

# NO MORE DEAD KIDS

Thomas Marshall

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*No More Dead Kids* is printed in Palatino Linotype

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For Mom & Dad.

Because of Dr. Bridget Besinger and Richard Fliegel.

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**NO MORE  
DEAD KIDS**

## PART ONE: *Millennial Fish*

# CHAPTER 1.

## New Americana

I REMEMBER WHEN I used to think people our age were adults. I remember when I used to look up to my father. Now I'm taller than him.

When I was at the start of my junior year of high school, I really had no idea how much would change over the course of the next two years. I could never have imagined how Ken, Lila, the road trip, or any of it would change my life, but I'll get to that and all that Holden Caulfield kind of crap about my younger and more vulnerable years later.

In short, I am a millennial. More specifically, I'm a 90's kid. I am a member of the New Lost Generation, Generation Apathy, Generation Why; the kids that were around for Web 1.0 but were raised on 2. The generation that saw the technology around them grow faster than they did, born in a period of Unraveling and growing up in a time of Crisis. The last group of human beings to remember 9/11 as an event in their lives rather than a history lesson. The sons and daughters of the Baby-Boomers who stayed together for the kids. We are not just the outsiders or the inbetweeners, we are the lost.

But that's just Juvenioia at work.

Sometimes I do think I'm an adult, sometimes I think I'm the only adult in the room, especially at home. And other times, like times when I pass by the Starbucks that used to be a Blockbuster Video, I want nothing more than to go back. I want to grow up, I desperately want to grow up, I just don't want to grow old. It's just that, right now, I'm stuck somewhere in between the two. But again, I really don't want to be whiney about growing up or finding myself or anything because everybody does that.

This is the purgatory of adolescence.

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I got my junior year class schedule about a month before classes actually started the first week of September, and by the time that came around, I was excited to be back at school. I spent the last night of that summer, a warm but temperate Sunday, with Dan just sitting on the hood of my car, parked by the cliffs eating California burritos and watching the last halcyon sun of summer set into the ocean.

"Think there'll be a green flash?" I asked, making conversation out of what was a nice silence.

"I dunno," he answered with a shrug, "what classes are you in again?"

"Creative writing, A-PUSH, Honors pre—"

"We don't have any together this year, right?"

"No, and I told you that you should've taken Mr. Darcy's with me."

"I didn't think Darcy was that great freshmen year, and I don't want to be in a class with a bunch of weird freshmen, especially creative writing," Dan said, crumpling up the tin foil and yellow paper with the last tortilla bite of his burrito and throwing it away. I didn't bother to get him to save the leftovers for me (my favorite part of the burrito), and I didn't bother to tell him that it was the English class that sucked two years ago and not Mr. Darcy.

"Whatever, I like him. What classes are you taking, again?"

He'd explain, and I'd take note, thinking of the times we'd be able to see each other during the day; mainly before school, during lunch, during the break after Mr. Darcy's class, and in the hour I had after school before practice started. He'd then ask, and I'd explain to him how much I liked Mr. Darcy, how even last year when I wasn't in his class he'd still be cool to have coffee during break, and we'd chat. I'd tell Dan how I was skeptical but excited to take Mr. Darcy's new class instead of an arts elective; Dan played classical guitar, or at least he took the class.

A flock of gulls passed overhead.

"Hey Alex,"

"Yeah?" I answered.

“How many times do you think you’ve seen the same bird twice?” Dan asked in a faux-philosophical tone.

“Shut the fuck up, man,” and we laughed.

The sun passed behind the horizon. I always loved watching the sun set from the cliffs; you could look out onto that vast ocean and see the gentle curve of the earth across the horizon and watch as blue night crept its way across the big sky behind the setting sun and the pinpoint stars materialized behind the blue and into the black. There wasn’t a green flash, but we didn’t mind. I was seriously starting to doubt the phenomenon even existed. The sun set, as it always does, and night fell, as it always did, and I drove Dan back to his house where we played *Zombies on Call of Duty* for an hour then I went home, driving on The 5 with the top down and the radio blaring just for the hell of it before returning home. I laid in bed, listening to music through headphones and not to the drone of the reality TV that my mother watched late into the night in the other room.

And then it was the morning. Cereal, coffee, the brushing of teeth, packing and leaving, and then I was at school. I went to the library and went through my planner until some people I knew but hadn’t seen all summer showed up. The kind of friends, you know, good friends but not close ones. The friends you do stuff with and have fun with, but never more than that. Not the people that you just know, but also not the ones that

you know a lot about. Or even really desire to, for that matter. I like it like that.

In the half-hour before school started, we caught up on each other's summers, on movies we saw, new music we listened to, trips some people took, internships others had, and then the bell rang and the day started. Junior year, and all the shit that comes with it. I already had the next few months of SAT prep, college searching, and general school doing scheduled, but actually being in the year, it was just like any other.

The day at school was more of the same, "Yes, Alexander Kaoruac, present. Yes, like the writer. No, not related. Actually, it's Japanese. My dad's dad, I'm only a quarter. And, yeah, it's spelled differently." For some reason this seemed to disappoint the AP Lit teacher, I couldn't tell if we were already off to a bad start. I liked it when teachers liked me, and that's why I was happy to find myself in creative writing with Mr. Spencer Darcy after lunch.

As I entered the classroom a little early, his sophomore daughter, Delilah, was leaving, carrying an old hardcover of Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, and an even older copy of *The House of Mirth*, she smiled at me as she passed and I sat down, waiting for class to start.

Even Darcy's class went through the typical circle jerk introduction around the room, with 'two truths and a lie,' a social skill I never quite seemed to master.

“Alex, I’m a junior, um, I’m an only child, I row, a lot, and I’ve never been outside the country.”

“I’m going to guess you’ve probably gone to Asia to visit your family?” a freshman looking boy asked. Yeesh. I took a breath and let it slide.

“Nope, actually, they’re pretty much all here, but—”

“You’ve probably been across the border though, right?” a girl adjacent asked.

“Yup, you got it,” I said and was happy to move on.

The desks and attached chairs in the class were set up in a circle, all slightly facing toward Mr. D’s desk at the front of the room. After a few more extravagant but believable facts and wholly unbelievable lies, I was glad to hear from someone who was apparently worse at it than I was. He was slouched forward in his chair (the chair slightly removed from the circle itself) his scrawny and pale elbows resting on the desk in front of him, his hand supporting his head while his messy dark hair hung over one of his eyes. He sat, silent.

“Um... Kenneth?” Mr. Darcy said looking at a class roster.

The kid barely bothered to move as he addressed the class.

“Hi, my name is Kenneth, I am a freshman, and um, I think that’s two facts, so, I’m also adopted,” reticently, and a bit annoyedly.

"The two facts have to be other than your name and grade..." Mr. Darcy reminded him with a jaded aggravation.

Kenneth clenched and unclenched his fist around the pencil he was holding, I could tell that there was an anger behind his apathy. He spoke as if the whole ordeal was a public chastening, "I'm a lifer here at Twain, and I want to be published this year."

The other lifers, those who had gone to Twain Pacific Elementary, Middle, and High Schools, knew he was one too, and he seemed either vain or cavalier enough to state his goals to the class, so it must've been the first.

"So... you're not adopted?" the same, overly participatory girl asked.

"I only wish," Ken half-muttered and I wondered if that was the punchline he had been waiting to say. The class moved on, I didn't really. The introductions concluded, a syllabus was passed out and read, an assignment was assigned (read a few short stories then write a personal narrative), and with that class was over.

I caught Dan in the break between that class and the next and told him about that strange kid Kenneth, wondering if I knew him from somewhere.

"Wait, Kenneth Chester?" Dan asked.

"Yeah, why, you know him?"

"Was he that kid that was suspended for like a month in the middle school last year for threatening that

teacher and throwing his chair across the room and shit?"

"Holy shit, you're right," I laughed, "I knew I knew him from somewhere."

"The 'unfortunate episode' as the email from the headmaster called it."

"Shit, I didn't know he still went here. His parents must have some money."

"Still waiting on Chester Auditorium...alright, see you later," he concluded as the bell rang and we parted ways for the next class.

I had a feeling that was where I had known that strange disaffected kid from, but I still felt as though I knew him more.

