

MILD TO MODERATELY SEVERE

by

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ABSTRACT

Mild to Moderately Severe is an episodic memoir of a boy coming of age as a latch-key kid, living with a working single mother and partly raising himself, as a hearing impaired and depressed young adult, learning to navigate the culture with a strategy of faking it, as a nomad with seven mailing addresses before turning ten. It is an examination of accidental and cultivated loneliness, a narrative of a boy and later a man who is too adept at adapting to different environments, a reflection on relationships and popularity and a need for attention and love that clashes with a need to walk through unfamiliar neighborhoods alone.

“Mild to moderately severe” is a diagnosed level of my hearing impairment. It is also the level of clinical depression I’m supposed to have been suffering since I was a preteen. It is also an answer to the question, “How was your day?”

This is dedicated to everyone who treasures the sound of their bare feet scuffing a carpet.

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1
LODI

~*~

Monday

Third grade. The closing bell echoed through the red brick building. The bell brought a moment of harmony. Everyone heard it and responded to it. The soft murmur of voices erupted into laughter and screams and squeals. Giddy children poured out of the building. We carried the memory of the closing bell with us like an echo. It seemed like the bell kept ringing and ringing, even when I was away from the building and a block away.

I walked down the cracked sidewalk of the hill, the sound of hysterical children not so much fading as stripping down to its barest elements. It was mid-October but still warm. Sweat had already started to soak the collar of my t-shirt. My grey windbreaker felt like tarpaulin. My books wanted to slip my grip and I wanted to let them. When I looked down at my own body, I thought I resembled a bulging cardboard tube, like a roll of paper towels with the last, half-glued sheet hanging off.

My walk home was a short descent through concrete. Down the hill under constant sun that reflected heat of the sidewalk, the streets, the beige or graying walls that held in sparse lawns flanked by houses that seemed sick and starving.

When we were living on Farnham Road the previous year, my walk was several times longer, in the opposite direction, uphill, leaving the school several worlds behind. I was traveling to higher planes. There was glittering shade from many overhanging trees, and the houses were friendly. The apartment on Farnham, the second floor of a two-family house, was open and brightly lit. I always

looked forward to getting home. The picture window in the living room frosted over in the winter. On clear mornings, I could see the city glittering in the distance from my bedroom window.

From that we moved to a garage apartment, two easy too-quick blocks down from school. Down. We lived under a real house, under a real family. My mother and her boyfriend had moved there while I'd spent the summer in Florida with my grandparents.

The front door at the Farnham Road apartment, with its huge living room, the den where I played Pac-Man on the Atari 2600, the warm, comfortable kitchen, was grey and inconspicuous. The elaborate and heavy lacquered wooden door of the garage apartment, with four small windowpanes that looked like delicate crystal, led to a dark space with two small windows inches above the dirt, one in the living room and one in the bedroom. The door lied to me every time I got home.

And I forgot my key.

I searched the gravel of the driveway. Searching for lost things is a ritual that has never ended. It's a feeling that must be akin to a ghost haunting a house. The door was firm, cold, locked.

I stacked my books beside the door and I walked down the hill. My friend Antonio lived a block down the hill in a brick apartment building. I knocked on the door and waited two minutes before walking on.

Just beyond his building, the hill leveled out. A block beyond that there was a big, open park that looked like a grassy dinner plate complete with the raised rim edges. Antonio and his two younger sisters and brother were running around each other. Black as ink, their huge smiles revealed big, perfect white teeth.

"Jules," he called as I got closer. "Jules," his siblings echoed in their smaller, giddy voices.

Antonio Slaughter was wiry, tall, just a bit shorter than I, and his body was a knotwork of muscle. He was one of those children who started life with all the grace he would ever need and his easy confidence showed it.

We played tag for an hour. I fell twice and stained the knees and rear of my tan “good” pants. My mother would wonder why I didn’t put on “play” pants before going out. I would rather let her think I forgot that than my keys. I always forgot my keys. But if I had actually forgotten to change pants, I bet I would have preferred she think I lost my keys. I guess it is the real embarrassment that we want to avoid.

After an hour, Antonio shepherded his brother and sisters home to do homework. I walked with them, and then kept walking up the hill, past the garage apartment. Farther up the hill there was a corner store that had Donkey Kong. The sun came through the window and reflected rudely on the screen, and the graphics looked like a vague ghost image. I had two quarters in my pocket. I played them quickly because Donkey Kong’s barrels kept sneaking up on me through the veil of sunlight.

When I left the store, it was close to six. I walked home and sat against the house’s wall for thirty minutes, or an hour, or two hours. I don’t remember. Not only is there the problem of time crawling along like a drying earthworm when there is nothing to do, but time doesn’t translate well across the decades between childhood and adulthood. It could have been three minutes that passed before my mother got home, late. My key was in my room.

Tuesday

I managed to remember my keys. I went home, stacked my books on my desk, and stared into the fridge. Food is different when you’re a kid. If there were more than two steps between the fridge and my mouth, it might as well have been alien technology.

I left the house—with my key. I walked to Antonio’s. He wasn’t home. Neither of his parents got home until five, so they weren’t home either. He wasn’t at the park. There were days, like this one, when he seemed to disappear.

I went to the corner store. I had four quarters this time and it was early enough that the sun didn't play interference on my games. I managed to drag the dollar out to 45 minutes, a rare feat.

It was just after four when I left. I walked along the hill, away from my house. The downward angle was barely noticeable and suddenly everything else was uphill except for the highway ahead. I walked the sidewalk beside the highway until I came to a bridge that crossed over a creek below. There was a path worn into the downward slope to the creek, and I always felt like I was walking a secret passageway when I made my way carefully down the steep decline. I loved the seemingly hidden oasis. The creek was twenty feet below Route 46, one of the busiest highways in New Jersey, yet standing on the moist bed of the creek I felt like I was the only person around for miles.

I kicked beer cans and debris as I walked. I followed the creek as the ravine became more and more level with the surrounding land, and the creek became smaller and smaller, until, finally, the creek disappeared into a dark stone tunnel. I could have stooped slightly and entered but I never had the courage. Above the tunnel, another road crossed. I made my way through bushes and over rocks to the street above.

Wednesday

As I was leaving school, the principal pulled me aside. He led me into an empty classroom, leaned on a desk, crossed his arms, frowned and asked me if I stole two dollars from John Paul. Just then through the high window classroom door I saw John Paul's high forehead and greasy, straight brown hair, and then his eyes as he got up on his tiptoes and peered into the room.

I had a Star Wars action figure, C3P-0. I had been playing with him, walking him idly across the table in the lunchroom, when John Paul, a hyperactive whirlwind, begged me to sell it to him for

two dollars. Five minutes later, he was begging me to give him the money back. I said no. I wanted my C3P-0 back, but I resented his shrill belligerence.

When the principal asked if I stole the money I laughed. I didn't think it was funny. I was nervous. I didn't like being anywhere near the idea of stealing, but I thought laughing was the right thing to do. I explained what had actually happened.

The principal nodded slowly the whole time. Then he said, very softly, "Well, we know how John Paul is."

Not knowing what to say, I said nothing, but I looked out the door at John Paul who ducked down immediately.

"Do you think you can give him his two dollars back in exchange for your toy?"

My fever of anxiety broke and I felt cold, but I was elated. I gave the principal my money. He went to and through the door, and returned with C3P-0. I followed the principal out of the empty classroom. John Paul was gone.

Two hours later I was in the backyard of a brother and sister, both bright blonde with big blue eyes. One of the brother's friends was with us and we were sneaking to the back of the fenced-in yard to a three-foot gap between the fence and a storage shed. They dug a small hole in the ground. We crowded around and the brother drew a handful of Popsicle sticks from one pocket and a book of matches from another. We got in really close as he lit a stick and held it as it burned. We watched as if forbidden alchemical reactions akin to turning lead into gold were taking place. He lit another one, and again we watched. I asked him for a stick and a match but he took a stick, lit it, and handed it to me. I was a visitor and could not be trusted with the fire that gave birth to all other fire. I watched as the fire ate its way through the stick turning it bright gold, black, grey, and then nothing. We were primitive explorers. We played in the dirt of their backyard, burning things, sifting deep through the dirt and watching the busy work of worms and insects. Most of my after school time was lonely exploration.

Thursday

Walking away from school with Antonio I felt like a celebrity. Kids looked at me as if they were questioning their previous appraisal of my value. I thought Antonio was the greatest person in the world to be friends with me.

We went to my house. We looked around for food in the kitchen. My memories of the kitchen suffer from insufficient amounts of light, like poorly developed film. There was nothing interesting for nine-year-olds except a can of fruit punch powder in the pantry. Sometimes, I closed myself into the pantry and ate spoonfuls of the sugary red powder. It tasted like Pixy Stix only sweeter. I would put a spoonful of it in my mouth and let it dissolve. My hands get jittery just thinking about it. Antonio always said that his mother and father forbid him to have candy or anything white (white bread, white rice, potatoes). I asked him if this had something to do with him being black and he laughed.

He opened the freezer and took out an ice cube. My fridge had an ice-dispenser in the door. He put the ice cube on the grate through which errant water was supposed to drain and pressed down on it until a row of parallel lines was melted into it. Then he sprinkled salt on it and handed it to me and said, "Pretend it's steak." I remember how good the ice tasted.

We headed to his house. Walking down the hill, we talked about Michael Jackson. Antonio almost looked like Michael Jackson. He worshipped him so I worshipped him. We talked about God, too. We liked to talk about God. Antonio's family went to church every Sunday, and I was the strange boy who, at four, provoked discussions among my mother and her friends that I was a witch or a priest in a former life. I wore a cross that I always handled when I was nervous and I prayed by speaking to God as if he were an invisible friend. When Antonio and I talked about God, we asked each other questions like how long did it take prayers to get all the way up to Him and did He really look like an

old man suspiciously similar to Santa Claus. Were Santa Claus and God the same? Also, we talked about *Star Wars*. Actually, I talked about *Star Wars*. Antonio was not allowed to watch movies.

When we got to his house, he went in alone to greet his parents, as was the custom. When he came back down, he was frowning and said he had to do homework. His parents were very nice. The things most parents say through stern expressions or gritted teeth, like “no television until you do your homework,” or, “no, you can’t stay up late tonight,” they said with a warm smile.

I went back home. It was so quiet. I could hear the hum of the fridge.

I went back out.

The street was dark. There weren’t many streetlights. I avoided the park because I always had bad ideas about wide-open places at night. I would rather be in smaller places. It was cold and I was shivering but I didn’t want to go back home. I didn’t like being in the apartment by myself. I didn’t really like being at “home” by myself. It was just this apartment. Lodi was usually very quiet at night. I walked a lot.

Friday

I went with Antonio over to John Paul’s house. John Paul was desperate to impress Antonio. He wanted to show him a ceramic figurine he had painted. It was nicely painted as far as the paint not straying where it shouldn’t, but the colors were bizarre for a figurine. They were the bright, neon colors of billboards and bars, not a little figurine of a chubby girl wearing a raincoat and a comical look of surprise.

“That’s great,” Antonio said through a genuine smile. “It looks really nice.”

“Do you want it?” John Paul sputtered, all of his word crowding to get out of his mouth at once.

“Aw, thanks, John,” Antonio had the biggest smile I had ever seen on a boy. The contrast of his black skin and white teeth was startling and disarming, “but I really don’t know where I could keep it. I really couldn’t.” He managed to make it seem as if it pained him not to accept it, but John Paul was still disappointed.

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Okay, whatever? What do you guys want to do?”

When John Paul turned away, Antonio gave me a sad look.

We played construction in the mud in front of John Paul’s house. He had no construction toys. It reminded me of the time I would get to enjoy on the beach that summer in Florida. Though the mud was like clay, our creations sagged and slowly lost shape, but we had fun. We were wet and orange-brown from the tops of our sneakers to our knees. Playing with John Paul wasn’t the torture I thought it would be. Children at play seem to have a habit of disregarding dislike for each other as if play is a holy thing, a service for which we can overlook petty differences.

Once I returned home, showered and changed, I started watching *The Omen* on television. The kid was creepy. My mother called and said she was going to go for a jog when she got home and asked if I wanted to go. I said yes even though I didn’t really like to jog.

While we jogged, we talked. She gave good talks. It was the chief way she taught me her best lesson, which was to think for myself. I think it was because she also yearned for conversation. She asked me what I thought about everything and kept me talking. I think some parents think they are supposed to do all the talking because they are supposed to teach. It seemed funny to me because we talked while we jogged away from the house but didn’t talk when we were walking, when it seemed more appropriate to do so, on the way back. I always felt better walking away from that apartment than to it. I remember thinking about how rarely we were both home.

Outside, on my own, was the only time I was me. In school, I was a student and whatever the teachers and students thought I was. At home I was someone else. While my mother never seemed

afraid of who I was, she was afraid of my life. She wanted me to have more. She didn't want to know that I wandered around the unstable New Jersey town for many hours out of the day. She didn't want to hear my adventures in the junk yard or down by the river, in places where bad things are supposed to happen to children. Outside I was just me. In between worlds was the only place I could be myself. I enjoyed jogging with my mother because I felt like we were meeting on that middle ground where neither of us were those defined selves. While the two of us walked back to the apartment I wondered if a person could be a runaway even though they never ran away from home. I felt like I ran away every day.

2
ANTONIO

Gliding down the hill on a white
cloudy day, my bike hit a cement curb
when a car passed too close.
Hands and handlebars tangled, I went
down, end over end, and slid on my face
three feet before my body collapsed
like a pile of wet clothes.
I woke and saw a squat,
old woman walking toward me,
and she saw me, bloody

bone and chrome twisted. She turned [away]
on her heels like a broken wind-up toy.
I lifted my shoulders, head hanging,
lifted my bike, we held each other up,
pushed towards my friend's house,
my original destination, not [in] my original,
untwisted bike-frame of mind.

He was at his front door before I was,
I had been screaming his name.
I only heard my voice when I saw his eyes
perfect white marble in a suddenly
deeply lined black face.
He brought my blood to his hands.

3
HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN, HALLWAY TO HELL

~*~

I woke up on Antonio's living room coffee table. It took some time to focus on my mother and her boyfriend, Garret, standing in front of me. She let out a shriek like a dog being kicked, covered her mouth with her hands, and hopped up and down. I asked her to calm down. Garrett demanded she calm down. Her hair has always been the same basic style, blonde, a little bleached with a brown undertone, bangs that hide her prominent Greek forehead. Huge teeth. I saw plenty of teeth when she smiled, but I had never seen this expression before, a mix of panic and a courageous attempt to not react like her son was lying on a coffee table with half a face.

Then I was at the hospital. I don't remember the trip. I don't think doctors and nurses have any idea how intimidating and baleful hospitals can be to children or anyone on gurneys, because they never look up. They are always looking down at the pale faces made to look even more sickly by the pall of fluorescent lights. Meanwhile, the sick and the wounded squint up at them under rows of narrow bands of light.

My memory of it is like a movie montage, those narrow bands of light ticking by as I moved through hallways, people with white masks hovering over me and mumbling directions and vague reassurances,.

I remember snippets of conversation, between a doctor and my mother. "There was a lot of gravel and dirt imbedded in his skin. There was a piece of tooth imbedded in his lip." Their description was more painful than the experience.

The hospital experience was preferable to the month spent confined to “home.” The garage apartment was claustrophobic and dark when I was well and could escape at any time, but trapped, the two tiny, high dirty windows that were framed along the bottom by overgrown grass made it feel like a prison. The left side of my face was bandaged. I could barely see through my left eye, so swollen was the skin around it. My lips were like boiled hot dogs. A yellow-white puss oozed from everywhere. I could only eat baby food, and some of that yellow, slimy baby food began to resemble the puss that I regularly had to clean away from my lips.

The day of the accident was a very grey-white day. The sky was blanketed by clouds, but they weren't storm clouds. It is that effect that seems like a ceiling full of fluorescent lights, stale, spiritless, anxious. I had decided to go to Antonio's to hang out. I got some cookies and put them in a baggy, and some marshmallows and put them in another baggy. I brought a tennis ball so we could play handball at the racquetball courts in the park. I got on my bike and pedaled down the hill, picking up speed, tennis ball in my left hand, snacks in my right, resting the outside of my palms on the handlebars. I rode on the street. As I picked up speed I struggled to brake. As I neared bottom of the hill the road curved to the right. A car came too fast from the other direction weaving into my lane. I turned for the sidewalk but hit the curb and flew over my handlebars.

Highway to Heaven was on television, and I had been watching it faithfully. I liked the idea of God helping people through this man who reminded me a little of my grandfather and my father. I'd watched Michael Landon on *Little House on the Prairie* when I was even younger with my mother; it was a show we made time to watch together. So Landon was a familiar face connected to pleasant memories.

One day an episode aired about a young man, maybe 22, with a massive red scar over the right side of his face. He is scorned by the town, lives with his mother, a small blonde woman, in a small house. The angel, Michael Landon, Jonathan, helps him find love with a pleasant blind girl, because only a blind girl can see through his deformity. The young man's name is Julian. The name of the episode was "The Monster." It was a two-parter. I had two weeks to mull that one over. The character with my name, who also lived in a cave and also had a small, blonde mother, resembled me—what I thought I might look like when I was that age—scar and all.

This was God's way of letting me know what I had to look forward to. I was going to be a freak. I already was a freak. Yellow pus dried into scabby crust on my face.

I had an annoying way of just accepting things. I accepted bad news, I accepted abuse from bullies, I accepted the derision of my mother's boyfriends—that I was too sensitive. I accepted all of these things as if they were facts. I was a bit of a sissy. I was too sensitive. Why didn't I like sports, anyway? I was going to grow up to be a deformed freak who could only win the love of a blind woman, and the townsfolk would try to have me arrested for assault when I tried to kiss the girl. It didn't help that *Highway to Heaven* was mainstream melodrama. It was meant to tug at the heart strings in a very unsubtle way. The viewer was supposed to simultaneously pity and be revolted by this guy. And they were supposed to be a little ashamed by their revulsion. Christian programs are really proficient with shame. The problem for me was I was the boy deserving pity and revulsion. I was nine, but I knew the language of destiny. I had already decided I was going to be Luke Skywalker when I grew up. Now God, through Michael Landon, was telling me to get myself a shiny black cowl and consider being Darth Vader.

I received a care package from my class. The teacher had instructed the class to create their own "get well soon" cards, and the whole bundle was tucked into a big manila envelope and sent home with my homework. Antonio or one of his siblings told them about the experience at his house,

because half of the cards featured me on a rectangle of sloppy brown crayon. It was the artwork of curious nine-year-olds. There were plenty of drops of blood. My round face was half red. Looking back they resembled Egyptian hieroglyphics. The perspective was unnatural. It was meant to represent an event. One of my fellow students had rubbed the red crayon so fully into the face that it no longer had the texture of crayon on construction paper but the smooth, shiny texture of the crayon itself.

~*~*~

One night I dreamt I was in the kitchen looking down the hallway that led up the house proper. The hallway was in the rear of the kitchen. Normally it was choked up by a stack of boxes that almost reached the ceiling, over which I could barely see stairs leading up. But the boxes were gone except for some detritus on the floor, just enough flotsam on the ground, the blood of a fallen creature, or a footprint to remind me of what was supposed to be there. Into the house above I went. The house in my dreams was much too large, dark, and ornately sinister. It was pure gothic terror. Overwhelming winds sucked at the hallways at random intervals. I knew, standing there in black and red hallways that I was in the house of the devil. It belonged to him. He didn't haunt this place. It was rightfully his. I haunted it.

For small children there is no emotional detachment from the boogiemán. He is a certainty. My boogiemán is the devil. He has no form. He is darkness. I was where he hated and howled. Alone in a house too big for reason my terror was unspeakable. The house seemed to breathe in long, wheezing, whistling gusts.

As I explored the house I discovered a massive room and in the center of that room was another room with walls entirely of glass and white curtains inside that prevented me from seeing anything beyond except a warm yellow light made soft and inviting by white curtains and clean glass. I dreamt of this house several more times while I lived there. Sometimes I found the room. Sometimes I didn't.

The room would follow me through the next two decades of my life. It would hide in impossible places.

JOHN CARPENTER EFFECT

~*~

I was returning to New Jersey from summer in Florida with my grandparents, where I'd spent every summer since I was six. My mother picked me up from the airport in her tan sedan. It had a cream colored interior of stiff vinyl. It was a bright, bright New Jersey day as we headed to our new home. Almost from the moment we set out from the airport I had to go to the bathroom.

Just like the summer before and two summers before that, we were going to a new home. She told me that she, Garret, and I had moved to an apartment in a town called Totowa. "It's just like the house on Farnham Ave," she said. I was all for it. "You mean we don't live in the garage anymore?"

I was anxious to see the new place mom described, with picture windows in the living room and a big kitchen, but I was more anxious to go to the bathroom. I kept whining that I needed to go. She assured me that it wasn't much further and that I could hold it. I couldn't. My mother grimaced and rolled down the windows. I apologized. She apologized. I had to greet my new home with a soiled outfit.

The town was pretty and open in a way Lodi wasn't, even the neighborhood where the house on Farnham was. There was more space in Totowa. More space between the houses and the streets, more green lawns between houses. We lived on the second floor of a two-family house. As I try to remember it, it almost seems magical. We lived there so briefly. It feels like a clever illusion. I have very few memories of my mother or Garret being there. Yet I remember the morning that I woke so tired and disoriented that I walked into the bathroom, threw my pajama shirt in the toilet and came

within drops of peeing in the hamper. Why are most of my memories of being alone? Did I edit my mother and Garrett out of memories? I remember playing with Legos, building a space ship that I built often and imagine twin brothers, Zack and Zeke, traveling out among the stars in different ships. I think I was Zack. I hope I was, because Zack is the one that always got the girl. I remember watching the election results as Ronald Reagan got the go-ahead from the American people for a second term. I admired Reagan. He looked and acted like I thought a president should act. I remember the day I thought it was a good idea to shoot arrows over my house into the not-so-large field in the rear.

School was entirely inconsistent. In homeroom I acted like a total ass. I spoke out of turn, loudly, and annoyed my teacher a great deal with all of the eye-rolling he was forced to do. In philosophy class I espoused my belief that we were born already knowing everything, but it was a jumbled chaos in our brains that we had to hurry up and organize. The teacher didn't even bother to explain why I was incorrect. I was chased home a couple of days a week by bullies who were either incredibly out of shape or just not very committed, because they never caught me. And I was chubby and unfit myself. I once cowered under the living room window, glancing up and over at the trio of bullies in my front yard. They were calling me out. Considering they took their sweet time following me, I wonder if they would have known what to do with themselves if I actually went out to meet them.

There were two girls, blonde twins who had a crush on me. How in the middle of this island of behavioral dysfunction did I manage that? They would wave at me from the far ends of halls. On the tarmac schoolyard one would come up to me briefly, engage, then rush back to rendezvous with her sister and share the intel from the brief conversation of "Hi." "Hi." "What are you doing?" "Nothing." "Okay, bye!" "Bye."

I made friends with two other sisters that looked nothing alike who lived up the hill behind my house. They looked like country girls. Both had brown hair. One had her hair in a pony tail; the

younger and shorter wore her hair in pigtails. They came from a large family and a large house made up of many small rooms. I played Atari games with them and they showed me the bunnies they had in cages in their back yard. They were my only real friends when I lived there.

I tried to have a Halloween party, but no one showed up except for the two sisters. My mother tried to salvage the evening by offering to take us to the roller rink. We perked up at the idea, but as the three of us and my mother headed to her car, she realized she had locked her keys in the car. We spent an hour watching and attempting to help my mother work a wire coat hanger around the lock before she gave up and left it for a locksmith to take care of the next day.

Every memory I have of Totowa seems to take place on cool, fall days straight out of a John Carpenter movie. Carpenter is an expert at atmosphere. The beginnings of *Halloween* and *Christine* are like the quintessential fall day with golden sunlight and brown leaves rolling in the air. One single moment acts as ambassador for the whole experience. I walked around on the main street where glossy paper ghosts and Frankenstein's monster, with accordions, crepe paper arms and legs hung from every storefront, and a bakery pumped the smell of candied apples, cider, and sugared donuts into the streets. The weak and festive passing in the streets didn't have a chance. They were pulled in like sailors lured to their deaths by sirens.

I compare every fall atmosphere to moments like that one in Totowa, when the entire planet seemed to turn into a bowl of potpourri.

I returned to Totowa for a visit when I was thirty-one. Everything looked the same but the Halloween spirit wasn't as vivid and earnest. I couldn't get an emotional foothold in the place. In that moment I felt like I hadn't lost my childlike side but Totowa had. And I think that's true of many places in America. Things have gotten slicker. The Disneyfication of the country moves forward with full steam. New apartment complexes have sterling silver uniformity and everything is of similar shape and size. Innocent, kitschy decorations are replaced with Wal-Mart bought goods. You see the same

decorations everywhere. The holiday that embodies chaos is reduced to simple and tasteful. When the leaves turn, people don't make long drives to forested areas to see a smattering of cookie cutter trees ensconced in pockets of tasteful color, swatches of color like small throw rugs besides pieces of furniture. People want to see an overwhelming display, a take-your-breath-away, kick-you-in-the-stomach exhalation of nature's giddy fertility sobering up. Riots of color. Torrential downpours of color. I hate words like "ensconced" and "swatch." I want to look in every direction and see smiling ghosts and howling werewolves looking up from cheap make-up kits displayed next to the candy bars and magazines in convenient stores. I want to see carved pumpkins everywhere. As I grow older and care less and less what the bullies of the world think, it seems the rest of the world is more and more concerned. I want those main streets that are slow-cluttered with holiday decorations that they're very likely a safety hazard and a fire hazard.

~*~*~

We left Totowa over Christmas break; we only made it four months there. We moved to New York City, Pelham Bay in the Bronx, into an apartment the size of a kitchen cupboard. A cranky old lady decided she had some space behind her couch that she felt warranted a tenant.

My bedroom was an eight by eight room with wood-paneled walls and no door. I had to walk through my mother and Garrett's bedroom to get to it. The living room had a picture window that made living in the apartment feel a little like living in a stubby, yawning yard snake. At least we were completely above ground this time. The living room had a shiny hardwood floor and a fireplace. The fireplace softened the blow of sacrificing privacy and space. We only used it a couple of times, though, since Garret decided that it was too messy, and popping bits of wood and floating embers ran the risk of losing us our deposit.

While Totowa came to be my archetypal fall, the Bronx became the archetypal winter night. Winter days had long been quiet lonely escapades—communications between me, a very young child,

the snow, and my imagination. Most memories I have of the Bronx seems to take place on cold, winter nights in a John Carpenter movie. *The Fog*, *The Thing*, *Escape from New York*, Carpenter made streetlights and headlights look menacing and cold. I spent many winter nights playing outside with neighborhood kids. We threw snowballs at passing cars, goaded each other into running up to strangers' doors, ringing their bells and hiding, giggling in the bushes. When they would open their doors and show the mildest of concern at the empty, chilly night, we laughed as if we had psychologically scarred them for life with our mischief.

Whenever I think of my time in Pelham Bay, I think of bad horror movies on played-out VCR tape. Garrett bought a VHS player. It looked like a boombox laid it on its side. There was a flashing clock that declared it was always 12:00 in light blue. I was thrilled to be able to augment the limited possibilities of four channels.

Garrett or my mother would sometimes bring movies home for us to watch after dinner. And sometimes I would go with them to video stores to pick out my own films. This is when I first watched Ralph Bakshi movies, cheap horror movies and really cheap and horrible science fiction adventures. And great horror movies like *The Thing* and *Poltergeist*. After watching *Poltergeist* for the first time I was afraid of clowns for years. Video stores at the time would stock their product face up. They had plenty of space to display the meager selection. I thought it was like discovering Ali Baba's treasure trove.

One night we watched *The Fog*. It gave night times a much needed sinister edge. Living in the Bronx sharpened that edge. But some nights were untouchable. After watching *The Fog*, my mother and I had a desperate need for clam chowder. We went to a restaurant at City Island, which was a short drive. Crossing the bridge into City Island, I felt like I was entering *The Fog*. There was a fog hanging low over the small island town that night. My mother ordered the chowder to go and we ate it in her car parked in front of Eastchester Bay. I thought of the fog rolling in over the bay and bringing

mystery. I understood then that all the greatness of life comes from within us. I made that night fantastic. Of course, my mother made it fantastic. She brought me. We enjoyed each other's company. But it was my fondness for her that made it magical, in a sense. Not her. I think I realized my power because I realized that I make moments wonderful or terrible.

I misappropriated the benefits gained by the video player. I was friends with a girl who lived across the street, and her brother had a massive collection of movies copied from cable and other video cassettes, usually three movies to a cassette. It was the visual version of the scratchy and poppy old record. The quality was horrible. I borrowed movies from him. He gave me one cassette that included a soft-core porn called *The Perils of Gwendolyn*. I watched it late one afternoon when my mother and Garrett were both working. The plot was indecipherable. There is one scene where the hero is captured by a tribe of Amazon women. His pants are ripped off and the women go into a frenzy and throw him down and mime oral sex. I had an urgent sense that I was supposed to be feeling something, but I had no idea what. It was at this moment that my mother walked into the apartment. No, it was that moment that my mother stormed into the apartment, in a different kind of frenzy.

Garrett did everything he could to make me into a man. Besides his tendency to run into my bedroom and jump on my bed whenever I let the alarm clock buzzer carry on too long, he trained me to use utensils properly and would not allow me to eat until I used them just so. He took me to Pelham Bay Park and made me run a mile without stopping. Halfway into that mile my nose began to run. A lap later I was huffing and puffing and begging God to strike either Garrett or me down. When I was done I felt exhilarated and hateful.

