me. And though I was looking directly at him, it was obvious I wasn't hearing a word he spoke as I focused on some other world he had no access to— like a tired bird flying over an ocean and looking for a patch to rest, but there is no land in sight. Michael told me he'd come over and touch my shoulder. I'd snap out of it and reflexively emit that laugh.

“Nah. We’re writers actually. We’re in the Creative Writing program.” I didn’t mention the program’s status or why it might be a big deal if he were interested in writing.

“So you guys like write books? Have you written any books?”

“Kinda. Well, no. Actually, that’s not true. The girl who owns the car has a book coming out. She writes fiction. Two of us are poets and the other guy writes nonfiction.”

His face twitched with a smile of his own. I wasn’t sure why this fact brought him such satisfaction, but he seemed genuine in his curiosity.

“I mean, we’ve all published something though. Journals. Magazines. That sort of thing. I’ve written some books. Six of them. They’re not published though.”

Maybe because few writers came through Sheridan or maybe he mistakenly thought we were more important people than we were, but he gave me a look. It was a look I saw on dates when I had said the right thing and the guy across the table connected with me the way tuning forks will match each other at the right frequency. He was beaming.

“So where are you from?” I asked. It wasn’t to be polite. I did want to know.

“Butte.”

I knew that place because we had driven through it earlier in the day.

“And what brought you here?”

“My girlfriend. She’s studying to be a dental hygienist.”

I remember a billboard on the way into town advertising Sheridan College. I assumed that included her program.

“Do you think you’ll stay here after she finishes?”

“No. It’s too small.”

I laughed at this, but not in a mean way— a way that conveyed I didn't know what he was talking about when I did.

“Are you from Montana?”

“No. I'm from all over. Born in California [I was careful to avoid saying Los Angeles because the two are met with different reactions up here]. Living in New York, Israel, New Zealand, and Texas before this [again, Texas is not the same as Austin].”

“Wow. That is a lot of places.”

He reacted as if there were a sense of achievement in my saying this, which could have been false for all he knew, that there was something respectable in my shuffling the globe.

“I'd love to go to those places. Israel, huh?”

People like to isolate that one from the list. I hated Israel. I was five and it was always too hot. When my living there is brought up in conversation, I include the tidbit of being half-Israeli, which I did to him.

“So you speak that language?”

The way he struggled with that sentence made it appear he wasn't sure what the name of the language spoken in Israel is; I often hear Israeli or Jewish when asked. His face twitched slightly in hopes that I'd pick up on it.

“Yeah, I speak Hebrew,” I said, nonchalant about the word— but said it loud enough to offer him the word for his memory. “It's my first language.”

“So you can read it too?”

I don't get his fascination with the topic and considered the fact that he might be a devout Christian. Christians love Israelis. I haven't quite figured out why yet since we did kill their savior— but hey, he was Jewish too, right?

Though Logan doesn't know it, there's something comical about his question. Reading Hebrew is easy. Anyone can be taught to read the language in a few hours. Also speaking it isn't hard. It's the conjugating and comprehension of what's said that eludes so many people.

“And New Zealand? Right?”

I like how he remembered and liked even more he wanted to check he remembered correctly. It was a meaningless gesture to him that endeared him on my part. It's the sort of thing that can only happen in this context: two people who meet in a speck of the world everyone else ignores and who will depart when the conversation finishes. I was the foreigner passing through and he wanted to squeeze me for all he could before I left. Knowing I'd never see him again, I wanted to tell him everything I could. I find it sad that this sort of openness only manifests in these odd circumstances, but I was prepared to answer whatever he asked. What was my real name. What sort of porn I watched. Why strawberries aren't really fruit.

“Yeah, I loved it there. It's a great place if you enjoy the outdoors. Aside from being beautiful, it's the safest place you can be lost. There are no native predators and so nothing on the island is carnivorous or poisonous. They don't even have snakes.”

He seems amazed by this world— that there are places without snakes— and mouths this last part as if the soundless movements would cast a spell of veracity. I mention that all the *Lord of the Rings* films were shot there and for some reason this shrinks his face. Had I ruined an imaginary world of his by saying it existed? Or perhaps I grounded one in reality that he now had no excuse not to access? I felt bad about this and there was a lull in our conversation. I finally spoke up by commenting on the game show broadcasting on the TV. I never heard of it, but recognized the host from The Food Network.

“So where do you work?”

I explained how I taught a class at the university. That I had been grading essays in the car while the tire went out. That graduate school was a sweet deal because it allowed you to do something you loved for two years and you got paid for it. He seemed like the guy who never knew that, and I wanted to be the guy who let him know about that option, but I have no reason to believe that was the case.

“So are you going to stay in Montana?”

“Probably not,” which is a polite way of saying I’m not sure I won’t drop out of the program at the end of my first year: I miss Michael. And I know he wouldn’t take me back even if I moved to Austin again, but I tell myself that people can surprise you so there’s always a chance. “I’ll see where the jobs are. I might go international again. I really like Australia.”

“That place seems so great. I always wanted to go.”

I tell him about the times I went, how I adore Sydney and Melbourne. How the country is beautiful and active. That it was only a fifty-dollar flight to New Zealand or the islands of Fiji at the time. And though we’re talking, I realize we’re not. He’s talking and I’ll drive away. I want to tell him that those places I lived mean nothing on their own. It was the people and experiences he’d never understand. He said Missoula was big for him and that even though he wanted to get out of Sheridan, he couldn’t move to a big city like that— oh, but I wanted to tell him that he could. He could come with me. That I was better than any guy he’d find in Sheridan. That I was a poet and a traveler and he just needed to come with me to experience it all, too. That Denver was only eight hours away and that there’d be thousands of other writers there at the conference we were driving to. That was an example of places I’d take him to that his girlfriend would never match.

And then a mechanic brought in the car keys. Even though Brian was prepared to pay, I put it on my credit card because I wanted the reward points for my new American Express card. A machine spat out a receipt, and I signed the slip.

“Wait. Can you do something for me?”

The boy looked at me longingly. Was he going to ask me to set him free? Did he have a confession predicated on the eye fucking we had been engaging in?

“I know this is weird, but can you write my name for me? In Hebrew.”

I wasn't sure about the significance behind this request. I was tempted to explain that “Logan” is not a Hebrew name, that there isn't a specific way to spell it. But I didn't. I picked up the black Bic pen by the credit card machine and began to scribble his name on a scrap piece of paper already littered with random messages. I spelled it phonetically. Then I pointed to each letter and said how it corresponded to the English equivalent. He seemed grateful as if god had popped our tire just so that we could find our way to his shop and we could have this encounter. He folded the paper the way I've seen people fold origami: careful folds with a purpose. He then tucked the paper into the pocket of his uniform patched over his heart. I hoped he wouldn't forget the paper when he washed his clothes.

And then I walked out of the store and we drove on to Denver without any further trouble. We arrived at two in the morning. The whole tire exchange lasted forty minutes from blowout to hopping back onto the highway. In the car I told everyone about the boy and the exchange. But I couldn't tell the story right. I repeated the anecdote many times that weekend to people at the conference, each time attempting a new way of conveying the magic embedded in the event, but it was futile. The story seemed vague and unimpressive each time.



At night when I cannot sleep, I think about Logan. Where he is. What he is going to do. If he ever thinks about me. And it is during these times that I confess to myself that I've no reason to believe anything I believe about him. That his unhappiness and secret homosexuality and devotion to me are things I've projected onto him. That he's only a boy I spoke with for ten minutes and will never encounter again. That I'm alone in bed tonight because throughout my travels I've abandoned the boys I loved and the one who loved me in return. That he followed his girlfriend and none of the people I loved followed me, including Michael. That an empty bed is the same as the amputation of a leg— I hear stories about how veterans complain they can feel it itch long after the bone has been replaced by the white space; I turn my body expecting to find another torso to lay my hand over. But it is always a ghost and you cannot hold a ghost— only offer it a bed to sleep in before it too disappears come morning. The doctors say these hallucinations are manifestations brought on by the disease. They probably are. Sometimes— when I'm at my loneliest— I won't take the medication to make them go away because it's better to live with the false ghost of psychosis than to exist in the absolute darkness of memory. And then I have to ask myself if I even saw Logan, that he wasn't some embodiment of repressed desire I used to build up my ego after feeling ugly in the absence of Michael. No, I think Logan was real. And I think the things I believe about our encounter are valid if not accurate observations. But if all of it were fake it wouldn't matter. The sense of value felt in that moment was true and will long outlive that boy in Sheridan. Still, if he came back to me as a ghost, I would not mind. At night I sing to the mountains: *tichzor*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word for “return,” but conjugated in the imperative, as in “return to me.”

# Pink Lemonade

xii

Lying takes practice, and we practice it a lot. I love listening to kids tell their tall tales and having their friends believe those stories. It makes me stop and think of all the bullshit moments in my life I must have spewed as a kid. What's wonderful about it is that I don't ever interrupt the kid to point out to his friends that there's no truth to it. I've never known a person to do that to a kid.

In that way, as children we get conditioned to believe that our lies are successful because we only learn from those who we think we fool. I dig that. It's the sort of self-esteem boost we get for drawing a mess of colors and having our parents tape the picture to the refrigerator. Why anyone would believe your house has a hundred rooms in it is ludicrous, but children do, and they did when I told them it did.

But with all arts, there comes a point where those who are gifted in the form diverge from those who can merely perform it. Either you decide lying isn't a good thing or you're not very good at lying. I mean just because we all learn to swim at age five doesn't mean any of us can be Michael Phelps—no matter how much we practice. At a certain point you need to either swim for the love of it or take up baseball.

With lying, if you're good at it, you begin to learn more than just how to lie. You begin to see it spatially the way a dancer can look at an empty stage and envision a movement pattern. You learn to recognize lying outside of your own body and have to see it from someone else's perspective. You learn that the lie of the one hundred room house is not believable to the person you're telling it to, and you begin to think of the ones that are. Yes, performance is still a large part of it. In fact, a good actor can make what seems like an unbelievable lie genuine, but it's a risk. Those who are best at the art get away with the deceit not only because they are good at playing the part, but also because you can't call them on it.

What I mean by this is simple. If someone asked me where I was born, I could say Kenya. It's not impossible, but it would raise questions. I would have to have a story to accompany it. Maybe my father was in the army or my mother worked for the State Department. I would undoubtedly be asked questions about growing up in Kenya. I would need to know the psychology of growing up American and white in an African country. The lie invites skepticism.

The better answer, if you're looking to make yourself seem exotic, is to pick Canada. Unless the person you're talking to has knowledge of Canada, you're off the hook. Most people don't care enough to prod Canada and if they do, it's a stupid question. *What was it like growing up there?* Just tell them it was cold. They'll laugh. You can say your father is Canadian and Mother is American, that you left the country as a child and don't remember much about it. No one is going to press the matter further. Canada is a safe lie.

And because I consider myself better at the art than most people— I think that's a natural gift of spending lots of time in my youth in Los Angeles where being fake and accepting the fakeness of others is required at times— it's easy to spot when someone isn't being truthful. In fact, it's funny half the time. It's not in me to point it out most of the time— mainly because I don't care.

But I can't be around those people. Being around someone who is full of lies is uncomfortable because it's the equivalent of being a negatively-charged magnet faced with a magnet of the same polarity. It's uncomfortable to be confronted by someone who engages in the same deception as you do, especially someone whom you can see through because it raises the notion that perhaps your airtight history isn't as safe as you believe it to be. It's not worth it to expose the person, but it you should refrain from association because you'll assume a general

distaste for him/her anyways. If Los Angeles has taught me nothing else it's that if you're going to be fake, at least be so good at it that I don't know that you are.

However, for a brief time in my life I did let someone into my life that I knew was full of it, and that's actually what I want to talk to you about, reader. Because I'm going to tell you this story, and it's going to seem fake. I get that. It's why I started this piece with a rambling introduction: I know all about lying. If I wanted you to believe it as is I would change the details to make it seem real. As it stands, if I told it to you, you wouldn't believe it because it would seem too much like Kenya. You need to understand that as far as the mechanics of this art go, I understand them, and I need you to know that I do; if you do, then you'll understand I could do a lot better than this if I were trying to pull your leg.

His name was Robb. Yeah, with two "b"s. It was short for guess what? Yeah, Robby. No, it wasn't Robbie. No, his name wasn't a nickname for Bob or Robert. It was genuinely Robby he said. Why the missing last letter? He said it had something to do with a traumatic childhood and home life. He wanted to reinvent himself. Dropping the last letter of his name somehow allowed him to do that.

I met Robb online. This was while I was still in Los Angeles and conducting my scouting Austin phase, where I wanted to talk to people to get an idea about the city and which part I should be looking to find an apartment. I can understand why most of the guys I tried to speak to in the chat room didn't respond: there's this weird thing where people pretend they're moving to different cities. I don't understand the allure in that game aside from having a life so pathetic that you'd try to convince someone you were leaving Podunk, USA for Los Angeles if only to live in those short conversations.

But Robb was one of the few people who responded to my messages. It was clear from the start that he was a psychotic. I don't quite remember what he said in our conversation for me to get that impression, but it was probably his life story. Something about being in the Air Force and having a sister in Tennessee. I continued to talk to him, despite the freak alert he gave off when he asked me to call him some time five minutes into the conversation, because he was giving me information about the city. I didn't know what he said at the time was useless— not wrong, but nothing I would ever agree with. He had poor taste in everything.

I didn't talk to him for a while, but as the decision date approached and I still had been unable to locate an apartment, I decided the worst thing I could do was remain on good terms with the guy. So I called him on his birthday.

He didn't pick up. His voice mail was something along the lines of *Congratulations, you can now tell all your family and friends that had a chance to speak with the one and only Robb....* I shit you not. It literally sounded like that and went on for a good minute. I left a quick message and regretted it immediately.

*Stunned* is the only word that I can use to describe Robb's response. He called me a day later as if what I had done was the nicest gesture ever performed by a human. It was another red flag that he was a freak. And his constant calls afterward were more and more red flags. He told me about his ex-boyfriend that he couldn't manage to move past, despite said boyfriend was apparently a drug user and cheated on him. He told me I sounded (in voice only) like his ex. When he wasn't complaining about how the only person he every identified with from TV was Butters from *South Park*, he was complaining about how miserable his life was without his ex.

Needless to say, I stopped picking up the phone; he still left messages. When I bought plane tickets to Austin to check out apartments and was staying with Nolan (explained later),

Robb said that I should meet up with him if I had time during my visit. I told him I'd call him if I did, but knew that even if I did have time I wouldn't trouble myself. I really wanted nothing to do with him.

By the time things were settled in Austin, Nolan wasn't speaking to me anymore. He was the one person I knew in the city. The days were hot, and I don't mean that in the offhand manner most people take that at. Having lived in Los Angeles for so long, I'm familiar with weather— or rather the lack thereof— of that kind.

But this was a different type of heat. Mostly eighties and nineties, with triple digits for certain parts of the day. I would've been fine with that had that been it, but it's humid too. For anyone who doesn't understand what the big deal about that is needs to sit in a steam room for thirty minutes. And the worst part about it was that it didn't end. In fact, the weather countered everything I thought I knew about weather: the temperature climbed as the day went on, not peaking until four in the afternoon. Even when the sun went down, the heat in the city lingered. At eleven o'clock, it would finally be low enough in the eighties to go outside without being miserable, but even then sleep was difficult. I wanted to go outside, to explore my new surroundings, but the heat was an effective prison system. Without a job or people I knew, my day were spent listlessly, as I would splay myself across my bed, naked, thinking. I thought about Los Angeles, I thought about Scott, and I thought about my life as a writer— how it seemed that this was some sort of a test and I was failing miserably. I remember reading *The Stranger* in high school and having a big problem with Meursault's killing of the Arab. It seemed ridiculous that the novel was predicated on a man being unnerved enough by the sun to shoot someone. After Austin, I understand that Camus wasn't reaching as much as I thought he was.

The only time I did leave the apartment was when I roamed the city for work and food. The thing about Austin is that it's always alive with people, so when you're by yourself, it feels particularly isolating. It takes time for me to learn how and where to be alone in a city, but then it felt I was doing it in all the wrong places. It's really the only reason why I started talking to Robb again.

Robb was absentminded about the fact that we hadn't spoken in months. I knew that was a bad sign. People with actual lives don't just welcome you back into your lives. He picked up complaining from where he left off. There was someone new at work he hated. He still missed his ex. I don't even remember most of the shit because half the time I would lay the phone on my chest and asked myself why I even bothered, but the muffled noise coming from the phone that thought I was listening to it was assuring, the way your mother calling you at four in the morning for no reason reminds you she's still alive and so are you.

I interviewed for a job with Delloitte. It was way up north and I had no car. The bus went by every hour. So in a suit tailored for me from before I was I sick, I trekked to their offices. I felt stupid. It looked like a kid as I shook hands with the interviewer, the sleeve dripping onto my arm. It didn't matter that I scored well on their stupid test (it was basic math, so it didn't matter that I hadn't taken a math class in five years because the little calculus from high school I retained let me solve each problem without a calculator). I don't even like finance. But I went because I needed a job or at least one to be offered to me so that I could turn it down and then tell myself I had the ability to find a job and wasn't a complete failure.

Leaving the interview, I felt even more crushed than how I started. I wasn't even going to be offered the job I didn't want. I called Robb because for once I wanted to complain. I suppose I could have called people back in Los Angeles, but they all thought I was living well. I liked the



lie I erected that I had boldly driven to a new city and carved unmatched success for myself. I didn't want word spreading that I was miserable and alone and wearing a tie. I fucking hate ties. It was so demeaning.

Robb was finishing up work when he picked up, but before I could mention my awful day, he began spewing about his. This was the worst parasitic friendship ever. But Robb shut up long enough for me to mention where I was. He wasn't that far. He asked if I wanted to get food. I thought about it.

Calling Robb was one thing. I liked the phone because it meant there was always someone on the other line that I had to hang up on him for. Meeting, I was rightfully afraid, would change the dynamic of putting up with him. It meant no easy excuses for curtailing complaints and actually having to look at him. I know that last part seems like nothing, but looking at someone completely changes everything. When you see someone has a face, you know they're human, and then all this humanizing shit happens. You listen to their stories—like really *listen*. You begin to take sides. You even remember shit about them and start to participate. God it's awful. And that's because talking to someone online or on the phone is faceless. You get to pretend that this person is just a robot or illusion of reality, which means you don't have to play nice. Meeting Robby meant I'd actually have to see him, which meant I would see in him myself, which meant I'd be nicer than I needed to be. You have no idea how bad I was feeling.

So Robb comes by. He says there's this great restaurant nearby. I'm dubious because the Delloitte office is located in an urban sprawl complex. Shenanigans! But I don't do more than doubt him once because he's offered to drive me back to my apartment.

Turns out this restaurant is T.G.I. Fridays. I'm laughing to myself in a sad way and trying to laugh/cry on the outside. I tell him that we have these in Los Angeles too. I had never been to one, but I knew they sucked. It's the same reason I've never watched that Britney Spears and know it's terrible. Let's not pretend trying something is the only way to know it's bad. So yeah, I knew this dining experience was gonna suck big time. And it did. The only redeeming aspect of a disastrous meal of some butchered eggplant dish that even Robb conceded was disgusting was that my drink had booze in it. God did I need booze so I tipped decently.

But none of this is actually the story I'm trying to tell you. This is all set up. You need to know how I met Robb, you need to know why I even met him, and you need to know the whole time I knew this guy was crazy. Because here's the part that's golden....

Sunday morning felt precious for once. The thing about Sundays is that they don't meaning anything without another day that sucks comparatively. When I didn't have work, every day was a Sunday. Too much Sunday and you get restless. I suppose that means something else if you have money, but I didn't.

But now I was working. The gig dancing. The job at the sandwich place. True, not great money, but I wasn't starving. I could pay rent and bills on time. Meds too. I was asking for more out of life, but was happy that I didn't need it. So when Sundays came, I enjoyed them. An actual weekend meant not having to work as opposed to not having work. Groovy.

But this Sunday was different. This Sunday I was up at seven. Showered. Shaved. Was careful not to wake the roommate, but I wasn't sure if he were there.

I shared the apartment with this guy named Greg. Stocky, muscly fellow who was a PIKE. He was good because he was quiet and not home half the time. Once he took me to the

gym with him, and I bought him lunch. I remember he couldn't find work and moved back to Dallas or Oklahoma. But he asked me to go drinking with him and his bud one night a month after I moved into town and I did. It was my first real outing. While I worked he watched my DVDs. He had good taste in film; I say this because he liked my movies. Hope he's doing well.

Anyways... I was up. And it was Robb's fault. I didn't want to be. The night before I walked down to the gay bars feeling adventurous. With money I felt sociable. No one spoke to me and I walked home around one in the morning feeling buzzed. The air was so warm it felt like a hug. God I was in love with nothing.

I shouldn't have gone out because I knew I had to be ready by half past eight. But I was bored. And if Robb were making me get up then I thought fuck him if he expected me to be all perfect in the morning. But I was an idiot for agreeing.

In poor judgment, I started to relax around Robb because money was good. I even stopped putting the phone of my chest while he made up shit. Because I did, I heard Robb was dying. I was crushed. I don't know why because he's crazy and I knew that. I knew that anything he says is melodramatic or a lie and still there I was on my couch literally crying for him because I was sad he was going to die. Medication is shit for your brain I tell you. But really I think I wanted to believe him because having just dodged the reaper myself I felt that I had to. That it was bad luck to insist someone wasn't dying and karma would get you.

So I asked Robb that I would help him like any friend would. I don't mean that in the I'll-pull-the-trigger-for-you-when-you're-a-vegetable way. I meant it in the I'll-be-a-support-for-you way. I told him if he needed anything that he should let me know, that he shouldn't be hesitant to ask. And guess what he did? He asked. Right after I said it. Bad sign.

But it made sense. It wasn't money. It wasn't a scam at all. He asked me to go to church with him. He said he hadn't been to church since he was a kid, but that there was this congregation for gay men in town. He was too afraid to go by himself and just needed someone there with him so he felt O.K. How could I say no to him?

Robb was supposed to pick me up so we'd be there by the nine o'clock service. At nine fifteen he returns my message saying he overslept, but that we could still catch the eleven. I groaned and wished I had drank more the night before so that I too would've slept in, but you couldn't say that to a dying man who wanted to go to church.

And had he said synagogue, I would've flat out said no, but I could do a church. Despite thinking all religion a waste of a Sunday morning, having never been reared as a Christian I thought going to church was like attending a Medieval festival. You dress up and spend a Sunday being weirded out by the people who talk funny and actually take part in it all the time. In fact I had only stepped foot in a church once before, and it was when I was in the fourth grade. We were exploring old Los Angeles. Our class walked into this pueblo-era building where people were crying over a body of a boy who was shot in the head. I was told he was alive and they were praying for his recovery, but I don't see how that's possible.

So I looked at this church thing as an adventure. When Robb pulled up he was dressed nicely. I was in the jeans and t-shirt from the night before, which still smelled of my cologne and ambient cigarette smoke. Clubbing for Jesus.

There was time to kill before the service, so he took me to his house because I forgot his bible. He had to use his bible. I wasn't sure why, but I assumed it had to do with translation. So while he fished the bible out of his room, his roommate, clad only in boxers walking to the kitchen. The roommate was gorgeous. Chiseled Italian marble gorgeous, i.e., he was bat shit

crazy too if he were living with Robb that far south in Austin. We're talking living in Jersey when you say I live in NYC.

And with even more time to kill, we stop in a Walgreens because I haven't eaten yet. I buy two candy bars. I eat one in the car and plan on eating the other in church like church is a movie theater. Then I think maybe church is like a movie a theater, where you can't bring outside food and you have to buy their food. I doubt I want church candy— if they even sell it. They'd probably just sell Kit Kats with a lot of upcharge because there are wafers in those. But if it were a genuine Jesus bar or something, I think I would at least try it to say I did.

When we pull into the church parking lot, I expect to get out, but we don't. We're all the way at the end of the lot and Robb makes no move to leave. He tweaks the rearview mirror so he can see the people exiting the church. I'm bored and begin to eat the second candy bar.

Robb makes no effort to understand why I'm agnsty sitting in a car in August heat on Sunday morning in a church parking still reeking of failed sex. He's just flipping through his bible and staring at people. I bring up the point that maybe we should go in, and he explains he's watching the people. He says that he needs to do this because he doesn't want to end up in some church with the people judge him. From what I can tell is that these people look exactly like what I thought they would: older men and women with kids. You know, the type of gay and lesbian neighbors you have if you lived in the suburbs. This means that that they're not young or attractive. The sugar is egging me on.

Robb explains that he needs to know this to be comfortable. He randomly flips to a passage in the bible and reads it aloud. He says that verse is a bad sign. I take the thing and treat it like a magic eight ball. I ask it whether gays are good people and it I read aloud some verse about the apocalypse. This sufficiently proves my point about biblical signs, but Robb keeps

looking. Now all sorts of people are leaving the church and new families are pulling in. Robb thinks that they're all staring at us because we look conspicuous sitting in a car in church parking lot.

So I ask him point blank what right does he have to judge these people for judging him. I tell him it's not like he knows them. I actually say it's hypocritical for him to assume that when in fact he's the one doing all the judging. I even whip out the judge not lest ye be judge verse.

And this is where I get away with lying and Robb sucks at it. Because he made up some excuse, but it was clear he was only coming because he was looking for hot Christian boys to make pretend Christian babies with. That I was a wingman. I was so upset with myself that I woke up early for this con. This lame con that had me sitting in a church parking lot filled with overweight lesbians.

But I knew at the time I would write about it. I knew it because it felt like a Flannery O'Connor short story unfolding. I told myself this was something. That I couldn't let go of Robb and this moment. So whereas I should've just yelled at him for wasting my time I didn't. I didn't even make mention of it over the next two months when our Sunday brunch tradition occurred. With nothing else to do, I mentioned a restaurant that served brunch that I wanted to try. We went. It was decent food. He said we should do it again next Sunday. That was real gay church to me. And so we did this for a while. The whole time I thought Robb full of shit. I didn't like him pretending to be dying. I didn't like him complaining about how the whole world was against him. It was exhausting pretending to be his friend. At some point he was talking about suicide and I told him point blank to shut up, that I didn't want to hear him. He hung up the phone. Five minutes later I received a text message from him telling me never to contact him again. And I never did.

When I first met Robb, he told me he had about a year-and-a-half to live. I knew he was lying for several reasons, but mostly because he didn't quite his job. I asked him why wasn't he traveling or doing all these important things with his life that he wanted to get done before he died, i.e., acting like he were going to die. He said he was happy with where he was at— despite his constant complaining about it all. When you know you're going to die, you don't go out like that. I know that. I know that because that's the only way I can really explain why I ended up in Austin. One last hurrah in the world you know? A real one.

Anyways, before I moved to Missoula, I say Robb in that same gay chat room and he messaged me not knowing it was me. This was when he would have about six months left of life left. I never responded. I've tried going back and finding his profile, but I don't remember his screen name and there are too many to sift through, but it also might be because it's just not there. I can't tell you why though. People remove their profiles for all sorts of reasons. Still.

All I know is when I had brunch, I was O.K. I was telling myself look Robby. You did it. You left home on your own. You found a place on your own. And now you're making money on your own. No one can say you didn't have a life that you created if only for a little while. I was proud of that. I say that because when I saw Robb, who didn't drink booze (another sign you're not dying), drink his lemonade, which he complained about for being the pink, fake kind that so many people say is lemonade when in no way or form is lemonade ever pink (or even yellow for that matter... he would have ordered cranberry, but they didn't serve it), he seemed content too. Pink lemonade and a church parking lot for a Sunday morning for \$17.95. Sure, I loved it— but that because I was only watching, because I knew even then that I would write about it. This is my life as writer I thought as I sipped on my mimosa, in my own way tempting Robb to admit he was careless.

# Savvy

xiii



In this story, I'm getting ready to meet Todd for the first time, but I don't know that yet. I'm nine and he's thirty-two. He e-mails me on a dating website that most gay men use to hook up. We talk, and I don't find him that attractive from his pictures, but he isn't ugly. I agree to meet him, and used the word "savvy" several times in the conversation because I read it in a book as a kid and thought it sounded cool— a better word for cool. Todd would later confess he thought it was weird and almost cancelled our date on that fact alone.

In this story, we're meeting because it's the first week of December and I don't have finals so there's time to kill. We agree to meet at Chilis. I see him and am still not attracted to him, but I'm bored and lonely. He has a better time than I do, but I still enjoyed myself. He invites me back his place, and I agree. We'd eat at the Chilis several more times because his dad kept giving him gift certificates to there for Christmas. It would become our restaurant. Even after we broke up, I couldn't walk in there without thinking of Todd— including when I had an awkward date with the manager, whose name was Robin. That was before they transferred him to somewhere south. That was before the Chilis closed, and I knew it did, but forgot, so when Todd and I walked past it five years later, when it was only a shell, we both felt someone had destroyed one of the landmarks of our lives. I don't know why I forgot that.

In this story, Todd and I fight because he makes a comment about how airports should use racial profiling to find terrorists. I'm offended and try to convince him that's unfair— whether or not there's truth to his idea, and I know there is because that's what they do in Israeli... and it works. And the end we hug and make up and I say I don't like fighting, even though we'll do that a lot more and I will enjoy it because that's the sort of person I am. We'll go to bed, which is in his house in Burbank, and I'll hold him. He'll tell me about how he was married for eight years and that it's been less than a year since his divorce. He'll tell me he's

never dated a guy before, so in that way we're both new to this. I'll respond and say that I'd accept everything about him. I was nineteen: of course I was lying, but I didn't know that then.

In this story, I spend all my Saturdays in your apartment while he goes to class at the community college editing thing. In the meantime he sells closets for Closet World. I spend the day reading, writing, and watching TV. When Todd comes back, we have sex. I once tried to be sweet and make him brownies, but his even was weird and it set to broil when I turned it to bake. Todd came back and laughed, and he's never believed me since that I'm actually a talented chef.

In this story, Todd miss Zena, the ex-wife more than me. All I know about her is that she was from Montana. She taught screenwriting. Todd's roommates, Shane Black and this guy who was an actor and then made money selling some gaming thing and had this run in with pedophilia but had enough money to make it all go away, set him up with Zena. I think she was working at Universal Studios. She cheated on him with his friend Kale, and for some reason confessed on Thanksgiving. That was the Thanksgiving Todd drove to Las Vegas while he was drunk. I would later write a screenplay with all their names and Kale would be the star and redeeming character.

In this story, Todd still misses Zena more than me, but we get back together. Lately he goes back and forth between whether he's gay or not. I remember the second time we met we walked in West Hollywood, and I wasn't supposed to see him, but he want to see me so he came down. I was eating Dots on the curb outside a Vons. He sat down on the curb with me and that's when it somehow came out that he was religious. That he was still the youth pastor in his church. He'd tell me he's a creationist and say *I just find it hard to believe that anything so beautiful as you could just be random*, which made me want to believe in god even though I knew it wasn't true, and not just the part about god.

In this story, I waited all day for Todd to finish class. We fight again. This time it's because one of his youth pastor kids needs his help to edit a video. I don't get it; he says I need to leave. I tell him I'll wait in the bedroom until he finishes. He says no. I cry because he's so paranoid. Then I yell. He drives me back, but I still love him for a very long time that hasn't ended yet.

In this story, Todd sees that I'm sick, but I can't deal with him and stop talking to him. It reminds of the time I'm so upset that he left me, told me he was straight, then went out with another guy for a very long time, a guy that I know he loves more than me to this day, that after I blew up at him he told me not to speak to him again. That was when I moved to New Zealand.

In this story, Todd only calls me for two reasons. The first is because it's my birthday, which he now never forgets. The second is because the guy he loved left him. He wants me to comfort him, but I don't. I'm not mean, but I tell him the truth. I tell him it sounds like he's putting so much weight on this guy he barely knew, and that's because this was the first guy in his life he thought he could start a life with. He smiles and tells me to shut up because I always tell him the right things when it comes to guys and makes him feel better. I tell him because I know what he's feeling because that's how I felt with him.

In this story, Todd and I are trying on shirts at Urban Outfitters. I'm going to wear one tomorrow when we go out. When we talk, it feels like we've been friends for a long time, but still tell each other we can't believe how long ago we went out— that and how crazy we both were. He tells me about the time I shave myself down there and when he left me room he sat on the brick wall outside my building and cried. I still don't know what he meant by my shaving did that. I assume it's akin to when he broke up with me, and he told me how the entire last month he kissed me he felt like it was a lie.

In this story, I remember our one month anniversary at a Brazilian restaurant. I remember a bad meal with great dessert for Valentine's. I remember how I was sloshes after this amazing New Year's party where we made out in front of Shane Black. It was hosted by the other roommate with the money. I remember Todd was too drunk to drive, but he still did. It must have been two in the morning when we collapsed into the new year, and when I held him, I had never loved a man so much, thought one so beautiful, thought *I can do this* when it came to looking at the feature, which we slept through.

In this story, I stop calling him Toddy Bear, because even though he doesn't say it, I know it makes him feel uncomfortable. I ask him about his family and he asks about my mother. We laugh because we like to do that and it's one of the few things we can do. Todd is worried about work, but I believe in him because he's grown so much. I then remember the night he almost stopped talking to him because I asked to sleep on his couch for a night when I passed through L.A. because he had this policy about exs staying over. He complimented my underwear in the morning.

In this story, I laugh about the fact I'm in Montana, and he resents me for being there because it reminds him of Zena, who's living there too after marrying a high school sweetheart. They have a kid or two. I tell him I've never met her, and he say's Montana isn't that big, and her name is unusual. I tell him I've practiced my line, *Oh, you're that Zena! I worked with Todd in Los Angeles. We met at an Oscar party at his place in Beverly Hills because he edited that a part of the show.* Sometimes I now I'm his favorite ex because we rarely talk, and when we do, I always say the things he wants or needs to hear, which lucks out when it's both.

In this story, Todd is apologizing about what happened so long ago. He always forgets how bad it hurt and simultaneously will never understand just how much it did/does. And that's

because even I don't know that fully. When we hang out long enough, somehow the conversation of us breaking up will come about and he'll apologize after I make some point about how bad it was. In these moments I actually feel healed, and think that I'll finally be done with this now.

In this story, whenever the phone rings and it's not my birthday and I see his name on the caller I.D., I take a breath and don't deny the possibility that this could be it. Even when I see him, I try to keep in shape because who knows. Todd will never want me again, and the last time I saw him, he looked older, the way my parents look older and succumbable to death. I don't know what I'd say if he did actually want to get back, but realistically, I know I'd be stupid and say yes. I even told him he looked the best he ever did, even if that is just in my eyes.

But none of these are the stories I want to tell: they're just the ones you need to know in order to understand this last one. In this story, Todd and I have broken up for the first time, but we meet and I talk him back to my arms. We're standing under the staircase in a building we shouldn't be in. He goes down on me and spits into a can of diet soda. I hug him in the darkness of that place for a long time, listening to footsteps reverberate in the night. I'm not sure how long it is before Todd tells me it's time for me to let go. Even then I knew better, because though it would be months later, I knew eventually he'd leave me if I did. And he did.

The

Last

Laugh

I'm not obsessed with James Franco, and I'm aware that saying that, that having that as the first line in this chapter seems counter to that statement. I'm sure someone more familiar with Freud's works than I am will point to the negative space of this assertion as denial. But I'm being honest here... and not that take-that-for-what-you-will thing I offer as a caveat whenever I tell you, reader, when I want you to trust me, but there are reasons that you shouldn't. Seriously, I'm not lying about James Franco.

I do obsess about things, some of which you're probably familiar with. My mother for one. My death for another. Sex (not in the fun way). And all those things are intrinsically connected to the larger ideas that occupy my mind, that drive me to the page when I believe that there's something of value I have to say to you— or that I can publish, i.e., sell. And that thing is memory, which is to say the past. Some people have oral fixations and always stick a [insert object of your choice here, but I was leaning toward thumb... and carrot. Yeah, carrot. I don't know anyone who sticks carrots in his/her mouth, but when I thought of oral fixation that's what hit me. Dissect all you want] into their mouths; I have a mental fixation. In a mental fixation, you're always focused on the past, always chewing on some memory that isn't important anymore.

And most of the time these moments are embarrassing— if not painful to recall. They're not the things I want to remember, but I can't help but conjure them to the surface of recollection. Like there was the time I was fifteen, and it was only the second time that I had sex. It was also the time I discovered how messy sex could be if a guy is not properly cleaned internally (my fault). The thing is I don't focus on the fact that I only slept with the guy because I was still under the stupid impression that people don't use you for sex and thought that this guy

would of course see me again if I had sex with him, that he'd love me eventually, which he didn't. No, I focus on getting the condom all dirty.

There was the time in Austin when I was going through a month of adjustments to life with new meds. I was crazy then, literally. If not for the fact that I was incredibly attractive from working out 9 hours a day (not an exaggeration... ergo, crazy), guys wouldn't have spent time around me. But I was hot, and guys wanted to fuck me so badly that they attempted my craziness head-on. Sparing you what is a chapter in its own right, a great coffee date with a guy who graduated from Texas Tech turned into him trying to fuck me, me crying hysterically because I didn't want him to touch me, him continuing with his attempts, me farting nonstop for an hour (the meds made me gassy), and his black Labrador running around the bed. In the morning we watched an episode of *Extras*, and he drove me back to my place. I never heard from him again. I don't have his number anymore, which I'm sorry about because there's so much I need to apologize for.... Seriously, farting through sex, and I can't seem to forget about it for even a day.

So this is what I think about when my mind isn't distracted. I gravitate to the peed-my-pants-in-high-school moments (though I didn't do that). I don't even know why I'm sharing this with you because I'm supposed to be talking about James Franco— but I have a feeling I owe you this.

It surprises me that people think I'm obsessed James Franco (I refuse to refer to him without the last name). I also think it's funny that people think I'm obsessed with Lady Gaga. If you feel that's all I talk about, it's probably because I don't know you well and I talk about her because everyone has heard of her.

But I don't really talk about him; if other people are, I use it as segue to interject my story about why he's a douchebag. If people are talking about encounters with douchebags, then I tell



the story too. Mostly it happens when people discuss their I-saw-a-reality-tv-star-at-Subway-moment on Facebook. I don't just tell people, and I'm not chomping at the bit to relive the experience. When appropriate, I let others know why I hate James Franco.