## CHAPTER 2.

### Soul To Squeeze

KEN LINGERED ON my mind that afternoon, even at practice. We were out on the water, doing long steady state drills in the eight, and so I had a lot of time to just fall into a rhythm with the boat and think. I thought about Ken as I rowed and listened to the oarlocks, the rhythmic feathering and squaring of the oars as they thudded along the hull of the long, narrow boat in unison. What kind of person does a kid like that grow up into, do they grow up? It just sucks to be becoming and not just be. I'm tired of becoming who I am, I just want to be whoever that is, but at this point, I don't even know who that is, and I'm dangerously close to not caring at all. I can only take so much before I stop caring, just like my dad can only apologize so much before it stops meaning anything.

I just feel like I'm in between so much, not a kid and not an adult, middle class, middle of the class. I know how much of an asshole it makes me seem like to complain about being middle class, but it really does suck to feel forgotten when you're not rich enough to have everything, but you're not poor enough for anyone

else to care. But honestly, the only reason I complain is because I can. The only people who can complain are the ones that don't really have any business complaining in the first place.

It still sucks, though. But I don't really care when my parents fight about it anymore. I used to care, but that didn't do anything. I used to feel like I mattered too. I was smart before I came to Twain Pacific High School, the only non-denominational private school in the county. Before I went here I used to go to a run of the mill San Diego County public school, and all the teachers there knew me specifically. They knew me because I had to make them know me. If I got lost in that school, I'd have been lost forever. Trying used to set me apart, now I'm just another student here, average even. It used to be like turning on a flashlight in a dark room, now it's that same flashlight outside during the day. How can anyone blame me for settling for 'good enough' here?

Well, now I'm just hurtling through my junior year, with all the shit that brings with it, after a summer of freedom and SAT prepping. And it was a good summer, I had a car, and I used it to spend as little time at home as possible, whether I was at Dan's, just driving around, or sitting in my room knowing that I could drive. I love driving. My parents would never have bought me a car though, but due to the unfortunately fortunate death of my childless great-uncle, I was willed his car a month before my sixteenth birthday last year. It surprised me, because he wasn't really close with any of us, and then

my dad had to drive the car all the way back from Tempe after the funeral. And then it was just parked in front of our house, waiting for me to learn to drive in it.

Thinking about it, your first car is never your choice, and that money you'd saved up as a kid from birthdays, lemonade stands, and yard sales getting rid of old, cherished *Bionicle* or *Thomas the Train* collections for 'my first car' never even comes close to the sticker price when that time comes around.

When I first saw the car parked there a year ago, a silver-gray 2005 Mustang V6 soft-top convertible with the *Bullitt* edition rims, I thought it looked like a life-size Barbie car. But it quickly grew on me, and after this summer, I'd fallen madly in love with that symbol of my minimal adolescent freedom. Now I mainly just use my car to drive back and forth, to and from school and practice; it's a shame, for such a powerful and beautiful car to be relegated to such a mundane existence, I wish I could drive it somewhere grand.

Having a car wasn't just about freedom though, it was about being that much closer to normal. I didn't want to spend another year being dropped off by my mother, and thankfully, I didn't have to. I learned more about my hometown that summer of driving than I had in all sixteen years of living in it before. I even kind of understand the geographical difference between Bankers Hill, Hilcrest, and Mission Hills now, kind of. What a gorgeous city, apart from the crazy massive homeless problem.

I was born and grew up in the wonderland that is Ocean Beach, California, 92107. The sort of hidden gem of San Diego that stands as the last authentic hold out of the beach bum, the retired hippie, the street kid, the punk, the original hipster, and the hodad and grom alike. Newport Avenue is at the center of OB, a street leading to the Pier and the Beach, and it's the hub and last bastion of the true Southern California beach town. It smells like piss and stale beer, and weed, so much weed, and you never don't hear either Sublime or the Red Hot Chili Peppers from a stereo or your own heart as you walk those three blocks to the water. That's home to me, and I love it.

My home, a three bedroom, one story house nestled in between more of the same is just a few blocks from the beach and a short walk from my old elementary school. I've lived in that house and that town since I was brought home as a newborn, something fairly uncommon for OB, and San Diego as a whole too, a true native son. A three-bedroom house didn't mean we had a guest room though, it meant that each of the three of us had a room, each at nearly opposite corners of the house. My parents hadn't shared a bed for as long as I could remember.

. . . . .

Dan and I have been friends since freshman year, he lived a short bike ride away, just over the hill in true Point Loma. He's my best friend, I'd even call him my

brother, but I guess that's something only only-children do. Growing up, my friends were my siblings, and that's just how it's always been. I'm not an introvert, I'm just a lonely extrovert. And I don't know if I care, because what else can I do?

Goddamn, I can't even complain about shit without it sounding like a fucking Upworthy article, but I guess I had to get all of that crap out of the way.

## CHAPTER 3.

# You Are Going To Hate This

I WAS HARD-PRESSED to write that personal narrative. Well, I wasn't really, I was still lazy from the summer and hadn't been assigned much else in any other classes so I didn't really want to start working just yet. So instead of working, I decided to put in probably the same amount of time it would've taken to write something to instead scour my computer for an old assignment I could use. And what do you know, it was another nostalgia trip looking through things I'd typed up from about fifth grade on; the oldest of which, essays no less, were typed in fucking comic sans. Do kids even know that the 'save' icon is a floppy disk, or what one of those even is, I used to learn on those things in elementary school, goddamn I don't wanna be old.

Even more cringe-worthy were some of the old poems I'd written back when I was in middle school, a time when the most pressing question on a boy's mind was "do girls masturbate too?" And if these poems were written for school, I can't believe I ever submitted some

of those melodramatic emo-trips to a teacher; I honestly don't know which were worse, the ones from middle school that are just funny how bad they are, or the ones from freshman year where I really thought I was deep and tried to emulate some sad romantic poets. Ode to my CD of *American Idiot*.

Green Day's *American Idiot*, that was the first album I ever bought with my own money way back when. The second was *Dookie*, and the fourth was *21<sup>st</sup> Century Breakdown* the day it came out near the end of eighth grade, I picked up *International Superhits* with it at Best Buy. God, I really used to love Green Day, I still do; I'm proud to be in the class of 13. The third CD I ever bought was *Icky Thump*, and the sixth, many many years later, was *Vessel*, still my favorite album; *Pure Heroine*, *Born to Die*, and *Torres* would all come a little later. From my parents I had *After the Gold Rush*, *Joshua Tree*, *Born to Run*, *The Beatles 1*, *Dylan*, and *The Wall*. Dan lent me *good kid, m.A.A.d city* and *Section.80*, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and *Late Registration*, *Run the Jewels*, *Illmatic*, *The Chronic*, and *Straight Outta Compton* last summer to download. And that about sums up everything I didn't either buy on iTunes as a youngster or convert from YouTube as a more worldly high schooler. When I was younger I was partial to buying the actual CDs because I could play them in the car, way back before iPod Nanos really had a way to connect to a mom's minivan; now, I like them because I still like music to be tactile, but I wouldn't go so far as to buy a record player though.

Anyway, back to my poetic waxings as a high school freshman. I found an assignment for Mr. Darcy, and I wondered why he ever talked to me. I'm guessing it was from sometime around the time we read *Prufrock* in class, for the intimate revelations of young men are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions.

*The Descent Of Night*

*Day falls past the horizon, light does die;  
The descent of night floods the sky behind;  
As darkness blankets the city, I lie  
With myself alone, a lost love to find.*

*The musk of the city's haze blinds the stars,  
Of streetlights and silhouettes, the lost scars  
Of a forgotten town; the totaled cars,  
That stank of tar, neon lights of the bars.*

*Derelict pubs, and gentlemen's clubs, seat  
To the hostilere, drowning in defeat.  
The city is dark, the night so long;  
I watch from my window, the empty throng.*

*And I left in-between, the city and my dreams,  
Garroted on the anticipation of death.  
A lost Larkin in the city I once loved.  
The industrial mill but sputters and steams,  
Whilst I compline for the Eventide of death.  
She said that she loved me, she said this as she left.  
Thoughts of yesterday, the tomorrow of figment,  
A lost symbol of the past, of joy, the signant.*

Well, we got through that together, and that's what's important. It really kind of goes to show where I was back then, grandiose and morose, almost yearning for some big sadness in my life to make me dark, mysterious, and interesting; something to make me a true brooding poet. But really the saddest thing or the reality of the saddest thing is not a man, defeated, weeping at the loss of his precious time and only life as I once thought, but it is instead the man unaware of this, the man who does not wallow in his failures or misgivings but does not even think of them. They are pushed down and forgotten; no remorse, no contemplations, no second thoughts about dreams lost or given up, it is simply a wasted life. Those are truly the thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

I've lived with what I now know is depression for my entire life. I realize now that for me and for a lot of people it is a struggle every day to fight off that depression or sadness or insecurity or uncertainty, whether it is on the surface or deep inside, and keep functioning as an adult and do the things that we are supposed to do. But we do, all of us. As Camus said, "nobody realizes that some people expend tremendous energy merely to be normal."