I don't know when this happened, it might have been when we lived in the Bronx, or Totowa, or sooner: my mother took me with her to one of her doctor's appointments that were happening with increasing regularity. It was a long drive along roads that curved around the mountains like a crown. I saw up and down the mountainside carpeted green with trees. She told me that she had Multiple Sclerosis, something that makes it harder to walk, sometimes harder to think. It had made her temporarily blind in one eye and restricted her vision in another. What was I supposed to do with this information? Why was this happening? We were driving through a beautiful country and I felt small already.

One of my strongest memories of New York is my mother coming home from work in the evening. She was wearing a black velvety coat with a fur lining that wrapped around her neck. I went to the door to hug her and she was fresh with the winter cold.

She told me that we were moving to Florida to be with Yiayia and Larry, because she needed their help. After that day Garret sat me down one day and tried to explain why he wasn't going with us. I don't remember how I felt about the man. He was big. His blond hair was closely cropped. The way he treated me was never mean. He was the only one of my mother's boyfriends who became emotionally invested in me. He told me that he cared about me but things didn't work out with him and my mother. We were leaving New Jersey and everything in it behind.

THE INTERIMS AND IN-BETWEENS

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Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory.
-Albert Schweitzer

These are my earliest memories.

I'm sitting in a high chair in the middle of my grandmother's kitchen and it's autumn. There is warmth from the kitchen being in use, from many people scattered throughout the house, and there is a cool air coming in from the door leading to the backyard, as people are going in and out, enjoying the crisp, fall cool. There is a mechanical bird hanging in a corner chirp-whirring every once in a while. The chirp-whirring sound is magical. In my memory it is a poem. The scene is both moving and still, quiet, and mingling voices, chirp-whirring. I'm alone. I'm lavished with attention. All at once, like cubism, the many perspectives overlaid and forced into one image. I may be as young as one year, perhaps younger.

I am four. I am wearing a dark brown shirt and darker brown corduroy pants and I'm standing in the living room of my grandparents' house. I spin around until I am dizzy and allow myself to lean into the floor. Giddily, I crawl across the room to the piano under which the family dog, Brandy, a mutt with lovely brown hair, is dozing. I can barely reach him, but I reach, and he grumbles at me. I go into the kitchen, open the fridge door, take a block of mozzarella cheese from the dairy compartment in the door and tear a few strings off and put it in my mouth.

I've tried going further back. I've tried arranging the dream-like memories and these two fall at the beginning of the initially sparse list of memories. But I'm lucky because these two memories are all I need to understand the life of a human being. Just being. Those little moments when life washes around us and when we look back it is poetry, a handful of images superimposed on what feels like a moment but can be a few minutes waiting for a bus, or an afternoon lying beside the water, or years waiting for life to make us move.

For a few years I visited my father's side of the family in South America, a couple of times for Christmas, a couple of times for the summer. The seasons are reversed and the character of the holidays seems a little different because of it. Over Christmas, when it was smoldering and humid, they celebrated by lighting candles and placing them in paper lanterns about a foot across and letting them drift into the sky. Many people did this at about the same time and the result was an artificial constellation of yellow, flickering stars that drifted over the city of Pereira.

My memories of Colombia are limited. I remember my father warning me not to sleep with my mouth open or mice would crawl into my mouth. An uncle threw a mouse that had been caught in a trap out the living room window into the street below. The aunts tried to frighten me with stories of "el Diablo," their version of the boogeyman, but my Spanish was never very good and no one was committed to really teaching me, so I was more confused than frightened. I remember them making horns with their fingers and trying to look menacing.

I remember walking for what felt like an hour to a nearby public pool with my father and several cousins and aunts. The pool was enormous and there were so many people in it that it felt like I was in a mall when I was in the middle of the pool and navigating around strangers.

My father had a friend who owned a ranch house in the middle of a banana plantation. The house was sprawling and lined with a Spanish tile patio. There was a pool with a small slide. I was five. I swam in it with other Colombian children around my age. I don't think I understood a single one of them, but body language and miming was more than enough for us to have fun. After the pool, as the sun went down, we played hide and seek. I chased a pretty girl around the entire patio to the rear of the house. She turned a corner and waited for me. I ran right into her. She caught me and planted a solid kiss on my lips. She opened my mouth with her tongue and what I experienced was both terrible and blissful. It was so wet and aggressive. When I went to bed I was feverish and exhausted. I am still in love with that girl and I never saw her again.

My grandmother and grandfather, Yiayia and Larry, moved to Florida when I was six. Yiayia is Greek for grandmother. My grandfather didn't want me to call him the Greek word for grandfather, which is papou, and he wanted me to think of him as my friend, so he encouraged me to call him Larry. His name was Spiro. Larry was somehow an American approximation.

They moved to a 55+ retirement community. A quiet place, their house had a small lake in the back. It was much smaller than their home in Oradell. The house, the houses surrounding, the town around, all were set in Florida colors, pastel green, pastel blue, pink, lots of pure white. New Jersey is a land of natural colors, both ugly and beautiful. Their house there was brick red and brown. The interior ran through with brown. My bedroom there was brown like a cozy cave. I remember once lying on the floor watching specks of dust drift slowly through a ray of light so bright and solid I thought I would feel it when I ran my fingers through it. And I did.

During the summer many of the homes were visited by grandchildren from up north, so when we visited the community pool, there were often other children my age. I have gone to the community

pool other times of the year and it could be ghostly quiet, but during the summer it is alive with the laughing and hollering of children.

I made friends with a cute girl named Debbie, whose aunt and uncle lived ten houses down the street. We had very similar, quirky sense of humor. We went to the pool and the beach and several amusement parks together. We borrowed her aunt's cassette recorder and made comedy skits that we thought would be perfect for *Saturday Night Live*, but they consisted of things like one of us pretending to read the news while the other pretended to be in the bathroom taking a very noisy and challenging shit. They didn't get much more high-brow than that.

Sometimes we're in motion. We're happy, frenetic energy. Get dizzy, play with the dog, eat a treat—this is life why, bother worrying about anything else. Sometime we're pressed chicken on a conveyer belt. Dress, work, consume; groceries, gas for car, get to post office before it closes. Sometimes we dally.

Hanging out with Debbie was one of the things I most looked forward to during my summers. I usually arrived in Florida days or weeks before she did. When the day came that I knew she should be arriving I would keep returning to the window in my bedroom and look to see if her aunt and uncle had returned from the airport with her. I checked so often that I usually saw when she arrived. They were too far to have possibly made out their expressions, but I was giddy to see them go through the mundane acts of unpacking the car, carrying things into the house.

One summer, as we were getting older, the tenor of our friendship started to shift. We started hanging out with other kids in the neighborhood and being less innocent. One day we went to the beach, her, me, and my grandfather and grandmother. I had a yellow raft, a two-person dingy—huge for us. We turned it over and came up under the water in the air pocket between the water and the raft. We had the whole world to ourselves. We said nothing, just looked at each other. Her face looked orange in the light, almost cartoonish, but radiant. The tense moment was dispelled the way such

moments are dispelled. Someone cracked a stupid joke. Perhaps I tickled her. Perhaps she dove down and disappeared, as if a mermaid disappearing forever.

After leaving the beach, on the way back home, my grandparents needed to “open up” a friend’s house. They lived in Florida part of the year and my grandfather opened the hurricane shutters, turned on the fridge and appliances and air conditioner. While they did that Debbie and I walked around behind the house. While we were alone Debbie grabbed me by my shirt and whispered coarsely, “Kiss me you fool.” It was my second French kiss. After the kiss I was a little afraid of her. She had a new power, a new strength.

Plumbing the depths of childhood memories is like dream interpretation. It’s chaotic and nonsensical, but it’s the closest we can get to who we are under all the bumper stickers that accumulate on our chassis over the years. My memories have been problematic ever since I began a hate-hate relationship with my memory in high school. Trying to remember has been like spelunking a dark cave at best and, at worst, like trying to understand a long dead culture from the remains of a dinner plate and a sandal. Of course I didn’t spend my childhood alone, but sometimes it seems like the bulk of my memories are just of me, by myself. I’m convinced that if I can uncover more memories that include other people, I will be able to break from this isolationist mentality and become a more socialized individual.

But memories are accessories we wear. Good or bad, they become heavy and burdensome. They shake and jingle and constantly make us aware of them as we try to move through the now. They make us self-conscious of our movements. Be careful moving your arm too fast or your loose-fitting watch might slip off. Don’t bring your wrist too close to shirt or the bracelets might snag the fabric. Is it saying something about the nature of depression that my memories, good or bad, seem to weigh me down? Good memories are sad because they are artifacts of the past. Bad memories are depressing because they are mechanisms of the present.

My mother and father divorced when I was four years old. My mother and I moved in with her parents, Yiayia and Larry, in their house in Oradell, New Jersey. It was where my mother grew up and I spent much of my first six years. There always seemed to be people there. My grandfather had worked as a bartender at Lincoln Center. Not only did we have a large Greek family, but he had many friends. They always seemed to be entertaining. After that we lived in Hasbrouck Heights. I remember carving pumpkins in that kitchen and rolling around in my blanket on the living room floor one Saturday. We lived in Rutherford, off the same street and a few blocks away from where William Carlos Williams lived. I was a little hoodlum. There was a parking lot behind the apartment building with meters. Many of them were broken and you could slip your fingers, if you were a child, into the change compartment and retrieve a few dollars in coins. I had a babysitter who looked like a librarian from the '50s and could do a spot-on impersonation of Edith Bunker. I stole candy from a drug store on Williams' street. I was so excited about it that later the same day I returned and stole another package of candy. I was spotted by an older boy who chased me on his bicycle for several blocks. I never stole again.

It was in Rutherford, off Williams' street, that I learned I would be a writer. I was being punished for I don't know what. Whatever the crime, the punishment my mother deemed suitable was for me to write, "I will not... do that bad thing" 200 times. I sat in the living room writing at the coffee table and probably smiling serenely. The punishment was like peaceful meditation. The pleasure of just watching my stubby fingers carve out the words was absorbing. Writing is prayer. Only God is praying through me.

We can't ignore the accessories and make them go away. And it wouldn't do to lose track of things that inform who we are unless we want to risk losing touch with our identity to a point that we

wonder about our own reactions to things with the same confusing and curiosity that we would react to a perfect stranger.

I have very few memories of my father that are in context. Most of my memories of him are isolated. If I imagine my life as a collection of photo albums—here is the album of Lodi; here is the album of New York—he is absent. The pictures of him are separate, in a box, a stack of pictures that I can't place. My mother told me that the reason I never saw him was because he lived too far away. My father lived in a spartan apartment in Lyndhurst for years. As my mother and I moved from place to place to place, I would infrequently visit him at the same apartment, decorated much as it was when my mother lived there and had done most of the decorating. One afternoon I watched an apartment building burn from his kitchen window. It was maybe two blocks away. It was so quiet. There was no sense of danger or crisis, just a building on fire. The flames were translucent in the sunshine. There wasn't much to do at my father's place. For fun he took me to visit his friends and occasionally our family and he would talk for hours with these people in ideas and often a language that I couldn't understand.

I spent the occasional weekend with my Uncle John and Aunt Fay. John was my grandfather's brother. They had three daughters who were a little younger than my mother. I spent a lot of time over there either with the whole family for gatherings or on my own for weekends. Uncle John had HBO. I watched *The Godfather* and Jack Nicholson movies with him. Through a generous bit of timing I was lucky enough to watch MTV premier with "Video Killed the Radio Star" by The Buggles. When MTV started, it was limited to a few markets. Fort Lee, New Jersey, where my Uncle John lived, five minutes below the Washington Bridge, is the center of a handful of news stations and one of the first markets MTV covered. The first few years of MTV seemed to be Rod Stewart on high rotation, but it

beat the hell out of the train wreck of reality television that MTV would eventually turn in to. My uncle John had a strawberry patch behind his house. I liked spending time there.

In Florida I had time to read for pleasure. The librarians loved me. I would leave with a stack of books so high I could barely see over it when I carried them. The librarians regularly waived the maximum book limit for me. I read young adult adventures, Encyclopedia Brown and the Hardy Boys, non-fiction books that could have been the research for every episode of *Mysteries of the unexplained*. I read about psychic phenomenon, the Bermuda Triangle, the Loch Ness Monster, UFOs, Bigfoot, the Jersey Devil, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, anything out of the ordinary. I dreamt that UFOs were flying around my house and Bigfoot was hiding in the trees behind the lake. I needed desperately to live in a world populated by monsters and magic. I still do.

Larry spoiled me. If we went toy shopping, and I couldn't decide between two toys, he would get both. I have a feeling that I took advantage of this some times. He was happy to do it. At night when my grandmother would sit in the living room watching *Murder She Wrote*, he and I would lie in bed and watch *Benny Hill*. I would lie with him and watch Benny Hill make an ass of himself. Larry always smelled of Oreos late at night. He regularly told me I was his favorite person in the world. "I'm with you, kid," he said. Once, when I got older, he explained. "I'm with you, kid,' means that I'm on your side. No matter what happens. I'm always on your side."

6
FLORIDA

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During the summer of my eleventh birthday, my mother and I moved to Boynton Beach, Florida, a town away and ten minutes north of Yiayia and Larry. We moved into an apartment complex as it was being built around us. Our apartment was the first completed. The surrounding structures went up like beige weeds in the months that followed. When I started the sixth grade I could walk most of the way to school in a straight line, across grass, sandy lots, and large concrete foundations with rebar sticking out here and there like weeds growing through cracks in the sidewalk, or rust colored sawgrass. By the end of the first year I had to weave around apartment buildings. I could have taken the road, but what's the sense in that?

These were not the big apartment buildings of New Jersey I was used to. In Jersey, apartments are either large homes converted into smaller apartments, or large brick buildings like squat monuments with ten plus floors. In West Palm Beach County no buildings were higher than a few floors. Apartment buildings were usually two or three floors, and each floor had four apartments. There were natural and man-made lakes everywhere. The landscape was flat. The only thing resembling hills were highway overpasses.

In Jersey the next town over was a different world that I never visited. When I traveled with my mother I had no concept of how far things were. In Florida I started to get a sense of these adjacent towns. Maybe this is one of the lessons we learn as we grow up; we *realize* that different worlds continue to exist when we are not in them, and then they start to make sense and take place in space in relation to each other. As we get older boundaries begin to blur, become hard to define.

When I first moved to Florida my stomach problems began. The first six months I went to school, I had a stomach ache every morning. My mother would spend the next ...23 years... *observing* how often I get sick. Observing the way someone with a debilitating condition observes as a stranger strays into their territory, territory they know well. I don't remember ever getting sick in New Jersey.

My bedroom was small. Just enough room for a twin bed, desk and dresser against the side wall, TV in front of the bed. A window beside the bed and the desk looked over a small lake. All the furniture in the room was a light toast brown. I spent many hours sitting at the desk writing by the dying sunlight. I've always enjoyed watching the shadows of the pencil moving across the paper in natural light. I leaned really close to the paper. The pencil looked like a monolith.

My mother dated a man that looked like a wrestler. He was Italian with a loud personality and obnoxious tattoos. He played too rough. He had M.S. also, but while my mother was showing stiffness in the way she walked and encountered more and more limitations on her mobility, he ran around like a hairy, tattooed teenager.

He had two kids. They were two and four years younger than me. My mother tried to be nice and pay attention to them, often at my expense. She regularly insisted that I be really nice to them. If I ever complained about them, she insisted that I play nice and let them have their way. Their cousin visited for about a week during the summer. He and the brothers picked on me constantly and I did nothing. But I was used to that, my mother had only just formalized it in this case. I was bullied, picked on and taken advantage of by friends. It was behavior I was used to but had no real response for. I didn't know my size or strength. I didn't have any connection to my personal power or self-respect.

One day toward the end of his stay, I was watching television in my room. He came in and stood between me and the TV and asked me why I let him and his cousins treat me the way they did? I'd like to say that I remember saying "I don't know." But I don't even know if I said that.

By then the dream had morphed a little. It stopped being the hallway behind the kitchen in the garage apartment in Lodi and was a variety of permutations of a haunted house in Rutherford.

When I lived in Rutherford there was a house, the stereotypical haunted house. I had no idea if anybody lived in it. The apartment building was right off of a main street, lined with little shops and offices. Go down the street in the other direction and both sides of the street are houses. Typical New Jersey houses, everyone different. The houses on the right side offset by walls and steep lawns leading up from the sidewalk. This house looked like a cross between a typical home and the *Psycho* house. The windows watched. I started learning my way around even as the layout began to change and become more complicated. I started getting more comfortable there. I don't know how to explain getting comfortable with discomfort, yet people do it all the time, don't they?

And every time I would find myself in a room, deep in the house, alit with golden light and windows. I braved this horrible place to find that respite.

MILD TO MODERATELY SEVERE

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When I was twelve, I learned I have a hearing problem. My hearing disability was labeled “mild to moderately severe.” I did not receive a reasonable answer to the question, “What is ‘moderately severe’?”

Many things in life can seem moderately severe. Love, for example, betrayal in friendships, bicycle accidents. I assumed my hearing must have some quality of interchangeability and drama like these things.

I remember the lab. Audiologists call it “testing room.” Twelve-year-olds go ahead and call it the *laboratory*. The way to make something less scary for a young boy is to make it impossibly sinister. I sat in a *chamber* (booth) barely wide enough to accommodate my shoulders with a small window between me and the audiologist and his testing equipment. It looked like an inside-out recording studio. It was the ultimate in anxiety technology designed by people that thought the word “test” itself didn’t conjure enough anxiety for children. There should be gadgets. I wore headphones. I had to stare straight ahead. If I leaned forward, looked at the knobs and switches the audiologist was manipulating, he would aggressively clear his throat and look up at me.

I didn’t know what was going on. I’m sure my mother had warned me, told me something like, “We’re going to get your hearing tested, honey.” Do I need to study? But who remembers things that they don’t understand? I would find out many years later that they already knew I had some hearing loss. (If you never have it to begin with, how is it a “loss”?)

The headphones were tight. I wanted to adjust them but was afraid to earn more throat-clearing. I raised my hand every time I heard a sound. I raised my hand every time I thought I heard a sound. Some tones were high and sharp. Some sounded like a slide whistle. Some sounded like the low-pitched electro-gong sound I often hear when tinnitus kicks in. Some tones were so quiet it was like I was imagining them. I was always tentative, like I wanted the credit for participation but was afraid if I raised my hand too high or too quickly I'd discover there was a very low-hanging, fast spinning fan. I began to sweat. I felt the moisture on the headphones.

After the test, he sat in his cramped office and leaned against his desk and told us—my mother, grandfather, and grandmother, who were standing above me—that my hearing loss was mild to moderately severe. This meant nothing to me. I heard the words, mild, moderate, severe, and thought, I have every kind of hearing. In a technical sense I was right. He suggested a hearing aid, a small device, barely noticeable. I had a Transformer that could change from a tape recorder into a robot. Too bad the hearing aid couldn't do that. Could I have a bionic ear? If a whole person was worth six million, how much would one ear cost? This is the sort of thing I thought about to avoid one particular thought. Does this mean I'm handicapped?

He injected cold foam into my ear that expanded, pressing against my ears, and hardened. When he removed it he showed it to me, Jack Hannah showing off one of his exotic animals. It looked like a tiny artificial heart.

~*~

I played a lot of sports, entirely against my will. Three seasons of baseball, half a season each of soccer (I guess my mother couldn't bear to watch my plump, tall and awkward form trot back and forth across the soccer field), and three games of basketball (the heat on the outdoor basketball courts nearly made me pass out). Baseball was a keeper; it was just the place for the physically awkward

children that apparently needed something to do so the parents could have some free time. I was not the most awkward child on the team. Just by the looks of me, there was every reason to suspect I might be a “normal” kid who was good at sports. Not weird. I was usually the biggest kid in the room. I didn’t look nerdy or geeky or shy or awkward, yet I was all of them. “Normal” kids quickly found this out and found out that I didn’t like sports, didn’t know who was on what team, who won the game last night. The eighties were not a good time for nerds or geeks. This lifestyle was not yet celebrated for its true glory. None of us even suspected its glory.

My coaches tried doggedly to teach me how to hit, to take advantage of my size. I was a passable hitter, but they were frustrated by my lack of enthusiasm and focus. They gave up on me. I didn’t hear most of what was called out across the distances of the field and this just made me distance myself more. Jocks were never comfortable with kids like me. We didn’t have the vocabulary to communicate with each other. So I was relegated to the outfield, far enough away from the action. It was peaceful. It was not an unbearable situation. There were many awkward kids on all of the teams. Some kids played because they wanted to, some desperately. Some, though, played because their parents wanted them to. I would have preferred to stick with the usual babysitter, the television, if I had the choice.

Television didn’t taunt me when I was up at bat. It didn’t ridicule me when I missed a fly ball. It didn’t make me wait for hours after the game ended, as all the players and parents and spectators disappeared, before picking me up to return home. My mother usually didn’t watch my games. She needed time to do personal things, and I needed to exercise and socialize. But she usually wasn’t on time to pick me up. So I’d spend half an hour to an hour, but on some rare occasions much more, what always felt like hours to me, waiting.

I haunt the perimeter of a baseball field
Leaning against a light pole like a limp flag
Lights gone out, spiked cleats crunching
The gravel that swallows up moonlight as I rock.
I still wear the glove, the rough inside
Softening the skin of my sweaty hand.
The sound of the gravel grinding under my cleats
On a night that is neither cool nor warm, I watch
The headlights of cars moving left and right
On the main thoroughfare. I wish I had a watch
I could check with compulsive frequency.
Quick glances at cars that turn
Onto the street leading to the fields
Start to feel like a nervous tick. Glance.
Glance. All the cars continue on
Pass the field into darkness. There are homes beyond,
lit up and full with movement. I am a ghost.
She is perpetually on the way.

I'm glad for this experience. I want to believe I am. I had played a game I had no enthusiasm for and then I played at thinking. I want to believe I'm a better person because of this idle time of reflection, that I was learning what fisherman and runners already know, but I spent a lot of that time wondering why I was alone in a parking lot. Did I deserve to be alone in a parking lot? Did I deserve to be alone?

~*~

I met a boy named Geza not long after we moved to Stonehaven Drive. He was a few inches shorter than me with carrot red hair and ginger skin. He and his mother came to America from Brazil when he was young. Geza had a mild temperament and in a lot of ways he behaved like an adult. He had a soft voice which intimidated me because it lingered near the limits of my hearing, but his voice was deep and he enunciated in a clear way that made me comfortable. I usually didn't have any problem hearing him. This was important.

Geza lived three apartment buildings down from mine. We had sleepovers. Geza and a friend from where he lived before had made up a role-playing game. He created a bunch of bad guys with stats that looked like the back of a baseball card. The stats were "strength" and "dexterity" and "hit points" among other things, that determined how much damage a bad guy did when he hit, how good his chances were of hitting, and how much damage he could take when hit. He taught me how to play it. We created characters of our own with their own stats that improved the more bad guys we killed. When he saw how much I liked the game he enthusiastically suggested we learn how to play Dungeons and Dragons. I had to buy a couple of books and special dice, 4, 8, 12, and 20 sided dice. It was like playing a fantasy novel. I was enthralled. We could create any type of character we wanted.

It was Geza and me at first. Eventually we met two other boys in the neighborhood. Primo moved into the building next to mine for our seventh grade year, and John lived in the next complex over. We became a circle of friends, Primo, a spirited Italian boy with blonde hair, and John, an

intellectual, tall as me but lanky with straight, thin dark brown hair. We all played Dungeons and Dragons together and learned how to skateboard.

I preferred Dungeons and Dragons to sports. And I liked skateboarding because I didn't have to compete with anyone, even though Primo frequently took note of the measure of our progress. I wasn't the best skateboarder because I was thick and awkward, but I could do things that impressed others and made me feel giddy. I could ride and turn on the nose of the board—whichever side was facing the direction I was skating, and essentially look like I was spinning on the board as I rode.

We learned to skateboard together. We bought boards to ride and videos to watch and built a ramp for stunts. All the pro skaters were giving themselves colorful skate names so we did the same. I called myself "Beast" because I was just starting to learn what it meant to be the biggest. When other kids threatened one of my friends, they stood next to me and the threatening glare in the eyes of the provoker would turn into self-doubt. They joked that I was adopting the name beast because I looked and smelled like one. Primo was the arrogant one. His nickname, "King," was given to him because, the joke was, he thought he was one. Delusions of grandeur and all that. As time went on and he matured and his delusions mellowed, we changed it to Prince. John called himself "Reverend" because he liked the sound and he fancied himself the spiritual type. He and I talked a lot about religion and science and metaphysics. Geza nicknamed himself "Mouse." This probably stemmed from his modest and unassuming nature.

D&D led me to so many other things. I learned about mythology and fairytales. I read fantasy novels like *The Lord of the Rings*. I ate the stuff up. On Saturday nights we played, usually at my house. We set up our stuff on my dining room table. Each of us had a stack of rule books and papers with our character's stats and the weapons we had discovered or bought on past adventures. We took turns as Dungeon Master. The DM ran the game, told the story, rolled the dice for all the antagonists in

the game. We usually played until after midnight and my mother shooed us all to my room so she could go to bed.

We often played until the sun rose and we turned off the lights and opened the blinds. We play right on until the mall would open, sometimes, rushing through the end of the quest or ending the session to continue the next week, and we go to the mall and get junk food and play video games.

I spent as much time making up characters as I did playing the game. I was daydreaming. Tailoring alter egos that could be all the things I felt I wasn't. I created a character I named Radaric Forbadin, mighty elf, a fighter and sorcerer destined to become king of the realm. I created many characters, but Radaric was my most personal and favorite. Radaric could not be stopped. The dice determined the outcome: who hit, who missed, whether or not a trap was discovered and disarmed or triggered, killing everyone in range, but through Radaric I made dice-proof choices. I developed his history, his skills. I pored over the books. I learned the weaknesses of the monsters, the ranges of the traps. Radaric traveled to the towns with names like Swordmarsh and Sabrehaven that I created and purchased the contingencies that bailed him out of every circumstance. If one of the others were DMing, they were trying to attack me, and I was laughing spritely and pointing out the evidence on my character sheet that proved I had been prepared for just such a sticky situation.

And my friends did not mock me, much. They had their own archon avatars, their own imaginary kings, warrior poets, mischievous rogues, antiheroes with grand destinies. We fought together and against each other. I created adventures and villains for the times I would DM. I realized that imagination was not a childish thing. I realized that even though I was socially awkward, my ideas were worth something, and there were other people that enjoyed them. My friends sat patiently as if time was standing still as I told the story.

Many people have cried out against the evils of Dungeons and Dragons, saying it is a gateway to more sinister things. In the late 70s a kid played the game and then went crazy. He thought he was

his character and there were real monsters out to get him. They make a connection between a game and one child's dissociative disorder but fail to make a connection between the game's elaborate rules and immersive game-play and the fact that most people that play the game have above average intelligence and excellent performance in school, not to mention improved literacy.

D&D did open me up to sinister things. I began to explore different religions and mythologies. I tried each on like a winter coat and walked around in it for a few weeks, part of the breakfast buffet. Norse religion, Thor, the thunder god, Odin the allfather, the one-eye who hung from a windswept tree and learned wisdom. I learned Thursday came from "Thor's Day," and every Thursday of that summer there was a thunderstorm. I explored Eastern religion. Buddhism, Siddhartha, the awakened one, seeking to save sentient beings from their own desire. Seeking to save me from the desire to masturbate every time I managed to watch an R rated movie on cable in the middle of the night. Hinduism, eternal law, karma. What goes around comes around. If you make fun of a kid because he's too shy to fight back, you're going to be making the minimum wage cleaning rich people's toilets when you're 35, and if you're constantly picked on when you're a kid, you'll be rich enough some day to drive a Jaguar and pay someone to clean your toilets. I explored black magic and learned the names of devils, and considered the moral dilemmas involved with cursing people. Even though I was bored with Greek mythology, being Greek and familiar with the Greek pantheon and not in the mood to retread explored territory, I explored Greek philosophy. I learned about the daemon, part of the soul, or identity, that guided and informed the soul of its destiny. I wanted Radarc to be my daemon.

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There was about a month's wait between my testing and the mold made of my ear canal and when I was told that the hearing aid was ready. We returned to the audiologist. I sat beside his desk. My mother, grandmother and grandfather sat in a semi-circle beside me. The hearing aid was the color of the "flesh" colored crayon that was still available back then. The audiologist slid the cold plastic in

my ear and switched it on and my face became tight. The audiologist picked up a blank sheet of paper like it was a piece of cake and began to crumble it up and—

Paper crumbling sounds like fireworks and popping bubble wrap.

—their eyes all lit up, a reflection of my reaction.

Below the machine-groan, air conditioners make a sound like a heaving, contented, constant sigh. They talked to each other about adult things, audiologist things. I heard everything and paid attention to nothing.

Sound rumbles around in the chest like a running engine. Air slips through the lips, between the teeth, it skips over the tongue like stones skip over a smooth surface of water. We thanked the audiologist. He beamed as he said goodbye to me.

Pant legs zip zip zip as people walk. Shoe's scuff along the carpet. Sometimes the socks squeak on the inside lining.

The wind makes sounds as it touches *anything*. The wind is like a capricious friend. It tells the world everyone's story. It tells everything's secrets, the corners of the buildings, the grass, the trees, branches, leaves. It makes windows and doors creak in their frames.

Back home, some time later, Geza was over and I showed him the hearing aid. I had him go into a different room and speak softly and I shouted back what he said as if testing spy gear.

Breath makes noise. Chewing makes noise.

Sound has reach. Reach has power. I could hear someone a few feet in front of me. Normal people can hear someone very far away. When people tried to talk to me from too far away, from across the baseball field, I always felt they were foolish. Why are you trying to do this? They had a power I did not and that I hadn't known existed.