Like all great stories, this one begins in Los Angeles and involves poetry. The Hammer Museum at U.C.L.A. holds this amazing reading series every year, which concludes with a poetry reading given by students who win awards. It's a big honor. I was invited to read my junior year after being U.C.L.A.'s nominee in this poetry contest (my manuscript ended up outplacing the students in both the MFA at Irvine and the Stegner, losing out to a fellow U.C.L.A. nominee who went to Iowa and this MA fiction student at Davis), but I was living in New Zealand at the time so I didn't read. As a senior, I didn't win away awards, but I was chosen as an honorable mention for an Academy of American Poets Prize (alongside James Franco). Based on that honor, James Franco and I, along with seven other poets who did win/and or placed in various poetry prizes, were the invited readers for that year.

To me this was exciting, and not because James Franco was going to be reading. At the time, James Franco was not as big as he is today. He'd performed in the *Spiderman* movies, but I didn't really know much about him. He'd been at U.C.L.A., then left to be an actor, and then came back. Matt took a bunch of classes in Mona's workshop with him. He told me James Franco wrote a story about an albino person and somehow made it all about him. For my entire college career, that's about the extent we discussed him, except for one day Matt said he stopped talking to him via e-mail because every time he did James Franco would list all these books that he *needed* to read, which is like asking a mathematician if he's heard of the number eight.

James Franco also took poetry workshops, but again, not with me. I heard stories about this trip he took to Europe with the English program, how he kept having lots of sex and even a

threesome while his roommate was in the room. Some people passed me along some samples of his writing: I wasn't impressed. Because James Franco is who he is, he didn't have to be in class to take classes. He's send papers and assignments via e-mail for private study. I'm not sure how many of his classes went this way, but I definitely know of a few. So when he says he graduated from U.C.L.A. like anyone else did, I take issue with that.

I confess that the only thing I've seen him in is *Spiderman 3*, and he sucked; I'll also be fair and say that movie sucked regardless of who was in it— except if Meryl Streep played *all* the parts. Based on that performance alone, I thought it would be a good idea to create a Facebook page inviting people to the poetry reading that included the former Green Goblin: it was called *Come hear James Franco and Me Read Poetry at the Hammer Museum!* I want to point out that I put his name first because grammatically it has to be that way. I also want to point out that in the description of the event, I mention the seven other poets, that we're all students and just want people to share that Thursday night with us. The only reason I put James Franco in there was because being a fraternity brother at the time, I felt the only way many of my friends would come to said event would be to spice it up. I told them hot girls might come to see him, and in turn that meant they might get too see said hot girls.

Remember, this was a college poetry reading. There wasn't an event charge, and readers weren't paid. We didn't have books to hawk. Stephen Yenser gave us five minutes to read, and then we'd all go across the street for drinks (paid for ourselves).

The only people who felt that was a big event were the poets. I had never given a public reading. I was about to graduate college and move to Austin. To me, this was a chance for me to read some of my work in front of my friends before I said goodbye to that era of my life. Again, I can't emphasize enough that this was a *poetry reading*.

So in my bright ideas of bright ideas, I decided to use for the event page an image that I found on the internet of James Franco shirtless. It's weird; the photo has this magenta hue over it and his lips are big and red. It only shows half of his torso from the waist up. Maybe he's naked below, maybe not, but you can't see his navel in it (it's cropped that short). I found it on the website *Actors Exposed*. It captured the seriousness of the invitation perfectly. I even took the same photo of myself and posted it as my Facebook profile picture so that everyone could see how serious this event was.

Apparently, some people didn't see the humor in this. The backlash began with a herd of sorority girls who began to send messages on Facebook. I didn't even invite them (the event invitation only went out to my friends). Here's what April Karstadt had to say on June 2, 2008 at 9:35 PM:

just wanted to let you know that james is my friend and i think that you are fucking pathetic. your poetry obviously sucks if you have to exploit a fellow student that \*just so happens\* to be famous in order to get people to come see you. it's just despicable.

and the picture?? come on...he was 18 when that was taken! have some fucking respect!

I tried to point out several flaws in her logic, such as saying my poetry sucks when James Franco and I both received the same award transitively means she thinks his does too, but it didn't matter. There were so many of them. He had this harem of defenders scouring Facebook to write me about a *poetry reading*.

What's notable about all these reactions is twofold: one, these people clearly didn't understand that attempting to defend someone else's honor by resorting to ad hominem attacks over the internet (to strangers no less) made them and James Franco, by association, look classless. And two, they always started their messages by letting me know how good a friend they are to James Franco: they all called him James.

Remember, I'm not the Freud expert, but to me there's something subconscious about this. It seemed odd that out of all the media in the world, the thing that upset them was a fellow college student inviting people to a fucking poetry reading. Did I cross some line by proving how easy it was to be James Franco's friend? I don't know. All I will say is that I tried to get my drunk fraternity brothers to come to a poetry event; I'm not sure who they were trying to impress by telling me how good of friends the two are (were?).

So the big night comes. I wear a vintage-inspired t-shirt with the Flash on it and my pair of nice, washed out jeans. I read three poems. None of my fraternity brothers come, and neither do any Associated Press people as one girl theorized (apparently, paparazzi was always hounding James Franco). Even James Franco kept low key. He stood in the back for the most part, had facial hair, and wore a lumberjack shirt. It was the first and only time I've seen him in person. He looked more attractive than he did on screen, but I didn't recognize him until he was introduced to read. He read a poem about Batman.

If that were the end of it, then that would be the end of this, and this story would really be more about James Franco's crazy female companions, but there's more. Celebrating our reading, the readers proceed across the street for drinks and late-night appetizers. I couldn't drink because of the meds, so I stuck to water and guacamole. In many ways the after-reading drinks is more memorable than the reading. The poets who read were all friends of mine, writers that I respected (and to a large degree think are superior to many of the writers I encountered in MFA programs over the years). We were high on stupid fame, the sort we know isn't important, and thus could sarcastically pretend was. For a moment, we suspended the reality that no one—not even James Franco— becomes a famous poet anymore, that there was no way to justify the student debt we incurred to write sonnets.

But James Franco didn't join our discussion. He talked with Cal Bedient and Stephen Yenser for the most part. And that's when we had our first interaction. Toward the end of the night, when people left and we shifted chairs to conserve tables, James Franco and I ended up in proximity. We hadn't even been introduced.

*And this guy here creates....*

I don't even remember the exact words. I remember the casualness of it, the idea that the speech was so perfect that it seemed to have been collected in his mind like a cloud amassing totality. He went on and on in front of the professors (my mentors), peers (my friends), and me. To illustrate the uncomfortableness of it all, Cal, whom if you don't know you won't get why it's important that he's the one who stepped in, told James that it was enough.

In many ways I love Cal because he's always been able to see my poetry for where it's coming from and what it's trying to be (as opposed to what he wants it to be). I attribute that to the fact that he understands where I come from as a person. I assume James Franco saw me as some twenty-year-old with an agenda (though why inviting college kids to a *POETRY READING!!!* is worthy of feeling insulted is beyond me). Cal on the other hand saw the seventeen-year-old kid with long, blonde hair walk into his class as a freshman. He saw the kid develop, cut his hair, and write better poems. He then saw the kid get sick... really sick. He saw him rush into class from MRIs and consultations with specialists. He saw him drop sixty pounds and move through the English halls disoriented. He saw his poems turn into shells of confidence that once lyrically challenged life revert to scattered meditations about what it means confuse sleep with not waking up. So when Cal saw the shirtless photo of me imitating the shirtless photo of James Franco, what he saw wasn't anything but the fact that I was putting on weight again because I was getting better. In many, many ways, Cal understood this reading was about the fact

that I had all but disappeared from the earth and this reading was about me saying I'm still here, still laughing, still trying.

At the end of the night, James and I made some sort of false peace treaty, Egypt-Israel kind. We even shook on it.

So that's why I think James Franco is a douchebag, but that's not why I hate him. And to be fair to James Franco, my hate isn't about anything he's actively doing. It's about what he represents.

As far as I can tell from Wikipedia, James simultaneously attend the MFA fiction programs at both Columbia and Brooklyn, while doing another MFA in Film at NYU. He's doing a Low Res at Warren Wilson in Poetry (and my roommate's ex-girlfriend who's in that program with him says he gets all sort of special treatment too). Now he's earning a Ph.D. from Yale while taking classes at RISD. Oh, and he got a book published with blurbs from big people. The nicest critiques were along the lines of *some of this isn't bad*.

None of this is James Franco's fault. He didn't break rules— Columbia did. Bemoaning the unfairness of literature and the literature industry is stupid because it's always unfair whether you're James Franco or not. Frankly, he'd be an idiot if he didn't milk it for all he could; but that doesn't dismiss the point that he's not a good writer and doesn't deserve all these exceptions because he's a good actor (who's famous, which is the key).

I hate the idea of James Franco's success as a writer (not as a person) because when he left the restaurant that night he went on to four MFAs and to show Sean Penn his ass. I graduated valedictorian, ended up delivering sandwiches in Austin, and dancing in my underwear for dollar-bills because they were no jobs when the economy tanked, and I needed to pay for my medication without health insurance. When I was admitted into MFAs with funding (it took two

rounds), I had to choose one program and there was no book deal waiting *before* I got there (or even after). I've fought for everything I've published.

These days one of my friends who stopped trying to be a writer is dating Bret Easton Ellis. My first ex-boyfriend is going out with Perez Hilton. As kid, I used to hang out with Courtland Mead (he was the kid in the ABC remake of *The Shining*). Growing up, I was really attached to the neighbor who lived in a duplex. He was twenty and gave me a hat when we moved away; the kid was Ari Emanuel. Once at a World Cup event when Los Angeles hosted it, the star of *Chicago Hope* came up to me, and I didn't know who she was until my dad explained why my photo was taken with her. I somehow got in a newspaper for shaking hands with the King of Jordan, which is funny because he's not the only king I've chatted with in person. Leighton Meester and I went to high school together, and were buddies, regardless of what she said in that magazine of how none in high school liked her. And I tell this to myself whenever I want to remind myself my life is not a coincidence, that the James Franco incident of 2008 is part of greater event, that one day I will be someone else's event.

It's like the time I auditioned for the cast of *The Real World* and made it to the third round of callbacks. I got that far because I told them about my life, the dirty parts. I told them about my sickness, which was weird and thus marketable. I told them about my 360-turn from academic to pole dancer to professor. I was a good storyline for many reasons. I also remember sitting in the interview room with all the other interviewees, who were the kids from Buttecrack, Montana. They were loud and seemed drunk on alcoholic energy drinks at 11 in the morning. Their clothes were color in a blinding way and probably from Wal-Mart. They wanted to be on television so badly and wouldn't shut up about it, to reveal every secret about their lives because they understood it was the only way for them to escape Montana, a place which isn't important

to the rest of the world. To be anyone, to have a shot of anything, you have to be in the limelight, which is tenet for my generation. I'm not going to lie and say I'm exempt because I was at that casting call too— I'm just not that obsessed.

When people play that guess which celebrity you most look like game, I always get James Franco. The year after I gave my commencement speech, the university invited James Franco to give one. When I look at my life, I can't help but admit that I've had it good at times, that even as a writer I've encountered more success than a lot of other people my age. What's more is that I know I can move on— that I know I didn't advance in the casting rounds because even though my story is interesting, I'm not interesting on camera because I'm quiet compared to those other kids. But even those kids that did advance, they didn't get cast. I walked out of the interview because I had a class to teach at The University of Montana. I imagine they got back in their cars and drove the two hundred miles home to wait for the call from the casting director. Sometimes I breathe a sigh of relief that I wasn't chosen, that I didn't have to resort to other people's lives and my own darkness in order to get people to pay attention to me, which isn't the same thing as liking me. And then I laugh because I look at this book, I look at this chapter, I look at my life as a writer and realize James Franco probably doesn't remember me, much less use me to get other people to read his essays. Sometimes when the phone rings I close my eyes, hold my breath, and think *this could be it, that they finally want me... they were just waiting*, before I answer the phone without checking the number on the caller I.D. because I still want to be on TV.



# New Mexico

xv

I'm a packrat, but I don't hoard. I don't go on ebay and bid in hopes of adding to a collection of beanie babies I keep in a shed out back because I don't have room for them in my house. Collecting isn't my thing. But I do have a tough time throwing things out that mean something to me. Usually they're small things— often pieces of paper. I have all the baseball ticket stubs from the games I attended with my father. There's a faded receipt in my wallet for a cinnamon pretzel I bought at an Auntie Anne's Pretzels at the Beverly Center in 2002; I bought that pretzel on my first date. But they're not always paper. I keep an empty bottle of Jack Daniel's Lemonade— which tasted awful— because I drank it with my first boyfriend. Basically, they're mementos.

But to anyone else, it's rubbish. In fact, most of the stuff I keep is papers with a few lines scribbled on it. As a writer, I'm always recording what people are saying and resort to writing on a napkin if I have no paper. There's a flyer on my desk from 2006 about volunteering for a Thanksgiving meal service: I wrote on it *It's in our nature for people not to want to fall into canyons*. I have hundreds of those scraps of paper in my possession, literally. I always think I'm going to write something and use one in a poem or a short story, but I rarely do. At times I mull putting them all into one piece and calling it *found art*. But no, I save them.

What's nice about paper is that it doesn't take up much space. I can store all of them in one box. And because of the ease of maintaining them, I often forget what it is I'm holding onto. Recently, while undergoing a move, I went through the unpacking process and came across my first will. I wrote it when I was fifteen.

And it's not so much a will as much as it's a suicide note disguised as a rant. That was the third and last time— though I have entertained suicidal thoughts since then, and have come

quite close to putting thought into action— I tried to kill myself. Even Sylvia got it right by the third time.

I remember parts of that day. It was a Thursday afternoon. I was walking to my orthodontist appointment. It was sunny and cool at the same time. A pleasant April day in Los Angeles. Nothing went wrong that day. I just knew walking to my appointment that I would come home and do it, which I did. I came home, wrote out the will on notebook paper that I was using for my AP European History class, swallowed what was left in a bottle of Tylenol, and passed out on a couch. I woke up several hours later with the paper crumbled in my hand. No one else was home.

Looking back on the memory, I know why I did it. I wrote a lot of “notes” back then. I once was going to run away with a boy I met online named Scott. The note, again, was a rant about how people don’t choose to be gay and that I wasn’t going to risk killing myself by staying at home. The day Scott and I were to run away he changed his mind. I still have the note that I was going to tape to the front door to announce my disappearance.

The suicide note shared similar themes with the runaway not, but rather than chastising my parents for thinking being gay was a choice, I was chastising them for making my life so miserable that I chose to kill myself instead of live. In the last few lines, I say that my brother and sister can have whatever they want from my possessions, that my family can try to publish whatever writing they come across of mine, and I want everything else to go to charity. I kept it simple. But I do state one demand: not to be buried in a Jewish cemetery and not to have my funeral conducted in any religious service.

In a lot of ways it’s actually a good will because it specifically addresses what happens to my body and in broad terms gives all my possessions to specific people (and what to do with

those possessions not wanted). But in that way it's also an amateur will: it doesn't do much but transfer everything to someone else.

It's weird to consider creating a will as an art, but it is. A successful will is specific and endearing; it leaves the right possessions with the right people; it absolves others from decision making processes they rather not make; and it comforts people because it's not only about giving away objects. A good will makes a person understand you loved them.

And that doesn't happen with the big stuff. That's easy. Money, stocks, assets, etc... they're the things everyone wants you to bequeath to them, but in that way they don't mean anything. Like the fact that my sister is set to inherit my IRA, and the only reason she's the recipient over my brother is because I think she'll have children and he won't. She'll need it more. Like I said, simple in this instance. But my brother doesn't get short-changed. He gets my truck, which is currently worth more than my IRA. They'll each get equal shares of my investments (I own stock that my father purchased in my name and a thousand, floundering shares of a New Zealand fast food chain called BurgerFuel, which was a joint investment effort with my boyfriend at the time). I want them to split my life insurance after the expenses for my burial are covered, and after ten thousand dollars is subtracted to care for my mother as she ages.

It might seem cruel to cut my parents out of this, but it's not. My father is a millionaire (or I assume so from the money he inherited from my grandfather, who was a millionaire, and his own earnings). My mother is poor, but she lives with my brother, and I think she always will. She can't manage her expenses— and maybe that logic is only me enacting one last move of revenge for the terror I put up with— so I figure leaving the money with my siblings is better than giving it to her because they'll end up spending it on her anyways.

In terms of my body, I still stick by my original demand. Burial not cremation (our bodies are carbon sinks and we need to decompose slowly so that our nutrients are slowly reincorporated into the earth). Organs are encouraged to be donated, but I don't think I qualify. No Jewish cemetery. No religious service (and that includes a Jewish funeral home). I want no rabbis. In fact, anyone who organizes any of those things in an effort to exert power from the fact that I'd be dead and can't argue forfeits all assets *for everybody*. In that event, all my assets and possession are to be donated to charities (I debate which charities I want this to occur with, but I have a list. It includes The Trevor Project, this charity that I can't remember the name of that donates food to the pets of homeless people, and a bunch of charities to that provide medicine and treatment to children. Essentially, I want it to help queer youth, animals, and sick children. The only stipulation is that none of them can be religious charities). In other words, if my mother tried to bury me in a Jewish cemetery— because she would do such a thing— my siblings would lose everything.

My specifications of not dealing with religion might seem overkill, but it's important to me. I think a good will also deals with how *you* would like to find comfort, and as someone who blames religion for a major role in those three suicide attempts, I'm making a concerted effort to deny it any role in giving me that comfort.

Which brings me to the name I want to be buried under. A tombstone is the last piece of writing you get a say in, and I'm struggling with how I want to sign my name to this life. A large part of me wants it to be *Robby Nadler*, the name I picked for myself, the only name that means something to me. At the same time, there's something in me that respects my birth name. I sometimes wonder if I want my real name in parentheses or maybe a smaller font underneath Robby. If cutting your parents financially out of your will seems mean, cutting your birth name

from your tombstone seems downright cruel. My mother is the sort of woman who would visit my grave frequently, and it's one thing to make a religious woman visit a secular cemetery; I'm not sure I have the balls to throw Robby in her face every time she does. Still, I haven't found a replacement for it so Robby Nadler is what I currently have chosen (*Darren* can function as a middle name).

Aside from the name and the dates of life, the only thing I want on my tombstone is the line *If I were a candle-maker the sun would never set*. I wish I could tell you I wrote that line, but I didn't. While touring the old Montana state prison, which was converted into a museum, I explored prison cells. Part of me hoped to find some letter stowed in a mattress or drawer. I didn't find that, but carved inside the prisoners' bureaus were messages. One was a simple *Little Frankie* signature. One was a confession to the women a man raped. Most of it was random scribbling. But as a writer, I have this ESP to detect when something literary is about to happen. In one of the cells, there was a bureau covered by dozens of different inmates' writings, but that's where I found the line. The prisoner attributed it Bernard Malamud, but I haven't been able to track down the line in any of his works. I'm hoping that the prisoner really did come up with it himself.

Now comes the hard part: everything else. This is the stuff that most people don't want. It's estate sale junk. It's the small stuff in our lives, and though we call it small, accumulated, it's actually what defines us, comparatively. Sure, someone in my family might take a pair of shoes or a jacket of mine, but who's going to want all my other clothes? I suppose they could sell it, but even then there are problem.

Consider my underwear. I don't see why anyone would want it, and I equally don't think I want anyone to wear my underwear after my death. But someone might. If my sister went

through my underwear (she's the only one who would do such a thing), how would she divide it? The pairs with small holes that I keep by justifying that I can still wear them while working out would be thrown out. But then there's my collection of designer underwear. Would she be able to identify a five-dollar pair of boxer briefs from a hundred-dollar pair? What about the cheap underwear that holds sentimental value? I have a pair of boxers I borrowed from Todd after spending the night at his place because I wanted to wear a clean pair the next day. I always meant to wash and to return them, but then he broke up with me. That and the Jack Daniel's bottle is all I have left of him. I don't want to see them thrown away, and I don't want them holding someone else's junk.

I've made the effort to rid myself of some of these things that I don't want other people to see. I call it *The Pieces of Me* syndrome, named after a Jewel CD I bought when I was ten. Not only do I not know anyone to give that CD to, but also I don't want to be associated with it. You only die once, but the memory of you having crappy taste in music lives on much longer. I'm tempted to throw it out, but then I remember I like that CD and it's mine and I don't want to give it up before I have to.

And if a lame CD of my youth is that bad, what do I do with the really embarrassing stuff? My porn (on my computer, DVDs, and magazines), sex toys, and a forty-two ounce bottle of Gun Oil lube a guy I dated for two weeks gave me years ago that I'm still working through. That sounds like my sex life is quite interesting, and I must interrupt myself here to assure you that such a thing isn't true. To me, a sex toy is a blindfold, and even that I don't own under my own volition. The word "dildo" makes me uncomfortable. But I do possess a series of chains, handcuffs, cock rings, leather getups (vest, chaps, underwear, mask, etc...), and a cat-o-nine

tails, all of which I have because they were part of the outfits I danced in. I keep them because they're good for last minute Halloween costumes.

The exception to my list of sexual paraphernalia bought for the purposes of dancing is a giant dildo called a SuperCock. I can imagine my mother rummaging through my closet to look for things to sell and uncovering my twelve-inch, life-sized, realistic Chad Hunt SuperCock. Truth be told, even though I bought it, I've never used it (and wouldn't know *how to*), and only did so because I purchased it at the height of my sickness when nobody would touch me. I don't know why watching porn of the guy with the biggest penis in the business was comforting, but it was— almost as if my being able to see him naked, i.e., vulnerable, was a surrogate for the fact that I hadn't had sex in four years because people thought I'd give them AIDS. Watching porn wasn't sexual; my testosterone levels were lower than a girl's, and I couldn't get an erection if I wanted to. It's stupid, but I watched porn because I needed to see people naked, to see bodies do the things mine no longer did.

So there's something incredibly emotional about that SuperCock, a moment where I see a gesture of trust that none one else would offer me. That sex toy is a monument to the only men who would take off their clothes for me— even if they were just recorded images. Chad Hunt is special to me in that way— so much so that one night in a state of medicine-induced delirium I bought it for seventy bucks on the internet, and didn't know I had until it arrived two weeks later. It's the strangest "mystery" package I ever received. Right now I use it as a comical hat rack because I find it funny— and there really isn't anything else to do with it except laugh. I laugh because I know this story— because I see it every time I open my closet and that hat cocaine Michael gave me dangles a foot off the ground. But my mother looking for things to sell? No,



she wouldn't see any of that— just a giant sex toy in her son's closet that's both horrifying in the fact that I owned it *and* the fact that it would be assumed I used it and *could* employ something that grotesquely large into me. And why would she?

I guess if I have advanced knowledge of my death, I'll throw all those things out or sell them on Craigslist. Until then, I keep Jewel and Chad (when there's company over) in a box marked *Throw Away!!!* My will specifically states for boxes marked in this fashion to be unopened and disposed of, and since I've never used an exclamation point in real life for anything, I'm hoping that the usage of three of them will get the point across. It's the safest compromise I have at the moment.

In terms of getting rid of as much small stuff as I can, this is my list so far. Matt gets my writing. Todd gets my DVDs. Scott (Pettit) gets my music. Lauren gets my books. On the surface, this seems straightforward, but this is what I mean by a good will bestows a gift of meaning.

Matt knows the real me better than anyone else. Though I keep secrets from him, they're limited. I've never trusted a friend as honestly. I consider my writing the most prized possession I have. As he's a writer, I feel he'd actually know what to do with it and could seek publication with it (thus serving me via publication and him via the monetary rights). Even more, I don't trust anyone else with my computer (again, the porn thing). Still, it's actually about the gesture. Handing over all your writing, including the poems you wrote at fourteen, is the equivalent of handing over your life in all its most intimate and failed details. It's the most precious gift I have to give anyone, and I know he'd understand that.

Todd would get the DVDs. He'd be able to thumb through my collection of obscure indie and foreign films and not treat them with pretension. He'd understand that *Diva* is a collectable.

But most of all, he loves movies— good or bad. He'd get that I understand his love for them. I want him to have them because I know they'd mean something to him, and I also want him to know the feeling that comes with someone acknowledging you.

Scott is a hard one. I don't know if he'd like my music at all, but the problem is he's loaded so anything he does want he owns. But I still want to give him something because I love him. It's my hope that amongst my weird, non-Jewel music he discovers a song that moves him, a song he'd never have come across otherwise, such as Idan Rachel's "Boi." And I hope when he hears it, he smiles and thinks of me and decides that no matter how much money he has, he'd never have heard that song without me. I want to tell him that's how he makes me feel every day when I listen to life in his absence, but the familiar melody of his presence lingering in my head.

And then there's Lauren, my oldest friend. She'd like the books because she reads them, even though we have very different tastes in literature. After my writing, my books are my most sacred possession. Aside the worth in that, what I've always loved about my relationship with Lauren is our talks. She calls me about boy troubles, and I offer spot-on guidance that I can't seem to offer myself in similar situations. It's one of the few relationships in my life where I feel I've something to offer to someone else. My books have taught me how to think and feel beyond what I should know. Though I never wrote marginalia in any of them— aside from circling grammatical mistakes editors didn't catch— I'm hoping when I'm gone Lauren can read through them and find the answers I learned from them about how to live and love and appreciate those who use appositives correctly.

And there are many other people I want to say thank you to and acknowledge— my extended family and other friends. There's a piece of paper I keep in an envelope that has the simple word *To* on the front. Written in it is a list of names. It's *über* poet of me. I want the funds

used to handle my death also to go toward writing a card to each person on that list that thanks them for their presence in my life so that they know I thought about them. I'd offer them a pair of underwear if that meant something.

And I realize most of the possessions that mean something to me will mean nothing to other people, that the best I can hope for is that my receipts and papers end up recycled instead of thrown out. And though I could designate for someone to hold onto them, I can't find a point in that. Who's going to love the memories— if they even know what they are— like I did? My fraternity paddles my little brothers built me, the vase of roses (now dried) Scott sent from New Zealand on Valentine's Day back in 2008 after we broke up (my favorite mystery package), and my stash of limited edition candy way past expiration date (that I never recommend anyone eat) are doomed to die with me.

When I was twenty and first diagnosed, I thought death was the hard part, but that's the easy part because that's when it ends for you. Even in dying, physically, you surprise yourself by how well you learn to deal with the situation. After I lost the first thirty pounds, I didn't panic as the weeks went by and still I lost more weight. I accepted that this was how I was dying and was ready to give my body away a pound at a time.

No, the hard part was being twenty and hearing the doctor inform me that it was a smart idea to have a will. Maybe it was because I accepted my inevitable death from birth, but having the one person I could turn to offer a glimmer of hope was conceding all chances of self-doubt about my own prognosis. Maybe it's because I was O.K. with giving away the fat on my body, but figuring out whom to give away my physical memories— the things that really defined me— was a visible death outside of my body intolerable. And maybe it's just cliché, that being twenty and sitting by yourself in your college dorm room trying to figure out what happens to you and

how you say goodbye to this world and all the people you know in it is hard no matter how much you understand on some level you're going to die at some point because dying is hard enough, but dying young and alone is terrifying. And though I had experience with wills, it didn't make the process any easier because this was the first time I wrote one and didn't want to die.

I'd like to confess that the process gets easier, but it doesn't. About two times a year, I update my will. Normally, I reread it and add a few things based on forgetting to have included something in the first place or taking into account a new possession. But, occasionally, I have to make a drastic change. When I was dating Michael, I put him in the will. I gave him the honor of giving my eulogy. It was a stupid move; we'd only been together for several months, and I foolishly thought our relationship would progress to some place it didn't. I had a nervous breakdown when he left me, and I had to remove his name (now that honor goes to Zachary Carlson). Now he sits on the thank you card list, but I do want to move him back to the will. I'm hopeful I'll figure out what I can give him one day.

And the weirdest part of all this is that my wills started with suicide, and that's exactly the sort of thing my doctor made sure I talk about in the new one. Except it isn't called that anymore: it's my right to die with dignity. I have to decide on a DNR and whether I want to be kept on life support if I slip into a persistent vegetative state.

In terms of the DNR, I want to be resuscitated. Maybe I'll change my mind on that if I fall into a constant, exorbitant pain, but for the moment I'm O.K. The vegetable is a bit more complicated. Personally, I think you go and that's it. If I have no chance of waking up, I'm O.K. with pulling the plug. At the same time, I know there are people in my family— my mother again— who'd want me on life support. I'll be the first to say I have a right not to have to deal with mother, even in death-like states, but I know people change. And whether or not she has, I

know she tries. The problem is I'm so broken after trying to kill myself three times in order to get away from her that I don't know how to be around her when I'm alive— even if she's changed.

So this is what I leave my mom: she can keep me on life support. She can come in every day and talk to me and hold my hand and mourn for me, and in return I can finally be the son who can stay in her company without screaming about my horrible childhood. I still stand firm in terms of my burial decision, and I don't want any praying or religious services going on by my bedside. It's not much, but it's the most I can give her, and even in that "death" I think we'd both find our own sort of peace.

But I have to tell you, reader, something. And I'm telling you this because a will should be honest because you don't get the chance to tell the truth later on: I'm lying. There's no will. There's no envelope that contains the names of people I want to thank. And it's not because the rest of this is a lie, but because I'm not strong enough to do this. I like to posture about my calm, my expertise in dying, but I'm scared. I don't want to figure out who gets what of mine.

It's not that I haven't been thinking about it. The doctor told me to, but I couldn't do it. I sat down in that dorm room with paper, but every time I tried to write it I cried so hard that I would make myself sick and need to stop. Years later, I still can't. I think about it. I know every name on that thank you list, but I don't want to write them out. To write it out means it's real, and not that it's not real whether or not I do it, but it's one thing to tell yourself you're dying and it's another thing to believe it. And I don't want to. My biggest fear is that it's going happen, and I still won't have put anything on paper. The alternative of all these people in my life not getting the messages I have for them in my head is as crippling a thought as admitting early death, but it's not enough to make me do it.

You don't understand the extent to which I'm afraid of this sort of thing. In graduate school, I shared a house with three other people in my program, a couple months into the lease the girl living in the house decided she couldn't afford the cost of staying and wanted to move out. I was O.K. with her decision, but I wanted her to sublet her room; she was being a bitch and refused to do it because I never made her sign the lease so she said I had no authority to make her do such a thing.

In one way, I'm not an idiot about life: I wanted her to do the sublease because then I didn't have to be financially responsible for some random guy she found on Craigslist to take over her share of the rent. If he were going to default, I was going to let him default on her. In the other way, I didn't want to deal with it for the same reason I never made her sign the lease. I don't do well with contracts, especially ones with money involved. What more is a will but a piece of paper stating a contract of what happens under certain conditions and deals with money?

With her at least, I didn't have to give back her deposit because in her own words she never signed a lease. Consider it a moving penalty. But what's my penalty for not signing the will? That I'm buried under my Hebrew name? I don't want that either.

So yes, this is cheating. This is a will because *I can* do it this way. It's all here— or at least the stuff I need to have figured out. It's not traditional, but it works. I can put myself on this page and tell myself it's an essay. After all, that's probably how you started reading this. And I'm sorry if I tricked you, but it only works as a will if someone else knows it's here in the world, the way I'm only dead if people know that I died.

Because here's the thing: Scott (the boy from the internet, not Pettit) did show up to run away with me that day. He was eighteen; I was fourteen. It was Friday and during the spring. I remember I ditched swim team practice, and he picked up from the high school during lunch. I

was still in my swim parka and carried my Speedo bag. He drove six hours to get to me from a small town called Coalinga. He said he could only take me away if his check from work came in. I remember while in his car driving around the city that he called his dad on his cell phone to check his mail. The money never came. He said we couldn't do it. I never knew if he were serious or if the "check" were more like the sick friend call on a bad date; I looked ridiculous in my swim parka in Los Angeles. I remember he asked if he could read the note, and I told him he could if he were going to take me away. That was before he made the call. I remember this was back when people still knew phone numbers by heart, and I called him for the next few months after our failed getaway. I remember I had to call him when no one but me was home because I wasn't allowed to use the phone because my mother didn't want me talking to people outside of the house, especially boys. One time I reached him just as he was packing his car for a trip to New Mexico for the summer. He never mentioned the trip before. He said he'd be back in seven weeks. I counted those weeks. I counted all forty-nine days of them. I remember strange things about him. That he smoked. That his favorite ice cream flavor was a Thrifty's flavor that was discontinued, and one day while visiting the Grand Canyon he found it stocked in a souvenir store. That he loved hockey and always wore a baseball cap. That whenever he didn't want to tell me about something, he would say *Anyways...* and change the subject just like that. That he lost his virginity at fourteen to his straight, best friend when they were bored (and I told him such things don't happen). That he was closeted to his parents, and his father missed his ex-boyfriend because he thought the ex was just a buddy who went camping with them. That he insisted he had no regrets in life.

I called after seven weeks and the line was no longer in service. Because I knew the number by heart, I called for a long time after that. It never came back into service. Years later, I

tried once— same result, but I never tried again because then I forgot the number and never wrote it down. All I remember is the area code: 805. I never knew what happened to Scott— if he even made it to New Mexico, if there were even a New Mexico to begin with, that it's not someplace we tell ourselves we go when the truth of goodbye isn't what we were made to believe exists as the end. No, I don't want to die.



# Austin

xvi

The first driver mosey in ‘round ten even though they got guys stretchin’ and pullin’ frozen about four in the morning. Senior comes in at ten ‘cause that way he gets dibs on the catering. Which is where you find buried treasure big tips in Austin. Hardly a thing to take that early, but every blue day moon on Sixth some hung-over bartender wakes with another tatt and wants a BLT. Don’t matter— those guys usually tip you good like with a five note and a shot of Patron and it makes the shift hellavu faster when sloshed ‘cause the heat don’t creep down as hard.

Quarter ‘til the other boys ride in tired ‘cause they kept that bartender company at Darwin’s. All ‘posed to flash by 11, but stragglers get going which the manager bitches for, but aint no need since nothing kicks in the phones ‘til-nother half-past. Let the pretty boys sleep in I say.

The Capitol sits six blocks north like an old bird that draws in the day. Everything gets near it so all them buses and important commuters takeover the CBD like fleas. Too many people in their shifts to deliver in a decent time. The best parking you gonna find if any is gonna charge you ten bucks a slot. So many peeps in suits who can’t leave their desks and i-berries to grab a bite willing to pay more than a shoe to cough lunch. This be the answer for all the bike deliveries ‘cause they weave the cars pretty good and you park anywhere with a metal neck to chain.

Pull in third mostly. Sometimes second and on last days when senior trips I steal first. I didn’t got any seniority over the guys, but they work hours ’til sleep so they didn’t throw a word since I grabbed sole shift unless to cover. Same guys play hello over the classic and the sun goes down but the heat don’t in Texas so I’d only brush with a signal since the sweat’s already rolling quarters. In the back with the bleach and TP there’s aprons to grab if in-shop, but the boys

change and hang their shit from an open rack or toss it on the grate if there's not. Some of the others mix up the uniform, but I kept it khaki and short in the summer. Don't know the idiot in Chi-Town that thought up black, but it was prolly Jimmy himself. Like the sun don't shine up in Urbana. So it's important to keep a hand of beaters to change out less you want that sweat riding your back.

I got a helmet too cause the store says something about hats and I didn't need hat with a helmet. Shit. If you wanna gamble head with the SOBs out there take your shot, but I wouldn't risk the bill for appearance sake. My mind we already looked moron in the getup so didn't matter none for a bit of flare.

We got called lazy 'cause we were in lots of ways. The drivers get it. Aint no money in-shop and no money in salary. Tips is cracking. The smart ones drive 'cause they see the money. Didn't start as one, but worked myself up. Doubled dipped my bank on spot. But we got paid to drive, which we did. But not always a thing to take and so in-shop opens mouths like you can pine the indie bands all you want 'til Mona Moans Mother Truckers and the Sweedish chick on violin takes on at Mohawks at eight like that ride east the fuck fly-by-through before Neches cuts you off in a police tape of punk lesbians pissed drunk Elysium aint gay night tonight. Still, there's a point we could do shit like sweep, but we don't.

But we got paid to drive, which we did. Delivery takes less than eight minutes from door to door and aint no one say "Subs so fast you'll freak!" like us. Take it this way. Grid use-ta-be Chavez by Eleventh, Guadaloop to Red River. 816 opened not long before and we found ourselves half as big. Up to south of Eighth. All in all we like it. None too much of a big order come up that ways to begin with. Save us the trip and fitty-cent tip. Second we sees ourselves a

weird order we knows who gets it. Show us any ten deliveries and well route 'em faster than you can check 'em.

Perks of the job is I take my bike all day. Leave Hyde Park at ten where all us drivers live 'cause we're smart enough to settle north of the drag with pools. Ride 'til three for the latest for cash, then ride back home some time before five with stops to grub. It's nice that way. Plenty of air to make thoughts and no one to bother you a word. Walk in and chat for few then out the door.

But that aint gonna change that water runs down hill, traffic one way on Ninth, so all 'paticos and Latins and Schemats listen like the dude who flew from the thirteenth floor forgetting the sky is painted in the other direction; the best rides are heading to Los Angeles and somehow everything else is out of the delivery area, but trust me, when you get 200 west you better pray 1980 is the floor a sweet potato pancake Janis Joplin choked Perry's cock on and now answers the telephone with "Hello, Kim's outback riding god into Moonshine and Magnolia, but there's tip," tip like powdered donut dust facial cosining the veins in your Labradors on leash for hands, and to tell me that this aint about music....

Purty though with the job I mean. Going into the buildings for every floor every office and no one sees the city like you. Meets all kinds of people. Lots nicer than the ones who can't. It's the occasional prick with a log in his ass that treats you like the JC dropout he thinks you are. Side from that folks treat ya well. Nice anyone pulls over for directions and you tell 'em if you want to. And that's 'cause there's outsiders and sometimes we don't. One thing here 'cause you gotta know my boys chase away San Jac 'cause they say it right and the second you Antonian mosey on it flashing big Tex talk of Salt Lick and jahlapenoh jam we're gonna slam Kerby Lane gingerbread down your throat and make you buy us a Mexican martini 'cause you god swearing

hicks of the way east are Mondays apart from L'ana and don't let no Luby's Luanne platter with side o' grits convince you otherwise.

I get mist for my boys back at the shop. Worry about 'em too. I got out when I did 'cause you can only spend so much daylight on the job before the decades catch up. Said to myself degree is happening now. Ride the hurricane economy out. Sandwiches a funny gig though. Didn't think no bread and ham could mean a damn 'cept to pay the way for grad apps, but it does. Alls I did back then was ride and talk and even my biggest problems were the best ones one could have. Looking back is water.

But I seen them after last Christmas on a visit to scout the pad and there was a party in my name. Real low key, but genuine Texan beer to boot props of the host. Spoke to each one and they seemed happy. Started calling me "college boy" though most did college too, just not grad. Smart too. Like you wouldn't know. Spin shit on Orwell or photography and you'd think you was speaking to a teach minus the tats, chains, and tight jeans.