I never understood the term 'battling depression.' Battling cancer makes sense, it's an adversary, something separate and menacing that can be beat. But depression isn't some invading force or something that can be defeated, it is me. Depression is just the worst

parts of me and a whisper in my mind to embrace them. A battle with depression is a war against oneself, which, I guess, is apt.

For the narrative, I ended up just writing about my summer, and how I sometimes wonder if my love of driving has something to do with my last name and how I should really get around to reading *On the Road*. In class Mr. D asked if anyone wanted to read aloud, and Ken immediately raised a hand up, pinky and ring fingers lowered over his palm like he was the fucking second coming, or maybe it was just out of laziness, like he could only give the effort it took to raise his index, middle, and thumb.

When he started to read I immediately knew he was one of those kids, the kind that always overshares; whether that was a product of too much attention as a child or too little, I do not know. Naturally, he wrote about death.

*"To wake up is a gift, to have food at the table is a gift, and to have a family to eat with is a gift,"* he began in a somber monotone like he was narrating a Cormac McCarthy novel.

I was already rolling my eyes, and he hadn't even established a central conflict.

He continued, *"When my grandfather was alive, we always used to spend the holidays at his home, Christmas, Easter, his birthday, and every summer. The hundred-mile drive to his home was an inconsequential distance between the two of us. He lived in the home he built, in the home he*

*brought his new wife to live in, in the home my mother was born in, in the home my mother and her brother grew up in, in the home his wife passed away in, and in the home he left. In the home, where his memory will live on."*

Oooh, parallel structure.

*"To wake up at his home was to wake up to the engaging, pungent smell of day-old coffee steeping in the use-stained pot. He always brewed coffee, he always over-brewed coffee. He took his cup with milk until it was as tan as he was and one-half a packet of the pink. To wake up at his home, was to wake up to him already up, already reading the paper, already with toast in his thirty-year-old toaster oven, already drinking his cup of coffee. I would wake up at his home, open my eyes to the sun streaming in through the drawn curtains next to my borrowed bed; the flecks of dust dancing in the light. I would get up, my feet would hit the warm synthetic, scratchy shag rug; the rug, which matted the floor of the entire home. The carpet was of a military tan, going yellow from the fifty-year sun. The feeling of the carpet, growing halfway over my feet, would caress my toes as I would walk to find my grandfather. The old dry smell of the carpet would be replaced by the hot moist air of a steeping pot of coffee, and then the burnt smell of toast as I neared the dining room. I can still see him look up at me from his paper, as I enter the room, his glasses at the end of his big nose, and his loving eyes glancing at me. A quick warm look, as if to reassure me that everything would be alright. That warmth was home."*

Okay, I get it, and it's wrong of me to judge, I mean I wasn't any better my freshman year, it's just that I never had the gall to inflict the things I wrote on others.

It's not that bad anyway, but that's not what matters, it's personal, and it's something important to him so I shouldn't judge.

*"Even now I remember the saccharine joys of that home as a blissful pleasure in my morose and melancholy mind, beset with the encumbrance of the adult world."*

Oh come-fucking-on.

*"When I was young, even younger than I should have been, he used to give me coffee. He made a cup for him and a cup for me. My cup had milk until it was white and sugar until it was candy. He gave it to me in a spoon, one sip at a time. I grew with him. He helped me as I grew up, and I helped him as he grew old. When I was eleven, he moved down to our house. He still was the same man with the same routine, only in a different place. I loved him so much.*

*"I was twelve when he died. It was a cold and grey December morning. He had been at the hospital the night before. He had asked to come home after he had been given his last living rites. When I woke, my parents were already up. I knew. I buried my head in between two pillows. The din of silence caressing my throbbing heart. The cold air was thick and heavy. I did not know what to think, and still, I don't. He is gone and nothing else. He rests.*

*"In his room, his things were all there, like he was just out for the day. His big green chair was still in front of the television, a section of the paper was draped over the right arm of the chair, ready to be picked up and read, started again right where he'd left off. In his room were the old wooden duck decoys that I liked that he once used for hunting. In his room the smell of day-old coffee and Mennen's cologne lingered in*

*the stitch of the fabric. I can still smell it there, and whenever he comes to mind.*

*"His death impacted me almost as much as his life did. After the funeral, after his casket of tan wood, stippled with dew drops of holy water was lowered back into the earth, I knew it was over. On any other day, the mass would have been normal. Normal had it not been for my grandfather in his box in the center of the aisle, and the pews of friends and loved ones who looked on with a sense of time and mortality. On any other day, the limousines and police escorts would have been a fantastic experience, fantastic had it not been for the hearse carrying my grandfather leading the procession. On any other day, the hours of silent prayer would have been too much. But this was not any other day. The mass was a cold and somber endeavor, the escort was a herald of death, and the prayer was not enough. I was struck by how many people were at the funeral service, by how many people this one death effected."*

*Really going ham on that parallel structure.*

*"My life went downwards from there; I was in the sixth grade, and I had longed to be with my grandfather. It was as if I could wake up at any moment and life would just have been a dream, like that warm feeling as you wake up in the morning from the end of a real dream. A real dream. No one knew what it was like, and the tidbits of fake sympathy only made it worse. I had not lost my grandfather, but I had lost my best friend, my mentor. He was always supposed to be there, to guide me and to teach me like he always had.*

*"There is nothing I would not give to hug him one last time, to feel his warm embrace and his beating heart. To say goodbye.*

*"But now, when I walk in the places he stood and think of him and his words, I am warm. Warmed with the thoughts of him, and the sweet smell of coffee and milk."*

The class sat silently for a few seconds and then clapped unenthusiastically out of pure obligation.

Well, we got through that together, and that's the important thing.

## CHAPTER 4.

### The Kids Aren't Alright

MY ROOM WAS not my house. I spend the time I have at school, rowing, and then shutting the door to my room to do homework, to listen to music, and to sleep. And then I wake up again, and the cycle continues. Saturdays I have practice until about noon, and Sundays I sleep in until at least one in the afternoon. And I usually spend the afternoons doing the same, sitting in front of my computer, consuming Facebook, YouTube, Netflix, fucking BuzzFeed, and of course, porn. Thank god for Vice adding some substance into that mix. Then it's on to my phone to do the same, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, porn again, all in an infinite scroll, passing posted photos and statuses of friends, acquaintances, strangers, and advertisements, each proclaiming without hesitation that they are each the hero of their own lives. Sometimes I'll even pick up a book. I'm becoming seriously concerned about the state of my attention span.

Some afternoons Dan and I hang out, either here or there, but usually there. I never felt like I could get much privacy at home; whenever I'd have a friend over my

mom would always be in the other room, pretending to read a magazine, listening. Sometimes she'd even interject. But my parents liked Dan, and he liked them, and the same went for me with his family; we only saw the best of each other's families' though.

My dad was rarely home anymore, between working late, going on runs, going to AA (or drinking); sometimes I thought he wanted to be home less than I did, he just had means and reasons to be gone. It was like my mom and I would be walking on eggshells anytime he was home, trying not to do anything to upset him, though I often got angry back at him, and that only made things worse. Either way though, the less they were together, the less they'd fight, and the less I'd be between them fighting, so it might've just been for the better. They used to be home together a lot more when I was growing up, but that still led to fighting more often than not as I remember. They were always so on my case about things, too, about grades and school, and even about their own problems.

