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Serious Men

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Serious Men

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Michael Bass

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Abstract

This thesis is a Fiction story collection written in fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of New Orleans.

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Shockingly Smooth

I'm trying to explain to this girl that I'm not like the other coders at this tech party. I've dragged her away from my posse of awkward, shuffling coder friends, and she keeps teasing me with her replies—*Oh I'm sure; That must be hard on a genius like you.* But I can tell I'm winning her over. It doesn't take long to exhaust the gamut of these gatherings, and if she's been around as much as her job title suggests, she too must grow tired of the same nerds nodding heads and talking stocks in upscale apartments, right-angled elbows and beer-clutching fingers, bottles discarded on stacks of electronics. Sometimes I want to confront them, one by one, demand that they tell me what they see beyond the endless rows of blinking code. Shake them by the shoulders and stare into their souls: smart as they may seem, the same, dull platitudes will always surface in their Magic-8-Ball eyes.

The girl's name is Korina, and she's a journalist for a tech podcast. "So how do the brilliant coders like you *cope* with such a drought of creativity?" She taps her pen against her pocket notebook, laughing at me. She wears a black, designer tank top and jeans, which makes her look both more casual and more sophisticated than all the high-

end button-ups and polo shirts that never quite fit the coders posturing in them. Later, I'll have to impress Korina by having her feel the wonderfully sleek material of my shirt.

The apartment lightly rumbles; some giant, oafy guy in a red sweater is pounding the floor behind us. He's trying some new virtual reality game, hunched over, his giant fists hammering the gray carpet as he swats at enemies invisible to the rest of us.

"It's difficult," I joke to Korina. "But it can't be as difficult as interviewing nerds for a living. How often would you say their social awareness is low enough that they imagine themselves cool enough to hit on you?"

She presses her pen to her mouth and pretends to peruse her notes. "According to my records," she says. "You're the first of the night."

And with that comment I'm in love.

The giant behind us is beginning to make a scene. He's conspicuously out of place—bigger than anyone else here, baggy jeans and sweater, mop of messy brown hair. He looks more like someone who plays videogames than who designs them. His thrashing grows more and more violent, and the guests around him are becoming disturbed.

"You know, if you find your fellow nerds so dull," Korina says to me, "maybe that guy's more up your alley."

I watch him pound at the floor. I can't tell whether he's genuinely too absorbed in his game to realize how obnoxious he's being, or if he's hoping to start a fight.

"Say what you will about him," I tell her. "You ever watch coders play their own games? A zombie would get more pleasure out of them. This guy could teach them a thing or two about passion."

The guy's getting rowdier. If there was any doubt, now I'm sure: he knows exactly what he's doing. His cries—"Die, Dwarves! Die!"—are an obvious performance, overly strained. He wants his big hands to swing out of control. The polo shirts and hoodies nearby begin to clear space as the circumference of his thrashes widen; he's clearly imagining them doing so, daring any of us skinny coders to clear our nasally throats, tap his shoulder and politely request that he stop raging with the equipment.

"*That's your idea of passion?*" she says. "Almost a red flag, don't you think?" Even when mocking me, her voice sounds like music. "We might have to investigate this," she says. The pounding on the floor is creating a rhythm, and her teasing words are pure melody. I'm about to ask whether she wants go somewhere else with me, but I'm interrupted by the guy's shouting.

"Dwarves! Dwarves everywhere!" he cries as he swats the floor, romping closer and closer to us. He's pissing me off. Korina gestures for me to back up with her but I shake my head, stay right where I am. I'm really never careful about these things. Throughout my twenties, I was on the losing side of countless fights, never able to walk away from a tense situation.

Soon his big back pounds into me. A splash of beer escapes my cup and soaks his sweater, already releasing a stale scent.

His back stiffens. "What's this?" He rises, turns to face me, squaring his shoulders above. Purple VR goggles cover half his face. They probe out into the air and he scans some alternate version of the space between us. "Only trees and forests," he says, acting as if I'm a villain he's unable to locate in his game. "Yet some invisible little enemy spilled beer on me."

The VR headset may take up half his face, but he still has plenty of face to observe. His cheeks and chin hang like raw slabs of meat, sloping all the way down to his neck. Grizzled hair fails to cover his pockmarks. I'm surprised Cheetos powder doesn't dust his face.

“We could try it again with vodka, if something harder's more your style,” I say.

He locates my voice, and his great hand springs at my face. I expect a blow, but he clutches only air. “Hey look, I caught a gold coin.” He sneers, probably imagining the way I flinched. “Extra points.” For a bully, he has a surprising sense of irony. I imagine what tiny eyes lie behind those goggles: inches from the screen that dazzles them, they dry up under their virtual sun.

“You know, that's only a prototype,” I say. “Do you think the forest floor can support someone big as you?”

Right as I'm hoping Korina's admiring my wit, Biggy takes me by the shirt and pulls me beneath his rotten breath. Blind, electronic eyes bulge down at me. “If I can't *see* my little enemies, I guess I better *feel* them.” His hands explore my shirt, button by button.

My shirt is deceptive. It feels more like a raincoat but looks like a button-down. The material is a highly-synthetic polyester, a joyously slippery plastic manufactured straight from our future. But it's designed to appear like a regular, faded-blue button-up. It's painted with fibers and stitches so detailed, you could stare for hours and never tell what futuristic material lurks behind the appearance of cotton. The disconnect of how it looks and feels is why I like it: I can present myself as formal while wearing a rebel's clothes.

His thick hands trace the material up to my neck, probe my cheekbone. When his big thumbs press into my nose, my eyes water. “You feel too cute to an enemy,” he growls. In my imagination, I’ve already twisted his neck and driven his body miles upstate. While everyone else sleeps, I dump his body in a river I used to play in as a kid. I imagine his body fading under stream.

Half the party is staring at us in silence. *Techies*. Some eyes are wide with curiosity, others frozen with fear, as if our blind bully will sense the slightest movement. In my fantasy, Biggy’s sweater grows wet and heavy in the water, but still he won’t sink. I imagine filling his pockets with fistfuls of pebbles, only to find the stream is too shallow. His red arm floats to the surface, spasming with the current.

“I’ll almost feel guilty,” Biggy says, still squeezing, “smashing someone with a face this delicate.” I feel like an idiot: even in my imagination I can’t be more careful about a simple matter like hiding a body? Won’t the morning’s fresh rays illuminate his dumb red sweater, barely submerged in the crystal clarity of my childhood? Even if I bury every inch of him beneath the riverbed’s stones, will the minerals and rushing water ever completely waste his remnants? Or will some child’s foot one day fumble between the rocks to unearth a fleshy crevice? My god—why couldn’t my imagination have disposed of him in the Hudson rather than taking me all the way up here?

“Hide your eyes, pork face,” I say. And before Biggy can register my defiance, I tug on the \$2000 prototype our host was dumb enough to leave out for anyone to use. He resists my pull, and when the taut band stretches an inch from his nose, I let the machine fly back at him. The gears and bolts jolt inside as it crashes against the meat of his face.

The squeal he releases is somewhere between menacing and pathetic, and I know I've fucked up.

He falls back in a wild, fumbling rage, and I shuffle up three carpeted steps to a landing a few feet above, where a crowd has gathered to watch. They smirk as I lean against the banister, their entertainer now joining their ranks.

Biggy comes to his senses in a rage, with a full party staring at him and no idea who's me. "Where the fuck are you?" he cries, the VR dangling from his neck.

He flails at the space before him, grabs my friend's T-shirt, but his anger is vexed—Joey's black Metallica shirt obviously defies his touch's memory. None of my friends could be me: Tom's too sweaty, far from lanky, and Kevin's face is speckled with a beard. Everyone who's been watching the scene is sending secret smiles and knowing looks my way. They know the players, but the beast is in too full a rage to follow their cues.

I feel like the coolest guy at the party. I spot Korina, who's been watching the whole scene. *Let's get out of here*, I signal with my eyes, approach her, but as I move in for our first fleeting—*fleeing*—kiss, a romantic, on-the-run gesture, I'm halted by the pointed end of her finger. "What are you doing?" she asks, her face blank with disgust. "Go get your friends out of your mess." The music in her voice has vanished; she's all stone.

I look back out over the banister and, behind me (I don't need to turn to know) Korina disappears in the crowd.

Biggy's in Joey's face, howling for answers. "You techies all sound the same," he cries. "Who was it—was it you?" Joey is barely able to shake his head. His wide eyes

must have been darting back and forth for a full minute, but now they settle on me, begging for answers. I gesture for him to look away, but he doesn't comprehend. Biggy begins to track Joey's line of sight, and I undo my top two shirt buttons. When he sees me, he's so enraged he looks like he needs to pound the floor a bit before he approaches.

I act first. I come down the steps, as if I've been looking for the culprit. "He ran off," I say, trying to make my voice sound lower than it is. As if every guy at this party doesn't share my high-pitch tenor. "It was some skinny dude in a yellow raincoat."

"A—a skinny kid!" Joey tries frantically to play along. "Yeah, in a yellow raincoat. I—I think he ran off and locked himself in one of the bathrooms."

Damn it, Joey. I want to yell at him but have to hide my disappointment. Never the witty one; why not just say that the kid *left*? "Yeah," I say. "I tried knocking on the door but he wouldn't come out."

Biggy stands still. My voice seems to register in him, but I can see my words transforming his memory into what I want it to be. What he felt = yellow raincoat ≠ me. He seems to be debating whether to continue lashing out. "He'll have to come out eventually," I say. My eyes signal that I'm on his side.

He lets out a breath. "That motherfucker," he says.

You'd think I'd be careful, now that I'm on his good side, but I've never been one for de-escalation. "You know," I say. "That kid was a motherfucker. But you're a bit of a motherfucker yourself."

His eyes refocus, consider my insolence. There's a long pause; those who are still watching seem to hold their breath. His eyes really are tiny like I imagined, but not as shallow. They perceive things. He looks smart for a bully. I almost like him.

To everyone's relief, he slumps back against a stack of speakers and sighs. Joey's still looking frantically around. He doesn't yet believe the danger is gone.

"These parties just make me so angry," Biggy says. "All the little twerps standing around, talking about stock prices and prototypes." His voice has turned surprisingly soft. "All you nerds deserve a little violence."

Everyone watching knows exactly what's happening. They seem to be expecting a performance from me, but I'm amazed by how much I actually empathize with Biggy.

"Come watch the bathroom with me," he says. "We'll wait for him there."

"Sure." I clear my throat. "We can do shots while we wait."

An audience member scoffs behind me. They're not sure whether I'm still playing a game. Biggy grins. "You're all right," he says.

He raises his great hand to slap my shoulder, but I'm afraid of letting him feel my shirt. I preempt it—pretend I think he's going for a highfive and seize his palm midair. Our hands half-clasp above me, awkwardly, mine almost fitting in his.

"There's some vodka in the kitchen," I say. "We can watch for the dude easily up from the landing."

Slumped over the kitchen table, Biggy slams back shots like I've never seen. The Oculus headset still dangles from his neck; it doesn't completely cover his mighty jowls. I wonder if he's planning on taking that thing home with him.

High-tech gadgets clutter the kitchen—translucent kettles, a computerized toaster. Occasionally, the Alexa on the far counter responds while Biggy rants about his inferiority complex in tech circles, but he doesn't seem to notice. We've pulled up two

chairs around the edge of the table, the vodka bottle and two shot glasses between us. Everyone's left us alone here.

"You engineer types are all elitists," Biggy says, wiping his mouth. Part of his nonstop rant.

The kitchen opens in two directions. The bathroom door, which I'm supposed to be monitoring, is in my line of sight. I made sure to arrive ahead of Biggy so I could seize this position, gesturing to him that I'm keeping vigilant watch for his mystery attacker to emerge. Multiple people have used the bathroom since we sat down, but despite the sound of the door opening and closing, Biggy hasn't noticed. He's busy pounding shots and ranting.

"You all assume I make dirt as a videogame tester," he says.

"*Do* you make more than dirt as a videogame tester?" I ask.

"Go fuck yourself," he booms. Then lets out a laugh. We're getting along great.

Two skinny kids in the next room are testing out some sword-fighting VR. They stand about five feet apart, tentatively swinging invisible sticks at each other. By the avidity with which Biggy watches, I can tell he's itching for a fight.

"When I see people like that, I just want to smash everything they own," he says. A moment passes before I realize he's talking about the swordfighters. "If I were playing that game over there, I wouldn't do it so goddamn gently like them. I'd smash that kid's headset to pieces."

"You know their swords are nonexistent," I say. "They're wielding air."

"Wouldn't stop me," he says.

I laugh. “They do look pathetic,” I say, even though I don’t have a single observation about the kids playing. It occurs to me that, if I can’t distract Biggy, I should at least redirect his anger somewhere. “Fucking coders are always so passionless about their own games. Maybe you breaking it might snap them to their senses.”

He looks at me. “Don’t *you* code? Aren’t you one of the people who makes this stuff?”

“The code I write is permanent. That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t love to feel some of that machinery break in my hands.”

Biggy guffaws. “For a little twerp, you’ve got a lot of anger.” He fills my shot glass. I turn back to the VR sword fighters, hoping Biggy will follow my attention.

“You better be in for a fight when that motherfucker comes out of the bathroom,” he says, and turns suddenly around. The bathroom door is shut, the light on beneath the frame. He watches it for a moment, then turns back to me. “We’ll be here,” he says.

I nod. We take another shot.

For a moment it feels like there really is some yellow-rain-coated kid we’re getting ready to wail on, I’m beginning to like Biggy so much. But then I remember I need to unleash him on someone else soon.

“You should try that sword fighting if this motherfucker doesn’t come out soon,” I say, my voice, nervous, slipping back into its original tenor. “See if that game can handle you.”

He wipes his mouth. “No. I wanna feel that twerp’s raincoat again in my hand.”

The bathroom door opens. A lanky kid with a thick, brown beard exits, grinning at nothing. This time Biggy notices. The kid's way over dressed, his fancy black shirt frilled at the shoulders. He grins right past us and walks through the kitchen.

Biggy turns back, studies me. I'm nobody, I want to say, but before I can speak he reaches slowly across the table. The bottle knocks over and vodka drips through its snout, collecting on the table, when Biggy seizes my shirt. I stay silent while he explores the familiar terrain, running his hand along the shockingly smooth polyester, reevaluating. His mouth twitches, his tiny eyes widening with revelation, as if he's discovering an enemy more exceptional than what any videogame has ever provided. His great sausage fingers, with surprising dexterity, redo my top two buttons, slowly, one by one, and then clasp my jaw. I freeze. The party suspends itself. Their distant chatter, long forgotten about us, fades into the background. I can't distinguish the sweat of my face from the sweat of his hands. Such pudgy fingers—they contemplate my face with all the sensitivity of a lover's touch, possibly discovering even more. Something between his rage and mine, unbearably taut, is about to snap, catapult us to a higher plain, far above the electricity that courses through this apartment, the buildings that tower outside, high in the sky where whatever metaphysical hand beyond plays and creates, before Biggy's fingers around my face begin to tremble and squeeze.

Seven Hundred Years

This was back in the early days, while God was out burying dinosaur bones to test the faith of future generations, so it was just me and Abel out in the field. My real problem wasn't how God loved him and that sacrifice of his, nor how I envied him for it. It wasn't even that I wanted my brother dead. No, my problem was that, when I did it, I struck him first in the foot. The Earth was new and we were all young, and I didn't yet know where the brain was. I guess in my head I'd imagined a swift conclusion, so when Abel didn't die but instead turned and looked me in the eyes, I was confused. I mean, I had the thought to do it and so I did it, but I hadn't prepared clever words any sort of face to make at him afterwards. My brother's face, however, always communicated exactly how he felt. At that moment, it showed shock and disgust, but also revelation: that the God he had appeased was not the only one to fear, that other humans might also be a threat, and he should have watched out for his older brother who always lumbered dumbly behind him. I could imagine what he thought of me—me who had just failed at sacrifice, and so came over to fail at this.

But then I remembered the cow Abel had sacrificed and how he had killed it. I remembered because it was actually that cow whose thighbone I'd struck him with. I

looked at the bone in my hand, then up at Abel, and he must have intuited the connections I was making—*strike him in the head*. And during his split second of deliberation, whether to stand tall and make a dignified stand against me or turn and run away, probably off in the direction of God so the two of them could talk about me, I decided I didn't like how any of this was panning out, and so I made the blow.

It's been lonely since then. To live seven hundred years and there's only this one thing you did. I wandered the deserts, watched history unfold. Nobody noticed me. I followed Abraham up the mountain, watched him raise the knife against his son. I wanted him do it, to know how it feels. Then that dove plucked it away and I cried. I watched Samson's fall, and even then I envied him—I wanted Delilah's soft hands in my hair too, touching my scalp, relieving me of these worn, ragged clumps: they brought me no glory. David got all this credit for watching Bathsheba bathe, but what about me? I haunted the streets below; I watched David *watch* Bathsheba, and felt just as many ways.

I watched cities form and the violence of civilizations grow, seven fold, seventy-seven fold, forever multiplying this thing I began. If these armies, with their war cries and armor, had seen my animal bone and my dumb, blank face, they'd never acknowledge me as their origin. I tried changing my ways, letting my hair grow long, dressing in robes and preaching peace, but that sort of thing wouldn't be in vogue for another millennia or so, and nobody listened.

I once returned to the place where it started. I'd marked the land with Abel's bone. It had seemed symbolic: to commemorate him with the same sacrifice that brought him honor before God. But when I went back to see it, I remembered that I also killed him with that bone, and then I got symbolically confused.