They kept asking if I was happy up north with the snow, balls frozen. Said yeah, that the place was the jump-off. That seemed to make 'em smile and they were happy for me, which is such a rare thing to get these day, much less from other people. Truth is that wasn't truth. My whole life I've spent moving, leaving people like boxes I don't have room for behind because it's what I do. Picked up words here and there and got to be local now and then. Not much to me more than I can write about it now. But this was different. They could tell by the way I spat talk outside the shop, something we never did. It was always "Yes" and "Good morning" when the helmets came off. Our own world for a bit, you know? Even when I said bye to them all I took salute and call. That's 'cause I knew when the door came clocked I'd be "college boy" again and

lose the language that bound us in more than just how we flipped the customers. Honestly, I had never been as happy.

*The*

*Ventriloquist*

xvii





*The Magical*

*Threesome That Did*

*Not Happen*

*Part II.v*

xviii

indent start italics play end italics colon stacey and i had trouble finding the theater in orange county, so the show had already started by the time we found our seats period it was only a minute or so late comma but that makes a huge difference when the dance is only five minutes period i watched the performance of start italics arms end italics comma mesmerized by the piece period the dance was originally performed in nineteen eightyhypenfour comma and the performance was billed as showing of susan marshallapostrophes newest piece semicolon had i known she was going to open the show with start italics arms end italics comma i wouldapostropheve made sure we left westwood much earlier period paragraph break rewind start italics play end italics ellipsis i first saw the dance was on video period susan and arthur performed it period it was the sort of dance that made you feel bad as an artist because you felt everything youapostrophed ever done or ever could do would be shoddy in comparison period paragraph break indent start italics fast forward end italics there was something different about the performance period iapostrophed never seen or heard or it performed with two men period they were beautiful comma but seemed mismatched sizehyphenwise period i sat in the balcony so i couldnapostrophet get a great view of anything except the mess of their bodies moving comma but the minutia of a face wasnapostrophet necessary period paragraph break i flipped through the program to see who were the dancers period and there he was colon darrin period start italics pause end italics this was only the second time iapostrophed seen him period the first had been during my senior year when he needed studio space to rehearse and i showed up to rehearsal for my own dance only to discover he was being given my rehearsal time period i sat outside of the studio doing calculus homework period when he left i think he said thanks comma but maybe he didnapostrophet because the sound of his voice i think would be the sort of thing

iapostrophed remember period paragraph break and i have to tell you that there was something magical about seeing him on stage performing that dance period because this was before i got sick or at least knew i was sick comma but still something inside of me gravitated to the work period you see comma aurther comma the guy who danced with susan and choreographed the piece with her comma was sick too period bug sick period and it wasnapostrophet a good time to be sick in the eighties period no one knew how it spread period sweat was considered a transfer mechanism period because dancers are gay and dancers sweat comma you didnapostrophe touch dancers period maybe if you saw the piece youapostrophed understand why this was a big deal period paragraph break itapostrophes two people standing sidehyphenbyhypenside period they just use their arms to dance period there are no fancy leaps or turns comma not even music period just arms period they catch each other comma touch each other comma throw each other comma push each other comma grab each other comma wrap each other comma and hug period itapostrophes painfully beautiful to watch the spectrum of an arm love and hate someone in five minutes period but thereapostrophes something about the ending comma something that freezes you period standing sidehyphenbyhyphenside comma the dancers move their arms in what i can only describe as swimming in a shallow ocean while signaling to a helicopter or god above for help period and in all their swift carving of the space comma the arms donapostrophet touch period they overlap and bleed through comma but they finally donapostrophet touch like some coordinated machine that fires a bullet through a planeapostrophes propeller without hitting period paragraph break susan always says that the dance isnapostrophe about arthur comma and i believe her colon but it is period paragraph break indent start italics play end italics ellipsis luke is trying to get me to have a threesome with him and his boyfriend period he tells me that he has just gotten back from the red bird and is a little tipsy period his boyfriend is someone

iapostropheve tried to chat him on this new app on my phone for finding gay men comma but he never responds iapostrophem not really in the mood for sex so i try to change the subject nicely comma but itapostrophes not working well period still comma luke likes me and thinks itapostrophem holding out because his boyfriend was rude to me period i wonapostrophet sleep with them regardless comma but i talk to the boyfriend because i donapostrophet want to seem like an asshole even though itapostrophes clear to me luke is the one i prefer of the two period paragraph break but luke passes out and itapostrophes the boyfriend and i period we talk and i mention los angeles semicolon heapostrophes from there too period he tells me he attend beverly high semicolon i respond similarly and find out he grew up on the block over from where i lived period i ask him about ben harris and he says he doesnapostrophet remember the guy comma but will check his yearbook when he gets home period i ask him what he meant by home comma open parenthesis i had assumed he lived in missoula because the two of them had been shown in the area for over a week close parenthesis and he explained he was in town mountain a section of start italics cloudless end italics with his boyfriend at the university for the undergraduate dance program period and that is when i knew it was darrin period paragraph break it turns out luke is the taller guy from start italics arms end italics period it turns out that show i saw in los angeles all those years ago is the one theyapostrophe mounting period i think for a moment about the universe and take this as a sign period paragraph break indent start italics pause end italics it was a smart move for me to switch from dancing to choreography period even if i trained comma i would never be able to make it colon my body isnapostrophet right period my feet have an arch thatapostrophes so high that it looks as if my toes donapostrophet point when they are period i also have a protruding chest that makes it seem that iapostrophem not relaxing my torso when in fact it is relaxed period and so when i say darrin on that stage i saw a version of me colon there

was a guy who had my name comma lived by my block comma and went to my school period he was a dancer that i could never be even though i was still trying at the time period paragraph break indent start italics rewind end italics i would come back from new zealand and begin my rapid health decline comma which officially ended my career in the dance world period no one would share a rehearsal room with me period no one would touch me because i looked like death period i would spend hours in front of mirrors comma but never looking into out of fear of seeing my own reflection while creating a dance that i had no one to mount it on period i became bored and picked up a newspaper and decided i was going to dance out the articles period the words were easy comma but the punctuation threw me off period how does one dance a question mark question mark in that moment i conceded the limit of the speech of my body comma the same reason why i watched start italics arms end italics and fell speechless colon how does one capture the arm in words question mark i wanted to be able to take my words and take my body and throw them together to make space to tell what only each could period i thought it was the only thing that could save me period paragraph break indent pause italics play end italics colon what i love about dance is that you lose it period unlike just about every other form of art comma you canapostrophet keep it period it doesnapostrophet stay after itapostrophes performed and rarely are they filmed semicolon if they are filmed comma the copies are not for sale period by walking into a show you surrender your right to be pleased ever again period itapostrophes only for that moment comma that one charge of life that you experience the bodies move in all their graces before itapostrophes vanished comma and all that you have proof of is your memory and ticket stub period in that way comma dance is like a threesome comma but also like sex in generalemdash which makes it like life in general period it is a commitment to an act of remembering period in that way comma it exists for you because no one can ever hold that

moment beside you period the moment dies and is buried in you period i carry a graveyard of the people and dances from my life in my chest comma but i still haven't figured out how to resurrect them on the page comma how to tell you in more ways than just telling comma but actually to show you period i want to show you this in a way that if you told someone you couldn't because once you leave this page it dies period paragraph break indent start italics play end italics colon i questioned why i came to missoula period comma and i wanted this to be the answer period i wanted to tell myself that what other cosmic force would make it so that darrin and i would end up in this place together period i wanted to agree to luke's invitation and be in bed with darrin and have him hold me and for a second close my eyes and picture a large stage and full audience and the house lights are down and he's whispering in my ear that he's ready to start the dance whenever i'm ready period i squeeze his hand back period

*Anna Karenina*

in the

Shadows

xix

When people in Los Angeles heard that I was moving to Austin after college, they assumed it was for graduate school or work. It wasn't either of those things. My plans to attend graduate school and earn my MFA in Creative Writing fell through after having the hubris to apply only to the top five programs in the country because I thought I'd be accepted into each: I was rejected by four of them. Depending on when and to whom I am telling the story, the fifth school changes. It's always NYU and that's because it was NYU. But in some versions of the story, I'm accepted without funding, others I'm wait-listed and eventually accepted with no funding, and also just the simple wait-list that never panned out. In either of the scenarios, I could only attend if I were accepted and if I were offered funding; I knew better than to sink into 100K debt in the name of poetry

There were a few jobs that I applied for in Los Angeles. The one that I wanted most was a managerial-level position in the university policy counseling sector at UCLA. I had been a counselor for three years and had more experience than anyone applying for the job. I think I would've performed well at the position. Maybe it was because I was visibly sick as this was the time of my skeleton-looking days in college— or maybe it was because they honestly didn't want me— regardless of my health. Either way, that too fell through.

After a string of failed interviews for summer positions in Los Angeles, it was becoming clear that I had nothing to fall back on. I could've moved back home without issue, but I was and still am too stubborn for that. Part of it was that even though the doctors had finally found a medicine my body responded to— and I was improving— there was too great of a chance of a relapse. Besides, I was in one of my many ongoing feuds with my parents and wouldn't give them the satisfaction of me relying on them. I wasn't speaking to my mother— this time predicated on her hanging up on me during a long-distance call from New Zealand when I



politely explained to her I would never set foot in Israel again and that she should stop trying to convince me to visit; she told me her country was worth more than her son and the line went dead.

It was odd being angry at my father. Though I had reasons to be angry with him my whole life, I viewed him as the lesser of two evils because he wasn't as consistent in his tormenting of me as my mother was. Of course, there was the time he strangled, beat, and threw me head first into a wall, and I didn't speak to him for over a year after the incident— despite him regularly dropping by the house to visit my siblings. If he called and no one were home, I'd hang up. But I ended my silent protest of him because I had to. I decided to move out of my mother's house and into his small studio apartment in El Segundo. Doing so meant speaking to him again, and so I did.

Since those days we hadn't fought until I became sick. But that story involves someone else. His name was Scott. He was nineteen when we started dating in New Zealand. I was Scott's first love. Part of the reason I fled the states was because I was quite distraught from the breakup of my first love a year-and-a-half before. I told myself that if I hadn't already recuperated, then something was wrong and I needed to distance myself from it. Ironically, I thought the thing I desired space from was in Los Angeles and Auckland would offer catharsis— but it was within and followed me across the globe.

Scott and I only dated for a little over two months when my visa expired. By that time the first onset of the sickness begun to manifest in ways I recognize only now; back then I viewed them as odd phases. The most notable symptom showed that last month in New Zealand when I found it hard to have sex with Scott. He was polite about in that he didn't bring it up nor wouldn't be offended if I didn't reciprocate a sexual act he'd perform on my semi-interested

body. In that sense he was generous in ways that belied his age. I remember we stayed in his parents' bach for a week as a final getaway together. We watched *Grey's Anatomy* to pass the time because it was a sparsely populated town without real things to do once the sun set. In one episode, a man hadn't slept with his wife in three years even though he professed his love for her. The wife believed he was cheating. It turns out he suffered from secondary hypogonadism caused by a brain tumor. The wife ended up cheating on him days before the discovery of the tumor. I turned to Scott and told a joke in the way people tell jokes about things that are true but need the veil of doubt: *maybe I have that?* It was the only time either of us brought it up.

I was ready to go back to California, finish my degree, and continue on my journey of becoming a writer. I loved Scott, but knew I couldn't create a meaningful life in New Zealand—with or without him. He loved me more than I did him at the time. That would change, but not soon enough. One night in New Zealand while we cuddled in his bed, he nervously proposed the idea that he could visit for a few months in the winter because there was a training course he could take that was cheaper in the states— ten-thousand dollars in the US compared to thirty-thousand dollars in NZ. He was one of a dozen people certified by Cisco to do something with phones and could charge five-hundred dollars an hour. If he attended this new certification course, he could charge eight hundred. Today, he's twenty-two and owns two companies. I told him if it were genuinely for work and not me then he should do it. He said it was for work. We both knew we were lying.

By the time Scott landed at LAX, I weighed one-hundred forty pounds. The trip he imagined didn't come true. Most of it resembled those nights when we shared a loveseat back in the bach, but this time there was less intimacy. Though I didn't ask him to, he took care of me. He listened to my rants as mild-dementia set in. He made sure I stayed atop of my appointments

with professors and doctors. And throughout all of that, I didn't have the desire to kiss him, not even as a thank you gesture to someone for being so devoted. What I appreciated most about Scott was that he was the only one who knew the gravity of my illness both from direct observation and because I shared everything with him— because I could not share my love and body with him, I opened up to him in the one way I could.

None of this involves my father; yet, it does. After a brief excursion to San Francisco before his last week in the states, we spent several days in Huntington Beach with my father. Scott wanted to sample the touristy things. Disneyland mainly. We went. There are pictures. I seem much happier in them than I remember being at the time. He seems the opposite. And even though I thought my dad would freak about the two of us sharing a bed, he didn't reveal much aside from a general discomfort when I informed him that Scott wouldn't be sleeping on the floor. The issue came after.

Scott needed to fly home the day before Christmas Eve because his grandfather was sick. The original idea was that he'd stay in the US until February, but he explained that this could be his grandfather's last Christmas with their family. I nodded, but I knew that he was exhausted from keeping vigil over me. Whatever relationship we shared in New Zealand had been extinguished. I began choreographing a dance for one of my two senior theses when I returned to California. I dedicated this dance to him. It was to premiere in mid-January—only weeks away from when he left the country. On opening night the dancers were sloppy. I remember being thankful wasn't there to see it.

My father wouldn't let me drive Scott to the airport in his car because he was afraid I'd crash it. He said he'd drive us. I didn't put up an argument. Because it was so close to the holidays, the international terminal was rather empty— people arrived this time of year, but

didn't leave for other countries— and Scott managed to check-in before twenty minutes passed. We arrived three hours before his plane was scheduled to takeoff. My father is a strange man. He doesn't like to wait on people, but is late to everything. He said he'd be waiting for me at the Holiday Inn parking lot in thirty minutes. The lot was a fifteen-minute walk away, but he refused to drive through the horseshoe of LAX if he could avoid it.

The two of us sat in the terminal eatery, and he went over to buy Häagen-Dazs— he liked the brand and they had flavors like mint chip, something not found down under. He offered to shout me a scoop, but I declined because of the new diet I started. Why I was dieting at one-hundred forty-five pounds I don't know. We didn't talk much or if we did we didn't say anything memorable because I don't remember anything but the ice cream. But I remember how he looked. I remember his face seemed to say, *I know this is over, but we have this moment, this now. That's good enough, isn't it?* I wanted to stay. There were still two hours to stay. Maybe in those two hours I could've apologized for not being affectionate and we could've sneaked off to a restroom so I could prove to him we could be a couple again. That probably wouldn't have happened, but I like to think it could've. I felt my phone vibrate. It was my father calling forty-five minutes after dropping us off. He sounded annoyed and explained he had somewhere to be. I rushed a goodbye and cried in a manner I hadn't done since I said goodbye to him on another continent. I thought maybe those tears would attest that underneath my sickness there was love and appreciation for him. I told him I'd see him soon, but that has yet to happen. He's now deeply in love with another man. I tell him I'm happy for him when we talk and maybe that's a lie— maybe not.

The appointment my father needed to attend to was treating my sister to a mediocre Mexican restaurant in West Los Angeles for dinner, called Taco Mundo. The name is supposed

be some sort of pun in Spanish, but I don't speak the language. Ten minutes into their meal I stormed out to the car and cried in the backseat. When they returned it was obvious I had been upset and I did nothing to hide that fact: I wanted them to see the anger. After dropping my sister off at my mother's, my father and I drove silently most of the way. I only said one thing: *You could've gone without me. You could've let me stay and picked me up when you were done.* He didn't seem to understand what this meant and to this day he doesn't.

That was the day I decided never to have to depend on anyone. No more dealing with abusive mothers because I had no other place to live. No more being at the mercy of fathers who didn't comprehend a thing about their sons. No more lovers ruined by healing me because no one else would.

So when graduate school and jobs fell through, I couldn't afford to stay in LA very long on my own means. My bank account rested comfortably at just under three-thousand dollars. I suppose I could've tried to make that work in LA, but I didn't want to stay. There were too many ghosts haunting the landscape. It was April then, and I began looking for cities to move to. I mentioned to Scott that I would move back to New Zealand for him. It was my first backup-backup plan if graduate school failed. He explained that he didn't think it was a smart move because I had mentioned I that would probably reapply to graduate schools the next year and would have to leave eventually. That was true in the sense that the scenario he spoke of was true, but it was false at the same time in way we both knew that wasn't reason for asking me not to move. I couldn't help but smile at how well he learned for me.

There were only so many cities I considered relocating to. The climate needed to be similar to Los Angeles but affordable. A big city. Some place with jobs. My research rendered Dallas, Houston, Austin, San Antonio, Atlanta, Sante Fe, and Memphis as viable candidates.

There was a senior I tried to date while I was a freshman at U.C.L.A. who was from Dallas. He said the only good thing about Texas was Austin. Everyone whom I spoke to who ever visited the city loved it. It also happened to be the city with the least chance of snow, hurricanes, and tornados from the list.

Unintentionally, my literary counterpart was moving to Austin too. He experienced better luck with graduate school and was accepted into the MA program at UT-Austin for fiction. When Matt told me this, I took it to be a sign the way I take anything that corroborates—even in the slightest of ways— what I want to do as a sign. Matt was the first writer I befriended and the first friend I had at U.C.L.A.

It was funny because for the longest time he wouldn't meet me. We chatted online for months. Many months. And still he wouldn't meet me. He had reasons. He was in a fraternity (his was less accepting of the gay thing than mine). I think at first we only chatted because it humored him. I'm not sure if it had to do with being-in-the-closet issues. But as time passed, he started to share more about himself. I dropped by unannounced to a fraternity party his house was throwing and finally met him face to face for a few minutes. After that ambush, he seemed receptive about hanging out and chatting on a regular basis.

Matt is the only other person I would've told about my sickness, but he took a year off after college before applying to graduate school under the advice of Mona Simpson. He moved to Northern California and folded sweaters in a Banana Republic backroom. He told me that he liked the job because he didn't have to deal with people and it left him time to read. He read *Anna Karenina* in the shadows of that backroom. The intro was written by Mona. We didn't speak much then. But when he did resurface I told him everything, but that was already March with Scott gone and me on the medications. He seemed casual about the information, about my

sickness like the way he must have known I was in love with him those first few months but never addressed it until I lost interest— since then, we have the most solid, platonic friendship possible amongst gay men. That I'd be the only person he could go to a gay club with or check out a bathhouse. He trusted me that way. We trusted each other with our secrets and never spoke of the people we used to be— only the people we could or pretended to be. We didn't mention our pasts. We accepted that silence like mountains you cannot move.

Matt was planning on moving to Austin in August. My lease in Los Angeles expired mid-June. I spent the better part of that April scouting Austin for possible apartments online. I chatted with people online too. I befriended a guy named Nolan. He drove the bus for the Boys and Girls Club, smoked a lot of pot, and was the most carefree man I've ever encountered. When I said I was flying down to visit the city and find an apartment, he offered me his couch—though I ended up sleeping with him in his bed. I intentionally picked days to visit that overlapped with his birthday. He left his keys in a tomato planter and I stayed in his house a good few hours before he got off work. I don't think I'd ever have such faith in the goodness of a stranger. I remember making a joke that I could've stolen all his positions. He responded that it was only worth money. And he honestly practiced that philosophy. The next morning I cooked him an elaborate breakfast of white chocolate, maple macadamia nut whole wheat pancakes with mixed berry compote served with Blue Bell vanilla bean ice cream as a thank you and birthday present. He said I was a natural domestic and would make a guy very happy one day.

I did sign a lease that weekend. Two actually— one for a summer sublet and the other a year's lease that began in August. I then drove out five days later on my own in a one-way rental and dropped off all my belonging into an apartment I rented but wouldn't live in for another month. The plan was to have all my possessions that I couldn't fit into a carryon stored in Austin

before I graduated, and then there'd be no way to turn back. I arrived with my things late Friday night and I flew out that Saturday morning. But on that Friday night, in spite of all of my tiredness, I drove to Nolan's apartment now located seven blocks away. He gambled on most nights and this Friday was no exception. He planned to leave his keys in the planter but his landlord saw them and picked them up thinking Nolan forgot them. It was past midnight and I had slept for only four hours in the past two days. I sat awake as long as I could in front of his door until he arrived and found me sleeping. I saw him a few more times after that, but it was only because I once again waited outside his door until he came home. There was reason for this distancing on his part. I had a small breakdown with the hormones that weekend I stayed with him. I don't blame him for not wanting to get involved after he saw me at what wasn't even my worst. It was clear that in my condition I was as good as money to him, which was to say something you bet with and held no remorse if you lost it.

You know about my jobs in Austin. The dancing. Why I did it. You also know about my adventures as a cashier and then cyclist delivery boy for a Jimmy Johns downtown. I held a few other jobs in Austin as well. Briefly, I was employed as a 24Cycle instructor at 24hour Fitness. I wasn't fired, but I had to give it up when I moved to Montana. At times I'd give men massages even though I wasn't a certified masseuse. They let me because I took classes for it back in college and had the hands for it— that and they liked how I looked when they saw me dancing in my underwear. It was never sexual— though I imagine that disappointed them— and they always paid a hundred in cash. The other and more important job is actually my point here: to all the children or curious adults reading this, yes, there is such a thing as having a job as a candy taster.



Candy was something I fell into because of New Zealand, which they call lollies. I always adored the stuff in the states, but never went overboard. I would buy a bag of Twizzlers if it were on sale. That sort of thing. But lollies were different. First, the majority of it was unheard of by me and thus exciting. I knew about Cadbury, but there were over fifty different chocolate bars they manufactured in New Zealand. I couldn't imagine a world without Twix or Reese's Peanut Butter Cups; yet, I managed to live in one without Aero, Moro, Flake, Twista, etc....

Even the way they made lollies was different. There was no corn syrup. And I don't care what the average American says; you, can taste the difference between sugar lollies and HFCS candy. It was also the small things— like the gummy lollies. They didn't have bears or worms. They formed their gummies into odd and grotesque creatures— octopi, rattlesnakes, and babies. There were always lots of different varieties of gummy babies to choose from. I never understood the joke behind it, but the Home Brand version appealed to me greatly and I bought a pack every week during my Saturday trip to the grocery store. There was a morbid sense of power eating them followed by guilt. I started calling them Swifties to deflect that feeling.

I returned to the United States with dozens of lollies only found in New Zealand: Pineapple Lumps, Cadbury Black Forest— it was Scott's and my candy bar the way couples have their own song— Crunchie, and Cadbury Cream Eggs. Yes, I know they sell Cadbury Cream Eggs in the US around Easter, but they're year-round in New Zealand and there are dozens of flavors unknown to most Americans, such as mint.

I started to become obsessed with candy for several reasons. The first was the sickness; my mind simply latched onto candy for unknown reasons. It needed to fixate on something and candy was there. The way people think about their children or jobs I thought about candy. I thought about the candy I owned, if it were properly stored, what would happen to my chocolate

if the heat in my room unexpectedly came on while I was out. It seems funny now, but I was serious at the time. I kept boxes categorized by type of confection they contained the way some men keep comic books in plastic sleeves.

Related to the sickness but in a different manner was that I felt it was important to eat it. Candy makes you fat. Everyone knows that. I couldn't keep on weight. If it were some chemical my body ingested that was causing me to lose all my mass then maybe one in the candy— perhaps Blue Lake 5— would counteract it. Again, a ridiculous notion that candy is a medicine, but I believed in it at the time. There was not much else to.

It was only logical that I started to explore candy once my interest was piqued. I read books on it at the library. I searched online and found blogs of people who were more intense in their passion for the delicacy than I was— and there weren't even sick (to my knowledge). Most of the blogs dealt with reviewing candy. I loved them. I read through all their articles. I would dig out the candy from my organized boxes and eat the same candy being reviewed to see how my opinion differed or where it matched. I had favorite authors, ones whose critiques I came to trust, who were mentors of the palate to me. I could go through ten pounds of candy in a sitting and still my weight was plummeting.

It was in April that Candy Addict, one of the blogs I consistently read, put out an ad to hire writers. I never had a job writing before. I didn't know much about candy except that I liked to eat it. I thought there was nothing to lose by applying. I was included in the final staff considerations, but was not one of the three new writers hired. A few weeks later the owner said the position reopened up once more and that I could have the job if I wanted it. I accepted and didn't even think about why there were so many new openings so quickly after a hiring round.

Candy Addict operated as a group blog. A man named Brian Pipa started it in North Carolina. The original idea was that he liked candy and wanted to write about it. His blog became popular. Soon he was writing one article every day, mostly reviews, but then it became two. He decided to hire a staff member, then another. Within a year the staff had grown to ten writers from around the world (there were writers in Australia and Canada) and an editor. I was hired in the heyday of the site when writers were paid twenty dollars a review and traffic was forty thousand unique hits monthly.

I started out slow with the job, not sure what to review or how to write the articles. But the editor assured me that my background in English and training in patisserie— another story— rendered me more than qualified. Most of the time we'd review whatever we wanted to as long as no one else on the site wrote about it yet. You could also write feature articles like a Top 10 Worst Candies list. Companies even sent us their products to review free of charge— that was best perk of the job.

The reason why writers kept quitting was that Brian failed to pay his employees on time. He said it was due to laziness and I have no reason to doubt him. We were supposed to be paid every two months, but that often stretched anywhere from four to six at a time. Many people left. New people were hired. Then they left, too. But I stayed.

I stayed because I needed the job for several reasons. The first was the money. Even though it wasn't much, with so many writers gone I could write an article every day and it would be published the following day. That was a hundred dollars a work week. I learned not to depend on that money right away and knew with patience that I'd eventually receive it.

The other part of the job was that it provided me with a cover for the dancing. I booked my dancing schedule in Austin around my shifts at Jimmy Johns, but the problem arose when I

had a gig out of town. Jimmy Johns was great because they let you take days off— weeks at a time for me— if you gave them advanced notice. There were always guys looking to pick up shifts so as long as someone covered for you were fine, which wasn't hard— pending you worked well and they wanted you to come back.

Whenever I traveled, I told them it was candy-related, that the company was sending me out to a factory, that they wanted me to write an on-site piece, etc.... I always brought back regional candy so they believed me. It was also a way I could convince my parents I was working. I didn't speak much with them, but my sister called every now and then and she told them about the job. They would read my articles online and knew that I was working. As long as I published, which I did, no one had reason to believe my travels and earnings weren't candy-related.

The guys in the sandwich shop were candy fiends as well. They teased me the time I stumbled into the store during the middle of a Monday lunch rush, a day I showed up later than I normally start because I was dancing in Houston that weekend. My buddy Jeff began singing under his voice *I smell sex and candy, yeah*. We all laughed. I laughed the hardest because I knew it was true and truer than they could imagine. This was followed by me handing out some candy that I bought while away, further evidence of the legitimacy of my trip, which I would then review to come full circle with my cover.

I did take one candy-sponsored trip. It was in May after I was accepted into graduate school, after I was fired as a dancer, and after I was promoted to courier. The All Candy Expo (ACE) is an annual convention in Chicago. It's the largest confectionary gathering in the Western Hemisphere. When you see spoofs of candy expos on *The Simpsons*, this is what they

base it off. It's not open to the public. You can only attend if you're a manufacturer, a buyer, or press. Candy bloggers count as the last.

My dad's family is from Chicago. While there, I met up with some relatives whom I had never spoken to in my life, but they knew of me from my father. It was weird to hear his name as Jimmie— which made me think of work as it too hails from Illinois— like he was some other relative I had yet to be introduced to. He was dad or James to me. They were really nice, but I didn't stay with these relatives. I couch-surfed the trip. Again, I have luck with meeting the right people when traveling.

The man I stayed with was named Jason. I knew nothing of the neighborhood he lived in or who he was aside from his picture and basic info I read on the couch surfing website. Jason let me sleep on his couch in a lovely brownstone in the rich gayborhood of Chicago in Evanston. Random facts about him include that he was the Obama's baby sitter when Obama was still a senator. He also served on the board for the ACLU. He was sweet and I would've slept with him if he wanted to, but he never seemed interested. I wonder if that is how Scott felt.

Jason was supposed to occupy his place with me for the entirety of my trip, but decided last minute to head to his parent's farm for the holiday weekend. When he left me alone in his expensive home ala Nolan's carefree nature, I assume it was because he knew that if I were stupid enough to steal his LED flat screen that he was so well-connected within the city that I wouldn't make it to the airport before being in handcuffs. I left before he returned from his Memorial Day Weekend trip, but as a gift bought him a copy of *At Swim, Two Boys* and some other book I can't remember the name of but mentioned he should read. I also let him keep whatever candy he wanted from my exploits at ACE— he enjoyed Lava Balls, mints (preferably Altoids), and gum, all candy he didn't have to eat right away.

The thing about being in the expo is that it's just too much. There are literally hundreds of companies sampling their entire product line. This is also where companies preview candy that has yet to hit the shelves so that the press can create a buzz about it. Within twenty minutes, you've consumed more than enough food for the day, but there's so much more left to try. At the end of the three days, I accrued over seventy pounds; I shipped most of it off in flat-rate boxes to my sister in San Louis Obispo, which she shared with her dorm and became popular after the fact. I also saved a bag for the boys back in the shop and they loved all the stories I told.

But my favorite part of Chicago was the city. I think Chicago would be miserable to live in during any other time besides May. It's either too cold or too humid. I've never lived there and I have nothing to base that assumption on, but it seems logical enough to say. I went to The Art Institute of Chicago several times to see my favorite painting by Lucian Freud: *Sunny Morning—Eight Legs*. I went to the beaches. I went to the gay beaches. I went to the gay bars and made out with a chef who worked at The Cheesecake Factory. He bought me two light beers. I felt I earned that trip because I had a reason to be in that city that didn't involve me taking off my clothes. For this I deserved some fun.

Before Montana accepted me, I was determined to leave Austin— with or without a graduate school acceptance letter. I hated it for the longest time. In fact, Chicago was one of the cities I considered relocating to if graduate school didn't pan out the second time around. Of course, this was for a boy. His name was Jason— not to be confused with the Obama's babysitter Jason. We would've been good together I think. He was embarrassed that he made some mistakes in college, which he never elaborated on, and now was paying for them. He was a substitute teacher living on the floor of one his friend's apartment. I told him that I didn't care about his current misfortune and that I was fine to meet him in a public place if he felt weird

about taking back me to where he was staying. I would've been content with a beer and kiss on the cheek. He was against it and I flipped on him when her refused to meet me after months of conversations. I called and left him a message geared at slicing through him as only I knew how to carve. It was about how he always said he wished he'd get even half of what he put out in the world and I told him that if he opened his eyes he'd realize he's been getting exactly what he earned. We never spoke again.

But it didn't matter. Shortly after the convention, the North Carolina legislature passed a law to tax all revenue generated paid by Amazon.com— Candy Addict's biggest source of income— to sites who advertised products that could be linked and bought through Amazon. Rather than deal with taxes, Amazon severed all ties with websites headquartered in North Caroline, including Candy Addict. Without Amazon, Candy Addict couldn't afford to pay its writers and so we stopped writing *sans*— the occasional times when a company shipped us a free product and it compensated for the pro-bono work.

I had one job left and that was the sandwich gig, which I— and everyone in that store— thought would be the first thing I'd quit as soon as something better came along. I checked for other things at the time, but never too hard. By the end, I didn't want to.

The problem with Austin was that I couldn't keep my head up while applying to schools. Like candy, the disease focused on grad school. Every day was about assembling applications and letters of recommendation. Once the applications were compiled and mailed, it became about waiting for responses. The people I'd later learn who were my friends kept extending their hands to grab a beer after work. I always said thanks, but left to write my candy review, dabble with an application, and sit in my room as the disease strengthened. I remember over that period

that the stress in conjunction with the disease became so unmanageable that it caused the hair over my body to stop growing and fall out.

The first acceptance changed that. I could breathe again. My faith in my abilities as a writer was restored. But even more than that, I foolishly believed that graduate school was the solution to all of my problems, that as soon as I went through it I'd be in the world of academia— far away from jockstraps, wife-beaters, and Sour Patch Kids. That I'd be with my sort of people again. That I'd be miraculously loved for no good reason and have book deals. It was all going to be so easy from then on and forever. It was this belief that resulted in graduate school holding such a strong grip over my life in Austin such that it's only now that I'm no longer in Austin do I see why I miss the city and my friends there. I started to realize how wonderful a place Austin was shortly before I left, so I told myself things would be even better from then on as long as I reached Montana. Of course, that wasn't going to be the case and graduate school would end up being one of the biggest regrets in my life. But at the time I needed that lie so that my chest could relax— if only for a little while.



# Collard

# Greens

xx

Something even you don't know about me is that I watched porn the day the call came. A lot of porn in fact. Though it's easy to imagine that I'm conditioned to death by this point in my life as a result of my disease, that isn't the case. I completed my morning workout, a routine that focused on developing my back and biceps— but I started late that day so I ended around 11:30. I went up to my room to strip off my sweaty shorts and v-neck tank, aka a wife-beater. I answered the phone naked. I'm not going to tell you who was on the other line. I'm not going to tell you what was said. I'm not going to tell you who died. No offense, but that's not your business. I get it that you're supposed to open up to the reader, but not here. You didn't know him. You didn't know how I knew him. Our history and our bonds are only details that help embed some voyeuristic sense of emotion in this story. But to me, they mean so much more because they're all I have left of him— and now you want me to share that with a stranger? So no, you don't get those details because you didn't earn them, didn't love him. I'm only going to tell you to know what you need to know. Like how it was St. Patrick's Day; that I went downstairs because I needed to eat something and devoured a leaf of raw collard greens, then broke into grief; and then I watched porn.

In general, I watch, read, and observe— yes, such a thing is possible— a great deal of porn. But there are two types of porn for me. The first is the type I jack off to. Depending on my hormones, I do that a lot or a little. I once went thirty weeks without getting off when they dropped to their lowest levels. When I start a new round of medication, I often plan out my day to allow for nine to twelve masturbatory sessions; one of the side effects is that the medication produces an inordinate amount of semen— even if I'm not horny, I have to release the pent up pressure. For this sort of thing, I like gay porn. Cliche shit: big muscles, big cocks, dirty talking, fucking, sucking, cum, orgies, etc.... But I've recently developed a taste for straight porn. I don't

prefer straight sex, but there's something erotic to me about watching a heterosexual man please a woman. Whether he's eating her out or fucking her, I like to watch men in action regardless of whom they're plowing.

The other type of porn I don't really talk about with people because it's not the sort of porn that I watch for the purposes of why most people watch porn— nor is it the sort of porn you can discuss with most people. I have a collection of weird, disgusting, and at times illegal porn assembled on my computer or in my mind. What does that mean? Let's start simple. Straight porn. Gay porn. Bisexual porn. Lesbian porn. Why? Like I said, it's not about getting off. The men can have small dicks and be twinkish— and honestly, I prefer them that way because I don't like being distracted by men I'd want to jack off to.

I have to tell you, I've seen a lot of weird porn. We're talking double insertions (both on men and women), water sports, food porn. And that's the tame stuff. One of weirdest things I've watched is a homemade fisting scene between three men that depicted one guy taking another man's leg up to the knee, which gave new meaning to having a foot up your ass. I marveled at the ability to perform such an act the way you might marvel at how someone can memorize the first million digits of pi: both seem impossible to me. When the guy pulled out his leg, a pink stub glistened in intestinal slime. I wasn't expecting it to be amputee porn too, but sometimes you luck out that way.

So I'm a freak when it comes to porn, but I do draw the line at certain places. I don't like many things: blood, vomit, scat, and worse. But I've watched them. I do have a personal boundary against actual rape scenes, which in my view encompasses child pornography too. I suppose I could tell you if I've watched that type of porn, but I won't. If the parties on camera are willing participants and of legal age, then I fully defend their right to partake in any sexual

activity no matter how nauseating it may appear to the viewer. I don't deny that sounds creepy, but at the same time I honestly— take that for what you will— don't share in any of the fetishes and kinks I observe. I think the people who commit those acts are more freakish than I am because they're the ones who actually perform them and I'm only a viewer— though I suppose that thought can be reversed because they're doing it for money and what's my excuse for watching? And this isn't to say that I think the performers in those films are freaks because I do appreciate them for what they do. In fact, that's what draws me to this sort of porn.

I've always been curious about people. People I know and especially people I don't. What they look like without any clothes. What sort of sounds they make when climaxing. What is the dirtiest thing they've done sexually. Rather than watch reality television, I prefer porn because there's something beautiful about watching another person naked and at their most vulnerable moving as if you're not in the room. I'm fascinated by twin brothers who have sex on camera not because incest does a thing for me, but because I then think of what their family would say if they found out; what the woman engaging in sexual acts with a dog was like as a little girl and if you could've told her at age five that she would grow up to love a German Shepherd. No one in life is ever that honest with you. And yes, I understand that people in porn aren't necessarily interested in the integrity of the acts they commit aside from the money. I'm O.K. with that. I find it just as interesting to know that there are married men with kids who star in gay porn because that's where all the money within the industry is to be earned for men, or thinking about what the man tells his wife and children about how he pays the rent. It's like you, reader. You should know better than to believe anything I say. Porn is funny because you're often lying at the same time you're telling the truth. It's not as if the sex doesn't happen, but everything about it, including the people who take on fictitious personae, isn't real. They're not necessarily into it.

They know you're watching and act as if they don't. Porn is successful not because you believe the acts or people are real, but because you don't believe they're fake. You can see the body. You can see the sex. Everyone's cards are revealed even though the deck isn't playing fairly. The outcome on your part is more important than the idea of if any of it is true for the people it happens to. It's like I said, you get told what you need to be told and the rest doesn't matter because the reality of the situation doesn't involve you. Regardless, the façade isn't as important to me than what I can come up with on my own, which is why I know the people in those five minute clips more intimately and rawly than I do with any of the people who say they love me. I mean, few people know that Robby isn't even close to my real name.

I went through a few hours of porn, the non-stimulating type that day I received the call. Then more the day after. Even when I flew to Los Angeles for the memorial service, while on the plane I closed the screen to my laptop, but listened to the playing porn video through headphones. If you listened to it without knowing what it belonged to, you might think it was a recording of people moving objects around in a room— a gentle quiet that became interrupted briefly by a breath or bend of a mattress. I wanted to know what it would be like to be in a marriage where sex rendered such a mute and joyless act.