I didn't want to be between that anymore, I really didn't want to have to choose sides anymore, and honestly, I don't even know who to side with now. It used to be pretty clear cut for me, I defended my mom when my dad yelled at her, I consoled her when she cried about it, and I yelled at him when he yelled at her. Now I see that she would always put me between them, unintentionally or not, I was the one that'd have to take

care of her. I never could bring anything that was bothering me to them, I didn't want to burden my mother with my problems, and I knew my dad wouldn't listen anyway. So instead, I took care of them. They made me the adult in those situations, something I was told near the end of my sophomore year was called Parentification. Now, I know it wasn't fair of them to make me chose or even put me between their problems. So now, I just try not to participate anymore. I know it's selfish, or at least it feels selfish, but I feel like in this case I deserve to be selfish.

. . . . .

I'd been home for a half-hour when my dad got home, I walked out of my room, said hi and went back in. I could hear my parents talking as I did homework. It wasn't long before I heard shouting. I could only make out some of what was being said, I didn't know if I wanted to press my ear against my door or put on headphones. I heard more shouting, something, a drawer or door slamming, then heavy footsteps and my dad shouting then muttering, "Fuck, mutherfucker," and my mom beginning to whimper.

My ear was pressed against my shut door, and I wanted to go out, but I just put in my earbuds and laid in bed until I was tired enough to fall asleep. They had stopped arguing by then, it was a Thursday night, and

my dad had to be up early for work. Before I fell asleep I could still hear the leather of the couch crumple as my mom shifted her weight on it, the television droning on, that malignant American addiction.

It wasn't like this every night though, I don't know if I could ignore that much. Some nights were good; some nights, a lot of weekend nights actually, we'd sit down together and have dinner as a family, mostly silently though. Before high school this would be done at the dinner table, almost nightly; but as things changed, I didn't get home most weeknights until after practice was over at seven, and we'd eat separately, and my dad would be in bed by eight. But some nights he'd stay up. What used to be the family table was now the couch in front of Netflix, which I'm not disparaging at all; we got to spend that hour or two together, sharing a common experience, and not needing to come up with conversation that could so easily lead to misunderstandings or argument. Those were good nights.

And like any family, I'd guess, some nights were bad and others nights were good. That night just happened to be a particularly bad night. I knew that tomorrow night would be equally miserable as my mom wallowed and my dad forgot why she was angry. I texted Dan, but he's typically bad at replies, and when I did get one he told me he'd be busy the next night with his family going out to the Old Globe. So, I arrived at

school Friday really not looking forward to going home afterward.

We were going over Aristotle's *Poetics* in creative writing, Ken interjecting on occasion with an off-color or unsettling joke that was probably only funny to him, and that one girl answering every question ever so promptly and ever so presumptuously, but my mind was out the window. A flock of birds swooped down into the valley, and I wondered how many of them I'd seen twice. Mr. Darcy could tell I wasn't quite there, and so he refrained from directing any questions my way during class. He dismissed class early into the break and asked me what was up as I packed my book bag.

"Nothing, I'm just tired," the same excuse I always used when anyone asked me if I was alright. He saw right through the bullshit.

"If you want to talk, I'm here after school."

. . . . .

After leaving my last class, I went to my locker, packed my books, hesitated, and then walked to Mr. Darcy's room. I hesitated again outside the door, but hearing nothing, I entered. He greeted me warmly, told me to take a seat, and asked what was on my mind. I never open up, it's safer that way, easier. I hate it when people worry about me, the last thing I'd want to be is a burden. Mr. Darcy was a friend, though, and he was reaching

out like he'd reached out before. I knew he cared, and I mean actually cared, not just in that obligatory way a teacher cares, he actually cared. He asked me what was on my mind.

"I'm good," I answered, "I'm just tired that's all, I've had a lot on my mind lately."

And we talked about Aristotle, and books, and the summer, and the hikers that had just been released from prison in Iran. After about a half hour he said he had a faculty meeting he had to attend and left, and then I went to practice early and left late, passing my mom on the couch on my way to my room.

## CHAPTER 5.

### Why Generation

I GOT A FRIEND request on Facebook from Kenneth the week before Homecoming 'Spirit Week.' I really hoped he wasn't going to try to ask me out. He smiled at me in class the next day. Okay, I know I'm overthinking it now, he probably just requested a lot of the people in the class. I said 'hey' to him the next day passing him in the hall, and on Friday he read aloud his latest confessional. This time it was a story, in the third person at least, about a high school freshman uncannily similar to him who was pining for and rejected by a girl that was his, the protagonist's, friend. I got it, I'd been there, I've been that guy, especially back in freshman year. Since then I've kind of given up on that, I don't really care all that much, it just seems like too much work. And honestly, why should I put myself out there if I'll only face rejection again. And the thing is, a girl has every right to reject or accept anyone she wants, she doesn't owe a guy anything just for being nice to her or caring about her; I didn't get that back then though, and I don't think Ken gets that now. It's better to just not get

in that mindset of being a selfish and horny teenage guy, or worse, a teenager in love.

I knew that his story meant he was looking to ask someone to homecoming, something I also haven't participated in since freshman year. When class was dismissed, I got up quickly as I usually did, and headed for the door. I was about to pass Ken packing his backpack at his desk, but I stopped and asked him a casual "Hey, you good?"

"Yeah, I'm well, I'm just tired."

I couldn't help but smile.

"I liked your narrative, by the way," I said, "you did a good job with reading it to the class too."

"Thank you," he smiled.

I turned toward the door to continue my exit, but Ken called after me, "Hey, Alexander?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to Homecoming next Saturday?" he asked, oh shit.

"Are you asking me?"

"No, no, I'm just wondering."

"I'm not, I don't usually go to those things."

"Oh, really?" he asked, as though the possibility of not going had never crossed his mind, and I guess as a freshman, going to a dance did seem like it was not only perfunctory to attend but mandatory to enjoy.

"Yeah, why?"

"I don't know I just sort of thought that everyone went."

"I've never been a fan of school dances. But hey, you're a freshman, have fun if you want."

"Yeah, sounds good."

"See ya," I said, making my exit.

"See you next class, not next class, I mean, next time we have this class," he seemed a little flustered.

"See you then, take it easy."

. . . . .

Spirit week, and then Homecoming, the game and the dance, all came and went. Some of the seniors performed the unauthorized annual shenanigans of coving the opponent school's campus with as much toilet paper as they could the night before the homecoming game (toilet paper, TP, for Twain Pacific). Spirit week was fun as always if a bit ridiculous, and then Dan and I got In-N-Out while a majority of the rest of the school went to the *Alice in Wonderland* themed dance, even if many of them didn't want to. My go-to In-N-Out order is a Double-Double with grilled onions and Animal Fries (with extra spread, of course), but if I'm feeling particularly adventurous I'll order the Double-Double with grilled onions and Animal Fries and a Flying Dutchman (just two grilled patties and melted cheese) and add that on top of the Animal Fries to make some pseudo-carne asada fries, In-N-Out style; but that's a tangent.

Dan and I each hated dances for our own reasons, but really the same reason. I didn't like them because I

couldn't be myself, I wasn't the kind of person that enjoyed dances or dancing, especially without a date, I just felt self-conscious and alone; Dan didn't like them because he couldn't be himself either, because, even today, at such an accepting school in a such a progressive town, a guy like Dan couldn't comfortably bring another guy to the dance, let alone find someone to go with from school in the first place, coming out last year was hard enough for him. We both waited for the freedom college would bring for each of us.

Monday morning, I was at my locker getting my books for Mr. Darcy's class when Ken popped up from around the corner, startling me, "Oh, shit!" I blurted out involuntarily, "Oh, hey Ken, what's up?"

"Are you headed to class?" he asked, rather flatly.

"I was about to."

"Cool," he said and started to walk in the direction of Darcy's classroom. I surmised that he wanted me to follow, and I did. "I was wondering if you'd written anything for class yet?" he asked, and now I knew why he wanted to walk-and-talk.

"Not yet, I mean, he hasn't even really given us the assignment for the week yet. Have you?"

"A bit, but I have some stuff I'd written before too, I was thinking I could try and get them into *Literary Nightmare*, it's the High School's literary magazine."

"I know what it is."

"Have you ever written for it?"

"Not since freshmen year."

"I know, I read it, that poem you wrote, I liked it," Ken answered bluntly, again, weird, "Did you not have anything in it these last two years because you couldn't get in? Anyway, would you take a look at some of the things I wrote, let me know what you think?"

By this time, we had thankfully reached the door to Darcy's Classroom, "Sure," I said, "I'll let you know."

Ken opened the door, "Great, thank you, I'll send them to you on Facebook tonight, if you want."