I stayed there for hours, until a wind picked up. I bent down to my brother's grave and reached my fingers into the sand, beneath the bone forever stained with his blood. "I didn't know what I would start," I said. "How all of this would spiral." I dug down into the desert, searching for what I had lost. "Brother, if we could start this all over; for all these long years," I told him, but I was whispering to dust, "I've been wanting to murder you right."

Ten Thousand Eyes

Friday, July 17

Wearing: White blouse (low cut!) and plaid skirt. A work outfit also good for nights out. (Though I hope she doesn't have anything too crazy planned in that thing, haha!)

Hair: Flowing down her back, blindingly red.

But why is she wearing so much makeup today? Doesn't she know her skin is beautiful as is!! She should never let society defile her sweet, sweetness with that corporate stuff! Behind all that makeup, a bird of paradise awaits. Of course, worms like me know what to expect from a bird like her.

But dear, you and I are creatures destined for so much more. You may not be aware of me yet my dear, but I'm counting the days. We will be together.

My god. I knew Kevin was a creep, but he's worse than I expected. Sammi, the new intern, has barely acquainted herself with the office, and already Kevin's pale, pockmarked face twitches and sweats whenever he sees her. He peers above the wall of his cubicle, watching her all day. He pants when she walks by his desk, then hunches down to scribble in his red notebook as if to record the sound of her footsteps, the scent of her perfume lingering in the air. What is he planning to do with these pages? I can imagine him in his home, feeding scraps from his journal to an altar he built for her, made from Sammi's used tissues and strands of her hair. I sometimes think I notice her

flinch when his eyes crawl up her neck, but that flinch turns into a twirl of the hair, and she's on with her business as if there's no skinny neckbeard bugging out at all. Kevin may have been fostering his passions in secret, but that ends now. I've been watching him all week, formulating my plan to access the goldmine of insanity I just knew he was hiding in that notebook. And earlier today, just as his furious writing seemed to reach an apex, I made my move.

Approaching his desk, I was able to watch over his shoulder for a few moments without him sensing my presence. Kevin must have grown used to the patter of coworkers behind his desk; his cubicle sits all the way in the back, by the break room. All day coworkers pass behind him, never acknowledge him.

“Kevin!” I said, startling him.

He scrambled to close his journal and turned to me, obviously not used to anyone speaking to him. His eyes were wide with fear, waiting for my next move as if it were judgment on high. I wore my best, winning smile while I bid my time. Absolutely *towering* over him, I leaned against his chair.

Here I must state that I take no personal pride in my muscled physique, broad stature, or powerful cheekbones (which could cut glass). While all my features communicate to men and women alike the high levels of testosterone that flow through my body, being an Alpha Male isn't something I strive for. No, the hours I spend at the gym are merely a way of releasing some aggression in this dull world where we, imprisoned in office cells, must repress the urge to smash holes through cubicles, computer screens, office walls, and everything that closes us in. That my rigorous

workouts have endowed me with such a manly presence is a mere side effect, though, in that moment, I did enjoy seeing how much inferiority I filled Kevin with.

“Kevin,” I repeated. “Would you mind if I borrow that stapler of yours?”

Our office is full of staplers, but Kevin didn’t have the backbone to point out as much. Instead he just let out a sort of piggish moan, torn between relief that I didn’t ask what he was writing and irritation that I was there at all. He avoided eye contact while he handed me the stapler.

Later, when he got up for a bathroom break, I had an excuse to saunter back over to his desk (return the stapler) and *nobody noticed* as I rummaged through his desk, found his journal, and flipped to the latest entry.

Now I can’t stop thinking about Kevin’s journal. I’m almost grateful for him. Work has been dull. I’ve had one (maybe two) public outbursts at these soulless drones, and now they act like I don’t exist—as if they don’t all suppress the same urge to hurl the copy machine against the wall when it malfunctions, as if they could ever even lift it. Since they all insist on suppressing the rage that flows through all of us, I have nothing left to do with them but observe from a distance. Karen in accounting lazes a heavy pen over columns, her eyes dreary as she scribbles clerical errors in permanent ink. Across from her, Bob wears loud, colorful ties that clash with his drab suits, pinks and neons against browns and grays. He answers all of Karen’s apathy with jokes and miscalculated facial expressions—probably the remnants of a class-clown personality he no longer fully commits to. Watching them has been dull, dull.

I think I admire your delusions, Kevin. At least you understand that suffering is real. Our souls may be confined to this nine-to-five, but your spirit still yearns. You may

be our first chance in this office for something to *happen*. Now that I see who you really are, I'll keep asking for common office supplies; you'll keep giving them to me, and I'll keep returning them when you go to the bathroom each day at eleven o'clock, on the nose. (Nice job staying regular!) I have to keep reading your entries, Kevin. Your notebook isn't a secret anymore.

Monday, July 20

Wearing: Green, wool overcoat. She brings it folded up in her workbag and takes it out when she arrives. Adorable. The air-conditioning is too cold for her.

Hair: Up in a ponytail (haircut soon?)

My plan to win her over is on track!! Step One, speak to her. Which this morning I finally did! She'd told her friends she made up business cards over the weekend, and god she was so adorable, arching her eyebrows with mock-sophistication to restrain that golden, golden satisfaction! When she passed by my desk, I asked if I could have one. She gave me a knowing look—*Yes, I was listening*—and I almost melted! She handled that card like it was something magical, tapping it against my desk before sliding it over. Oh, I thought my desk barred the way to precious waters in another dimension, and she was Moses at the Rock! Well dear, keep on tapping! My new plan will release those gushing waters of love!

Step Two, to surprise you later today I'll tell you about a new bar I just heard of. And Step Three? Some day I'll ask you to go with me. When you say yes, I'll bring you a flower as beautiful as you, though you are more beautiful than any flower, and when you say yes, we'll leave the office together.

He spoke to her this morning! This development is wonderful—Kevin's finally talking to Sammi! Not that the talk isn't horribly cringe-inducing, but it's *something*. Kevin *does* have a plan. His real problem is that he lacks initiative, he's practically procrastinating. *Mention* there's a bar nearby? As mere *preparation* for whenever he plans to invite her to said bar? Kevin is wildly imperceptive about his fellow man. He thinks he's alone, that this office isn't full of other vultures ready to swoop down on Sammi. I can't let him go

on with no timeline. By the time he grows the courage to ask her out, Sammi will be long promoted from her internship and graduated up the corporate ladder, leaving ever-meek and unambitious Kevin below (with a new pack of underlings where he'll find fresh meat to hopelessly fixate on, obsess over). No, if Kevin's going to make something *real* happen in this office, he'll need a little push.

When Sammi's walking back from the break room, coffee in hand, she passes Kevin's cubicle, and he stops her again. I hide behind a nearby desk to eavesdrop, but Kevin's stammering. He opens and closes his mouth, then finally mumbles something pathetic about this neat (*neat!* he says) bar down the street, Step Two in his three-step plan. Sammi's responses are truly artful—*oh cool; you don't say*—reducing Kevin's advances to mere statements of fact. She really is nice to him, but it's the niceness some women feel compelled to show in unfamiliar work places, never sure who might lash out. I first became aware of this trait in female coworkers when I saw how deferential Karen became towards me after our incident in the break room. What kind of idiot can't figure out how many damn packets to put in the coffee machine? (A question to which Karen had no response.) Now, our dear Kevin is fulfilling his role as a creep by mistaking this polite attention for sexual attraction.

“Yeah, and...” Kevin can barely go on. He's hurtling headlong into failure. This plan of his is never going to surface without a cat to draw out his mousiness. I'll need to intervene.

While they talk, I sneak into the cubicle beside them. With a forceful thud to the shared wall, I knock Sammi's coffee mug off its perch, and it crashes down by his chair.

Half the office turns to watch her frantic apology, but I've moved far enough beyond them that no one would suspect I was the cause of the spill.

I round the corner and approach them from a new direction. "Woah, Kevin," I say. "Careful, Bud!" I swoop in, good guy that I am, flexing my eager-to-help hands. Kevin eyes me like I'm the most threatening man on Earth.

Sammi's embarrassed, saying *so sorry* and *I'll go get some napkins*, but I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Listen," I say, "it happens to all of us." I bend down to pick up her mug.

Poor Kevin reshuffles his feet, edging slowly away from the coffee pooling beneath his shoes, but I leave no space for him to mention it. Placing the mug back into Sammi's hands, I inject finality into the gesture, as if handing her mug back is all that's needed to resolve the situation. With my stallion charm, I force our conversation forward, entering the stage of chitchat that should occur only *after* a coffee spill has been cleaned.

"Well, what were you two talking about that got Kevin here so *excited*?" I ask, winking at him and subtly blaming him for the spill.

"Kevin was saying," Sammi says, "that maybe some of us should go to a bar sometime after work."

"Is that right?" I grin. I'm impressed with how subtly she's managed to sidestep Kevin's date; she *must* be aware that a whole-office meet up was not Kevin's intentions. I plant a big palm on the back of Kevin's chair, but I focus on Sammi, locking the three of us into a triangle. Fun little posse! I flash my pearly whites back and forth between them. Sammi smiles back, but Kevin folds into himself. He won't even look me in the eye.

“Maybe seeing some of our wilder sides will bring a little life into this office,” I say.

“Hey, how about this Friday?” Sammi asks.

While Sammi and I talk details and exchange numbers, Kevin turtles into his cubicle. He has no idea whether he’s included in our plans or not. The more he withdraws, the more exclusive Sammi’s and my eye contact becomes. Poor guy, there’s barely a body there: he’s 20% meat and 80% envy.

What a beautiful blend of suffering. Just what I need from you, Kevin. You may be closing off now, but I’ll turn up the pressure until you’re *forced* to act. You’re going to come out of your shell whether you like it or not. I’m your bully and she’s your love, Kevin. What are you going to do?

Tuesday, July 21

Wearing: Who the fuck cares?!

Hair: always red and billowing all around the whole office for other people to breath why would you do this to me! All I wanted was to tell you about a cool new bar, *without* that other predator hovering around us, ruining all our plans. What secret life are you living. Yesterday you were Moses with a magical staff against our rock. why not parting the sea of coffee?? for me to cross??

If you’re telling me to be the man here, message received. I’ll step it up if I must. But, my god—why play these games when we could just be happy?

I knew he’d come around! Boiling with anger is just what he needed. Although, apparently, by writing that he’s going to “*step it up*,” it seems he was merely referring to the third step of his plan: Kevin’s bought Sammi a rose. He didn’t even give it to her himself, but instead left it on her desk with a card: “*For the nicest, most wonderful woman in the office. Love, Kevin.*”

“*Love?*” Cute plan, but a single rose doesn’t even approach an adequate reflection of the mania we’ve seen in his journal. Sammi will be able to smell the falsity of this gesture. Where’s that wild Kevin-energy I’ve grown so fond of? Women don’t like the lovable loser from the PG-13 movie—if he wants to succeed, he’s going to need to tap into his dangerous side, show us that R-rated anger.

Sammi enters and sees the rose immediately. It shocks her, but she soon turns that shock into bashfulness, thinly veiling her *true* feelings of elation and absolute delight. She blushes, looks around, holding the rose beneath her nose as she smiles—just the reaction Kevin was pining for. As he watches her, his smile stretches farther than his widening eyes. He seems to believe her blush is all for him. She’s read his note, he thinks, and is delighted to receive a rose from him, our very dear Kevin! He brings his hands to his face, laughing, relieved. He collapses in his wheelie-chair, not knowing what to do with himself. However, poor Kevin doesn’t yet know that I have *removed his note*, and Sammi isn’t looking around the office for *him*; she’s looking for her mystery suitor.

I walk over to her, and she plays up her bashfulness. “Look what was on my desk when I came in,” she says, holding up the rose. “Someone must have misplaced it.”

I lean close to her. “Or *did they?*” I ask.

An uncontrollable grin takes over her face. I wink and walk away, making sure to catch a glimpse of Kevin’s horror at what he witnessed. He doesn’t seem to comprehend—*he’d left a note*—how could I have stolen the credit for his gesture?

Let that be a lesson in creating mystery, Kevin. Though I should again reiterate that my good looks and charm probably helped; it would be difficult for anyone less

dashing to pull off a move so simultaneously cliché and risky as leaving a rose on a coworker's desk. In fact, I did Kevin a favor; for him, such a gesture might prove fatal.

Kevin's eyes dart forth to Sammi and back to me, confounded. Time for some damage control. I approach his desk. He's livid, but I pretend not to notice, patting him hard on the back. I feel powerful, my big hands on his thin, tense shoulders.

"I must have a guardian angel, Buddy," I whisper in his ear. "A wingman with actual wings!"

He doesn't budge.

I feel like I'm confiding in an enraged garden gnome. "Don't tell anyone, but I have *no idea* who bought that flower for her. Who knows? Maybe someone *did* misplace it." I give him my exaggerated *oops* face.

Oh, Kevin. You don't even notice when I toss your note beneath your desk for you to discover later. It'll crinkle when you roll over it in your chair. You'll lift it to your face, horrified. That'll make you second-guess your grasp on reality. Drive you a little madder. Show us who you are.

Wednesday, July 22

Wearing: Green silk blouse, tight black skirt that barely reaches her knees (I can only imagine how short it is when she sits)

Hair: Sunset red, flowing down her back—the forest fire running through a meadow of green.

I am the only man alive who sees her for who she really is. I would never comment on her weight even though she looks perfect. I know she is so much more than that. She is the feeling someone gets when they pick roses in the meadow. She is the roses and the meadows and the forest fire all around. My competitors, crouching behind their computers, see only her appearance. Doesn't she understand? She is a rose and I know she's a rose and that rose was from me! It's sabotage! Everyone here has always been against me. Everyone going to the bar

this Friday, they won't stop me from sweeping her away. I'll do everything I need to show her, fighting off all our coworkers, stealing the office goldfish. I'll break into her apartment, dust off her old family photo albums, use my own toothbrush to scrub the tiles in her shower, *anything* to prove my love is true.

Dear, reading my journal entries again was such a rollercoaster. One day when you're with me, you'll read them, too. Then you will see. What we have is real. My dear, when the content of my love is unveiled—*then* you will see how I see.

Yes! Kevin's becoming unhinged. I *knew* turning up the pressure would bring out his passions! His words are turning into pure poetry—nonsense though they may be. And what a great idea! Take that manic spirit *out* of his notebook and unleash it into the world!

I stop by Kevin's desk all the time now, armed with back pats, shoulder grabs, and a big, poster smile. I act as if drawing the poor guy out of his shell has become a personal project of mine. Whatever I say to him, Kevin always responds with a sort of *haw*. He's just making sounds now, not even witty enough to play *mouse* in this game I've cast him in.

Within earshot of Kevin's cubicle, Sammi and I talk about the outing planned for this Friday. On my phone, I show her the menu; we plan tapas to order, scroll through their selection of wines. Some inside joke prompts me to nudge her shoulder, and, just as Kevin peers over his cubicle, she nudges mine back. I turn to wave a playful shooting finger at him—whacky third member of our posse!—who of course has been agonizing over our every word.

A date with Sammi was supposed to be the biggest event of Kevin's life, and now, at the bar he selected, he'll have to really show us some muscle to push past me and win her over.

As Kevin's visions get wilder, he retreats even further. This may seem antithetical to my ends, but he's boiling, boiling. Soon he'll explode.

Kevin's in panic mode. He looks malnourished. I doubt he's been eating lately. All this social interaction has proved too much for him. His red book has vanished—hence I can report no journal entry today. Does he suspect that I might be reading it? But he seems afraid of everyone, not only me. He's absolutely paranoid. When our boss walks by him at the water cooler, Kevin drops his half-full cup into the trash and scurries away. Even in his cubicle he feels unsafe. All day he sticks his neck above its walls like a frightened giraffe, scanning the office, as if every male in a ten-mile radius is a potential predator. The Bar's tomorrow, Kevin, wake up!

[Undated, but this was obviously written earlier today]

I've been a fool. Your presence is everywhere. The universe is contained in you, expands around you. Though no one else will see you as the goddess you are, still I can never have you. I should have known you were never for me. I promise never to bother you again. You are of the world, for the world. I am barely here, rotting in the eternal gloom of the one who sees. I want nothing more than to take you away, to go to a cool new bar with you and you alone. But alas, I cannot. Stay happy, Sammi.

Kevin's last entry has really caught me off guard. I never expected him to be self-aware enough to try to end his obsession with Sammi. In fact, self-awareness is the last thing I expected to find in Kevin's journal when I broke into the office tonight to steal it.

(Moving that red notebook from desktop to bottom drawer was not a retreat strategic enough to overwhelm *me*, but the attempt is laudable.) In this last entry, Kevin almost seems humble. Although "the one who sees" still carries tinges of the old Kevin hubris,

he really seems to care about Sammi. I almost feel guilty while I photocopy these pages: some of his creepier entries will probably overpower Kevin's touching little ending. Particularly disturbing is an old entry consisting of nothing but Sammi's name scrawled over and over, with strange eyes framing the margin—presumably *his* eyes, presumably seeing *into* her name? He may think he's finished, but I know Kevin. All he needs is my extra little push. As I flirted with the night time cleaning lady, she didn't even notice as I plucked the key from her waist. Here, alone in our office in the dead of night, plastering these pages across the walls, I feel proud of Kevin and me. We did this together. His desires are finally out in the open.