In regards to the illegal porn, most of it is the sort that you can find on Google if you type in the right search phrase. A recent, related internet phenomenon that has burgeoned involves people videotaping their reactions as they watch those extreme porn clips, and then they post said reaction footage on YouTube: all you ever see is their faces squirm. That's my second favorite thing to porn because then I witness how other people experience the act differently. They always do. And the really horrible stuff has often been offered to me by men who think I'd be interested in that sort of thing. I remember in a chat room a man from Nevada told me about the

time he went to Cambodia. Immediately, I thought this was going to be another child porn story, which more often than not were fantasies— a fact that interested to no end, that a person would invent such a heinous story for sexual gratification. But every now and then I knew they were true when they then offered to send me a copy of the video. This was not the case though. There were no children involved. The Nevada man told me about how in Cambodia you could rent bodies from a funeral home, and that he waited six days in this small town to make love to a woman's body that was still warm. I didn't ask how old she was. I didn't ask how she died. In my mind I already decided she was a woman in her thirties and had children and I mourned for those children and what was being done to their mother. There was no point in asking because in the absence of truth whatever my mind could picture would be all that more devastating and fulfilling. Her body was the only thing I could picture during the memorial service.

*Kirby's*

*Body*

*Floats*

It was difficult not to think of Shane, despite the fact that we were never together. I doubt I ever used the word love with him outside the walls of my brain. But at the time, I was in love in with him, and because he was the best thing I had going for me in my life, I took it badly when I lost him. Somewhere amidst this story is the point where a psychologist points out my unhealthy attachment to men who were never actually with me.

When Shane returned to his home in Petal, Mississippi, I had hope about everything. I thought he was proof that things do get better. But the more we talked, the more he went back to his regular routine. He went to bars, to clubs, on dates. I never used the word boyfriend to describe him, and I honestly don't think of him as one today, but I can't shake the feeling that I was hurt because I loved him. I thought that was the point of him flying two-thousand miles to see me.

I didn't know at the time that he slept with other men when he visited Los Angeles, and when I did find out I was just one of the many, I had to rethink how special the moment of losing my virginity was. Again, this is that funny moment to everyone else, but I was young and living in a house that hated me. I was a teenager betrayed by the heart, which doesn't make it less pathetic, but I hope you understand where I'm coming from.

It wasn't long after he flew back that Shane met this kid named Bobby. I use the word "kid" because he was my age and now Shane was twenty-one, and even though I was fine with him sleeping with me, sleeping with anyone else was statutory rape (but probably only out of jealousy). I thought they would break up like all of Shane's flings, but they didn't. He sent me pictures of them together (Bobby was a major twink that I didn't find attractive, and not because I was jealous). As time progressed, I stopped talking to Shane because I was stupid and still



loved him and well... he had a boyfriend and didn't care much for me more than a guy you speak to from Mississippi can. Reality sucked balls.

With the little contact I did maintain, which meant speaking to him twice or so a year, I learned the two broke up almost two years later. It was because Shane had enlisted. I was surprised by this not because I didn't know Shane wanted to do this, but because he had told me on several occasions that he could because he had spent time in a mental hospital as a teenager and would not meet the requirements to enlist. Several years after 9/11, the army was having a hard time meeting their quotas and they relaxed their policies. Bobby, Shane said, was against the idea and they broke up. It was the only thing Bobby and I saw eye-to-eye. I'm telling you this because that time in West Hollywood was not the only time I saw Shane.

Shane had completed basic and was going to be shipped to Korea (I was very thankful it was not Iraq). But before he left, he was spending three weeks in Sacramento. At the time, I was working at a Jewish summer camp as an arts counselor so that I could save up money for college, which I was to begin in only a few months. Though I was only seventeen, I had managed to survive high school and was now shortly on my way leaving home forever. Seeing Shane somehow felt appropriate for this moment in my life.

The plan was rather stupid because I didn't have much money, and as a minor there was only so much I could do without a parent's hand. There was a guy I had chatted with for a while named Casey Doward in Bakersfield— I know, I know. Another boy from the internet. If you're still shocked by this then you haven't figured out that being gay means using technology to find other gay people. Our lives don't work the way straight people's do, and it's not as if we can just walk up to someone we find attractive. Rant over— but had never met. Casey was attending San Francisco St. They were on the semester system, so Casey was leaving for school much earlier

than I was. Because it was fate— these things always are— Casey was leaving on a Saturday to take the train up to San Francisco, which happened to be the weekend I was considering going up to visit Shane. My plan was to ride with Casey to San Francisco via Amtrak, spend the night at his place, catch the train to Sacramento, see Shane for the day, and fly back to Los Angeles. Like I said, stupid.

To get to Bakersfield, I caught a Greyhound. Once there, I boarded the train and tracked down Casey. Though we had never spent much time talking on the phone, he and I were close in a nonsexual way. He was a friend I chatted with about being gay, and as much as it sucked to be me, at least I wasn't me in Bakersfield. There was some issue between him and his brother's crazy girlfriend, which caused a splintering between the two boys. Casey was often saddened by it, and I would comfort him in our chats.

We spent the whole nine-hour train ride talking. And when we stopped in Oakland, he and I cuddled as a bus dropped off us in San Francisco. We then caught a cab his basement apartment in some part of San Francisco I don't remember. It was late by then. We climbed into bed, which was a mattress on the floor. I went down on him— he's one of the few guys I've ever swallowed— and I remember his body being so sensitive that I had to take it slowly. I held him. While he was in the shower the next morning, I wrote a poem for him as a thank you and tacked it to his thumb board. He found it when he came back from school that day. By that time I had nearly missed my bus to the train station because the Greyhound station at Embarcadero is hidden, but I did locate it with help of a man I asked on the wharf. Shortly after one, I was in Sacramento, and though I didn't know it at the time— as in that moment everything seemed like a beginning... the start of a life with my control in it... a new friendship begun on an adventure that I assumed would repeat— it would be the last time I would see Casey, whom I still catch

myself thinking about, as we just drifted away as both of our lives took off without the other's inclusion the way an eclipse means possibility and goodbye at the same time.

My father made a point of telling me to enjoy the Sacramento train station because it's a historical landmark, but I had seen it several months before when I competed at the state's Academic Decathlon. I was only interested in seeing Shane. I called him from the train station, and he and the guy he was staying with picked me up. Shane looked bigger now that he was finished with basic, but in many ways he hadn't changed from that night I left him in the hotel.

I, however, now had long blonde hair and braces (a second time, as a result of a broken jaw). I don't remember the guy's name that Shane was friends with, but he was a bear and a bouncer for a gay club. He was incredibly nice. He also gave me the nickname Goldilocks.

The friend drove us to lunch, where the three of us dined with this very attractive guy (I think he was mixed-race because of how dark his skin was) that Shane had nonchalantly brought up as the guy he slept with the night before. Later on in the meal he'd reveal they would be perfect for each other if they weren't both tops; I finished my sandwich quietly.

Even though Shane hadn't been in Sacramento long, he was popular and with friends. A tall, skinny guy passing by recognized the crew and sat with us. He asked if I minded if he smoked, and though I did, I shook my head. He was in the Navy, and he talked about how his crew knew, and he was intentionally not reported for dismissal so that they could torture him. He was nervous and kept looking for people who weren't coming. Shane seemed optimistic about his chances nonetheless.

Because I was scheduled to fly out that evening, we went back to the house Shane was staying at so that I could spend quality time with Shane, which meant sitting on a couch and watching TV. The house was shared by an even larger guy who also was a bouncer at the club,

and the ex-boyfriend of the bear, who couldn't afford to move out. When I asked where his ex slept, I was told in the same bed. At some point, two of the other bouncers came over and it was a house full of very large, noisy men. But they all liked me.

I think it was the friend who suggested that I stay the night. He said he talked to one of the bouncers, and I could crash at his house. I should preface that the guy like me and wanted me to stay because he confused my niceness for attraction; wanting to see more of Shane, I would flirt back and even kiss the guy. I was a long-haired, blonde with a svelte frame in a house of bears that were hungry, and I knew that.

I also knew that I was continuing my streak of breaking rules of common sense safety. To add to the ludicrous and random nature of my trip, I was agreeing to spend the night in a strange man's house. I told them I would see if I could change my plane ticket. And I'm not sure how it happened, but I did. All I did was call up, ask if they could switch my flight for tomorrow, and the lady did it. No charge or explanation needed. Like I said, this trip was fate.

Not having to rush the rest of the day, I sat down and watched more TV with Shane. We were cordial. When time came, Shane was going out for the night, and I could've gone with too— had I not been seventeen. I remember I spent the night standing outside the club, sitting in a palm planter, and talking to the friend while he attended to his bouncer obligations. I thought if I made out with him he'd let me in, but he didn't. So I waited with him until the other bouncer finished his shift.

I don't remember the car, but I do remember his name: Scott Mcneer. I don't remember his house, but I do remember there was a Bierstadt painting in the living that I recognized. Even the specifics of Scott's face are lost on me, but he was tall and the only bouncer in shape. I want to say he was in his thirties. I say this because I actually thought he was attractive. When we

arrived at his house, he turned on the *Golden Girls*. He told me about himself in an honest way that I can't explain why anyone would except that for some reason there's a boy with long, blonde hair leaning on your chest, he'll be gone tomorrow, but for now he wants to hear you talk.

And so he told me how he was circumcised because he brother wasn't (he's Italian), and one day his brother caught his foreskin caught on something while running around the house as a toddler. The problem was the doctors cut the skin too closely and he's dick would be incredibly dry and taut, so he needed to use lots of lube. He also told me how the same brother would go on to rape him, that his parents know, and that it only stopped when he put a lock on his bedroom door from the inside. He told me the brother doesn't remember it because they'll watch a show like where a rapist is on the news, and the brother will say something like *those people should be shot*. Scott will tell him *yeah, they do*. Keep in mind this is the guy the bouncers teased for having slept with four people, including fucking a woman on the hood of his car, in one night, and his response was *come on, it was my birthday*. And then he told me that he was once married, that he had a son somewhere out there that he hadn't seen in a very long time because his ex-wife wouldn't let him once she found out he was gay. I don't remember the son's name, but I remember he was my age. For a moment I stopped my hand that had maneuvered its way through Scott's buttoned shirt and was rubbing the chest hair over his left pectoral. He was sad with this revelation. That was when I asked if he wanted to go to bed.

Today, I wouldn't have let him fuck me, and even then I wasn't much into it, but for some reason I thought of my body as currency for letting me stay the night. I know Scott didn't expect sex, that even the obligatory oral sex would've sufficed. I know this because when I asked Scott if he wanted to fuck me, he reached for a bowl of condoms he kept by his bed with sample-sized packets of lube— the free kind clubs handout for safe sex, and I know that they were from

there without asking. And then we waited ten minutes, or I should say I waited ten minutes. Scott couldn't get hard enough to enter me. He apologized as he stroked himself, but it didn't work. He said he jacked off before the shift because he knew I was coming over. And though that's a valid excuse, even in my limited knowledge of sex at the time, I knew this was about nerves.

For a long time during those first years of sexual navigation, I fumbled too with the short-circuiting self. It's one of those things guys don't talk about. Even when I could trick myself into erection, it took years to be able to relax enough to maintain a reaction or cum in the act. I told myself that it was like nose-picking or smoking pot, that you grew out of it as you became an adult. Seeing Scott, a man with a son my age, I felt electrified by the thought that I could do this to him and relieved by the notion that regardless of one's age or experience, when our clothes come off we revert to a yielded form that isn't masterful as in the movies when people launch into spontaneous desk sex amid a flurry of sucking kisses and ripped buttons— no, sex is muted in strange houses with people who tell you things as revealing as the bodies they show, and that they're human in that they fail in moments like your own.

In some ways, it was one of the most awkward ten minutes of my life; it was also the first time I learned of the potential of love through sex in that sex, once in it, is easy, which is to say the expectation of life in sex without it is the part the I cling to when I think about why it is I love so many men without the act of my body becoming a lighthouse of the night. And in many ways, I think that's why men and their love fails me so often. Yes, I like sex, but what I really love is the body that sex comes from because *body* is a sun in a solar system of myth. I want to be blinded by it, to live off it, to be dictated by it, and yet never be able to touch it. I want to accept my dependence on it and falsely worship it for being a god when really body is as both meaningful and unimportant as anything else. I want sex to be the act of a sunset and sunrise

simultaneum. I want the answers it tells me and the lies it obfuscates with its tellings. I want body as a lie of how beautiful we are and the truth of how beautiful we are when body breaks to a box and shows us how we measured the earth in nothing more than a faked vessel of blood and sticks of bone. I want body because when there are answers and lies and truths, what that really means is that there are questions and that there's body, too. That body becomes questions when it's not one and when it is. That when I lied on my stomach so that Scott could have his time without me staring at him because I accepted he would, I closed my eyes and thought, and when I finally felt his weight on me, what I remember to this day is not the sex, but how the hair on his chest felt against the bareness of my back, the weight of his question against my own until they conflated in a series of questions I still ask: *Have you seen your son since then? Do you know that I cut my hair? How many guys have ended as spit into the red, plastic cup you kept on your nightstand— like me?*

Scott left in the morning for work. I took a shower, loitered in the house, wrote a few poems about things I saw, and then left when Shane's friend picked me up. I locked up and left the key in the mailbox like Scott asked me to do. I haven't heard from him since.

And when we arrived at the house, I found Shane on the couch watching more TV. We talked, but I don't remember what about. Probably about him going off and probably about nothing. Maybe we talked about me going to college, but maybe we didn't. I don't know if anyone I met in that house went to college, and years later when I found myself dancing in my underwear for money, I knew I wasn't welcomed into that house because it was still a temporary position in my life.

At some point I went down on Shane, but he refused to return the favor. We then watched more TV until it was time to go. One of the bouncers gave a business card for a cab

driver that was good to them, so I called. The operator said it would take five minutes for him to get to the house. I said my thank you to the people who let me stay and welcomed me for those two days, who if I've given the impression were anything but hospitable and kind and warm enough that I remember them fondly today I apologize for not capturing correctly. And then there was Shane.

He waited with me outside of the house. He also lit up. I asked him what he was going to do tonight, and he responded that he'd most likely head back to the club. I nodded. It's hard to tell what I thought of Shane at that moment because when I think about that trip—the trip that was about seeing him—he's what I remember least. I imagine I must have still loved him at that point, that it was hard for me to lose him to the services because he might not come back. But it was equally hard for me to be there on the porch step and know why I was on that porch step and he wasn't in many ways because even though he'd be leaving that house too, when I left Sacramento he was still there, and he too would disappear like everyone else on that trip.

Knowing the cab was coming, I reached into my bag and pulled out a program. It was the program to a dance performance I was in, where at sixteen I choreographed a dance that garnered a review for Lewis Segal. The review was mixed. But the dance was about soldiers who wrote home to loved ones, their letters read over as music to the moving bodies on stage. I dedicated the dance to my U.S. History teacher, who passed away from shingles months before I began choreographing it and to Shane. I had highlighted the program to show him that. I wanted to tell him about the dance, about the fact that even if I meant nothing to him anymore, regardless of my future, my past was occupied with the ghost of him. But I couldn't because the cab pulled up.

My eyes watered while I rushed a goodbye, a moment I would learn to repeat though never accept. And maybe I'm confusing the first time Shane and I parted, but I want to say that



he kissed me again, *softly*. Perhaps if I would've known in the months to come how the service would jade Shane, I might've pushed for tongue. But even he couldn't foresee whatever was to happen. All I know is years from then I would send him a message and he'd blame the service for ruining the only meaningful relationship he had in life: with bobby. When I tried to comfort him, he told me *Shane is dead. I'm Josh*. I'd never hear from him again because he stopped talking to me. The only reason I know he's still alive, wherever he is, doing whatever he does, is because I see him sign into his instant messenger account every so often. He still won't respond, and I doubt he even realizes who it is that says hi sporadically to him. But his chat avatar icon is that of the US Army.

But I didn't know that. I just know something— something literary and significant— happened to me in those two days. What I remember about the taxi to the airport was that the driver and I talked about nothing I remember, and that fare cost me forty dollars, which I found expensive at the time.

*What Inga, Joey  
Bishop, and Andy  
Lipincott are  
Yodeling About*

xxii

I once tried to write this story about a father who flies to New Zealand after his son dies unexpectedly in an ice climbing accident. It was inspired from when I lived there and such a thing happened to three students who were also studying abroad. The three boys were climbing a glacier when one slipped. Because they were all roped together, they all plummeted 1,600 feet. Miraculously, only one boy died. Of the two boys alive, one managed to climb down the glacier to a hut and radio for help. The other lay with his injuries overnight, unable to move because of a shattered pelvis alongside the body of his friend. This happened on May 7, 2007.

I remember this because there are odd things that haunt me about the event. For instance, the dead boy's family had just visited him on a family vacation, and his mother even bought him the ice pick as a gift that he went on to use on that trip. It also sticks in my mind because I remember talking about the moment when I was workshopping the first draft of this book, and Inga told me she was the boy's college counselor at the University of Idaho. She said she took his death hard and was startled by my mentioning it because she's tried to forget it. She said his name was Austin Hanchey.

But this is not important to the story; all I say is that the son dies in a climbing accident. Rather, the story is about the father cleaning out his son's room and what to do with the porn magazine he finds. It's about looking at his son's mourning flatmates, and them trying to decide how to tell the father his son never paid last month's rent. It's about the father learning how you get a coffin on a plane. It was supposed to be a great story, but it never worked out.

And I think of this because I wonder what it would be like for someone to walk into my room and have to clean out my possessions. Thanks to computers, I don't keep anything except books, clothes, junk in the name of mementos in my possession because I move too frequently. Most of these things are explainable— or at least understandable, but odd. On my bookshelf I

maintain yearbooks for every year I attended high school, but alongside *Watchtower* 2001-2004 is edition 1966. Why?

When I was in college, I wrote a piece about a war veteran named Richard Lubin, who died in the Vietnam War. The assignment was to write about an anniversary that ended in the number zero or five. Somehow I got interested in writing about someone who died in the war, someone who went to my high school. I went through the database of those who died in the war and Rick popped up. He was supposed to be celebrating his sixtieth birthday that year. I decided I would write about him in relation to the then unending Iraqi War.

I got my first feel for journalism then when I discovered just how little information there is out there. This was all I could find when I searched the Virtual Wall memorial database:

“At about 3 AM on the morning of 26 Jan 1969 two CH-46s launched from Marble Mountain on an emergency medevac mission. The pick-up aircraft, CH-46D BuNo 153997, was crewed by 1st Lt John F Meyer, pilot; 1st Lt David W Sterling, copilot; LCpl David P Dolan, gunner; LCpl James E Hannibal, gunner; LCpl Michael J Schickel, gunner; HN Richard M Lubin, Corpsman; [and] PFC Charles L Peddy, crew chief

“There was no moon and visibility was limited by haze. As the flight proceeded to the west at an altitude of 3,000 feet, Meyer's aircraft ran directly into the side of Ba Na Mountain, the only terrain feature in the area that extended above 3,000 feet. While it couldn't be proven, it was postulated that Meyer probably was flying instruments and depending on the Danang TACAN for navigational purposes. Other aircrews had experienced Danang TACAN errors of 40 degrees or so in the vicinity of Ba Na Mountain, and post-crash reconstructions of the flight route indicated that a 40 degree lock-off would place the aircraft exactly at the point of impact on Ba Na.

“The chase aircraft, piloted by 1st Lt Don Robbins, attempted to lower crewman LCpl Curtis P. Knox to the crash site to check for survivors, but when the jungle penetrator cable was fully extended Knox was still 50 feet above the ground. Robbins abandoned the attempt, only to find that the hoist retract was inoperable and Knox could not be hoisted aboard. Knox dangled below the CH-46D while Robbins flew six miles to the nearest secure landing zone, where he gently lowered his aircraft until Knox was safely on the ground.

“‘Rick’ Lubin was remembered by one of his officers: ‘There wasn’t a finer corpsman out there.’

These seven men, and the other Purple Foxes who served in Vietnam, are remembered by the women who waited at home, whether mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, or friends.”

Because Rick lived in a world before the internet, there was nothing else about him. The other six men on that page had photos, but Rick was faceless in history.

But I used my wits because I had a grade depending on this. There was a quote. It wasn’t much, and it was unattributed, but it meant someone out in the world knew Richard— even knew to call him Rick. It was the only lead I had. So I googled the quote. I got two hits: the original site and a new one from the Purple Foxes’ homepage. Turns out the quote was a snippet for something else.

“Information received from LT. Les LeFevre, (DC) USN (Vet):

“I served as dental officer with Richard Marc ‘Rick’ Lubin at MAG-36 and MAG-16 until I rotated home 681712. There wasn’t a finer corpsman out there. In fact all the guys that flew were the bravest guys I ever knew. I never saw one try to get out of a mission. Rick lived next door to Joey Bishop in Hollywood and we gave him a lot of crap about it. There is hardly a

day that goes by I don't think of him. I should have contacted his family right after I heard, and have regretted it ever since. Sorry Rick, but we haven't forgotten.”

It wasn't more information than I had before, but it was something. I knew this Les LeFevre was the man I needed to get ahold of. I googled him too. The only hits I got were for a cowboy painter and dentist. I realized they were the same person when they both claimed residence in Madeira, Ohio. I found an e-mail address and shot him a query. This was his response:

“Dear Robby,

Yes, I am the Les LeFevre you are looking for. I am 64 years old (gosh that seems old when you print it) but Rick and Vietnam seem just like yesterday. In fact I am purchasing a memorial brick for Rick in a local memorial here in Ohio. It will be unveiled for Memorial Day this year. Rick still has a brother living in the Los Angeles area. His brother was also a Corpsman in Vietnam and returned shortly before Rick's deployment. Rick did grow up next to Joey Bishop (do the research on him if you do not know who I am talking about. A member of Sinatra's Rat Pack) and Joey actually gave me a call a number of months ago. Rick came from a realitively [sic] well off family as you know and was as innocent and green as grass when he arrived. In his business, as a Corpsman on Med-evacs, you grow up quick. He flew on the big 46's and they would take lots of fire. Unfortunately his death came as a result of a night time med-evac accident. At least it is listed that way. The Viet Cong we think messed with the TACAN or radar that was used for orientation and may have given them a false reading which resulted in them flying into Charlie Ridge in the pitch black. We lost a number of aircraft that way with no explanation. Rick's family was into some sort of auto racing and also Caterpillar Tractor sales. There must of been a Jaguar dealership in there somewhere because we were all going to get a great deal on Jags when

we returned. He was really just a baby as you know, raised in Beverly Hills, a true loss to humanity. A really nice kid, who should have been sipping sodas with his girlfriend. I have written his brother for a picture of Rick which was promised but has never come. He was into Caterpillar parts and that is how I found him. Maybe his brother is gone now too. His name is Joe Lubin. His web address was, Oldtractorparts@aol.com. He has not responded to my requests for a picture of Rick. If you find him. maybe you will be more successful. I think of him almost daily. The playing of the National Anthem now causes me to reflect on three of my friends whose lives ended in 68 and 69. I thank them for their sacrifice, and the fact I have been able to so enjoy my life. They are truly the ones who deserved to live, marry, have children and enjoy life. It happens in every War, the best are lost, the ones that cannot be replaced. It is happening today. I have a friend who lost his only son, Chance Phelps, a Marine, in Iraq. He was the best of the best, lost to the world, never to be replaced. Good luck with your project and if I can be of further service, please ask. Les LeFevre”

I was surprised by my chance success, attributing it to the unforeseen luck that guides my life every now and then. I tried to contact his brother, but never heard from Joe. Every now and then I'll see his name flash on my instant messenger list before signing off. So I called Les for more details and asked about his life. The paper grew from a portrait just on Rick to one also covering Les, but then I received another e-mail.

“I would appreciate a picture if you find one. I tried to locate two corpsman who served with Rick. After many years, thanks to computers I found one about 5 years ago in Cleveland. He was reluctant to meet me when I was in town but we did meet for lunch. He had severe PTS and was seeing the Psychiatrist at the Vet Hospital weekly. He seemed fine but the jovial, joking kid was gone. He does have a successful marriage and children with his second wife. The

casualties were not all on the battlefield. He told me the other corpsman died from cancer because of Agent Orange exposure when he was in his thirties. I do have pictures of them taken in Nam. Thanks for remembering Rick, there are few of us that do. How many fallen soldiers can there be from Beverly Hills? God Bless. Les”

The paper now covered four lives that were changed by the war. The paper kept swelling, and I knew I had to put the lid on it because I had a word count. I turned the thing in and said goodbye to Rick.

But the one thing that haunted me was this lack of a face. If Les’ words were true— and I don’t see why they wouldn’t be— it felt wrong to live in this world if he couldn’t remember what Rick looked like, especially since he had been searching for that face for so long. That’s when I went back to the high school, interrupted a Beginning Journalism class, lied about writing an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, and stole the yearbook from the archives (I don’t feel bad because there were two). I scanned the yearbook photo and sent it to him.

“Robby, Much thanks for the picture. I had forgotten how he looked. Were you successful in reaching his brother? You can call me but I am leaving for Wyoming on Wed the 10th and will be gone till the 20th. My cell phone rarely works there. If you can call before the 10th or after the 20th would be fine. My number here is XXX-XXX-XXXX. Les”

The thing about the class I wrote the paper for was that I was going to drop it. At the time, I had a perfect GPA. I even set the record at UCLA for most units taken at thirty in one quarter with a straight As (and several pluses). By the third week of the class, the last week before you could drop without penalty, I knew the teacher wasn’t going to give me an A, but for some reason I talked myself into believe I could earn one if I tried hard enough. I earned at B+ in the course— the only class I didn’t get an A in counting both undergrad and graduate school. It



was an Advanced Nonfiction class of all things. The professor's comment on my writing portfolio were somewhat patronizing— unintentionally. She told me I had a lyrical voice and that I should look into pursuing writing. She also said she loved my anniversary piece and that I should publish it, but I never did. I regret that sometimes because I wanted people to hear Rick and Les' story. I wanted people to know that Les is a great painter and that if I ever publish a book I want him to do my cover art. So despite the one speck on my GPA, I consider the highlight of my collegiate career the moment I got that photo to Les' eyes.

If I were the sort of person who went to yard sales, I'd look for yearbooks because there's something about them that makes you feel smaller in this life. I remember I was living in my father's apartment after he moved into his new wife's house, but he still had some possessions stored there, including his yearbooks. It was an odd feeling to scan the pages and glance over the photos of him on the baseball team, the football team, and the swim team (I think he played one more varsity sport, but I can't remember which one), and see him at my age. His hair was long and smile wide. I flipped through the pages and stared at all the faces that once filled the halls of Fairfax High. I knew some of those faces were dead by now, some people my father once knew.

And I read through the messages people left my father. The generic ones. The intimate ones. One football teammate commented on my father's explosive anger on the field by joking how it sometimes freaked out the other players. It was the sort of joke you make when the thing you're laughing about needs to be laughed at to acknowledge it. Another was from a friend, and judging by the intimacy of it, a best one, who jokingly referenced how the two of them had made it through everything together and did it all... *except it*— which he said they'd do in college. I treated that moment like when my father and I discussed *Brokeback Mountain* and he said the way Ennis and Jack goofed off reminded him of how Jeff and he would be when they worked the

cattle and horses in Simi Valley— which is to say I changed the subject because my mind was going to bad places.

And I tell you, reader, this anecdote not because I want you to check your parents' yearbooks for gay jokes. I tell you because a yearbook is a portal to a life of someone you never saw. I mention this because I've been keeping a yearbook of my own life.

When I was thirteen, my sister-in-law gave me a journal for my birthday. It's six inches high, one-inch thick, and four inches long. Once it was a dark brown with black tape on its spine; today its thick cover is faded and stained. The etched, color image of the Americas is preserved, but dulled by time. Even the paper has separated from the binding and only keeps in place because of the loose elastic strap that marks the book closed and private.

At first I started writing in this a journal, but that attempt failed. I got through no more than thirty pages starting on November 21, 2000 and ending on March 6, 2004. That final entry reads:

“It's 1:32 in the morning. I think a lot about writing in you. I tend to think a lot now. Whether that is good or bad is undecided. Today, when the sun comes up over my hopefully sleeping body, I will go to Les' for the seder for the third time. I need to ask Lisa college stuff. I got into U.C.L.A., Berkeley, and NYU, rejected by Cornell, and wait-listed by Columbia. It is really hard to decide, but read [sic] over you makes me think something funny. The people in you do not last and I trace away the disappearances of those written names and events. College will one day be the same thing and neither school will matter.”

By now, the pencil entries are becoming illegible, but I can still make out pieces. On the twenty-sixth I write “...she rather have a rock than have me born and the only reason she puts up

with me is because I'm a minor, but as soon as I'm an adult, she never wants to hear from me."

Other times it's more casual. October 19, 2002:

"So I took the PSAT today. I want a 1350, but I'll end up with an 1100 I bet. We also had the Aca Deca group thing at Mr. B's house. It was fun. My hair is blue and purple. Tomorrow I have the AIDS walk and the Ben Wright audition. I hope I get in. I might see Travis there. Chris never called or e-mailed me."

The tropes I cover are always boys, depression, my mother hating me, boys, high school, depression, and the generalities of being a teenager. Sometimes I'm lyrical, sometimes I think someone is reading my writing so I need to sound "literary," and sometimes I think I was so lonely I had to talk to myself. The boy that I'm in love with at the time is a year older. His name is Grant Schacter. I took freshmen geometry with him. I know I have good taste in men because all the girls were in love with him. He was quiet and angular in the face. That's how I imagine a triangle to be. He played baseball and wore a baseball cap. The one time I said something to him was *Go Tigers* because he was wearing a Detroit cap. Despite the fact that I never spoke to him again, I know he went to college at Emory is now married... the wonders of the internet I tell you.

But like I said, that journal failed because I'm not good at being consistent. The real treasure of the book though is found halfway through. What you'd find is a bunch of lists that don't make sense. One is a list of all the books I've ever read (one hundred four). One list is of all the men I've ever hooked up with that breaks down what I did with them and where (one hundred twenty all inclusive, but most of those are only men I kissed; my favorite "place" is skateboard). One list is the titles of novels I have ideas for. One list is a name of the people in the

limo who went to prom with me. One list is a list of all the dormitories I hooked up in at U.C.L.A. One list is for the dates I took HIV tests and my results.

But the largest list at one hundred seventy four names is obscure. Sometimes the name is all that's there, sometimes it's just a date. If I have all the information and filled it out correctly, the entry should read as name, screen name, electronic meeting spot, and the date of real world meeting. For instance, such an entry would look like "Jon Guttman, JonKewl, PlanetOut, 5/23/03." This list is a list of all the men I've meet off the internet, which started at age thirteen with Gregory Francis, a boy I would go to high school with and hear later on when to jail. And for posterity's sake, Jon Guttman was an asshole.

I'm not sure why I have these lists, which only serve to function as reminders of things that happened in my own life. Maybe it's an innate characteristic of being a poet. There's something wonderful about putting the arbitrary next to each other and challenging the mind to make order. It's both about structure and music as it's about chaos.

But the real reason I'm telling you this— any of this— is because there's one name on the list that needs to be talked about. And I want to talk about it because I'm afraid of losing it. Of the many names on that list, I know most are already forgotten or not to be known even by me. There are the random men I kissed while dancing in bars in New Orleans that I describe by how they kissed: "puffy lips" or "scoop kisser." Even for the ones with names I knew, I don't know anything about them aside from the short time I met them. In some ways I think about writing an annotated work to my journal to say what I can remember, but then I realize you probably don't want to read that. I also concede this book is the best shot I have at telling you about some of those people.

Buried in the list of one hundred seventy four names is the entry *Tommy Zavesky, Halospace9, 04/02/04*. I met Tommy when I was a senior in high school. He was four years older than me— five if you round up. I'm not sure if I had decided which college I'd attend by then, but I remember being in a better place by then because I saw an end to my life at home.

I met him through the now defunct LGBT site *PlanetOut*, which was a less sketchy place than the modern *Gay.com*— though they are owned by the same company— which was shut down because it was less sketchy, i.e., not enough people were using it to find people to have sex with.

I don't remember what Tommy and I would've spoken about, but I remember always being insecure when I spoke to guys on that site who were older. I was seventeen, still in high school, and didn't have a driver's license. What would someone who could buy alcohol want from me?

But Tommy was in a weird place. I learned that he had recently moved from Ohio to attend school at Cal Lutheran as a Psychology major. He was bisexual— and not just one of those guys who throw that out there because it gives them some slack. He had met a boy when he moved out here and the two hit it off. Things were quite serious and they became engaged. This was before the whole Prop 8 battle, so what he meant when he told me the story is that they were going to have a civil union. I don't remember the boy's name, but I do remember he destroyed Tommy when he broke up, and in Tommy's words, *became a ho bag who would fuck anything for coke*.

In a situation I found funny, Tommy lived in Simi Valley with the boy's mother. The mother and he got along swimmingly, and she never forgave her son for what he did to Tommy. I remember her as a quiet one, blonde, living in a house in a community where all the houses

looked the same. While working at a summer camp in Simi Valley, I took my twenty-four hour break, which we were allotted one per camp session, and spent it with Tommy. His room was in the basement. It was actually the boy's room before, and when he wanted to move back in, his mother told him no. At some point a cousin moved in who was no help and didn't pay rent. Then there was a girl. I know you think this isn't important, but I need you to remember this.

But I'm also jumping ahead of myself. Going back to that April night, here's what happened. Tommy and I went out on our first and only date. We went bowling. I chose bowling despite the fact I don't bowl (and he didn't either) because it seemed kitschy in L.A., like this was hipster before there was a hipster movement. When we pulled up to the bowling alley, which was in the east part of the city, Tommy made a joke. *You do realize there are black people here?* I shrugged it out as if I were saying *of course*, but in reality I didn't realize we'd be in that part of L.A. when I got the directions from my friends to drive east on San Vicente until we saw the neon sign. It didn't matter though and we went in.

I'm not sure if Tommy or I won. What I remember is that when you rented shoes you could purchase socks. Because I was in flip flops, I did this. They were regular, ankle-high, white socks, but at the top was an embroidered image of a bowling ball striking a pin as the letter "i," to spell out the name of the establishment: Pinz. It was a fuzzy sew job.

The night didn't end there. After the game, we headed to West Hollywood. For someone who was seventeen, this was a big deal. I wasn't old enough to get into bars or clubs, and—*sans* one ridiculous attempt to enter one with my student I.D. on the Fourth of July when I was fifteen, I didn't try. This was the life my mother tried to keep me from, the one she passionately hated and hated me for wanting. When Tommy told me where we were going, I offered the obligatory protest about age. It was only eight o'clock, and some of the bars were still just restaurants he

explained. The plan was to eat at one and be seated by the time it converted to twenty-one and over.

He chose Fiesta Cantina, the dive of Santa Monica Blvd, where the theme is something of a mix between Hawaiian and Mexican and sports bar. On the walls are spray-painted pictures of buff men on a beach. It's two stories high, though it would be four years before I ever went up to the top deck. The food is mediocre and the drinks are of the cough syrup taste variety, but they do a two-for one happy hour between eight and ten and then again at midnight to two, so everyone flocks there. I ordered nachos.

In order to avoid suspicion, Tommy texted several of his friends who joined us. I don't remember any of them except for one boy who had really white teeth, and Tommy explained he was bulimic. Stomach acid; who knew? I remember Tommy ordered margaritas, each time a different drink, and would hand one of the two to me. He wouldn't let me buy them until it was past one in the morning and when I offered he finally smiled and nodded. All these years later if I ranked the moments I remember best of Tommy, drunk Tommy smiling would be at the top of my list.

Needless to say I was in love with the boy who was 5'6, sharp of mouth, and introduced the word "aight" to me. When I asked how to pronounce it, he told me to *say alight, but drop the "l."* Needless to say, Tommy wasn't in love with me. But what differed between Tommy and all the other unrequited loves in my life was that Tommy was still interested in seeing me, platonically. In many ways, this was a bad idea because in my head that meant I could eventually win Tommy over. If you read my journal, you'll notice Tommy's name never appears on the hooked up with list. The closest Tommy and I ever got to it was that night in Simi Valley when we shared a bed after drinking some wine coolers and watching adult swim. I inched my fingers

into his palm like they were worms moving on the concrete— slow and cautious and unsure of themselves. And like worms, Tommy rolled away when he felt them.

Had I not been lost in the drama of my life during college and still been in high school, I would've seen Tommy more. But he still lived in Simi Valley at the time, and I was busy with falling in love with boys who lived near me who at least went down on me before they decided not to see me again. I invited him to a summer costume party when I worked at U.C.L.A. He told me this one girl who dressed as a bunny was beautiful, and she was. Back in my room he drank some of my beer and I almost got written up by the R.A. because Tommy left the door open while drinking it. I remember I let him open the pack of cigarettes (Marlborough Reds) that I bought when I was eighteen just because I could. I still have six cigarettes left from that pack, and I've never smoked any of them. That night he slept on the spare bed I had in my room.

Another time I wired him twenty bucks for gas money and he drove down to stay with me while I housesat for my aunt. We drank beer and watched TV but didn't go out because my state I.D. card was late in the mail, so I couldn't go to the clubs. This occurred in the winter of 2005. The next time I saw Tommy was the week before I moved to Austin. That was in 2008.

Tommy invited me to a Gay Pride party he was throwing in his apartment in West Hollywood. I wasn't specifically invited because he sent a generic message to all his friends on *MySpace* to come, but being one of those friends I was.

I remember the first time I attended Pride was accidental. It was a Saturday and a week shy of the end of my sophomore year of high school. My mother was still in the hospital, but she was expected to recover. My aunt flew in from New York and was staying with us. That morning there was a meeting for the new Academic Decathlon team where we were given our materials. The novel that year was Hardy's *Far From The Madding Crowd*. I decided I would take the bus



to West Hollywood and waste the afternoon at a coffee shop reading about Gabriel. It was stupid, but I had this fantasy that I would be sitting in an over-sized chair and strike up a conversation with someone I would end up loving. What's even more stupid is that I still believe in those moments.

When I hopped off at my stop, I could tell something was off— in a good way. There were more people than normal. Men paraded without their shirts and plastic beads dangled over their developed pecs. The air was loud with mixed music. I had heard about Pride, but didn't know anything about it. I never had money growing up aside from a ten-dollar allowance I received once a week. I barely had enough to buy the student ticket into the festival.

It's not worth it to describe what a Pride festival is like. There are booths you stop at because they have free condoms. There are carnival-style concession stands that feature beer and Chinese food. There's a section called Erotic City that you can't enter until you're eighteen, and when I was finally old enough to walk through that city, I found it paled in comparison to internet porn. There are three dance floors that feature pop music, hip hop, and Latin— this doesn't include the gay country line dancing area.