I would not wear the hearing aid in practical situations. I absolutely refused to wear them to school. How could my mother be so cruel as to expect me to wear them to school? I already had a scar

on my face that earned me the name Wartnose. I had cracked front teeth that made me feel like a gibbering slob. Whatever other otherness about me I couldn't even identify earned ridicule long before those recent details even existed, and now she wanted me to wear a hearing aid? I could hear what I needed to hear.

People talk about you when you're not looking. I didn't want to hear that, too.

I knew people who wore hearing aids. I kept them company in New Jersey when I nine and ten, hanging around at the Boys Club. They talked like they had a mouth full of toothpaste. They were mentally handicapped, and so thankful that I would sit with them and talk to them that I always felt guilty when I didn't. To this day, this very *now*, even though I'm miles away from the pain, even though I wear hearing aids that are MORE obvious because I want it to be right out there in the open so I don't feel the temptation to hide it, I will still argue that when we see people wearing glasses we automatically assume they are smart and when we see people wearing hearing aids we automatically assume they are slow. I've met people who wore what looked like prescription glasses when they had no actual impairment because they wanted to look smarter. Hearing aids are still equated with the old and the mentally challenged.

The reason my hearing loss is mild to moderately severe: Low frequency tones I can hear at near normal levels. As the pitch increases my hearing loss becomes more profound. I can hear people talking and yet not always understand them because the higher pitched sounds of tongue and teeth etching blunt formless words into intricate, complicated language is often not loud enough for me to grasp. Most people talk loudly enough that there is no problem, but with some people I just get the acoustical clumps of clay. A code that I have to use context and body language to crack or else it is the litany of "What?Heh?I'msorry?Comeagain?Canyourepeatthat?"I wore them once in a while, as a private novelty. When I wanted to eavesdrop on my mother's conversations or when I wanted to watch

television late at night when my mother was sleeping. I wore the hearing aids when we played Dungeons and Dragons.

8
MIDDLE SCHOOL

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The first few years in Florida were like a breakfast buffet at a cheap motel. I sampled many things and very few of them were of any real quality but my options were limited, being a young boy with tons of intellectual curiosity but real and imagined limits.

My mother had several suitors that, if I were old enough, would have made me wonder where the heck she spent her time in order to meet this wide an array of people. One was a self-satisfied lawyer, another a weatherman, somewhat of a local celebrity at the time. There was the body-builder with M.S. The rest are forgotten, probably by her as well. She was pretty, always looked young for her age, but she had a progressive and debilitating disease, and worse, she had a kid. This made for many brief relationships.

My grandfather told me to be patient with the situation. My mother needed someone to keep her company and to be the man of the house, he said. I didn't, though.

I explored different religions. I read about the Greek and Norse gods and decided Thor was a worthy patron saint. That there was a thunderstorm every Thursday. Of course, there were thunderstorms almost every day of the week that summer. I explored witchcraft and Satanism. My heart wasn't in it, but I came to understand something of the difference between the two, and I found Satanism interesting for the same reason I found horror movies interesting. It hinted at supernatural element of life. But the devil was still the only thing I was truly afraid of when it came to the realm of

things that lurk in the dark. I wasn't afraid of ghosts. I had no boogiemans but the devil. My spiritual exploration was parallel to eating at the different fast food vendors in the mall and calling that an exploration of ethnic foods. Still, it was important to me. I wanted to feel like I understood things better than your average pre-teen.

I began to understand sexuality, also, if only in that clumsy and crass way of young boys. My friends talked about sex as if their exploits numbered in the triple digits, despite the fact that none of us had lost our virginity. But making out was a constant. Finger fucking was the cosmopolitan taboo. My third French kiss was with a small pretty girl named Michelle. We made out on her parents' water bed one day while they were at work and we were skipping school. While we clumsily and sloppily made out I slipped my finger into her stretchy cotton skirt and into her. The main impression of those early experiences was that everything was so very wet. I was too afraid and anxious to truly enjoy it. Sadly the rest of the world wasn't moving at that reasonable pace. A friend of mine lost his virginity to his cousin before his thirteenth birthday. And Michelle had a son less than a year later.

In middle school I finally started to dress for myself. By "for myself" I mean I stopped wearing what my mother wanted and started wearing what everyone else wore. Sometimes. There was a girl I had a crush on named Laneeta. She liked me too, but not enough to accept me without some minor alterations. She pointed out the sort of look that she needed from her friends and peers. I whined and cajoled my mother into taking me to JCPenney to get some new shirts and pants. The very next day I wore red pants to school with a red and yellow shirt combo. I felt like a ruby red grapefruit. The girls actually hooted and hollered appreciatively when my outfit debuted in our first class, and Laneeta was now willing to openly date me. I barely processed this information. I never wore the outfit again. It hung in my closet for a few years after that until we moved and I made it disappear.

When we first moved to Boynton Beach, the town was one big cow pasture. Within the first year a mall went up about a mile away. Then a movie theatre was built across the street from the middle school. One night I wanted to go see the movie *Howard the Duck*, based loosely on an adult comic book. But my mother wouldn't let me see it because she heard on the news that it had "sexual innuendo." I went to see it anyway. As far as I could tell the only sexual innuendo was Lea Thompson in lingerie making out with a midget in a duck costume. Sexual innuendo? My mother wouldn't let me see this because of supposed sexual innuendo? At that age sexuality was either too implicit for me to even understand, or it was clumsily explicit, like Primo's sexual Zen Koan's, like, "It's not the face that you fuck, but the fuck that you face."

I had watched *9½ Weeks* a few days earlier on cable. *9½ Weeks* did nothing for me. I had no idea what was going on, Mickey Rourke looked weird, and Kim Basinger looked too much like my mother and seemed pretty close to the same age for me to dig her sexually. However, late at night channel 29, a local cable station, showed reruns and news during the day and bad movies at night. It would eventually become Fox 29 and start carrying *The Simpsons*, show that I loved and would not fully understand for years. Many of the movies were racy, with nudity and soft-core porn level sex scenes. It always seemed like the sex was veiled by demure camera angles and lots of shadow. This totally got me. I would lock the door, turn the volume down really low, and sit on the floor inches from the television. This is when I discovered masturbation. I had no idea what I was doing to myself and what my body was doing to me but it was the best thing ever.

Middle school kids and high school kids alike hung out in a wooded area behind the movie theatre. They drank and smoke and listened to rock and roll and heavy metal. I hung out sometimes too. I always looked older than my age and I was just starting to realize that I was also big for my age, so I started hanging out back there with a new level of confidence and some excitement. My

confidence wasn't much. My confidence still isn't much. But I felt giddy at the idea of hanging out rather than nervous and completely reserved. I always liked the rebellion from the mainstream. I think I felt that the mainstream rejected me, so I belonged with the counterculture. It was always a good match. The counterculture has always been more self-conscious and critical and more willing to dismiss with fads. I'd never got the hang of fads before. I chafed against the idea of constantly having to remake myself to fit trends. Sure, people were still following fads. While the high school kids wore black concert Ts that they purchased at record stores or actual concerts, middle school kids had to take white undershirts and draw replications of band logos and hostile looking skulls because we didn't have the money, and our parents weren't willing to buy us shirts with guns and skeletons on them. But that crude simulacrum was acceptable. A preppy couldn't buy a generic polo shirt and use a magic marker to draw the logo of a popular brand on the breast. The idea is ridiculous. You have to spend the money on that trendy brand name. For the counter cultures, the headbangers, the punks, the point was to announce to the world your beliefs and the bands that turned you on. You advertised your sensibilities. The preppies merely announced their ability to simulate the person walking ahead of them in line.

The day that I skipped school and went over to Michelle's house, a friend came with me and sat in the living room. Michelle and I became bored with making out, and we were young enough that moving further seemed too intimidating. She got dressed and I went into the living room where my friend waited, watching television. I mimed a baseball player hitting a ball and running the bases, pantomiming that I had gone "all the way." I don't know why I did this. A day or two later he must have told her about it or asked her if we did it because she dumped me through him and asked me to return a couple of her personal effects through him. Maybe he was jealous. I don't know. I got what I deserved. I watched from a few blocks away while he went to her house. She opened the door, took her things, and exchanged a couple of words with him before closing her door again.

There was another girl who liked me, and asked me more than once to go to a local teen music club with her. I don't know what I told her. I don't know if I rejected her outright or made excuses but we never went. I wish I had gone. Her interest in me and attention was genuine and vulnerable. But she was a little chubby and I didn't find her pretty. I felt bad for rejecting her. It was not a familiar experience for me. I don't think I had ever rejected nor had occasion to reject anyone before. I wish I'd liked her.

The day the Challenger shuttle exploded I was in the cafeteria. I sat with Claude and a quiet and strange black boy named Michael who was an excellent artist. We role-played wrestling matches in a spirit of one-upsmanship that frequently brought us to hysterics.

“I kick your grandma out of her chair and smash the chair over your head!”

“Oh yeah? I grab your grandma and smash her over your head.”

“I climb up to the top arena and drop down on you.”

“I drive a truck onto the ring and run you over. Then I drive another truck on the roof of the arena, cut a hole in the top, drive the truck into the hole and crash it on top of the other truck.”

I noticed the dean walk into the cafeteria. Her face was stark. She talked to a few other teachers who were keeping an eye on the cafeteria. Their faces took on the same expression of horror. They told people who told people. The look of horror spread in a wave across the cafeteria. Teacher told student who told student. There was a change in air quality. The tone of the chatter became brittle and hoarse.

We were told to return to our homerooms. The space shuttle had exploded.

In my homeroom the teacher repeated what we had already heard and turned on the news. The first thing we saw looked a tree branch made from white smoke. Then an anchor woman announced what we had already heard for a third time and then showed footage. The space shuttle took off. It did that lazy spin it does as it starts to turn into its trajectory. Then it exploded and the entire room gasped

as if we had no idea it was going to happen. We could feel the explosion. We could feel the heat of it as the air got sucked out of the room and the ground shook.

"Life is hard for me. I'm a freshman in high school."
Me. November 1988

9
ROCK AND ROLL HIGH SCHOOL

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All things considered, the song we begin talking about should be “Rock and Roll High School” by The Ramones, but I wasn’t into punk yet. This was the full bloom of my Heavy Metal phase. I started hanging out with the headbangers just as middle school came to a close. They introduced me to Iron Maiden and a friend got me a bootleg of Guns N Roses demo. I was used to the polish of synthesizers and pop and this was raw and sounded like the god of thunder breaking things in his garage. The sound of the guitars drove me crazy. It drove my mother crazy, too. Unfortunately for her I was hooked. It was the angry battle cry I needed to give me the courage to deal with high school. I wish it had been “Rock and Roll High School.” The song is fun, carefree. I was not carefree. I barely made it out of middle school alive, and now I was expected to go on to high school? Bigger, faster, earlier in the morning.

As my body grew the scar stretched and became thinner and less greedy for attention. I got my teeth capped. The baseball and skateboarding helped me lose weight. I was more comfortable with myself on my first day of high school. I wore freshly shredded, factory stonewashed blue jeans, a rapidly growing mane of fur, a determined expression, and my boombox on my shoulder like a priest carrying a holy idol through Egypt. This was my security blanket. The song I played as I walked the tarmac gauntlet to the school bus was “Bang Your Head” by Quiet Riot, perhaps some of the most

inane lyrics available at the time and the headbanger's anthem of the moment. To my pleasant surprise there were a good half-dozen other headbangers on the bus. They nodded their heads solemnly as I bore the artifact to an open seat.

I spent almost every morning on that bus that first year. There were times I would run late, miss the bus, have to walk. I enjoyed these times. It was cool and quiet on the morning walks. The bus was quietly chaotic. It was the first morning stirrings of the hornet's nest. The young gods were beginning to remember themselves. A girl performed oral sex on a guy in the seat behind me, under cover of a denim jacket. There were numerous fights. I set my jeans on fire. I borrowed a hairspray bottle from a girl sitting behind me, a lighter from a guy sitting across, sprayed up and down the legs of my jeans, touched the lighter to my legs like it was a magic wand and "whoosh!" Or more like "flhhiff?" I let the flames burn for long enough to get enough heads looking my way and then slid my hands quickly, but not too quickly, down my legs. Putting out the flames was the prestige for the magic trick. A girl just behind me asked, "What's your *name*?" and looked at me like she just discovered I was made out of chocolate. I had no idea who it was. I told her my name like I was doing her a favor.

I was suddenly popular. From that first day I was received with a level of respect and good humor that I had never encountered before. I quickly developed three modes. Or, perhaps, in that ever-evolving litmus test that is social life in high school, my three public faces stratified. There was regular Danny. A little reserved, attentive, clever, sometimes funny, hopefully considered a nice guy. There was performer Danny, because performance was often necessary. That is the one who lit his pants on fire, who demanded the center of attention during many lunches and made people laugh. Then there was moody Danny, who on his darkest days would walk in circles around the school square deep in thought. All three D's proved a success. Regular Danny showed he was intelligent. Performer Danny showed his was fun and funny. Moody Danny totally appealed to the high school girls' interest in dark, brooding, mysterious and sensitive boys. I had no idea how good I had it, but I was definitely spoiled.

I started playing guitar. Me and my friend Claude got guitars at the same time and started taking lessons with the same instructor. I learned the intro to “Sweet Child O Mine” within weeks, yet my skills were slow to develop because I spent most of my time with the neck of the guitar pressed against the wood of my dresser. I discovered that when I played a certain note, the low E, it would resonate through the wood and through me. I knew I was missing a lot of the tonal quality of all the high ends, but this sound flowed through me. I imagined Beethoven must have done something similar, resting his chest against the body of his piano. I wished I shared more in common with him than his disability.

As popular as I was, as assured and confident as I seemed on the surface, I was in a constant state of low-grade panic. I was used to being abused. I was waiting for the punchline. Half of the things said to me in class or in the halls during quiet moments I completely missed. I couldn’t say “what?” to everything, and often I was rewarded with too many requests for a person to repeat themselves with a frustrated “forget it” as the person turned to talk to someone else or bury their nose in a book with a dejected look. So I responded with what I hoped approximated the appropriate body language response. This made me seem more “cool.” I responded to sharp barbs, worried rumors and gossip alike with a good-humored smile and a non-committal shrug.

Claude and I befriended Harvey, a boy in my neighborhood who had long straight blonde hair and had started playing bass guitar a couple of months earlier. We talked about the band we were going to form and the necessary qualities of our soon-to-be-named drummer, yet we hardly ever actually played together. What we did instead was hang out in my room, talk about girls, music, and our incredibly storied future and perform air guitar concerts to KISS albums for the imaginary audience that was clamoring for us. We would jump up and down on my bed as we blazed through the solos. We took turns singing.

I became more popular. I skipped classes with Mike and Michelle in Mike's Oldsmobile and we'd go to McDonald's or to Mike's house. Sometimes they went off to do it in his bedroom. I walked to the store with Jessica and talked about whatever political causes she was invested in that week. I'd go over to Susan's house after school and hang out with her in the living room while her friends Heather and Dave would fuck in Susan's bedroom. Somehow I managed to do all of this and still spend many days lying on my bedroom floor daydreaming to Def Leppard. Everybody was doing something. Some smoked pot, some drank too much, some skipped school too much, some were sleeping with too many people, some were casually stealing too many things from the Circle K. I sampled cautiously from this buffet of bad life choices. The only thing I wanted to partake of like a rabid dog in the candy aisle was girls, but I was entirely too shy for that. I also thank God for my ignorance. If I had any idea how easy it would be to win girls over, I'd have been screwed.

Florida being what Florida is, the fact that the great majority of my memories seem to take place in the relative cold of winter speaks volumes about me. I've always felt more emotional in the winter, as if the cold draws me out. So just about everything I remember happens in that brief time of year that Floridians call "jacket weather." I had a sweet denim jacket, light blue and more heavy-metal-band-patch than nude denim. I was very proud of this those first two years of high school.

One day during first lunch I was standing alongside one of the picnic tables outside of the cafeteria when a friend backed into a black student. It should have been nothing, but the black student took issue with my friend, who held up his hands and apologized and said he didn't mean anything by it. The black kid was a little bit bigger than my friend but not bigger than me. He approached my friend aggressively. I pushed in front of my friend, told the black kid that he didn't have any trouble and that he needed to move along. He did. Twenty minutes later as first lunch was about to end I was shoved from behind. I turned to face one of the members of the wrestling team. Black, tall as me, twice as

thick, menacing. He claimed to mean business—posturing, rocking back and forth, taking off his jacket. Within seconds we were surrounded. Everywhere I looked was either someone I knew, white, except for Kim, with a dangerous look in their eyes nodding at me, or someone black with an eerily similar dangerous look in their eyes, also nodding at me—with a completely different promise on the tip of their tongue. *Oh shit*, I thought. Everybody I know in school is watching this. Everybody seems to want this. And I have only one black friend. I stood my ground. I told him to do what he needed to do. I made the “I’m right here, I’m not going anywhere” body language with the added shrug of resignation. In my head I had already had my ass kicked. I felt the excitement of it. What made my stomach quiver was that there were things at stake that I did not understand.

I have no idea what would have happened if every single member of staff, faculty and security hadn’t converged on us as if in a coordinated wave, but they swooped in, drove a wedge between us and began scattering the crowd like Palmolive in a greasy sink. They actually thanked me. They thanked me as if I had just bestowed on the school a million-dollar endowment.

Weeks earlier another black student fought with another white student. I heard that the white student was a white supremacist. There already was racial tension in school and this incident amped it up. That day I had apparently quietly encouraged and quietly staved off a massive riot.

I was nervous for days, but nothing happened. At the end of the week, there was the Friday afternoon pep rally. All the headbangers and punks and new wavers sat in the same section. We were a little rambunctious that day. Everybody in denim jackets got kicked out of the pep rally. We were both bitter and triumphant. As I and a small group of friends were walking across campus away from the field where the rally was held I had a tussle with a Coke machine. I woke up in the front office staring out a windowed front onto a crowd of students doing their best to peer in through tinted windows. At me, I would have assumed.

I had been jumped. A black student half a foot taller than me with a roll of quarters in his hand ran from halfway across campus, punched me in the back of the head and continued running. My head thrust forward, smashing the Coke logo of the machine and bounced back like a ball against a wall and struck the hard concrete. I had suffered the sort of concussion where they struggle to keep you awake and reassuringly tell you you need to stay awake or you may die. My friends had chased the guy, who was two grades ahead of me, and security followed them. He didn't get far.

I spent the next week in the hospital, then the next month in bed. I had vertigo. I couldn't turn or tilt my head without being overcome by a nauseating spinning that sent me reeling to the floor. When I returned to school I was somewhat of a weeble wobble that did indeed fall down. I was usually escorted by at least two friends, one on each side of me to make sure that were I to fall, I would fall into somebody. It was a reassuring time. I happily traded my composure for the feeling of being looked after.

All the white boys were livid, the boys that spent any amount of time identifying themselves as white. Some of them had even formerly disregarded me because of my vague Hispanicness, but they rallied to my cause and assured me that revenge would be had against *them*. There were brands of vengeance being demanded. My friends wanted an ounce for an ounce, the racists wanted an excuse.

Somehow I managed to make it clear throughout the school that what I wanted as a complete cessation of hostilities. The guy who jumped me had been arrested and expelled. The wrestler who gave me a hard time had been contrite—disgusted himself by what had become of the situation. The tension, at least as far as I cared, had been eased. I suddenly had black friends. I felt like I made a sacrifice and that made me feel noble. All that and I had an ever-present revolving coterie dedicated to keeping my face off the pavement.

There was a fair on the school grounds that year. I loved fairs. I loved cotton candy. I loved elephant ears. I loved rides that formerly put me in the exact state that I would spend about four months of my life. Against the better judgment of some friends, and with excited approval from others, I decided to do all of the twistering, flipping, centrifuging, in my state of vertigo and truly get my money's worth. It was my best trip to the fair ever. A friend sold me a hit of acid and I dropped it as three female friends and I left the fair in one of their cars, a white VW bug with black cow spots, and headed to McDonalds. The acid was absorbed into part of a dollar bill. We drove in nothing remotely akin to silence, hooting and hollering. I had not told the girls that I dropped acid. I don't know why. Nothing happened for the longest time until I saw a line of pink elephants parade across the dull black finish of the Bug's dashboard. I told the girls what I was seeing. They spent the whole time at McDonalds goading and interrogating me. I saw nothing more, but I felt like I was still on one of those fair rides. They giggled and my burger went uneaten.

10
ANXIETY

~*~

My mother started dating and eventually married a man named Ron. He was typical of her type. He was an Italian who owned pizza place, a bodybuilder, he owned a Corvette, grey with big hips. When he moved in he brought his furniture with him. It was all black and white, white sofa and love seat, black and glass coffee table, posters with artsy renditions of the silhouettes of half-naked girls, and a two-foot high statue of a shiny black wild cat.

When we lived in the Bronx I had a dream that I was being chased by a man with a large black wild cat. I tried to fly away from the man but he lassoed a rope around me which trapped me like a big balloon twisting in the wind. The arrival of the black cat statue was a not a good sign. He invited me to go with him to a muscle car show with him. I didn't want to go. I thought the idea was stupid. I remembered Garret taking my mother and me to a boat show and apparently dazzled her with the idea of buying and living on a boat for a year. After I turned down the invitation, Ron never invited me to do anything else.

After the concussion and almost two months homebound, I returned to school, and I started working at Ron's. Claude worked their some nights as well. I cut vegetables, cleaned up and made sandwiches. Ron wasn't a horrible boss. He joked around with everybody, maybe making fun of us a little bit too much. I always went home stinking of food and dirty rags, and despite hot showers I slept in that smell.

When I had the dream, it was in a new house. A huge mansion. It looked a little bit like a space ship. The whole place rumbled like a sleeping giant. The interior was serpentine. I became very familiar with that house. When I finally found my room it was at the outside of the house. It moved. Rather than a room with glass walls it was a room at the anterior of the house with two huge windows that overlooked the mountainside. It was a room in the Merkl's house. The Merkl's were friends of my grandfather in the mountains of New Jersey. I didn't know what this meant. A familiar room, and it moved.

My grandfather also started working at Ron's some times. He was bored, wanted something to do, and Ron respected him so much that he was practically honored to have the man working with him. I never got to work with him.

I was obsessed with my hair. When I worked I wore a hat. The hat gave me hat hair. For someone with hair so curly that it curled into knotty ringlets when I didn't take the time get it chemically straightened and style it, hat hair was brilliant. Two or three times a shift I would go into the bathroom, take off the hat, untwist my hair and brush it straight and admire it. This was the only time it ever looked that straight. I usually kept it in a pony tail. I was obsessed with having long hair like all the heavy metal idols, but it was usually just a messy irritance.

I was a member of maybe a dozen bands the first two years of high school. I say member lightly. I was the singer in two bands, yet I never owned a microphone and I never sang a note. I knew I had a decent voice because I sang in chorus and had to try out for chorus alone with the teacher who decided what section I would sit in. Baritone. People said I had a good voice but I still couldn't bring myself to sing in front of people without thirty other people surrounding me. Some of my friends were a little more successful, managing to land gigs at local clubs and dive bars. There was a skating rink with blue concrete floors and a half pipe against one wall called Atlantis that had regular all ages shows and I went to many of them as did many of my high school counterparts. There was one band

that I went to see a lot called Raped Ape. They played tight rumbling thrash metal. All the members were in their twenties but they had many high school girl groupies who frequented their shows and loitered at their warehouse when they played. I was friends with some of these girls. I wished they loitered around my practice warehouse.

I decided I wanted to start a fanzine. I liked to write, I was getting restless about it, not really having anyone to write for, and I knew other people that were doing fanzines. I called it Wasteland. A very literary friend of mine admired that I had named the magazine after the poem. I never told her that I named it after *The Who* song, Teenage Wasteland.

I understood what it was like to be loud and on the fringes. In classes I would be quiet, usually because I understood half of what everyone said. In gym class I and two or three other students avoided the group athletic activities as often as possible and sat against the wall of the auditorium, when gym was held inside, and against the fence lining the field when it was outside and read or doodled. I avoided sports. I liked to ride my bike. I practiced yoga and tai chi privately from time to time. But I never saw myself as athletic and I certainly wasn't graceful. The wrestling and football coaches tried to recruit me through members of the teams but I demurred awkwardly. Yet I was popular within my own crowds and everybody knew me and wanted to talk to me. I got used to the attention and sulked when I didn't receive it.

I had an assembly line of crushes. From week to week I would write about my lust and admiration for different girls. I couldn't stop moving. I couldn't stop thinking. I hung out with different people all the time and in between, often in long stretches, I would hide in my room listening to music and reading under my blanket. I came to accept this tidal force of urges. I joked that I was the lovechild of a lone wolf and a social butterfly. I joked I was the lovechild of Tigger and Eeyore. It's probably best not to give that last one too much thought. One day I bounced around gathering attention close to me and the next I paced around the perimeter of the school square during lunch and drift home after

school to put *Metallica* or *The Cure* on heavy rotation, depending upon whether I was more angry or more depressed.

One of the bands I was in tried doggedly to practice. We gathered at different places numerous times determined to play together and learn songs. One weekend afternoon we brought our equipment to a friend's friend's stables. We attempted to practice at horse stables because we couldn't find anyplace else. Practice broke down into chaos before we even plugged in our instruments. Me and the guitarist played with a Ouija board. I was entranced by it. I asked it questions that it gave vague answers to, but we both swore that it wasn't us that moved the pointer. We asked who we were talking to and it spelled out i.n.s.i.d.e.t.h.e.h.o.r.s.e. and just then a horse in a stall adjacent to us leaned in close and huffed loudly. The board and pointer were launched into space.

This didn't deter me from later on asking the board to channel the spirit of Jimi Hendrix through me. I got up, strapped on my guitar, and proceeded to play some of my most mediocre guitar solos to date. I was devastated.

There was one girl who I fixated on a little bit more than the rest. Her name was Ivy. She had board straight, platinum blonde hair parted on the side. She was weird. She always looked like she was thinking. I wanted to figure her out. For months I just stared at her from afar. When we finally hung out it was with the buffer of other people. She didn't pay too much attention to me. She dated somebody I knew. Then she dated Harvey. I hated him. Then she dated somebody I didn't know. She was always dating somebody. I realized the only way I could date her was by hanging out in her social perimeter consistently and trying to keep my eyes open to when things began to break down with her current boyfriend. I had never been very focused and consistent so I failed consistently at this.

In the start of my junior year I went to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* for the first time. I thought It was a ridiculous movie and the songs were inane, but the environment in the theatre, the people that went there, the crazy antics they got up to were fantastically absurd and sexual. There was

so much sexual tension in that place I didn't know what to do with myself. I went with a group that eventually grew to include a member of my high school cheerleading squad. She straddled one of my legs and fondled my knee. Afterward we made out on the car ride home. The next week she wrote me a note that said she didn't want to date me IN school, but if I wanted to we could fool around outside of school. I understood. Cheerleaders couldn't be seen with punks like me. I think my eyes probably glazed over as I read the note and the social butterfly flitted on to the next drama.

I started hanging out with a girl named Susan Herrington. She was a grade ahead of me. If someone could sum me up into a few words, as people seemed to really enjoy doing, and I really enjoyed hearing, it seemed to be intelligent, passionate, and "intense." That was the catch-all, intense. At the time I was convinced it was because I was "intense." But it might have also had something to do with my changeable and unpredictable nature, the fact that people were often caught off guard by me. One minute I whine like a middle school girl and the next minute I responded with an intellectual observation that would stop conversation. And the next I would storm off like a diva that didn't get her soda water at the right temperature. Susan was a consistent source of energy. She had her own gravity. She was one of the people that I felt like I was cool for being allowed to hang out with. And she was also a "warehouse bimbo" the name given by the members of Raped Ape to the high school girls that loitered at their warehouse.

One Friday, we went to hang out there. It was Friday the 13th. I had always been superstitious, but in colorfully individual way. I believed in luck, but I believed it was a malleable force. I frequently walked under ladders and did things considered unlucky because I believed that I was so energetically strong and confident that I turned it into good luck. I barely understood that it was all a force of will. I still had the child's misunderstanding of abstractions. Susan and I walked around in the neighborhood outside of the Apes' warehouse and talked. She was one of my favorite people to talk to. I met a bunch

of new people including Scotty who was also in a band that was playing actual shows, who would become one of my best friends within the next week. I felt so cool.

11
IVY

~*~

When I was sixteen and it was starting to get hot even at night, I was spending a lot of time with a recently-made friend Scotty. We hung out most days after school and I stayed at his house several nights of the week.

Once Scotty and I hung out with two girls, one skinny with blonde hair, the other a little curvy with brown hair. We hung out with them two days in a row and only after the second time we hung out did Scotty tell me he was hoping to get over to his house so we could “swing.” He would be in his bedroom with one and I would be in his brother’s bedroom with the other, and then we would switch. He said the girls seemed into this idea. The idea made me incredibly anxious. On one hand I’d never even entertained something like that before. My fantasies were limited to conventional and very boring sex. I’d only had sex once. It was missionary all the way, and that was probably all I could handle. Scotty was short but cute with thick, brown, wavy hair that hung almost to his waist, a drummer in and out of bands that played live shows. He pursued girls fearlessly. I wished I had his confidence and courage. The planned event never happened, though.