I was curious and didn't want to be unkind, so I said 'sure,' and he messaged me his weighty tome that afternoon. It was an account of his first homecoming experience, and I wasn't sure if he wanted it to be a short story or not because I didn't think any of the names or events were even changed in the slightest. I wouldn't bother to remember the names of his friends anyway though.

### *The Homecoming*

*Monday- And so it begins. This week is Homecoming spirit week, four days of dressing up and merriment to the theme of Alice in Wonderland. Today I dressed up as Lewis Carol.*

*Thursday- I asked Brooke, with a rose, one on her locker in the morning, and another, after taking a knee before her at the end of the school day; "Yes," she said, "I will go to Homecoming with you." An embrace and a goodbye before tomorrow. She understood we were going as friends.*

*Friday- I gave her a plate of cookies that my mom baked that morning, gluten-free especially for Brooke.*

*Saturday- After meticulous preparation, I was ready to go. To Beatrice's home I went. I drove with Reuben, who lives nearby, and there, at the home, we met up with the rest of a larger group of friends. All the girls looked so nice. We soon sat down to dinner, where I made a toast to Beatrice, and to Brooke, just because.*

*Before the dinner, Brooke's father approached me and said, "Kenneth, so I hear you asked my daughter to homecoming,"*

*"Yes, sir," I replied.*

*He continued, "You know Ken, tell Brookey that I started to tell you puns," I cocked my head at the odd introduction into the family circle, "she'll get a real kick out of it." He finished.*

*"Yes, sir, thank you, sir... and, sir... it's... an honor, sir." And that was just about it. We then left the home in a caravan of vehicles, and off to school we went.*

*At the dance, the once gym had been transformed into Wonderland and was pulsating with the heavy bass of music. I tried to convince Brooke to dance, and she danced more than she ever had since I had known her, which still was not much. For most of the night though, she just sat outside, with Carl, and sometimes others who did not care too much for the whole 'homecoming dance' thing but came anyway, that was mainly the group that sat outside, them and the smokers. Outside, in the cool of the night, sitting on the benches outside the gym, everything still pulsating with the muffled dance music. But even then, Brooke still would not just let go, too self-conscious, and trapped in the sinews of the social web, she would not simply have fun. I tried, and I tried to convince her, especially when the slow dance came around, but she still*

*would not budge, she just stayed sitting outside; she was there each time I went outside. And she felt sorry for me, and I felt sorry for her.*

*"Some days he feels like dying,  
She gets so sick of crying."*

*From there I emerged from the cold of the night into the heat of the mass in doors. The people, and the lights, and the music. Bigger than middle school dances, meaner too. It was beautiful and horrible. All the people dancing, grinding, latching on from person to person or in set one-night couples, in groups, all there, moving in that huge mass on the floor, doused in those lights, and moving with that heavy and consuming music. It was sickening, and it was captivating. I felt lost. The whole mass moving together, up and down, back and forth, hands in the air, the music loud and consuming, the heavy beat you could feel in your core, and the lights and the strobe adding to the horrible confusion of the scene. It was awful, and it was unlike anything I had ever seen. I felt so lost and so alone and out of place.*

*I looked at that mass of bodies and sweat, only to find the once pure Iris grinding with every fucking guy there, and not just the popular or attractive ones, all of them, anyone who could latch on. Hips together, arms in the air, hunched over or moving together, grinding, and gyrating. That is not her, to be used and objectified like that, like all of the other teenage whores there.*

*Finally, another hour later, I said my last, drawn-out, goodbye; holding back the last word. And as I watched Brooke drive away, I hated myself. Hated myself for not saying the*

*last final truth that I had been waiting all night, and all the time that I had known her, to tell her; 'I love you.' I should have said it and let her know, I should have told her.*

*Jamie, she hates me, and she is just another slut; the way she danced with Carl that one time at the beginning of the night tonight and even with Reuben I think, and I think it was all to get back at me for God knows what I did. She left even before the first slow song played. Iris, God help her. And Brooke, by process of elimination, she is the one. I love her, and I will never be able to tell her.*

*"Wonderland of long ago, and how she would feel all the simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in their simple joys, remembering her child life, and the happy summer days."*

*-The end-*

I didn't really know what to do with all of this information. I'm guessing all of the people in that were his friends? At least now I know he likes Green Day.

"Great imagery," I messaged him, "how much of the short story was true?"

"Oh, it was just taken straight from my journal, I wrote it after I got back from the dance. I liked your narrative that you read in class, and I really wanted to see if you liked mine before I showed it to Mr. Darcy. Maybe I could publish it, or at least put it in *Literary Nightmare* at the end of the year" he replied rather promptly. His journal? Publish?

"Well, if this is real then I'd change the names before you do submit it to anything. And maybe don't have

your protagonist call the girls whores."

"Yeah, I was thinking I'd just leave them all as blank spaces, let context fill them in."

I tried to be polite, I wish I could tell if he was joking, "Maybe it'd be better just to use made-up names, it might be confusing the other way," it was already confusing enough as it was, "turn it into a romana cleft or whatever that's called."

"Roman à cleft."

Prick.

. . . . .

The next day, I caught up with Dan at lunch and told him what Ken sent me.

"Fuck that's rough, why'd he send *you* that shit though?" Dan said, as we walked with our food to a courtyard, we usually liked it better than eating in the cafeteria, and they didn't really mind as long as we brought the plates and things back.

"I dunno, man."

"How is that new boyfriend of yours doing anyway?"

"Jesus Dan, you're one of most homophobic gays I know."

He laughed, "I take that as a compliment, it plays into my own general self-loathing," he said, and this time I laughed. We found a spot to sit and began eating.

"But seriously man," he continued, "what is this, like some sort of community service thing? Is Ken going

on a college app?"

"I mean, he honestly doesn't really seem to have any friends."

"So?" Dan retorted brusquely.

"What?"

"You know what I mean- I mean it doesn't have to be your job to be that friend. You don't have to make everyone like you, Alex."

"It's not about that, I think. I guess I just know what it feels like to be unliked, and that really sucks. I feel like I should help him if I could, you know?"

"Serious?"

"I don't know," and I didn't.

"I mean I guess, but look after you too. God knows what that kid is like."

"Yeah, thanks," I said, and by that time we were done with lunch.

I pointed to Dan's tray, "Here, I can take that."

"Thanks, man."

"No problem, see ya," and I walked the short rest of the way to the cafeteria to return their lunchware.

. . . . .

On Friday, Mr. D wanted to give some of the other students a chance to read aloud, and so Ken was not able to share his work, but he turned it in at the end of the class to what I could only guess was a similar reception. I mean, it did help to reiterate to me the reasons why I stopped going to dances; they're nothing other than a

disappointment in which you see your classmates doing things to one another that would never be spoken of the next day, swaying and jumping, and grinding in a single mass, all holding up a sea of phones on record to capture the moment. It's just a gym full of white kids shouting the lyrics to "Niggas in Paris" and Pitbull songs, so much fucking Pitbull. ;Dale! We were on the cusp of the change where the popular music went from Rap/Hip-Hop based Pop to Electronica/Dubstep based Pop. And this was clearly evident at these dances from year to year, or so I've heard.

I didn't go to dances for the same reasons I didn't go to parties. Well, if I were invited, it'd be the same reason I wouldn't go to parties.

I dunno, I kind of saw a bit, or maybe even a lot of Ken in me; but I just don't want to fall into that trap of wanting to help him, but I also don't want him to get depressed after getting rejected again.

. . . . .

The next day, I saw him standing in the front of the cafeteria holding his tray rather dismayed, looking for an unoccupied table to sit at. I waved him down. I asked him where his friends were, "Um, Brooke, Jamie, Carl, um...Pastrami? Those are your friends, right?"

He laughed, "Ruben, and yeah, they are. It's a good group."

Clique, I thought.

He continued, "It's Brooke, Carl, Beatrice, Jamie,

and Reuben, he's probably my closest friend out of all of them, and well, probably my closest friend out of anyone. That's like the main group, but there are other people that are kind of around too."

"Sounds pretty sitcom-y."

He kept on continuing, speaking in vague allusions to things I had no idea about, but speaking as if I did, "I don't know, I really like Brooke, but I'm almost sure she's going out with Carl, and that really just breaks my heart, I don't get it. I wish Jamie didn't hate me so much, I mean, I know that could've been something if I hadn't been so stupid. Reuben's really the only stable thing in my life right now. And you."