Friday, July 24

When our coworkers trickle in this morning, they're shocked by the display of photocopied journal entries all over the office. The eyes and faces Kevin sketched in the margins gaze down at our staplers, filing cabinets and personal computers, covering the blank walls that once closed in on us. I opted against perfect rows, defying the symmetry and right angles of this space, and instead let the configurations run wild. Their minds can trace their own patterns between Kevin's ramblings, like finding faces in the clouds. The marginalia may not contain school girl hearts that bind Kevin + Sammi forever, but still realization dawns slowly, face by face, who the subject and author of these entries are. Plenty of other gems give our Kevin away, such as the crude sketches of Sammi's face with Kevin's superimposed, the two merging into what looks like a composite, alien baby (fascinating fruit you were planning to bear, Kevin!)

Our boss is anxious and disheveled. Maintaining calm damage control clearly isn't his specialty. He bounces between coworkers, none of whom are working, to assure everyone things are under control, then remembers to take down a couple more pages, which at his rate will take all week.

When Kevin finally enters, Sammi is sobbing in a corner. Three female coworkers surround her with consoling coos, trying to relieve her of her relentless sobs. Everyone turns to Kevin, watching to see what he'll do. As he processes the scene—the wild content of his mind finally made manifest, no longer cooped up in his notebook, but out in the open—I can see the change in his eyes: *this is his space*. Kevin, act now! You've blasted your hidden feelings out into an office that ignored you, didn't respect you. Now that they see you, make your move. This is who you are, Kevin, now *become what you are*. Cry out for your love. Rip off that blue button up (it's two sizes too big anyway.) Take a paper cutter to your chest, inscribe Sammi's name, Kevin! *Give us your blood*.

But instead of lashing out, Kevin hangs his head. He turns to me. I've been in the center of the office, puffing out my chest as if ready to stand between him and Sammi. I want Kevin to retaliate, show me his fighting spirit, but the look he gives me doesn't seem angry at all, nor does it plead for answers. He simply looks submitted. He may not understand why I've done this to him (he tells me with his eyes), but he knows I did it. He nods sadly; there's nothing he can do.

My eyes water up, but Kevin turns away from me and looks at Sammi. He knows he'll have to accept responsibility for her distress. He doesn't try to approach her or speak, nor does he avert his eyes. It's almost admirable, the way Kevin defers to her pain, lowering his head in apology. Do I imagine it, or does our boss even give him a sort of

gentlemanly as Kevin collects his single possession—the source of all this chaos—and sulks wordlessly away. (Of course, even at his most dignified, Kevin still sulks.)

Monday, July 27

We've all had the weekend to reflect. All those eyes posted everywhere, all those reckless professions of love—as our coworkers see it, Kevin had prepped the office for a grand gesture, possibly something violent, and then he quietly fizzled away. It's as if a series of explosions had begun to go off, but were diffused at the last moment. Our once-quiet and humdrum office is filled with tension.

Our boss goes out of his way to speak to Sammi but doesn't seem sure whether to actually talk about what happened. Sammi nods, accepting his platitudes but, with a casual smile, dismissing any need for deeper conversation. Bob strolls up to her with a toothy grin, eyebrows raised (as if she'd ever want to laugh about what happened with Bob), and Sammi waits for him to either make a joke or walk away.

Many, I can tell, feel that something big was supposed to happen, but they were robbed of the conclusion. Of course, no one can admit to this. Instead, they lower their heads, nod to Sammi, and conceal their excitement, their disappointment. Violence threatened to strike, and they had wished to see it follow through; now they must carry this shameful knowledge with them. And even those supposed *empaths* are less innocent than they'd admit, like Karen, who approaches Sammi during lunch with soothing babble—*that was really tough back there, are you okay? ; My cubicle is open if you ever need me*. She even goes so far as to bring Sammi a cup of herbal tea without asking, like

a child who needs nursing. Emotional parasite—only out to feed her own neglected emotions.

Who else sees the God Complex that lurks behind our boss's nervousness, the dark compulsions that shadow Bob's humor, the quiet desperation that motivates Karen's compassion? This office should be brimming with emotions, but the conventions of the workplace have reassert themselves, overpowering what could have been an orgy of experience.

Kevin. I wish you were here to witness their falsity. That journal was the one honest thing in this office, and look how they received it. Hypocrites. As if they aren't hiding hard drives full of fetish porn, secret email accounts, fake dating profiles to solicit nudes from younger women, second cell phones to cheat on spouses. Kevin, don't despair. None of them can judge you once their secrets too are known. Behind every coworker's glazed-over eyes, fears and fantasies cower. Just like yours, they are waiting to be coaxed out. A fantastic world lines the horizon: an office with nothing but honesty. Kevin, my darling boy, there's nothing hidden that I won't find and reveal.

Jeremiah, Traveler

Jeremiah flew to Costa Rica to finally make meaning of his life. After squandering his post-college years unemployed in his parents' backhouse, Jeremiah was in a rut. It was LA's fault: the city was filled with toxins. The LA sky and culture (smoggy and capitalist, respectively) alienated the population from itself. He blamed the city for sapping his spirit, blamed his family for settling in a desert that needed an artificial river to rob water from Colorado in order to compensate for its drought. But when he read online about an organization dedicated to building sustainable earth-homes in the Costa Rican jungle, he thought he'd found his Hero's Journey. He listened to the universe's call to adventure, packed *The Collected Joseph Campbell* in his bag, and filled out a form to volunteer. This would be his chance to work with his hands, create sustainability, touch spirits with like-minded travelers.

His first night camping in the jungle, while the other volunteers passed around weed and tequila, Jeremiah lay against a rock, watching the starry spectacle above. He wanted the sky to open up for him, to unfold the meaning of the universe. Shrouded by neither light pollution nor smog, heavenly bodies flashed and fell against the Southern Cross. The higher spheres promised to reveal their manifold secrets. But soon Jeremiah's jetlag kicked in, and he became anxious that he might be insufficiently decoding their

messages. He needed shrooms. Shrooms would make the ultimate meaning of his transition from a lazy life in Los Angeles to a life wedded to the earth beneath the Costa Rican sky.

So Jeremiah went between volunteers, telling about how the heavenly bodies almost opened up, about needing shrooms tomorrow. Never one to regulate his volume, he boomed this speech to each volunteer separately, unconcerned by who'd already overheard, until Mick, a recruit from Michigan, said sure, man, he had some shrooms they could take together, and Jeremiah calmed down.

However, as it turned out, shrooms only intensified (but later, resolved) the anxiety that plagued Jeremiah's first week in Costa Rica. The following morning, Jeremiah and Mick took their first dose while the owner of the farm, Bearfoot, welcomed them all to a new season of WWOOFing. Bearfoot demonstrated how to lay stones as a foundation for the adobe houses. Jeremiah deeply believed that non-wasteful homes were the future. Regenerative materials were the preferred method of almost all indigenous peoples before capitalism corrupted this world. Jeremiah was whispering all of this to Mick. When the shrooms kicked in, the two of them would need to formally pledge their labor to these renewable constructions, Jeremiah went on, but Mick shushed him; he couldn't hear Bearfoot's instructions.

When it was time to try laying his own foundation, Jeremiah felt his mind seep into the stones, hot and sun-soaked in his hands. His mind felt renewed; his body reborn. He touched his beard. Fattened by humidity, the knotty growth sprang from his face like flora, rugged as the land around him (a feeling that would later turn into another source of

anxiety, as he began questioning what spindly-legged creatures might seek refuge in his own body hair). He stared up at the hot, wet sun, until Mick told him he shouldn't do that.

Just as his trip was about to peak, Jeremiah learned what giant water bugs were. When he removed a stone from the wheelbarrow, two horrifying insects were waiting beneath. Twice as big as the cockroaches back home, their prehistoric shells made them look like dinosaurs. He imagined them roaming above the hot stones, lording over a world of ants. The space under the next rock was clear, but the following rock turned out to shelter a scorpion. The hallucinations must have been kicking in, because its stinger seemed to spew green toxins into the air. Jeremiah froze and Bearfoot came over. "You'll have to get used to those," he said. He shook the barrel and the scorpion scuttled deeper into the pile. "All good," he said, reassuring Jeremiah with a pat on the back. But Jeremiah's paranoia mounted, anticipating the arachnid beast, what it might plan next, crouched and waiting for its next unveiling. Yet three rocks later, when he found, instead, a tarantula—huge, hairy, and twisted in a hallucinated hiss—Jeremiah's mind went dark. Bearfoot guided his shocked and speechless apprentice back to the communal cabin, where a traumatized Jeremiah lay on the floor. Hours passed before he regained his senses, only to find that this cabin also had spiders.

That first week, Jeremiah spent his workdays pussyfooting around the camp. He never recovered from the shock. During the nights, while everyone else sat around the campfire, mingling, sharing life stories and travel plans, Jeremiah raved about primordial monsters and insects of the mind. He told them just because, at twenty-eight, you were finally noble enough to leave your parents' backhouse and embark on the Hero's Journey, didn't mean the universe would accommodate you. The Journey wasn't spiritual or

invigorating like Joseph Campbell promised; it was horrifying, evil, and held no promises of escape. When the other volunteers tried to ask him what part of Los Angeles his parents lived in, Jeremiah screamed that the shadows of his mind stretched too deep, crawled with too many spiders, and he'd never make it out.

Mel thought dating a stripper would be more fun than it was. The two met on Tinder, and on Mel's first night in New Orleans, this stripper made Mel feel beautiful and free. Mel imagined releasing all her self-consciousness and joining her date up on the pole. In her fantasy the audience was all screaming, horny women, for whom Mel and her date danced and grinded. But when Mel met her date's friends, an all-white posse of strippers, they all said the N-word too much and did key-bumps of coke late into the night.

Mel herself was dark-skinned and Latina, and her date's casual racism wore her down. One night, while they were all doing coke together, Mel teared up at the sound of the slur. Her stripper girlfriend took Mel by the hand. "Hey," she whispered, gazing into Mel's Peruvian eyes. "It's not about color." She kissed the back of Mel's hand on its darkest spot. "You're nothing like *them*."

Mel was furious, but they were all really hot. So Mel did coke with them for three more days before deciding New Orleans was only a pit-stop. Her first year of adulthood, free and eighteen, shouldn't be wasted by settling too long in any one place. She got in her car early one morning before any of them woke and drove west again.

Rather than imparting all of life's meaning, the shrooms had imparted Jeremiah only with arachnophobia. Golden orb weaver spiders didn't ever leave their webs (he triple-checked

his sources) so Jeremiah scouted every web in camp. He kept a vigilant eye, reminding everyone of their locations whether they cared or not. Now he had only to worry about the crawling tarantulas and scorpions, which could be anywhere. He screamed in anticipation as he overturned stones. Lint, leaf, or hair could send him into a fright; leaping, he'd fling the foreign object at anyone nearby.

Willow, another new volunteer from Michigan, finally dropped her shovel and took Jeremiah by the hand. "Come on, sweetie," she said. She was almost thirty years his senior and spoke with the deep calm of a New Age mom. She found some more shrooms for Jeremiah and herself, whispered that she was here for him, and told the other volunteers she'd need the common room for the afternoon. Willow undressed them both, told him to breathe, and they held each other naked on the carpet. When the shrooms kicked in, Jeremiah's eyes grew wide and he began to rave about demons. She shushed him, guiding his fingers across her dimpled skin. He had never seen a woman in her late fifties naked; it really moved him. The folds of her body began to take on the meaning of the earth's terrain. She continued to coo into his ear, and as he played with her breasts, he was in awe of how rugged they were, deflated and chewed by her three children. They had supported life, given milk to the propagation of the earth. Jeremiah began to cry. As he touched them, he thought of the honor that came with all that sagging. It made him think of all the earth's critters, gifted with perpetual progeny, and he cried even harder as he paid penance to a universe that imbued this soil with life—penance for his fear of that life. After Willow fell asleep, he went out naked and weeping onto the common porch. Acknowledging the three yellow spiders still visible in the dusk, Jeremiah held a peace

sign up to the darkening heavens and declared a covenant with the spiders. They'd be cool to each other from then on.

Mel fucked a girl in Houston and a guy in Albuquerque, and in Arizona she partied with some Navajos. They gave her Ayahuasca, and at the height of her trip, one of the mothers in the reserve touched Mel's face and told Mel to join her own people, told her America devours all. When Mel came back to the light of reality, she was so invigorated that she decided to leave before dawn. She leaped into her car, and the Navajos cheered as she drove off to explore her roots. So excited to know her history and the history of people like her, she drove three days with few rests until she reached Mexico City. In Mexico City she almost fucked a German tourist with nice biceps and an arrogant smile, but she decided most men were kind of rapey and she was done with them.

Jeremiah hadn't had sex since college. Somewhere in him, he related his journey into the Costa Rican jungle as his attempt to confront the Great Feminine. It's impossible to say on what level Jeremiah formulated these conceptions, but by a series of unquestioned assumptions and regurgitated Jungian symbolism, he viewed the jungle as a place where men and their libidos slashed through vines, conquered bears and snakes, warred against chaos, and tamed the feminine wilderness. Though he hadn't yet allowed these associations to piece their way into his conscious narrative about his journey, deep down he assumed that travelling Central America meant he'd definitely get laid at some point.

In LA he had bought a book about Tantric sex and Taoist orgasms. By masturbating in a warrior pose and practicing Taoist breathing, he'd learned to halt his

flow of semen and raise the orgasmic sensation up into his mind. The full body convulsions were like electroshock. He could come like this for hours, squatting in his parents' backhouse.

So when Willow told him she ran female orgasm workshops, Jeremiah almost fainted with delight. The two were packing earth and water into a wheelbarrow to make adobe, and Jeremiah almost collapsed into the barrow. After practicing alone for so long, he finally had a companion. He dragged Willow back to his tent, scrambled through his bags, and showed her his tantric-sex book.

Within the hour, the two were naked in the jungle, Jeremiah holding a Warrior pose while Willow straddled up to his back, the two of them deep-breathing in unison. Willow caressed Jeremiah's tantric pressure points, saying, *Good, baby, good*, while Jeremiah howled into the trees. Their pleasure seemed to merge with nature, even the surrounding spiders, he thought, seemed to share their pleasure. Occasionally Jeremiah would reach behind and try to feel between Willow's legs, but she would push his hand away, saying, *No, baby, no*.

Jeremiah was perched on a log and zoning out into the campfire. Sharing his spiritual practices with Willow was an actual sexual experience with another person—his first in years. His soul felt wild, elongated, stretched to its limits. Yet still he hadn't gotten laid. Jeremiah had never considered the possibility that someone might caress your tantric pressure points, yet rebuke your advances, show neither desire nor attraction for you. In Jeremiah's mind, sex meant uniting souls with another person, connecting with the higher, universal order, and right now he was in a crazy, in-between state—tantalized by,

but unrequited with the world. If he wanted to connect with higher spheres, he needed to fuck.

“Bro,” Mick said, taking the joint Jeremiah had been holding and not smoking from his hand. “You don’t need any of that weird shit you and Willow were doing. We’ll catch a bus into town this weekend if you want to get laid.” The campfire lit the volunteer’s surrounding tents, and their worksites and the communal cabin beyond were shrouded in dark. “I’ll take you to a club where you can find a girl your own age and have normal-person sex.”

“I hate clubs,” Jeremiah said.

“Then fuck it, dude. Just go to a brothel.”

Jeremiah stared at the fire. “Brothels aren’t spiritual.”

Mick tossed the butt of his joint into the campfire and the flames flickered. “You’re ridiculous,” he said. “Is public masturbation spiritual? All your screaming took away our appetites.”

Jeremiah started to giggle. “We should protest,” he said, more to himself than to Mick.

“What? Protest what? Do you know how valuable our appetite is after building all day?”

“Protest for our labor rights.”

“We’re here to volunteer, dude,” Mick said. “If you don’t like the work, leave.”

Jeremiah’s giggles grew more violent. “Man,” he said. “I haven’t protested in years.”

Mick drew a cigarette from his pocket and rose from the campfire. “You’re a clown.”

Jeremiah was beginning to wonder whether it might actually be *he* who gave heat to the flames, when he felt someone spin him around, and he found himself staring into the eyes of a young woman, their darkness illuminated by the campfire flames.

“This is Mel,” some outside voice muttered. Jeremiah felt as if he’d known the name forever. Her youthful beauty awed him. They stared into each other, both clearly strung out, neither able to articulate any revelations that flared behind their eyes. Jeremiah thought he saw in her Heaven and Earth reflected. Finally, they shook hands. Jeremiah made a joke out of not ending the handshake, and Mel upped the ante, shaking back with even more vigor. Both grinned at each other and neither spoke, and the handshake lasted over a minute. When the joke finally ended, they resumed their empty stare. Jeremiah asked where she was from. Mel said the fifth dimension. Judging by the breathy hysterics this provoked, Jeremiah thought this was comic gold. They were both Californians, though it would be hours before they figured this out.

After Mexico City, Mel had set her sights on Peru. She had drank Red Bulls while she drove and searched the internet on her phone, trying to track down her family members who still lived in her native land. She refused to ask her parents for help, now that she was finally out of her house. She was reuniting with her roots and she was doing it on her own terms.

Mel told all this to Jeremiah two nights after her arrival. The two had become inseparable. They spent silent hours staring into each other’s eyes and touching hands; a

few volunteers had to yell at them to move away from the worksites if they were going to look at each other rather than help. Now Jeremiah and Mel lay in his tent. He gazed at the night sky, faintly visible beyond the windscreen, and soaked in her story. It was wonderful. Each word she spoke corresponded to a point in the constellations above, and it was as if her life narrative were playing out in the stars.