On one day in the middle of the week we were over at his on-again-off-again, soon-to-off-again girlfriend Ali’s house. I don’t know what they argued about inside. I was outside, standing on the drive, giving the couple some space, talking to Ivy, a tall, platinum blonde with a thin frame she always hid in

baggy clothes. That day she wore grey sweats. Her straight hair was razor sharp and her features almost as dangerous. She had shallow, Caribbean water eyes. She always looked like she had just figured something out, like she forgot to turn the stove off or that boys really do mature more slowly than girls. I barely knew Ivy. We moved in the same circles and had the comfort of frequent nearness with no substance. This was our first conversation. I don't remember the conversation. I know I was wishing at the time that it would go something like this:

“Danny,” she could have said, turning to look me in the eyes. “I don't know why we're standing around here. Can we go to my house so we can be alone?”

I would have looked at her with a lop-sided grin and said, “Sure, sweetie, that'd be nice.”

I'd like to remember it that way, but it went more like this.

“What the fuck is Scotty's problem?” Her side in the fight was clear.

“I don't know what's going on and I don't care,” I probably said. We were standing on Ally's driveway. The girlfriend's house looked just like Ivy's and just like Scotty's, and just like all of our names ending in the same way, every drive had the same computer-generated-Y shape with room for two cars and a walkway to the front door. They lived in a community where the houses had paper thin walls and all the teen-aged residents knew about each other the way small towns in the fifties seemed to have a holistic sentience.

“Is he cheating on her?” She turned to me with her hands firmly on her hips.

“No.” It wasn't a lie if I hoped it was true, if it was my truth. I wouldn't cheat on you, Ivy.

“I think he's cheating on her. Do you not know, or are you lying?” Her upper lip was quivering. I felt guilty by proxy.

“I really don't know, but I'm glad they're breaking up. I don't think their relationship really works, that's all.”

“Why do you hang out with him?” She moved closer.

“He’s really a good friend.”

“Do you think boyfriends and girlfriends can be friendfriends?”

I looked at her. She looked away.

Scotty threw open the front door. Ivy turned her attention to him and her hands went back, stiffly, to her hips. She didn’t hear me say “definitely” as he approached—

“You’re all crazy bitches.” He said to her as if coming to a gratifying conclusion after hours of laborious calculations.

—and practically dragged me down the drive with his body language.

“You know,” she shouted after us, “You don’t see the black and white!”

His bedroom had two waterbeds. I never thought to ask him why. We talked about music, girls, and the philosophical musings that friends usually share when lying on the grass in the woods or on the hood of a car beside an airport runway, lying on our beds with the lights off and the room outlined with the blue glow of Scotty’s stereo, my Blue Oyster Cult *Agents of Fortune* cassette playing low.

Scotty lay on the bed, against the wall, his long, thick brown hair in a loose knot. He huffed.

“What the hell does that mean, anyway? ‘You don’t see the black and white’?”

~*~

A few months later, on the other side of summer, Ivy dated a friend of mine named Andy for a little while. We skipped school on bright days in his VW bug and wandered, her in black jeans and black t-shirt, he in same, and I in blue jeans with shredded holes in the knees. Once she sat in the front seat and I sat behind her. My friend—her boyfriend—was in his house doing something. She wrote the lyrics to a Warrior Soul song on one my folders. “We’re beautiful no matter what anyone says.” Then she drew an anarchy symbol, a peace symbol and a couple of hearts.

~*~

October. It was getting dark earlier. Scotty and I were hanging out at Raped Ape's rehearsal warehouse. They were a heavy metal band, very popular in the region. One of the members was a mechanic, and, apparently, there's a saying: "That car runs like a raped ape." I've never heard this outside of the context of the band.

Friday the thirteenth was a couple of hours away. Scotty was jamming with the band. Susan and I were hanging out outside. The music was a muddy, hammering afterthought. We went for a walk. She gave me a piggy back ride. Between ten and eleven the temperature dropped from the high 70s to mid 50s. It is the earliest that winter ever came. Susan and I talked about beautiful things. Everything can be beautiful from the right perspective. The words are important to me but they're lost. But I have the image. I have the feeling. Scotty and I sitting with the lights out. Ivy and I in a VW on a blindingly bright day. Susan giving me a piggy back ride as the world freezes. The words would allow me to live in these moments longer.

I do remember that the subject of conversation turned to Ivy and Andy. They had broken up or would soon was the rumor. I said that I liked Ivy and wished I had the balls to do something about it. Susan became distant.

That night I crashed at Scotty's again. Our friend Gary joined us. In the morning we got a ride to school in the back of a Gary's dad's pickup. Gary sat in the cab with his father. It was fifty degrees out and we were in the bed of a pickup wearing t-shirts and black jeans. I didn't have anything warmer. When I went to Scotty's the previous day it was eighty degrees. I think he didn't wear a jacket because I didn't have one. When we got to school our hair was crazy. We were hair gods. Our hair reached halfway down our backs, both curly and brown, Gary's blonde and curly. We had massive sweeps of hair after the truck ride—*The Three Musketeers*, directed by Rob Reiner. At school a friend took a

picture of us that I still have. Scotty and I look like brothers, combing our fingers through our unruly hair and tying it up and looking like kids at an amusement park on a bright day.

Later that day I was walking on one end of the school square and Ivy was on the other. She waved to me and started to cross the square. I waved. We met in the middle. We stood in the middle. I remember nothing of the conversation. I remember the noise of students circling us. I want those words now the way I wanted her then.

~*~

January. The last time I saw Ivy alive was at a roller rink in Green Acres. Dingy blue concrete floors and aluminum siding for walls. There was a massive half-pipe for skateboarders in one corner. They played rock n roll and heavy metal. Most of the teenagers talking, skating, dancing about to the music were from my high school. There was blue everywhere. The floor, the ubiquitous denim, the blue lights that splashed the off-white airport hangar walls with blue streaks. The music was a layer of graffiti over a white noise of voices, scuff-scuff of roller skates on concrete, and skateboards on wood. I would discover years later that most people find the noise cumbersome. For me it is an equalizer. In clubs and bars everyone feels the need to yell in order to be heard. The noise is nowhere near as loud for me as it is for everyone else, and I can hear people clearly. I became very comfortable with this loud atmosphere.

Ivy had been dating That Guy a couple of months. I only knew one thing about him. She started dating him almost immediately after she and Andy broke up. I got the news regarding both the break-up and That Guy at about the same time. I heard the new guy was a douche bag. I latched on to that. I knew his name but never used it and instead referred to him as That Guy. “Is Ivy still dating That Guy?”

Her platinum blonde hair fell like the blur of fast rushing water. Under the blue lights her eyes seemed almost white. She was standing in front of me, anxious, and if I had been more observant I would have noticed she was on the verge of tears. She asked me, “Danny, if I broke up with him, would you go out with me?”

Behind me the rink floor was like a constant ocean humming under skates, to the side the half pipe on which skateboarders swayed like a pendulum. All around were friends and acquaintances. I felt small. I said, "I'm not gonna be some sort of stepping stone."

I walked away. I tried talking to other people but kept looking back at her as she made a circuitous route in and out of groups of people. Every time I looked at her I wanted her to be looking at me but she wasn't. I left within minutes. I was too angry and confused to stay. I thought disappearing into the night was the most dramatic thing I could do. I had gone with friends, but I didn't tell anyone I was leaving. I walked two hours home. The walk was quiet and dark but the cacophony of the rink stayed in my head. Like the sound of crunching metal and glass might reverberate through someone's head for hours after a car crash. Walking along the side of the road with only half-moon light showing the way helped slow my thoughts. On that walk home from the roller rink I dug a deep pit in my thoughts and part of me jumped in and never came out.

We all have those parts, don't we? It's as if we're born with every option and opportunity in the world and over a lifetime, sometimes out of many years of trying and sometimes over nothing but imagined pain, we dump opportunities into that pit. My pride was wounded. I didn't want to be a device with which she could extricate herself from another relationship.

That night I dreamt of her. The picture window in my bedroom was covered with white vertical blinds. One was broken and never closed with the others. I was lying in bed and through the space I saw her face. The moonlight was bright enough to turn the world a pale blue it never will when I'm awake. Her skin was marble. In a way I was outside with her as much as I was lying in my bed afraid. It was cold out there with her. She said, "help me." To this day I can't leave any sort of gap when drawing curtains or blinds over a window at night. To this day I know hell is no inferno. It is a cold place.

An acquaintance called me in the afternoon of the next day. It was Sunday. The sky was white all day and it was very cold out. He had heard that she was dead, that she had killed herself. His sources

sounded sketchy. I reassured him. It couldn't be. I hurried off the phone with him. I didn't try to find out if I was right or wrong.

Monday morning I was as muted as the weather—all greys and cold breezes. I hadn't seen the sun in days. I didn't feel anything when I arrived for school Monday morning. Off the bus, through the main portal of the school into the open square, a tight knot of friends at the far end of the square were talking and crying. One by one they turned as they saw me and as a group moved into a tighter knot, drawing me in as I came near.

I didn't feel anything. Later in the day all of her closer friends were rounded up from their classes and assembled in the theatre for handling by the guidance counselor, like sick livestock. I remember nothing that was said by anyone. I don't remember any sound. I sat in the middle of a row and watched the dean and assistances and the guidance counselor make a circuit of the auditorium.

Night time was different. That first night I listened to music and felt my first adult feeling. I'd mourned before, for dead pets, for cancelled TV shows, for lost baseball games. I couldn't move. I said to Susan on the phone, "I didn't know a body could hurt this bad without bleeding." I listened to music that I knew Ivy liked.

The next night I finally cried. I thought about where she might be. I thought about the dream, her whispering to me from the moonlight. Hell is not fire and pain. Hell is a cold place. It's loneliness. I started to wonder if she was in hell because she killed herself. A song by Queensryche called "Silent Lucidity" played on my stereo. There is a part just before a bridge when a girl whispers, "help me." It sounded exactly like Ivy's voice in my dream. This shook me, penetrated through the numbness, and I finally cried.

My mother and the guidance counselor wanted me to see a therapist. During the day, when they saw me, I was a blank slate. I was asleep, but at night, surrounded by friends who suffered the same, I

woke up. We cried. We laughed. We had impromptu parties with dangerous amounts of alcohol and drugs. Our laughter was the piercing cackle of witches and the defiant, brusque spit in the face of the impenitent man about to be hanged. I've never seen anyone since act so brazen and be so vulnerable. The moments of sober reflection were deep chasms that we'd thrust each other into. Here. This is my pain. Swim in it.

The wake was a soap opera. When I saw her in her coffin I was reminded that she had killed herself by placing the barrel of a shotgun between her teeth. Her face looked like a mask made from leather. There was an exit behind the viewing area. I stormed out of the building and stood in the cold in the parking lot looking at my breath curling up and listened to the traffic of the highway. A group began to tighten into a knot nearby. I asked what was going on. "Some people are going over to the ex-boyfriend's house." Nobody liked him. Now they blamed him. Several cars headed to his house. We were following a carload that wanted to beat him up. Scotty, Gary, I and a few others divided into two cars, weren't sure if we were going to stop them or watch. I didn't care about him, but I didn't want our mourning to become something ugly.

We arrived at his apartment. The lynch mob had not shown up. Gary knocked. He came. I watched the clouds move quickly over the moon. Gary told him we were going to hang out for a little while until things calmed down. I leaned against the car in the parking lot alone. It made me sick that I was defending this guy. Nobody disliked him more than I did. Nobody really knew anything about him except that he got her pregnant then wanted nothing do wither. She offered me the last few inches of her rope to pull her out of her abyss and I made a noose. I was too young to believe anything but this. Even now I feel implicated by the events as they happened.

The day of the funeral, too many people tried to cram into a much too small room. The several small rooms of the parlor were full. I was near an entry way between the main room and the others

connected. I glanced forward and back, caught the eyes of friends and acquaintances and we searched each other's expressions. I felt like the funeral was the line of an amusement park ride. Stand here. Let us pray. Stand here. Let us lament. Here we inter her body. Here we memorialize her name. Stand here. Sign the guest log. Each name is proof for her parents that she was loved. Each name a sort of currency adding up her value. It all felt badly staged. She is buried in a type of cemetery common to Florida, with small plaques instead of stones, pinning the dead to the earth. I felt like I was watching actors. He said such nice things about her, the priest who knew nothing about her, about God. He didn't know God's plan for her.

There was a moment when we became real again. We all stood together by our cars, unable to talk, unwilling to drive away, unsure where to go.

We went to the beach. I don't remember whose idea it was. It felt like we all had the same idea at the same time and got into our cars without even discussing it. Where are the words? We went to my house and grabbed some shorts for a few people so we wouldn't have to make an array of stops. On the way to the beach the sun came out and I realized I hadn't seen the sun in days. The mood lifted. On the way to the beach we it seemed like joined a caravan. I noticed that the cars in front of us and behind us were part of the same group.

At the beach we laughed. Gary walked on his hands halfway up the paved hill from the parking lot to the beach. It seemed that everyone I knew from school was there. Including many people that I knew didn't know her except by name.

In the water, Susan called my name. I turned to face her and she splashed me with water. I splashed her back. She screamed, smiled, giggled. I tackled her into the water and we rolled with the waves onto the sand, breathless. We lay side by side on the yielding sand where the water ebbed and flowed and tickled at our sides as it pulled the sand like a rug out from under us. The sun languidly tugged the white blanket over itself again. We breathed.

“It’s funny.” I said, still breathless.

“What is?”

The water surrounded us, drew away. “How happy I feel right now.”

In my mind, Susan told me all the things I want to hear, but I know she didn’t say anything. I had added depth to a moment that didn’t want depth. We were in shallow waters and I let it go. I didn’t want to pull the blanket over myself the way the sun had. But the giddiness was gone. The entire group felt its energy ebb, but our moods were still light. We had only been there about forty minutes. We piled back into the cars, some of us soaked, shirtless and smiling, chuckling quietly at the ghosts of old jokes.

I think often about experiences like this: the sunshine after the storm. The giddy, happy moments we steal from disaster. We do it in groups—large, unruly groups thankful for being led away from the carnage.

~*~

A few months later, I was at my best friend Claude’s house. He was there Ivy’s last night at the rink. He filmed the night on his dad’s video recorder. He told me she was on it. I wanted to see. I was reintroduced to the evening that I had grown too small to experience. His band had performed that night. Someone was having a birthday party. Ivy appeared briefly in the screen here and there. Claude did not know her well and she was never the focus of the frame. Claude told me about things that happened after I left. Ivy was acting weird. She gave some of her stuff away, apologized to people, forgave people. We sat on the floor of his room watching on his television as the camera jerked back and forth through the crowd. People laughed into the camera and answered Claude’s various questions or requests to ham it up.

I was struck dumb by what he said. It seemed so obvious that it was coming in this new context. What if I had stayed? I was a peer counselor. I had volunteered for a suicide hotline as part of my counseling class. I was trained to see the signs of suicidal behavior. I should have been there. As far

as I was concerned, I was being told that events I had set into motion were easily evident to anybody with a lick of sense—which seemed to include no teenagers at a roller rink late at night. Would I have missed it if I stayed? Would I just have one more thing to be guilty about in mourning a still dead friend?

I realized something after watching the video. The person on film, Ivy's simulacrum was no longer real. In death she was frozen in me. Had she lived, were I able now to look back on her as a girl I had a crush on in high school, she would not have this power. She became something bigger, the pain etched her deeper. She took on greater significance. I romanticized her. I couldn't see her or talk to her anymore and it felt wrong to leave her as such a small part of my life—or impossible. So her character continued to bloom.

And what feels like the worst thing that could happen is precisely what happened. Life continued. Ivy began to fade. Slowly. Nothing really changed. I heard secondhand that her brother and younger sister were trouble in school and had withdrawn from friends. The pain of the loss of her was something to push away. I shoveled the memories, the words, into a fire that I now sift through ashes to resurrect.

12
HELL

~*~

I had always had colorful experiences with dreams, and others had colorful experiences with my dreams. Once, while sleepwalking, I wandered into the living room where my mother and Ron were watching television, as they narrated to me later.

My mother said, “What is it, Daniel? Is everything alright?”

I had a troubled look on my face. “If you think I’m going back in there, you’re crazy!” Then I turned around and walked back into my room and went back to bed.

In middle school I wandered into my mother’s room and said, “Where is the orb?”

“What, honey?” My mother wondered if she heard me right.

“Where is the orb?” I asked, more insistently.

“I don’t know, honey.”

I huffed, shook my head, and walked back into my room.

Once while at a sleepover at Claude’s house. I dreamt that a hole in the fabric of reality opened up. . . in Claude’s room, and beyond it was a glittering cityscape. I turned to Claude and nudged him an point at it. “Look! Look at that. Oh my God. Look!”

I apparently wasn’t entirely asleep. Claude later told me that I nudged him with my eyes half open and pointed at his television, which was turned off, and said, “nuh nugh nuh. Mu mnnn nnnn.”

Most of my sleep issues aren’t as amusing. I suffered from bouts of sleep paralysis. During REM sleep, when the mind is caught up in a dream, hormones paralyze the body so it doesn’t run

amok acting out the sometimes violent actions of the dream. Sleep paralysis happens when someone begins to wake and become aware in the middle of REM sleep while the body is still caught up in the hormonal paralysis.

The waking person is still prone to the hallucinations of dreams, and for some reason these hallucinations are usually horrible and scary. Maybe it grows out of the fact that the body can't move. Sleep paralysis is the root of many myths of succubi sitting on a victim's chest, and of vampires coming in the night, and of UFO abductions.

When I first started having the experiences, I was caught up in crazy thoughts and sensations. I was convinced something evil was coming closer and closer. I could feel it. Sometimes I could hear its raspy clicking death rattle. I would fight desperately against it. It would take minutes to finally struggle to mobility and then the feelings of terror would dissipate as surely as the memories of dreams often do.

Sleep paralysis can happen when falling asleep as well as when waking up. Once, while on my back and about to drift into sleep. I opened my eyes and looked around my room. I couldn't open my eyes. Then something skeletal and cold wrapped its arms and legs around me and screamed, and I fell down through my bed. I kept falling. The thing holding me kept screaming. That scared the hell out of me. I was convinced I was having a near death experience and was going to hell.

After Ivy's suicide I was preoccupied with the idea of hell. I was testing the parameters and very nature of my faith. I read the Bible trying to explore its position on suicide and hell. I read somewhere that when we die we lose our memories of our earthly lives because the pain of the knowledge of those of our loved ones who were not with us in heaven would not be compatible with the idea of heaven.

This didn't sit very well with me. If there is a rule system, you do any of the things on this list, you go to hell, then some of the people we know must wind up in hell. And there can't be any mourning in heaven. Mourning does not figure into bliss. So the memory of them would have to be erased.

But the idea of my love for these people being taken from me is in itself a sort of hell.

But heaven means a love for everyone. Then we would either need to be aware of the people in hell, and love them all, or we would have to be ignorant of them, completely unaware of the existence of hell.

But the idea of being ignorant doesn't fit into my idea of heaven. If heaven is any sort of ascension, then it's ascension, not regression or repression.

I worried about my grandfather. He never really went to church and I had a sense that he was not really invested in the idea of God. I asked him about this one night not long after Ivy died. I was lying in bed thinking about all of these ideas and crying about the idea that Ivy might be in that cold place I dreamt of and I called him. He reassured me that he believed in God. "Aw, buddy, no, I believe in God. I definitely do."

I was not comforted. I knew he would tell me that to comfort me. I knew he was a good person, but I was still wrestling with the idea that you needed to believe in God to get into heaven.

I didn't care which version of God one believed in. I didn't care what name he was given. Or her. My view was that God was a little bit like a mountain. The entirety of human civilization lives around the base of the mountain. If I live on the west side of the mountain, I see a totally different mountain than somebody who lives on the east side. And if they have a different culture and language, then they have a different name for him. And if their culture is different they have a different idea about his personality and sensibilities. I thought the idea of quibbling over the nature of God and his

laws was as silly as the image of two people getting into a fight over whose word for “mountain” was correct.

I resolved my worries about heaven and hell in this way. If there is anyone that is willing to go to hell to find you, then you don't go there. Maybe that is what purgatory is for. It's kind of an extension of the idea that people are spiritually connected. I believed I was spiritually connected to certain people, my grandfather included, and I had no intention of letting him languish in the cold loneliness that is hell. And for that matter I had no intention of letting Ivy languish in hell, either. As pained as I was, I could still admit that my connection to her wasn't that deep, but still, all or nothing. They get into heaven or nobody does. I'll carry them on my backs if I have to.

Then I realized something in my emotional drive to be fatalistically chivalrous I was saying something that starting to sound familiar to me. Wasn't Jesus Christ sent to earth to take care of this? He was sent to atone for the sins of humanity. He was the one that was gonna fight his way through hell and carry the souls out. And major culture has a parallel.

Heaven was another problem. Everyone has his or her own idea of what is heaven for them. I would assume that for most people, heaven is having their loved ones around. Well, what if my uncle's idea of heaven is bowling five hours a day and listening to country music?

I'm not even sure what my idea of heaven is. There isn't anything that I do that I think to myself, I wish I could do this all the time! Maybe we'd all be clamoring around in the foyer of heaven. “Where's the foosball table?” “Foosball? Screw that, where's the hot tub and 50 virgins?” “I don't want virgins, I want my wife. Where is she?” “I want your wife, too! When I find her, maybe I'll let you know!”

Then God clears his throat, waits for people to notice him. They do and stop and stare and he says, “Maybe this will be to your liking,” and pulls back a curtain to an impossibly beautiful courtyard.

Everyone stares for many seconds, a few gasp, a few say, “holy fuckin’ crap!” under their breath. And collectively they all agree, yeah, this works.

But that seems like another cop out. If we’re all individuals then we all have our own precious bliss. There are people out there who want to share their eternity with someone, and that someone wants to spend their eternity with someone else.

These questions went unanswered. I was satisfied with my conviction to be their personal Jesus, IF the real one only spoke up for original sin and didn’t have it in his plans to serve as Orpheus for every grandfather and daughter out there. I didn’t put any thought into the idea that my grandfather’s wife or daughter might be willing to make the journey, or that the daughter’s mother, father, brother, sister might be willing to make the journey. It was only my pain I was struggling with, after all.

13
NOTES

~*~

In high school I started using composition books as diaries, every one permanent-markered black and covered with stickers, like the bumper of an old car. The freshman year journal could have been an 87 Chevy Camaro with stickers from heavy metal bands. The senior year journal a gremlin, covered with slogans supporting hip causes. I read through them, hoping to reconnect with deeper meanings. I was disappointed to find that I wrote mostly about my long hair and girls.

My poetry wasn't much better. Although, at times I attempted to explore spiritual things, most of my efforts were invested in death and sex.

Here's a gem from when I was fifteen.

*Moonlight passion strikes
My heart ablaze in the dead of night
The realm of night, a lonely place
Has my soul
Rape me and kill me one thousand times over cruel world
Let me grow
Stab me and kick me and slay me with your words cruel world
Let me know*

I suspect, somewhere, a Victorian-era girl is rolling over in her grave.

I try to remember that the way I look at that writing now is the way I will look at my current writing in fifteen years.

Here's part of another one.
*Darling pain
Why do I love you so?*

...

You are in my soul, dead

You dance in my dreams and stand at the foot of my bed

In both sex and death I was a novice. I had the briefest of relations with both. My detachment allowed me to romanticize them, turn them into personas of mystery. Both can change you the closer they draw near. Both can change you in good and bad ways. In high school sex didn't come close enough. Death came too close.

I wrote about every girl I had a crush on. Often there would be the names of several girls in one two-page spread. I wrote about them as if they were toys in a set that I obsessed over and didn't know which to get first. But I never did anything about it. Even when I was told that a girl that I liked liked me, I still didn't do anything.

I had a girlfriend my freshmen year. We broke up within two weeks and maintained a relationship of drama and gossip for months afterward. I had another girl the summer between freshmen and sophomore years to whom I lost my virginity. She was the sweetest girl and incredibly nice to me, and because of that I stayed with her for a couple of months, but it wasn't what I wanted. I dated another girl my sophomore year for two months and we never kissed.

I imagine school looks a little different now. Everyone has a phone or is ostracized for not having one. Friends communicate immediately with text messages or instant messages. No need to track the friend down or plan for when to run into them. I can't imagine they have the same stealth of old-fashioned pen and paper. Note-writing was one of my finer preoccupations. I still have a folder stuffed with an inch thick ream of notes I received during high school. And that is probably only a portion of the notes that I received, and of the notes I had a hand in.

It's odd to read through them now. They are half of a conversation. Sometimes there will be a series of notes from the same person, all half of a long, sometimes dramatic, always ludicrous conversation.

I remember, and my journal tells me with mind-numbing frequency, that I always felt inadequate when it came to girls I liked. I had no reason to think they could go for me. They would have had to beat me over the head, tie me by my long and tangly hair to their bumpers and drag me home before I'd wonder if there was something they wanted from me. Reading through the notes I see hints, open invitations. Confused responses to what must have been whining on my part that they weren't paying attention to me or not calling me.

Apparently I complained a lot about people not calling or writing me.

Some of the notes are nice to read. A three-page note from Molly teasing me about my crush on Deidre and whining about her unrequited affection for Brian. She is able to be happy for him in his new relationship, though.

Here's a letter from Nancy. I have no idea what's going on here. I think she's writing from church. And she isn't too happy about it. Another note from Nancy rambling on, quotes from *Iron Maiden* and one of our friend's heavy metal bands. She decided not to take French III the following year and has given up pursuing Jimmy.

One from Chanda saying that she yelled at Allen for having asked me a very personal question about the nature of our relationship. She hopes I can come over.

Some of them are bittersweet, some painful. A love letter from Jen ten pages long, written in big looping cursive talking about the first time I said, "I love you." Long rambling notes from someone who called herself Sunshine with me.

What hurts the most are the declarations of eternal love and friendship. The relationships that seemed so close and passionately loyal that have dwindled to nothing.

My last year of school the depression got the worst. Many of the letters either sought to encourage me to realize that I had a lot going for me, or they rebuked me for being a constant asshole and urged me to get myself together. I found a note from that must have been written write after Ivy rejected me and started dating somebody else that spoke very harshly of her. It's odd to read it now. It dated less than two months before she killed herself.

After her death I stopped writing as much about girls and my hair in my journals. I wrote more about the bad things I felt I had to deal with, but even so much of that was trivial. Friends who didn't call me. Feelings that eluded me. I would say there was a lot of pain to work through, but working through pain implies working for the release from it. I was working *with* pain, working it like clay. Taking ugly feelings and making ugly things.

you're falling away from me
like a memory pulled out to sea
and i swim the oceans far and wide
pulled about by the cruelest tide
seek peace on an island in a stream
that floats about from dream to dream
wishes are dark that burn when you make them
wishes are darker that scream when you break them
people are daggers that smile when you face them
beauties are rainbows that fade when you chase them
love is a word that grows stranger when you repeat it
hope is the horizon that never comes closer

I don't know who the "you" referred to in the poem is. I wrote lots of poetry that referenced the second person and it usually didn't address a specific person. I'm tempted to think that the "you" is me and that it is written from outside of myself. Most of my poetry was very stream of consciousness, written quickly and unapologetically unedited. I felt it was blasphemy to revise or edit poetry. It was automatic writing, as far as I was concerned. Sonar of the soul. The best chance we had of understanding our hidden selves.

It is odd to look at those old journals and notes, kept in the same box. One is all my point of view. I read them now as if reading the words of another person, and reading them reminds of the place and time. Old memories return to me. And I read the notes, all the words of other people, often in response to correspondence from me. And I have to divine the greater context of the conversation. Side by side, the two almost seem to have a conversation with each other. I almost seem like an autistic and troubled teen responding to the words that desperately try to reach me disassociated rambling.

14
GUIDANCE

~*~

My mother took the school counselor's advice and took me to see a psychiatrist who said I had "mild to moderate clinical depression." And also took me to a L.C.S.W. on a weekly basis. His name was Joe. He had dark blonde hair in a neat pony tail and an affable grin. He seemed fixated on my father's role in my life. He kept telling me that I had issues with my father that I needed to work out. At the time I usually rebuffed it, because my father wasn't a large part of my life and I didn't have any hostility toward him. Our relationship, as it was, seemed positive. Joe wouldn't leave the subject alone though. He told me that I had issues that I needed to resolve and I had needs that had never been met.

I was introduced to new concepts. Even though I had ears to hear, I never looked so closely at their function until, in middle school, I learned that mine didn't function correctly. Even though I understood psychology and suicide, as a child with some slight academic background may, I never thought about depression until it was a like a new sound. Then I came to think about depression with the same closeness that people think of weather and gas prices.

They tried out different drugs on me. Prozac took away the negative feelings, but it also took away the positive feelings. I resisted the idea of my emotions being muted. My pain was mine. My joy was mine. The trash could take my depression, but nothing surgically removed my melancholy. So I vetoed all medications within months. Eventually I and the doctors gave up on that. I decided to start exercising more and that helped. I decided to start trying to open up more in therapy, and that helped.

Once my depression had a name, it became like a villain. The nights lying in bed listening to music thinking dark thoughts were thanks to depression. The times when I couldn't let go of negative thoughts no matter how positive things were, were thanks to depression. The days when I crawled into my closet, closed the door behind me, and let my family and friends wonder where I was, thank you, depression. When I wrote something morbid, I wasn't the one doing the writing. It was automatic writing and depression was the spectre that haunted me.

It was probably a good thing that I had started to organize everything negative under the umbrella of depression. Instead of blaming myself, I blamed depression. And my mother and grandparents started reacting differently to my bouts of isolation and days hiding under my blanket. They stopped reprimanding me so much to stop being lazy, or to go out and do something. They started to look at me with pity and less with recrimination. It was hard for my mother who worried about everything. It was hard for my grandparents who now had a daughter with multiple sclerosis and a grandson with a hearing disability and depression.

I got to the point a few months into my senior year that I just wasn't enough to motivate me to go. A couple of friends said I was too smart and that school wasn't challenging me. I'd like to think that was part of it. I found no pleasure in school, no challenge like I once had, but I think part of that was because I wasn't finding challenge in anything, and things that were challenging—getting out of bed, being in constantly social contact, were challenges I didn't want to put up with.