As boring as it sounds, this was the time when people flocked all over the state to attend. The bars and clubs were filled past capacity, the streets carried people of all confessions, and you booked your room at the Ramada Inn a year in advance so that you could be hung over and still watch the parade the next day from your balcony with a mimosa in hand. The internet existed, of course, but not in the way people know it today. No one had online communities that rivaled the real world. There was no *Facebook*. The point of the internet was that it let you find people to meet in person.

Seeing Pride these days is depressing because it's turned into a production of *Cats* that only the old queers and people who see it the first time for kicks still go to. The house parties are fewer and people seem to have work the next day, which unlike prior years, they planned ahead and called in sick. Last time I attended it looked like a paltry Friday night in WeHo. In some ways this is a good thing, that kids these days grow up feeling O.K. and accepted so in their eyes Pride is every day. In other ways I miss being fifteen and catching the eye of a man I'll only refer to as Chris because he was thirty-eight, but he looked younger and I older, as we caught up on the pop dance floor and kissed, where I later tried to convince my aunt to let me spend the night out to be with him and she said no. It was where I met Jeremy and wanted to sleep with his friend, Cory, but Jeremy was the one I ended up with. It's where I spent the night roaming the streets looking at a boy named Aaron Hambleton one year and Zach Anstett another (both on various lists). It was the only time I was lost in a crowd of thousands of people and despite my isolation I was fine with that.

When I hit Pride that day, I ran into some former coworkers from a job I had counseling students at U.C.L.A.— one gay and one straight. I used to have a thing for the straight one, and discovered he was moving to Austin to attend UT— though I would only see him once while I was riding through the campus on the way to work. I also met up with Todd at the Abbey and had my first alcoholic drink in almost two years now that the medication didn't conflict. At some point I caught myself staring at a gorgeous man I would learn was named Albert as was partnered and finally married. He was a good kisser.

The truth is Tommy did invite me to the party *specifically*. I like to say otherwise because it makes things seem more casual, i.e., less of what I would later see as a fault in myself. I sent Tommy birthday wishes that year because his birthday is easy to remember: May 8<sup>th</sup>, the

same as Shane. Tommy replied by thanking me and inviting me to join him out that night. I don't know what excuse to offer aside from being emotionally lop-sided, but in truth I'm not good at being gregarious. There's always some paper I need to write, some job I have to wake up early for. I think I was also socialized poorly as a child in the way dogs not done so have no idea how to be around other dogs. Public gatherings don't scare me, but I don't like being in rooms where I don't know everyone. I also find solitude addicting because I didn't know better growing up.

I never called Tommy that night when he asked me to if I wanted to join him for his birthday celebration. I was being polite when messaged him probably out of a sense of obligation that I did care for Tommy as a friend and he was always generous with me, including the time I gave him directions to a place and made him drive in the wrong direction for thirty minutes. Tommy let go easily.

A month later he sent a personal invite to his party, which he touted as a BBQ with booze— an alternative to the cluster fuck of bodies packing into the clubs. My response simple: *I'm down to swing by. where are you at?* By that point, I had determined I was leaving Los Angeles and was headstrong in my closures. Pride was the week before I moved and it felt right to see Tommy despite my reservations with house parties and strange crowds of intimacy. After all, I still thought of him as the smiling boy who took me to my first bar, the first boy who didn't walk out of my life— though I did in his in understandable and unintentional ways... but that doesn't make it easier.

Tommy said *it would be great to see you!* I've alluded to my reservations about exclamation points in this book. They're nonsensical because no one should ever exclaim anything in life. I see one and can only think of irony or sarcasm as proper uses. So it kills me when I opened Tommy's message, knowing me, I most likely cringed and judged it.

A strange thing that happened to me during my second year of my MFA is that I gave up on the workshop model. I lived and died by it in undergrad— or at least I thought I did. I was actually smart then, but didn't realize it: whenever someone in the class gave me feedback, I ignored it. Of course I listened and wrote down suggestions, but I figured out that the only thing more devastating to a writer's work than writing by committee is having the committee being comprised of people writers like yourself, i.e., unpublished, greedy, and inexperienced. Why I loved the workshop back then was because the instructors at U.C.L.A.— if you were a good writer or James Franco— were mentors to you. Being in a workshop with Reed, Cal, and Mona was really an apprenticeship. They told me the people I needed to read and I read them. They told me to write for them by giving my specific assignments to see what I could do with my abilities and I wrote better because of it. They then told me how to fix my writing and I trusted them.

Coming into the MFA was different. In two years I took six semester-long poetry workshops (compared to three quarter-long workshops at U.C.L.A.) with five different faculty members. On the one hand I wrote a lot for a lot of different people. On the other hand, the faculty ever knew me well as a writer, and I never knew them well as people— aside from Prageeta Sharma. I remember I met with a professor to discuss my work, which was a class I wrote one hundred poems in. I wanted feedback on as many as he could give me. We met at a coffee shop and he spread my poems out like they were tiles or tarot cards. He asked me to stand back with him and try to see what I was doing from a bird's eye view. This was the same professor I scheduled a different appointment with to talk about poems after having felt let down the prior time, and instead of reading my poems like he told me he would, he told me he hadn't

and ambushed me with a therapy session— to be fair, I was a wreck (that’s putting it gently) because of having just lost someone, but still.

I found this exercise at the coffee shop a waste of my time because I had woken up early to get to the gym and squeeze in this appointment. I knew what my project was. I actually found it insulting that he was asking me to figure out I found this a waste of my time because I had woken up early to get to the gym and squeeze in this appointment. I knew what my project was. I actually found it insulting that he was asking me to figure out *my* poems for *my* book. Reed, Cal, and Mona talked to me, pushed me in the right direction, and at their most valuable, they shut up and became line editors.

Prageeta was different partly because of circumstances and partly because she is. In many ways Prageeta was nicer and more interested in my work because of her position as the director. She was new and needed to curry favor with the students after the rough welcome she received when she first arrived. Much of that is also part of the job of the director, that students need to be happy and she has to convince them to stay in the program so that when they graduate and write books there’s a great alumnus blurb on the department’s website. That’s not her fault, but if that were it I would have seen through the B.S. and left it at that.

No, Prageeta was different because she also genuinely cared about me, and much of that care had little to do with me being a writer. I know I wasn’t first-choice when the program picked their candidates because Montana ranks their MFA candidates for funding. I was eighth on that list. It’s hard not to take that personally, but it also makes sense. I don’t think I’m the sort of writer who is understood in ten pages of work. I like to work in pieces, series, and arcs. Plucking out the Jason section from *The Sound and the Fury* is meaningless if you don’t read it in conjunction with Benji, Quentin, and Dilsey.

At a certain point it became clear I was better than eighth. The faculty noticed I could vary my poems in length, style, voice, construction, etc.... I then started writing across the genres, and I don't mean that in the I-took-workshops-not-in-my-admitted-field way and now I could call myself a short story writer; I mean that in the I-out-published-both-the-fiction-and-nonfiction-students way, that when the department held contests for those genres, I would win them. I wouldn't say I was the best poet in the program, though I think I do well in that regard, but I'd say I was the best writer.

And that's why Prageeta and I got along. When talking to Mona and Cal about MFAs, Mona told me to wait five years to apply because my fiction wasn't ready. Cal told me I could get in, but that *I* wasn't ready. Had I gone straight to the MFA out of college, it would've been a waste of time— more so than I think the MFA already is in many regards. But that year in Austin messed me up pretty good in a good way, so *I* was ready after that.

Here's what Mona and Cal meant. There are two types of people who shouldn't do the MFA who do them. The first group is people who have talent, but don't know their voice or style. I'm not going to get bogged down in arguments about how those things change even for people who think they know what they're doing. My point is that if you read Elizabeth Bishop's work, no matter how young she is, she knows how to write her poems. I see half the crop of MFA candidates have no sense of direction. After two years, most of them find it, but I think that's a waste of the degree. You shouldn't need to find yourself in an MFA: you should refine yourself.

The second group of people is comprised of people who aren't ready to be people in an MFA, which happens to be just about everyone. I see students get caught up in the publishing game. They get together and throw submission parties. One such party occurred in my living

room courtesy of my roommates. They were telling each other where to submit, reading each other's work to figure out which poems go where... it boiled down to flinging poems at every literary journal. I laugh at this because that was also the year I dominated the student update blurb with all my successes. I knew publishing, like writing, was individual. Knowing the editor was more important than knowing the readership. Contests are always more likely to publish your work than the slush pile because fewer people enter contests and someone has to win. I also knew that my time could be better spent writing than attending those parties.

Those were the same people who went out drinking every night after workshop and have student loans all in the name of poetry. In my final semester, I wrote three books of poetry, my thesis (this memoir), taught as part of my T.A.ship, and worked thirty hours a week at a second job. At the end, I had money, books, and publications.

To keep on track with my writing, I set out a schedule that determined I needed to write ten poems a week to finish my books on time. Compare this to the fact that *I know* people would spend hours figuring out where to put a comma on the page. I think it's great to be social, and my abstaining from the mingling probably had a lot to do with my being uncomfortable in social situations and that the breakup with Michael changed me, but I also know that this is what Cal meant. I watched my peers fuck each other's boyfriends, I saw them squabble in high school popularity context redux over who would join them in their theses readings as opposed to working on their theses, and I got the general impression that what they considered writing was child's play to me. I think the MFA is a studio degree that's terminal for a reason: you spend two years writing your ass off. I never looked at the program as a means to earn a degree and write some poems; I understood the degree as a fellowship that funded me for two years and made a lot of people read a tremendous body of my work.

So when I say I gave up on the workshop my second year in the program, what I mean to say is I learned the workshop was useless to me. It didn't matter how good a suggestion was because I also knew none of the people in the workshop understood my writing or even the context of it. I wasn't getting published because I was listening to people who weren't getting published. I took full hubris in my style, which isn't to say my work was perfect because it wasn't. It meant that I trusted my instincts and knew that when I was workshoped it wasn't about fixing my writing like so many comments wanted to do: I needed to listen to people's reactions. I was more interested in how people responded to my work, what they thought it was doing, and whether my intentions were successful. In other words, they were a focus group. I think when you're truly ready for an MFA, this is the place you need to be in: you don't need the feedback as much as you need the regimen, the money, and the compulsory readership.

Prageeta knew this about my writing. I picked her as my thesis chair because she was on the same mental page and was upfront about it. She told me that everyone else was going to be using his/her thesis to write, but I had a manuscript and what I needed to do was publish it. Again, this isn't to say I was better at writing, but this is why I was a better writer than everyone else. This was how you played the game, and I wanted to play it.

But Prageeta and I bonded as people too. We both felt like outsiders in Missoula and both missed the big city life of our departed coasts. We lamented the lack the quality food in town and developed a mutualistic relationship: she threw elaborate parties and I would cook for her at them. Her husband had health issues and I had mine. But what I think best sums up our relationship in terms of its intimacy and professionalism occurred when she read the first draft of this book. I came to her office and we discussed it. We spent a good hour talking titles, which is a good sign for a first thesis meeting. We talked about the right agent and how to get chapters



into the right publications to generate interest. But at a certain point she asked me to shut the door. She told me that if what was in the book *were true*, and I loved how she prefaced her comment with that, she said some truly awful things happened to me in my childhood.

I was slightly taken back by this because, as I've said, I don't remember the details well until I'm forced to confront them. I shrugged my shoulders. She told me that my mother sounded like she had Borderline Personality Syndrome, that her step-daughter's mother had the same. In a testament to my desire to repress, I defended my mother. I didn't say that my mother wasn't awful because she was. I don't deny my mother was a monster. But I also know good people can be awful parents, and I like to convince myself that was the case with my mother, though she wasn't a good person at times either. What I said was that there were things I owe my mother for and told her what happened already did and there's not much I can do about it. I know she said this because she was always inquiring about my health out of a genuine sense of wanting to know how I was holding up as a person. Her comment was only to say she was empathizing. After I pointed out the vicious snow storm from her window because the moment was quiet, she nodded and asked about a new title she thought of. It's that relationship I thank her for.

What I took most out of the program was to learn to shut up about other people's writing and just focus on my own. I realized I could spend an hour beating to death the placement of a comma on a page, but not only was that a waste of the poet's time, but also it was a waste of mine. Of course I didn't know this about myself when I saw that exclamation point in Tommy's message. So when I exhausted the day light at Pride and meandered to Tommy's rent-controlled apartment, all I could think about was that I was going to an exclamation mark apartment party.

The party I found in Tommy's apartment is the sort of party that makes me feel both uncomfortable and sad at the same time, which is like watching a homeless person walk up to

you and ask for change. I don't remember being early, but there weren't many people there. To be fair, I'm a judgmental prick, and I think a small party is a minimum of twenty-five people but fewer than fifty. But part of it is that I feel I can't lose myself in a space with that few people. When only ten people are in a room, you're going to have to talk to all of them. You're going to be introduced personally to each one and be expected to remember a name. There are times when I'm socially able, when I have no problem being witty and interested in the lives of people I don't know whom I'll never speak to again once I finish my beer and leave. That kind of performance is taxing and unproductive if accomplished too often. I'm reminded of how a lion has to be careful about how often it hunts because of the amount of energy it uses to bring down prey.

Tommy was happy to see me, and this fact made me feel guilty. He introduced me to the guests in attendance, he offered me a bratwurst (forgetting I'm a vegetarian), and then directed me to a stocked foldout table of various hard liquors and beers. I made myself something fruity and kept it weak with lots of juice. I didn't plan on doing more than making a cameo.

Tommy seemed older, and when I say that there's nothing positive about it. I'm only mistaken for someone older who looks young. What that means is that means is at thirty people will say I look like a forty-year-old with the face and body of a thirty-five-year-old. Lots of things will age you. For me, it was fear, depression, anger, and loss. These things brings early wrinkles and an older manner to the body, a position of the spine that slumps with guard to say *I know this world, I know it very well*. I move through life with my chest puffed out, my hands clenched in fists, and a constant squint to bring my crow's feet into sight. At times I relax, let my skin settle and smooth out. I'll even open my eyes fully, walk with bounce. These are the times I tell myself to be beautiful, and it's usually because I want something and being beautiful is the

easiest way I've learned to get what you want in life— if you're not rich. Tommy looked older because he seemed tired, he drank, and he did things he shouldn't have.

And this was the case. Tommy filled me in on his life. Circuit City had let him go because of the economy, and now he was living off unemployment. He finally graduated, but there were loans to repay. I looked into his face and life compared to my own— then the bright light of a supernovic future that was to be the hope of Austin buttressed by what I faultily assumed was the power of education and pedigree— and wondered about what it was I fell in love with. Tommy wasn't ugly, but he wasn't attractive to me any longer. Even the memory of that smile seemed far off, an impossibility I only remembered much later out of the need of conjuration.

But Tommy, like he always was, was happy for me. He seemed more excited about my future than I was, and maybe that's because he knew nothing of my sickness. I didn't tell many people, but I question why I never did with him. He was sick himself, so he would've understood in ways that I wanted people to: the *I'm sorry... so, do you want to go out and drink?* kick and jerk response when most people had trouble delving past kick.

When I thought I had paid my respects to Tommy and was free to return to the festival, Joshua Nelson walked in. Joshua was tall, blondish, and Jewish (I found out). He had been a WAC major as well, a major so exclusive in size and in males that I managed to get him to flirt with me for the better part of an hour on that connection alone. We talked about the professors who tried to get him to come out (this way before he *was* gay). We talked about how useless the degree was. He kept telling me how much he loved Austin. All the while Tommy seem poised to jump into the conversation, but he never did. In fact, I ignored everyone at the party, including Tommy, so that I could flirt with Joshua, who lived two doors down. Joshua didn't drink, but he

smoked, and he asked me if I wanted to walk back to his place to grab his cigarettes. I nodded and followed him. Once in his apartment, he took me in his arms, kissed me, and dropped to his knees. By the time he took my dick out of his mouth, less than a minute passed— I didn't cum, and this wasn't about making me reach that point. Think of it as dogs sniffing each other's butts. He righted himself and said we should get back to the party. Had I not been leaving in a week, this would've been someone I could've fallen in love with.

I don't remember how long I stayed at Tommy's party after that, but I was bored with the idea of it and continued to ignore everyone but Joshua. However long I did end up staying, I said goodbye to Tommy afterwards and went back to Joshua's apartment for a second time. I spent the night and this time we did have sex in the fullness of the idea. When I gathered my things in the morning, I asked Joshua if I could see him again before I left for Austin. We made plans for Monday.

What was nice about Joshua was that I really enjoyed him as a person, and he responded similarly. Because of our connection, what transpired between us felt less like a fuck buddy and more like realism. We were two guys in our twenties (he was about five years older) who liked each other, but knew in six days I would leave. There was no pressure to commit, which let ourselves be honest, funny, and giving in ways we might've normally held back in. When I arrived at his apartment that Monday evening, he greeted me in the same embrace, kiss, and blowjob habit. The fact that someone wanted to do all three things with me didn't embarrass me in their progression, succession, or quickness. No one had touched me since Scott and here was someone who waited for no signal, held no delay, maintained no system of checks before he attempted any run in with all of my body. In fact, I loved it.

As Joshua finished putting himself together, he asked me if I wanted to run next door and invite Tommy. This soured my mood. I liked Tommy, but I felt I had done my friendly duty and come the party. My peace was made. This extra obligation was not necessary. And this is a defining thing I learned about myself in relation to what friendship means and what it meant to be friends with Tommy. I feel right in the fact that you don't invite people to crash your date, but looking back I know what Joshua was doing. No attachments, no seriousness. Clearly I still had some conditions for casual sex— or at least I pretended I didn't as he went next door and invited Tommy. Tommy agreed to come down.

I take things as signs on through hindsight. Yes, I can be superstitious. I have pairs of lucky underwear. When I was in high school, that meant underwear that would get me blow job. Now, it's more or less the same thing, but also includes additional wishes, such as *he's* the one who insists on paying for dinner. When I found out I was a finalist for admission to U.C.L.A.'s screenwriting program— a feat that surprised me because of the fact that I had only written one screenplay in my life, and I did so at the age of nineteen— I was invited to fly to Los Angeles for an interview. I celebrated by ordering in Chinese for dinner. When I opened my fortune cookie, the paper slip proclaimed *You will be taking a trip out west*. I guess the fortune didn't mean much considering I already knew about the interview, but I took it as a cosmic sign that the universe was reminding me it was aware of me again. Even if it's to squash your dreams, it's nice to be noticed by something that big.

I bring this up because that night when our date added the third wheel of Tommy, we went to Fiesta Cantina of all places. Logically, I can explain the decision easily. Fiesta serves food and Joshua was a recovering alcoholic who was the only person I'd ever met who enjoyed AA. Fiesta was the only bar on the Santa Monica strip that served food. I remember I ordered a

burrito to go with my margaritas. Though I'm sure I enjoyed myself with Joshua, I can't recall what we said that night. I only remember two things: my burrito— it was oversized and had peas and carrots in it, which is a Guatemalan move, and thus memorable— and the surrender of Tommy.

Tommy, though exhausted, seemed lively at the party he had thrown only two days before. He was a sailor just shipwrecked and treading water— discouraged, cast a predicament, but using his strength to survive. But in two-day's-time, Tommy had taken to floating on the surface, letting the natural physics of life keep going, which even then capitulated when he exhaled and the salt water rushed over his face before the next inhale could bring him to rise once more. There was no anger in him, no gesture for people to pity him. The short boy with spunk who roamed his way from Cleveland to WeHo looked expendable for once. He sat drinking his hard liquor without the zest I always admired in him. I wanted to hug him, but I didn't. Instead I rubbed my leg against Joshua's under the table and felt sad Tommy was the most boring and depressing complement to a date that I'd ever seen.

After offering an obligatory goodbye to Tommy, after having more sex with Joshua and leaving in the morning, I returned to my dorm room to prepare for graduation by editing my commencement address and jacking off to high speed internet porn. The only time I heard from Joshua before I left for Austin was when he called me to let me know he was leaking from his penis and that it was a good idea for me to get tested. This admission upset me immensely because my health insurance was about to run out so I had to squeeze in an appointment the Friday before I left.

I would already be living in Austin when I was e-mailed the results of the test saying that I had gonorrhea. The doctor ordered me a prescription to be filled at a local CVS in Austin. She

gave me two pills: one for me and one for me partner. Even if Joshua had been living in Austin, I wouldn't have given him the other pill. I became incensed when he had the Gaul to suggest *I* was the one had done this to him. Unless men were quietly breaking into my room at night and then putting their dicks in my mouth while I was sleeping, there was no one for me to have been with to catch it from aside from Joshua.

The matter was further complicated when my real doctor— not that the lady doctor who was filling in for my doctor who was on vacation— called me to let me know his stand-in had botched the treatment; she issued the wrong antibiotic. This was frustrating because I had recently given a bj to a marine who had just returned from Afghanistan. I was the first guy he had ever been with. I was supposed to be clean. I was taking *Support Our Troops* to a new level, and in some twisted sense of patriotism, I still feel awful if I infected him, which I most likely did.

This is why when Joshua sent me text in late September I was inclined not to read it. I keep my phone on silent or vibrate because there's something about a phone ringing that calls too much attention to itself when it's not in your house. On this day it was on vibrate. I was working at Jimmy Johns, and the afternoon was slow like they always were after the lunch rush. I was scheduled to work until five. Not wanting to sweep the floor because there were no customers to ring up on the register, I pretended to use the restroom so that I could check my text message.

The messaged started out casual. I don't remember what it says exactly, but I still have it saved on my old phone, which is tucked away in a drawer of electronics I keep for the purpose of one day needing to power them on to check such information. I wasn't planning on checking it, but then I thought how dumb would that be. That message is one of the few reasons I use to

justify my hanging onto that piece of rubbish (I'm not putting down the phone. I loved it. I had it for five years and refused to get an upgrade until only after the protective back broke off, the screen would be scattered with random pixels, the charge port worked only half the time, and I could only hear people on speaker phone. And still it took me several weeks to convince myself that I needed a new one.) So when I started to write this paragraph, I stopped and dug out the phone and uncoiled the charger that was ensconced in a brilliant web weaved from dozens of wires to devices I'm not sure I still own. It took less than two minutes. But there was no juice in it, so now it's recharging. As soon as it powers up, I'll try to dig it up, but as I was supposed to have this chapter written about two months ago, I'm just going to keep plugging away and I'll stop whenever it just so happens to work out that way.

In dance we called those sorts of moments *happy accidents*. I remember hearing the story of Merce Cunningham creating a series of possible dances, and right before the curtain would open, he would roll a die. Whatever he rolled would dictate what the dance would be and how it would change. I got to see Merce's company perform before he died, and I found the entire event one of the most boring experiences of my life. Merce was always defensive about his games of chance, saying he recognized good vs. bad chances. He claimed when he played with chance in the rehearsal studio, he always cut the sequences that were just accidents, so that when he says he left the dance to a die, it was a rigged experiment where all the outcomes would come out well regardless— somewhat like the multiple endings to *Clue*. I hate to think of how the moments he cut looked if what I watched was what he kept.

O.K., so the phone finished charging. I know that might not have seemed long, but it takes a good deal longer to write something than it does to read it. Also, during this time I had to reread some articles on Merce that I didn't end up using, and because I was already online, I



checked my e-mail. I'm also expected a phone call, but I'm not sure when it's supposed to arrive so I keep checked the phone too.

I found the message a lot easier than I thought it would be. The screen only went out once.

That last sentence was written exactly (give or take the seconds contained in a minute) an hour ago. The call came. It was about a Ph.D. program in Illinois. The conversation went well, and the woman I spoke to was tremendously giving, funny, and honest in the shortcoming of the city and program. What I appreciated most about the call was at the end after we had discussed the whiteness of the city, how an ice storm is only romantic when Rick Moody talks about it, how everything I needed to know about whether I should move to this city was summed up when she told me she was *jealous* of my being in Montana, was when she told me she hopes I make the best decision, to which she admitted she'd love to see me come to their program, but wants me to receive that Fulbright I'm shortlisted for and pick it over them. I love it when people can be happy for you in ways you don't know, and it was that sort of honesty that made me realize everything she had just talked to me about was true.

But back to the message, it wasn't hard to access. The problem was I had about a thousand saved messages (I think all messages are worth saving). As I scrolled down, I began to see the names of the men who mostly sent them to me.... Jel (who was supposed to be Joel, but the six button wasn't working on the phone that day): we stopped talked and later when I found out he was HIV +, he wouldn't return my calls after I tried to confront him about it, needing to know if I had to run and get tested— what's funny about that story is the guy who inadvertently told me about Joel's status tried to defend Joel as a good guy, and I refused to hook up with him because he took the wrong side in that argument... maybe it's not so funny as it is something I

felt important to mention; Ricky: an undergraduate who was a rebound after Michael, and what's funny about him was that I think he thought I wanted a relationship when in fact all I wanted to do was take care of him because in my mind it was the only penance I could think of so that I would not hate myself every day; and then, of course, Michael. I knew if I kept scrolling down that I'd eventually backtrack from the serious, awkward messages from when we tried to patch our relationship to the message that ruined it all. As another sign that I needed to stop, that was when my phone's screen went out.

After refreshing the screen by closing and opening it— it's a flip phone— I started with the messages, but going from the other direction, knowing I would find Joshua's message almost a year before I knew who Michael was. This time I only stopped once. I read a message from a one Rob Eller.

Rob's last name wasn't Eller. It was Leftwich. He told me lots of things that may or may not have been true. He told me he went to the Anderson School of Management. He told me he was part of the Eller fortune. I do know when we were together, there were times when I felt deserving of the happiness I had with him. It was under his watch that I drank too much (he kept ordering me too much in a bar), and threw up for the first time since the fourth grade (I still claim I wasn't drunk... just very intoxicated as I remember the whole incident). I remember how he led me out back and sat with me in the alley behind the bar in WeHo and gave me a bottle of water he bought for several dollars. This was after he passed my wallet around the bar without anything being taken. We were magic that way. Rob told me he'd come back to check on me in five minutes and an hour later I was cold, had thrown up, and was angry he left me there. I caught a cab home and threw up for a second time that night at home.

That should've been a sign to leave mark, but I didn't. I e-mailed him, told him I was mad, but apologized to for my behavior. I told him it was my fault I drank so much and that I should've taken better care of myself. I'm liable to apologize for anything, which is a habit I picked up from trying to live with my mother when everything in life was my fault and never hers.

Like the time I was I don't know how old. I had to be younger than twelve because my father still lived with us. We were cleaning the house for Passover, and I my mother had been particularly horrible that day. I tried to avoid her as best I could. She was cleaning the hallway closet when a large, plastic figurine of a horse fell off its shelf onto her head. I saw the whole incident unfold, and then turned away and continued to clean. Within seconds my mother was on me with her arms, throwing out spit from her mouth alongside her blow, for not... *doing something?* I know what I was supposed to do as a son at that moment, and I know why I didn't do it. I was once considering applying to USC's film school, and they had this writing prompt to talk about the most shameful moment of your life. Had I applied, I would've talked about that moment— possibly even left out her attacking me out of rage that I didn't care for her even at that age.

But about that night with Rob, I wrote a poem about it. I remember it only because I showed it to Rob the last time I saw him.

inexpressivity

i  
can make myself  
sick for you  
every  
night of the week

and be the only one  
that kisses  
vomit on my tongue,  
heavy  
with the waiting  
that you  
will swiftly  
come

and this time  
you'll finally  
be  
with me  
by the curb  
in the back alley  
where you  
dropped  
me  
until i finished  
chucking breeze,  
freezing  
with just what  
you  
told me  
to do,

which was  
to wait for you  
to come back  
from peeing,  
but i got  
so cold  
and tired  
after  
thirty minutes  
and  
said i'm done  
and  
went back  
to the bar:  
you stood wired

in a group  
of friends  
not at the toilet  
with a pic  
of us

clipped from  
my wallet

*(this was a sonnet)*

Fuck, that's that best sonnet I've ever written, which is sad because I was twenty when I wrote it, and it still isn't that good. I also love how I had to tell the reader at the end that it was a sonnet. I'm also aware of the differences in what I told you happened that night and what I said in that poem. Maybe I changed the details for the meter and the volta. Maybe not.

The point is the last time I saw Rob I forgave him and it was the last night I spend in my dorm before I was to move to New Zealand. My room was all boxes. He spent the night in my cramped bed and we ate curly fries. When I went to the restroom, he stole a hundred-dollar bill my mom had given me for my birthday weeks before, a gesture that made me feel guilt because I knew she couldn't afford it and she had better things to spend it on than me. I left it by a box.

When he left the next morning and I finished packing, I noticed it was gone. I figured I must have already packed it, but couldn't find it when I unpacked everything. Rob was the only other person in my room, and though I felt guilty for accusing him in my mind of stealing it, I still called. He admitted he did nonchalantly, and he told me he was wondering when I would notice, that he thought I would before he left and then he'd give it back.

The bad part about this was that I never got angry with him over it. I took him at his word that we'd see each other again, which is when I would retrieve the money. Rob was hard to get ahold of after that and we didn't see each other. The only time he picked up was when I called him after I had a tooth removed and I was still under the effect of the anesthesia. Apparently I left him some message about waking up from surgery and needing someone to take me home. I don't recall doing it, and I only learned that I did after he called back frantic and scarred and afraid for me. In the way someone who loves you can yell at you and you know they love you in

that yell, he did so for making him think I had been in some horrible accident. You can see why I thought I'd still be getting my money back.

The text I received from Rob told me politely (he actually used the word "please") to stop calling him, that he was busy, and that we would hang out soon. At that point I just wanted my money. But it was fruitless to call because I couldn't make him pick up. The day before I left for New Zealand, I spent the night at my father's apartment in El Segundo because it was only a mile from LAX. I called Rob from the landline in the apartment and he picked up. He made up some excuse and said he'd call me after he finished what he was in the middle of, but we both know of the futility of that. I sent him an angry e-mail or two later demanding my money back, but I accepted it was lost forever. Part of writing a book is revenge because you get to tell your side of the story without the other person getting any say in it: Rob's penis was smaller than mine, and I'll fight any editor tooth and nail who tells me to take this line out of the manuscript.

After Rob's message, it didn't take long to scroll up to Joshua's. Here's what it said:

"hows [sic] austin [sic] treating you? haven't [sic] talked to you in a while. did [sic] you know tommy [sic] passed away a few weeks ago? im [sic] not sure if you heard yet. call [sic] me for info [sic]"

The message arrived on September 17, 2008 at 10:58 AM. A Wednesday.

I realize at this point that the writer cogs seemed revealed. I wasn't my intention, but it's probably (entirely is a better word) likely you think I was hiding Tommy's death from you. In the name of keeping the machine running, I'm going to show you some work here that will hopefully let you see this wasn't a sloppy-handed approach at suspense.

I started this chapter with death. I followed it with another instance of death. From the title, you can see how the observers of said deaths are giving a voice. I still have one more to

cover. No, I think if you reread my parts on Tommy, it's pretty clear he's dead despite the fact that I don't say it (there's a difference between giving everything away and tactfully coming to it). I'll also say that the delay in giving you the text message wasn't meant to be a meander. I really did get that call. I really did check those messages and decide that Rob needed to be addressed. And I'll get back to this point at the end of the chapter, so that the "reveal" doesn't feel as surprising as it might otherwise. It's all orchestrated and predestines despite how much I'm attempting to make you think otherwise, i.e., the artifice of the truth is a lie itself. But do know it's not suspense I'm going for— rather, I'm hiding from something else.

You'll also note, parallel to the poem, a *happy accident* of writing that I stumbled upon Rob's message and it reminded me of that sonnet I otherwise have forgotten, there's a difference between what I wrote about how I learned about Tommy's death and what happened. I promise I wasn't trying to lie to you. That's how I remember the day until I checked.

I would call September 17<sup>th</sup> mid-September, not late. I might have been getting off at two or three in the afternoon. At 10:58 AM, morning rush is just about to start, which makes sense because Bastian, a mouthy coworker in the best way who wrote plays, was educated, and hoped I would ask him out (he wasn't my type) would later ask during the shift why I was staring at the bread oven, and I would tell him Tommy died. I would write a poem about it too.

eventually loss escapes great yesterday

tommy zavesky died three weeks ago  
around the same time  
i(ye) lost my california driver's license  
while living in texas  
in those three weeks on separate occasions  
i(ye) also managed to lose my house keys  
my debit card

my baseball cap i(ye) wear to work  
and i(ye) found or replaced each item  
except  
    tommy zavesky died three weeks ago  
and i(ye) found this out today  
after stealing a(yuh) hat from the new employee  
uniform bin  
when his neighbor whom i(ye) slept with at a(yuh) party  
sent me a(yuh) text message asking if  
i(ye) heard  
    tommy zavesky died three weeks ago  
while i(ye) was working at this sandwich shop  
i(ye) know that i'm supposed to be ringing up orders  
but instead i'm stare through the oven's door  
at the baking loafs of french bread  
because i'm sure the customer don't want  
to know  
    tommy zavesky died three weeks ago  
and no matter how hard i(ye) try to believe he is gone  
repetition is not the answer  
but i(ye) will pause from my grief  
when it is time to pull out bread

But I'm not even sure I did stare at the bread or if I invented that for the poem's sake. I lose myself in my writing when I fictionalize portions of my life to make them better on the page that after a while I can't tell what was invented. I do know I lost my wallet and keys, etc... but maybe that happened after. I started to write that poem in the sandwich shop on the day he died, but I only got through three lines, and those all come in in the penultimate stanza. I wrote the full poem in my first year of graduate school when I enough time has lapsed to forget the order in which those small events in the poem occurred. Most if not all of those things happened. Even when I'm trying to tell you the truth I suck at it. So does it matter if I lost my Driver's License (it was at the gym) months after Tommy died?

When I called Joshua after work, he seemed normal, and sadly, so did I. I know I was upset, but I couldn't cry over Tommy. I don't cry as well as I mourn. But I was mourning. Bastian *did* come to me because I was visibly affected. I know this because he tried to relate by



talking about the untimely death of a friend of his. Tommy was the boy whom I was inspired to write an entire book of poetry about his eyes after our first date. It was called *Tommy Eyes*. I thought his eyes were green and they were actually brown. I had everything in the world to mourn for when I learned I lost Tommy.

Joshua told me Tommy had a seizure, and, in his words, *he went all Anna Nicole*. What he was saying was that Tommy took a lot of things he wasn't supposed to take alongside the medication he was. What Joshua didn't realize he was telling me was about his choice of words. I remember I was in a colorful hostel owned by an Israeli couple I spoke bad Hebrew too. We were in one of the larger, small cities on the South Island that doesn't include Victoria or Christchurch. And by *we* I mean I was traveling with this couple I met in my program's orientation that I lost contact with after our trip (most likely to my sickness and reclusive tendencies that came along with it). I was checking the internet on a paid service, and as I quickly browsed the news, I read about her death. I never knew anything about the woman aside from what everyone already knew and that I saw here once in a pink convertible as she waved to the crowd in the 2005 Gay Pride Parade as Marshall. Still, there was something sad to this news, and I remember needing to tell my companions as we drove off that day, and they too were sad. There's something in the permanence and ecumenical reach of death that makes all death a bit more real than they should be— perhaps because they reaffirm what we all know: that we, like celebrities, shall die.

Joshua told me he helped Tommy's father clean out his son's closet, that it was a lovely service, and Tommy was handled from this world. This made me feel both angry and pathetic. I realize now that there would've been no way for me to travel to the funeral; I had no money. But I there was power in pretending the rage that I could've gone had Joshua not waited several

weeks to tell me. I preferred that emotion to the pain that would've circulated me the day I showed up to work knowing they were lowering Tommy's body into the ground (though I believe he was cremated), and I was charging people for their sandwiches instead.

But that's also when the reality hit me: I didn't know for three weeks. Obviously, the dead don't tell us they die: that's the job of those who surround the dead. I don't know who found Tommy. I don't know under what circumstances he died. And I don't know these things because whenever those things did happen, I was not one of the people who were informed of them. And I have to blame me for that.

For a long time I didn't know how to deal with Tommy's death. Besides being someone I cared for enough to make the focus of the longest chapter in this book, he was also the first person I knew who died. Sure, I *knew* people who died. I lost a grandmother I didn't know and had friends who lost siblings at young ages. But I never dealt with the death of someone whom I talked to, not to mention some whom I expected to live much longer than he did. Tommy broke my heart in many ways that I didn't want to deal with, and I wasn't sure where to begin with the mourning process.

So when May 8<sup>th</sup> came around, I visited the only place I knew I could see Tommy: *Myspace*. I know this sounds like the start of joke, but I'm serious. It broke my heart. His homepage still had his picture. It told me his last log-in date, as if he were supposed to come back soon. His mood was set to "busy" and there was a picture of an emoticon grumbling in an anxious way. And this is when I learned the first rule about what it means to die today: we die in every world but the technological one.

His pictures were still posted. I could read about his favorite films (*Millions, Garden State, Cowboy Bebop The Movie...*). I read over his out of date profile blurb because when I did I could hear Tommy's voice in my head reading it:

"I'm originally from Ohio and I moved to California three years ago... at first just for school, but i think i am going to stay here because shoveling snow and 2 degree tempertures [sic] freakin [sic] suck. I work full time and i [sic] go to school full time. I am graduating this year from Cal Lutheran...yes, finally. Besides studying and doing homework, I like to take road trips, work out, and hang out with my friends in my spartime [sic]. I also like to go out and check out new places and meet new people....so hit me up"

Tommy only posted once status before he died, and it arrived on August 21<sup>st</sup>. *Tommy is spending time w/my dad & brother while they are in town.* Two years later, a photo-less commenter named Stephanie, probably after having her account hacked, responded: *nice! you wanna make any extra csptnmng money lol by way? i made \$140 today check out main article on Chan33News.net*

I point this out because in the ever-advancing digital world, the rules of dying become murky. It used to be you just kicked the bucket and then told the post office to discontinue the mail. A credit card application might still arrive, but generally that's the worst of it. I know this because I live in the house of a famous poet, and I break federal laws by opening her mail.

It's not just her mail that arrives, but she's my favorite. I get mail from the people who lived in the house after her. That stuff I don't open. Most of the time it's junk mail so I recycle it. Sometimes a package will arrive; in those instances, I keep them unopened in my room. I do this because I believe in the strangeness of the world that people will one day show up on my

doorstep to look for their mail. But with Patricia, the woman who lived in this house, the woman who's spirit haunts this house in a friendly way, I do open the mail.

Patricia Goedicke and her husband, Leonard Robinson, lived in this house for a long time, so much so that when I lived in Montana, I called it Patricia's house and everyone in Missoula knew what that meant. My neighbors who raised a son next door would talk about her because of the kinship of all of us being writers. The faculty all would tell stories about the writers and parties and workshops that went on under that roof. One of them laid the wooden floors. One of them adopted Patricia's cat; when I petted the cat, I wondered if he could smell his former home on me.