"What do you mean, what did you do with Jamie?"

"I told her I liked her last year, and it's been weird, and I think she hates me ever since."

Shit. I hate drama, or at least I really hate high school drama, it's meaningless. It's made up conflict and insecurity created in order to feel self-important, to feel like you're the main character in your own story.

"I don't even know if I'm really friends with them anymore or if I just hang out with them because then they always go do stuff on their own. I always find out they've done something after they do it, I see a story on Snapchat of them all hanging out, or hear them talking about doing things I wasn't a part of. It just sucks, it fucking sucks man. Thinking about it, and while I was writing that story, I now kind of realize that it's Brooke's group, it's her story, she's like the main character of our group of friends. It sucks not to feel important like that."

Now, I always listen to people, and I try to help, sometimes listening is all the help some people need, but I just don't know why people always do the whole emotional dump on me. I decided to console though, "I know that sucks, but it's okay, stuff like this always passes, and things always turn out in the end." I, myself, was looking forward to college so much, I'd only have to stick out another year and a half here and at home and then I'd be free.

"Except it sucks at my house too," he continued to continue. Shit. "Sometimes I don't even think my parents care about me at all, they're never home, and if anything is ever wrong, they just throw money at it. Like into all my mom's prescriptions. And sometimes it just seems like I'm the only one that'll take care of my little sister, she's eight."

"Well—" I was becoming slightly uncomfortable.

"You know what my dad said the other night, one of the first night's he'd been home in a week, he was 'disappointed,' he fucking said that when I told him about writing and working hard in Mr. Darcy's class."

"I'm really sorry man, that, that um, that really does suck," I said. Now I felt like this was my problem too, but I just really didn't want to get involved. I've gotten involved before, and it only ends badly. I don't know though. I know what he means, I know how it feels, high school can just suck. I just don't know though, I don't know if I hate myself enough to say I want to stop him from becoming like me.

## CHAPTER 6.

### Father Of Mine

WE SEEMED TO BE going through a rough patch at home. Another few days of my mother's wallowing and my father's anger at her wallowing passed, and this cycle just continued to spiral downward. It usually went a day of arguing then a day of wallowing, a day of shouting then a day of silence, day after day for as long as it needed to go on.

I came home one night exhausted after PR-ing on a 6K at practice, and my parents were in their separate rooms as I anticipated a night of wallowing following last night's shouting. I was wrong. It wasn't long before I heard my mother's footsteps across the living room, my guess was that she was going to either ask for an apology or try to re-explain her point in the argument, things were never over for her, she never let things be. But, then again, with the way she'd been treated, how could things just be over and forgotten? Especially without apology. The shouting started up rather quickly, then I heard my name shouted across the house.

"Alexander! Alexander come here!" my mother

yelled.

I wondered if they got an email from school, I hadn't done anything bad that I remember, I didn't think I should be in trouble; nevertheless, I was frightened for myself as I entered the room.

"Are you hearing this?" my mom whined, exasperated, "Did you hear what he said to me?" I can't help but say I was a little relieved that it had nothing to do with me.

I was deciding internally whether to just leave and not get involved, not get between them or to get involved and attempt to resolve it.

"Please, just stop, okay?" I asked, doing my best impression of a level-headed counselor.

"Of course you bring our son into this to defend you. You're always playing the victim you fucking—"

"Hey!" I interjected sternly, I wanted to put an end to it more than anything else.

"Did you hear what he just called me, Alexander?" she was starting to cry as she spoke.

"I'm sick of all this martyr bullshit, I'm the only one who works for shit around here, and I'm the only one who doesn't fucking complain about fucking everything not being perfect!"

"Oh goddamnit," I muttered, "Just go," I told my mom, "just go, both of you, just stop."

"So this is my fault? He calls me a *bitch*, and it's my fault? Why are you on his side?"

'Mom, did I say anything to even remotely suggest that I was taking a side, you fucking-' I thought and instead said,

"Not at all mom, I just want this to stop for tonight, okay? Both of you. Please. Okay?"

They were both just wrong. My mother was wrong in her reactions and my father in his actions. Sometimes I wondered if things might be better if they just split, but they stayed together, and fought, for me. And I took that burden, and I buried it deep inside, and to cope I sometimes cut, sometimes slept, sometimes ate too much or too little. I was an adolescent sin-eater to my wire mother.

. . . . .

I was 'just tired' the next day at school, I knew how bad that night would be. After class, Mr. Darcy asked what had been going on, saying I looked particularly tired.

I told him I could use some coffee and motioned to the thermos he had on his desk.

"Uh, I don't think I'm allowed to share anything with students, I'm sorry," he told me with a bit of apprehension.

"That's alright, and yeah, I'm just- I've just had a lot on my mind lately, I mean..." I thought, fuck it, why not, "honestly, I've been better."

"What's been the matter, Alexander?"

"I've just been going through a lot of... shit at home, and things have been pretty bad recently. I honestly don't know if my parents are going to stay together."

"I'm truly sorry to hear that, Alex."

"Yeah..." I sat down on a desk, feet up on the

attached chair, facing him. He leaned against the bookshelf by the door.

"So, what's been going on?"

I sighed, "Home's just not been much of a home lately; my parents have been fighting a lot. And, and I know that's normal, for a family to fight, but it's just been really bad lately."

"Well, it doesn't have to be normal for you to put up with that."

"Thanks, it's just, it's..."

"It's hard sometimes, I understand, but this isn't a burden you have to bear all by yourself, and I hope you know that."

"I know."

"I'm here for you."

"Thank you, I mean that," and I did.

"Hey, I have to ask, do you feel safe or comfortable being at home right now?"

"It's unpleasant, but it's not unsafe. And I always have my room to escape to."

"Well, it shouldn't even have to be unpleasant, but that's life, and you're stronger and a better person for it," he hesitated, "And, Alex, if you ever don't feel comfortable, or safe, or you just don't feel like dealing with that one night, you're always welcome at my house. My wife and I would be happy to have you, and I'm sure my daughter wouldn't mind having someone her own age at the dinner table again."

"That's really kind of you, thank you," I imagined how uncomfortable a dinner like that might be, I liked

being around adults but I never like it when people put themselves out for me, and I'm sure I'd feel like some sort of refugee or charity case at their table. But I thanked him again, I knew it came from a good place. It was nice knowing someone cared and had my back in something like this.

"See you in class tomorrow," I said and got up.

He interjected, "Oh, and Alex..."

"Yeah?"

"I saw you talking with Kenneth, keep an eye on him for me would ya? I worry about him sometimes, he sure is an interesting one."

"He sure is. Will do, Mr. Darcy."

"Alright. Take care, kiddo."

All I do is seek the approval of the father figures in my life.

## CHAPTER 7.

### Everlong

“THERE ARE JUST so many people who just exist,” Ken said after a pause, “just look at all those people out there,” Ken pointed out the window. We were sitting in his favorite nook in the library after school as he waited for his mom to pick him up and as I waited for the time I could leave for practice. I’d been hanging with him a lot more after school recently, and usually here, and it’s a nice spot; he said he liked it because it has the best view of the entrance, our gated school’s only entrance and exit to the main campus, and that he likes to watch all the people coming in the morning and leaving after school, ‘like ants after a flood,’ he said. He’s a good kid but I worry sometimes, and I do want to be able to be a friend to him. I asked him what he meant by what he’d said.

He explained, “I just want to be something more. There are so many people out there who are just filler, and I can’t be that. I want to be someone. When I look out the window here, or when I’m in the car, or anywhere else, and I see all these other cars and all these other buildings and all these other people I just wonder;

I know that they are out there, but I will never know them. I just don't know. There are just so many people who just exist, you know?"

"Huh, you know I think about that a lot too, I think it's called 'sonder.' I don't know if people are filler though. It's like, everyone has a story, and everyone is the main character of their own story, they have fears, and hopes and dreams and aspirations. But, y'know, you'll never come close to knowing them all, and *that* is what makes me sad," now I knew what I'd write about for Friday.

"But some people just don't become anything. Sometimes when I'm just sitting around I- I wish for bad things to happen, you know, so I could be a hero, so I could be someone, and be recognized. I don't want to just be another person," Ken sighed.