For me the bottom was when I quit school. I slid, faster and faster toward that. Missing days, skipping days, not being there even when I was there. I wasn't constantly sitting in a shadow feeling sorry for myself. I distracted myself with friends. But I stopped caring about school, stopped caring about the magazine, stopped being attracted to girls. I was tugged between depression and distraction. Once I just stopped going to school and the days started to pass, and my mother accepted my decision,

since the alternative was seeing me spend all of my time over at a friend's house, I dragged along the bottom like a boat keeling over in shallow water. I stopped moving.

There was a guidance counselor in school, Mr. Greenwood who my mother consulted the second after I decided to get my GED and go to community college. I didn't for one second think I was going to be a high school dropout. I was too arrogant for that. Even though I felt like a failure, I wasn't going to let that be a turning point in my life: the day I dropped out of school. It was going to be less important than the next turning point, the day I started college. Mr. Greenwood made it a point to be the one who I talked to when I returned to high school to see about getting my GED, to register for the prep class it would be necessary for me to take in order to take the test. Mr. Greenwood even called me a couple of times just to touch base and make sure I was still determined to go through with it.

He was just a little shorter than me, he had a round belly, a ruddy face and a pocked nose and thick glasses. He was weather-worn but seemed absolutely jolly most of the time. He had seen the effect Ivy's suicide had on me. He had known about me, more than I was aware. One day when my mother and I were sitting in his office going over information and forms he told my mother that I'd be a teacher someday, and that he wasn't surprised if he saw me a decade later back there teaching chemistry. His confidence and regular reassurance did more for me than any of the anti-depressants.

I enjoyed the GED classes. They crammed as much information into the month-long class as each student could handle, and found I could handle plenty. Mr. Greenwood seemed absolutely giddy and expressed that he was validated at my quick progress. He was beaming when I aced the GED course and when he presented me with my diploma. I needed his enthusiasm and strength. College, another magazine and a serious and intense relationship were just around the corner and I wouldn't have been prepared to make any of those things happen if my spirit couldn't leave high school behind.

I went back to see him when I had successfully registered at Palm Beach Community College in midsummer. It felt like years later. It was oddly dream-like being back on campus. It had only been a few months, but it felt like so much time had passed. So much growth and letting go of dead weight.

In August Hurricane Andrew devastated Miami. The skies in Palm Beach County were bright orange in the middle of the night. Driving around afterward there was so much destruction, and we were a seventy miles away from the eye of the storm. Driving along the intracoastal I saw a royal palm, fifty feet tall, that had been uprooted and tossed across a four-lane road. It landed on an orange construction vehicle and had crushed it like a massive orange bug.

That year Mr. Greenwood was runner up to Henry Kravitz, multimillionaire extraordinaire for South Florida's Man of the Year. Kravitz had donated large sums of money to charity and to having the Kravitz Art Center built near downtown West Palm Beach. Mr. Greenwood gave his life helping in the rebuilding and recovery efforts in Miami after Hurricane Andrew. He was struck by lightning in the middle of a neighborhood that had been flattened by Andrew.

15
THE FOUNDATION

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In the summer of 1992 I my father bought me an '84 Mustang convertible as a “graduation” present when I got my GED—white paint, red leather interior, a steering wheel so easy, I could have blown lightly on it and the car would turn.

I was sitting in the car outside of a club called the Foundation. It succeeded a long line of short lived heavy metal clubs. It used to be 21 North and that used to be Slammers and that used to be The Pit. I think there might have been a couple of others but I'm not sure. The Foundation was Punk, Gothic, and industrial music and a wine and beer bar. Throughout its five years it looked perpetually in progress.

The club was half of the top floor of a two-story block of white cinder block. The rest was low-rent offices and the ground floor was shared by sellers of western wear and pet supplies. It always smelled of leather, birdfeed, beer and cigarettes.

The public face of the club was white wall with a small door covered by a wooden awning that sagged on the left side. Above that, set in the very center of the wall, a six-foot-tall black tile “F.” The parking lot was no frills. People hung out in the parking lot as much as they did in the club. Sometimes I'd sit with friends in my car with the top down until a string of unfortunate events forced the owner to corral everyone into the bar or turn them out of the lot. There were many gang fights that culminated with a girl falling out of the back of a truck that was hauling ass out of the lot.

It seemed for every gang there was a gang formed merely to oppose their philosophical stance. A racist skinhead gang and a gang of skinheads against racism both frequented the club. They usually

didn't show up on the same night, as if planning ahead of time so as to avoid fashion faux pas. "I'm going tonight and I'll be wearing tight jeans tucked into my black Doc Martens with black suspenders and my head freshly shaved." "Dammit, I was going to go tonight wearing tight jeans tucked into my Doc Martens wearing *red* suspenders. I'm just not gonna go!" "Bye. Hate you." "We'll fight to the death next time we see each other."

Some nights they did all show up. Nobody seemed surprised. It had the drama of a professional wrestling match. But sometimes there was a lot of violence and destruction of property. One night the fighting overwhelmed the parking lot and after a few minutes of skirmishing, people jumped in cars and fled the scene. A girl, hanging off the back of one vehicle fell out and landed on her head as the car was entering the road. After that hanging out in the lot was banned and it turned into a ghost town. It's odd to think of a parking lot as a ghost town, but there you go. When you're used to the sight of a place as a backdrop for the dance of youth and suddenly it's just a lot filled with cars parked askance, it seems like a ghost town.

I liked clubs for the pretty girls, for the evocative music, for the pretty girls dancing to the evocative music. I liked the Foundation because so many people I knew from high school and beyond went there. Many of them started going about the same time I did, seeing as we had all just turned 18 and were legal. Though the owner regularly dismissed the law out of hand and let people as young as 15 in. He had a hard time saying no. But for that reason several 15-year-old girls went home with older guys (or to the bathroom, or a car in the parking lot). It didn't seem like a big deal to me at the time. We all seemed like we belonged in that place.

I liked clubs for the noise. People talk loud in that environment. They can barely hear. It is the great equalizer. Often I noticed I heard people speaking better than the normals who went home and, the next day, heard just fine, save for maybe some annoying tinnitus.

There was a trade-off. What I took in in terms of social anxiety I gave back for feeling comfortable with my hearing. And there were so many people, that the focus couldn't ever be exclusively on me. For me a club was a cool, comfortable place.

The club was on the second floor. The walls and ceilings were black. The floor was the color of dirt and puke. The dance floor was tiny. There were chairs and couches that we were all absently relaxed on, and a small stage on the opposite side of the room as the dance floor. It opened on a complex of halls and that opened on a balcony that overlooked a stairwell. The stairs wound around the wall. There were more couches below and outside of the second door was the usually dark parking lot. I have memories for every part of the place. Once, in the parking lot I sat in my car showing pictures taken for the magazine when the manager came out to tell us to go in. He was mid-sentence when he recognized me and said, "Oh, it's you, Danny. Okay, see you inside." My two friends' mouths dropped open and my ego was fully fueled. Sitting on the stairs I had a long conversation with a pretty girl who wanted to tell me what she thought of one of my poems I published in my magazine. I fell asleep with my head on Nicole's lap on the couch in the stairwell. Another time I fell asleep alone, curled up and feeling sick from too much drink alone on the other couch in the stairwell. A girl had a mild nervous breakdown behind me while I was pissing into a wall urinal in the men's room. Gwar (sort of like KISS only with way, way more make-up) totally soaked every square inch of the club during a show once with fake blood and mostly fake bodily fluids. The club had to close for several days to clean up.

I danced for the first time. While I don't count slam-dancing, I definitely think there is some grace and skill required to get the most out of it. Otherwise you're just some schmoe jumping up and down and crashing into people—of course there was plenty of that. That could be pretty cool, too, actually. But this was the first time I actually danced, without the purpose of crashing into people and without the need to be prepared to have twenty people crash into me. It was the first time I swayed, writhed, and pivoted in praise to pounding music coursing through me. In public, that is. I danced for

months alone in my bedroom with the lights off and the music turned low because it was late at night. I wanted to dance so much, but I was captivated by the fear of dancing in front of people. It might as well have been like masturbating in front of people. I remember the first few times I stepped out onto the dance floor. It was like jumping into a cold pool, only the pool was two thousand feet below. And no one else noticed how groundbreaking an experience it was.

There were speakers at two corners of the dance floor, three-foot-tall, sturdy black cases and a couple of benches. I often sat along the dance floor watching girls and particular good dancers and disappearing behind the flashing lights that lit up the floor. There was one girl, almost as tall as me, who often wore a tight black cat suit. She had short black hair and severe eyeliner. I loved watching her dance. Her whole body writhed like a willow in a hurricane. Her hands weaved a spell. I watched her for months until my whole body would respond when I'd see her. She knew several of my friends. I had started to get to know several of hers. She was reserved. But sometimes I would see her animated and laughing when she was comfortable with her friends.

Her friend Nicole liked my friend Joe. We seemed to have an unspoken bargain to pimp our friends. She and Nicole and me and Joe and Roger and Ali hung out some times. Roger was an Asian friend I had known since Mass Media my sophomore year. Ali was an English transplant I met through another friend. Her name was Maria. Maria would be the one involved in the unfortunate incident.

We became a circle of friends for a couple of years. It was a great time. We all went to the beaches at night. I was in a lazy orbit around Maria, looking for opportunities to talk to her. We hung out at Denny's after the club. Back in those days you could find a healthy population of club kids at Denny's at three or four in the morning. Not that the club kids don't still go, but it's a different generation, a different uniform. I don't recognize them as club kids anymore.

Joe decided he too liked Maria. He started talking about how great she was. I think he was testing me. Nicole started acting out a little because Joe started paying more attention to Maria than he did to her.

Then one night, it seemed like everybody there was high or sugar high. Everyone was manic. We were all teeth and laughter. I was sitting on the perimeter of the dance floor and I saw Maria joking around with Bonehead. I didn't even know she knew him. They were sitting on a couch a few feet from the door. The light from the hall lit them up. They were pushing and pulling on each other and laughing. It looked like they were too cozy to be just friends. I felt a heat rise up my face as they got up and left. A few seconds later I followed. I don't know what excuse I gave myself but I was wondering what was up with the two of them. When I got to the door I saw them in the stairwell leaning against the iron railing. Then they weren't and I saw two pairs of feet kick into the air.

I ran to the stair well. The railing was hanging over and parallel to the floor. Like you could almost walk out on it. Bonehead, Chris, was splayed on the floor. Maria was kneeling next to him. She looked like she was praying.

I went down the stairs to them, as it seemed like half the club was. Maria was in shock. Chris looked like he had been knocked out, and there was some blood around his head. "They were just leaning against the railing!" Several people said, in varying degrees of awe. "She landed on him." "I knew that railing was going to give out eventually."

I took Maria to the hospital. She was dazed. I tried to make her laugh and I succeeded after a couple of attempts. She was alright for the most part. A few bumps and scratches. Chris had suffered the worst. He had tried to hold on to the railing but it chewed off part of a couple of his fingers and he suffered a bad concussion.

It was the first time I had taken a friend to the hospital, but I was familiar with it from repeated trips with my mother. Friends and acquaintances came and went, dropping into the emergency room lobby to see how the two of them were doing.

Maria and I went out a couple of times alone after that. Within a month we were dating.

16
AWAKE AND DREAMING

~*~

Once I woke up to the yellow-white light of the very early morning and I could hear everything outside, birds chittering and cawing and whistling, sounding like children at play moving over the lake, the fountain like liquid static in its center, cars coming and going on the turnpike half a mile away, like the ocean ebbing and flowing. I could hear it all. I never heard these things in quite the same way before. The fountain sounded louder to me in my room than it did when I was standing beside the shore of the lake. I'd heard cars on road before, but up close. They were so far away that the sound of many tires on the road had a ghostly quality to it.

This experience lasted less than a minute. It could have been fifteen seconds. To fall back on a cliché, it felt like an eternity. It is still happening in a confused and hopeful part of my mind.

I was nineteen when this happened. It had never happened before and it has never happened since. The hearing aids, even though they've opened up new worlds to me, don't duplicate the sound. I still respond to the opening of a can of soda as if it were a religious experience, but the hearing aids have a tinny overtone and a falseness. They do not fully reproduce the natural audible experience. My crazy experience was like being bathed in the sound. I heard more than I hear with the aid of technology and it sounded completely natural.

I've told doctors about it and they never seem impressed. They believe it was my imagination or some sort of auditory hallucination. The experience is about as imaginary as my big toes.

There is an episode of *Twilight Zone* in which the main character finds out that his reality is an elaborate stage production with set pieces constantly being built and broken down by alien actors and

stage engineers. His first clue to this reality is seeing a bit of façade that he wasn't supposed to see. He turns a corner too quickly, and a nearby building is not yet complete. The machinations were clear, like the inside of a clock. He discovered that his life was fiction and his surroundings were temporary set pieces.

My sudden and momentarily perfect hearing, my auditory hallucination, made me feel like that man felt. The fact that for a few brief seconds I could hear tells me that somewhere in my brain things can still work. Is something in my brain disconnected? Like headphones after too many hours of use, the music starts to snap in and out if you fiddle with the connection. Did I sleep in just the right way?

I was working at Motorola when I had this experience, doing minor repairs on pagers. There was a phrase that appeared frequently on work orders that accompanied pagers that needed repair: "Works Intermittently." Meaning there was a bad connection somewhere, or water damage that made the connectors, or damage to the board. Something made the pager just not work right. The customer didn't know what was wrong with it. They had thrown up their hands and taken it to a repair facility.

Somewhere in my brain is a faulty wire. This wasn't so much a birth defect as a petty and selfish component in my body that could work but didn't feel like it.

Once in a while when I'm sleeping I'm awakened by what seems like a very loud noise. I think my ears have worked right at other occasions as well. Normally I would think that it was something in my dreams, or maybe a car backfired. Now I wonder if my brain is intermittently working. I am haunted by Normal Daniel, a boy that may not have had it so hard because he could engage perfectly fine in communication.

~*~*~

I lived in Boca Raton. I hate Boca Raton. Mouth of the rat, indeed. I lived with my mother and her newish husband, Ron. I had a small bedroom with my own bathroom and balcony. I spent a lot of

time alone in the bedroom because all of my friends, my job, and Maria were a thirty minute commute away.

I slept on a firm twin. And I propped the pillows against the wall and used it as a day bed when watching television or reading. I spent a lot of time on the balcony leaning on the railing and staring at the lit fountain and imagining that it was a bigger patio stretching out from a house of my own. I didn't see Maria often enough when I lived there. It put a strain on our six-month-old relationship. Six months for an 18-year-old might as well have been a two-year marriage. I wrote poetry about how much I missed her. I left sad songs about lovers apart as away messages on my answering machine. Once I left a song called "Waiting for Her" by a-ha. The lyrics on the message were "Waiting for her, that's all I ever do." Someone left a large chunk of "I Am the Walrus" in reply.

The times when she came down to visit me were precious. Once when making love on my bedroom floor, she started sobbing. Absence truly made our hearts desperately fonder.

I felt like I was the desperate yearning. I had something I treasured, but it was often held just at the limits of my reach. Our time together was sweet, and when we were apart we listened to mix tapes we made for each other. They were love letters. They were full of sadness and yearning and raw passion for the moments of connection. I could revel in misery and drown in the sad music of bands like The Cure and Concrete Blonde. I would listen to these tapes in the dark in a sort of comfortable oneness with the sound. I am gothic, hear me mourn. It's embarrassing how natural this state is for me.

Before and after I lived in Boca, Maria and I fought often. The distance kept us longing for each other. We never wasted time arguing that we could spend eating dinner together or watching movies or having sex. We had broken up twice before I moved to Boca. We'd break up a half dozen or so times after.

~*~*~

I had a dream one night, an important dream. I knew it was important because important dreams seem to be capitalized. Everything has an almost Biblical relevance.

I was standing in the living room of the apartment my mother and father spent my first four years in, up until they divorced and my mother and I moved out. My father remained for many more years. It was on the fourth floor of red brick cube in Lyndhurst, New Jersey. The rug was burnt umber color. The walls were institutional white. My four-year-old self's toys were scattered all over the floor, more toys than I could have possibly possessed at once. Water started to fill the room. The dried-blood-colored rug became shiny and smooth with it. The room quickly filled, the water rose, and the toys began to rise up and float about as if tossed by waves. The water smelled sweet, like calcium and flowers and soap. My father was in the room as a visual impression, a two-dimensional haunting. When I recollect the dream I don't see him anywhere in the room, but I knew he was there. Perhaps in the dream I was remembering that he had moments before been in the room.

The water rose, and my toes started to wash away, disappearing from the room down its two halls. I woke up.

As is often the case after a forceful dream, I wandered about the next day in a daze, floating as if in that water. That smell never left me all day.

My father brought me to Colombia for Christmas or for the summer every year until I turned six. His mother and father had a large two-story house that looked something like a Brooklyn brownstone or a bombed-out World War Two German office building. The ground floor was a big open space. The second floor looked very modern for the time. There was a massive multi-paned window that looked out on the street. It was usually open. I watched in horror as one of my uncles took a dead rat from a trap and tossed it out the window onto the street below.

The very back of the house was one large, long room. It was partially open. In the middle, part of the wall and ceiling were missing. Looking out you could see a large part of the Pereira

mountainside and a hundred other houses, many with similar open rear porches, many of those with old women hanging laundry from lines or beating out rugs. There was a large shower here in part of the closed off section. And a massive sink that my abuela scrubbed clothes in by hand.

The shower was wonderful. I remember the smell of the water from the shower and sink. It was the same sweet, flowery smell from the dream. It was my grandmother's smell. The smell of her homemade soaps and the mountain water. The smell in the dream was the smell of my grandmother's water.

In the week after the dream I felt compelled to visit my father. I took a leave from work and I made plans with him, to spend ten days in New Jersey. I flew up, getting on the plane in Florida in 70 degree Florida day and landing in New Jersey in snow and a biting wind. I hadn't seen snow in years and I was thrilled. My father had a late model Ford Bronco that I drove for the duration. It was powder blue and perfect for the weather. I did a lot of driving, visiting places that I used to live.

I spent some time with my father, more time with my uncles and aunts. Four of my aunts and uncles lived in the area. They all regularly congregated at my Aunt Lyda's apartment. I stayed there for the whole trip. She had a spare room and a sofa bed. We spent a lot of time hanging out. They all drank a lot. I was only nineteen, but I drank at home and they didn't bat an eyelash at me drinking a little bit. Spanish music, traditional and contemporary, was almost always playing. If they were more into American music, they probably would have listened to the popular dance music of the time. Thank God they didn't. Even though the stuff they listened to wasn't that much different than the pop music I was familiar with at the time. I had grown up comfortable with Spanish music and it seemed both familiar and exotic.

My father still lived in the same apartment he lived in when he and my mother divorced 15 years earlier, the apartment from the dream. This was Lyndhurst, New Jersey. Rutherford was the next town over. The two towns were connected by Ridge Road and only separated by Route 3. I once asked

my mother why I never saw my father. She said he was too far away to see me more often. He was the next town over. It took me five minutes to drive from his apartment to the apartment my mother and I spent two years in for first and second grade.

One night my father, two uncles and a friend of theirs tried to have a man's night out. We went to several bars but for some reason never settled down. My uncles didn't speak much English and they were often uncomfortable trying to communicate. So I was left out of the decision making and didn't know why we were going from bar to bar. I think perhaps they were trying to impress me, but I thought all the places we were going were dives with no personality.

We wound up back at my aunt's house. Everyone had had a couple of drinks and it continued again once we'd settled in. The conversation drifted through Spanish and English, usually Spanish. Once in a while one of the uncles would smile, a little embarrassed and try asking me about school or work or my girlfriend. I'd respond simply. When I tried responding with anything more than a "very good, thank you," they had to look to my father to translate. Then they would nod their heads, smile, and say, "Ah, bueno!"

As my father got drunker he started talking more and more in Spanish, leaving me out of the conversation entirely. He started asking me questions about school and work and my tastes in music and clothing. At the time I had a long tangle of curly hair and I usually wore black concert tees and jeans. He would ask me something and we would go back and forth a couple of times and he would turn back to his brothers and talk in Spanish. He grew progressively more agitated. We were arguing and I had no idea what we were arguing about. The brothers tried to calm him down and lighten the mood. I think my years of compensating for poor hearing made it a little easier to understand them. I took in their tone of voice and body language. But I didn't realize how little I paid attention. They had been acting weird all evening, all of them.

My father finally asked if I liked them. I was taken aback. "Sure I do."

“Well, we’re trying to spend an evening together, and you can’t be pleased?”

I don’t know what my expression was. I felt confused. I had no idea what was going on, but he must have taken my confusion as dismissal.

“You’re the one that wanted to visit. But you don’t talk to us that much. You just sit around listening to your headphones and reading your magazines. We take you out tonight, and you can’t be pleased. They only wanted to take you to clubs because they know you like going to clubs. Do you think we ever go to clubs?”

I didn’t know what to say. My father responded as if he hadn’t yet impressed his feelings on me. He talked about how he wasn’t there for me, and now I don’t have any respect or discipline. He said that he was looking forward to my visit because he thought we would connect and talk, but we hardly did any talking at all.

I said he hadn’t really tried to talk to me. I had been there for a week already and I’d only seen him a couple of times.

“You don’t even speak Spanish!”

“You never taught me Spanish!”

“You should have learned it on your own!”

“I shouldn’t have had to learn on my own!”

It went back and forth as we both started raising our voices more and more and the uncles just watched us uncomfortably, occasionally trying to smile and say something softly in a conciliatory, drawn out way.

“You hate me!” my father yelled. His face was flushed and he looked on the verge of tears or rage. “Hate me! Hate me!”

The confusing thing was I didn’t know if he was saying “hate” or “hit.” At first it sounded like “hate,” but then he kept repeating himself, gesturing as if beckoning, and it finally sounded very much

like he was yelling, “Hit me! Hit me!” I kept saying no. Finally I went to my room and closed and locked the door. I put on the headphones loud and read.

I slept late. The next day my aunt said my father had been calling all morning, asking if I had woken up yet and expressing an unending stream of regret. My aunt did her best to diffuse the situation. When he called again, he apologized then sermonized for a solid ten minutes about the roles of a father and a son. It didn’t really sound like an apology but it felt like one. He was talking about the way it’s supposed to be and we both knew that it wasn’t. He came over later and was very polite and slightly abashed the rest of my stay. He did his best to be warm and friendly.

That very night, everyone in the area who was family came over and waited to call my grandmother in Colombia. They put her on a speakerphone and we all talked. She sounded very far away. What she said was often translated so I could understand, even if it wasn’t said to me. I addressed her a couple of times and I answered the basic questions. It made me sad that there were thousands of miles of telephone line and a host of translators between her and me. I remembered when I was four and my father was following me with a belt threatening to lash me for some infraction and I hid behind her and she yelled at him in Spanish, pointing her finger at his chest, holding my hands with her free hand. He looked like he was talking to a cop and trying to get out of a ticket. She was a beautiful woman who, when she looked at me, looked full of love. And I had talked to her maybe twice in thirteen years.

The rest of the trip was pleasant. My father came over more often. We never talked about the our little drag-out again, but things felt a little bit more equal between us. I played barefoot in the snow. My aunts laughed and shook their heads at me. I said I hadn’t seen snow in years and I wanted to remember the feel of it. I returned to Florida feeling a little bit more mature, a little bit taller. At the time it seemed like my father had more anger towards me than I did towards him.

A week later my grandmother, my abuela, died. I called and spoke with all of my aunts and uncles and my father. Every one of them said it was great that I was able to talk to her before she died. The fact that I had gone to Jersey and was with the family when I called her, they said, made it feel for her a little bit more like I was there with her at the time.

17
MIX TAPES

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Music has always been holy to me. But its relevance in my life has built up over time. So if I was a pious weekly church-goer when I was seven, singing John Denver's "Leaving on a Jetplane" while doing dishes and looking out the afternoon window in utter rapture. Then I was a penitent monk by high school, worshipping nightly at the altar of my hand-me-down dual cassette/phonograph/am/fm stereo. Finally, years after high school, after a few years editing a music fanzine, and a companion stint as a dj at an am radio station, and later a dj at a college radio station, I was a bishop.

I had the Mamas and Papas, Jefferson Airplane, and John Denver when my music was my mother's music. And I was faithful. I had MTV all to myself when I stayed at my uncle's in Fort Lee. When I moved to Florida I had MTV in my very own room—Thank you, mom, for getting cable—I had all of 80s New Wave. Everything from poppy Mr. Mister to gothy Love and Rockets. Meanwhile I ordered cassettes through Columbia House, copied copies of my friends' Guns N Roses. Oingo Boingo blew my mind and Iron Maiden made me want to get a sword and some armor and stand on a hilltop looking menacing.

In high school I went in all directions, deepening my religious observance of heavy metal by wearing the ritual denim and black concert shirts and learning to play "Sweet Child O Mine" and anything by KISS on guitar. After school I would fall asleep to Def Leppard's *Hysteria*, which still makes me daydream. I copied The Cure's *Disintegration* to one side of a long play cassette and the Charlatans *Some Friendly* to the other and I listened to it until the playback became hissy and tinny and the tape sounded like it was being played under water.

It was the time of mix tapes. Mix tapes as soundtracks to our lives. Mix tapes as love sonnets, rainy day mixes, mixes to get my in the mood to go clubbing with friends, mix tapes to listen to while exercising, mix tapes to listen to when life felt like a 200 pound yoke on my neck.

Even today, sometimes I will hear a song and expect the song that follows to be the song that followed on the mix tape in which the song was introduced to me, or when the song was given its incidental emotional power.

In high school I dated a goth girl named Jen. She called herself Darkness. She was a cute blonde Jersey girl I met in Mass Media class. She had only been in Florida for a couple of months and we already had many mutual friends. We sat in her room at night and listened to music and talked about all things that go bump in the night. The conversations were punctuated by making out or having sex.. She was the second person I had sex with. We dated briefly but remained friends and flirted with the idea of being a couple for a couple of years. I gave her one or two mix tapes as my girlfriend and one or two more in the years after as friends. She gave me a half dozen. She included samples from movies like *Legend* and *The Lost Boys*. She fantasized that I was her Louis, the protagonist from *Interview with the Vampire*. (Many years later another girlfriend would fantasize that I was her Edward, the vampire protagonist from *Twilight*. This was a 32-year-old woman, mind you. It's sexy and romantic when you're in high school, grounds for divorce when you're thirty five.) I listened to Jen's mixes when I was alone in my room at night, sitting by my window and longing for god-knows-what.

After high school, Maria took my decent music vocabulary and hitched it to hers. It was like dragging a dinghy onto a Spanish galleon. I made her dozens of mix tapes. And she made me dozens more. My longing for her was palpable; it was a six-year heart attack. I can't even fathom it now. It was an exquisite pain and I fed it all the high quality romantic pining away I could muster. It seemed like we broke up every other month. Sometimes she ended it, sometimes I ended it. And when we were

apart I pined. I listened to mixes and it almost felt like we were making love. And she fed it with her mix tapes that declared her thrashing, desperate, painful love for me. When we were apart I lay in the moonlight in my room staring out the window and listening over and over to her words as conveyed by Siouxsie and the Banshees and every other wonderfully, defiantly depressed band of any quality. She was the Cyrano, whispering to me from the darkness through the music.

I coaxed and cajoled every serious girlfriend after to make me mix tapes and gave my own creations prolifically. They were soundtracks of my affection.

In the five years that Maria and I were a couple I moved four of times, always rooming with friends in their houses or apartments. I was in five car accidents. One driving Maria's car. She was with me for all of them. I had a dozen jobs, a few of them at the same time. My fortunes rose and fell.

After a year and a half at Motorola, I quit. It was cushy job for my position. Horrible money for a career adult, but great as a first serious job for a kid living at home. Maria and I went to Disney World every other month. What money I didn't spend on us I spent trying to get the magazine off the ground. One day my mother said she was so proud that I was being a responsible adult. I had cut my hair because I was sick of the effort it took. I wore business casual to work. The mistake was in her phrasing, something like, "I'm so proud of you, Daniel. You 're working at a corporation, you're dressing well..." I think I trailed off at that point.

That week Maria and I were fighting. One day we had a real drag-out right before I went into work. Sitting in my electrically grounded chair, working on pager after pager, I couldn't shake the frustration of the conversation and the feeling that I was becoming a "corporate whore." Part of the reason Maria and I were having trouble was because I worked five nights a week and we didn't see each other that much.

I worked myself into a storm of frustrated and impotent thoughts. Finally I got up and walked out. On the way I met my boss who smiled and asked me how I was doing. I said fine, thanks and kept on walking.

I worked on the magazine, Rage, for almost a year after that. We got up to the eighth issue, printed ten thousand copies of the last two issues. It finally looked like a real magazine. I had interviews with Radiohead and REM set up for the next issue. And then I quit that too. My reason, pre-packaged for everyone and barely true, was that I had no more rage so no more reason to do the magazine. Maria was pissed. The staff was pissed. It's not that I didn't care but I couldn't deal with it. It's like I had a nice car, maybe not something fancy, but maybe a pretty red Honda Civic, and I pulled on to the shoulder of the highway, got out and let it idle into a ditch on the side of the road and walked away. Sure, it was partly my fear of success, of completing something. But I had already completed eight issues. It was an easy situation to rationalize. But the fact was that I quit just when it was started to get successful. I would see people reading it in downtown cafes. I started showing up in other local magazines and smaller fanzines. I just gave up. Over the years people would ask me if I ever intended to start another magazine. I still think about it sometimes. But the era of the fanzine is over. There was a time when tens of thousands of kids were printing fanzines in copy shops. Now they have internet blogs. Cheaper, easier, and lacking a lot of the intimacy and urgency of the message in the bottle that was the fanzine of the time.