There were always odd things about living in that house. Once, a lone apple grew on a tree that wasn't an apple tree. The keyhole to the door to the basement was obscured by blue cellophane not so that you couldn't see into the darkness down there, but that whatever lived in there couldn't see into the upstairs light. After deciding to attend Montana, it would be strange to learn that Cal and Patricia were great friends, that they exchanged letters and that he even stayed in the house. Coming home from the airport one time, I was chatting with the taxi driver. When he pulled into my driveway, he let out a smile.

*Oh, you live in Patricia's place! If you ever hear noises, that's Patricia dancing. She loved to dance.*

I had always just assumed it was the work of squirrels.

Most of all, it's weird to live in a house you know people had sex in who weren't you.

I've decided that her haunting is the friendly kind, and I've also given that power to the house. I like to think that no one is anything but a *good* writer until living in Patricia's house,

that even Patricia and Leonard and all the writers who spent a night in 310 McLeod were only *great* writers after letting the house have its way with them.

But I want to clarify about the mail thing. It's not something I did often. A letter would arrive once or twice every six months— if that much. Most of the time it was from an organization that Patricia had donated to; *Poets and Writers* is still wanting Patricia to come back to them, but who can blame them? Amherst, the university, says they have a check for her amounting to \$20.82. I know these things because, yes, I opened her mail. I also think Patricia would let me, in fact, despite not having ever met her, I want to say based off everything I've learned about her vicariously that she would tell me to. It's such a burden released to know you're not missing out on something important when you're gone.

But with the digital world, things are changing. I can imagine all the e-mails about Viagra and my how to better grow my penis still making their way into my inbox. I try not to think of Tommy's death because then I have to admit the only reason I knew about it was because I hooked up with the guy who lived a few doors down from him and in the process was given gonorrhea. Is there anything more pathetic, anything that tells you how down the totem pole of someone's life you are than having that guy be the one to *text* you about your friend's death three weeks after the fact?

What would you say if I said Joshua never gave me gonorrhea? I'll let you in on something. When I lie to you, I don't lie about the big stuff— unless I am, which I do. But more often it's the small things, the writerly moment that pushes the interesting to the spectacular detail. Like didn't it seem like I had it coming just a little bit for being upset when the last time I saw Tommy alive I wanted to ditch him so that I could have sex with Joshua? Isn't that what

people like me deserve: gonorrhoea— a little dissatisfaction, a little inconvenience, and a whole lot of shame. Didn't I have it coming?

Well, I stole that line from an Amy Hempel story. And I both did and didn't have gonorrhoea. The first time I was e-mailed my results the tests came back clean. Remember how I was being treated by an incompetent not-my-real-doctor doctor? I would later get an e-mail informing me that those results were not true because I did indeed have gonorrhoea... but *of the throat*, which is why the results came back negative at first and the doctor jumped the gun with e-mailing me before the throat culture came back from the lab. The only thing worse than having an S.T.I.— the new name for S.T.D.s— is having the addendum *of the throat*. There's something particularly vulgar, like a punch line of joke that goes one step too far. It tells the world you put more than food in your mouth.

But in some twisted way, I owe Joshua. I can't imagine how I would've eventually found out, but I probably would've been careless and sent Tommy another birthday message on *Myspace* only to discover— maybe years later— that he was dead when his brother finally figured Tommy's password and logged into the account to respond with the dated, sad news.

However, there's now a service for that too. It's called *Deathswitch*. You create a string of e-mails and can attach photos and videos in them. You can create separate one for different people. All you have to is pay twenty dollars a year and give them your e-mail address and password. Depending on how frequently you set your check if I'm dead setting, you will be prompted via e-mail to enter a password that resets the switch, which effectively lets the website know you're indeed alive. But if you don't reset it, your messages will be sent out. This is the best way we've figured out how to let the people in the cyber world know we've become unplugged. This might be stupid, but I remember when the cyber world was the better world for a

scarred, overweight, gay kid who couldn't look at a bottle of pills without chasing second thoughts.

And when I visited Tommy's page, I was amazed by what I read. People, people who knew right away because they didn't try to lose Tommy, left him messages on his birthday. His wall was filled with posts. Many were cheesy. One was just a copy/paste job a Sarah McLachlan song I'm embarrassed to say I love. I couldn't help but read them all even though they weren't for me.

Kristen said:

"Tommy Zavesky!!!! My birthday came.... I missed you! I missed the birthday call....

I miss being able to tell you the "scoop"....but then again...you see my every move....so that's [sic] could be bad news bears!

I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU!!!

Remember How I Always used to tell you....if I could stick you in my back pocket and keep you with me all the time? How much do you love that your [sic] STUCK WITH ME....all the time....and when I come to heaven to join you...Your ashes are going to be buried with me! So I'll never be without you! Isn't that the best?

I LOVE YOU!!!!!!!!!!"

Cassie Quinones said:

"hey buddy just wanted to say i am thinking of you and at least if say happy birthday to you on here it wont [sic] be as hard but. even as i am writing i have tears in my eyes for you. i miss you so much. i'll raise my glass in honor of the day you were born. love you"

Part of me felt relieved that I wasn't the only one who felt this need to visit Tommy on his birthday. And as much as there was a creep factor to many of these messages, I understood

their laments. Even Kristen's buried with me blurt was softened because I started returning to Tommy's page when it wasn't his birthday to see if anyone still spoke to him. She did.

"I misssss you! Ugh.... this is hard! They say it gets easier with time....I'm not sure thats true!!! xoxoxoxoxo Me"

And

"How do you like being in Atlanta with me? I told you I always wanted to put you in my suitcase and take you where-ever I go... Well I'm upholding my promise! I love you! ;)"

And the raw, but honest face in this one.

"Tom....

You know...Your [sic] such a punk! :)

I would love to beat your ass right now... ;0 :D

So I have some questions?

What about us? (how selfish I know) How does this happen? How do I go on? How does everyone go on?

You told me if I moved to Columbus that "I would never see you again"... I didn't think you were serious.... We were laughing and joking that day....and discussing our upcoming holiday plans....

How is it that everyone else's life gets to move on...and for awhile [sic] time is just going to stand still for me... especially without you!

We all are so sad....so sad...

Its [sic] our own selfish reasonings [sic] for why we mourn...

Tommy... You better help me though this buddy because my heart is so broken... But as I sit here with tears running down my face....



I know your [sic] in a better place...

and all I can ask of you now is....

PLEASE COME VISIT ME IN MY DREAMS.... please....

I can't imagine never seeing your face again...

I can fall apart after I take care of you... Right now I'm just doing what I can for you and your family...and of course your friends...

We are putting together pictures tonight of you....I have so many fun pictures... of your fantastic smile....and good times...

People always say to "go out with a bang"....

I'm doing what I can to make sure you would have your wishes honored at a time like this....

I'll be dressed and ready to go for our last night out together...

We should be going to BOUNCE....

I can't believe this.... FUCK! WHY!

I'll be there for Tony as much as he allows... I know how important he IS to you.... You always wanted to be the example for Tony... That's [sic] what big brothers are for! You know that he loves you and looks up to you so much Tommy... This is going to be so hard for him....”

It was also through these wall posts that I learned what happened to Tommy. His father posted first.

“Thomas R. Zavesky, Jr. died Saturday night, August 30th. It appears he had a stroke associated with new medicine he was taking for his seizures. I, his father, will be at his apartment for around a week. My phone is (440)xxx-xxxx and I will post details of his funeral here.”

“Tom's funeral will be at Jardine's Funeral Home at 15822 Pearl road in Strongsville, Ohio on Wednesday September 10th. It starts at 4pm with the service at 7pm and a reception afterwards.”

Turns out I only missed the service by a week. There was also selling of his stuff.

“There will be an informal viewing of Tom before he is sent to Ohio. It will be held at the Crawford Mortuary, 8717 Tampa Avenue, Northridge, Ca. on Friday, September 5th from 5 to 8pm. I could use some help clearing out his apartment, if anyone would like to buy his flatscreen [sic] tv, dvd/vcr, printer/fax, air conditioners, futon, bedroom set, dining room set, computer stand, microwave, expresso [sic] machine, lamps, fans, chairs, or anything else call me at (440)xxx-xxxx.”

I wouldn't have needed any of those things, but you have no idea how much I would've loved to have held onto a folding of his. I don't think Tommy had a will, and if he did, I wasn't in it. But at least socks are easy to take with you around the country.

I think \*WANTED\* said it best when he posted “today was the hardest of them all, we asked your dad if he needed help and he ask us to clean your clothers [sic]. and all i can think is that i am never going to see you in them...miss you and please look over me and have a drink ready for me when i get up there babie [sic]. love with you all my heart and soul”

If Tommy can read his *Myspace* from wherever he is, then he can read this too. I would've done that for you in a heartbeat. And when I say I didn't have the money to visit you, had I been told in time, after working one of my dance shifts in Charlies, I would've spent the night on my knees in the bathroom until I had enough money to fly out one way. I'd figure the rest from there— not to mention I still had the other pill.

Following Tommy's page, I also learned he didn't Anna Nicole himself. Ken Kristiansen set the record straight.

"To Tommy's friends-

The L.A. County Coroner's Office gave us the official cause of death this week. After several months of tests, it was determined that Tommy's seizure disorder lead [sic] him to leave this world last year. It turns out that Tommy had hippocampal dysplasia, which is what made his seizures so severe.

The truth is that he was born with that malformation in his brain and could have passed away much earlier in his life. I am personally grateful that he lived as long as he did, got to move to L.A., have such great friends from all over, and was able to see his family so recently before his condition caught up with him.

If you have questions, I can give you Dr. Young's email contact information."

But the hardest message to read is also one of the shortest. It comes less than a year from my writing this, which is a good deal of time since Tommy's passing. From a one, Mr Smmooth:

"hey stranger...havnt [sic] heard from u [sic] in a long time...what u [sic] been doing?"

I flinch at this message because it's heartbreaking. But I also flinch because this Mr Smmooth with two "m"s could've so easily been me. And I hate that about myself. I hate it because when Todd left me I remember speaking to him after that lull in our friendship and told my biggest concern was that if I died suddenly, then he'd never know. He told he'd have found out eventually, and now I have proof that's not the case. It's like when Michael was supposed to show up, and a week before he cancelled I got him by a car on my bicycle because the driver was busy talking on her cell phone. When I called Michael to see if I could change his mind and he

said, I told him what happened earlier in the day as if that accident were leverage. He still said no and hung up the phone.

In my fantasies about that accident, I imagine what would've happened if the driver hadn't been pulling out of the gas station slowly and instead making a full-speed turn. I was wearing a helmet at the time, but worse things have happened in more protection. When being treated on the sidewalk before I pass out, I tell them to call three people. The first is my dad because he's my dad and I know his cell home number by heart. The second person is Prageeta, and though I don't know her number, I can tell them to call the university because she can handle the necessary components of my life in town. The final person is Michael. I tell the people helping me I can't remember his number, but he works for Rackspace Technologies in Austin.

In this fantasy, Michael called into his supervisor's office. They'll tell him to sit down, and in his jovial, but serious demeanor he'll inquire as to what's happening. A personnel worker will ask if he knows anyone by the name of Robby Nadler. This will upset Michael because he'll think I've somehow called the company about something and am disrupting his life. The personnel will interrupt and tell him there's been an accident. Michael will get very quiet.

Sometimes in my family Michael takes the flight to see me in the hospital before I die. Sometimes I die on that street. Fantasy seems like the wrong word to use in this imagining, but in all scenarios, I see Michael, and at some point he's crying because he loves me, and even in the briefest of times, he forgives. So yes, I stick by that term.

But the idea of returning to internet to see Tommy isn't a strange one. Historically, there are reasons for burying a body. On a utility level, it's a must. The body swells and decomposes quickly. Aside from the sight of gasses bloating the body to signal to degrading of the internal tissues be a warning that toxicities are at play, it's plain disturbing to watch. Bury the dead was a

must in terms of cleanliness. And the rot factor is the end of the diseases. The animals which feast on the body, which, again, isn't a sight the mourning parties was to see, are carriers themselves. The ground is a convenient place to remove both the health aspect and the grotesque aspect as there's nothing if we can't see it happening below.

But as I've also once said in a poem *burying a body gives our hands something to do*. And you have to bury someone you love, you'll understand importance of keeping busy. Ceremony is a drive that outlines what must be done when you have no will to do any of it. It gives a chance to say the things we need to confess. In many ways, the burial process is only for the living because what do the dead care in the aftermath of the greatest care?

I was told that modern society is the first generation that doesn't know where it's going to be buried. In the past, you never left your home, your village, your people. Where you were born was where you died. And people have always moved around, but not like today. Kids are expected to leave for college, even study abroad. There's access to anywhere you want to be. With technology, the threads that kept people close to home have allowed to extend the distance because phones and pictures are comfortable substitutes for the real thing, the real presence. So if we're not happy with our lives, we're allowed to pack up and move. And we can. Tommy died in Los Angeles, but his father had to bring him to Ohio.

So when I visit Tommy's page, I'm visiting his cyber grave, the space that outlives him and will outlive as long as *Myspace* doesn't collapse. You laugh, but I'm terrified of that happening because if does, I'll have nothing of Tommy left beside those socks. And in a world where *Facebook* and *Twitter* is pushing that website to its own death, I feel I have to begin a campaign to keep it relevant. And that's because it's important to have a place to visit the dead. In every way, we surround ourselves with all sorts of dead. Pictures of family. The cat's ashes on

the mantle. A whole chicken you keep in the freezer. Regardless of the justification we're not as afraid of the dead as we are of dying. At least that's how I feel.

When I stand in a room, I have this morbid game I play; I make the order in which everyone in the room will die. I don't exempt myself. Older go first, but not always. Those I see as risky because they drink too much or seem like the person who would get hit by a drunk driver (it's always the people who shouldn't) go quickly too. It's an odd game to play, to yield that in a room of people *there is* an order to which these things *will* happen. Ever since Tommy, I think of my friends, how long I have with them, and how will I know if I outlive them.

The hardest time to play this game is when I'm with my family. I don't want to think of my family as dying, but they will. I picture my aunts and uncles, my last grandparent (my paternal grandmother), my cousins, and random relatives. I have a lot of funerals to attend with some being harder than others. Some I would ask to be pallbearer, to speak on the deceased's behalf. Some I would attend out of familial obligation without doing much besides offering my condolences to people who are grieving in a way I can't.

In terms of my immediate family, my parents would go first. The odds would have to be on my mother because she's already sick, though I don't that wish on her. I hope she's one of those people who carry sickness past everyone else. But the fact is she is, she's overweight, she doesn't eat well, and her life is full of stress.

My father has become a lot happier since remarrying, which is a good thing. Sometimes he stays in good shape. I said sometimes. His wife, Ellen, will likely outlive him because she's always in good shape and women do that in general. I have nothing against my stepmother, I just didn't know her until I was sixteen. My father is the link between us, and without him... well, I wonder what that would be like.

After them, my half-brother goes. Sandy is much older, which ups his odds greatly. I have spoken to his ex-wife more recently than him, so that says how well we keep contact. Last I saw him, he was overweight too and unmarried. Both of those factors up your chances of dying sooner. He's one of those people that I wouldn't know about it if it happened.

That only leaves my two, full siblings and me. Scott is the oldest, but only by fifteen months. He has good genes and he does exercise, but he eats crap (it just won't show because of said good genes). Scott also lives the riskiest life of the three of us. He drives well— too well. He's most likely to be in a place he shouldn't be. Though he's the far superior driver, neither Jessica nor I have tickets. I want to find a good job and someone he can love. I think he'd be a good father and a better uncle, but he needs the guidance of a lover to help him. Of all the qualities I want to be in that person, intelligence is always top three. You can't go wrong with health and looks either.

Jessica in many ways should be the last one standing. She's the youngest and she's a girl. She had a weight issue, but she's doing a lot better with that. I think of the three us, she's the one who'll get married and have kids. If she does, I want her to live the longest. She'd be a great mother, and I'm not wishing my brother and I an early sendoff, but children should have their parents around as long as possible. Even Scott would agree with that logic is in some twisted game we had to pick who comes out empty.

Some days it makes sense that I live longest, that I'm the only one who outlives everyone. I see this because I'm the sort of person who be voted to be put in charge of having to deal with everyone's deaths. Remember, the burden of being the last one standing is that you have to watch everyone go. It's a job I could, and like all jobs I do, I would do well— better than most people. But I don't want that job, I just want the perks of it.

But then I remember I'm sick, and despite that I was always healthier lifestyle one, I'm the sickest of the three, that it's possible my parents bury me. There are moments when I question this. There have been so many times I have come close death that it scares me think that something is keeping me here. I don't know what it is or why it wants to do that, but I'm thankful nonetheless.

In high school, I was very confident in how I was going to die. I told only people whom I knew wouldn't tell the guidance counselors that I was going to die by my hand or in an airplane. All these years later, I moved a great deal from the suicide side of that coin. Airplane makes sense. From a young I've always thought I would crash in one, and it's the sort of odd death is reconciled easily by those who know me, that if I had to die— and of course I do— it would all over the news in a way that most people don't.

But the truth is that I don't think I do dying well, which is to say I'm normal in that regard. I'm fearful and dodgy, unprepared and emotional. On my death bed I can't imagine myself being wonderful; I'd be morose and angry. To avoid this unpleasant, last image of myself, I'm studying how to die well.

Gay men didn't die before Andy Lippincott. We disappeared or were remembered, but we didn't die— not as who we were. Reagan wouldn't talk about it. The media liked to talk about it, but not about us. We were sick and didn't know why, didn't know how to stop it, and everyone was scared. And it's in that fear that people forgot about us as people. We were posters of horrible images of what could become of a body, of the destroyed canvas of skin marked by Kaposi. The reason bathrooms have those paper seat covers was because at the height of the panic it was suggested you could contract it that way. No— no one wanted to see us as people.



Andy didn't about that because Andy Lipincott was a comic book character. He wasn't even a Peter Park or Bruce Wayne, which is to say a man with superpowers or an ordinary man performing superhero feats. No, he wasn't even featured in those sorts of comics. Andy Lippincott was a character— a minor character— in the funny pages' strip of *Doonesbury*.

Andy debuted in January of 1976. He and Joanie Caucus, a major character, were studying in a law library. Joanie falls for Andy and asks him out. Andy was the first cartoon character to come out as gay even though Snagglepuss had been parading for a generation before. Joanie takes the revelation harshly, and after a few stints in an election campaign, Andy is written out of the series and forgotten. He returns six years later, still alive, still gay, and working on another political campaign, but is written out of the series once more. Gay men noticed Andy because there weren't any other gay characters to compete with. His presence was short and unimportant as a central character, but it didn't matter because we had him— had *someone*.

Andy became far than a top a five favorite *Doonesbury* character for gay men, a character that when compared to other people's lists would often be met with *who was that?* when he returned to the comic in 1989 as the first comic character to have AIDS. And it wasn't just the first comic character: Andy was the first person in America to have AIDS. What I mean by that is before Andy, the only who caught AIDS were gay men, and that was GRID. Even when the facts became clear and the world starting catching on that it wasn't just for gay men, it still remained a disease of panic and of retribution, which were funneled toward gay men. We were easy targets chastised for immorality. We were promiscuous. We used drugs. We were effigies to be burned by a public that needed to set aflame the terror in a black plague for a new for world.

And despite all this hate, Andy took the light with the poise that none of us could muster (but wanted to). When visited by Joanie in the hospital and he tells her to do one thing for him, she leans in and responds *Anything Andy*. As the reader, we're made to think of these two in the law library where Joanie confesses her love, now sitting with her dying friend in a newer, deeper kind of love. We expect Andy to go there. What he tells her is to bring him a bag of White Castle because the hospital won't let him have any.

Andy wasn't always funny, though the balls to have wit in the face of death was a marvel for those of us who had forgotten how to laugh even on the inside. There's the sad and touching moment when Andy's mom knows that she'll outlive her son. Andy is lying in bed at home because there's nothing left for the hospital to do. The panel is striking. Andy is propped in profile, the long nose he shares with his mother in view. And though his hair is in place, his eyebrows thick and sharp, his eyes are lost. They droop. Andy is emaciated in way ways. In a distanced diagonal, his Mother sits in front of a window, a window that we will come to understand. She is burdened as any mother would be. Her eyes are wide. She places a hand on her son's torso. Andy tells that when he dies he'd like to be cremated and have his ashes scattered over the Bay.

What Andy did for gay men was show the world that we were people too. That when we were dying, we didn't disappear. We withered away sometimes with friends and family, sometimes not. We had good days and honest conversations. We talked to the people we needed to and distracted ourselves about inevitable ends. We made arrangements to fulfill desires. We broke the hearts of those people who had the audacity to love us and still love us. We died in the mundane ways that all people did, and like all people, our deaths were just as tragic. Andy showed not only to the world how we died, but also he taught us how to die.

In the last panels of Andy's life, he's rejoicing in the *Pet Sounds* being released on CD, a smallness he didn't think he'd ever live to see. Andy is now bald and Joanie looks tired. This doesn't prevent the light coming through his smile as he explains to his friend how *Sounds* was the basis for The Beatles *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club*. In that moment, it seems as if he can't die, that if a CD could put such life back into him, there's hope. And because Andy is only a cartoon, we as the reader know there's a possibility in him being saved. A cure. A miracle. An it's-all-just-a-dream. All those endings are sloppy, but in life we don't argue with how we get what we want as long as we get it, do we?

And it's in this state that Andy panics and tells Joanie he left the over on. In a four-part panel, we begin by seeing Joanie kneeling in front of the over. She's opening its door and is calling out her actions as she's leaving the house. She tells Andy and us that it's off. Her suit is dark. She seems to be smiling. There's a kettle on the range and it seems important in its nothingness. Panel two is close up of Joanie turning over her left shoulder. Her face has changed, but fear hasn't sunk in yet. Apprehension would be the best word to describe it. She asks Andy if he heard her, then tells him that *it's scary* when he cuts out on her like that. Panel three breaks our hearts. Joanie was become a silhouette with mass, everything now the color of her suit. We watch her from the foreground— she's standing in profile, angled on a diagonal toward us with her body away from us. There's a purse hanging from her left shoulder; she looks ready to leave. The only other inhabitation of the picture is the top of a chair. It too is black. We see its four posts interrupted by the blinding white that occupies the majority of the frame as if to suggest that Joanie and the chair were negative space. Joanie's away from us because she's facing him. She calls out one thing on top of her head: *Andy?*

The last panel doesn't show us Andy's face. His back is to us as he's cover in bed, the baldness of the back of his head and the strips of his pajamas the only visibilities that he once existed. The room itself seems to be alive as if to suggest he's only sleeping. The bedroom window is as large as it's ever been, taking up nearly the whole frame. A curtain is neatly pulled back so that nothing is obscured. There is a city and an outside and clouds beyond it. We don't see this head-on, but an angle. Following the vanishing point, on the sill are books, a plant quite alive, and the music player. Emerging from it are two musical notes that hover in the air around the lyrics *Wouldn't it be nice....* After a year-long public battle with his disease, Andy Lipincott left us.

When I was doing research for this book, I stumbled upon someone's journal entry about this last comic.

"Eighteen years ago your death filled me full of sadness and on the morning I opened *the Guardian* and read about the last moments of your life, I cried. I had followed the last tragic weeks of your life as AIDS overwhelmed your ability to resist the inevitable. Every time you fought back it just got stronger and still you faced it all with a stoicism I couldn't understand. If I had been you I would have been so angry. I would have spat out my frustration and railed against the world. Instead you checked out listening to the Beach Boys playing 'Wouldn't it be Nice.'

A lot of people, real people that I actually knew have died since that day in 1990, some I expected to lose like my Mum and Dad and others got ill and died. One got a lift from a guy, travelled a few hundred yards and hit a tree. Death is like that, it comes to all of us but when it does we seem surprised. We know when we drink too much we will get drunk or if we eat too much we will get fat but we never seem to come to terms with the fact that if we live too much

then we die. I remember your death because it was the first that actually meant something to me and although you were a character in a cartoon strip that didn't seem to make much difference."

So when I say I want to learn how to die like Andy, I think this is the measuring stick; if anyone writes that about your life like that— people you never even met— then you know you did something right.

I've often thought about why Andy asked Joanie to check the oven. The timing is too coincidental. I mean, how long could it have been from when Joanie leaves Andy to his music to when she calls out the shell of his body? A few minutes, maybe five if she stopped to use the bathroom first. So I take that to mean Andy knew it was coming, that he was actually holding on for Joanie to leave the room. That's a ballsy way to go.

Back at the height of the AIDS epidemic, many gay men died alone. Amy Hempel never wrote about it, but she worked for a charity in San Francisco where people volunteered their time to sit with the dying. It was hard enough being gay in the 80s and 90s, so that was one strike for families to disown their children. It wasn't the same as today where if you come out now, you at least have justifiable anger to direct toward the people in your life who stop loving you because of your sexuality. It doesn't parents don't kick their kids out still or that friends stop being friends as soon as they learn. No, that shit is common. But what has changed is that it's politically incorrect for those things to happen. The world, in theory, is now on your side of the fight— as if that matters. It's a small victory.

But back then we didn't even have that. Being was mostly a choice and it wasn't wrong to dislike someone for being it. So imagine how worse the situation became when gay men started dying in droves and no one could figure out why, no one could figure out how the disease was transmitted, and even when the public learned it's fine to touch someone, to be in the same

room, Ryan White, a teenager who contracted the virus from a contaminated blood transfusion, was still expelled from school because of the hysteria that filled people's minds of how he could infect people in the most contrived if not improbable situations. Reagan wrote a tribute in *The Washington Post* for Ryan when he died in April in 1990. This was a month before Andy's death.

What's interesting about Ryan's death is that he and the Ray brothers (a tragedy of transfusions where three boys all contracted the disease; only one is alive today) and Kimberly Bergalis (who simultaneously made the disease not a gay man's disease and placed its fault on solely on gay men) and Magic Johnson told the world that everyone could get AIDS, i.e., white people or rich people who were straight. That's when people started to care because it was horrible that these people were dying. But it wasn't anything more than sad that gay men were.

I used the acronym LGBTQ, which has morphed into a much longer string of letters I can no longer keep track of, and a gay man made a quip about how the "G" should precede the "L." There's a lot of misogyny amongst gay men. After all, the gay rights movement is that: *gay* rights. And though gay is supposed to be without gender, men who are gay are gay and women who are gay are lesbian. When people talk about gay rights, when they lament the lack of gay characters on television, it's always in a male context. Lesbians are accepted by gay men but only in the way men accept women, which is to say as society we tolerate them, but expect to be less than men.

This is a big problem for me. The whole misogyny thing is a problem in general, but that's too big for me to get messy with. But what's bothersome on level I can pick at is that this young generation of gay men don't understand what lesbians did for us. They don't understand that gays lesbians weren't close before AIDS. They had their bars and we had ours. It still works

that way, but that's another issue. Though the two camps united in the burgeoning gay rights movement of the 70s, gay men often left their lesbian counterparts unsupported on many fronts. It was also the women's rights movement. Issues of women's health, such as abortion and breast cancer, were in the air. Gay men sympathized, but these were *their* issues. Women being raped was an issue for women because to be a feminist you *had* to be a woman.

This is why it's surprising that lesbians came to help us at our weakest of moments. They weren't catching the disease and they had no stake in sticking by us, but they did. The image of gay men being treated as they died is often associated with a doting partner, and there are those stories, but where there was family, it was often mothers and sisters and, most sadly, wives to the unfaithful who treated these men in bedtimes. For the most part, men gave themselves AIDS, but it was women who took care of them. And those who had family, who had homes to go back to, were lucky as Andy showed us.

But to in order to go back to something, you have to go somewhere first, and the somewhere was the hospital. It's not talked about much today aside from abortion, but it was a big issue when doctors (not as much as nurses) and dentists began to refuse to see patients who were sick. 1987 was a banner year for this discussion featuring op-eds on both sides. In an article in *The New York Times* on July 29<sup>th</sup>, a one Dr. Henry is quoted as saying "I will no longer perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation... I consider that an unfair risk to myself and my family." This was the climate sick men had to deal with, where to go in to get your teeth cleaned turned in a battle of tears not expected, where a man could be reduced to an impotent shame he didn't think such a trivial thing was capable of.

Lesbians, particularly lesbian nurses, did the right thing and were never thanked for it. They treated these men by administering IVs and needles others would shy from. They bathed

the lesioned bodies that the media had beat into the public's mind of what someone sick looks like, i.e., should be avoided. They sat by them late at night when there was no one else in those rooms and forgot the fact that these men had turned the back on the issues that they needed help to fight for. And that was because they remembered they were people before they were nurses or queer or anything else that was used to delineate them. They saw sick people whom no else would help, and they helped them because it was the right thing to do. So when gay men complain about a letter in acronym or how there are too many dykes in *their* bars, I have a problem with that.

But maybe Andy wasn't being ballsy. Maybe Andy was being Andy. It's a hard thing to make some watch you die, and Joanie had already done so much for him that perhaps he felt he could spare the last gritty detail so that her final memory of him was of the lively Andy singing with the vigor of good pop music.

I understand this gesture because I suffer from a similar problem of communication. You see, I have this habit where I don't talk to people I don't like... but I also don't talk to people that I do. It's confusing because my not talking to someone could mean anything just as my talking to them might mean I do care or that I don't.

In instances where I don't talk to people who are good friends, I defend myself by explaining that I don't know how to be social. As I've said before, I didn't have real friends growing up and even though I lived in a city of millions of people, I was reared as if I lived on a farm with the next house miles away. The only person I spoke to regularly were my siblings, and even then we could get by on silence and grunts. In fact, growing up in a place so filled with people and being so empty of those people made me hyperaware of how lacking I was in interaction. So I can do people. I know how to talk in public. I know how to make friends. But I



don't know how to follow through on the deal. It doesn't occur to me that I haven't picked up the phone to speak to Lauren until she calls me about boys, and when I ask about the one who's giving her trouble, she has to correct me by saying that boy was from six months ago. It's nothing personal with these people.

But here's what it looks like when I don't talk to someone out of dislike. Take Bastian for instance. Bastian is an instance of a true friend I made where we were good in each other's lives. I kept him sane and from insulting the customers too much; he kept me company because he was the only one I could talk boys with. He was smart and cultured. We talked about the few plays I knew, and I even ended up across the tracks (an expression with real meaning) in the bad side of town to watch a show he wrote and acted in. That night my bike blew out a tire, and I cursed him in fear as I slowly rode with it to the safe part of town, hoping that I didn't damage the rim in the process. I don't regret seeing the show that night, and I know he invited the whole crew to come, but I was the only person who did. I even loaned him two-hundred dollars to finance it.

But Bastian was different than me in the sense that he was quick with temper, and though I can be, it takes a lot for me to explode at someone. I don't recall what we were doing, but we were in the back during the middle of the lunch rush looking for something. I made a comment about the word "smarmy" because it was a running joke between us. He spit back *No wonder Cornell didn't want you, you don't even know how to use the word "smarmy" correctly in a sentence.*

I melted. This was in my phase of applying to graduate schools for the second time, where my health depended on getting in so that I could get health insurance again. I was so nervous and sick with the process that my hair stopped growing or fell out. My arms were

smooth. I hadn't needed a hair cut in eight months. That morning I had told Bastian that Cornell was the most recent of the many schools that had euphemistically told me I wasn't good enough in their rejection e-mail. I gave Bastian leeway with a lot of things. I let him call me a cheap Jew and make all the stereotypical jokes associated with my life as he wanted. And he did. But my worth as a writer was a line crossed.

Instead of exploding back, I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything for two weeks that wasn't more than perfunctory. Bastian corned me one day and asked if there was something between us. I told him what happened to which he replied he didn't remember, but that if he did say anything, even to insinuate he didn't think I was the capable, learned person who was full of talent that he thought I was, then he apologized. And he sincerely did.

The adult think to do would've been to make nice and go back to our friendship; I couldn't. In a weird way of keeping grudges, I don't hold animosity toward people. By the point Bastian has apologized, I didn't care for him anymore. I wasn't angry or hurt. In fact, I had been accepted into programs by then— but the testament to why I couldn't be close to Bastian like before was seen in the fact that I never told him the good news.

Once, on a slow shift, Bastian and I got through the drawn out hours by talking about astrology. I don't believe in it and he does. He asked me for my sign. *Yeah, that makes sense. You're a total Scorpio.* I don't know much about them, but from what I've gathered hearsay over the years is that were, one, the best at sex, and two, that you shouldn't ever piss us off. I definitely agree with the last part. When people trespass on my life to a point where I can't forgive them, I cut them lose. There's no revenge. There are no second thoughts. And as soon as I do I stop caring about those people.

So, no, I didn't hate Bastian; I just didn't want anything to do with him, which is why I didn't talk to him. It's why shortly thereafter he quit the job to work at a restaurant as a waiter a few blocks down. The job paid a lot more than Jimmy Johns did, so it made sense, but the timing was too perfect. Part of me felt guilty that he only stayed— if he did— because of our friendship and I turned on him to the point where he didn't even say goodbye. I just showed up to work one morning and there was someone new at the cash register.

If I had to figure out why I'm like this and couldn't just run around life with a sign flashing *Scorpio, Scorpio*, I'd say it's because of my mother and to a lesser degree my father. I can't do confrontation. Wherever I work, there's always one person at the job who doesn't understand how to be angry in public. In privacy, yell, explode, yodel for all I care— do whatever you need to do to tell the world to fuck off for everything it's doing, done, and will do to you and your little dog too. But in public you repress: that's how it's supposed to be. So when someone becomes visibly angry, starts swearing and complaining I revert to a child and I feel like I'm in the presence of my father because he was the one full of rage he let boil over his lid with muttering and talking under his breath. His moments grew quick. My father was an earthquake of a man where the only safe place to be around his temper was somewhere else, somewhere far away for extended periods of times because the aftershocks of that rage could still get you. I've almost quit jobs on the spot when that voice returns to me because my body goes stiff and I instinctively scour for small hiding places that are too deep for anyone to reach with long hands.

Jointly, my mother was all about her rage being expressed at such an audible level that everyone on the block heard it. That fact that she screamed and was not as large as my father

made her less terrifying because I always knew how she'd react: yelling, insults, and slaps. Being predictable had its safety value.

But with her constant tantrums for the seventeen years that I lived with her— and the several more after I moved out and tried to be a son in the image of family I so badly wanted— I cut her loose as soon as being gay in that house drove me to drink bleach that first time. The problem with that scenario was my cutting loose method of success depended on distance. I only had to see Bastian at work and there are rules of decorum we follow in public. The furthest I could escape from her was my bedroom, and she had access to that place whenever she needed to breakdown.

I took many years for my mother to *get it*, and as a whole I think my family has a problem with *getting it*. When I left for college, I left them and that entire life. I wouldn't use the word abandon because I still speak to my siblings and father, and we do see each other and have a healthy relationship. In fact, this is the best we've ever been as a family. But I did leave. For the amount of times I saw my family while I attended U.C.L.A., I might as well been in another country because I called home for often when I lived in New Zealand than when I resided a few miles away. This wasn't a decision of spite or retribution: this is what I had been trying to do from a young age and could only truly implement now that I wasn't bound to a house with these people I couldn't bring myself to want to talk to.

But it took some time for my mother to get this. That day Prageeta and I talked about my first draft and she brought up my mother possibly being sick in the head, the meeting where I defended my mother, I came home and found an e-mail from my mother. I can't explain the coincidence the timing of it because I had been on the computer before meeting with Prageeta so it's as if my mother cosmically knew we were talking about her. Here's what my mother had to

say to me, whom I hadn't spoken to in months since I stopped by briefly to see her in Los Angeles because I was already there to see other people and I tried to do well on my nagging obligation of being a good son, starting with the most passive aggressive e-mail subject header in the history of the world:

“Eye to eye level, A poem to my son. Love Ima  
I never envisioned  
giving birth to a detractor  
raising a hater from within.  
Stand on your feet  
claim your own fame  
it is rightfully yours.  
As for me...officially resigning  
the punching bag position.  
See my son,  
there are limits even in the  
Jewish mother's Manuel[sic].  
Painfully silenced  
carrying loads of  
humiliating accusation  
misrepresentations,  
careful not to sever  
the umbilical cord.  
Once, I tried to  
straighten up the record:  
poetic license -  
you claimed.  
Poetic license to  
shame me? I clutching  
the facts to my heart  
Yet... careful not to  
Undermined [sic] your talent

Today, standing not in public  
nor for fame, afraid I lost the  
fear of God and... you.  
as I'm taking off my  
striped uniform defining borders  
My last lesson:  
R e s p e c t  
Don't write about me  
Don't lie about me

leave in peace  
rather than [sic] in pieces.  
Don't walk all over me  
and don't trample me  
See, in my eyes  
I was a great Mother.  
This: I won't let you  
take away from me.

In many ways you can see how this is the woman who raised me. I'll be honest, my first response was to laugh at how awful the poem is. I laughed at her misspelling of "manual" and "Manuel;" I laughed at how she actually spelled out the word "respect" like the how the song does; and I laughed at her use of "then" instead of "than" because I correct my students' papers for that same mistake and always ask myself how does anyone get these two wrong?

I tell you this because I understand what a thing it is to receive a poem from your mother like that about you. And my only response was to laugh because I had become so detached from her so long ago I couldn't cringe. The only place I could interact with the poem was on a purely cerebral level of craft.

What's odd though is that I have a similar poem that deals with that same space, a space where I investigate my failures as a son.

my body

throat sunken like weight in sand  
skin segments into pigments could never  
imagine as body color  
red, white, different shades of white  
connect a(yuh) constellation of disease  
hair long but destroyed by cheap dyes  
excuses for bleach and gray seems better  
than this wrinkles a(yuh) name for  
ubiquitous ravines of skin  
that filter toward eyes  
but eyes still revivify green  
voice louder than it should be when

there's no intention to raise it  
    it scares the dog  
breasts deflated lumps of latex balloons  
that refuse to pop  
but slowly release helium contained  
    stomach fat with decades  
of fat that old photographs of me  
before children would now laugh at  
odor smells of garlic though garlic is  
    never eaten and  
the only place left natural is  
unkempt reaches  
of cup holding spine to navel  
in a(yuh) (yuh)u that no man has touched in years  
that once split to give birth to the  
child that now  
    sees me this way  
the old and fat and dying woman as  
    synonyms for words you can draw  
with fingers in clouds  
as opposed to using my name

What's even odder is that the more I read my mother's poem, the more I enjoy it. It's subject is pushy and it's voice is musical in its strangeness. Though I originally resisted the spelling out of "respect," I can't help but enjoy the campiness of the poem with that tune in mind as I read the lines. It's surprisingly strong given English isn't her first language. And though the line doesn't resonate with me as she wishes it to, there's something heartbreaking as a reader in a spectacular way to read "afraid I lost the fear/ of God and... you." I can't help but read that line and imagine who the poet is referring to, who this son is and what he did that was so harsh—until I remember it's me.