*Sonder: the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own.*

What Ken had said got me thinking. Yeah, we are all different, and it's so very easy to just discount everyone but the people you personally know as filler, or as extras, but they too truly are just as complex, conflicted, and important as you are. Aren't they?

I wrote this and turned it in on Friday, *The Substitute*.

*There was no ring on his pudgy fingers as he waved the green-dot laser pointer at the powerpoint slides he had prepared the night before, with calculated yet awkward and unsure gestures. His thick Chinese accent made my attention wane as I fell into seeing the stereotypes that I was used to; he*

would be just another, unfeeling, antisocial, awkward, and incomprehensible substitute teacher. The shades of annoyance and even disgust began to well deep inside of me as I thought about him and reached for my phone so I could disappear. But then I thought about him more.

He has a Ph.D. in Statistics from Wharton at Penn, I could never do that. He must be smart, I'm not. Does this make me jealous of him? No, as I quickly retreat into the comfortable notion that I probably could've gotten laid last night if I really wanted to, that I have friends, people like me, I have it easy, I have it all and I will forever. Does this make me feel good? No, as I start to feel a tinge of sadness creep into my mind. He doesn't.

What if he had a girl at Penn that he truly felt he loved, but he just couldn't talk to her, and he just longed and brooded. He's thirty years old, and he could be alone, he could have always been alone. Some things may come easy to him, as I struggle in that class. Other things that I have taken for granted for so long he may've never been able to have. Maybe I'm completely wrong, though. But one thing is true, behind that accent is a man, a person, he has feelings, hopes, dreams, aspirations, loves, joys, and sorrows. He's not the robotic mathematician, the foreigner that it'd be so easy to forget him as. He fidgets with his glasses and rubs his nose as he thanks us and dismisses us, and we part to our separate lives.

So, am I the only one I know waging my wars behind my face and above my throat? No. And I know I should talk to the outcast Ken. Even though there are so many people out there, if you can help even one, then you've made a difference. In that moment, I knew it was my

responsibility of sorts to look out for Ken, because I could. I remembered a story my grandpa told me as a kid about two men walking on the beach. In the story, it was the morning after a huge storm, and so when these two guys got to the beach, they saw that hundreds and hundreds of fish had washed up onto shore. The fish were just flopping around on the sand, gasping for water, drowning in the air.

One man said to the other, "We need to do something."

To which the other man replied, "There are so many fish, how can we possibly do anything to help?"

The first man then bent down and picked up a fish, walked to the water, and put it in. As it swam away, he said, "Well, I helped that one."

I wonder if that was from the Bible. Actually, I wonder if there was even a storm at all, maybe Jesus was just practicing his multiplication, and he ended up with way too many fish. But anyway, Mr. Darcy was right, if I can help Ken, then I should help Ken; that oh so millennial fish, Ken.

. . . . .

Ken said he wanted to 'be someone.' *"I want to be someone. I want to matter. I don't want to be just another person."* But that's the big lie, isn't it? We all want to be someone or do something, but we really don't want to do anything about it, do we? It's the same lie that's been shoved down our throats since we were kids. In every

hero story nowadays, it doesn't involve someone trying to become something, practicing, auditioning, training, or writing in, it's just some kid, your average kid (where the audience can insert themselves), that gets picked by powers bigger than them to be someone special and do something special. Like we all have this dream that a CIA recruiter, or Morpheus, or Hagrid or Qui-Gon Jinn will give us a call one day out of the blue and tell us that they've been watching us and we're special. Like in the original *Star Wars*, Luke had to work to become something, he had to take a true hero's journey complete with trials and obstacles; in the prequels, Anakin was just told he was this special kid, and that's it, he's in. We all want to be something, but we don't want to do any work to get there anymore, we just want other people to recognize us on the outside for being as great as we secretly think we are on the inside; therefore validating us, our lives, and everything we've done, even our own sloth, inaction, or laziness. It's the ultimate self-aggrandizing fantasy, and we buy into it from childhood to adulthood because the people that make money off of stories know that that's exactly what we want to hear. We all want someone else to do the work for us and tell us we're the best thing ever by doing exactly what we always do. We don't want to work for achievement, we want our lives as they are to be validated by an outside source, because if it's not then maybe we see the truth that no matter what we think deep down, no matter how great we see ourselves, all we'll ever amount to is being just another person, and

that terrifies us more than anything else. More than death, we're terrified that our life didn't matter. And we're too afraid to do anything about it because we're too afraid to fail. We've become so afraid of failure, and what that failure might mean about us, that we're too afraid to even try. In reality, though, the true heroes are not the result of fate or fantastical circumstance, but instead, they are simply the result of choice and action; and anyone is capable of that.

I just get sick of everyone thinking they can be Harry Potter.

## CHAPTER 8.

### Parents

WHEN I TOLD HIM, Dan agreed with Mr. Darcy that Kenneth is most definitely an interesting one, but he did not agree however that it was any job of mine to care in the least.

"I'll just talk to him, see what's up, tell him I'm here to help if he needs it," I said earnestly and with great sense of upstanding moral duty.

"Shit man, you really better be getting community service hours for this."

"I'll see if I can get Darcy to sign off on it," we laughed.

Mr. Darcy smiled at me after class with one of his signature head nods of understanding as I went to chat with our man Kenneth.

"Hey Ken—"

"Yeah?"

"I thought about what we talked about some more, and I just wanted to let you know that I'm here for you if you wanna talk, or anything; hell, I'll even proofread some more of your stories if you want."

"I *am* working on a novel," said the boy earnestly and with importance.

Oh, greeaat, I thought, "Oh, how cool, what's it about?" I said.

"I'm thinking of typing up my journal, changing the names and seeing about getting it published. I'd love for you to take a look at it when I'm ready."

So, he thinks he's important or even interesting enough to be the character in a novel. Prick. "Sure, I'd be more than happy to," I said, and remembering Mr. Darcy I thought to add, "Ken, what're you doing next weekend?"

"Nothing, I don't think."

"Well, if you're free, do you wanna hang out Saturday?"

"Sure, sounds good, talk to you later, my dude."

What have I gotten myself into?

. . . . .

Things had kind of seemed to calm down at home, or at least they reached a comfortable state of discomfort. The parental units were talking again, just about the day-to-day status quo things though, two separate people under one roof. Things stayed like this for a bit, teetering on the knife's edge; I tried to tip the scales toward order and peace, but as always, entropy won out, and we (they) were thrust back into discord. I was able to practice my normal escapism during the week, staying late to clean up the boathouse after practice, doing

anything to minimize my time on the front lines at home. But, come Friday, I knew the weekend wouldn't be so easygoing.

I listened in on shouting, a bedroom door slamming, footsteps, a refrigerator door opening and closing, and the plastic-leather of a couch compressing under the weight of an occupant, and the muffled drone of the television.

I walked to the refrigerator and got a bottle of water. Returning to my room, I kissed my sitting mother on the top of her head and whispered, "I love you, mom."

In my room, I opened my laptop, checked Facebook, checked YouTube, checked Outlook, and then closed those windows and hovered the cursor over 'shut down.' I reopened Outlook and wrote and rewrote an email to Mr. Darcy. I always got nervous, or at least very self-conscious when writing an email to an English teacher, I felt like they'd always judge my grammar and syntax.

I broke down and typed out the email asking him if I could join him for dinner that Saturday.

I deleted it instead of sending it. I still thought the whole idea was still a little weird, and I certainly didn't want to impose. I didn't want to be a burden to him, or to anyone for that matter, but especially him.

Saturday came and went, as did the next week in anticipation of my scheduled play-date with Ken. I picked him up after practice from his huge, beautiful home in Coronado; I always love driving across the bridge from the city to Coronado. I met his parents,

starting pleasant small talk, and Ken quickly told them to shut up so he could leave. Top down, he directed me to a place near the beach where we got boujee Coronado Mexican-ish food to go and ate it in the car parked by the shore. You know, really bromantic shit.

We hadn't had the chance to just talk for such an extended period of time before, and it was good. We talked about a lot of things. He told me more about his little sister and taking care of her when his parents weren't there. How he couldn't wait to get a car so he could drive his sister to and from school; it terrified him when his mom drove strung out on meds. His parents didn't seem to care about him, just throwing money at any problems that arose. He told me he hated them.

I told him that they seemed nice, that he should be kinder to them, and that he should be grateful for what he does have.