I gave up on college after two years and a changes of my major. From English to psychology. I decided I was going to be writer, and I was going to write what I wanted, and writers didn't need a college education. And I certainly didn't need to be a psychologist, listening to other people's problems for hours a day.

After moving around my whole life, never living in a place for more than a year, I moved to Florida and lived in once place for three years and then another place for five. On one hand it was nice

to have the same bedroom for five years. But on the other, it was during this period that I became progressively more depressed. I think part of me was convinced that living in the same place had attracted something unwanted. And I started to run. I thought not standing still, in an existential sense, I could outrun whatever it was weighing on me.

In a way I think it worked. All the moving, all the different jobs, the different identities I tried on: corporate whore, college student, dj, magazine editor, writer, it's felt like I was forcing time to accelerate and pushing something further and further back in the past. The feeling of the passing of time and all of the small life-lessons I picked up helped me to grow up a little faster, but I wanted to slow down. I was spinning my wheels and sinking.

I got a job delivering pizza for Papa Johns. Even though I was putting almost a hundred miles on my car a day, I was making decent money. I was seduced by the habit of going home with a wad of cash in my pocket. I made very good tips. I drove like a mad man, something I already did, but embraced when I decided I could do it professionally, and I was exceedingly friendly to customers. I got better tips than anybody else I worked with. I realized quickly that I should stop talking about how much I was making because none of the other drivers appreciated it.

I loved my job. I loved driving around, listening to music, eating pizza. I made my own recipe. I would toss out a medium ball of dough into a large pizza, add extra spices and oil and cheese. It's a wonder I didn't get huge working there. Then I started working with Maria at a sandwich shop. I delivered lunch there in the morning and pizza at night. I didn't spend too much time at any one place, most of my time was spent alone in my car listening to music. I was a professional slacker,

I went on a lot of road trips. At least once a year I went to New Jersey or New Orleans. Maria was never willing to take the time off from work to go with me. It wasn't that she didn't want to go with me, she was jealous and bitter that I went alone. But she wasn't the sort that could tell her boss she wanted time off. She was not only loyal but she was afraid to expect respect. So I would walk

around New Orleans by myself, slowly falling in love with the city and imagining stories taking place there. I wasn't able to make too many friends, but there were loud goth clubs where I could hang out and I did meet a few people. All in all I just wanted to be in the city. I wanted to walk around and feel like the history of the place was psychically seeping into me. When I visited New Jersey I would drive around looking at the places I used to live and I would spend time with family on my mother's and father's side.

It was the long drives that I liked most. Sometimes I would spend as much time driving as I did at my destination. Hours alone in my car watching the road unfurl listening to music and thinking. It was the very deepest form of meditation I could muster and it helped me to figure out all of my little problems. And the time away from Maria would focus our need for each other. We would write long letters to each other in absentia and hand over a half dozen letters once we were reunited.

18
ROSEMARY AND TIME

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When I was 23 I moved into my first apartment by myself. It was the first time I lived without parents or a roommate. It was small and narrow apartment in a bad part of town, just south of downtown West Palm Beach and five blocks away from Respectable Street Café. The building was surrounded by fields of grass, empty except for a few lopsided bushes, empty beer bottles, and discarded furniture.

I was careful with colors, using mostly earthy tones, greens and browns and I put up a few posters. The couch was a futon I had padded with four body pillows and a comforter. The pine green curtain was actually a bed sheet I stapled to the wall. The bedroom was barren except for a night stand and a queen sized bed. I only used the bedroom for sleeping and sex, and ultimately only for sex or when someone spent the night. I bought a cheap dinette set for the “dining room,” a spot in the corner of the living room with a chintzy chandelier, but I never once ate there. I only used it as a computer desk. The real money I spent on a nice VCR, a laptop that cost three weeks’ salary, and a plush, green lounge chair. I bought all of this on credit, credit that was already strained by the magazine, but was extended to me nonetheless.

It was too lonely sleeping in the bedroom. My dreams grew progressively more chaotic, my sleeping habits slowly derailed, and as my stress levels grew.

I delivered lunch for the sandwich shop, where I worked with Maria. It was a spartan, white store front. The front had an empty display case and an empty board behind the cash register where no specials or for sale items were listed. The back room had mostly empty metal countertops. The owner, a sometimes charming, usually sullen pot-smoker had a lot of ideas for the place but nothing more than a lunchtime delivery business ever materialized. We sold several different varieties of sandwiches from breads that he made early in the morning. I spent three or four hours around lunch time delivering to local business. I saw a totally different part of a town in this way—moving from business to business around lunchtime, interacting with doctors and doctors’ assistants, accountants and mildly successful lawyers, shopkeepers and salespeople, all moving slowly, often as if in a dream, until they’d see their lunch coming and they suddenly perk up, if only just a little. Nothing seemed busy at that time of day. Everyone seemed mildly bored. As a customer to all of these places I was a mark, or a mild hope, or even a focus of resentment, their expressions sometimes being, “How dare you make me work.” As the expeditor of their lunch I was a relief, a co-conspirator, an excuse to leave the monotony of the front office or the store proper and take a lunch break. “Oh, thank you, so much. That smells so good!” Of course, some would give me the expression, “How dare you keep me waiting.”

My shift at Papa John’s usually began at six or seven, so I blissfully avoided the worst of rush hour. Twilight seemed to stretch when I moved so quickly from place to place, listening to loud, fast music. The business was brisk so I was in my car most of the time. I drove fast and crazy and felt uncomfortable dawdling. I loved the relief and pleasure people usually greeted me with. It was a simple pleasure. I loved peeking into people’s lives. More than once I was greeted by a pretty girl in a bra or topless, perhaps hoping to score a free pizza. Once I was greeted by a fat, hairy guy in faded boxer shorts. The guy gave me a much better tip than the girls. I saw a totally different part of town in this way—moving from home to home. These were the same sorts of people that I saw earlier, in a few cases the very same people. They were more animated. They stood more upright. They moved about

quicker. They were on their own time, after all, and they were eager to get to the ritual of sitting down to dinner. Sometimes sitting on the couch with friends and watching television. Sometimes standing in the kitchen alone and watching the sports news.

I floated like a ghost through these lives. My face would be forgotten quickly. Once in a while these people never really looked up at me from their wallets and their change-counting and their hungry gazes into pizza boxes. Often they'd crack jokes and only some of those would I hear. Either way I'd chuckle. Sometimes I'd be able to give their joke an extra beat or two.

Eventually I started delivering the *Sun Sentinel* as well. Every night of the week at two or three in the morning I went to a distribution warehouse. I waited around twenty minutes or two hours for the newspapers to arrive. I folded and bagged them, pushed the pile of them in a cart to my car, loaded up the back seat and headed out to my route. I delivered between three and five in the morning.

Depending upon how long it took the journalists at the actual *Sun Sentinel* offices to finish their product and get the paper itself out. This was the quietest time of the day. I delivered on a street that had small named communities branching off into very different neighborhoods. A few were slightly lower middle class. A few were slightly upper middle class. Even though they often lived within a hundred feet of each other, they segregated the communities in order to have the illusion of disparity.

On any given night I would see more owls and cats than humans. As I approached, cats skittered out from under cars fled for the safety of bushes. Small owls would alight on mailboxes and watch me pass. Once in a while they flew alongside my car, and I watched them as if they were frozen in mid air. There might be a couple of joggers, especially if I delivered later in the night. There might be a man in pajamas and a robe walking a dog. I saw a totally different part of town in this way—moving like a cat, gliding like an owl, the sound of my motor and the lull of my music every night penetrating the dreams of the sleeping or disturbing the reverie of the jogger or the dog-walker. The world slept and was quiet.

I had a dream. I was walking up steps. The walls were off white and the steps were metal. I walked through a door into a huge loft. It looked like a Pier One Imports showroom. There were several sitting areas with pretty tables of wood or wrought metal surrounded by couches and loveseats and chairs. Each area had its own decorative theme, but the whole room fit together nicely. To my right in the corner was a kitchen just like any of the kitchens my mother and I had when I lived in New Jersey, and a couple of doors led to bedrooms. I walked through the large living space, admiring the furnishings and décor and saw the far end of the room sectioned off by a white half-wall topped with a row of potted plants. This part of the room was two steps down and the entire end was a window. I looked through this window and saw a dark and empty part of town, the side of town that had dive bars, struggling diners, used car dealerships and low-overhead auto shops.

I noticed a narrow hall with a short flight of stairs leading down to a door with a tiny window brightly lit from within. I saw movement almost as if through a phantasmagoria. I couldn't make out what was going on. I just saw shoulders, the backs of heads, the sides of faces moving about. I thought it might be a store. I saw the occasional animated face, talking, smiling. I couldn't hear it.

I suddenly realized this was my room. This was the room that started as a glittering and unattainable prize in the house of the devil. Here the room was as fine an apartment as I could ever hope to have and the view was of night time in a dilapidated part of town. It was so empty. No devil's house. No fear. No prize.

That was the last time I ever had the dream.

I hadn't started working at the paper when I first moved in. I had more time. I invited Maria over a lot. She was newly single, and I wanted to impress her. She was impressed. I was working hard and claiming my independence. She came over when it was empty and we ate fast food and had sex on

the floor of the empty living room. She came over when I started acquiring furniture and some kitchenware and we had sex on my futon. She came over when I had the kitchen stocked and started cooking, and she started going down on me in the kitchen. That sort of impulsive attack of passion held me completely hostage. The sex was more adventurous than it had been in years. She had more initiative with our love-making, and during her eyes blazed.

After I started delivering the paper my schedule started taking its toll. I worked at the paper and then slept from six or seven in the morning till ten. Then I went to the bakeshop and worked from eleven till two. Then I went home, sometimes to take a nap. At six or seven I delivered pizza till nine or ten. Then I went home and watched television. Some nights I went straight to the club and stay until I needed to be at the paper. Sometimes I drank and worked with a buzz and I would joke about this before leaving the club. Sometimes I deejayed at the club and I would chomp at the bit the whole night beforehand at Papa Johns, wondering about what I would spin, and run to the club, changing into appropriate bad-ass deejay attire.

The friction between Maria and me returned and the smooth, exciting way we interacted when things were best turned into the snarled knotted awkward. One night when I was changing in the bathroom and we were arguing, I found my socks in the toilet. It was entirely possible that they fell in. I had them sitting on the sink with a change of clothes. But I was convinced she did it out of anger, lashing out at me, and I thought it was perfectly reasonable to accuse her of throwing them in the toilet. She left angry. We didn't talk for a few weeks. She started dating someone else.

I started sleeping around. I desperately wanted to meet people, so I started an account on Love@AOL. A simple and very user friendly dating service America Online provided free to its customers. At the time it seemed like everyone was on AOL. It was the Facebook of the nineties, but a multipurpose monolith from which people did their websurfing, sent their email, chatted in instant messenger. This was the time when pictures took many seconds to download and most people didn't

have the patience to even consider downloading a song. I met lots of girls that way. Some of them I met for lunch or invited to my place for a drink. Most of the girls that I met I had sex with, usually the first time we met. I met one girl at a McDonald's and we chatted over Chicken McNuggets. She was a pretty mocha-skinned mulatto who had just turned twenty and was slowly adding tattoos to her back. When we parted ways I wasn't completely sure what she thought of me, but then she said she'd like to get together again so we met at my house. She came over and we talked. I have no idea what we talked about. She hung out for maybe an hour or two. She started making references to the late hour, and I conceded that I should probably get some sleep. I walked her to her car. She kissed me. I kissed her back. We made out for a few minutes. Then she said, "You know, I really don't want to leave. I want to fuck you."

So we went back to the apartment. The sex seesawed between intensely energetic and awkward. When it was hot, I had the sense she was performing, and when it was awkward I had the sense she didn't know what she wanted. Thinking back, I was probably transferring my own feelings. When she finally did leave, she was beaming, and I felt wanted.

We chatted online, usually not about anything interesting. Our conversations seemed more to gauge interest in meeting again. I did want to see her again. I had enjoyed the feel of her body, but I was bored by the conversation. She picked a fight with me, and I've always been good at fighting. I had the vocabulary, the built-in righteous indignation and the passion. She scoffed, as much as somebody can scoff on a computer, and said she could sit on somebody else's cock.

I met a half dozen girls on Love@AOL that I invited over and had sex with. One week I had four dates on four nights in a row and all four resulted in sex. I can't remember any of these girls no matter how much I think about it. I met one girl through a friend who wanted some extra cash, so I gave her my Saturday nights on my route. The paper delivery job was every single night of the year. If I wanted a break I had to find a replacement. She was a pretty girl a foot shorter than me with pale skin

and dark hair. Having her naked on my bed felt nice because she had such nice skin and a nice body. I remember her lying on her stomach as I was putting music on the stereo. Her skin was milky white on the tan sheets. I wanted to date her but she was very good at deflecting my overtures, good enough that I didn't realize until one night when she stopped by to pick up my route book for the newspaper with a guy in the car that she tried to prevent me from seeing. She got in trouble that night for missing too many customers, and that meant I got in trouble. So I fired her. More because she was doing my route with some other guy then because she messed up.

I exercised a lot when I lived there. I did yoga to the dreamy music of Enigma and Kung Fu to the kinetic music of Moby almost every night on my living room floor by the light of my stereo. I rollerbladed and bicycled to and from Palm Beach Island at one or two in the morning. I worked on a sci-fi novel that I never completed and stood in the doorway of my apartment listening to the trains in the distance. All these things I did alone.

After a few months of what I wouldn't admit were one night stands simply because I talked to all of these girls a little bit before meeting, even though none of them did I see after more than one or two nights of sex, I got sick of it. I started actually dating. The dating didn't go anywhere. It usually resulted in sex very early in the courtship and after a couple of weeks would totally fizzle out or turn into friendship. I'm still close with a few of these girls, the ones for whom the friendship was valuable in itself and who actually did like me enough to maintain a relationship and weren't just lingering in hopes that I would come around. Many times I found myself getting very attached to a girl, who promised me her eternal friendship, and then found a boyfriend and never had another real conversation with me again. I was too wrapped up in my isolation. And any thoughts of love and romance were thoughts of Maria.

I met a smart and incredibly neurotic redhead named Susanne who looked cute and sexy in her librarian's glasses and a ponytail. She was one of the first people I told about my hearing impairment,

because her often loud and demonstrative voice would just as often sink into a smoke murmur. She became used to speaking with more intent in these murmuring times for me, and often sought to make accommodations for me. We had sex almost immediately. She liked going down on me, but wouldn't let me go down on her. She was insecure about it for reasons I couldn't get out of her. She didn't smell and the brief seconds I would be able to lick her before she pushed me off told me she tasted perfectly fine.

Her insecurity stretched to every physical, mental and emotional aspect of her life. Even though she was pretty she constantly complained about her weight and a scoliosis that I only noticed when she guided me along the line of her imperfect back. She was one of the smartest girls I'd ever date, but her intelligence seemed weaponized for her own self-destruction. And every time we got close she practically collapsed into convulsions of self-doubt. Very quickly, my romantic interest in her crystallized into the platonic. Perhaps it would have been easier for her if I were easier to read and as open as transparent at the time that I was convinced that I was. She fawned and convulsed some more until giving up altogether. But not before being there for me for one of the more trying times of my life.

One Sunday while delivering the newspaper I was pulled over by a police officer. I had no idea what for. It's the nature of the job that I sped and ran stop signs. Two police officers approached my car. I was barely a third of the way through my route and the back and passenger seat of my car was piled to the roof with Sunday papers. They asked for my license. Even asked me what I was doing. Then they said that they had a complaint from a young female jogger that someone in a car matching mine was following her around. I chuckled, relieved, and said, "Well, as you can see, I'm delivering newspapers. I guess I can imagine how she might have been confused but" and I gestured at the stack "I'm just delivering the newspaper."

They nodded and told me to wait in my car and went back to theirs. I sat there for another ten minutes until another car pulled up. This was a sheriff's deputy. He asked me to get out of the car and then asked me to join him in the back seat of his car. Then he started asking me what my relationship was with this girl. I said I don't know who you're talking about. I see quite a few joggers this late in the night.

The night sky had already started to brighten. He told me exactly what she looked like. "Oh don't give me that. You can't tell me you haven't noticed her," he said, scowling at me. "She's pretty, tan, brown hair." He told me her address. Told me her father was the Fire Chief in Broward. I knew the second he said that I was screwed, but I had no idea what to do except sit in his backseat and keep denying everything he was saying and say, "But I'm just delivering the paper."

I don't think he cared what was going on. And I suspect he didn't think I had anything really to do with her. From the way he responded to what I was saying, I think he thought I was just a delivery boy who had taken to gawking at this pretty girl and it made her uncomfortable and he was going to do whatever he could to impress her fire chief father.

When he finally let me go I was so rattled that I started crying. If someone asked me a week earlier what I would do if put in that situation, I would have said, in my arrogantly passionate way that I would have chewed the guy a new one for trying to use intimidation in such an unethical way. I would not have said, "Well, I'll stammer excuses at the guy and then shudder like a leaf afterwards."

I went straight back to the paper. One of the nicer delivery women saw my distress and was already unpacking my route to deliver it herself before I completely explained the situation. My supervisor, however, had already heard about it, probably from the fire chief. He sat me down in his office, "Listen, I don't know what sort of situation is going on with you and this girl, maybe you were dating and she dumped you or something—"

"I have no idea who this girl is! I couldn't point her out in a line-up!"

He waved my excuses off. “You’re not going back out there. We’ll find a different route for you.”

The real bitch of it is, I’m pretty sure I knew who the cause of my troubles was. I never met her. I never gawked. I had no reason to gawk. What do I care about some jogger? But I was aware. I was taking in everything around me because driving fast in and out of cul-de-sacs I needed to be vigilant about my surroundings. There are usually a good half-dozen people jogging at that time, but I noticed all of them, and I tried to drive a little bit more sanely around them not just because it was safer but because I didn’t want anyone to complain. But for that reason I also didn’t care who she was. But the fact that I had a good idea I knew who it was made me feel guilty. Like somehow I deserved what was done to me. I wished I could be completely innocent of the situation. If none of this had happened I wouldn’t have seen her until the next time I was out delivering that late or never again and two days later I wouldn’t have remembered her, but now I had the blurry half-image of some jogging girl filed away in my head making me feel like a pervert.

The route they put me on was horrible. It was considerably fewer papers, which meant less money, but took longer. Instead of a nice quiet drive, tossing papers onto expansive driveways, most of this route was running papers up flights of stairs to apartments where the addresses were barely legible in the dark. I quit less than a week later. I never called. I let them sit on the route till the last moment when they called me repeatedly and left messages on my machine.

I met a girl that lived in Mississippi named Anna on Love@AOL. We chatted online. We talked on the phone. She said she’d just turned nineteen. I thought that was okay; I never really noticed her immaturity. She talked about things I liked. We talked for hours. With the extra time I suddenly had, being down to two jobs, I still couldn’t sleep that well or that much, so I appreciated having someone to talk to. I never saw a picture of her. But I believed her description because it was the image

I saw in my head. Pretty red hair, pale, slightly doughy skin, full figured. She described herself to me. We didn't talk much about sex, once or twice she described herself in lascivious poses, waiting for me to do things to her. We flirted around the idea of my visiting her. I had been to New Orleans a couple of times already and we talked about meeting and spending a couple of days in New Orleans, which was less than an hour from her home.

Finally we decided to do it. I took a Friday night off work from the pizza place and drove out to New Orleans. I got there at three in the morning. I booked a romantic little room with a four poster bed that almost took up the whole room and I napped while waiting for her to arrive.

When she didn't arrive on time, I called her. She lived with her parents but had her own line. She said she would be there later. When she didn't arrive later I called her again and she said she was having some problems getting permission from her mother. She admitted being eighteen and that her mother was a little strict. She said she wanted to lie to her mother and say she was going to a friends to meet a 19-year-old boy, but I told her that I wasn't comfortable with her lying like that. I said I would talk to her mother if that would help, but she didn't think it would. She said she would see what she could do and a couple of hours later would give me a call again.

A couple of hours later, around five in the afternoon, we talked again and she admitted that she was seventeen and that she had told her mother how old I really was. And that her mother seemed impressed that I insisted on honesty, but not at all impressed that I wanted to spend the weekend alone with a 17-year-old. She wouldn't be able to come after all. I was horrified that she was seventeen. But when she said maybe I could stop by to visit her on my way back to south Florida I said I wanted to. I knew we would stop communicating, at least in the fashion we had been. But I wanted to at least meet her and see how much of my image was purely my imagination.

I decided I would stay for the duration, even if it was by myself. That night all I did was lie in bed watching television. I saw a great black and white movie with Steve Buscemi and Catherine

Keener. Sometimes, when I really need to laugh, my laughter sounds a little maniacal and forced. What is funny seems much more so. I think that night I needed to believe in romance. So the dysfunctional romance between the two of them seemed poetic and beautiful.

The next day I decided to go back home early after all. I called Anna and she said she would be at a friend's house and gave me that number. No big deal. Just hanging out at her friend's house. She told me to call when I was in the area and she would give me directions. I called from a mini mall payphone. Anna wasn't there. Her friend told me that she had gotten in trouble. That she was actually sixteen. Her friend told me to wait and call her back in an hour and maybe Anna would be able to sneak out and come over. I wasn't having anything to do with that. So I left.

The whole drive back I listened to loud, angry music and hated myself for getting hooked on a 16-year-old girl. Shouldn't I be able to tell the difference between a 16-year-old girl and a 19-year-old girl? Shouldn't I be unimpressed with the courting skills of a 16-year-old girl? It could have been that she was the first girl I made any sort of connection with that wasn't sexual. It could have been that the concept of the internet relationship was a new thing to me, to anybody, really, and I didn't think about how much of my own imagination was filling in the blanks of real world interaction. Rationalizing it didn't make me feel better.

As I drove through the states, into the panhandle, the music and my mood became more and more somber. I decide to take a three hour detour and drive through St. Augustine. I had been there twice with Maria and I loved the town. When I finally got there I opened my windows and cruised along the intercoastal, out onto the island under the light of the lighthouse. The night was cool. There was a perfect mild breeze drifting over me. I listened to "Face" by Moev, a groovy somber gothic song, over and over and over. It was on a mix that Maria had made for me. I still remember the drive, the feeling of the breeze on my skin, the sensations of the music and the wheel in my hand, but I don't

remember the face or names of the girls I had slept with in the previous months. I listened to Maria's mix for the four hour drive from St Augustine to West Palm Beach.

Having the extra time didn't help my mood. I exercised, I jogged and rollerbladed and rode my bike back and forth to the quiet, winding paths on the Palm Beach Island side of the intercoastal. I usually made my way to the tree. Sometimes lingering or sitting beneath it and looking at downtown West Palm Beach across the intercoastal waterway.

I slowed the pace of my dating, but living alone, several blocks away from where I regularly hung out, needing to fill a void that I didn't want to deal with maturely, I kept bringing girls home on a regular basis.

There is a difference between a slut and a stud, and let's just dismiss the whole, men are studs and women are sluts bullshit outright. A stud is someone who conquers. Whether it's through seduction or initiative, they're the one who approaches the other person. They take the initiative. A slut usually tends to acquiesce. They are the conquered, the go-along. I was a slut. People thought I was a player, but if it wasn't online, I never approached a girl unless she was making it completely clear that she was interested, and subtlety was wasted on me. I went along with dates and sex far more often than I should have, and more often than I would have liked to.

The overwhelming majority of the girls I talked to seemed either crazy in the delusional way or crazy in the intensity way. I didn't think of it as weird that I would meet a girl and within a date or two we would have sex. Then I would promptly discover she was crazy or she would begin to make bizarre demands. I had blinders on. It was an intense time. I was no longer with a girl who I had spent five years with, who I was convinced I would marry. I was on my own. I was writing a lot, working a lot. My relationships with women were shallow and short lived.

Now, I'm thirty five. I don't really even know people like the women I dated at the time. In a sense they're invisible to me. I still go to clubs. I notice them sometimes. But somehow I started talking a different psychic language. I chalk it up to maturity and respect. I look around at the people I know and spend time with now and I think, damn, there are some smart, funny, decent people in the world. When I lived on Rosemary I knew some desperate, lonely, emotionally troubled, dishonest, manipulative, often stupid people who lacked self-respect and self-awareness.

One night I had a dream, I think it was a night terror fueled by sleep paralysis. I'm quite sure I was somewhat awake, but the dreaming was overlaid onto my bedroom like cels in a cartoon. A man and woman dressed as Puritans were pacing besides my bed, urgently reading in what sounded like Latin from a leather-bound book.

I felt an evil presence coming closer from above me, behind the bed. The anxiety of it pressed at me and my ears hummed. This is why I am convinced it was part sleep paralysis. It is that feeling of impending evil that characterizes most episodes of sleep paralysis and what convinces so many people that they are victims of alien abductions or vampire attacks. As the evil presence came close, the Puritans read more loudly and quickly from their book and paced with anxiety. The feeling of evil built until I was waked by fright.

I went into the bathroom to wash up. I needed to leave the bedroom. I looked at my tired face in the mirror. I had claw marks from my neck down to the muscle of my shoulders. Did I claw myself in my sleep? Was this the sort of rash that can happen in times of great stress? Was I that stressed out?

I already spent most nights sleeping on the futon with the television or music playing. I usually didn't even unfold the futon. With the comforter and pillows, I felt like I was sinking into the softness of it. Once I had that dream, the feeling of loss of control from not being able to move is what got to me the most, I almost never slept in the bedroom alone.

One night, lying on the futon, I tried calling a couple of people who weren't available. I wanted to want to commit suicide. I saw my inability to ponder it as cowardice. I was lying on the couch, feeling like the softness was sucking me in. I had no strong feelings about anything. My feelings were explosive, consuming, but they were a bland ennui surrounding me. Like a humid fog making it difficult to breathe and impossible to see. I wanted to want to commit suicide. I wanted to be open to the self destruction, but my passion wouldn't focus on anything, not even annihilation.

I went into the bedroom closet and dug through a box of stationery left over from the magazine and found an X-acto knife and sank back into the futon and slowly dragged the blade on my skin, lightly at first, like a sensual, teasing, drifting finger, then slightly harder. The blade dragged a white wake on the surface of my skin. I made lazy rows of ever deeper grooves. Then harder, tiny beads of blood popped up like red pinstripes. Then deeper and I had a thick red line that spawned a few rivulets of blood that ran down my arm and soaked my shirt. I dropped the knife on the floor and closed my eyes and focused on the sensations, the pain, the tickle of blood dripping down my arm.

It felt good. It felt cathartic, like the sweaty peace after vomiting. But I imagined watching myself from above lying there and felt grandly retarded.

19
SECURITY

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When I was sixteen years old I went with Fred and Mike to the first Lollapalooza tour in Orlando. Lollapalooza was a music festival of eclectic often extreme alternative bands, eco and sexual friendly exhibits and \$4 water.

We walked around for a while looking at the different exhibits, eating, when not watching the bands we wanted to see. Henry Rollins, Ice T, Nine Inch Nails played. The crowd was thick near the stage, and about a hundred feet out standing gave way to lying and sitting on blankets and sheets. I got stomach cramps. I found some friends who had laid out a couple of blankets and lay there for a while. It started to rain. The rain didn't feel warm or cold. It felt like sweat. I heard Siouxsie and the Banshees performing and they sounded tinny and penetrating. I couldn't believe I paid to get into a place and then paid "How fucking much? Are you kidding me?" for food so I'd have the luxury of lying on a blanket and suffering in the rain. Lying still and breathing steadily was the only way I could keep from puking or shitting myself. Trips to the bathroom tents were arduous.

I wrote that while working as a security guard. Now we get to the narrative moment of my story. A few days after my anxiety attack, after losing the newspaper job, and after some sexual misadventures, I was returning from a delivery for the bakeshop. I pulled up to the back door and a loud bang and oily steam erupted from under the hood of my car. It took two days to find out that the engine had cracked. I had the car about a year. I put close to thirty thousand miles on it.

My situation had become too problematic, and I could barely deal with it before the car broke down, abandoning it was the best idea I could come up with. A friend and fellow wannabe writer suggested working as a security guard would be great for someone who wants more time to write. I ran with this idea.

I got the rhythm of my breathing just right. The soft rain became comforting. Siouxsie and the Banshees moved away from their early jangly postpunk into the melodic stuff they had been doing recently. I focused all of my attention on calm and evenness and suddenly felt in the middle of all that chaos as comfortable as I'd ever been. It was the closest I'd ever gotten to Zen. I placed my hand on the white picket fence surrounding the homestead of enlightenment. You really could get there by way of the path of excess.

Now, I don't remember the pain. I don't remember the pleasure either, but I remember the experiences that led to the sensation of comfort. The peace I found. The stomach ache subsided and I rejoined the crowd nearer the stage as the sun disappeared. There was one moment when Janes Addiction played "Classic Girl" and the crowd swayed as one. People pulled lighters from their pockets and waved their flames in the air. A cool breeze made the flames flicker.

Over the years I have become good at finding peace in bad situations. I can find beauty and peace in the house of the devil. I can find comfort on a wet blanket. I can leave a bad situation behind and quickly recover emotionally relatively quickly, even if my credit score wasn't so changeable. I was back at my grandparents' house for a little while. Then I moved in with some friends who liked to party too much, but found a job in security where I could have peace and quiet at least forty hours a week. I worked nights, midnight to eight. My first gatehouse was so quiet that I did no more than five minutes of work in a given night. It was wonderful. It was a much smaller and wealthier part of a large

well-to-do community. Maybe five cars went by in a night and most of those drifted quietly through the residents' gate barely affording me a smile or a wave. The gatehouse was ten feet by ten feet, empty of anything but a desk built into the wall like a counter that was the length of the front wall and all white. The entire room was white. The sliding glass doors were eight feet high and immaculate. Sometimes I would see the slime streaks of snails that had traveled there.