My mother always claimed to be a writer and a great reader, but I never saw her do either— though I once found an old press badge in the house that belonged to her. My half-brother— hers— was a success failure of an established journalist/reporter so I took as a sign that that's the sort of inheritance of writing ability she passes along. But looking at the poem, the similarities in styles is shocking— particularly the way she breaks lines. I'm known in my poetry for odd breaks, breaks in a line where the two units change the meaning of the sentence if read

separately. To understand what I mean by this, consider the last line. “This: I won't let you/take away from me.” Now, read the line in two parts. *This: I won't let you.* There's such defiance and anger in there, especially when you consider the speaker's addressing of her son. It's a strong stance. But what's more wonderful is what surfaces in the last half of the sentence, the poem's last line: *take away from me.* The break creates an imperative, a dueling statement that in a turn commands the addressee to do what the speaker is specifically arguing against in the whole poem. I hate to admit it, but it's genius.

But as I said, that's my response to the poem. It's a poem. In my head I know that I should be experiencing, that an emotional response of some kind if warranted, but I can't bring myself to reach that place. Eventually I responded to my mother with this reply:

“i don't know what you want from me. you want to write a fuck you poem, go ahead, but don't send it to me. you want to say that you were a good mother... well no one is saying you can't. i don't bother you. i don't pick fights with you. you conveniently forget that this is what it was like growing up with you: you go out and pick fights with people who aren't even talking to you.

i'm an adult, and even more, i'm a writer. i will write about whatever and whomever i choose to. i've never told you to read my work, and in fact, i have always kept you away from it. but here's the truth: i write about you a lot. some good, some bad. you want to call it a lie, then do it. i know what happened to me. and for the record, my book is being sold as we speak, and it's a memoir. i highly recommend you don't read it.

and finally, don't ever write me at this address. this is my work e-mail and i never gave you this e-mail address for a reason. if you try to, i will have you blocked from my account. i left



the house a long time ago and i stay away from you and this sort of thing for a reason. i have a life, and i'm happy with the way it is. leave me alone."

I don't like to capitalize when I don't have to, and I never heard from my mother after that e-mail. That's the extent to which I can respond because I'm not sure what triggered my mother's original poem. My guess is she was googling my name and came across a poem I wrote "about" her, which was about what it was like for me growing up with the knowledge of the Holocaust at a young age. The poem isn't assigning blame as much as it's saying I was fucked up as a kid with awful nightmares because I was told about the Holocaust at an age that was too young in an effort to "never forget." In my dreams Hitler was always coming after me.

Even though I see traces of writing style in my mother, I stand firm in my belief that I inherited my writing powers from my father. If he believed in himself, he'd actually be one of the most read and loved authors in the country. I'm not being hyperbolic. I remember him making up fantasy stories each night that he gave to my brother and I as kid, how we'd lie in bed listening to the adventures of kids who had the same names as we did, how he'd finish on a cliffhanger and I'd feel the stubble of his mustache as he kissed us before leaving the room, how when he returned the next night I would eagerly remind him of where he left off. All this he could do without trying.

And when he did try, he was unmatched. I remember my father giving the eulogy for his father, and it's the sort of eulogy they should anthologize to teach sons how to do it right. He made people laugh. He made people feel comforted. He made poetry out of fact when he explained how my grandfather lived in a duplex on a the second floor; counting all the days my grandfather lived in that house, he came up with the average for the amount of steps he walked

up his life: it was a giant number— but as a writer, he knew how to push that fact into the beautiful; he told the story of how when he was a teenager his father had closed a big deal and his coworkers had taken him out to celebrate, effectively getting him tanked; he was too drunk to walk up the stairs and asked his son to help him up, to sneak him in so that his wife wouldn't notice: I'm not doing justice to moment because it was filled with humor perfectly timed and appropriate; and then he does what all great writers strive for: he shattered us; he explained the only other time my grandfather needed help up those steps was after his chemotherapy, months before he passed—he wouldn't leave the image alone; he pondered aloud of what it felt like to carry his father up each step as we listened from the pews, heartbroken, at the masterful setup we had been happily led into.

Is it awful— I was going to ask if it were weird, but I've accepted it is— to practice your mother's eulogy? I don't practice it in the sense that I have the speech ready and I can't wait to give it. No, what I mean is I think about it a lot. Ever since my mother's first flirtation with death, I've thought about it because it seems like people would ask me to say something and the more time I had to figure something out the better it would be for all of us.

For starters, I think it's an awful idea to have me speak at her funeral. I'm not good at lying when I don't want to, which isn't to say I want to tell the world about my childhood— kind of unnecessary with this book and all— but that I wouldn't be able to stand up there and give the eulogy people want to hear. In many ways that would be letting my mother win in a race I won't let her have from me.

Whenever I start the eulogy in my head, it begins off coldly. I think of how paranoid she was, how we could never go to a store without her thinking a cashier was insulting her, that people were against her kids. She was more than difficult to live with— she ruined lives. She

didn't bathe regularly and had awful manners like farting in your presence and talking with her mouth full of food. She loved to think she could cook, but she always burned or overcooked things until they lost all nutrients. She had ideas that never worked and unreachable, unexplainable expectations to the point where you questioned if she knew the first thing about you.

I remember one time she bought the black, plastic pond frame that looked like a topographical map in reverse. We didn't have the money for this. She decided to install it in our backyard, which was a lousy idea because my father was incredibly capable with landscaping and gardening and had done a beautiful job with colors tiles interspersed with plants, which had continued to last years after the divorce without our touch. Of course, she couldn't let this garden stand and so she ordered her kids to remove the heavy, cement tiles and dig.

We didn't have shovels and we didn't know the contours of pond frame— much less how to dig for one. This didn't matter to her and she set us to work at nine in the evening with spades. Essentially, we dug an uneven hole in the ground that didn't fit the pond frame, but let the frame sink in at enough points. My mother then filled the thing with water from the hose and released thirty goldfish from a bag into it. The idea was that the fish were supposed to eat the plants that floated on the surface of the water. I was so tired and there was school the next day that I went to bed with dirt under my fingernails and didn't complain about how stupid the idea beyond when she first told me of it.

When I woke up in the morning, all the fish were dead (there was no oxygen system in the pond). The plants died in a week. We had a back yard with an ugly, black mess in it. In two months, the thing was filled with mosquito larvae. That was the summer West Nile Virus was big in Southern California. If you want to know what my mother was like, that's her.

At the same time, beyond the need to destroy my father's artistry, what I see in that story is my mother's recklessness. True, it was met with stupidity and failed, but it's the idea of it that I think captures my mother. My mother was never afraid to dream, to have visions of how things could and should be better. The problem was my mother couldn't dream realistically or for herself, but that doesn't mean she wasn't a dreamer.

The only reason I do as well as I do is because of that power to be stupid and dare to think of the irrational coming true. I apply to fellowships I don't have a shot at. I move to cities on a whim thinking they'll save me. I wake up and decide that I can start a new job with no experience prior because I want to. And though I waste my money on a lot of things I don't win, I do at times. I met Michael because I decided to be stupid and take a chance when I didn't have to. It's also how I lost him. If anyone told me that I would've been a dance major when I started high school I would've laughed. My mother taught me it's all possible.

And I think part of the reason my mother wrote that poem is because she doesn't think I know the things she did for me, the things she feels for me. Of course I do, and it's why I struggle so much with her. I want to see her as the woman who came to see my dance performance my senior year in high school, the one unbeknownst to her sat in front of my friend Aly, who later told me how my mother cried through the whole performance with pride. My mother doesn't know I know these things, that I love her in spite of all the suffering— and I'm sure there are many things she sacrificed for me that I don't know, that in her mind when she reads this that's all she can think of, which is why she doesn't understand my betrayal. It doesn't excuse all the bad things that happen, but when I'm thousands of miles away and don't speak to her for years at a time, I want her to know that in those moments when I do think of her, which is every day, I remember the good things because that is how I prefer to remember her.

Another line I like to steal from Amy Hempel is that you can't die in the past, only in the future. I like this line because it explains everything about me. I also like it because, like me, Amy is obliterated by her mother. And when I say I like her, what I mean to say is that I enjoy her work, but I've been teaching her collected stories to my class so she's fresh in my mind. I'd be stealing from another writer if it weren't her. But because it is her, I'm going to steal something else.

In the short story "The Harvest," the speaker tells the reader about this accident she had and how she was treated in the hospital. The story changes halfway when the speaker is now a writer and explains what was the truth of the original story and walks the reader through the lies about why she changed the details to make it a better story. By the end of it, the reader doesn't know if it's this meta-writing experiment or if both stories are fiction.

This is what we in poetry call the volta. In a sonnet, the poem is constantly changing on itself in sections, but flowing. The progressions make sense, but it takes a second read to see the compartmentalization. My favorite form is the Shakespearean sonnet because it works with the sections of four lines. I know some people space these into stanzas, but I don't. I like to see the movement of the first section bleed into the second. In this form, the volta is the final couplet. In those two lines, the poem reveals itself based upon everything previously presented, but retools it to say *and this is what I was getting at, but first I needed to wander so that you could understand what I meant.*

When I say something like I love Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, what I'm doing is not saying something else. Sometimes it's because I don't want to say it outright and I think that you, reader, should get this chapter was an homage to him. My editor is going to tell me take this out, but I'm fine with that. Other times it's because I don't want to say what I know I have to

say, and I think wandering will give me time to say it better. Other times I can't bring myself to get there.

When Amy wrote "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried," she did so after being given the prompt *write about the thing that you'll never live down*. The story is dedicated to Jessica Wolfson. There's indeed a Jessica Wolfson buried near Al Jolson. That's about as much as I want to believe is real in the spillover of life onto the page because it's hard enough to imagine myself in this.

I say that because I imagine my mother hunched over the keyboard pecking that poem out. I shouldn't be writing about her in general— and definitely not here. I hate how she steals everything from me. This chapter wasn't supposed to be about her, but in the way she can make everything about her, it now is. I'm sorry Tommy.

I'm sorry because the truth is she only has the power I give her, that I could've written this without her or deleted her any time I wanted to. I didn't because when I say this is about her, what I'm really saying is that I found another way to make things about me. That's what I do, isn't it? It's always about me. Honestly, all I wanted to do was tell Tommy's story, and even that I screwed up.

This was supposed to be really short and just about Tommy, and now I realize that I didn't know Tommy was a Jr., that I still don't know what the R. stands for. I try to talk about other things, because (I'm not talking to you anymore, reader) it means I don't have to talk, to think about you and what I did. And I get that in the grand scheme of things I didn't do much, but that's exactly it. Every time I think about you, I can only think about how much you gave to everyone in this world, and how much I took— continue to take. I wanted this to be just about you, to give something back to you, and I'm failing.

The truth is in dying you taught me how bad I can be when I'm being me. And maybe it's easier to feel bad about myself in relation to you than it is to Michael because he's the one I cried over when he left me— and he didn't even die. Sometimes I wonder if I'm romanticizing your death, but then I think back to how much I would've loved you if you let me. And what strikes me about that line is that you did love me, and that I only knew that when it was too late because I thought love meant many things that I no longer need it to be. Because Michael left me, but you wouldn't. You never did in that way regardless of how much I was me. Every day you teach me how to be a better person, and I'm sorry you didn't get to see me as this better version of me. I'm sorry I'm still making your elegy about me. What I mean to say is Tommy Zavesky was my friend, and I miss him.

*The Magical*

*Threesome That*

*Did Not Happen*

*Part III*

xxiii



indent stage lights up period no one can remember what time the cleaning lady comes in the morning period it doesn't matter comma but at the moment we're drunk that we think it does comma that she might come in at two in the morning to change the sheets colon we can't find the start italics do not disturb placard end italics period luke says i stole it because i would do such a thing period i laugh and fall on the bed period i tell him he doesn't know me well enough to make such a claim comma but in my head i know he's right period still comma i didn't take it period paragraph break i'm tired and don't want to move period the air feels heavy and the word open quotation mark altitude close quotation mark is important for reasons i cannot articulate to anyone period open quotation mark stop exclamation mark close quotation i yell out comma but it's not to anyone period i realize this and start laughing period luke and darrin start laughing period i'm still laughing but now they're whispering period i ask what they're keeping from me comma that this is the start to a bad friendship comma but i'm only talking to the pillow and even then there's something with me getting my words out period paragraph break i'm staring at the ceiling comma and it occurs to me all along that walls are just paper period this upsets me because i have wasted so much of my life buying paper and not writing on walls period i want those walls and years back period i reach for the ceiling comma to drag it down and write on it period open quotation mark hey exclamation mark get down here exclamation mark close quotation but when i put a hand over my mouth i discover my mouth isn't opening when i talk period it's broken period i want to tell luke and darrin to help me comma to fix me because i realize luke is a doctor and darrin is an olympic gold medalist for equestrian period i'm thinking luke

can fix me and darrin will know what to do if he canapostrophet colon heapostrophell consult his medal and it will tell him to take me to china and there they will fix my mouth period paragraph break but i canapostrophet tell them any of this and the unbearable stretch of arms is shrinking me period they fall to the mattress period squinting my eyes comma the perspective of the ceiling is right on top of me period i feel it like a body period like two bodies and i canapostrophet struggle under its enormous pressure period just my fingers are free period i start to cry and with one finger write on the ceiling colon i donapostrophet want to die like this period period i even write out the punctuation because that seems importantemdash even more important than the words because i can now hold a period in my fingers and give it to luke and put it in his mouth and tell him to taste it comma to swallow it comma and then itapostrophes in him period i want to feed him all the punctuation marks colon colons comma commas comma semicolons comma ellipses comma etc ellipsis period especially the semicolon because i love those with theyapostrophere floating heads that are only a pause comma a gate the blinks backhypherandhyphenforth between ideas or a bench to sit on until youapostrophere ready to continue period theyapostrophere so considerate i want to tell luke period i want to be bent into one and carried to an airport because i have someone to see period paragraph break i want to tell luke this because heapostrophes the taller one of the two with long arms and i think he was a bird last tuesday period besides comma heapostrophes burying his mouth in my neck and iapostrophem confused about whether making love to bird is a crime in montana comma but the idea is so beautiful in my head that i hope it is comma that i hope no one else does because i want to keep it all for myself period paragraph break darrin is now rubbing my left thigh and it occurs to me that there's a line in a joyce novel about a character whose name is spelled anything but ahyphenthigh comma but thatapostrophes how you pronounce it period for a second i think

itapostrophes joyce rubbing my thigh and it scares me because i miss darrin and hope he hasnapostrophet taken off on his horse comma but the bird luke assures me itapostrophes fine and that he and darrin think iapostrophem sexy and that makes me realize itapostrophes just darrin wearing a glove of joyceapostrophes hand period it also makes me realize i hate that short story by jhumpa lahiri semicolon in fact i hated that whole book comma and now all i want to do is fuck period paragraph break the three of us break into pythagorasapostrophe blowjob triangle comma and iapostrophem side delineated start italics b end italics period in a sixtyhyphennine you feel so fucking green comma like youapostrophere the mother fucker inventor of green and recycling period the karma of sex where you get and give simultaneously flows in energy into cum that if swallowed theoretically recycles between you two over and over until youapostrophere nothing more than a chain of snake itself and suddenly iapostrophem scared of love period paragraph break but not the triangle period the triangle is an infinity that you have no idea what it feels like to have some sucking your dick and youapostrophere sucking a dick and know those bodies arenapostrophet connected period you feel you go on forever period you feel cheat because that means thereapostrophes another mouth out there that isnapostrophet returning the favor colon but it is period itapostrophes a gesture that says iapostrophell help you and then you help another until that single kindness loops back into itself ellipses but you never see it period you never feel it period i imagine this is what it must feel like to talk to someone standing on the other end of an ocean period to hold the entirety of an ocean in yours and die trying period to be the pacific ocean itself and suddenly youapostrophere the indian period paragraph break and then we reverse polarity of the triangle comma which makes us a dodecahedron because in that time some in us blooms spectacular period we are not dying because we already are dead period and bird luke shakes between my legs because he misses his older life and body comma

but i tell him in darrinapostrophes dick like itapostrophes a microphone that itapostrophes ok and i know the message will flow through to him period and when it does comma the chain breaks and darrin is holding me from the back and luke is reverse holding me from the front period i feel like the lungs of janus period i feel like knowing every direction by the east because iapostrophem not ready to start anything period open quotation please let me go back comma close quotation i say period but darrin isnapostrophet there and his horse tells me he doesnapostrophet know where darrin is either period paragraph break but thatapostrophes only because darrin has disappeared inside of me and i into luke period i feel like the mantle of the earth sandwiched into something bigger comma but still i am fiery period i must be i protest period and even though my melted nickel of a body should burn his lips comma darrin is burning them on my back period i relax and he goes deeper until i realize i must be burning off his entire face comma that half his brain must be gone period no wonder he canapostrophet stop i think period thereapostrophes only so much think you can do with half a brain period paragraph break and we decay until we are ruined back into our bodies once more comma until we are no longer planets and dead and birds and horse riders and math expressedem dash until we are no longer special ellipsis or at least thatapostrophes how i feel about me period and because elephants are october and light is a pun on itself comma dancers are sensitive people and luke and darrin feel this in my breath period they hold me as if holding mean marriage and we are now all a couple period that it is my turn to have a bad day period that missoula is podunk and tomorrow we all go back to brooklyn so that we can eat good thai food and find puerto rican boys to ogle period paragraph break but then weapostrophere dying again because weapostrophere alive again period and by this i mean my body is a stage period so when they hold me what they are really doing is practicing because iapostrophem not important or there period the dance begins period their arms

take over with me between the movement and iapostrophem inside the performance period this is a beautiful dash no my favoriteem dash way to die period itapostrophes always been a favorite dance of mine period but as they dance i lose them period itapostrophes no longer luke and darrin semicolon itapostrophes susan and arthun period and theyapostrophere fucking me while they dance it period susan is the one fucking me from behind because itapostrophes her dance so she gets to period thatapostrophes fine because if iapostrophem ever going to be fucked by a girl i want to have to watch her do it period i watch arthur and fuck him even though i know this is dangerous period but hey comma iapostrophem dangerous i think colon i made two people disappear on my just like that period paragraph break but they had to go period they had to go because darrin and luke didnapostrophet get the dance period when i say them perform it wanted i wanted to shout out was start italics youapostrophere beautiful exclamation mark stop being beautiful exclamation mark end italics the dance isnapostrophet about being beautiful and susan and arthur know this period on stage you can could see the two dancers fall in love and it was a dance about their love ellipsis but thatapostrophes not the dance period the dance is about not being in love but dying in love period only susan and arthur know this period and susan will tell me thatapostrophes not true because arthur died almost ten years after that dance comma which means open parenthesis given the time because of lack of medication close parenthesis there was no way he was sick when they made that dance period that the dance isnapostrophet about her losing arthur and a statement against the fear of aids period that even darrin and luke had dated and fucked long before they performed that dance so they werenapostrophet falling in love for the first time as their arms lay over each other like sun in moon in eclipse for the fleeting first time period paragraph break and to this revelation i tell susan to shut the fuck up because sheapostrophes wrong period that darrin and luke didnapostrophet get the dance because they

couldnapostrophet period that she does because the dance isnapostrophet about arthur because susan understood why we make art about other people colon we give their life to another person period we let them live in the mind of someone they have not met period darrin donapostrophet be mad if you ever read this period iapostrophem rebirthing you period iapostrophem putting you on a map and telling people to sail over the flat side of the earth because when you fall off its face you land in the holiday innapostrophes bedspread period trust me itapostrophes safe period paragraph break and that means that itapostrophes not even about her because itapostrophes about me period itapostrophes always about me period and despite the fact that susan didnapostrophet know me at the time and has probably forgotten my by now comma the dance is about me period it was choreographed just for me period then arthur died just for me period and because of this i let susan fuck me and i fuck arthur because i have to say thank you somehow comma because in my guts iapostrophem collaborating with them and now iapostrophem a real dancer period paragraph break but when i open my eyes iapostrophem in my own bed and itapostrophes three in the morning and luke has left me a text about the dick size of an undergrad i fooled around with after a rebound episode period i have to be up in two hours for work period and i never get to touch or even see them because they get too drunk at cast parties their last night in town period i tell myself this is why i came to missoula period to be reminded of what iapostropheve lost in my life period paragraph break when i was sick comma no one would touch me period not in a dance class and not in the privacy of darkness where fingers could still see out my body by the feel of a rib exposed period i swear you could touch my kidneys period i went a whole year without anyone touching me period do you know what itapostrophes like for your skin to forget what another hand feels like question mark paragraph break one night when i was sick i had this dream where iapostrophem sick and all the guys iapostropheve ever had sex with

standing in a line period iapostrophem naked and theyapostrophere naked period iapostrophem  
also sick comma but it doesnapostrophet stop them period one by one in the order we fucked  
they come and fuck me period and i just lay there period i donapostrophet feel anything period  
and when the guy stops comma he collapses on top of me comma deadem dash the way squids or  
salmon die after mating period iapostrophem filled with cum but not dead period just empty still  
period and so one by one they keep fucking me and cumming in me and dropping dead on me  
and i donapostrophet care period i want to tell them itapostrophes not worth it comma that  
nothing is worth it comma but i just lay there period paragraph break but this time when i have  
the dream itapostrophes not just guys iapostropheve fucked period logan is there period darrin  
and luke are there period even guys i have never met are there period iapostrophem being  
smothered by billions of men and filled with billions of loads of cum and nothing changes the  
fact that iapostrophem empty and even though there are all those men on me comma i can still  
see the last guy waiting to fuck me comma and itapostrophes michael period i want to scream  
and tell him not to comma but my mouth and hands are buried beneath the sweaty corpses period  
all i can think is semicolon comma semicolon comma semicolon ellipsis and begin to cry period  
semicolon period and right before he enters me i see a smile on his face semicolon at that point i  
wonder what it will feel like if this doesnapostrophet work and every man in the world has  
touched me and still i donapostrophet feel anything as i lay beneath the statue of their mass  
waiting for my turn period i wake up screaming michaelapostrophes name before i learn what  
happens, an arm reaching forward as if to say stop period stage lights down

*The Dissociation*

*of*

*Darren Gregory*

*Taylor*

xxiv



I wasn't supposed to be born Doron (insert various spelling of Darren here) Nadler. My father picked my name: Darren—the way he wanted it spelled—Gregory Nadler. The story goes that when my mother was pregnant with me, she worked for the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance. Asked by a coworker what she planned to name her child, she told him the name my father chose. The coworker responded by informing her that the name sounded *too black*. This upset her greatly, and she informed my father the name was no longer appropriate. She decided on a new name and as a consolation would use Darren as my middle name. She was the one who also misspelled my middle name on all my birth and citizenship documents.

The ironies steeped in the origins of my name don't elude me. Like the fact that a person working for the Museum of Tolerance had enough balls to object to the name a coworker picked because it reminded him of an African American name. Like the fact that the etymology of Darren is rooted in Irish and Gregory in Greek, which makes the combination quite Caucasian-sounding to me. Like the fact Doron—a popular Israeli name that is actually Greek and means “gift”—is not pronounced as it appears to be spelled, and throughout my entire youth people read it as Doh-Ron or Doh-Rin when in fact the proper anglicizing of it is Doh-Roan—in my opinion, any of these sound far more African American than Darren Gregory. Had I not needed to escape my religious roots by shedding the association of my name, I still would've abandoned Doron based on this story for Robby. I don't appreciate being named in this world out of racism.

The evolution of Taylor is simple. Nadler comes from the Middle High German word *nadel* and Middle English *nedle*, both of which mean needle. When appropriated as a last name, it specifically referenced needle makers, but within an Ashkenazi context, needle makers become tailors, which I imagine was because within the community tailors often made their own needles.

Aesthetically speaking, Taylor pleases me more than the spelling Tailor. And that is the story behind why I named him Darren Gregory Taylor.

I don't know when Darren was born. Perhaps, he's my age— maybe older because his persona is rudimentary emotion, which I assume formulates before self-consciousness— in that respect, he'd be my twin. It's also possible that he is younger and didn't come into this world until I became sick. If that's the case, Darren would've been born when I was twenty, which places him around the age of four.

Darren manifested briefly at first. While living in New Zealand, I'd blowup at Scott over small matters. I remember while these incidences occurred that I'd be wondering to myself why I was yelling. There was no reason to be angry at him for being five minutes late to dinner; yet, I could only contemplate my behavior, not actually prevent myself from continuing it. At the time I thought this was a bad habit I picked up from my mother because this is how she'd yell at me. I didn't know that this wasn't a reflex, that this wasn't even me.

As the first months lapsed from when my sickness developed, Robby gradually lost control over his body. Behaviors and thought patterns Robby never engaged in replaced his usual likings. Robby's body no longer liked to be touched by anyone, including himself— leading to a period of thirty weeks without sex, kissing, or jacking off. Robby's body would wake up at four in the morning and work out even though his body grew more emaciated every day. Robby's body became afraid of people who claimed to know him, not understanding who was this person named *Robby* or the memories locked in it.

As the disease progressed and my hormones dipped to their lowest levels, Darren no longer existed as an occupant inside my mind but the controller of it. And it's not as if Robby disappeared in turn; that was the most terrifying part. I retained all my memories, my desires, my

identity as him inside my head, but I couldn't act upon them. Robby became imprisoned in his own body and watched impotently as another persona lived via his body in contrast to what he'd tell that body to do if in power of it. He watched it scream at people he loved, he watched it hide from people he didn't fear, and he watched it waste away in a neurotic isolation that severed all his connections with the outside world.

Darren didn't inhabit my body constantly. Robby remained the default persona, but that persona shifted to Darren by the slightest of actions. If something embarrassed Robby, then he became Darren. If Robby became happy, then he became Darren. If Robby experienced any emotion whatsoever, then he became Darren because Darren was a hyperreality of Robby's psyche.

There are some quotes on the topic of hyperreality, a theory I learned during my second year of study at U.C.L.A., that have stayed with me for years. Jean Baudrillard described it as "the simulation of something which never really existed." Umberto Eco is more succinct: "the authentic fake." The philosophy of the hyperreality is predicated on the existence of something that's real. At some point, a simulacrum is constructed of the real thing, and at this time, people are able to distinguish the copy from the original. Hyperreality occurs when the simulacrum replaces the original by becoming more real than the thing it was modeled after. Think of the way people in Los Angeles run on a treadmill as opposed to exercising outside or how texting on a cell-phone has replaced talking to people.

There's no medical opinion to support my hypothesis on Darren, but I can't imagine there being another explanation for him. As I see it, when my hormones dropped, my body reverted to a primitive state where it was guided on the basis of emotion without thought. You don't realize how much your brain is responsible for ensuring you behave or act according to what you

believe is intrinsic to your nature. Well, let me tell you as someone who lost those chemicals that we're not intrinsically rational or pleasant. Without judgment to control the manner in which we process our surroundings, we're pathetically-scared creatures. And it's out of that fear that so many other emotions develop. If my boyfriend were five minutes late it was because he must have abandoned me and he wouldn't be coming to dinner; and when I watched him walk toward the restaurant, I threw a scene because I'd end things before he could, before he could leave me to the false-reality of my fears.

I'm lucky that Darren is anthropophobic because the less interaction that occurred between my body and other people, the lower the chance there was of doing something I'd regret. This is because Darren's memories are not divorced from my own. In terms of a past, Darren uses parts of mine to fill in memory gaps, but for most he claims his own personal history. Darren wasn't born in Los Angeles, and his birth city isn't known because he's adopted. He lived in places I've never been too, such as Mississippi and Brazil. The reason for this is because I've thought of what life would've been like if I lived in those places the way we all formulate alternate realities of ourselves when caught in the moment of reading a book about a place you've never visited and you picture the life you'd craft for yourself if you resided there. And then you forget that moment of imagination and then you return to your living room. When we dream, we understand these realities aren't real outside of our minds. Darren arose from that part of my mind where all my fantasies are in fact his history, as he is the embodiment of them.

When Darren is in power of my consciousness, if he's asked a question, then he'll respond based on the world of information he knows. Sometimes that information intersects with Robby's or Doron's past, which makes it true for the most part, but often that's not the case. And I know as Robby when Darren tells people that Congressman Jerrold Nadler of New York is a

relative that Darren is lying, but Robby isn't in power to tell that truth. If you hooked him up to a lie detector and asked me as Darren whether my relation to the Congressman is real, he would pass because a lie detector doesn't detect if you're lying: it detects changes in your body that occur when you lie and realize you're lying. If Darren honestly believes Jerrold is a distant uncle, then a lie detector will believe him too.

That's the type of lying that makes me feel as Robby the guiltiest. When I lie as Robby, I have little regret doing so. The lies are white lies that I'd tell regardless of who I am the way everyone will tell a small lie so that the passing of their day goes smoother— *Sorry, Mom, I can't talk, I'm in the middle of work. Oh, I love that band too! Let's do lunch sometime.* The other lies I tell as him are the important lies that keep Doron at bay because Doron is too unstable to exist from many years of mental abuse. It's important that Robby replace Doron and I defend any lie I tell in the process of maintaining that repression.

However, the lies that Darren tells aren't necessary. He isn't protecting anyone, and they're not to deal with people he doesn't feel like dealing with at the moment. Darren lies because they aren't lies to him, but Robby, who has to live with these people when Darren is gone, knows that they're lies, and when those lies are revealed for the untruths that they are, it's Robby who must face those betrayed friends.

The first medicine that started to work for me is called Clomiphene Citrate— Clomid for short. Clomid is typically prescribed to infertile women who suffer from anovulation. When ingested by men, Clomid binds to estrogen receptors to inhibit the hormone's production while concurrently allowing for more testosterone to be synthesized. Within a week, I could sense Darren losing his grip over my mind and Robby returning to his prior self. I thought that in

another week Darren would be less present and even more so in another and then another until he was locked away in the same prison cell Robby spent the past six months in.

But that never happened. The medicines were working, but not always. Sometimes my body responded well and other times it would grow immune to them. Similar to how a woman's mood changes because of her menstrual cycle, my hormones fluctuated and in turn my ability to suppress Darren did too. Eventually, it became clear that Darren would never leave entirely, but it was possible to exist in a mostly normal life the way a man who loses his leg can go about the rest of his life as he planned to— just with slight modifications to how he would do it. Small things no longer stimulated reactions from Darren so he remained dormant for the most part until a major trauma occurred. In those cases, my body resorted to Darren because my body built him to be the defense for those moments in life.

I hadn't dated anyone since my relationship ended with Scott in December of 2007. When I moved to Austin, Darren resurfaced because of the stress that was levied from me trying to find a job, pay for my medications, survive life as a go-go boy, and be accepted into a graduate school. He did well or as well as he could subsist through those times, and I'm not sure if Robby could've moved past his ego to do what needed to be done to achieve those goal— i.e., walking around in his underwear for money—so in that regard Robby owes Darren one.

That's the first time that I noticed that Darren isn't a bad guy. Darren can't be a bad guy— at least not to me or not to me intentionally because he is me. Darren only exists a persona of my most extreme emotions, good or bad; I'm at my happiest when I'm Darren and at my worst when I'm him too. It's all that in-between emotional time that Robby occupies. Those first nine months in Austin were impossible to live though as Robby because he so scared then: what would happen if I never found a job before my savings dried up or if Michael— the cocaine

dealer, not the ex-lover— wouldn't take no for an answer or if for a second year in a row I wasn't admitted to a graduate program? Robby would think about these possibilities, and when that moment of fantasy presented itself, Darren arose as a guardian to step up and deal with these circumstances because Robby was too intimidated by them to act himself.

But after the shared body was fired from dancing, after the job of the delivery boy was secured and could support a meager lifestyle, and after the first offer of admittance into an MFA, Darren was no longer needed. Robby could breathe and retake control of life in Austin. And as Robby, I have to thank Darren for what he did because I know I couldn't have performed those feats on my own. By the time I did reclaim my body, he provided a comfortable existence with a job, friends, and a future. No one has ever emulated the extent of that kindness—though I think Scott and Michael (ex-lover) came close.

It was during those last few months that Austin became a city I appreciated rather than one I sought to escape from. As Robby, I could finally enjoy the constant live music it hummed at all hours of the day, the selection of food unique to Texas, and the coworkers I rode with every day but distanced myself from befriending. I've never loved another city the way I grew to love Austin in those last five months.

It was also during that time that I began to go on dates with people. The University of Houston, which rejected me the year before, offered me a spot at their program and a generous financial hand. Their program is better than Montana's in most ways, and it seemed that I was destined to remain in Texas. I didn't commit to them because there was an entire month before I needed to give my answer, and I was hoping I could use Montana as a means to leverage more funding out of Houston. The plan worked well and the value of my first year was estimated at fifty-thousand dollars.

Their director obliged my request to visit the campus on the day Edward Hirsch and Charles Simic were slotted to speak at the program. Neither poet excited me, but I did appreciate the value of their names and expected any program that offered me that much money to offer visiting writers the same generosity. It was nice to be thought of as one of the upcoming best that needed to be in the presence of the established best.

Having danced in Houston at Tony's Corner Pocket, I knew a few people who lived there. The one whom I remembered his name and telephone number was Greg. I sent him a text a week before I was supposed to arrive for the visit. *Hey, guess which boy the quadratic equation ass got accepted into U of H. I'm visiting next week.*

Greg reminds me of Darren in a lot of ways. He and I met the last time I danced in Houston on the Sunday night before I headed home that Monday morning. He was tall— 6'6 at least— and skinny, but not in the defined way that most men of his height also carry low body-fat percentages. His face wasn't unattractive, and there was a perpetual goofy quality etched into his cheeks that made smiling as natural as breathing for him. He likes to insist that he was a gentleman and didn't speak to me until after my shift ended and I was done tramping around the bar in my underwear to collect extra tips. I remember talking to him without my clothes on, but I drank a lot that night and so maybe it did happen after I changed.

We talked in a way that surprises people I can talk to them. Most don't expect a go-go boy to be able to carry on a conversation about anything. He told me he was from San Antonio and that he went to school in Los Angeles. I informed him I attended his rival school for college. He made a joke by asking if all the graduates of my school ended up dancing in their underwear. I made him buy me a drink. He talked about being an engineer for Boeing, that he designed the brake system for the new 787. I went on a rant about how I thought the proof for the Pythagorean



Theorem was the most beautiful piece of art in the world. That's when he started to compliment my body in mathematical code. I laughed because no one else in the bar understood his jokes. As the night unwound, there were four people left plus the bartender, Chuck. Greg happened to be at the bar that night because Chuck asked him to drop by with the intention of them hooking up after Chuck's shift ended. Greg's birthday— I think his twenty-seventh— started at midnight so Chuck kept buying the four of us in the bar shots.

The other two guys in the bar were friends with each other. The quieter of the two seemed like a closet case by the way he only spoke when directly spoken to or to agree with something his friend said. The talkative guy was a chef in town who had a giant dick he fucked Troy Aikman with. I suppose he could've been lying about either fact, but there was something specific about the odd details he inserted— the number of the hotel room where it happened, the color of the suit jackets the men wore who escorted him to Troy's suite— that made the story seem too real to be fiction.

That entire weekend I attempted to seduce Chuck, but it never moved passed flirting in the bar. To be clear, I found it odd revenge that Greg was into me and that I'd end up stealing him from Chuck for the night because Chuck wouldn't entertain me, but it wasn't intentional. My Greyhound back to Austin left at 6 A.M. The bar was open until two. It wasn't worth it to splurge on a hotel for the night so I intended to stay until the bar closed, catch a cab to the station, and stay up the remaining four hours. I explained my plan to Greg and Greg insisted that I go back to his apartment in the CBD. I waited outside the bar while he conveyed to Chuck he'd no longer be leaving with Chuck. It would be eight months before I'd see Chuck again and when I did he refused to serve me.

Greg and I didn't remain in contact after that night until I sent him that text about my possible relocation to Houston. There was no reason to. We didn't have sex that night. We slept in his bed and he was hesitant to hold me until I reached over and pulled his arm around me. I did learn many months later after inquiring about what happened between the two of them that Greg made up the night to Chuck a few weeks later.

I never outright asked if I could stay at Greg's apartment when I visited, but the implication was there and he extended the invitation. A week later I hopped the Greyhound to Houston and arrived at his apartment on a Sunday evening. Riding the electric train to his apartment, an overweight queer boy in a Fedora, who was failing out of an undecided major at U of H, attempted to convince me that I should follow him to a poetry reading. I declined the invitation. Greg would later tell me that was the night he fell in love with me. I waited in the lobby of his apartment for him to come downstairs to access the elevator with his building key, and when he saw me after the golden doors opened—a remnant from before the apartment complex was converted from a hotel—he said there was something about me that changed between that night long ago in October and the me standing there in April. I made a joke that the answer was that I wore clothes this time.

Over those two days, I'd visit the city and learn that I hated it for resembling Los Angeles—large and sprawled out with concrete—but lacking any of redeemable aspects that made Los Angeles so wonderful. The heat and humidity were oppressive so much so that walking outside was enough to convince you not to move. But I would've moved if I hadn't hated the program too. The students were unwelcoming. Tony Hoagland snapped at me in the middle of his workshop for throwing in my two cents during the critiquing of a poem; it was a moment reminiscent of David Wong Louie. There was nothing enjoyable about the visit except

my stay with Greg, and I told Greg this the night before I left for Austin. He responded that it sounded like I was making a smart decision.

Despite the fact that I no longer planned on moving to Houston, I continued to see Greg. He drove out and stayed with me the following weekend and we attended the Hill County Wine and Food Festival because he already bought tickets before he met me— or so he claimed. He drove out another weekend, this time without an excuse to be in town aside from seeing me. I enjoyed spending time with Greg, but it was clear he was becoming attached regardless that we never had sex— minus one time I was tipsy and let him suck me off. I made it clear to Greg we weren't and were never going to date exclusively. I accepted my spot in Montana after they belatedly offered me a teaching fellowship. I was moving in several months and didn't want to deal with the hassle that accompanied leaving a boyfriend. During his courtships of me, I went on dates with other men and was open about it, but I did hide the fact I slept with them. I didn't want to sleep with Greg, partly because my hormones weren't high and partly because I didn't find him sexually appealing. One time while he was drunk and we were cuddling, he asked me point blank if I'd ever have sex him: I lied and said *Once my hormones are up, yes.*

He introduced me to his family and paid for expensive meals and in many ways you can perceive the situation of him being a sugar daddy of sorts, but I would've been fine cooking for him at my house and staying in. It was his company I preferred, and though his money enhanced the grandness of our time together, it wasn't necessary. I didn't plan on hurting Greg.