But her phone's awful data-plan had made this difficult, and plus, tracking down ancestors in foreign countries turned out to be less fun than it seemed. After losing hope, Mel spent three weeks at a hostel in Limón where the employees dropped acid during their nightly drum circles. One night during the drum circle, an indigenous traveller improvised a dance which left Mel dancing until she couldn't breathe. She asked what the dance meant, and he told her his dances were protests against colonization; he was acting out his praise for renewable homes and sustainable living. Mel's mind was blown, and the traveller suggested she come check out Bearfoot's farm.

Here in his tent, she told Jeremiah that when she first arrived, she was floored by him. He had seemed so strung out, so mystified by the universe, which was exactly how she felt after her week in Limón. Jeremiah's heart leaped. Their souls were connected, he told her. He tried to explain: how they had both grown up in California but a divided nation kept them apart; they had been separated by class, by ethnicity, by culture. But here in Costa Rica, their lives were destined to converge. Jeremiah couldn't stop giggling as he explained all this, and he probably articulated only five percent of what he wanted to.

"Take some shrooms with me," he said. "You'll understand what I mean."

She flicked his forehead. “You’re such a weenie,” she laughed, and left his tent to go talk with the other recruits. Outside, her stories continued. The others laughed, responded to her words. Jeremiah lay back in his tent and listened to the chatter until the words divorced from their meaning—crickets in the night.

The other volunteers had made Jeremiah and Willow limit their cuddling sessions to a certain time frame in the afternoon. But nobody warned Mel, so it wasn’t long before she walked in on one of their sessions. She stood above them and let out an *awww*. When they both looked up, Mel stripped down to her panties and lay on the floor. Her soft nipples pressed into Jeremiah’s back, and the three of them spooned. Huddled together, they were like inverse Russian dolls, Willow taller than Jeremiah and he taller than Mel. To Jeremiah, this was ecstasy. Wedged between age and youth, he didn’t know which side of his eyes the tears were on. Humanity seemed to stretch out endlessly on either side of him.

A tarantula he had seen earlier peeked out from under the couch. Ever since he’d made a covenant with the spiders on his last shrooms trip, he’d been researching them; tarantulas don’t bite unless they feel threatened. He reached his hand over Willow to coax it over, and, miraculously, it came. He let it crawl up his arm, and, after its spindly legs searched for Willow’s body, it settled tentatively into their union. Mel tipped her head up to see, and they all gazed in wonder. Man, woman. Woman, beast. The highs and lows of life coming together in the cuddle puddle. Mel reached over Jeremiah to stroke the tarantula’s long, hairy legs, and Jeremiah could imagine the spider’s sensation, vivid and wild, as each leg curled back in delightful surprise. The four beings stayed on the floor

way past their allotted cuddle time. When the door opened and one of the volunteers screamed at the sight, Mel screamed too, and the tarantula hurried away.

The rumor was that Mel was ready to tell Jeremiah she was a virgin if he ever tried anything. On the farm, gossip circulated freely, and Jeremiah knew that they all mocked him for being so obviously in love with Mel but unable to actually fuck her. One girl reported that Jeremiah's hesitation surprised Mel—most men in Mel's life had been such entitled pricks—but his lack of initiative made her life easier; she didn't need to run through her typical laundry list of excuses to ward him off.

But the truth was, Jeremiah had no idea why he couldn't make a move, nor whether Mel wanted him to or not. Despite the cuddle sessions and long bouts of eye contact, he never worked up the nerve to kiss her. When he looked at her lips, he imagined the promiscuous past they contained, and an unbridgeable chasm opened between them. He craved the unknown space beyond her wet eyes, longed to pierce into her mystery, but serpents from his own mind swam before her, preventing him access. Whenever his tears began, she'd flick his forehead, call him a weenie.

When the Envision Festival rolled around, Willow invited Mel and Jeremiah to her female orgasm workshop. The festival was held where the Pacific Ocean met the Costa Rican jungle, and they needed four bus-transfers just to reach this distant location. When they arrived, the party was in full swing, stretching across the beach and into the wilderness. Music blasted over the shore while the wasted crowd let alcohol spill across their torsos, waves lapping against their dancing ankles. Jeremiah ran into the ocean. It

made him think of archaic harvest orgies, which, he tried explaining to a wasted British guy sharing whiskey with the two women draped around his arms, have totally been proven to exist in all ancient cultures. Waves washing over him, he felt he was cleansing himself in the primordial waters. According to Jung, the ocean was feminine—which reminded him to go to Willow’s workshop tent. Jeremiah gave the Brit, who hadn’t really acknowledged him yet, a big, long, bear hug, whispered in his ear that alcohol is poison, and showed up late to the female orgasm workshop.

Outside the tent, a sign read, “*Red Tent for Wombyn: Female-Identified Persons Only.*” Jeremiah pussyfooted outside for a while before he crept through the entrance and took a seat in the back. Lavender and incense oil filled the room. He was glad the ocean washed his beard and made it smell like salt; otherwise his body hair might have fouled the scents.

Willow sat in the lotus position on stage and spoke into a headset, and she led them through “clitoral meditation,” which meant imagining directing their breath into their clitoris. Jeremiah translated *clitoris* into *penis head* for himself. The women closed their eyes and “breathed into” their clits, their cervix. The woman next to him was wearing a leotard, and Jeremiah could feel her bodily energy. He’d never felt so much sexual energy in one room. It welled and welled, rose like great waves above him, and he could feel these feminine vibrations gathering together, forming a great goddess. He envisioned her rising above the festival, primordial and enraged, ready to stomp through the rain forest, to destroy trees and villages in her path. She was fearsome, amazing. Her great foot could step on him, crush him into the earth; her gargantuan hand could lift him

up and thrust him into the heavens. She held all the meaning he was searching for, embodied all that he desired, and would grant him or deny him at her whims.

After the workshop, he was on a high. He didn't receive (or at least notice) any negativity. "Thank you for being a pillar," one older woman said, and his heart melted. He joined Willow and Mel in a circle with five other women and watched them discuss the workshop. Willow invited the women into the back section of her tent for a private session, and Mel bit her lip in anticipation—Jeremiah had never seen her look so eager. But when he tried to follow them, Willow turned to lay a heavy hand on Jeremiah's chest and shook her head. The seven, lightly-touching women walked away into the private area, on the other side of a zipped tent lining. Any onlooker would have compared Jeremiah, watching them leave, to a puppy left in the rain. It would have been a sad, comical sight, but there was no one there to judge him; Jeremiah stood alone in the empty, red tent.

The next day, back at camp, Jeremiah was depressed. Autumn was near, and the volunteers were putting the final touches on their adobe homes and getting ready to clear out. Jeremiah had never felt so low. His inbox was flooded with emails from his parents—travel funds were running low, was he coming home soon, did he need help booking his flights back. He avoided their questions. He felt the jungle had swallowed him, his psyche had sunk into its pits, beneath the colonies of dung beetles and army ants.

Mick and Mel hauled wheelbarrows and shaped adobe bricks in the sun. Too depressed to work, but wanting to be near their energy, Jeremiah sat off to the side, trying to perform Reiki on a miniature jar of honey he had bought at the festival.

Mick finally snapped. “Can you get the fuck out of here if you’re not going to help?”

“I *am* helping!” Jeremiah said. He muttered something about filling the honey with energy, so Mel could use it to mend old planks of wood.

Mel laughed. “Organic honey for our organic homes.”

Mick walked over, grabbed the honey jar from Jeremiah’s hands, and hurled it into the distance. “We’re sick of your shit!” he yelled. “We’re all out here busting our ass while you stand around like a weirdo.”

Jeremiah trembled in the dirt.

“Goddamn it, just get the fuck out of here if you can’t help,” Mick said. And Jeremiah did.

Still trembling, he leaned against a rotten log beyond the clearing, where the wild jungle floor harbored more creatures than most people were comfortable with. He had wanted to join the yellow orb weaver a few trees over, but his research instructed him not to go too close to those.

When Mel came to find him, he could barely look at her—he trembled too violently. Mel sat next to him, holding the jar of honey that she’d retrieved. She dipped her index and middle fingers inside, and told him to open wide. Jeremiah opened his mouth and felt Mel’s honey-soaked fingers pierce inside. Slowly, she swirled the honey around his gums and teeth, gobbing the material into his mouth’s darkest crevices. It was pure heaven; his eyes rolled back.

She giggled. “You’re such a pandejo.”

“What’s a pandejo?” he asked.

“You’ve lived here two months and you don’t know *pandejo*?” Mel said. “It means idiot. You know, like a white person who visits Central America but doesn’t learn Spanish.” She pushed Jeremiah’s head playfully against the log before she went back to finish her work.

“Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror,” Jeremiah asked, “until your face morphs into something alien, monstrous?”

It was Willow’s last night before leaving to tour her workshop in South America, and she’d agreed to be Mel’s and Jeremiah’s spirit guide on their final psychedelic trip. He and Mel lay on the hill, shrooming. Willow, sitting above them, leaned over to caress him. “Why so dark, honey?”

“Do you have any recurring dreams?” Jeremiah asked. Before Willow or Mel could respond, he continued. “When I was a kid, I had the same dream every night. Slugs infest my room. They’re all over my walls, charred black and cancerous. I cry for help, but Mom is already there. She stands in the doorway. I want her help, but all she does is grin at me.”

“Woah.” Mel rolled over to listen.

“When I begin to cry, my mom takes a slug from the wall and bites it. She’s laughing. Slug juice drips down her chin, and she’s laughing at my fear, as more and more slugs emerge from behind the walls.”

“Baby, baby,” Willow cooed.

“Do you ever dream that you’re about to have sex with a girl,” Jeremiah said, “but when she unzips your pants, your penis is a slug?”

“My penis?” Willow took her hand off his chest.

“A big, pulsating slug,” Jeremiah continued, “and she’s horrified at you?”

Willow let out a disappointed sigh. “Come on, honey,” she said to Mel. “He isn’t talking to *us*.” Willow took Mel’s hand, and the two of them left Jeremiah on the hill.

All alone, he began to shiver.

“My penis has a rage beyond me,” Jeremiah whimpered, staring up at the empty, night sky, “outside of me. It’s a great, thrashing serpent. It’s out to destroy the world.”

Mel told Jeremiah she had to go south, see the rest of her continent. Jeremiah was devastated, but Mel diffused his hurt with one of those long, meaningful looks she had mastered.

The night before Mel left, the camp built an effigy out of old crates, drew a smiley face for its head, and declared the first official Costa Rican Burning Man. Mostly they just wanted to watch the old supplies burn, but Mel found it to be a touching goodbye gesture. The flames rose into the pitch-black jungle, lighting the hiding places of scurrying tree-dwellers. Everyone stared in wonder. Jeremiah felt their collective thoughts merging together, a giant speech bubble above all their heads that read:

Everything burns.

Someone had laid a bunch of straw underneath the effigy’s head. When the straw ignited, a booming erupted from within the hollow space of the torso-box, and its flaming head popped off and fell to the ground.

Jeremiah watched in awe. It was like an omen. The explosion perfectly represented how he felt for Mel, as if all the love and revelations he'd been having had channeled into the effigy and caused its head to pop off.

Mel giggled. "You feel like a god right now, don't you?"

Jeremiah looked down at her, amazed. It was like she had read his thoughts.

"Hey, Mick," she said. "Jeremiah really does have powers."

Mick began to laugh. "Hey man, if you can make a head explode, I can forgive any of your weird bullshit."

"You all thought Jeremiah was crazy," Mel cried to the group. She took Jeremiah's arm and held it straight out in front of him, with his palm open to the fire, pointing at where the explosion had occurred. "But I always knew Jeremiah was magic."

Soon the whole crowd was in an uproar of laughter. "Jeremiah, Jeremiah!" they cheered.

Jeremiah kept his arm raised out in front of him, feeling the fire's warmth on his palm. For a moment, he wondered whether his passion for Mel truly had sent the effigy head soaring into the night. (His memory had already wildly exaggerated how high it had gone.) A tear welled in his eye. As the group cheered, Mel leaned on her toes up to him. He felt her mouth brush across his beard, and when her sweet lips found the skin above his cheek, they opened.

"Don't leave," Jeremiah said. The other volunteers had trickled off to sleep, and Jeremiah and Mel stood alone before the effigies last, burning embers. Crickets chirped around them.

“I’m going to Peru,” Mel said. “It’s what I’m here to do. I’ve already connected with my family down there.”

“We have something special,” Jeremiah said. “You’re running away.”

“*You’re* the one running away,” she said. “I’m traveling towards my roots. You’re afraid to go back to LA.”

“I want to show you something,” he said, pulling her by the hand.

Jeremiah led Mel about a quarter mile, through a patch of trees and out into a clearing, where they stood by the foot of a small hill. At the top of the hill, against a full-moon, sat a nearly-finished adobe house, seven feet in diameter.

“This is the first house I started building here,” Jeremiah said. “I was almost finished when we met.” Only the space at the top of the dome was left open to the sky. By their feet lay the final adobe brick. “I think I somehow knew to leave the cornerstone for you to place.” He picked it up and held it out for her to take. “This should be our home.”

Mel’s face was blank. She looked at the house, at Jeremiah, then down at the brick. It glistened in his hands. She eased her own hand out, stroking it, tracing her fingers along its striations, massaging, as if her fingers could find the meaning inside the material. Eyes wide, she looked up at Jeremiah.

“You weenie!” she shrieked, and plunged her fingers through the brick. Lunging forward, she smeared the mud into Jeremiah’s beard. “You can’t do that to us. Look around, Whitey. You’re a visitor here, and I have places to go.”

Jeremiah touched the mud in his beard, felt Mel’s fingerprints there. Uncertain, he held his mud-caked fingers out to her, as if to ask her what it meant.

“Go home,” Mel said. “If coming here was your Hero’s Journey, it isn’t over until you return home.”

“My Hero’s Journey?” A tear formed in Jeremiah’s eye. “You read the Joseph Campbell I gave you.”

“Of course I did, you weenie. You came here to find the elixir. Now go back to LA, use it to establish a better life.”

“What if you’re the elixir? How can I go home without you?”

“It isn’t me. I’m not a prize to be won. It’s all the experiences you’ll take home.”

Jeremiah gazed into her eyes. Associations went off in his head, explosive, leaping from one to the next. If he had to stop and identify any of these thoughts, the whole process would likely be disrupted. For him to even say whether his revelations aligned with or rebelled against Mel’s advice would be impossible.

“If you can’t go home,” she said, “something in your journey’s misfired.”

The next morning, Jeremiah and Mel stood on the dirt road barefoot, staring into each other’s eyes. Bearfoot idled in his truck, waiting to take Mel back into the city. The two of them seemed spaced out and empty. To any onlooker, it would probably have been difficult to tell whether they were actually communicating. After a while, Jeremiah formed the words, *I love you*, and, as if in echo, the lip-motions rippled across Mel’s mouth, too. She could have been saying it back or simply mirroring his movements. It was a great, blank, spacy love, neither requited nor denied. They stared at each other until Bearfoot, apparently bored, knocked his truck into gear and it began rolling down the hill. Mel jumped, let out an *oh*, and scurried after it. She scrambled inside. The truck’s back

windows were tinted; Jeremiah couldn't be sure whether or not she turned around to wave goodbye.

That afternoon, Jeremiah padded the final brick into his adobe house. The ceiling was just high enough for him to stand up in the center. Sloping trees surrounded him on all sides. If he cut some vines and branches, he could clear a view of the dozen or so cottages strewn across the valley below. Their lights would flicker through the evenings until, one by one, they gave way to utter darkness. He stepped outside, cracked a branch of bamboo, and staked it into the clay top of his little home—a flag-mast without name, insignia, or cloth. Its bareness reflected the universe, its flaking bark and slight bend the ultimate declaration of nothing. He wept when he realized it was the only flag of its kind. At that moment, Jeremiah declared this place his home. He could stay here forever and nobody would find him. The other volunteers certainly didn't know where he had been building, and Bearfoot probably never came out here during the winter. He could buy a guitar for twelve dollars from the nearby town. The acoustics would sustain him through the rainy winters, echoing like memory.

His tears lasted through dusk. He stood naked outside his adobe, crying and masturbating, and breathed what seemed to be a two-hour orgasm into the wilderness. Mel may not have wanted him like he wanted her, but she gave him something. What had he been thinking, blaming her for leaving Costa Rica before he'd gotten what he wanted? How entitled was he? She was her own person, an incredible being, and the love she'd given was more than he could ask for. He didn't need sex to unite himself with nature. Above him, the stars revolved, danced, they opened and closed, a cosmic striptease. The

higher spheres may never show all their secrets, but he was happy with what they gave him. He held one hand to the sky, channeling all the energy his time with Mel and Willow had filled him with, and his other hand to the adobe, imbuing this love into his bamboo flag. He'd do this every season—fill his home with the love from each of his encounters from now until forever. As the tourist seasons cycled with new waves of WWOOFers, he'd open his humble adobe to all: a temporary shelter hostile to no life. They could sing Leonard Cohen songs. His walls may be bare, but they could shelter women, shelter spiders.

The last light was fading. Beyond the distant hills, a storm gathered. Jeremiah didn't worry about the fury it might bring, its torrents and lightning. Nor did he worry about the venomous creatures that surrounded him, the lack of local hospitals, or that nobody knew he was still here. He didn't worry about how he'd feed and clothe himself once the last of the volunteers had left, nor how he'd contact his parents once Bearfoot shut down the electricity and wifi. No, none of these things mattered. Jeremiah thought only of Mel.