There were tons of snails. They crawled on the sliding doors and windows and walls, across the drive leading into the community. I slowly, gingerly picked them up and relocated them on the curb in what was hopefully their original destination. The sensation of prying them from the gravel, a sucking like ripping a gummy worm in two made me worry I was hurting them. So I started tearing small pieces of the glossy front covers of magazines and sliding them in front of the snails and waiting for them to ...goo onto it. I tried this with paper at first but the ooze made the paper disintegrate. I'd place the tear-away on the curb and watch them slowly crawl off. Sometimes they tried to avoid the paper. Sometimes, once on, they'd crawl in ever widening semi-circles until finally crawling off the paper.

I had many activities to avoid going crazy from boredom in this work. Most of them, like herding snails, look very much like going crazy. I talked to myself. I stared a lot—at door handles, pencils, the moon, the trees swaying in the breeze. Sometimes I wrote.

The lesson I took away from that wet blanket applies to anyone. Stop, look around, this moment is going to become part of who you are. Some day the wind might stop so absolutely that you'll spend months still and alone with nothing but your memories to keep you company. Is there something in this moment that can keep you company, maybe even help stir up the winds again?

I got that first security job convinced I was going to use that time to write novel after novel. I wrote one. In about four months I wrote a vampire novel about a vampire who was afraid of

commitment. He'd marry a woman, stay with her for about a decade, until her age and the lack of age in his face would be a pressing issue. He would fake his own death, spend a few years wandering about, and then meet another mortal woman and repeat the cycle. Until he met a young vampire. It doesn't matter whether it was a good story or not but I gave it to a couple of friends to read. They said they liked it and returned their drafts with the notes I pleaded with them to make about the story. I didn't look at the story or their notes again. And I didn't write.

I journaled.

The other night I had an absorbing, sweetly passionate, and primal dream involving Milla Jovovich. You know her. You've seen her seraphim eyes done up a hundred different colors in those make-up commercials. Maybe you saw her kissing Bruce Willis in Fifth Element. I really liked Bruce Willis before that kiss. If you're really lucky you might have heard her sing.

It was one of those end of the world dreams I have all the time. If you were trying to sell the screenplay, you might call it a cross between Fifth Element and Clan of the Cave Bear. I was this mountain man sorta guy and I lived in the wilderness. The forests had taken over most of the US. Years ago all but the largest cities on the coasts had been abandoned, and cities were teeming, shining citadels. You either lived in the cities or you lived in a world that was older and stronger than cities. Milla was... I don't know. She was a cross between Fifth Element and Clan of the Cave Bear. Naive yet animalistic, strong and capable alone in the wilderness.

She was trying to find me. I was up North near New York. She had carved a canoe out of a fallen tree. She carved out a huge pawprint in it that I knew was mine. I was a werebear. And I was astral projecting or something, because I was standing there watching her the whole time even though she couldn't see me. I knew my body was a thousand miles away. When she finished carving the print, I put my paw into the indent and it was a perfect fit. The feeling of the dream was amazing. I was an

astral projection communing with a figment of my imagination, but all I knew was the spiritual connection told me that we would be rejoined soon.

As I write this my thoughts degenerate into Milla naked, wet, writhing on a sports car. Cue the heavy metal guitar solo.

Much of what I wrote meandered among pointless ideas. They were the musings of the night and the dreams of the day. Sometimes I got home from work and went immediately to bed. Sometimes I was too wired and didn't go to bed for hours. Those days, when I went to bed during the day and woke up at night, could be hard. Something about reversing the natural order of things didn't work well with my body. But I fluctuated between these two patterns for years. I had already taken the conventional sleep cycle and thrown it out the window with my delivery work. It wasn't too difficult to adjust to the new routine. At least it was a routine.

There was a lot of comfort in ending the day not with sleep but with hours alone in a glass room. I wrote more than a million words in word files and on the livejournal blog. Much of what I wrote was available for the public to read. When I wrote in my diaries I was appalled by the idea of someone reading my private thoughts. When I started publishing my intimate thoughts to the livejournal blog, I was appalled when nobody commented on a particular post.

I dated one of those people for whom music was an ever-constant soundtrack for life. Someone like me. Our relationship was intense, passionate; it suffered from multiple personality disorder. When things were bad the arguments were like a firing squad that kept missing. When things were good it was nights of glacial slow sexual tremors and natural disaster orgasms. Days tangled in bed sheets listening to the world that didn't know what it was ruining by moving by so quickly. Flowers on car windshields and mix tapes as love letters.

I can barely remember why we broke up, why it didn't work out. I'm forgetting the fights. It doesn't seem like they happened nearly as often as the good stuff happened. I remember her staring angrily at me when we argued, when I begged her to tell me what was going on with her, why she was so distant. I also remember lying with her. I remember the way she screamed my name and the way she looked at me when we were lying in bed making love.

The blog was therapy. Sometimes I sought validation from my readers, sometimes honest appraisal. It was the validation I needed most. I needed to believe I had a right to feel the way I did. I needed to feel I wasn't the only one who felt that way. I finally started getting over Maria by letting myself remember and then letting go and reflecting on my life.

Many of those journal entries were magnificent. They did the work of armies of maids and civil engineers and editors. They cleaned. They remodeled. They reimagined and rebuilt my infrastructure. I reflect on things best when writing about it and I had plenty of time to do both. I spent the next six years reflecting on my life.

20
RESISTANCE

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Perhaps it was years of the high school diet, no breakfast, cafeteria lunch, occasional dinners, that started my sugar problems. I can only guess. I know that at least is responsible for the migraines and, I've read, could be responsible for at least exacerbating depression.

When I worked at Motorola, my lunch was often a Mountain Dew and apple pie from the vending machine. I joked that I was fulfilling the requirements of the neon green food group.

When I used to go to the Foundation night club, there was a tall, gangly blonde man who read palms in the noisy club and wrote fortunes on yellow paper in a broad and lazy scrawl. I still have this. He hit the nail on the head with quite a few things, and one thing he spent a lot of time talking about was my need to stay away from refined sugar. I ignored this.

It wasn't until I worked security that things got bad. Working midnight to eight naturally took its toll often enough and I got into the habit of drinking a 2-liter of Mountain Dew a day.

Some people call Mountain Dew liquid crack. It probably has the same level of stimulant as the drug itself and is the sweetest substance in recorded history. It wasn't until I started falling asleep after drinking the last of the 2-liter that I realized I had a problem. I didn't realize it earlier, when my hands would start shaking uncontrollably when I tried to write. I thought that was nerves. I didn't question why I would be suffering nerves when alone, four in the morning, at a job where I work roughly four minutes a shift. "Incidents" as dramatic as they could be, did not happen often enough for me to be on edge.

My habits put me in a bad situation that culminated in a trip to Disney World with Scotty and Jahala. The plan was to drop acid once we got there and bonus up the rides. I didn't eat for several hours. Not because of the acid but because of the anxiety of waiting for something to happen. Nothing happened for hours until I was in a tunnel for a line for one of the rides. All of a sudden the walls began to wobble and they were completely carved with runes and sigils that were carved deeply into the faux rock. Before I could even attempt to identify the writing, as if I was suddenly qualified to translate dead languages, the effect vanished and I felt nothing more from the acid except for feeling like I had a cold rod shoved up my ass and into my brain. Hours went by without food until I started to quiver like those walls momentarily did. Scotty bought me orange juice and poured several packets of sugar into it.

This scare was enough to rouse me to the fact that I had a problem. Through a more disciplined diet I managed to push back the effects until my issues turned into a "vocabulary barometer." The hungrier I get, the more words disappear from my vocabulary. I suddenly find myself trying to remember that one word that really means what the five words I'm forced to use barely simulate. It's really bad when I start losing adjectives and conjunctions. The problem is that for a long time I was usually in this state and I started to think I was getting stupid. I had already gotten stupid, though, to let this become a common occurrence in the first place. But that was better than consuming several times the average American's consumption of sugar per day. My life is a dance between managing my diet successfully and feeling almost completely normal and the too-frequent times when I lose focus and start having a little bit of junk food, then a little bit more, until things are bad enough that I have cramps and bloating and gas all the time, I'm depressed and angry, and I fall asleep every time I have a meal with too much sugar or carbohydrates. The key is exercise. Exercise makes us human. We're not human when we work, watch TV, drink beer and go to sleep to start the whole thing over again. The closest facsimile to that is the cow. A cow stands around all day. Eats what sometimes would

eventually be turned into beer, and stares at a tree, which is infinitely more stimulating than most television. So actually cows are smarter.

I sometimes get wake-up calls that nudge me back into better patterns. Once I lost all feeling in my left big toe for six months. That was creepy. Depression and sugar issues are often said to go hand in hand, and I can say that my depression and anger issues usually worsen when I start consuming too much sugar.

I realize that I have spent much of my life in an environment of illness. My mother has MS. My grandmother has cancer. My grandfather had Parkinson's. The men on my father's side have persistent, uninteresting alcoholism going for them, with a few exceptions that my father can take the credit for. He once crashed a single engine plane in the middle of New York. No one heard from him for six months as he convalesced in the hospital. I barely noticed because six months is often the amount of time that passes between our correspondence. If you're going to be an alcoholic, you should be glamorous about it. My father was boring enough to be the type of alcoholic that doesn't let it interfere with his health or his career—until he crashes an airplane. I've never crashed because of drinking. I've crashed because I was in the middle of an argument with Maria. I've crashed because I underestimated the slippery qualities of rain. Living in Delray Beach, the only city in the country that has more assisted living facilities and nursing homes than McDonald's franchises, I've crashed several times because a senior citizen decided to make a left turn right turn into my lane from the Publix three blocks away. But I've never crashed because of drinking. I have fallen asleep on the way home from a club and woken up when most of the ride was over, but that sounds like a pretty great way to travel. I have been unrepentant about drinking and driving in the past. My philosophy had been that over the years I had driven hundreds of hours under the rolling curtain of concussion relapse. A healthy buzz is downright Shaolin compared to the feeling like I'm driving my car by remote control from the inside of an industrial washing machine. There's another one.

I condemn myself by saying that I'm not an alcoholic, but I'll do it anyway. I have the same problem with alcohol that I have with sugar. Actually it is a helluva lot harder for me to back away from sugar than alcohol. I can go weeks before I realize that I haven't had a drink. If it were sugar, several days later I'd probably wake up to see my reflection, eyes wide, lips coated white with powdered sugar freebased inhaled and rectally installed. Sugar is evil. Aliens planted sugar cane here millennia ago as they have done on countless other planets to clear away the intelligent life for colonization purposes. We should court positive diplomatic relations with hostile nations by establishing Krispy Kreme and McDonald's and 7-11 franchises in their countries. These are weapons of mass destruction. What I want to know is why do they put sugar in fruit juice? Why is black sugar water the most popular drink in America? Oh, God, I could really go for a Coke right now.

When I was four or five, my mother organized a birthday party for me at Burger King just down the road from our apartment in Lyndhurst. It sticks out in my memory as a good time. I looked forward to the times my mother and I would go to McDonalds for dinner. It was a happy treat. That's what fast food is, a treat. In high school, after Ivy died and I had weekly appointments with a therapist, we went to KFC for dinner as a treat. McDonalds markets aggressively toward this demographic, the parent-child bonding experience. It's a lovely thing, actually, but it's just as insidious a marketing campaign as trying to get kids to start drinking and smoking young so they get addicted. And that's no different than a drug pusher giving a potential new client a few hits on the house so they develop a taste and hopefully a dependence. But it's not mom's fault. I'd be sad if this file of memories were suddenly deleted. Now when I go to KFC and McDonalds I have that added emotional resonance. The fault is my own for letting a comfortable, tasty treat stand in for a real meal. It's my fault for going to McDonalds alone when there is no purpose for it other than laziness. It's kind of like sex. Sex is great when it's appreciated, when it's shared, when it is given the proper reverence. It's ugly when it is sneaking into adult bookstores or with paid escorts into by-the-hour motels. Or when it's a joyless act

of distraction. Or when it replaces real communication and real relationships. Mountain Dew is a treat now. I give it the proper respect. Now when I drink it I am always properly awed by how sweet it is. I usually get Mountain to accompany Fried Chicken or Pizza Hut, or at Chinese restaurants which always seem to have Pepsi products for some reason. And I appease that junky inside of me and relax and smile and enjoy the treat and ignore the small part of me that is quivering and spastic and wants to drive chopsticks into my brain via my cornea.

Now I feel like I'm herding cats. I grab hold of one, triumphant, try to grab another and the first slinks from my grasp, grab, hold, lose, grab, lose, lose, grab, lose, until I finally realize I have caught no cats and they have shredded the cuffs of my sleeves. I feel like it's a losing battle to feel like a healthy, strong paragon of Greek godness while wrestling with a host of Herculean challenges. Is this the common experience? I notice sometimes that some people make absolutely no complaints about their health while others, like me, seem to get sick with the cold every third Monday and have a host of popular maladies. Am I just a lemming pretending to have the first stages of adult diabetes to fit in? Am I pretending to be hearing impaired for the exotic cache? Are my maladies a sign of lazy character? Would I be healthy if I just tried harder? Or is it useless to resist, the sickness being a punishment, a way to cleanse the karma of past sins?

~*~

1640 hours

Security involved about seven hours and fifty-five minutes of sitting on my ass and five minutes of work. It was two or three months of navel-gazing, nap-taking, and boredom-inspired tomfoolery followed by a massive crisis involving firings, arrests, and a death toll.

Nothing ever happened on a Sunday. I was at work barely an hour, and I was already bored. I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. Dark circles under my eyes worked with the high contrast of the overhead bulb to give me a villainous look. I wore a black uniform. My revolver was strapped to my left hip in a holster that bit into my side whenever I sat down if didn't remember to push it away from me as I sat down. I always became alarmed every time I experienced that pain of a loaded gun poking my flesh.

The gatehouse was a fishbowl that straddled a wide median between incoming and outgoing lanes. It was two rooms divided by a wall and a coffin-sized bathroom. The rear room was the captain's office. On days when I worked the second shift, four to midnight, I often shared the gatehouse with him.

"So how's the letter coming along?" The captain called from the back room. He often held conversations this way. We should have gotten a couple of Dixie cups and string.

"It's an ever-evolving process," I said.

"What you got so far?"

I pondered for a moment how seriously to take the question, then reached across the desk for a red folder so worn that the edges were a disintegrating fuzz, pulled out a piece of lined paper covered with doodles and handwriting and read aloud to the captain. “Dearest ass-buggering blowhards: Long and storied has been our acquaintance but I fear that I must ask you now to lick the funky black stuff from between my toes. And not the balled-up lint from my black socks but the moist build-up of dirt that evades numerous showers and becomes—”

I stopped reading to appreciate the captain’s restrained chuckling from the back room. “You like?”

“You got a real talent, there, Daniel. Maybe you should consider becoming a writer or something.”

“Gee, what a great idea.” I was twenty-five at the time. It had been fifteen years since I’d written my first poem.

“You’ll never turn that in, though.”

“Yeah? Why is that?” A silver sedan approached the gate. “Hold that thought.”

“Because you’re too polite,” the captain said as I got up from my chair. I slid open the cranky sliding door and was standing besides the Jaguar as it came to a complete stop. “And you love us too much to go anywhere!”

An old couple, all smiles, nodded quickly and almost in unison gave their last name and where they were going. I swiveled and returned to the air-conditioned gatehouse, checked the computer system for their names. The captain darted out of the back office and out the exit-side door. I found the visitors’ names on the residents’ list and waved the couple through with a “have a nice day.” And a tight-lipped smile. I have seen this same smile on almost every security guard or police officer that has proffered a smile. They looked ahead and hit the gas. No smile. I ceased to exist.

I sat back down and propped my legs up on the white counter. The room was all white—white tile, white walls and a white countertop that stretched from wall to wall. On it sat CB radio equipment, my book bag, and two computers, one for inputting guests and one for more important things like emergency service calls... and solitaire. My book bag was filled with loose-leaf paper, multiple copies of *Entertainment Weekly*, *Writer's Digest*, and *Newsweek*, a *Dungeons and Dragons* manual, three books, two Snickers bars and a dozen assorted pens and automatic pencils.

It was a slate grey Sunday afternoon that was quickly going to ashen and black. The sky threatened rain occasionally with deep rumbles of distant thunder. I sank deeper into the chair. It was a comfortable chair. The back came up above the head, perfect for napping. It was probably not real leather but it felt soft enough. It was the second chair in a month. The chair was shared by five people and belonged to none of them. When a thing belongs to no one and is used by everyone it's never well-treated.

1702 hours

There were three ways into this development. Three gates. I usually worked at one of the other two. This particular gate was the dispatch gate. Whoever worked this gate also had control of the radio.

The captain's voice was gravelly with static over the radio: "Base?"

I was base. "Go ahead."

"Emergency vehicles are gonna be coming through your gate."

"10-4."

Two minutes later an ambulance and a fire rescue truck came from around the bend. I opened the gate immediately and the trucks flew passed. I paced for a few minutes, looking ahead for more emergency vehicles and behind me even though there was clearly nothing to see beside the road disappearing around a bend. After a few minutes of nothing I settled back into the chair.

1730 hours

The “main gate,” the dispatch gate, where I worked on Sundays, was the least busy of the three gates. It was considered a back entrance. Everything except the hospital seemed to be on the other side of town. During the second shift, and especially the third shift, there was very little traffic.

“Base,” the captain radioed.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“The resident at 8355 Oriole, Robert Sanderson, has passed away. The EMTs are taking him to Boca Memorial. If anybody comes to the gate for that address let them in.”

“10-4.”

I knew to wait for the captain to return to base but I asked anyway. “How did he die?” I waited so long for a response that I was just about to assume I wasn’t getting one when the captain replied. “Heart failure.”

I crossed myself. Seventeen people died in the four years I worked there.

1804 hours

I checked the time on the computer screen three times in four minutes. Two hours into a double shift, fourteen hours to go. The emergency situation kept me out of the lax zone where time moved more quickly. I was anticipating further issues and was too vigilant. You don’t survive as a security guard being too vigilant. I planned to spend most of the time reading a book. I preferred horror novels at work. I took advantage of the atmosphere, and a little bit of fear helped keep me awake.

The phone rang. “Hunter’s Run Security. Can I help you?”

“This is Betty Sanderson,” a shaky voice said. “I’m trying to get in touch with my father.”

I became very hot. I had no idea what to say. My right leg began to shake.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Um...” Nothing came. Why do I have to do this? “I’m sorry,” I said. It was meant to be the sort of “I’m sorry” that is followed by a “but” and then something vaguely professional. But I couldn’t think of anything to say quickly enough before I heard her violently sob on the other end. Then she stopped.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. Only this time I was trying to be conciliatory. I realized I was very quickly pacing the room. “They took him to Boca Memorial.”

She became quiet, then a moment later quietly said “thank you” and hung up.

After a moment I hung up and sat down. I started to cry. Why did it bother me so much that she said thank you?

2205 hours

The captain, Vic, often said he was glad to have a writer as his secretary. I suspected I worked this shift in this gate no this day even though it turned into a double because it was on Sundays that Victor wrote all of his reports for the previous week.

“Valencia, how do you spell ‘unfortunately’?”

“u-n-f-o-r-t-u-n-a-t-e-l-y.”

“Thanks.”

2221 hours

A powder blue Ford Tempo pulled up to the gate. I didn’t notice it until I saw the brake lights. A pretty blonde, mid thirties, looked like she’d just barely woken up said, “I’m Betty Sanderson, going to Robert Sanderson’s.”

“Oh. Ah. Yes. Yes, of course. I’m sorry. Go right ahead.”

“Are you the guy I talked to earlier?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

I was alarmed. “No. Ma’am. You don’t have anything to be sorry for. I mean, come on.” I gestured emphatically, palms up. There was nothing appropriate or inappropriate about this. We’ve been dealing with death pretty much the entire human career and we have no idea how to deal with death. Do we fight against the idea of appropriateness with death? I think it is a little crazy.

She smiled, nodded, and moved on.

I realized that the captain was standing beside me. “You believe that?” I said. “She thanked me on the phone and now she’s apologizing.”

“She’s pretty hot,” the captain said.

“Are you kidding?”

“What?”

I went back inside, sat down, pulled the letter out of the red folder and read it.

The captain walked behind me. “If you’re gonna turn in a letter like that to the chief, do me a favor and do it before your days off so I have some time to get your shifts covered.”

“Sure thing.”

2359 hours

Shift change. On the third shift three golf cart rovers patrolled the golf courses that were backyards for many of the residents. They all wore BDUs, or battle dress uniforms, black cargo pants, gun holsters, black windbreakers and black baseball hats that they wore even when they weren’t

working. They showed up one by one. The captain left after a few hellos and goodbyes. The golf cart rovers wedged their nightly foodstuffs in the fridge.

Two were in and out; one remained. Anthony Reina, short and lithe with closely cropped blond hair, excelled in a combo of the Shaft and Barney Fife philosophies as a security guard. He tipped his golf cart over at least three times on the hilly golf courses. As a person he was an intelligent and personable Jersey boy who was a fisherman at the shore before moving to Florida. We got along well, when he wasn't pissing me off making my job interesting.

“What’s up, Daniel?” Anthony asked while making a Tetris-style puzzle out of the food in the fridge.

Once Anthony rolled his golf cart into a sand trap where it came to rest on its brittle roof like an upturned turtle. Yet three months earlier, when a vanload full of drunk kids who lived and worked at the clubhouse as hospitality interns wrapped their van around a tree, Anthony was so capable in his response, he received an ABCD award. Above and Beyond the Call of Duty. I received one as well for the same tragedy—for spending four hours wringing my hands and pacing in the gatehouse, fielding calls, directing emergency vehicles, and telling a news crew to leave and another to go fuck themselves after a helicopter hovered overhead.

Two of the kids in the van died that night. Anthony and I knew one of them, a bright, cute Colombian girl in an exchange program. I had no idea what happened. Anthony wouldn't talk about it for weeks. Finally, one night we sat in the gatehouse talking about it for hours. Reina held the dead girl in his arms. He had a crush on her. If this never happened, he would have forgotten her name and her face within a few years. But he held her, very possibly as the last bit of life fled her and he was talking about wanting to fuck her a few days earlier in the way young guys say that sort of thing to each other. He'll remember her for the rest of his life.

Starting at eleven, radio checks were supposed to be done every half hour, mainly to make sure no one was sleeping on the job. They never happened just at midnight because of shift changes. I radioed as the last person was leaving the gatehouse for patrol. Anthony was still hanging out in the gatehouse with me as I started the check.

“Attention all units. Radio check. Gate 2.”

“10-4.”

“Gate 3.”

“10-4”

Rover 1. Rover 2; Anthony smiled and cued his own radio “10-4” with a little feedback from the two radios being so close. Rover 3. Patrol.

When I was done, Anthony asked, “So you still working on that letter of resignation?”

I swiveled around in the chair picked up the letter, swiveled back, held it with mock pride.

“Are you ever gonna turn it in?”

“I intend to.”

“Did you show it to the captain?”

I nodded.

“What did he say?”

“He thought it was funny. He doesn’t care. I mean, I’m sure he doesn’t want to see me go, but he probably thinks it’s just a joke.”

“Isn’t it?” Anthony asked.

“Well,” I churned the air with my hands. Often they make more sense than I do. “Sure, but I am gonna quit.”

“Then why don’t you just quit?”

“I *am* gonna quit.”

“You’ve been working on that letter for three weeks.”

I shrugged. “I am gonna quit.”

Anthony grabbed the remaining golf cart key from a hook on the rear wall. “Well, I’d hate to see you go, but you gotta do what you gotta do.” He headed out the exit-side door. “I’ll drop by to hang out a little later.”

0015 hours

I propped open the entrance and exit doors, and a slow, cool breeze slid through the room. Just after I opened the exit side door, John Paul entered, 6’2” of pasty, knobby swagger. John Paul had a similar name to another guy in my life. They were very similar. If the first John Paul turned into this John Paul, though, I would have been pleased. John was a bit of a geek, a bit of a dork, and, thankfully, a bit of a nerd. Smart. Smartass. Basically a nice kid who would probably have just enough wisdom after getting his ass kicked once or twice.

“Valencia!” John said with affected enthusiasm.

“John!”

“Reuter is working tonight!”

“Yes he is!”

Bill Reuter was an unfortunate man. He’d been with the company 43 days and had for most of that time been the butt of John’s jokes. Reuter was also crazy.

John had a wheezy chirp of a voice that never escaped pubescence and years of smoking. He went straight to the main computer. “Check this out.” He swiveled the monitor for me to see, typed, and a screen popped up. “We can instant message the computers in the other gatehouses. Betcha didn’t know that.”

I was intrigued. “I didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, Reuter doesn’t either. I’ve been fucking with him off and on. I send him messages like ‘system error in clitoris.’ The other night he called the captain over the radio and told the captain that the computer told him there was a problem with its clitoris—*on* the radio.”

I laughed that sudden jolting laugh of surprise. John was usually interesting and sometimes amusing. He was in fine form.

“I’ll come back later and we’ll fuck with him,” John said. He grabbed one of two patrol keys from the hooks, for one of two red SUVs parked behind the gatehouse, and headed out the exit-side door. There was only one patrol at night. Two during the day. John sometimes sped around the development for thirty or forty minutes racking up miles (it was the mileage the chief paid attention to) so he could spend a few hours anchored to one spot, sleeping or toying with his Gameboy. John was 21 and he acted 12 as often as he could.

And two nights of the week he was the third shift supervisor.

0130 hours

Nine and a half hours, one minor crisis, and three radio checks into my double, I was sitting in the executive chair eating a Hot Pocket and reading *Mothman Prophecies*, the supposedly true experiences of a journalist who was plagued by strange happenings—perfect middle-of-the-night, middle-of-nowhere reading.

John pulled up fast and braked aggressively enough that the SUVs tires squealed. He hopped out looking like the cat that ate the canary and glided into the gatehouse, around me, and to the mounted computer monitor. He brought up his clandestine instant messaging screen. He typed in, “WE ARE WATCHING YOU!”

“Oh great! Now I’m gonna have him shooting at little green men.”

Reuter inspired conversation in the rest of us about how long he would last. I had actually never met him and had only talked to him briefly on the phone and radio. He had this twitchy quality to his voice that made a lasting negative impression. He never said anything out of the ordinary to me, perhaps because I was the dispatcher and always considered second in command, but he'd started talking to some other guards about seeing little green men and receiving messages from his computer. The scary part was, and I got it confirmed independently from three sources, Reuter swore the computer was actually talking to him, real, audible voice and all. It was more than just John's surreptitious instant messenger could be responsible for.

0425 hours

I was lost in my book. Anthony entered the gatehouse through the exit side. "What are you reading?" he asked.

I was surprised. Anthony looked amused. "*The Mothman Prophecies.*"

"Better or worse than the movie?"

"Nothing like the movie," I said. "Way better."

Anthony dragged a stool from against the wall and sat nearby. "So what are you gonna do if you quit this place?"

"Beats the shit out of me."

"You're gonna quit and you don't even know what you're gonna do after?"

"I was thinking about taking a road trip to New Jersey to visit my dad. I'm done with security."

"Security ain't so bad," Anthony said. "It's the perfect job for a writer."

"I want to get out of Boca Raton. I hate working in this town. I hate stopping at gas stations and seeing 17-year-old kids driving sports cars their parents bought for them."

"Most of these people would get their asses handed to them in Jersey."

I grunted an agreement. Anthony hadn't lost any of the New Jersey attitude or accent. I didn't think I ever had it. But even now people sometimes say I still have it.

"You don't know why you're quitting and—"

"—I know why. I'm sick of this job."

"Okay, but you don't know what you're quitting *for*," Anthony said. "I mean you've got no plan. No other job."

"I don't want to be a fucking security guard for the rest of my life."

Anthony shrugged. "Whatever, man." He got up, got a can of Coke out of the fridge. "If you don't want to be a security guard, what do you want to be? I mean, nobody wants to be a security guard. I'll probably eventually go back up to Jersey and get back into commercial fishing, but this is a good job to have for now. But, whatever. You're the smartest guy I know. Maybe you should go to college."

"I already tried college. Right after high school. Writers don't need to go to college."

"Why's that?"

"When I was in college I did anything but write. I composed. I researched. I did essays and papers and shit like that, but I never had any time to write. Writer's need time to write. That's why I got this job. I wrote a whole novel in the first four months I worked here."

"Shit. Really?"

I nodded.

"You try getting it published?"

I shrugged.

Just then we heard what sounded like a gunshot and we jumped from our chairs and went outside.

I cued my walkie talkie, "Anybody hear that?"

Nothing for a second, then John responded. "Hear what?"

"It sounded like a gunshot," I said. "Gate 2, everything okay over there?"

"Yeah. I didn't hear anything."

"Gate 3, you hear anything weird? Gate 3?"

Reuter responded, "Yeah?" He sounded out of breath.

"Everything okay over there? You hear anything?" I waited a few seconds. "Gate 3?"

"No."

Anthony said, "I'll go over there and check it out."

0505 hours

Anthony called my cell phone. "I think it was him."

"You think? He denied it?"

"Yeah, but it kinda smelled like gun powder and he was really nervous."

"What happened?" I asked.

"I left. I'm not getting into it with that guy. He scares me. I made like I totally believed him. I told him it was probably something popping on the electrical lines and I left. I hope he bought it because I don't want his two working brain cells to figure out that he should do something about the spent casing in his gun before the chief has a chance to look at it. I already gave John a call and told him to call him."