There were a string of Gay Pride events I was slotted to attend that June. Greg was temporarily restationed in Los Angeles for work and I agreed to fly out to meet him— he paid for the hotel with a company credit card and I bought my own plane tickets. Though he offered to buy my tickets for me, I said no to prove to myself if not him that being around Greg wasn't

about money. A week later we were supposed to rendezvous for Houston Pride. But before either those festivities unfolded, there was the meager Austin Pride. The date was June 6<sup>th</sup> and it was a Saturday. Unlike Los Angeles or Houston, which are weekend events that include festivals, large parties, and crowds numbered in the hundreds of thousands, Austin Pride lasts one day. It took place in a small park where local gay groups—softball teams, choruses, political groups, etc...—canvassed for new members or donations. Makeshift bars and food-stands were erected that overcharged patrons. I didn't plan on attending. Nothing against small Gay Pride events, but I find their unadorned construct tacky more than charming. I spent my Saturdays exhausting myself at a 10 A.M. cycle class and then sleeping through the afternoon. Evenings I usually busied myself with long walks around the neighborhood or a date. My intentions for that Saturday were no different.

It was early afternoon when I browsed the forums of RealJock.com, a gay men's fitness website dedicated to issues of fitness and recreational leisure. I liked the website for its melding of traditional gay websites— fronts for places to meet men online to cam or hook up with if they lived close-by— and sports sites. Most gay men enjoy maintain active physical lives— think of the gym as gay church— and it was nice to have a community where men were comfortable discussing the sport teams they rooted for in addition to why the newest Lady Gaga music video was superior to her last.

One of the forum posts that day was dedicated to Austin Pride. The thread's original post read *Anyone going to Pride in Austin, TX tomorrow? I will be there promoting our San Antonio gay flag football team the Diablos. I hope I get to see some of you guys out there!* I didn't know the member who posted it, and his profile pictures obscured his face. He was twenty five, a few inches taller, and seemed nice enough to meet from the description blurb he wrote about himself.

All the responses in the thread were from people who lived in Austin, but couldn't attend the event and felt the need to convey this news despite the fact that none of them knew the original poster either. Maybe it was because I felt bad this guy was alone in town— a feeling I knew well— or that I was bored because none of my friends with benefits were texting me back to my requests of hanging out, but I told him I'd be happy to grab a drink with him and gave him my number.

I caught the bus heading downtown and walked the few blocks west of Congress Ave to the park hosting the event. Half of the stands were closing and I was informed the other half would do so too in the next thirty minutes. I hadn't anticipated the festival shutting down before six because Los Angeles' ran until midnight. I paid the ten-dollar entrance fee and meandered the park to see if there were people I knew, possibly attractive men I saw at the gym or those that I delivered sandwiches to during the week— places where it would be inappropriate to flirt or ask about their sexuality. I recognized no one.

The parade was slotted to begin at seven, and though I gave this person named Michael my phone number, he hadn't contacted me. This annoyed me because I have to be in the right mood to take part in any public activities by myself, and I wasn't in that sort of mood. I walked past the gay bars— Rain, Kiss and Fly, Oil Can Harry's— on Fourth Street and the intoxicated people that posted themselves along the parade route toward Congress Ave. I told myself I would give him thirty minutes to hear from him and then head home if I didn't. Michael responded to me in those thirty minutes— that and the bus running home was late. I would tease him in the upcoming months how I almost never met him because he hesitated in contacting me.

Michael told me a group of friends and he drove down from San Antonio and were standing by a police car by the park on Fourth St. and Guadalupe. The two of us would later

point out that this was the spot we met any time we walked or drove by it— a place that brought happiness to mind but now is something I wish to bomb off the map. By the time I weaved my way through the mess of people waiting for the parade to start for the second time, the police car landmark drove off. I mentioned to him that I dressed in a bright, orange t-shirt, which made me stick out amongst the crowd— a trick I learned when coordinating large-scale volunteer programs in college: the person in charge must wear bright colors or some odd feature, say a cowboy hat (my favorite). That way it's easy to be found by people who don't know who you are. As I moved around the block trying to match a body to the one I remembered from the photo online, I heard a voice call my name.

Michael introduced me to his four friends. There was a skinny, blonde twink shorter than me who had a thing for Michael; we later referred to him as Twinkie and how I stole Michael from him that night. Two of the others were interested in each other and the fifth isn't memorable. Michael was easily the most attractive of the group and looked better than his pictures would lead one to believe. I liked him right away. Unlike the way that I came to love Todd—my first boyfriend, a man who was thirty-two, recently-divorced from a wife of eight years, and hardcore Jesus freak, that I dated when I was nineteen— or Scott, where I agreed to meet each for dinner but felt little for either right away and it was only over time that my feelings for them emerged, I knew from the beginning that I wanted Michael. We spoke as the parade of makeshift floats and marchers passed. I tried my best to be casual and witty. I commented on how the people watching the parade kept infiltrating those participating in it and you couldn't tell where the spectatorship ended or began, that someone broke the forth wall of the parade. He said he loved that phrase. I explained it was a poem waiting to be written.

The six of us ate dinner at a Mexican restaurant named Manuel's, and we each ordered a different-flavored margarita. I sat on one side of Michael and Twinkie on the other. We talked in a loose way, not afraid to let information about us spill that we might not bring up in regular conversation to strangers. I told him I was moving to Montana. He told me he was moving to Austin that same week. I laughed at the coincidence and put a hand on his knee. He didn't brush it off so I proceeded to rub my palm over it, feeling the roundness of the cap trace into my hand. We'd share our first kiss in a gay club that night. Twinkie would drive back to San Antonio with two others in the group. Michael would invite me back to his hotel room that he shared with the remaining guy from his group of friends. We would have sex in the shower and then the next morning in a bed while his friend read a paper downstairs. There was a meeting for work I planned on attending that Sunday morning to learn how the new computer system in the sandwich shop operated, but I didn't go because I wanted to stay in bed with Michael because I missed being held. I never mentioned it to Michael, and still haven't told him I was close to being fired for staying with him that morning. If given the chance to do it again, I'd make the same decision, but maybe that's only because I know I don't get fired. I still miss being held.

Michael left the country that following Wednesday for a three-week trip to Europe where he was to attend his god-brother's wedding in Norway, tour the continent, and see Josh Ritter perform in Dublin. I savored my time with him that weekend, but acted nonchalant about the relationship because I didn't think it would develop. That Friday I flew to California to be with Greg for Los Angeles Pride.

But Michael surprised me. He'd call me from Europe. He explained how he was diagnosed with glandular after complaining about lethargy over the trip, that he was sorry if he had accidentally infected me, that he missed me and wanted to see me when he returned. It was

an odd combination of things to feel upon these revelations, but I told him I appreciated our night together and would meet with him when his plane landed in the states.

While in Los Angeles, I introduced Greg to Matt; who happened to be on summer break and home in Los Angeles for a week; Todd, who is the only man I know who becomes both richer and more attractive with each year of his life; and Lauren, the friend from high school whom I had that panic attack because of her birthday dinner. This was my equivalent of introducing Greg to my family. That weekend Greg surprised me in the way Scott revealed his plan to come to the US. Though Greg couldn't move to Montana, he insisted that he wanted to drive there with me. We would drive my car to Los Angeles, pick up some belongings in storage there, and drive to Missoula up the West Coast. The trip would be nine days in length and he would finance the entire thing, including meals, gas, and hotels. Truthfully, I planned to load up boxes in the passenger seat, but I realized I could mail them to Missoula with the money I'd save if I said yes to Greg. I said yes.

I was sensing Greg's growing commitment to me— and this trip only confirmed my suspicions— and as a way to deflect part of its intensity, I invited Matt to Houston Pride in front of Greg while the three of us talked without our shirts on in Los Angeles bar. Because I knew Greg was a nice guy and because I knew Greg wouldn't say no to anything I asked. Greg would say it would be O.K. for Matt to sleep on an air-mattress in his Houston apartment, effectively quashing any plans of serious intimacy Greg might have been contemplating. Greg extended the invitation as I predicted and Matt accepted.

That following Friday I drove Matt to Houston in my recently-purchased truck, named Houston— in honor of the school I turned down. Like my prior visit, the heat was intolerable even at night and with all the liquor I consumed. Matt remarked on several occasions that he too



would've declined the offer based upon a day of walking around in that city. That's why Matt and I will always be friends.

It was at a party that Saturday night that the Houston Pride fiasco unfolded. After an expensive dinner that Greg paid for— I long gave up on pulling out my wallet and him telling me it was on him; practice becomes expectation in that regard— the three of us headed to a house pre-parade party. On the cab ride over, Michael called. Nothing was slipped that indicated to Greg I was talking to boy I had slept with on our first date, but I did end the call with *I miss you too*. Greg didn't seem bothered, but maybe he assumed I was speaking to family. That wasn't the incident or at least the straw that broke the camel's back. That occurred at the party. Greg introduced me to a very tall and attractive man in his building that he slept with months before. I wanted to sleep with him too. It was obvious by the way I flirted, the gaze I gave him that I couldn't mimic for Greg, that anyone watching me chat with him could see that I wanted to find a closet and play ten minutes of heaven with him. Greg stormed away from the party. When I tracked him down in the busy street outside, he accused me of trying to sleep with the tall man, and then told me to leave him alone.

Darren hadn't surfaced in a while up to that point, but this encounter was enough to revitalize his presence because Robby hates to be called on his shit. Hours later Greg would find me and sat by me on parking spot barrier. I refused to look at him as I started angrily into the distance. In three seconds, Darren managed to reverse the power dynamic. In what originally developed as me flirting with a friend in front of Greg turned into a lecture. How could he accuse Robby of trying to seduce his friend in front of him? How dare he insinuate Robby would be that sleazy as to have no regard for his well-being, which Darren also explained would've been impossible given Robby was going through an impotence stage resulting from a low hormone

levels— the excuse Robby offered Greg whenever Greg asked why he wouldn't sleep with him. But Darren didn't end there. He explained that even if Robby were interested in the friend— which I was, but Darren was right in the sense that I'd never have allowed my flirtations to transgress into relations so there wasn't anything to worry about— that Robby had every right to fuck the guy, that Greg wasn't Robby's boyfriend, and Robby could flirt with whomever he chose. Darren was correct in all those points.

Greg apologized, but it was too late. He broke the rules of not getting (overtly) attached and Darren sensed this was the opportunity to cut the head from the snake before trouble arose when Michael returned from Europe. Darren said, *Any relationship, any future beyond a platonic friendship is over.* The next day Matt and I drove to Austin.

I can't say for certain why Greg didn't rescind his offer to accompany me and fund the trip. Maybe he believed I would forgive him and there was a possibility of the two of us being together. Maybe he felt guilty over the incident and this was a form a self-inflicted punishment by having to drive over three-thousand miles with me. I never asked him why, not even after Michael returned to the U.S. and we started dating exclusively. I informed Greg of our relationship only to have him insist he still desired to take that trip with me. I also don't know why the Monday before the Friday we planned to drive out of Texas Greg sent me a message on Facebook. It explained that he was relocating to Los Angeles after leaving Boeing for another contractor and couldn't assist me in my move.

My rage for Greg was multifaceted. I hated him for not having the balls to call me instead of hiding behind the internet's distance, feeling as if a joke had been played on me because of the pathetic nature of the event. I hated how I didn't have the money to take the trip myself and I depended on his generosity. I hated how he figured out a way to outplay me in the one way that

would hurt most. But even worse was that I left myself open to such an easy and obvious attack. Darren returned.

The first mode of business Darren handled was dispatching of Greg. In addition to all the previous points addressing Greg's cowardice and selfishness in calling the trip off, Darren went for the jugular— the same manner as he attacked Jason in Chicago. In three sentences, Darren managed to express that Greg would always be lonely because any person he loved would leave him too once they discovered what an insecure and jealous man he was, that at his core he allowed his resentment to destroy the lives of those he thought he cared about. The final comment conveyed how Darren felt sorry more than any other emotion toward Greg because no one who's that miserable of person could ever change.

I'm sure Greg's decision had something to do with a person— probably a friend of his— stepping into the situation, pointing out he spent thousands of dollars on me, and I wouldn't even sleep with him. I don't deny that's what happened between us, but at the same time I never wanted Greg for his money or what he could offer me. At a certain point, he came to believe that's what I needed, but the truth of the matter is that I would've never slept with him and never promised otherwise.

I've not spoken to Greg since, but I dreamed that the two of us were driving to Montana and a volcano erupted. Just before it killed us, I buried my head into his chest and cried. I'm not sure why my mind cast Greg as my comforting last embrace when I missed Michael, but I'm starting to think that Darren is developing a moral code of his own, and though he will always protect Robby, he likes to send Robby messages that Robby's behavior isn't without reproach.

Matt met up with Greg in Los Angeles several months after the incident. I didn't ask much about it and Matt told me I wasn't discussed. The two of them had been friendly the

several times they interacted; Greg knew few people in Los Angeles after the move and heard Matt was in town visiting. According to Matt, it was just a drink. I've no reason to think Matt lied to me because Greg isn't Matt's type and for all the things for Matt to lie about this wouldn't make sense for it to be the first. I'll confess that if any other friend of mine performed that act of betrayal, I would've stopped speaking to him. I don't know why Matt receives special treatment from me in that regard, but perhaps it was because it was after Michael and I broke up, that I wished to show the mercy not shown to me.

It's difficult to be upset with Michael because of all the great kindnesses he offered me. He was the one who let me crash at his place the week my lease ran up in Austin so that I could work an extra week to finance the trip. He was the one who drove ninety-percent of the way with me to Salt Lake City because I was nervous driving with that much stuff in my car and SLC was the furthest he could travel before flying back to work on Monday. He paid his share of the trip and one more gas tank than he needed to— of course I noticed a small gesture like that. These were big acts of his love, but they don't replace all the small ones I adore about him too. In SLC, while preparing to drop him off at the airport, I cried as I cried with Scott. I handed him a love letter. All that was written inside of it was a poem called "meandering fourth wall of the parade." He claims it's his favorite of all the poems I've written about him— and I've written many. I want to tell you that the story of Michael and I breaking up happens because I move away, that our love ends in the parking lot of the SLC airport. I tell that to some people, but I'm going to tell you the truth this time. I cheated on Michael. I had no reason to do such a thing despite all the reasons I'll now give you.

Michael wanted to know if we should end our relationship when I moved, but I told him no, that I loved and because I knew I was going to marry him— I didn't tell him that last part. I

looked at our future with more insight than I did in anticipating my upcoming degree in Missoula. How many children we'd have. The type of dogs we'd raise. I was in love with him and the future him. I asked for a long-distance relationship and he agreed to it. The beginning of our new relationship was fine. We talked daily that August. He told me he would visit over Labor Day Weekend. I couldn't wait to kiss him again.

But slowly changes occurred within me. I missed Austin, my friends, and of course, Michael. I didn't anticipate the move being as jarring as it was. Todd once explained to me that the four most traumatic events a person can ever experience are: the loss of a loved one, loss of a home, loss of a job, and loss of a marriage— in order to convey why he was so messed up from his divorce. I never understood what he meant by that until and learned I moved how one of those categories bleeds into the others.

During this time, my doctors stopped prescribing my medications. My hormone levels were good— too good. Where once my testosterone count was lower than a female's, it was now higher than any acceptable range for male. That on its own is bad, but the fact that I exhibited none of the signs of excess testosterone exacerbated the issue. No matter how much of the hormone was present in my body, it only synthesized the hormone but didn't use it. There was no point in the medications anymore as it became more harmful to have a body create unusable hormones than to let it lack them. Darren emerged out of this distraught.

I never told Michael the specifics, that the doctors had said it was finally happening... that big picture of how my body would end up and how my life would end. I didn't want to die alone in Missoula. Every night when Michael called I told him how much I missed him, and though I couldn't tell him why it was important to see him, I hoped he'd detect urgency in my voice. Michael was unable to fly out that Labor Day Weekend.

Around that time I began to suggest that Michael and I open our relationship. He immediately said that if I wanted to sleep with other people, then we should end things on a good note and be friends. I gave him the same line as Greg, that it wasn't about sex because my hormones were too low for that; this time it was true. I didn't want to see other people for sex. I wanted someone to hold me at night as my body slipped out of my hands once more and tell me that I was beautiful and important until Michael could come and do it himself. I wanted to be loved by proxy.

I kept pressing him and pressing him and he always gave the same answer. I always responded in that same way: *I don't want to sleep with other people, I just want you.* One night, Michael relented, but it was a slip and I knew it. I don't think he knew he agreed to give me permission, but I latched onto his passive O.K. the way that a lawyer discovers his client isn't guilty not because he didn't commit the crime, but because of a technicality in the law that forces his client to be freed.

The night that I cheated on Michael unfolded shortly after that conversation. In the prior weeks, I corresponded with a closeted undergraduate who was my age. Jesse had never been with a guy. In a certain light, Jesse was attractive the way I find men who drive pickup trucks with free weights in their trunk bed attractive. Physically, he was skinnier than I preferred, but he looked the part of the closeted gay male. We met once on an August evening and ate ice cream—though it was cold outside and he shivered halfway through his cone. I didn't hear from him for weeks and I didn't expect to.

His text came late at night— around two to three in the morning. He said he was drunk and at a party and wanted me to pick him up. I could've pretended I didn't read the message and gone back to sleep, but I didn't. I put on my flip flops and drove to the incorrect address he gave

me. It took thirty minutes to find the correct corner he was standing outside of because he was too drunk to know the correct one. He climbed into my car and drank a beer he kept in his backpack with nervous speed as if he were underage. I tried to start a conversation and he told me how there were two football players at the party tag-teaming a girl and they asked him if he wanted to join. We drove the rest of the way in silence.

I told Michael I brought him to my house because he was too drunk to tell me where he lived, and though that probably would've been the case had I asked, I intended to take him to my home, to my bedroom. I told Michael, *It just happened*, but I knew as soon as I left the house to retrieve Jesse that we would fool around. And that is how it happened.

In truth, all that did happen was five minutes of kissing and bad oral sex on his part. He wanted to fuck me. I told him no. He stopped being into it. I never really was. We both went to sleep and he left early in the morning. The only time I spoke to him after the incident was later that day when he sent me a text message asking if I carried any STDs. I didn't.

And though I lied to Michael about a lot of what occurred that night, I didn't lie to him about the infidelity. In fact, I called him that very morning, confessed, and essentially doomed our relationship. I tried to explain it wasn't about sex— because it wasn't, that I only wanted a body in place of his and if that meant the promise of sex to lure that body near me then so be it. That Jesse was a sad boy who will take a decade to be comfortable with his sexuality, and I felt bad for a twenty-two year old virgin who never kissed another man. Jesse and I didn't want each other; we craved the action of the body the other represented.

I want to tell you that it wasn't Robby who cheated, that it was Darren. But I don't remember which one of us picked up the boy, which one us unbuttoned the shirt, which one of us

opened his mouth and tasted the flesh of another man. And because I'm not sure, I want to say that it's Robby because of the two Robby is the one who represses memories that are unsettling.

Over the course of the next six months, I talked to Michael and saw him. He told me he'd fly out for Halloween after saying he forgave me. That the week before arriving, he'd then tell me he canceled his ticket. That occurred after I invited all the people in my program to a dinner party in his honor. Many people at the dinner asked where he was when they didn't see him. He said he would fly out with me to Los Angeles over Thanksgiving to meet my family (the tickets had been booked before my transgression) and give me the closure I asked for. That he didn't lie about. While in Los Angeles, he'd see my mother perform at her worst, regardless of him being in present company, then watch me run out of the house in tears. I'd seek refuge in the rental car we shared and he'd follow. In the car I'd disintegrate with my face buried in his shoulder. I repeated, *Why, why won't anyone love me?* speaking more to him than my mother.

I'd then fly to Austin for three weeks over my winter break after the completion of my first semester at graduate school. It would be my belief that we resolved our troubles in Los Angeles. I'd then flip-flop between Robby and Darren because Robby loved Michael and Darren knew the relationship was over, which led Darren to sabotage the trip any moment he could. By the time I flew back to Missoula, Darren told Michael that I was dying and that this was a goodbye trip. Darren also managed to drive a wedge between Michael and Robby's mutual friends who switched to being only Michael's friend after the original breakup. Those friends bothered Robby. The worst of all was that Darren cut Michael in words the way he cut Greg. When Darren retreated, I didn't know how to as Robby address the damage he constructed.

The truth is that it depends on which one of my many doctors you talk to in regards to how serious my illness is, but most agree it's burdensome psychologically and not lethal. The



truth is I blame Darren for lot of Robby's behavior because is convenient to pretend you can be a saint when you can write off any objectionable behavior onto someone else. The truth is I love Michael and I'm sorry for hurting him.

Before I left Austin for Missoula and while Michael was transitioning from San Antonio, Michael was throwing a Christmas in July party. He asked me to attend, which was to take place two weeks before my scheduled departure with Greg. There were many reasons for me not to drive out. Houston (my car) was acting up and there much to pack and deal with. I told Michael I wouldn't be able to come and he told me he understood, though I heard defeat in his voice. I tried to make it up by telling him I would mail him a surprise for the party, that it would arrive on the day, and that he should call me when it did. I planned on mailing him gingerbread men in accordance to the party's theme. What he didn't know what that I wasn't mailing them. After work on that Friday, I drove Houston through three hours of rush-hour traffic to San Antonio despite his broken IAC motor could've stalled my car at any minute. I didn't care. Michael called me and left me a message saying the package hadn't arrived. I pulled up to his house, called him, and pretended to be oblivious about the package's disappearance. He said he'd go outside to the mailbox and check again. As he moved to the porch, he could hear the echo from my phone as I said, *Are you sure?* in response to there being no package, all the while running up to him and jumping into his surprised, but waiting arms. I could barely prevent myself from crying out of happiness to see him. Michael always told me that was his favorite thing I ever did for him, that it seemed based on that moment that we'd always be in love. I never pointed out that his favorite moment of love was predicated on a lie of circumstance.

I have many moments I reflect on when I look back at my relationship with Michael, and I too have a favorite one and it involves San Antonio. It was a Sunday—the week before he was

to help me move after stepping into Greg's shoes. But before my move, Michael was finishing his own to Austin. I drove out with him to San Antonio not because I was helpful in his packing, but I wanted to be around him. He didn't mind and liked the company in the car. I didn't realize how late it was becoming and Michael stated earlier that day that we'd be back in Austin by ten; it was eleven and we were still in San Antonio while my nightly medication that I took before midnight sat in Austin. I told him we needed to go back and he drove as quickly as he could. I take many of my medications at certain times of the day because your body is supposed to be rich in hormones at corresponding times: testosterone is highest at morning and therefore you take the medicine at night so by morning your body's production peaks. If I miss this medicinal time slot, my body falls out of sync. The more we drove the more my body lost itself amidst a haze of confusion and muddled speech brought on by a lowered hormonal balance. I wasn't sick—just exhausted. There was no danger, but I couldn't bring my mouth to open to tell Michael this. When we pulled up to his house in Austin, I couldn't walk up the stairs without his help. He kept repeating in a low voice, *I'll never forgive myself*. As we lay in bed, he embraced me the way a soldier might hold a wounded friend. Come morning I knew things would be fine. I fell into a deep sleep knowing how much the man whose arms cradled me felt and that he would protect me for the rest of my life. I never told Michael I was cognizant the entire time; since he never brought it up, I assume he thinks I'm not aware of his devotion that night.

I don't fool myself into thinking everything I did to Michael was bad or that everything he did was just. There were moments that deserved my retribution, but they were often predicated on actions I took beforehand. Can I blame him for telling me he forgave me and then changed his mind when I first told him that I loved him then cheated? Can he blame me for cheating after he told me he'd be there to take care of me that Labor Day Weekend but wasn't.

We shared a beautiful love I haven't felt with anyone else on this planet before or after; we then watched the monuments we built in homage to each other decay into the acid winds that blinded us with the ashes of their traces.

What is left is what I feel will always be left: Darren. Though when first presented with him I felt my life robbed from me, I've come to depend on him the way a shadow abides by its owner. And what if he leaves me too? Darren, for all his trouble, is the closest thing to a friend and lover in my life. He defends me with the ferocity of his own destruction, gives all that is of his own world in the process. I cannot imagine many men wanting to be with me upon learning about my disease and neuroses that accompany it, nor the pasts I hide from the world. Darren is the only man who recognizes the face buried beneath the mask of Robby, and it's a face he loves for every feature that's beautiful and every scar that isn't until he can't distinguish the two. That's what it means to be loved unconditionally. That's what he does.

It's hard to know where the lies in my life begin as so many become realities. I don't pretend that Darren is real, but it's hard to call him fake when his actions in the real world have consequence. The same way Robby isn't real, but the lies are necessary to keep what is real about him from drowning into the ocean of memory. Technically, only Doron is real, but he hasn't existed for almost a decade and cannot be considered more than a ghost.

There are also the lies told by not admitting the truth. For instance, I'm twenty-three and I don't pretend to be a different age, but am often assumed to be much older. Is it a lie that I don't correct people? The same can be argued when I'm intentionally vague about my disease and people assume that if a gay male is sick it's because he suffers from HIV. I'm not HIV positive, but I do little to dissuade people from their erroneous beliefs. Much of what you think about me

is probably a lie you are telling yourself. Should I be blamed for what you are doing in your own head?

I don't view my life as a linear chart. Often, the things that happen after events are the predecessors to what came before. What I mean by this anachronistic thinking is that Doron only exists today because Robby does, because the lie is the continuing thread that weaves both into reality. The joy in writing for me persists in the power the author wields as he is god of whatever universe his pen creates. But nonfiction is a strange planet. I began to think how I could tell this book honestly, and the only way I imagined being able to do so involved lying to you along the way. Is that a cop out from my duties as an author of nonfiction? Maybe. But we all lie; I'm just honest about it.

Even if I were to tell you this entire story linearly and truthfully, much of it would be wrong. We cannot escape the fact that what happens in our lives colors how we view our past. We cannot deny that our perception of reality is biased, and whenever we tell the story, we only tell one side of it. There's nothing I can do to make my life any truer than it already is: I firmly believe that the fact that you were told my story in the perspective in which my mind knows it to have occurred is the most honest that I can be.

Because if I wanted to lie to you, then it would be easy to. This ending would happier. I wouldn't have cheated on Michael. In fact, there wouldn't be one line in this book that painted me in any negative light. But the truth is that I wrote this book because I thought it might bring him back to me. I kept telling myself as I wrote it that if he only knew the story— *the whole story*— behind my infidelity that he would understand and take me back. If only he could see me when I wasn't being me. That I had to tell every painful detail, every wrong I enacted so that he believed in my flaws and in the pain they caused him and me. If nothing else, I believed the act

of writing an entire book for someone was enough to convince them that you loved them in a manner that no one else will ever match. But that's not what happened.

In the second semester of MFA, I let it slip to a few people that there was a strong chance I wasn't returning for my final year in the program. Soon enough, the entire faculty wanted *to talk* with me, a fact I found funny because I threatened leaving since October, but it was when they discovered my words weren't idle that talking became important. There are reasons to be angry at the program: they don't fund their students well, they don't bring in guest readers of the caliber that they should, etc.... Most of the reasons are valid complaints, but only things to mark on an assessment sheet under areas needed for improvement— nothing serious enough to merit leaving the program.

But there were two, big reasons behind my decision to leave. The first was that I felt I put more into the program than I received. This meant spending hours writing a poem only to have my peers barely read it (if they even did), then give feedback based upon a misreading that would've been obvious had they spent five minutes trying to figure out what I was doing as opposed to what they thought I was doing. For instance, I used the word “Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch” in a poem. The word is a name of a city in Wales. Three-quarters of the people in my workshop, including the professor, wrote comments about how my decision to invent ludicrous words was childish and ruining the intelligence of the rest of the poem. There's also the matter that I've devoted much of my free time to attending events my peers invited me to: their readings, their presentations, etc.... But at a recent conference that I presented at the university, not one student or faculty member attended. In Austin, every one of my cycling coworkers, who'd have been up until 4 A.M the

night before, would've been present and sitting in the front row of my presentation if I asked them to come— or even if I didn't ask, they'd find a way to show up on their own.

There's also the matter that little of what I wrote was particular to being in graduate school. I think I would've written the same poems if I stayed in Austin. Neither my style nor my sense of revision underwent any metamorphosis. The program didn't set any students up with publishing deals, meetings with agents, or even direct links to small publications. I'm asked to perform all those tasks on my own these days, which I could've completed in or outside of a graduate program.

I was so convinced that things would change when I left Austin. I realized many of my thoughts weren't realistic, but I didn't think it was too much to ask for people who said when they supported you then to do so or to grow as a writer in a manner you couldn't teach yourself. But looking at a rose, no one teaches a rose how to blossom. It learns on its own and learns how to be beautiful in the same way. I'm learning that becoming a writer isn't to become a rose bush someone plants in his garden— a plant that's dependent on the hand of the gardener— but to live as a wild, thorny organism spreading across the forest floor with defiant presence that dares anymore to tell him not to bloom the deepest red.

When I told people I was ready to leave the program, that was a lie, but only because it was encoded. What I meant to say was that I miss Michael and would move to Austin if he'd take me back. I'd rather have lived as an unpublished poet with a husband I adored than put myself through the hoops of the writing world only to discover the entire experience hollow. This is the point in the lie where I tell you Michael said yes and I left to reunite with him.

This is the part in the truth where I tell you that didn't happen, that I told Michael I wrote book a for him that explained everything, that like in the movies if you were persistent with love

then eventually the other person abdicated their hesitations and the two lovers rejoined. I spent months writing the truth, writing the most touching words I knew, and still they didn't work on him. I want to believe that there's always a chance to change someone's mind and that writing is the ultimate debater to convince someone of your side. But that's not the case: writing only works in the sense that you recreate reality to fit the needs of what doesn't happen in your own life, that in another story I'll write that Michael and I cross paths years from now and fall in love again because it's possible. I'll never stop writing the lie as I wish it to come true, but it will never be more than fiction.

And the most devastating part of this story is that the only reason it ends this way is because I decided to tell Michael the truth. I've lied my whole life about my whole life and lived the lie of life; it's not as if I couldn't tell him one more untruth. But I thought it was important in love to be honest because I imagine love being the most honest of all emotions— though I no longer think that's true. I told the truth to the man I loved because I loved him: that's how he found out the truth and that's why he left. He thanked me for being honest, but that honesty wasn't enough to redeem myself.

What's the point then of telling the truth if it doesn't contribute to the wonderful life maintained through the lies? Is it that I can earn some semblance of revenge by telling you Michael had a botched circumcision so his cock looks burned. That he speaks in a gravel voice during sex and it's a turn-off. That Michael's biggest weakness in life is that he's unable to think like any rational person would in situations where he's afraid to disappoint someone else— this is the story of how the former mutual friends didn't have the guts to tell me they didn't like me to my face and told Michael instead in the hopes he'd play messenger for them, then Michael not having the nerve to tell them off, effectively allowing Darren to call them both on their shit.

And originally, that's all I had to say negatively about Michael. I sent him a copy of this manuscript so I was careful in what I revealed. His response was *Don't you think it's kind of self-indulgent to write an entire book about yourself?* Bear in mind Michael isn't an idiot so the idea of him calling me out on writing a memoir about myself said a lot. He hated the work. He said he stopped reading after thirty pages because it literally made him sick. I asked him what parts and he referred to the details about the threesome in Las Vegas as an example, completely ignoring the fact that it was the truth and that I was just as much culpable to the stigma as a part of it as he was. But he couldn't see that. In fact, it seemed he couldn't recognize anyone but himself in the work as if he only searched for where his name appeared and read those sections. Everyone else who read my first draft enjoyed the work and commended me for what I revealed about myself, but he assumed the entire work was about bashing him. The worst part wasn't even that I asked him to read it all the way through and when I called him a month later he said he'd never read the work so I should stop asking. The worst was that he believed the parts that I fabricated that he should have known were embellishments and responded *I always suspected you did that to me.*

Michael had two requests. One, that I never mention this work to him again. And two, that I change his name. Let me be clear in saying that I always intended on changing the people's names in this work and only wrote their real ones on account that I have a bad memory for keeping track of stand-in names, that after completing this book I was going to replace them all. I promised Michael I would do that. But I'm not doing that. I think Matt said it best when I recounted our conversation to him— Matt particularly liked the work and had no qualms with appearing in it— *it sounds like he has some issues of his own to work out and besides, what has he done to earn that change?*



So this is what I didn't include in draft one because I thought I'd spare Michael the disgrace he assumed I was writing. Michael cheated. Way worse than I did. Not on me. When he was my age he was friends with a guy and regularly slept with his friend's boyfriend. The two eventually became lovers. I might have hurt Michael, but I don't think my actions were anything close to that level of deceit. I also don't think Michael explained that part of his to our once mutual friends whom he told I cheated on him. Not that that fact surprises me since said mutual friends include a guy name Derek who is upset about his boyfriend sending naked pictures of himself over the internet to other men while Derek is fond of showing his friends the private sex videos (solo) that his former boyfriend at the time sent to him, which I'm sure was never intended to be shown to me. Though I don't think that's as sad as the pair of platonic, heterosexual forty-year olds who hang around with a group of gay men half their age because they have no friends of their own and live off the gossip their young companions provide. As far as I'm concerned these people deserve each other.

Because the part that gets me most riled is that Michael hated the fact that in this work I spoke of whom he is in the way his family and friends don't know. That in my truths I speak of the lies he hides from them. I'm not sure how that is any different than him letting those friends read my private letters that I sent to him in the aftermath of my cheating, that if I am putting myself on the page here why should he or anyone else be immune? That maybe if Michael showed a modicum of friendship, had read the whole book, had called to wish me a happy birthday that I wouldn't have gone back to my draft and written this section with the intention to give him something to feel ashamed and angry about. Is that revenge? I don't think the term is mutually exclusive from fairness.

Most of the people I write about in this book, including myself, would prefer you not to know these truths. They wouldn't ask me to lie about the situation, but ask me not to write about it at all. What's difference between telling the lie and suppressing the truth? We all sleep easier knowing that though the moon can read our minds when we sleep— as she judges us for the lies we've told that day— that come morning she's vanished from the sky and the sun knows not a word of the exchange.

The only merit I find in telling the truth is that it comforts those who share the lie. It doesn't mean that those people then confess the lie— just that they know they aren't alone in telling it. This book isn't about emboldening people to reveal the truths too painful to divulge; rather, I'm asking you, reader, to embrace the deceit if the deceit is what let's you sleep next to the warm body who knows nothing but the lies you tell it. Now you know the sort of person I am.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do now that Michael knows all this about me, and as he put it when asked if he would take me back: *Robby my answer is and will always have to be no. I am sorry that I am in a different place now, but I no longer feel the same way about you.* That and even if Michael wanted me back I can't help but to notice that I've planted some mean seed in his heart and he no longer acts like the man I loved, the man I still see in him but isn't there. I left the kindest man I've ever loved to become a person I resent in a place that I resent even more for being the reason for taking me away from him. *Do I now leave that place too? If so, then where do I go?* Those were questions I thought about when debating whether to finish my degree.

The problem with the truth is that this is the truth: unfair. I want my truth to be akin to all the movies about love and the lies they instill. The truth rarely ends well. When such is the case,

why are people so resistant to living in the falsities of the shadowy mind? The night Michael said he'd never be with me again, I had a dream.

In this dream I meet a rugged, mountain man in his thirties, named Aiden. He's depressed and the sole guardian of a little blonde-haired boy, named Tye. Tye is four. Aiden's ex-wife is an alcoholic who's fighting for custody because Aiden repressed his homosexuality all his life and now cannot hide it anymore. There's a battle in court trying to assert being gay makes him an unfit father. It's a nasty battle, but the judge rules in Aiden's favor. His own family shuns him as do his former friends. He's on the verge of collapse when I meet him. Our life is difficult, but we love each other and I save him the way I'm attracted to all broken-winged birds and desire to fix them— because I'm an injured creature too, and it gives me hope that my loving these wounded men means there might be someone out there who'll love me for the same reasons. On a trip home to Los Angeles for Father's Day, a day which all of my dad's side of the family gathers and children present gifts and barbeque for their dads, Tye reads a letter he wrote in school about why he enjoys my company— it's because I play video games with him and bought him a puppy. I'm touched, but confused why Tye is reading me this letter until I turn around and find Aiden on one knee asking me if I'll be a father to his son and husband to him. I try my best to be a father, but it's clear Aiden is better at teaching Tye certain aspects of boyhood, such as throwing a football. We wait up the first time Tye goes out on a date with a girl. Aiden comforts me when Tye goes to New York for College and I miss the fullness of his room. I comfort Aiden when Tye is mugged and stabbed in the city. We both cry when we give our son away at his wedding. We both are proud of him and do our best to tell him as often as we can, though we don't say it nearly as much as we should. We both are there for the birth of his daughter. We talk of what will happen when the first one of us dies, what the other must do if he's the surviving

spouse. I never find out because despite my being a decade younger than Aiden, my disease catches up and I die in my sixties. I die happy.

The dream is obviously a lie as all dreams by definition are lies. But what's the harm if you say that the telling of the dream is a lie? By writing it, the dream breathes in this world. Maybe it wasn't my dream. Maybe that's the life of Darren Gregory Taylor. Maybe Darren Gregory Taylor is the real body and Robby is the imposter. Perhaps we're both parasites in the body of Doron. What's known in this world is the collective experience of perception. At night when I close my eyes, I dream without a body or mind attached. In these dreams I'm an entity that hovers in the world by any name and any manifestation I choose. Robby and Darren and Doron are just a few characters of this greater persona. If indeed the soul is real, then at night it abandons the current body who hosts it because that body is a temporary lie— a vessel that hides the true form and abilities of the spirit limited in that fleshy prison; dreaming is a transient respite for the spirit, where it regains its powers to bend reality as reality desires to be bent while watched in a series of colors there are no names for. When the body returns into the earth, the soul moves on as truth into a different plane. When you dream, that's your soul living in the most honest way there's to live in the infinite universes of the cosmos. When we wake, we wake into a lie and the spirit's magic is imprisoned by the laws of physics once more. This is why we tell lies. It's not what we call lies that are unreal, but the truths we're convinced are indisputable. Lying is the language of the traveling spirit telling the adventures of where it has journeyed and where it hopes to go. I confess I don't believe in a soul, but when there's nothing left in this world for you to believe in, you must admit it's a wonderful lie to convince yourself of.