He stayed outside masturbating for hours, releasing his love back out into the universe: it reverberated south into the Americas Mel was travelling toward. He wondered if she could feel it. Even when he thought he had no more to give, he persisted, deep into the night. Storm clouds approached and he howled up at them, awaiting their cleansing waters. The winds picked up and the jungle around him grew dark.

Serious Men

On your first date, Davey is fun right out of the gate. He suggests the two of you brown-bag it, and as you walk past the illuminated façades of Downtown LA's trendiest bars, he jokes about all the suits inside, each too busy draining money to come out and enjoy the night. Every time you speak, Davey hunches down to you with a grin and breathy laugh. He's the exact opposite of the serious men you usually date, who firm up their faces and postures, always reserving their intimacy for some grand gesture that never comes.

From then on you meet on the nights Davey doesn't teach poetry at Valley College. If only he would channel his just-for-you laughs, the wild ways he interrupts sentences for a kiss, into a single, movie moment. Maybe he'll stop you one night. Maybe the yellow light of a streetlamp will illuminate your face, the way moonlight falls across a pond, and his eyes will grow wild with thirst. Maybe he'll ask you to build a life with him. So a few months in, the two of you stumble beneath a streetlamp that seems good enough, and you stop him. Davey goes on smiling his same old smile. If the streetlight is doing the whole yellow thing to your face, he clearly doesn't notice. "Maybe we should live together," you stammer. Davey's grin stretches to preposterous limits—an inarticulate yes. Which would look decidedly stupid in a movie.

Old beer bottles and unpublished manuscripts clutter his Sherman Oaks apartment. You find work at a local coffee shop, and every evening you come home to Davey hunched over old poetry, squinting with the myopic concentration of a scientist over a microscope, only he never discovers anything. You make his balcony into a potted garden. Chrysanthemums, marigolds, bloom and frame the dingy streets below. At night you watch the moonlight—so much brighter in the valley—fall across the various petals, providing a perpetual, cinematic glow. The scene's set. All Davey needs to do is notice this setting and say the right things.

One night, when Davey cracks his midnight ale and joins you outside, you refuse to soften to his grins and jokes. He gives that *what's wrong* look, and with your eyes you tell him to get serious. Before you can process the effect this has on Davey, his knee bends, and he's fashioning the plucked stem of one of your chrysanthemums into a ring. He takes your hand, finally aware of the sacred space you've created here. His eyes glow with meaning. Then squint back at the flower. His goal seems to be for the petals to bloom above your ring finger like a jewel, but the stem is thick. He's having trouble tying the knot. Apparently ineptness plagues his moments of invention, too. You turn around: moonlight hollows out the streets beyond, where old warehouses harbor sacred moments in dusty movie sets. As if they too have found nothing remarkable beneath the visiting moon.

The Jokes that Bond Us

It's all a comedy to me. I spend the morning brainstorming funny ways to tell my friends I'm no longer a virgin. Read a book, my mother tells me, play drums, *do* something—seventeen is too old to lie on your ass. I ask her whether Dad recommended that airport paperback to her, part of their book club or something. The joke being that Dad never reads, only yells. When he comes home, he's shirtless within minutes, angry that he's out of beer. I consider revising their fights and turning them into a sitcom—*Where's the kitchen knife? I stole it to chop off your tongue*—but TV writers would call it over-the-top.

James, my older brother, closes his door on the yelling. Quiet boy genius of our household, he fits perfectly into this worthless, American sitcom: probably off to recite the first hundred digits of Pi, to add bullet points to his manifesto on the rules of comedic structure. If TV were interested in *real* humor, humor that doesn't *avoid* but *confronts* this Maddening, Fucked-Up World (alliterate it, and I'm honing in on a title), our lives would fit perfectly—the type of material producers wouldn't need to rework in post-production, superimposing laughs.

I go into our renovated garage where we keep our superheroes and band instruments, and open Courtney's Instagram page. Every moment not spent telling my friends I've had sex is a moment wasted. I mark the pictures I know read as attractive to most guys. Later, I'll write witty captions and send them to friends. When they meet Courtney, I'll need her to somehow corroborate that we've had sex, without letting on how much I clearly hate it.

I close the garage door, flick my snare drum as I pass, and watch fetish porn for an hour. (If the world were honest, this too would have a place in our sitcom.) I try to imagine Courtney in the various torture videos, but I know her personality too well. If she ever saw my true sexual impulses, she'd burst out laughing. Probably text my friends right there in front of me, *Guess what sick shit Isaac's into! No wonder he's so lousy in bed!*

James knocks, and I close the browser. He comes down the carpeted steps and begins playing the riff to one of our band's songs. Our singer, Brent, has been too busy all summer partying with his college friends to come by, and James has been waiting for practice. He stops strumming when it becomes clear I'm not going to join him on drums.

"James," I say, "we're only a band because Brent can get us into cool college-venues." James and I communicate only through jokes. Now, I'm setting him up with a premise. "What's the point in just you and me practicing?"

James never needs a pause to consider his wording. "If Brent finally drowns in his frat party's jungle juice," he says, scratching the scraggly red hairs on his neck, "you and I might need to rework our sound. I have a feeling the only venues that'll accept us are bowling alleys and nursing homes."

I let out a laugh. “Nursing homes might be an improvement for a cool, college kid like you. You must be sick of playing for losers your age, who live away from home, have friends besides their little brothers, and get laid all the time.”

From the couch I lean towards him, widening my eyebrows, grinning, *mhh mhh*. There’s no joy greater than pretending I might one day coax a laugh from him, but James, though always joking, never laughs.

“The audience in nursing homes *would* be an improvement,” he says. “Have you ever seen Brent pretend to dry hump on the dance floor? At least the old folks have reframed the standard of *cool* beyond the caveman days.”

“You mean we shouldn’t play for college kids or cavemen, because both of those groups fuck?”

James shakes his head. Ever since, when we were younger, I made the mistake of confessing to him the violent fetish that fucks up my head, sex has been a taboo subject for us. But damn it, I’ve been with a woman now, and I need my brother to know that.

“You know,” I say, pushing the subject, “the only reason old folks don’t care about honoring their biological imperative, is they have very little biology left.”

“Well,” James says, “next time Brent comes over, I’ll have to inform his biological imperative about all those condoms and morning-after pills.”

He mutes his floor pedal and inaudibly tunes his guitar. Just like James: if we ever do joke about sex, it’s always sex as something other people have, sex as abstraction, something out-there-in-the-world, disconnected from us. Well it’s *not* disconnected from me.

“Be sure to tell Courtney’s biological imperative, too,” I say. “You know, when she comes over.”

Now, James has no jokes.

“Have I told you about Courtney?” I ask. “She wants to come over soon.”

James, still tuning, barely nods. The prospect of a girl in my life must be too mysterious for him to respond to. He’s probably wondering whether we’ve actually done it yet, whether I’m even able. He must be wondering how his deranged, younger brother could ever move beyond our family’s dysfunctions, what it will mean for me to gain the social title, Man Who Fucks, in a society the two of us have always mocked. Wondering whether his younger brother losing his virginity before he does will open a gulf between us, and we’ll slowly drift apart.

Well, wonder, Brother. Wonder and wait. Courtney and I have done it *three times*.

When Courtney comes over, it’s two weeks into our thing. I lead her around back to the garage, and instead of saying how cool our band equipment is, she rushes over to my life-sized Spiderman statue.

“Woww,” she says. “You didn’t tell me Spidey’s here to keep you safe.”

“Don’t mock Spiderman,” I say. “Save that for my family.”

“Not mocking,” she says, mockingly. “Just didn’t expect such a manly presence in your house.” She pulls out her phone to take selfies beside Spiderman, her fellow glamour queen, tracing a circle around his eyes. Finger-Vs, pointed tongue, she’s perfectly designed the whole act to be the exact antithesis of my sensibility, which, I have to admit, I admire her for.

I'm wearing a moth-eaten sports coat with tweed elbows and shoulder pads which my great uncle wore at his wedding to piss off his father-in-law, a pair of my mother's discarded, black slacks, and a rainbow beanie. This might be the first time Courtney meets my parents, and I want to make clear just how seriously I take the whole thing. Standing in the middle of the room, I make faces at her. If I make her laugh, I'll have disrupted her selfie-show.

James comes in through the house entrance. Courtney looks at him, expecting a greeting, but James stares at the carpet, shuffles right by her.

"Courtney, James," I say.

James beelines to his amp and puts on his guitar, which dangles from his shoulders while he bends down to set up his floor pedal. He fumbles three times before successfully plugging in the cable.

"Courtney's been excited to meet you," I say, and James finally mutters a *hey*.

Earlier, I told Courtney how hilarious my brother is, that he's the funniest guy I know, the only person who fully understands my humor. I knew how awkward James could be around other people, and I didn't want her to think my brother was lame. Now, Courtney's watching him, sizing him up—*really, this guy is funny?*—trying to reconcile the disconnect between my description of him and the unsociable being he is.

I'm still trying and failing to get James to acknowledge my first-ever-girlfriend, when the door opens and my mother appears above us.

"Isaac," she calls.

"Yes, Mother?" I say.

"Oh, Isaac, is this the friend you've been giving drum lessons to?"

“Hi, I’m Courtney.” Courtney.

“Isaac, you should have told me you were having a friend over. Why don’t you invite her into the house?”

“Is Ted wearing a shirt?” I ask.

“Your *father* is sleeping.”

“In your bed?”

“In the living room, Isaac.”

“Then he’s already into the beers,” I say. “And definitely not clothed.”

My mom’s eyes narrow. “Isaac…” She looks me up and down. “Isaac, you know I don’t like when you dress like that.”

Puckered brow, exaggerated clown-frown, I scrunch my features in towards my nose.

“Isaac,” she says. “Please. Don’t wear that silly hat. It’s Summer.”

I place a hand on each side of my rainbow beanie, let them both linger there, then pull it snug over my ears. My fiery red hair, I know, flares out beneath. My mother shakes her head. *Isaac, Isaac*, her internal monologue forever on loop, forever wondering: when will I account for my transgressions?

I’m about to say something witty, but Courtney isn’t watching my performance. She seems genuinely curious about the strange creature my brother is. James is looking around for something, patting his pockets, and Courtney grins, waiting for him to notice that his guitar pick has fallen beside him. She’s wearing a white tank top, and most guys I know would be making grave efforts not to look. But James doesn’t even seem to notice. Isn’t he envious? Later, I’ll have to make a joke about how good she looks naked.

“Isaac,” my mom says. “You don’t have any friends staying the night, do you?” She looks suspiciously at Courtney. “Because your Aunt Stacy’s staying the night. I was hoping you would sleep in here so Aunt Stacy can sleep in your room.”

Courtney is still distracted. James, having located his guitar pick, doesn’t bend down to pick it up, but simply nods to himself, satisfied. A teasing smile grows across Courtney’s face. He’s so uncool, it’s beginning to make me look bad. James, who’s effectively never talked to a girl, looks like the kind of guy who hates sex, *looks* like the kind of guy I *am*. She might be connecting him to me, beginning to understand why our sex is so terrible. I swear, if Courtney tries to make fun of my brother, I’ll lose my shit. It’s time to flex my personality.

“But, Mother,” I say, walking towards her. “Are you sure about Aunt Stacy? Because my friend here, Courtney, *really* wants to sleep in my bed.”

This gets James’s and Courtney’s attention. My mother’s face is a blank, stern plank.

“I mean, Mother”—I come up the steps and pretend to whisper the way school children tell secrets. But it’s not a whisper; everyone hears. “Are you sure Aunt Stacy’s up to the task of *banging* Courtney tonight?”

My mother remains firm, but I’m all big eyes and grins. My good cheer always wears her down. I wait, grinning. She sighs, shakes her head. Too tired for the reckoning I deserve, the reckoning always to come, she adds one more to the ledgers of my disrespect. “Isaac...” she mutters. She leaves.

James’s always expressionless: now he’s expressionless and red. I stride over to my drum set. Courtney’s jaw hangs open and her eyes scan the room. She knows I’m like

this, but now she knows I'm always like this. If I acknowledge what I said it'll ruin the effect. I raise my sticks and signal to James: go get your fucking guitar pick.

When Courtney leaves, James and I play Mario Kart in his room. James lives in a miniature Coke museum, a vintage vending machine by his dresser, a giant *Have a Coke* poster by the door, a shelf stretching his room's perimeter that exhibits the various bottles across the ages, their bottlenecks slimming and fattening with each decade's fads. Seeing my brother through Courtney's eyes today reminded me how weird he is. Case in point: I've never seen him drink a Coke.

Growing up, James and I had few exchanges. He spoke to no one. But I remember, when I first came to the realization that our fucked up life was a comedy (I was thirteen, James sixteen) he observed my young, developing wit. Every time I cracked a joke, his gears seemed to turn. He must have seen that comedy, like math or science, was one more subject his great mind could become proficient in, eventually master. From then on, humor became a line of commentary between us, something that bonded us. It's a common lens through which we can understand the world for all its bullshit.

"Hey, James." I nudge him. "Are you coming to my dance recital?" He knows I'm setting him up for a punch line and declines to respond. According to his comedic rules, I was supposed to cloak my premise in natural conversation. Because I was too obvious, he now refuses to aid in the set up.

"Because," I press on, "Courtney and I did the horizontal Tango."

Though sex is not in our conversational repertoire, I'm hoping, since this is a joke, he might engage. The Super Mario Kart turtle waves his flag, fires his gun, and at

the green light, my brother and I each swerve off the rainbow track and hurl our characters into the black nothingness below.

“You can do better than Tango,” James finally says. “The Hokey Pokey is a funnier dance.”

“James, the Hokey Pokey is a solo dance,” I say. My brother can spend hours constructing and deconstructing jokes, so long as they’re not about anything. But this joke *is* about something. “That doesn’t work for the punch line. Which involves two people. Because it’s *sex*.”

I lean towards him, shoulder him, giving a big, wide grin.

“What are you doing, Isaac? Drive off the track,” he says.

I’m temporarily paralyzed; the CPU Bowser hit me with a sleeper shell. I tell him it’ll be a few seconds before I can kill myself again.

To unlock the secret characters and levels in Mario Kart, you need to play two hundred matches against an opponent. Some of our friends use cheat codes instead, but my brother and I have too much integrity, and so we’ve spent the evening burning through each match as quickly as possible, plunging to our deaths until our three lives are wasted.

“You might be right,” I say, “that a bed doesn’t have enough room to Tango in. Maybe waltz would be better.”

James thinks about this. “Waltzes are the soft-core porn of dances. Perfect for amateurs like yourself.”

This is going amazingly. I thought he’d shy away from a subject he knows is so shameful for me, possibly for both of us.

“Maybe if you ever actually talk to a girl,” I say, “we can work our way up to a conga line. Conga lines are definitely hard core.”

While this should have been witty enough, James doesn’t respond. I pushed it too far. For a while the only sound in the room is the cries of our characters each time we drive them over the edge. Then James asks, “So what’s it like?”

“The Tango? We’ve already established I’m not there yet.”

“No, really,” James says. “Sex.”

I don’t know what to say. This might be the first time in my life he’s breached our unwritten rule that everything must be funny, and asked me a real question. “What’s sex like?”

What’s it like? My older brother is asking me what sex is like? Do I reach over and grab his shirt, tell him I’m on a high, my ego’s enflamed, I’m wild with energy. Tell him I’ve finally been granted this level of personhood, which he has yet to achieve. Fucking Courtney means I’m normal. It means my fucked up psyche doesn’t define me. So if he’s somehow failed to forget all those things I once told him, he can go ahead and forget them now because I’m fucking normal. It doesn’t matter whether the sex is good, that I’m still having vicious thoughts; what matters is that others now know I’m a guy who has sex. Or do I tell him that the sex is terrible. It’s ninety-nine percent anxiety, and Courtney’s bored, disappointed face beneath me would give me even *more* anxiety were I not so busy being bored myself. Do I tell my brother that, during the act, all I want to do is joke with her about how *nothing* this all really is, but for some reason sex is a topic most people take seriously, and I might as well assume she’s one of those people. Tell

him, now that I've had sex, I'm convinced everyone who claims to like it is only faking, that the whole world is lying like *I* am lying.

Instead, I crack my neck, collect my nerves. Drive my character off the track. "It's just like masturbating," I say. "But into someone else's body."

Which satisfies James. He nods, scratches his neck. We play for another hour until my father storms in and yanks the TV plug from the wall.

A few days later, Courtney's making me listen to David Bowie in my brother's room. I'm so bored I want to kill Courtney. For some reason, she's insisted on including James, and he couldn't be any more awkward around her. Right now, he stands before his *Coca-Cola* poster, his back a wall to the scene around him. Courtney's eating popcorn on James's bed. She closes her eyes and plays air guitar along with the music. She knows I hate Bowie, so she's trying to amp up her adoration for him to a comedic degree.

"This is almost the climax!" she cries. "You must be *so* excited, Isaac."

"Funny," I say. "So your joke is that you know I know David Bowie sucks, but you're making me listen anyway?"

She closes her eyes and doubles over into her fist pump, lip-synching along.

"See," I say, "You want to convince me he's passionate, but you have to mock his passion in order to do so. It doesn't work."

"It's true," James says to his Coke poster. "You can't be simultaneously ironic and serious about the same thing."

Courtney pauses her act, peers up at him from the bed. I guess the only way he can talk to her is if he's explaining how comedy works.