"What do you think he was shooting at?"

"Man, I have no idea."

I got off the phone, grateful for once that I was anchored to a gatehouse.

0610 hours

It's always darkest before the dawn. The night was black beyond the bank of windows, with misty gold orbs of light around the streetlamps that followed the winding road to the unseen avenue beyond. If anything lurked, if people tried to sneak on to the property, they'd have to dance down the center of the road to be noticeable in the gatehouse. The job was a joke. I was a blind fish in a fishbowl. Security is all for show. I felt useless.

I only took the job to write and I hadn't written in three years. My pride at having written a book was buried under three years of sitting on it. I stopped telling people about it because they would ask if I was getting it published. Nobody ever even asked if I'd *gotten* it published.

The only thing I'd written recently was my resignation letter, which I rewrote several times into progressively more outlandishly insulting drafts.

Dearest ass-buggering, sycophantic blowhards: Long and storied has been our acquaintance... congealed, elemental evil, very much like yourselves... I quit myself of this unholy place. Get thee behind me!

I slouched in the chair. "I'm an ass." The lights were dimmed and the sky had picked up a few bits of color.

I heard, or felt something, to my right, outside the exit-side door and looked over my shoulder. A fox stood in the door frame. It jerked its head to face me when I looked at it. Then it resumed scanning the room. I moved slowly, bringing first one then the other leg down to the floor, and swiveled just enough so that I could look at the fox without craning my neck. The fox watched all of this, staring with shiny yellow and black eyes. The fox moved stiffly into the room, to the garbage can. It nosed through paper and cellophane.

"You hungry, little guy?" I whispered.

The fox suddenly went rigid, looked at me, growled. When it bared his teeth, what looked like toothpaste was congealed around its gums.

“Oh shit,” I shot up. The executive chair bounced against the counter and slammed, askew into me from the rear. The fox tried to lunge at me but his feet skittered on the floor. I ran through the entrance-side door and ran for the rear of the gatehouse. The fox leapt after me, then struggled to change direction. Its motor skills were off. It seemed like it was breaking down, faltering.

But it was still fast enough. The other of the two patrol SUVs was parked behind the gatehouse. I clumsily jumped on the hood of one and crawled to the roof. The fox make an attempt to jump on the hood. It smacked the grill with its head and fell out of sight for a second. Then it jumped successfully onto the hood. I fumbled with the button locking my gun into the holster as the fox jumped up on the roof between my legs. I flailed my legs trying to kick it away as I brought my gun up. The fox leapt up at me and I gave up on the gun in order to block his face. The fox bit deep into my right arm.

0635 hours

I woke myself up by yelling.

“Base to all units: security check.” John was being an ass doing the radio check. When he got to himself he had a brief one-on-one. “Base to patrol, radio check. 10-4 base. How are you doing? Fine, Patrol. Just chilling.”

I usually only took controlled, timed naps. After 16 hour shift, though, I have been known to sleep on my feet. The captain watched me almost fall over like a rigid, sleeping light post once. That’s a funny image. He thought it was funny.

0710 hours

The world could just go ahead and end so the shift could be over. That would all be fine. I thought back on my dream. Is there any special significance for foxes in dreams?

A very clean, black convertible Mercedes sped to the gate. At the same time I started my opening line, “Morning, where are you headed?” He blurted out, “You gonna open the fucking gate?”

“No.”

The guy gave me a look I see often enough. It was a mix of glee and fear. I don’t think people see that look too often unless they’re in a profession like mine. He was half thrilled he got to take his issues out on a peon like me, but he also had that innate fear of the guy in a uniform with a firearm.

I took note of the car. Its edges almost insinuated the car into the environment. It was a car that demanded attention and demanded ownership of everything around. I wasn’t thinking that at the time, of course. I would think that later, when I was writing. At the time I thought, I’m sure I’ll write about this asshole and this car later. I’ll pound on the keys while I’m writing about wanting to pound his pug face.

“Open the fucking gate!”

He couldn’t hear the low, deep chuckle in my throat over the engine of the landscaping truck idling behind him, but he reacted to the spasming of my shoulders and the crooked smile on my face.

“You think this is funny!? I’ll have your fucking job.”

“No, I certainly don’t think this if funny. I don’t enjoy getting abused by people who think they’re above the rules. What I find funny, what I never get over, is that people like you think yelling at a guy with a job to do is going to get you in.” Usually I can’t string a sentence together in a volatile situation to save my life. But I am capable of thinking as interestingly as I might write.

He gave me a different look. I think it can best be described as *what the huh?* “What the fuck” is the surprised response you give a situation you’ve encountered before. “What the huh?” is the

surprise you give when you don't know what the hell is going on. It's how you react when a dog starts talking to you. When you have a "What the huh?" moment, you look around, like this guy was, just taking stock of the situation, checking things off a mental checklist, making sure he was where he thought he was. I realized he was probably drunk or on some hard drugs.

He leaned toward the passenger seat, pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. Showed me his club membership card that verified he was a resident. Usually residents have stickers on their cars that signal the gates to open automatically as they approach. His car had no such sticker, his nice Mercedes that I liked despite myself. He handed me the card and I checked it just a little longer than I usually do. His hands were shaking.

People don't make shits of themselves because they are secure in who they are and where they're going in life. This guy, sitting comfortably in his black convertible, is wondering if his wife is cheating on him. Maybe his boss gives it to him every time he's five minutes late. He wants me to cross a line, and he is dancing by the line. The line wavers in the air between us like the cages in a zoo and we're both pacing back and forth and beating our chest like gorillas.

I give him the card back. Expressionless, he hit the gas a little too hard and squealed "Fuck you!" as he passed the gate.

0750 hours

My relief showed up five minutes late. I nodded at her. Gates are supposed to change shifts fifteen minutes before the hour so gate guards and patrol aren't all changing shifts at the same time. She was a chubby black girl with inch and a half long plum nails with little imbedded gems in the centers. How the hell can she type with those? After she settled in I backed away from the computer, from the sliding door, from the car and the driver squinting up at me, and left an empty space for her to fill.

I moved to the exit side of the gatehouse and got my stuff together. I heard a massive crunch, crashing, slamming of metal and a droning, continuing screech from right beside me. The black Mercedes looked like it was humping the gate arm's housing pylon, the squat, metal box on which the arm swivels. It was moving slowly past the gatehouse dragging the pylon like a wounded black leopard dragging a gazelle. It stopped. The driver hopped out and jogged away from the road toward the cement wall that hid the houses from the road. He climbed this like a twitching cat and disappeared over the side. The black girl watched this, shocked still. The line at her entrance was eight cars long at this point but nobody was honking. They were all staring at the space at the wall where the Mercedes driver was a minute ago. I radioed for assistance. "Base to Patrol, it appears we have a jailbreak."

I left. There was nothing more for me to do and I was not curious enough to stick around and find out where that was going. I've had my fill of crazy stuff. Once an old lady in a blue Cadillac drove through the resident's lane, flames coming from under her hood. She was stopped very quickly by a patrol guard who happened to be in the gatehouse with me at the time. She told him she wanted to get home. She figured if she got home everything would be okay. She had every intention of pulling into her garage with her burning car.

Another time two Hasidic Jews walked to my gatehouse from the street and asked for a drink of water. They had been caught after nightfall and had to leave their car and walk home. I offered for them to come in and drink from the water cooler with paper cups. One accepted. The other eschewed the paper cup and drank with his hands. His friend chuckled at this. They stayed and chatted with me briefly. I was sad to see them go.

I found out what happened after the man disappeared over the wall. He fell into someone's pool. He climbed out, took off all of his clothes and, seeing them in their house through their rear sliding glass door, gestured **emphatically** for them to let him in. They called the police and the police came and picked him up and brought him to the front gate where the supervisor on duty gave him his

patrol jacket to wrap around his midsection and took him home. He was seen half an hour later sprinting down the road twirling the supervisor's windbreaker over his head. I decided I wasn't ready to leave after all.

OPPORTUNITY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF OBSTACLES
OR WHAT I LEARNED FROM BHARATA AND OINGO BOINGO

~*~

I finally decided to quit my job. I turned in my 2-week notice, explained that I was going to be spending a few months in Jersey with the intent of relocating. This was only partially a deception. I did decide that I was going to go on a road trip, visit New Jersey and my family up there, stay with my father and my two new sisters, and try to decide what I wanted to do next with my life. I thought there was a chance I might move up there, but I didn't take this seriously. I just added the relocation part so I didn't seem like as much of a flake.

Part of me wanted to burn my bridges, to turn in the letter I had written. I wanted to assure that any temptation to return would be thwarted. But I also wanted to be mature. This job took the last four years of my life and I didn't want to have to steer future employers away from them in my resume.

I drove slowly up I95. I stopped in St. Augustine, stayed a couple of days at a pirate-themed hostel. I spent an afternoon wandering around Savannah taking pictures of the cemeteries and the waterfront. I stayed with my uncle Jim, my mother's brother, in Richmond. He was affable and friendly the first couple of days. I spent a lot of time walking around Richmond and reading at the libraries. Then after a week of being there, he snapped and told me to get the hell out at ten at night. I was so startled and hurt that I didn't react the way that I would spend the next couple of weeks wishing I did. By calling him a useless asshole who ought to try saying that sort of thing while fighting like a man. I felt stupid for just packing up and quietly leaving.

From his house I drove into the Shenandoah mountains. I spent the night camping in the woods. I saw *The Blair Witch Project* a year before, and that wasn't far enough in the past to keep me from being freaked out as I tried to sleep in the middle of the night.

I spent the next two months in New Jersey staying at my father's house in Wayne with his wife and my two sisters. One three and one not yet a year. They were adorable. My father seemed like he would be more committed to them than he was to me.

We spent a lot of time sitting around at his house or with some of his brothers and sisters talking about everything from the weather and politics to some of the slightly more intimate goings ons of our lives. We never got deeper than that. I did talk a lot about where I had been in my head for the last couple of years and my ideas about what to do for the next few years. My thoughts clarified on the idea of going to college. I didn't want to deliver things or guard other people any more. My time of enjoying being a slacker was over and I wanted something more.

I also didn't have much faith in my ability to discipline myself to make writing a successful career without some serious instruction. I decided to go back to school for an English degree and then at least get a MFA in writing, maybe also a PhD in something similar.

While in Jersey I was communicating frequently and intimately with Maria. And she was more and more in my thoughts. I started thinking about what I wanted in my life romantically as well. I wanted to eventually have a family. I didn't want to sleep around anymore.

I started a pros and cons list about different ideas as far as jobs and schools and majors. I journaled about all of my ideas. At the same time I was spending many of my days hanging out with a girl I met through livejournal who lived in Lyndhurst, just two blocks away from the apartment that I lived in until I was four years old and that my father lived in for about a decade and a half after that. She was my passenger and audience as I drove around every place I lived when I lived in New Jersey. I told her about all of my experiences there. These talks were more about me organizing my memories

and my experiences than it was about communicating them to her, but she was a wonderful companion. She already knew me very well from years of reading my often most intimate thoughts on livejournal.

This trip helped me organizing my thoughts and prepared me for the decisions ahead. Going back to school after more than a decade felt like a nice dream where I return to the simple and naïve times of school and a nightmare where I am in school unprepared and in nothing but my underwear at the same time.

I returned home. The first thing I did when I returned to West Palm Beach was go downtown Delray. Maria and some friends were in the park watching a revival of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I spotted her in the crowd, reclined on the grass. I came up behind her. She looked up and saw me with the sweetest smile. I wanted desperately to be welcomed with such happiness.

We started hanging out more, tried dating. The sex was both awkward and nice. Our bodies were older. We had both put on a few pounds, but it was nice being wrapped up in someone so familiar.

After a few months it began to fall apart. I realized that there were real and debilitating reasons why we didn't work out in the past. She had issues with communicating and emotional connection that I simply could not put up with in a relationship. I realized I needed a lot more validation, a lot more attention and a lot more emotional and spiritual connection in order to truly trust a woman enough to be completely secure in a relationship. I also realized that I had a lot of growing up to do if I wanted to have a constructive and mature relationship. The realizations were painful for both of us, but we adjusted quickly to being platonic friends again. Sadly, we were never quite so close again.

In 2004 I was desperate for something to give me discipline and make me stronger. I decided to become a certified yoga instructor. I had been practicing yoga off and on since I was nine and I was

already informally teaching a few friends. I learned about an intensive training program in the area and the idea excited me. The program was arranged by a local ashram. “Ashram” is used loosely for any building devoted to teaching yoga, but traditionally the term refers to spiritual centers where communities live isolated from civilization. This ashram was in a storefront in a mini-mall in the urban sprawl of Lake Worth, Florida, but once inside I was transported to a different sensibility. The world outside was forgotten. It was a three-room haven with a small, carefully tended garden in the rear of the building.

The training I went through was rigorous. I woke up at five every morning. Group meditation began every morning at six in the smallest room of the ashram. It had clean and bare white walls, a light wood floor, and a small altar in the center of one wall. A class of seven people, including me, meditated quietly for an hour in a semicircle on cushions with our legs crossed, our backs straight and our minds barely contained. Then we chanted “Om” for a few minutes before our guru spoke for a few minutes. It seemed like a church service. After a few minutes of speaking he encouraged the class to discuss personal perspectives on our spiritual lessons.

After meditation, we had three hours of yoga instruction each day, classes in anatomy and physical fitness theory, and right from the start we were expected to teach classes as well. We also had to take part in karma yoga, which involved volunteer work in the community, and promoting the ashram.

While the ashram wasn’t large enough to accommodate sleeping quarters, as one might imagine in a large monastery, we were expected to live a monastic life. I wasn’t allowed to watch television or listen to the radio and had to adhere to a strict vegetarian lifestyle, which for a ravenous carnivore like me was hard. The point was to slow down and detach ourselves from the hectic distractions of life, and the enforced limitations were the best we could do as we continued to move through our lives.

Two major hurricanes moved through Florida that year, and each knocked out our power for a total of five weeks. Two of those weeks were during my training. It was warm at night, high 80s and humid. I slept with a sheet and still managed to sweat through the night. But it was quiet. We lived by candlelight. There was no temptation from television. The monastic lifestyle was moved up a notch, thanks to Mother Nature. I found the experience so calming that I look back at the massive inconvenience fondly.

I was looking for a very specific experience. I didn't think I would become a yoga teacher, I was looking for more than the skill and practice. I needed a change in my life. I wanted a mentor and I hoped the experience would teach me discipline.

Most of the lessons I carry with me from this experience have nothing to do with yoga. During my training, I got into the habit of seeking guidance from my guru, my teacher. At first, it was because I was seeking sympathy. I was having a hard time engaging in the program at first and problems from real life were making things harder.

I started college at Palm Beach Community college while I was in yoga training and I chafed against the busy schedule. Prior to all of this, I was a successful slacker. I enjoyed delivery, security, spending my evenings in a small gatehouse reading, writing self-indulgent journal entries, and watching movies. The experience of school was a familiar one, but I knew it would get tougher and tougher and I knew of course that on the other side of that degree I'd have to do something besides sit in a gatehouse all night.

Leaving my quiet slacker life was difficult, and at first I seemed bent on making it more difficult, but when I complained about my real and imagined problems to my guru, a six foot four, 270 lb smiling rock, his usual response was, "It's so wonderful that you're able to experience this opportunity!" I could tell the guy that my right arm just fell off and he'd say, "Wow! That's great. I envy this learning opportunity you have to look forward to."

The lesson he was trying to teach me was this: Every problem can be the beginning of wonderful and productive personal growth. Now, when I face difficulties, a part of me responds with his words. I wonder what developing or previously unknown faculties I'm going to put to use to overcome the obstacle. This is possibly the best lesson any teacher has ever taught me. Thanks to my guru, I've learned into the habit of responding to problems and bad attitudes with a greater sense of resolve. Sure, it feels tough but I'll be a better person on the other side of it.

Oingo Boingo has a song, "Makes Me Laugh." It sums up nicely like this, "I don't know why I feel this way / I don't know / Is it right or wrong to laugh at misfortune? / Darkness can only last so long / If you laugh in its face." I think the fundamental shift in my life was to go from seeing problems as an excuse to write in my journal and ponder the pain of it to seeing problems as something to reflect on and learn from. Both sides of the shift involve reflection. I've always been wild about reflecting. But for every day of life I live, I felt like I needed to spend two days of reflecting. Problems were an excuse to shut down and retreat into my cave.

This experience and learning the skills to be a yoga instructor didn't only help me to become a more mature person. I became even more reverent of the skill of teaching than I already was. I learned how to teach with patience and persistence, and I learned that forming effective habits is the best strategy for any situation. For example, I'm a whiz with tests. I look at tests with the same geeky glee that some students look forward to leaving school to go home and play video games. I'm convinced the latter is responsible for the former. I'm so successful with test taking because of my positive view of them. This outlook is something that can be learned. Positive self-talk is a learnable habit, just like remembering to wash your hands before dinner.

After acquiring my instructor certification, I began teaching small classes and individuals both in the ashram and at my home and the homes of my students. I enjoyed watching people gain skills right before my eyes. Every session I would teach them different poses and work on deepening their

practice of other poses, and I could see the effect this steady accomplishment had on others. Even though I didn't teach nearly enough to make a living and would eventually let the classes and opportunities peter out, I clung to the feeling of gratification I got from teaching. Eventually I would graduate with my bachelor's degree and begin a grad program in writing and teach English.

Frequently someone would become frustrated trying to learn a physically challenging pose. I had already learned well that we should be positive about our first, clumsy efforts with a new skill. I did my best to make sure my attitude reflected the excitement and possibility that they should try to find underneath the fear of failure. We all fail at first. Trying means doing something badly until we learn to do it well.

My guru injected his positive viewpoint into every learning session and every bit of advice. He had decided for himself before the first minute of each teaching program that there were bigger lessons that were more important than all the smaller lessons, bigger lessons that inform all the smaller lessons. He wanted us, all these future instructors, to bring a certain mindset to the classroom and to our everyday lives.

I'll probably feel like the occasional fuck-up, and I won't always be able to face crises with equanimity, but most of the time I don't let my failures inform who I am. I am not a failure. I'm a person who occasionally fails, but who more often succeeds. When I try. Trying is the important thing.

I went back to Security. It really was a great job for a student and writer. But only for a couple of years. Then I became a bouncer for a while. This seemed to be a good skill-builder for being a teacher.

23
DISTRACTED

~*~

Christmas was in two weeks, and Charlie and I were doing last minute shopping ten at night at a twenty four hour Target when most of the usual clientele was sleeping or watching TV. I had to be at work in two hours. We entered. It was the rare occasion when the inside of Target was warmer than the Florida outside. Something about the sudden warmth loosened my bladder and I scanned for the restroom. Seeing it, I pointed it out to Charlie, lost in his iPod. He nodded and we walked.

The Target bathroom was freezing. It reminded of my days as a cog in the corporate wheel and how I used to complain about how fucking cold it always was in the offices. One day a co-worker told me that they do it on purpose because they believe it makes people work harder. Am I working harder in the Target bathroom, today? There was a bulletin board above the urinal with clippings from a soccer game the night before. Apparently a team beat another team. The tinny Musak and my pissing created a rattling, chirpy din in my hearing aids.

“I have a weird talent.” Charlie said as I was pissing.

“And what’s that?”

“Well, more of a skill, I guess.”

Then he said nothing. I know Charlie’s need to constantly be prompted, so I ignored him until he started again of his own accord.

“I can tell what a person has eaten recently by the smell of their urine.”

“You’re shitting me.”

I could sense his disapproval. “Dude! You had something with a lot of wheat, maybe puffed wheat cereal for breakfast.”

I respond with protest. “Dude.”

“It’s sick, right?”

“I could have done without knowing that.” I, in fact, had three bowls of Super Golden Crisps upon waking up. At about two pm.

“So,” I ask, “why?”

“Cause it seemed like a good start for a story.”

“I don’t get it. Why would you start a story with your skill as a piss detective?” My style was decidedly more conservative than his. Well, that can’t really be true.

“Sometimes I try to actually have conversations that I’m thinking of writing.”

“No. You’re not listening to me. Why would you want to start a story with something like this?” It’s at times like this I seriously weigh the idea that I am the only real thing in the world and that everything I perceive is a construct of my subconscious. Charlie is easier to explain as an imaginary friend.

He mumbled, “It doesn’t matter anyway. The conversation went terribly.”

I do need conversations in order feel out possible story ideas. Often they are as bad as the piss idea but not by much. Charlie was a character I was working on. I have to let the characters live and breathe the same way method actors need to spend time as their characters. They need to know how that character will react in different situations to the point that it is intuitive. Charlie was a good character to sound ideas through because he made outlandish ideas sound plausible, or at least tried to. What didn’t sound outlandish to me might sound outlandish through him. But sometimes it’s the outlandish ideas that turn into the best stories and the best characters. I have no interest in writing a story about someone who can tell what someone ate based on their pee smell, but I was standing there

peeing and the smell hit me, and Charlie just said it because it is within his character to do so. He wouldn't write a story about a pee-smeller either. He was just trying to have a quiet laugh.

The only way you'd think I were crazy is if you don't understand me. And if you're a writer, or a woman, you understand me. Women often imagine conversations with people—several women have confirmed this for me. Usually real people. They do this to get stuff off their chest or imagine how an inevitable confrontation will go. Or they do it reliving conversations, wondering what went wrong, wishing they said things differently, or just torturing themselves. I do this. I was raised by women. Although I never observed this phenomenon, I firmly believe that all human beings are mildly telepathic and that their crazy conversations or deepening it. Sometimes I imagine an argument and become enraged at someone over words that they never said. But I knew them and I knew it is something they would say. And that pissed me off.

My arrival in the greeting cards section saved my brain. "Christmas: Father. Grandfather." I looked around to ask Charlie if he knew the logic of cold bathrooms, but he wasn't there. Even my make-believe friends are unavailable. "Mother. Grandmother." I looked down the rows. "Heartfelt. Funny." I hate funny greeting cards. I hate sentimental greeting cards. Poets shouldn't be allowed to exchange greeting cards. If my family knew any better they'd demand poetry, but there was the possibility that they liked greeting card poetry better than my own. The last poem I showed them, a masterpiece about a young black boy who shot himself in the head to free himself from the public education system only to rise from the dead and become George Bush's conscience, had what could be called a tepid reaction. Maybe I should write my mother a poem about a woman who spends all of her time wondering what hair dye would best complement her skin. Wow, that was mean. Where did that come from? The meanest part about it is that she might spend a little bit of time thinking about her hair. She is vain. But she spends the vast majority of her time thinking about what doctor to see to get relief for her Multiple Sclerosis.

I wish I could blame that comment on Charlie.

Buying greeting cards is fucking impossible. It's a little like sleeping. You can't really do it if you pay too much attention. You can't care too much about it. This in keeping with the whole idea of giving greeting cards rather than personal sentiments in the first place. I found my grandmother a gold-fringed, religious card with tasteful art. "Happy Christmas to a grandmother who always seems to be there." Check.

Mother. Favorite color: blue. Pretty landscape art. Short poem about how much mother is appreciated for all she has done. Check.

Where's Charlie? I look around for a skinny black man staring into an imaginary distance with drool running down his chin. No luck. I want him here to deal with the coming purchases. I invest my imaginary friends with entirely too much agency. In my mind's mind's eye in the intellectual distance he having movie montage moments in other parts of the store. I was trying to distract myself from the task at hand by putting my attention elsewhere.

Father. Can't do the funny. I couldn't bring myself to get a funny card. I have no idea what his sense of humor is like. The looks he gives me every time I try to be funny around him are a mix between a mechanic trying to figure out a rattling sound in a carburetor and a father trying to appreciate his 10-year-old son's first stabs at outsider art. Sentimental is all I'm left with. It's not like I could get him a religious card with gold fringe. I wished I had the balls to get him a religious card with gold fringe. Something aimed at old ladies. Who really like cats. And doilies.

Thirty minutes passed. Rather than summon Charlie I imagined him dancing to his inner iPod and grinding against a mannequin in women's wear.

Why does every excursion for greeting cards turn into me squatting, looking back and forth between cards, pondering the nuances of relationships? "Thanks to the father that has always been there"? A card that is too sterile seems like a brush off. A card that is too emphatic in its praise and

appreciation seems snide with its irony. I suddenly felt sensitive. While he rarely gets in touch with me, his concern and desire to connect is genuine. He doesn't really know how to connect with me. He complains to my mother that I never call him. What am I supposed to do with that? It seems like he calls my mother more often than he calls me—to check up on me and complain that I never call him.

Charlie is an odd bird. He works days in a machine shop. He writes in his spare time. He writes action adventure in science fiction settings about people that are as odd as he can imagine them. When he isn't writing, he is playing video games and watching porn. He's a 15-year-old trapped in the body of a 28-year-old. He is loosely based on a real friend of mine

Sometimes I'm tempted to say that I'm a 70-year-old trapped in the body of a 28-year-old, but if a seventy year old man ever woke up one morning and was thirty years younger, he'd probably have a lot more energy and enthusiasm about life. He'd say, "Jumping Jesus on a pogo stick! I'm thirty years younger! I'm gonna drink and fuck and work a pointless but relaxing job and do whatever I want!" We wouldn't be that different, but while he would do it with gusto and an appreciation for how things could really be. I did it because I didn't have the balls to do the things I most want, which is anything of more relevance and lasting value. Thank god I'm back in school. I'd shoot myself in the face if I didn't at least have that.

I had to work through Christmas Eve. At least I had the entire month off from school. I wished I had a job on campus. Then I'd have the whole month off—period. I'd read and watch movies all day. I'd finally start submitting my poems and short stories for publication.

When I get into a funk—replace the word "funk" or "depression" with "cave." That works better. When I get into a cave, all I see is the cave. The cave has a low ceiling. I have to hunch. I always look down. I'll tell anybody who cares to listen that I'm not a very good walker. I hunch over all day, only looking down. Are normal people like this? Do they get into a situation, a cave, and forget

the person they were and the person they can be when they're not in their "cave"? We're pretty good at forgetting the other parts of us. This makes hypocrisy and judgment very easy.

And I wouldn't do all of those things if I had a month off. I would get depressed because I had nothing to do. Without structure I wouldn't write, I wouldn't be overly ambitious, and depression would rob me of motivation. These are good things to know about myself. Caves are oddly attractive when I'm walking by, minding my own business. Perhaps caves seem safe and warm. This gives credence to the idea that depression is as much a natural human process as fear. Except both have been perverted by our evolving brain functions. I know these things about myself, so I try to steer clear of caves. I try to get a full head of steam going if I see a cave entrance up ahead so I can pass it quickly.

Still looking at cards, I pondered creating a greeting card line. "Dear Dad, Merry Christmas. Thanks for being so wonderfully fertile!" There are enough dysfunctional families in the world. There should be a line of cards especially for us, so we can be thankful without being *too* thankful. "Thanks for making an effort." Where were the politely indifferent cards? "Thanks for not being an angry drunk or a crazy woman who hears voices that one day tell her to kill her children."

My mind wandered. Squatting with three cards in my hand I thought, Christmas is three weeks away, but if we rounded off like we do with everything else than it would be considered a month away. And then, boom, Merry Christmas. We say something is two days away when it could really technically be a day and four hours. Rounded off that's more like one day than two, but we have weird artificial demarcations for time. I'm twenty eight years old. If my thirtieth birthday was three weeks away, making me much more 29 than 28, mathematically speaking, I'd still be 28. I'm thinking about implementing an age measurement of 5-year intervals. If we did that than I could consider myself 25 and stay that way for another two years. Then again, the trauma of going from 25 to 30 would be considerable.

I returned to my senses, made a decision on a card, one that reflects more on the character of the individual receiving the card than on their relationship to the card-giver or their contributions to said giver.

The rest of the shopping trip was considerably smoother. I went through the checkout with \$70 worth of presents and cards and enough paper to wrap a Humvee. Honestly, who the hell goes to Target for Christmas shopping?

Being back on the job as a security guard was a bit painful after swearing that I would “never ever be a security guard again ever,” but that pain was eased a little by the virtue of being a college student. I had a sure, upward trajectory. Security is the perfect job for college students as well as writers. I liked the job. A couple of days a week I would drive around in an SUV enjoying the quiet night and listening to Coast to Coast AM. The rest of the time I would in a gatehouse watching movies on DVD or doing homework.

I was reading *The Old Man and the Sea* for a lit class. I wasn't sure how I felt about Hemingway yet besides the belief that he was over rated. *The Old Man and the Sea*, though, was a simple and masterful portrait of humanity. I hated it. Years later I'd love it, but then I thought was boring. The rhythm alienated me. I had spent a few years being ruined by bad, easy to read fantasy. Literature would take a couple of years to get reacquainted with.

I fell into a steady, consistent routine at work. It was no longer the center of my life the way it was before college. I did most of my thinking and feeling at work before, writing in my journals or staring at swaying trees and serving as patron saint of snails. Being a college student meant that I devoted a fair amount of my time to studying and reading.

And it wasn't so quiet anymore, either. I decided that if I was going to go back to school, I was going to do it properly. I got new hearing aids. They were much smaller than the one I had gotten in

middle school, and I had both ears covered. The sensation of being less hearing impaired wasn't as dramatic as it was when I was younger, but I had integrated it into my lifestyle. I was able to interact with people that came through the gates more easily and I interacted with my co-workers more fully. Formal interaction didn't feel like a farce. I didn't spent a lot of time agreeing with things I barely knew what I was agreeing with. I was allowed to be more engaged. I liked having them in, especially when the gatehouse was empty and quiet. I became more nervous about what it was that wasn't hearing. With the aids I enjoyed the little things like the sounds of electricity, air conditioning, static from radios, the whir of computer fans, the sliding glass doors rattling and trees shifting in the wind, cars on the streets in the distance.