“Is that right, James?” she asks in a teasing voice.

“It’s insincere irony,” James says. “Makes for bad humor.”

Courtney giggles, delighted by his weirdness. She takes a handful of popcorn.

“Tell me a funny joke, James.”

“That’s not even how it works, Courtney,” I say. “Stop being so boring.”

“Five seconds!” she says. “This is almost the climax!”

I close the laptop and the music shuts off.

“Gah!” she cries, horrified. But even her frustration is exaggerated, ironic.

“Seriously, Courtney,” I say. “You need to decide whether something’s serious or funny. You can’t decide, so this is neither.”

“It’s hard to be *ever* serious around you. You’re facetious about everything.” She leans back with her popcorn. “Hey James, are you as dead-set on stopping girls from climaxing as Isaac here?”

My stomach knots. James turns and leaves.

“Look at that,” I say, trying to stay calm. “You bored my brother right out of his room.”

“Cool guy like your brother?” she says. “He doesn’t need his room. Probably off to bang bitches right now.” She gives me a dumb grin. “More than you can say.”

I lock eyes with her, and she answers with the same grin. Which dwindles when I take a step closer. I want to take her by the throat, pull her close. I can imagine how her lips would recede, her eyes go shallow. Harrowed, serious—she’d look good that way. I’d almost like her.

“Leave the jokes to me,” I say, a hushed growl. “And don’t speak about my brother.”

She inspects me, her face a question mark. “Oh my god,” she says. And then bursts our laughing. “*That’s* your angry face?” She throws a piece of popcorn at my forehead, leans back on the bed. “How adorable.” She scrolls through her phone.

I watch the clock, barely able to breathe, until it’s time for her to leave.

Sex is intolerable when you need to defecate beforehand but hold it in. At first the sex was just bad, but lately, I can’t let her touch me without my stomach violently rebelling. Courtney’s bathroom is only feet away from the kitchen table where her mom sits. The bathroom’s white tiles and thin walls have the resounding acoustics of an auditorium, and if I did what I need to do, Courtney and her mother would be audience to my awful performance. I’ll need to remember not to eat so much on the days I see Courtney.

I lie in agony on Courtney’s bed while she scrolls through Instagram, ignoring me. She probably thinks I’m being distant to her because the sex was so bad, and so she’s returning what she perceives as the cold shoulder.

I may be able to hold my bowels, but I can’t hold my tears. My eyes begin to water, and Courtney must see, because she rolls towards me.

“Hey,” she says, wiping the moisture from my eyes. “Don’t be sad. It’ll get better.”

She must be mistaking my anal agony for shame at my inadequate performance in bed. This misunderstanding seems to have warmed her a bit. She props herself up on her elbows and looks playfully down at me.

“So what’s up with your brother?” she asks.

“James?”

“He’s so quiet all the time. What is he always thinking about?”

She’s probably setting herself up to mock my brother again, but I’m in too much pain to diffuse this. “Probably noticing the humor in things,” I say.

“You know, when you describe how funny he is, it’s like you’re describing someone else. Someone completely different.” She squints past me, contemplating. “I wonder what kinds of things he notices,” she says.

Her fixation on my brother is driving me insane. Is it all that purported wit his aloofness conceals that she finds so endlessly entertaining? I should probably try to reframe Courtney’s understanding of him, but my mind refuses to cooperate. It’s busy brainstorming funny ways to tell James about having sex while my bowels were on fire, and I can’t control my thoughts.

But why do I need to control my thoughts? It’s not like I need a shrink to tell me what I already know. Why worry about controlling my thoughts as long as no one sees them? My mind may be mad at me, but let it stay mad: my secrets stay inside. A thought is nothing. If the mob conceals corpses in wet cement, never to be discovered, a thought is less than that—it’s vapor, nothing. If it’s in your head and you don’t like it, ignore it. No one will know it exists.

I know this because it’s the first thing James ever taught me. It was when I was twelve, and the violent, uncontrollable fantasies first began to stir in me. While my adolescent friends confided new feelings about girls in our class, teachers in skirts,

celebrities on magazines, my budding sexuality shared none of this. Instead, images of imprisonment filled my mind: rows and rows of victims, chained in a basement, starving. Boys, girls, it didn't matter; they could be my classmates or fictional creations, as long as they were at my mercy. I couldn't understand, by what will did I oppress them? I never summoned these visions; *they* came to me. *Their* suffering imprisoned *me*.

Afraid, I went to James to confess. This was in our pre-joking lives, before comedy opened a valve for us to communicate. It was one of the only conversations we'd ever had, the first real moment I ever remember sharing. I trembled. He didn't bend down to comfort me, didn't place a hand on my shoulder, didn't look me in the eye. But he spoke to me. It was the closest I'd ever felt to him. "Isaac," he said. "If you hadn't told me your thoughts, they wouldn't be real." And in the way he calmly turned to leave, his silence comforted me, assured me: *already forgotten*.

I'm brooding on all this while James and I sit in the kitchen. It's like, when I showed him what I was made of, I wanted his judgment. Now he knows what I am, but to me my brother's mind is still a black box. My mother's trying to get me to eat—holding up apples, cold cuts, lox—but I'm seeing Courtney later. If my stomach's completely empty, my bowels won't be able to act up. *Two days* and only half an avocado, my mother chastises, she *knows* what I've eaten so I shouldn't tell her otherwise. But I feel better since I stopped eating, anyway. The body's disgusting; why shouldn't I deny it? The mind is better off without. Half an avocado? James asks whether I'm finally following my dreams, becoming a supermodel, and I say my only dream is to look my best for you, Brother. I know he still remembers what I told him; it must still worry him sometimes.

I make a joke about a guy in the news who lured victims into his basement, kept them for torture, and I watch James for a reaction: nothing. He chews his food, his eyes a goddamn blank. Maybe he does think only genius thoughts: equations, chemicals, geometries, grids.

Listen, I say to him. Try to make some jokes tonight. His chewing slows. I tell him he's been weirding Courtney out with his silence; she's been asking about him. Harsh, I know, but tonight's the night Courtney meets all my friends, and I want it to go well. I want her to think that I'm cool. I don't say this, only want it. Want to dip my finger in the content of my brother's mind, see what colors it's made of. Want Courtney to know how funny he and I can be. He seems only vaguely hurt, my brother, but it's hard to tell with him. He lowers his head, nods. He'll try to tell more jokes.

We're at Denny's, and I'm on fire, cracking jokes left and right. To my friends I'm a man with a woman and to my woman I'm a man with friends. It's James, Courtney and me, then our bassist, Greg, with his knobby knees, cargo shorts, and bright blue eyes, looking like a five-year-old drew him, and his girlfriend, Alice, yellow dress and all cheer. I sometimes call Alice Greg's sister and watch Greg get crabby about it, too spineless to defend himself. That *brother/sister* isn't even a cutting insult makes it all the funnier when Greg crosses his arms and slouches into his seat. James, to his credit, has tried a few times to get in on the jokes, his mouth opening, faltering, but someone always cuts him off.

When the waiter comes to our table, I wonder how I can avoid ordering food without calling attention to myself. I had to endure two days of my mother's chiding, but

my stomach finally feels empty. Our last few dates have been tense, but if tonight goes well, if Courtney wants me to go home with her again, who knows—maybe I can even learn to like sex with her, maybe I just need more time.

The waiter comes to me, and I try to subtly slip in an order of grapes.

“Grapes, Sir?”

“Grapes?” James asks. “Why aren’t you eating lately?”

I shake my head at James; this isn’t what I meant by talk more.

“Sir,” the waiter says, “we don’t have—”

I cut him off. “Do they ask you to call patrons *Sir*?”

“Well, Sir—”

“Because that seems above your pay grade here.”

Courtney gives me a dirty look. She’s worked in the service industry, but I want to prove to her that, even when chiding an overworked waiter, I’m still fucking funny.

“We don’t have grapes, Sir,” the waiter says, emphasis on *Sir*. “We have a fruit salad if you like.”

“What’s wrong, Isaac?” James asks. “Are you trying to be a supermodel?”

Courtney laughs—I think genuine, this time—and I shoot James a look.

Recycling jokes: I thought he was better than that. I tell the waiter the fruit salad is fine, and as he scribbles in his notepad, I add: “But can *you* eat all the ingredients that aren’t grapes, Good Gentleman Sir?”

Courtney almost snorts 7-Up out her nose, covers her face with a napkin. But I’m losing my sense of things. I can’t tell if my humor has won her over, or if her snort conveys shock, disapproval.

Later, Brent, our college singer, pops in. Which is a rarity. He's usually too cool to spend his time with a bunch of high-schoolers, so he must be really excited to welcome me into the club of sexually active males. He slaps James's back; James rocks forward but doesn't respond. "Hehehe, James!" Brent says, then walks over to Courtney and me.

"My lord!" Brent says. "You must be Courtney." From behind, he puts his arms around our chairs, leaning in, his face both above us and between us. "I Hear you finally made a *man* of our man here."

This unsettles Courtney. She shrugs Brent's arm off her shoulder, but Brent, the sex appeal of our band, is used to getting away with lewd comments; he replaces his hand. His Cheshire-Cat grin moves between her and me. Courtney simply freezes, hoping that he'll leave. Even if she hates him, he has a kind of power over her that I've never experienced. We're like small, wild animals he holds; he won't let us go until he gets what he wants. Towering above us, he waits for me to respond with a joke about our new sex life.

"What can I say, Brent," I finally respond. "I'm only with her for you." I put my hand on Courtney's leg, hoping to invite her in on the joke, and she squirms away. "I couldn't stand the thought of the Great Brent LaBrada being in a band with a bunch of virgins."

Brent guffaws, slaps my back. Courtney makes a show of crumpling her napkin, dropping it on the table. "Well now that I've served *that* role for your band..." She makes a gesture as if to leave, which I hope others interpret as a joke.

"You're on *fire*, Isaac," Brent howls. "Positively *glowing*. Whatever you're doing, Courtney, to stroke his, er, *ego*"—Brent mimes just what he means—"Keep it up."

For a moment I can't tell who is and isn't laughing. I imagine they're all watching Courtney recoil from the very *thought* of our sex. In fact, I'm *certain*: they are practically viewing the scenes of our strange and disappointing sex life replaying in Courtney's eyes. The whole table silent, awkward, Alice questioning my manhood, the other patrons pausing their meals to turn, watch as Greg raises his knife and fork above his head, about to bang them together and publically declare that I'm a fraud, that I'm *not* the kind of guy who has normal sex and that's *not* the reason I'm with Courtney.

But when I snap out of it, Brent is joking about something else. Greg and James listen to him; Alice and Courtney form a side conversation. They don't know. They don't know.

Chilidogs, country-fried steak, sausage links and eggs arrive for everyone else. Before me, five grapes squat on a mini-plate. Brent eats a Grand Slamburger, a travesty of an invention: an entire breakfast of hash browns, a fried egg, and bacon, all slopped on top of a double-decker burger. He won't stop talking about it, lifting the bun, showing the disgusting insides to anyone who'll look. Courtney mildly grimaces away; everyone else feasts with their eyes. He's trying to make a legend of himself—*the time Brent ordered a Grand Slamburger*, a tale he'll tell and retell. I hate him. Hate his masculine presence. I hate his appetites for food and sex—regular, healthy sex. I hate that he can stride in and overpower the dynamic I have with Courtney, bending us to his will.

His mouth exaggeratedly open, he begins to make a show of chewing the damn slop-heap. There's Brent for you: all charisma, zero wit.

“Hey, Brent,” I say, putting on my best joke voice.

He leans forward, his elbows on the table. “What’s up, Isaac?” His wide, open grin is somehow unaffected by his continuous chewing.

“Brent, that shit is sooo disgusting,” I say, all cheer.

He furrows his brows, not sure whether to take offence.

“Brent, that burger in your mouth has got to be the grossest thing I’ve ever seen. Grosser than death, Brent.” A few tentative chuckles scatter around me, and I amp my joke voice up to eleven. “In fact, I’d rather watch a corpse eat a corpse than watch you invite that fat, bloody carcass into your mouth.”

Greg is beginning to laugh harder. Brent seems to want to take offence but, unable to reconcile the mean words with my mirthful tone, he wears the same face all dumb guys wear when trying to mask their confusion with a smile.

“It’s so gross, Brent, that I’d like to sew your mouth shut.” I hear more laughter and I click into gear. “Better yet, Brent, *you* close your mouth.” I get up and cross over to him. He doesn’t know how to respond, burger still in his hands, in front of his face. I sling my right arm around his shoulder, jolly as ever. “Brent, close your mouth, or”—with my free hand I reach for his steak knife, hold it up—“I’ll take this blade, incise a nice, red gash. *Here*”—my right fist a ball, I give his hard belly a soft, friendly pound. “I’ll reach inside you, Brent, and squeeze that cute, little pouch of a stomach until I hear a splashy pop. Brent, I want to spill that goddamn meat-slop over your intestines, just so we never have to watch you eat again.”

Brent frowns, and I feel wild with energy. Greg I especially struck a chord in; he cackles uncontrollably next to us. He’s too wrapped up in my performance to notice that

I've genuinely perturbed Brent, who looks down at his burger, then at his stomach, and lowers the meat away from his face.

I feel like I just slayed a great beast with my wit alone. I look over for Courtney's reaction, but she and my brother didn't witness my feat at all. Instead, they talk inaudibly to one another, lost in their own, little world. I watch Courtney bite her lower lip as she listens, watch my brother, eyes down at his plate, mutter some joke, watch Courtney toss her head back with delight. I can practically hear my own words looping in my brother's head—*talk to Courtney, make jokes to Courtney, try to impress Courtney*—but I want to scream, Not like this, you fool, don't you see what's happening? The whole table goes silent when Courtney, leaning ever closer, places a gentle hand on my brother's chest. Alice raises a hand to shade her view; Greg doesn't even pretend to avert his eyes.

That night, when I finally fall asleep, I relive this all in dream. The internal logic of the moment is so surreal, so sufficiently absurd, there's very little for my subconscious to warp. Courtney's face turns red; she freezes up, her hand stuck against my brother's chest; James shakes his head—this isn't what he wanted. Brent begins to smile. He *thought* he should hate me, but now he's witnessed my humiliation and his gut response is certain: I'm loathsome.

The dream's only departure from reality occurs right before Courtney touches my brother, her eyes already telling us exactly what she wants. At this moment, Alice drifts over, leans bodily over Brent, and whispers in my ear. "Don't think we're afraid of you," she says. "It's *we* who are out to torture *you*."

The next evening, James and I select the same Mario Kart characters on the same Rainbow Road. We've unlocked all the extras, but only to have them. None are on par with the classics. My brother wears his *Coke and a Smile* shirt, and next to him is a glass of orange juice.

My stomach is all acid. The bowl of mango slices by my feet goes untouched. I never realized how disgusting eating is until I met Courtney. Neanderthals can feed flesh with flesh, foreign meat absorbed into their own. I'd rather starve than feel food become body, become sweating, copulating body. Let my stomach rupture; I want no part.

My phone vibrates: Courtney. She's been calling all day. I silence it.

"Does Courtney not see that her awful jokes earned her more than a Time Out?"

James asks.

I say nothing.

"Or," he tries again, testing another premise, "does she think this is just some ultimatum between you and David Bowie."

"Go fuck her for me." I say. "She'll leave me alone."

James shuffles uncomfortably. Not because of the accusation, but because my anger is so naked. I'm supposed to dress it up for him.

We play on. James hurls a green shell and it hits one of the CPUs instead of me. Going easy on me must be his way of showing a little empathy.

"Did she..." James falters. Then, instead of searching for another joke, he clears his throat, seems to change gears. "What really happened between you and Courtney?"

This is the second honest question my brother's ever asked, both in the same week, and I know I should take it seriously. I crack my neck. "Wasn't for me."

James swallows. “Maybe if she did the Tang—“

“I would have liked her better locked up in our basement, pleading for mercy.”

James’s character drifts off the track; his hand must have frozen.

“I could get behind our relationship if she were chained to a pipe, starving, naked, shivering. If, over time, I could see her eyes harden into small, conniving shells. A greedy little animal: filthy, hateful, desperate to please.”

I’m aware that none of this is exactly funny. James appears to have malfunctioned, choked up at my outburst.

“But as things were,” I say, “while Courtney played the role of normal, fucking girl, and I of normal, fucking guy? Every moment with her I felt like I was pulling my intestines out of my stomach, stuffing them inside of her.”

Pouring out these truths may have broken our silent pact—I should have let him forget—but I no longer care. He can take it how he wishes; I’m done worrying.

“If you did lock her up,” James finally says, “do you think Courtney would take torture selfies?”

I almost drop my controller. What mechanism misfired in him? All these years I’ve hid these truths about myself, and *this* is all he feels? The thing is, I could handle James accidentally stealing my girlfriend, could handle his disinterest in my tortured—*torturing*—fantasies. I could even handle that he made a joke about it all. But for that joke to be *bad*?

I pause the game. What made him think his tired, comedic patterns were adequately inventive, an alchemy high enough to transform what I’m saying? I suddenly wonder if he’s ever found any of it *truly* funny—the scornful family dinners, our father’s

beastly prowling, our mother's cowardice. Have our years of jokes been his way of *seeing* these things for what they are? Or is it all just a formula to him, into which any input functions the same.

He turns to me. This might be the first time I've looked my brother in the eyes. His tiny pupils quiver, struggling to stay level, to resist the urge to dart down to my cheek. He forces a grin, and I see why he never smiles. Comedy might have been our thing, my brother and me, but not an ounce of humor resides behind his eyes. Every joke I've ever told him was told to a series of codes and numbers. There's barely a person there. I'd slapped him but I'd be slapping a machine. He wouldn't understand why it hurt.

Confessions During the Plague

Soon after we hear reports that a plague is spreading through parts of the country, I see my father, Old Lee, out in the schoolyard, kneeling over a dead rat. He's outside my history class window and I ask our teacher if I can be excused. When the two of us are alone on the asphalt, I stand next to him but don't speak. The rat lies in a pool of its own blood, stiffened on its side with one eye wide.

After a while, Lee closes his eyes, mutters a prayer, and genuflects above its carcass. "Its dead eye angles up to the Heaven," he says. "That portends dark days."

Such Gothic imagery would normally make me laugh, but he speaks with such force. I don't think I've ever seen him so severe. I've been told he always used to be this way back when he was town preacher, before I was born. People tell legends about how he was back then: striding behind the pulpit, fist raised above his robes, expounding on the virtuous and the condemned, on covenants and those who break them. I didn't know him then, and I barely know him now. Today, he wears faded overalls and a buttoned shirt, a school administrator. He's a soft-spoken, introspective old man.

Kneeling is a struggle for him, and he tries to stand up. I ask if he needs a hand. “No, stay back, Jake,” he says, and tries again. But he wavers, falls forward. His hands land in the rat blood.

“I’m so sorry,” I begin, not knowing what else to say, but he shakes his head. With great effort, he heaves himself off his knees, rises above me.

“Don’t worry about it, Son,” he says. This should be monumental, my father making contact with contagious blood, and *still* we have nothing to say. I feel dumb, incomplete.

He raises his hands, studies them against the sky, lowers them. “I didn’t have much time left in this world anyway.” He winks down at me. “If this rat came to infect us, let it do its work on old farts like me.”

He’s about to leave, but lingers there once more. Once more, I see in his face the traces of the severity I’d only heard about. “Look after your mother,” he says, and lumbers away, off to make a school-wide announcement—*it’s spread to us*.

Sure enough, Old Lee is the first person in our town taken by the plague. He dies within two weeks, and our whole town is devastated that he, the most beloved man in our community, should be the first to go. I don’t tell anyone that I was there when he got infected. I’m overtaken by an urge to be alone. I bring a book to his funeral so I don’t have to speak to anyone, but before the service, our Science teacher, Greg, catches me sitting on the steps outside.

“Jake,” he says, putting his hand on my shoulder. “How are you pulling through?”

I answer with a nod.

Greg's black suit looks odd on him, too wide for his tall, gangly figure. Usually he wears T-Shirts or sweaters, what you'd expect from a high school teacher who wants to be called Greg. Hunching down towards me now, the shoulder pads only exaggerate his bad posture. He talks about about how hard this must be for me, how great a man Old Lee was, how I'll have to look after my mother now—all the stuff you're supposed to say to a kid whose father was actually around.

Then Greg pauses, seems to really consider. "You know, Jake. I've got to be honest," he says with a nervous smile. "I'm worried. Your father was a real pillar of the community. Who'll keep us together now?"

I don't know, Greg. Maybe... Greg? I have to suppress a laugh at the thought of saying this.

"You know what was great about Old Lee?" Greg asks. "Even in times of tragedy, he never lost his sense of humor." This is true about my father. In a time like this, his smile would be tender, gentle. Unlike Greg's smile right now, which is simply nervous, out of place. "How do you do that? Stay so light, so good-humored, even when everything around you is tragic?"

I start to say that it probably comes with wisdom, that I don't think cracking jokes is the end in itself, but Greg interrupts me.

"Positivity." He rambles on about how people need a positive environment in order to thrive. "If a plague is coming, someone's going to have to step up. Now that Lee's gone, someone else needs to pull us together. Keep things positive."

Do you imagine yourself fulfilling that role, Greg? I'm tempted to ask. But I don't think he'd know I'm teasing him. He might even roll up his sleeves and look contemplatively off, dazzled by the distant image of himself, the *New Lee*.

"I really think," Greg says, "that you could be a positive pillar for people, Jake. It's in your blood."

Inside, before Old Lee's casket is a large portrait of him preaching. He's so young in it. Just like the legends I've heard about him, his face terrifying, his eyes full of rigor, as if no ounce of imperfection would ever escape him. Beneath the portrait, his old, silver cross dangles from its chain. I can barely see it, but I remember the minimal rendering of Christ etched into the silver.

Everyone who speaks during the service tells Old Lee's story with the same reverence: how he went from minister to local hero. After his family (his first family, nobody needs to specify—his daughter, son-in-law, and grandchild) all died in a car crash, he was too overcome by grief to fulfill his duties to the church. So he hung up his clerical robes and dedicated the latter half of his life to our school. He assumed a minor, administrative role, rejecting all offers for raises and promotions, but he soon became known among the kids as a wise elder, a father to everyone. Our town has one school for Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade, and kids of all ages would bring disputes before him, accepting whatever judgment he passed. In response to most of what's said, my mother quietly nods along, murmurs inaudibly, but she neither cries nor gives a eulogy.

I don't know if I'm more sick of the story or of the people who tell it. Even as these people talk about how selfless Old Lee was, most of them seem to be in competition with one another, each speaker trying to one-up the last, embellishing on

their relationship with him, telling anecdotes that get more and more personal. Even with the language they use to describe him, they try to out do one another. Soon, their phrases become ridiculous: *He pieced together his broken heart and set it before the community; He arbitrated disputes like our sad, local Moses.*

The one hitch in his life, his second marriage and its result, me, is often acknowledged, but only briefly. It's as if shining too much of a spotlight on my mom and me would be inappropriate. My mom has a fragile pride about her marriage, but people know our family was an afterthought of Lee's. More than they judge him for distancing himself from us, our town seems to blame my mother and me for being Lee's burden, for causing this single dent in his otherwise spotless reputation. I've heard the narratives that go around—*If only that awful, younger woman didn't prey on him in his time of weakness; how could she expect him to invest in a new family so soon after the loss of his real one?* My parents never formally divorced; my mother and I simply started seeing him less and less. It's difficult for me to pinpoint when I began to see him more at school than I did at home, but I was very young when I realized he was no more my father than he was any other student's.

After the service, I want to find a place to sit on my own, but before I'm able to leave my mother, Sara and her father approach us. As I'd have guessed, my mother begins to fire off her thoughts about the service in a rapid succession, and Sara's father nods along, occasionally mustering a laugh in agreement.

Sara turns to me, her red hair framing a smirk and raised eyebrows, mocking them. Sara and I are basically friends by default. Her mom passed before Sara could form coherent memories, and after Old Lee drifted away from us, her father started being

really kind to my mother. We're something like a hybrid family, but Sara and I both agree, the less we know about our parents' relationship, the better. They're weird when they're together.

"It feels like we all kind of lost a father," Sara says.

"It's hard to say *what* it is I feel I've lost," I say. "I mostly just don't want anyone to ask me about it."

Sara considers this. "It's hard to imagine. Having a father die who you never really knew. Must be sort of like if you heard that God died, but then nothing much changed."

Talking to Sara is always like this. She finds the messages most people conceal and gives them to you directly. It's like talking to someone in a dream.

"Well," I say. "What about your dad? Our parents seem to think the four of us are some sort of family."

"Sure, Jake. You should *totally* use my dad as a role model." We both look over. Her dad looks down at his plate but doesn't eat, and it's no longer clear whether he hears my mom's words. "As if you're not quiet and mousy enough."

"I can learn from his negative example," I say, "and get out of bad conversations." I hold my book to her face and make a move to leave.

"So that's it? All you ever want to do is read on your own?"

I nod. "Better than staying around these immature people."

"Sure, reading at a funeral is *much* more mature. Hope that book's better than our thoughts about Old Lee," she says, and walks off before I can respond. For the rest of the funeral I stand silently seething next to my mom.

Soon after Lee's funeral, ours and the neighboring towns go on lockdown. Everyone is forced into quarantine as a plague sweeps across the nation. As my mother and I prepare to leave home, I make the mistake of watching her gather the objects she considers meaningful. "Oh, Dear," she says, after scrambling around for any relic from her marriage, "your father's tool box." She lugs it out from the cabinet. "He used to be so amazing with handiwork." She takes out an iron screwdriver, caresses it longingly. A real Spartan relationship, my parents must have had.

Our school is transformed into a compound; the gymnasium, auditorium and larger classrooms are emptied of seats and supplied with military bunk beds. Government security assigns my mother and me to the gymnasium, and the school's iron gates close. With two hundred steel bunks packed in perfect rows, it feels like we're in a massive cell. Within days, toilets clog and long lines form outside the two bathrooms. No one's comfortable here.

Most families have lived in this town for decades, but close quarters and a national threat have exposed how little community we've formed. Neighbors are afraid to speak, to share their feelings. Are these the same people who spoke at Old Lee's funeral, who praised selflessness, community, openness? Here, where we should be sharing, families hoard what they have and keep greedy tabs on their neighbors' possessions. Instead of giving words of kindness, they give askance looks, as if any one of us might be a thief.

I want out, away from their pettiness. Sara and her father are assigned to bunks several rows over from us. If this is what a plague is like, I tell her, I'd rather bare it on my own. *Yes, yes, you told me*, she shrugs.

In the mornings, security lets us out to wander the asphalt schoolyard. Outside the iron gates I sometimes see rats bare their teeth, sniffing blindly around. Families crowd the basketball courts, old people lean against tetherball poles, and most of my classmates sulk around. The younger children, however, run amok. With Old Lee gone, it's become apparent how few adults here have authority over them. It doesn't matter the setting, children can dance on the sharp concrete of industry rubble, scale the stone walls of ancient ruins, play tag among rusted machinery. Here in the crowded schoolyard, they act as if each depressed family is merely an obstacle for them to run between, hide behind.

A few days in, while I'm reading outside, Sara runs over to me. Oddly cheery in her pink, long-sleeve shirt, she's out of place against the background of bored, miserable people. How has she kept up appearances so well? They tell us we'll be able to access showers within a week, but somehow Sara's red hair looks combed and shampooed, flowing down her back. Her hair contrasts with a red hue in the sky, which I only just now notice.

"Still want to get out of here?" Sara asks. "A place to be alone?" Usually, when she wants me to do something, she grabs my hand and leads the way. Now, she lightly kicks my shins, tells me to hurry.

Entering the elementary kid's building, she tells me to cover my nose with my shirt. All the halls and unused rooms are being fumigated for rats, and we're not allowed inside. She takes me up to the fourth floor, and pulls back a row of old lockers, the empty compartments creaking and swinging open. Behind is the dusty outline of a door.

Is this what she's been doing in her spare time—searching the halls for secret rooms? I ask how she found this but all she says is "Look".

She swings the door open, and I follow her in. The space inside is stuffy and hot, almost worse than the fumigation in the halls. A few cleaning supplies fill the shelves, but this is more than just a supply closet: posters cover the walls; pages and postcards are strewn across a desk. There is even a sink and old cot in the corner. “Is this an old Janitor’s closet?” I ask.

“Figure it out for yourself,” she says. She’s already flinging open desk drawers, pulling out old collectables and souvenirs—key chains, miniatures, flattened pennies with unrecognizable emblems.

The cot in the corner is bare metal, so low to the ground I can’t imagine anyone sleeping on it. The sink drips. This must be where Sara washed her hair. “Is this—” I ask. “Did someone use to live here?”

“Nice, Nerd! You’re beginning to get it,” she laughs. “Look at these posters.” Dead Kennedys, Marilyn Monroe, *Scarface*, she points each of them out. “Clearly a *man* lived here.”

Behind the Dead Kennedys poster, a cockroach creeps forward. It’s above the desk, a foot from Sara’s forearm, but she doesn’t react. I tell her to look out, we don’t know whether insects carry the disease, but she mimics my voice and continues to hunt through this mystery person’s possessions. She shows me an old bible and some scattered postcards. She asks if I can imagine someone lying here, holding these postcards at night, dreaming of palm trees, white sand beaches, crystal lakes, but I can’t take my eyes off the cockroach. Its antennae wriggle, probing the air.

Sara waves her hand in my face. “Look.” She holds up a photo album. “You agree that a man must have lived here. But do you want to know *which* man lived here?”

She opens the photo album and I'm shocked. Inside are photos of Old Lee and his family. His old family, that is.

"You mean," I stammer. "*This* was my father's place?"

"That's right," Sara says. "You said he used to spend nights here when you were little."

"I always assumed that was just a line he fed my mom. You mean to tell me, this is where my father lived all those years?" I look around, taking it all in. "You mean, Old Lee was a Dead Kennedys fan?"

Sara laughs. "Seems like he was a fan of a *lot* of things. Marilyn Monroe on the wall, his family photos in a closed drawer," she says.

The small TV in the corner, the stacks of magazines, all form a side of Old Lee I'd never imagined. "This all feels impossible," I say.

"It gets better," Sara says. "You want to know one other secret interest you didn't know Old Lee had?" She jerks back the shelf, causing a few cleaning supplies to teeter and fall to the floor. In the wall behind the shelf is a four-by-four hatch. Sara removes the covering, and from this secret space she wheels out a motorbike. It barely comes up to Sara's waist and the red paint is peeling off, but still it's the most beautiful thing I've seen.

"No," I say. "No way Old Lee rode a motorbike."

"Clearly," Sara says, "you're unable to admit that Old Lee was a bad ass, right up to the end."

I try to imagine it—Old Lee racing down highways, through Jefferson State Park, off through the forest roads and up into the hills.

But, apparently, Sara has no interest in watching me gawk. She drops the old machine before my feet. “I found it, you fix it,” she says. “There’s cans of fuel back here and everything—he must have been riding it up until his death. Figure out why the engine won’t start.”

“What?” I ask. “You want to use it? Where do you even plan to ride it?”

“Of course I want to use it.” Sara’s eyes are wild with excitement. “This motorcycle is our ticket out of here.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “Out of the compound? Where would we go?”

“*Where would we go?*” she mimics. “All you’ve been talking about since this began is how badly you want out. Well, here’s your opportunity. Are you just going to chicken out?”

“It’s just—what about our families?”

“Right,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I know how much you love being there for your mom.”

“Well, we can’t just leave, Sara.”

“I’m not saying we should run away forever. But this is a place of refuge. We can do whatever we want in here, and with this motorbike, we can get away, take trips to the forest, the state park. We can go anywhere; there won’t be a soul.”

I consider this. It’s wildly tempting.

“All you want to do is isolate yourself anyway, Nerd. Just thank Old Lee for leaving his stuff behind so you can fulfill your desires.”

Suddenly, this all feels inappropriate. I take a step back. “I don’t know, Sara. We shouldn’t use a dead man’s things like that. This all belongs to my father.”

Sara steps closer and evaluates me. Then, swiftly, she raises a broomstick over her head. I back off, thinking it's a threat, but instead she whacks the metal cot, breaking the broomstick in half. She flips open the old bible, rips out a page, folds it into a triangle, and sharpies a large "S" across its dilapidated text. In a series of fell moves, she pierces the page with the broomstick's splintered end and posts her makeshift flag in the frame of the cot. It stands tall above us, solid and unmoving in the stagnant air. I want it to look stupid—she's being so ridiculous, dramatic—but her *S* flag is surprisingly well crafted.

"It's not his place anymore, *or* yours," she says. She climbs the cot to stand next to her flag, probably thinking she looks majestic. Which, irritatingly, she kind of does. "It's *mine*."

I feel nauseated. I think of the crowds, the plague-infested sky outside.

"You can go play by the rules out there," she says. "Don't come back here unless it's to fix my motorcycle."

"When the plague broke out across Europe in 1347," Greg the Science teacher tells us, "the stench washed over entire cities."

Classes resumed earlier this week. Our principal spoke through the gymnasium loud speaker and assured us that life would go on as usual. As if we can keep up appearances when beyond the window our families wander like ghosts among the asphalt basketball courts.

"Decomposing bodies produce a powerful stench," Greg continues. Then he grins. "Lavender," he says, pausing in case there's a laugh. "Most reports say plague-stench is a

lot like lavender. Real sweet and pleasant.” Apparently it will take more than a plague for Greg to revise his sense of humor.

Sara sits beside me. Rather than flowing down her back, her red hair now covers the right side of her face. That’s her way of blocking me out.

“Symptoms include blackened skin and boils,” Greg continues. “If you look in your handouts, you’ll see that Daniel Defoe also notes muscle contractions. Kind of like a Swedish massage.” Greg grins again. “In their plague-ridden muscles, patients report intense relaxation.” I guess these are the jokes to expect from a high school teacher called Greg. I make a note to read Defoe on my own. But I shouldn’t judge Greg too harshly. It’s kind of nice that he’s trying out the whole *humor in a time of tragedy* thing, probably figures there’s something heroic in it. Which might be true, for some people. Until the end, my father, Old Lee, kept his humor. Pain can’t always be articulated, and my father’s jokes were always sensitive to that fact. Greg, however, doesn’t look like he could confront pain if his own throat was seized by relaxing, lavender death.

Now he’s telling us the difference between bubonic and pneumonic plagues. He hasn’t mastered the transition from *I’m your pal* jokes to serious lessons. He still wears the same grin. The plague that’s currently affecting our country is probably bubonic, Greg guesses. He can’t be sure, but the warnings of boils and gangrene sound a lot to him like buboes. But to reiterate: Greg doesn’t know.

Done listening, I begin to take my own notes. Everywhere the air is like a swamp, hot and heavy. Out the window, beyond the asphalt and clusters of silent families, a red sky bellies over us—swollen and tumid, as if it too has been infected. We wait for reports on the radio, but they’re as measly with information as they are with our rations. When

everyone's caged, it's like the 50's again, where the only truth is what they feed through our TVs and radios.

I'm writing this down—I've learned to look at teachers while taking my own notes—when all of a sudden my pen is sliding across a different grain of paper. Sara's shoved a note under my hand. It's a card made from construction paper. On the front, in giant block letters, she's written, "Sara's Lair." Does she want me to think of her as a five-year-old? To make matters worse, beneath it she's drawn a skull and crossbones.

I open the card. On one side she's sharpied a note on the construction paper, and on the other she's taped a page ripped from what must be the motorbike's instruction manual. "If you want entrance, then you need to bring an offering." *Offering* is underlined, and from it she's drawn an arrow to the instruction manual. The depictions of wires and bolts are out of context, but clearly a section of the motor. With her sharpie Sara's circled a Philips screwdriver above the bolts and written: "Your offering."

I whisper, "You want me to take one of my mother's tools?" But her hands are folded neatly on the desk and she sits posture-perfect and attentive like a kindergartner trying to impress the teacher.

When class ends, Sara slips out the door ahead of everyone else. No doubt she's skipping through the hordes of families, off to her hide out. I hate that she has this power. As much as I tell myself *Sara's Lair* is not hers at all and I don't want any part of it, still the envy creeps up on me. I imagine her paper flag, staked in Old Lee's closet—the only private place in this compound, and she alone has claimed it.

We have a few hours out in the schoolyard before curfew. They usher us in long before sunset, so I never get to see how the oranges over the horizon interact with our newly-red sky. I stop by the library on the way out for Defoe's book on the Black Death and go outside. I've found a place behind a few abandoned bungalows that's usually less crowded. It's an atrocious space where they hide the industrial ventilators and sewage vents. Weeds poke out of the cracked asphalt, and wild brush and poison ivy encroach from the other side of the chain-link fence. But the sounds of screaming children are a little farther off, and I can usually focus on my book.

At night, packed into the gymnasium, I continue to read on my top bunk. All around us people mutter, whispering secrets as they get ready for bed. My mother fits right into this repressive environment. Ever since my father left us, she talks to me nonstop, but has yet to utter a meaningful word. I lie in my bunk reading while she thinks out loud—*They've changed the sheets for us again, isn't that nice; That's good that high school classes have started up again, some normalcy will be good.* I read through anyway, through the hushed panic that perpetually echoes around us.

In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, I read about bodies piled each morning outside houses, about the carriages that came by each morning to collect the dead. So far, our death count hasn't piled nearly so high. Only a few times have the paramedics taken anyone into quarantine, and we never saw their symptoms advance too far. The paramedics assure the possibly-contagious they have nothing to fear, usher them into trucks, and disappear behind the gates. Centuries worth of technology has really saved us the eyesore of corpses in the street.

Nonetheless, everyone's on the watch for symptoms. Whisper networks form about whose skin seems discolored or whose needlessly long clothes may hide gangrene or boils. Covering for a loved one, failing to report coughs or muscle spasms to the paramedics, would be worse than protecting anti-revolutionaries from Mao, than plotting treason in the echoey palace where Louis the XIV kept his court. But by all evidence, this plague strikes slowly, and I don't worry. I count on my fingers the people I'd be sad if the plague took: I still have a hand to hold my Defoe.

Several rows over, Sara's father sits alone on his bed. Sometimes he comes over to our bunk so he and my mom enact the ritual of their friendship—her talking, him, dead-eyed, nodding. But tonight he's trying not to seem sad as he does and looks at nothing. Each family is responsible for reporting their children's attendance, and Sara hasn't returned for curfew. Amazing, that even during a catastrophe, she's able to coax him into silence so she can stay out all night, enjoying her precious little room. Here, where everyone's body heat cloys the air, where a neighbor's stifled sob is the closest thing to a cricket chirp, I think of Sara—alone in that room, clearing out cobwebs and bugs, making a private haven of what isn't hers.

That motorcycle was beautiful. My father's motorcycle. I imagine leaving all this behind, and my envy grows. I want to take everything Sara has back there. Seize everything that makes her *lair* so precious, that makes her feel so damn superior, and make it mine.

That night I dream, years from now, our compound is in ruins. Starving families shuffle across cracked asphalt, bare-feet splashing through puddles that float with sewage and

insects, and everyone is hungry. Then I notice a man, crouched behind a dumpster. He's wolfing down a piece of bread that wasn't part of our weekly rations. When he catches my eye, he grins and flashes a coin—the coin with which, he seems to be saying, he'll secure his next meal—before he scampers away. Soon, others begin to exchange the same, coded looks, raising gold coins into the light that flash secret signals. With dreamlike logic, I follow these strange messages to the center of what seems like an underground network, until I find myself with Sara. This time, she takes me by the hand and leads me back to Old Lee's closet.

This is where she runs her black market. The walls are decked in gold and velvet drapery. Her once-paper *S* flag is now silk, elaborately-laced. Old Lee's belongings have been cleared away, and the shelves are now lined with nonperishables—enough canned meats, bread, spam and peas to feed a village. Every day, she tells me, she rides off on Lee's motorbike and comes back with more food, and from these dealings she's made a killing. My subconscious presents the treasure she hoards in old-time imagery: silver coins, jewelry, pearls, as opposed to credit, watches, devices.

Outside a riot ensues. Everyone we know is demanding food. Their shrieks pierce through Sara's windowless walls, but she takes no notice. They won't find us here. Looking at me, she opens a can of dried meats. Its saltiness wafts into the air and my stomach rumbles. I want to reach out and eat, but the crowd grows thunderous outside. Sara doesn't budge. When I fear the mass's cacophony might be enough to bring down the walls, she leans forward and whispers, her words like prophecy in my ear: "Here there are no rules. Take what you want."

I wake early to go through my father's old toolbox. I take out Sara's note, ready to compare each screwdriver to the instruction manual's depictions until I find the right size, but when I open the toolbox, only three tools are inside: a hammer, a screwdriver, and a wrench. Each one is bare-iron, huge. My heart almost breaks. These are my mom's prized possessions? They have to be the three ugliest tools I've ever seen. I take the screwdriver and put back the box.

I decide to skip class today and wait at my spot behind the bungalows. I can read until lunch and then go meet Sara.

When I sneak over to my reading-place, I'm not alone. Science-teacher Greg is down on cracked asphalt, slumped against the bungalow. His usually-rigid posture is now crumpled. He looks like a can with a dent in it. When he sees me, he tries to restrain his sniffles.

I don't know why, maybe only because he already noticed me, but I sit next to him. "Jake," he says, wiping away his tears. "So you come back here to hide away too?" He tries to smile and I'm thankful he doesn't mention that I'm skipping class. His grin lasts a couple seconds before he collapses back into tears, saying *sorry, sorry, sorry*.

With his sniffles and high-pitched sobs, he doesn't make for an attractive crier, but I tell him it's okay. I tell him how weird these past weeks have been, how everyone feels a need to hide away when they cry, like they're animals defecating in corners. Greg lets out a laugh between the sobs. I tell him I don't know why we all agreed these emotions should be shameful, as if the only proper response to someone's vulnerability is to look away. As if, when we want to cry, we should all be decent enough to wait in long lines to hide our tears in the bathroom. Or out behind the bungalows, I add.

Greg lets out another laugh, looks over at me affectionately. A silent *thanks*, he puts his arm around my shoulder. My words must have really worked on him, because he's weeping openly now. His arm is sharp and bony against my shoulder. I don't think I judge Greg harshly enough. I'm glad this talk has been nice for him, but really I came back here only to read. Now I'm obligated to sit next to him while he cries.

When lunch comes around, I walk up to the elementary building's fourth floor. I take my time—confident, relaxed—letting Sara get there first. In my pocket I fiddle with the rough plastic handle of my father's screwdriver. Outside his room, I hold the screwdriver by the shank and bang the handle on the door. The thuds resound through the hall.

Sara opens up in a rush. "What are you doing," she hisses. She looks pleasingly distraught, her red hair and freckles poking out into this dusty space between wall and locker. "People will hear you."

I stroll past her and survey the room's changes. The surfaces are wiped clean and everything is tidy, postcards and souvenirs arranged along the desk. "I can actually breathe in here," I say. Her paper flag still stands above the cot.

Sara strides up and examines me, inspecting my features like she would a show dog. "So?" she asks.

I hold up the screwdriver and she plies it from my hand, studies it, then gives it back.

"Get to work, Nerd."

I have to read up on simple engines; this truly is a model in simplicity. I trace my hand along the cylinders and pistons, imagining how they might interact, come to life.

However, I don't need to research any of this now. The sparkplug is simply disconnected. Sara could have fixed it in a second if she tried, screwdriver or no. But I don't tell her this, stretching out each moment, studying the machine. Sara's growing exasperated. She pretends to flip through an old *Rolling Stone* from Old Lee's collection, and she's beginning to let out the kind of little huffs a child might communicate with as she flips the pages. I take in the fine symmetry of the engine's construction, unscrewing and re-screwing parts for fun. When I've stretched Sara's patience to its limits, I stand up. I grasp the handlebar and feel the engine thrum to life.

The handlebars vibrate in my hand, and I feel powerful. I imagine the roads and red skies outside as these wheels outpace swaths of diseased gnats. Sara comes over, reaches out to feel its life, but I silence the engine. The handlebars are dead before her hand makes contact.

"Tomorrow," I say. She looks surprised. "We can't let them hear us." She doesn't like when I make decisions, but she nods. I unplug the sparkplug and tell her we'll bring it out before sunrise. "We can test it on the asphalt courts while everyone's asleep."

"No good," she says. "They'll still hear us. We need to leave with it."

"How will we open the gates?"

"I know how," she responds.

I hate when she's this confident, but I agree.

Back to the gymnasium, when everyone sleeps, I pack a backpack full of books and a change of clothes. I look at my mother in the bunk above. Even in sleep she looks

distraught, as if something on the inside of her eyelids displeases her. I bend down to return the screwdriver to its home, but I can't open the toolbox without feeling awful, that my mom could imagine these three tools to contain any sentimental value. There's nothing special about them. They're useless in here, and who knows what I'll encounter out there, beyond the gates. I take out the hammer and wrench, return the empty box, and stash my father's tools in my backpack. I have everything I need.

Sara's right about the need to leave. I can't stand one more day here. I want to race out beyond the gates on my father's old, rusty bike, ride beyond the plague-infested cities, through the mountains and state parks. I want to do this and I want to do it alone.

Before sunrise, alone in the quiet halls, Sara and I wheel the motorbike out of the closet and down the dusty flights of stairs, as if it's a two-person job. Neither of us pretends we're helping the other. It's territorial—our fingers haggle over the handlebars as if that will dictate who rides first.

No one keeps tabs on the gymnasium's backdoor, behind the bathrooms, so I was able to sneak out with no problem. I dropped my backpack of supplies behind the bungalows; when I steal the motorbike, I'll round the corner to retrieve my things. I didn't agree to meet Sara only because she controls access to the motorbike, nor because I intend to share it with her. I'm going to make her watch as I ride off without her, just as I learn how the rising sun looks in our strange, red sky.

Outside, a single lamp by the basketball court is our only light. Neither of us will let go of the bike.

“Open the gates,” I hiss.

“You go. I’ll tell you how,” she says.

We struggle over it. My hand revs up the engine, and just when I’m ready to push her aside and hop on top, a hand plants itself on the bike’s tip, interrupting us. Greg stands before us, tall, slumped, and darkly lit. “Kids,” he says.

How did he find us? Normally Greg feels a compulsive need to talk through silences, but he seems calmer than usual. The motor purrs and his eyes bear down on us, waiting for an explanation. In the dark, he almost looks powerful.

Sara begins making a show of an apology, lowering her head, telling Greg how wrong we were. My hands tremble, shake on the handlebars. I can feel the gates closing in on us permanently. She must sense my determination, because she furtively stomps my foot, indicating for me to let go, to turn it off.

“Don’t run away, Jake,” Greg says. “It won’t help.”

Sara begins telling him that it was never our intention to leave, but Greg bends down to the darkened asphalt and produces my backpack, holding it up to me.

“How did you find that?” I ask.

“Filled with all the books you need for a summer. What will leaving accomplish?” Greg asks. His eyes are sad, and he isn’t smiling; he’s actually serious for once. I’m almost proud of him.

He steps in front of the bike, lays his hand on it. “Don’t do it, Kid.”

Kid, Greg called me? Only Old Lee used to say that. Sara’s staring at me, horrified. She begins to yell at me about how I was going to abandon her, promising Greg she had no part in my plans, but I can’t focus: I begin to imagine that my father’s old, silver cross dangles from Greg’s neck.

“When did you start wearing that?” I demand. I can’t make sense of what I’m seeing, what anyone’s saying.

“Wearing what?” Greg asks.

“Lee was buried with that cross,” I say.

Greg shakes his head, concerned, Sara screams, and I can’t distinguish who’s saying what—*What do you mean, Kid; Shut the fuck up, Jake; Turn the motor off*—but I need to get away from this. I’ll tear right through the old chain-link behind the bungalows and keep riding, anything. Greg begins to ease the motorbike away from me, the silver cross now catching the first glint of sun. I secure my grip on the handlebars and leap up for the seat, but I’m barely able to hold on. The motorbike lurches forward and slams into Greg at an impeccable speed. The motorbike flies away, Greg and I crash to the ground, and before everything goes dark, I hear Greg’s voice, clear as day, speaking in my head. Some time slips by, and when I wake up, a paramedic stands above me. I begin to scream; blood of Greg’s corpse surrounds us.

Greg’s funeral is held the day they open the gates of the compound. Unlike the plague-taken bodies which were burned, they preserved Greg’s body for the six months until reports went out that our district could, cautiously, resume normal life.

When the gates open, the sky is no longer red. Apparently, the hue was caused by the burning of bodies. In areas like ours with no factories, paramedics were forced to pile coal on the streets to burn the plague-infected carcasses and corpses. Each body was wrapped in plastic and coated with chemicals, and wherever these strange substances burned, the sky above would grow thick, dementing daylight into the red hues of sunset.

But now that the nation has fewer to burn and the dead can be transported to the necessary facilities, the sky is clear and blue again.

The funeral is in the green hills a few blocks from the compound—which is now just a school again. As we migrate in a long parade out the school’s gate, the other parents give looks to me and my mother, some sympathetic, some sidelong. They’re all wondering how guilty I feel, what I’ll say. I imagine Greg joining the walk to his own burial. In the fantasy Greg looks over tenderly at me; he’s become remarkably open about his sorrow.

Sara isn’t with us. When they discovered the gangrene on her arm, they took her into quarantine. Before they took her away, I asked what she was thinking, did she imagine concealing her illness would rob it of reality? She shook her head; she had been unable to bear the thought that her last days of life might be spent in quarantine. That’s why she had been living as recklessly as possible. Now, the paramedics say she has a strong chance of recovery, which is good; she was quarantined before I had thought to apologize to her.

In the park at Greg’s funeral, the trees and grass move in the wind, and as we line up the chairs they keep blowing over. When I step up to the pulpit to speak during the service, I look out at all the sad faces. They’ve been locked up and huddled together for so long, and they look as if gathering out here is a final release. Their black dresses and handkerchiefs wave with the wind. Waiting for me to speak, my mom’s face is wet with tears. I forgot what it was like for her to look into my eyes so meaningfully. She wants to hear me open up.

When I speak, I tell them all the truth. The truth about what Greg had done for me. I tell about that moment in the air, right before my selfishness killed him, how time had stopped, and Greg's spirit rushed in and out of me. "Well, don't worry about it kid," his voice cracked through space and time to tell me. "I must have stepped in front of you there," he said, before he vanished and time resumed. And I tell them I don't know how hard it is for a spirit to take detours on their great journey up, to wind back time a few moments just to relieve the guilt of the kid who killed him, but it was kind of him. He didn't have to do that. And as I look out at the crowd's crying faces, I think of how strange it is, that it took the death of Greg the Science teacher, who at least tried to be a good man, to bring them all together.

But I didn't tell them everything. I didn't tell about the dreams I have. That ever since Greg's death, my father speaks to me in dreams. We're back in his closet. I'm on the floor and Old Lee sits above me on the metal cot, and outside, I know, the sick, red sky still waits for us. Old Lee's presence is too great for his own room, and he's terrifying. "You may have fooled them, Boy, but I see into you." Beyond the walls—I can sense it—rats stalk the perimeter, cockroaches crawl up the building, smoke rises in the sky. I'm too afraid to budge. "You fooled that science teacher into forgiving you, fooled the town into shedding a few tears, but I know what you are. All you want to do is isolate yourself, Boy. Lie to your friends, steal from your mother, run away when they were in pain, just to feed your own, damn, selfish, little self." I want to protest, none of this is fair, you taught me how to leave, that was your motorcycle, you did the same thing to me, chose that small, lonely closet over me, but Old Lee sees into my thoughts, silences me.

“You judged this whole town for being selfish, petty, and all your life that’s all you’ll ever be.” He becomes redder, angrier. “A selfish little snot. Close your heart off like a fist. Pull your life into the gutter. Everything you do, I will know and judge.” His face is ballooning, dementing above me until it’s indistinguishable from the flame-infected sky.

VITA

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