He seemed disappointed in me and began almost lecturing me, "Alex, it's like if you only watch the last half-hour of an action movie, and only see the parts where the hero comes in and tortures, fucks-up, and kills the bad guys, you'd get the idea that the roles were reversed; you'd think that Bruce Willis is some sick fuck and Alan Rickman is just some helpless foreigner. You didn't see the whole first part of the movie when the bad guy is really the bad guy. That's what it's like when you come over and see me ignore or argue with my parents and tell me to be nicer to them. I'm done being nice to people like that."

"Your parents made you walk on broken glass?"

"Fuck you too, man," we laughed, which was a nice change of pace.

He then went on a bit of a tirade against the entitlement of other people at the school, and the cliquiness, and all the other things he generally doesn't like about high school and losing touch with his friends. High school does just suck, but that's life.

"I don't get it, I just don't get it. Homecoming was awful, and then they all go and have fun at their parties afterwards. Why do they get to have all the fun? We go to the same school, but we live in different worlds," he said, "it's just so goddamn segregated at school, it's the populars and everyone else."

"Yeah," I let out, "but are we really that different? I mean, we're all just kids still you know?" he agreed, and I continued, "We are pretty much the same underneath all that social bullshit. We like the same things, we like to do the same things, and you're right, why can't we just get along more?"

"Well, uh, that's just not it though. I don't know, it just doesn't work that way."

"Why not though, I mean, why doesn't it work that way, you know?"

"Because they don't have to like us, they're different, we're different, that's just it. I don't know."

"Okay," I said. I didn't know whether to be insulted or feel complimented that he included me in his perceived group. Either way though, I didn't really like the suggestion.

"I don't know if I even want to try anymore," he

said.

“Why’s that?”

“I just keep getting rejected, I put my heart out there and just keep getting rejected, I don’t know what these girls could want.”

This wasn’t really a conversation I wanted to have.

“It happened again today,” he continued.

“What?”

“I see it everywhere, and it takes so much of me to act like it’s normal, and not just grab one of those fucking yuccie, yuppie rich kids and just shake them. I hate entitlement, entitled to something, all these people. Entitled to a car. Entitled to a good education, entitled a good grade, that’s really what they’re after. I just can’t stand it, kids that have been given everything, kids who never know anything other than having, never know anything other than being entitled to having.”

I thought this opinion was a bit strange coming from someone as well off as him.

“They don’t know what it’s like to have to fucking take care of anyone, even themselves. Entitled to a goddamn new phone. Your phone breaks, daddy gives you a new one, everyone and their fucking iPhone. Crash your car, you get a new one, mommy and daddy bought you a car, now they’ll buy you a new one because you’re entitled to it just like how you felt entitled to the road and didn’t have to pay attention to them, this actually fucking happened, and they just walked away. It’s a sheltered culture of entitlement, and I’m sick of it. And I’m fucking sick of giving every part

of myself to these girls with fucking nothing in return, why won't they like me, spoiled bitches."

I didn't really want to contest him, so I just nodded and sympathized with the rejection and tried to move on. And we did, we talked about books and movies and TV, and I drove him home before dark. I knew what I'd gotten myself into, and some of the things he said really, really stuck to me, and they concerned me too. I guess I'm glad that he let me in, I'm just worried about all that anger. I mean, I used to be angry too, I just knew it didn't do anything for me.

He's so caught up in all of the drama, the cliques, the inclusion and exclusion, and the girls. He feels so intensely. His rage and his love. I've just given up on that, the less I open myself to feeling, the less hurt I can get, the less disappointed. I don't know which is better though. It doesn't mean I don't hope things would happen, I just don't get my hopes up. Rage and love, apathy and hope.

Thinking about it, I think that there's a real difference between growing up in a certain generation and growing up poor in that same generation, all your tech and cultural touchstones are usually five years behind the new stuff, so looking back you identify more with the older generation a bit. Like I went to public elementary school, and we learned on those clucky beige plastic box computers that were as old as I was, when at the same time those big clear colored plastic iMacs were becoming popular everywhere else, especially among the kids I'd later go to school with at

Twain Pacific. And it's the same thing now, I had a flip phone when everyone else was getting iPhone 3G's. Plus now that I finally have an iPhone, I really just don't get that whole broken iPhone thing that's popular now. These rich kids would so much rather have a broken expensive thing than a perfectly fine cheap thing. And they don't care about breaking things either, they're just cavalier with that too.

• • • • •

I returned home after dark to find my mom sitting on the couch, in her nightgown, waiting to scold me and ask why, where, and with whom I was late. She yelled, and I apologized. I didn't bother to argue like I normally would, I didn't bother telling her that I had already told her I didn't know when I'd be home, that I had told her before not to wait up and not to worry; I instead just took her yelling, and I kept apologizing. I was sad and exhausted by the time I got to bed.

## CHAPTER 9.

### A Proper Polish Welcome

IT WAS FRIDAY, November 25<sup>th</sup> and the three of us (my parents and I) went out to dinner that night for my 17th birthday after I spent the day nonchalantly at school. Around then and after that, things seemingly evened out at home, and the good days came to outnumber the bad as December break approached. I was busy enough studying for the SAT I'd take in January and finishing up mid-term exams to be concerned with too much else, and when break finally did come I looked forward to the relaxation it would bring. I'd hang out with Dan playing video games, I'd read, and I'd watch movies or television. I'd spend the days at home with my mom, doing my own things and doing fix-up work around the house and yard, and then we'd have dinner as a family almost every night. And it was really nice.

And after about a week of this, I thought I'd go insane. Stir crazy, cabin fever, or whatever. It didn't help that being home with my parents that much also meant we had so many more opportunities to get on each other's nerves. It got to the point that almost everything they did annoyed me. I didn't bring it up to them though, I know it was irrational, so I didn't want to

really trouble them with it. They still fought though.

An argument between my parents usually started as a misunderstanding that spiraled downward from there, reopening old wounds, rehashing old fights, bringing up things that were said were forgiven. And they weren't even arguing, they were just fighting; contentious, belligerent, and at times downright cruel. Now, I really needed to get out; Dan and his parents didn't mind, they actually enjoyed when I'd stay over, but yesterday they drove up to NorCal for the week. I tried to just bear it at home, but the fighting once again became more frequent. I swear if I started to plot out the ebb and flow of their clashes I could come up with some sort of tidal pattern to it all.

During what I guessed to be high tide, I knew I just needed to be somewhere other than home. I called Dan to see how he was doing; I usually had to be relatively quiet or nondescript on the phone, as my mom often had the 'accidental' habit of listening in from the other room, but she was out for the day running errands (so I called Dan in between furious bouts of getting to jerk off home alone for once).

"Have you been up to anything since I left?" he asked.

"Not really, just hanging around home."

"You're just staying home still? Jesus, I'd go crazy. I'd honestly take Darcy up on his dinner offer if I was you, that'll at least get you out of the house."

"Yeah, I guess I'll email him tonight. I don't know how I'd phrase that to my parents though, dinner at a

teacher's house seems a bit weird."

"Eh, just tell them, what's the harm?"

"You know my mom, though. She probably thinks we're 'smoking dope' right now."

"So dinner with a fifty-year-old man is out?"

"And his family, and yes. I'll just tell them that I'm at yours, if that's cool with you."

"Because your conservative mom just loves when you hang out with your gay best friend."

"Oh, she doesn't know. As far as she's concerned you just haven't found the right girl yet."

"And you?"

"She thinks kissing is a big step in high school. She'd die if she ever saw what went on at parties here."

"When have you ever 'seen what goes on at parties here'?"

"I mean I've heard stories..." we laughed.

. . . . .

That evening, I hesitated to send that email to Mr. Darcy, and I wrote and deleted three separate drafts, but finally, I sent the fourth and final one late that night.

I woke up the next morning to a reply from Mr. Darcy, very enthusiastically extending an invitation to dinner the next night. Goddamn, I thought, he even got up early during break.

. . . . .

It took a little while to decide where on the spectrum from formal to casual my attire should fall, and it took less time to lie to my parents that I was going over to Dan's for dinner.

I arrived at their La Jolla home ten minutes before six and waited in my parked car for nine minutes. They had a beautiful home, his wife was a well-paid doctor, and he loved teaching so things worked out. I knocked; Mr. Darcy opened the door, and welcomed me in, he mentioned something to me about my timeliness as he called to the kitchen to his wife and upstairs to his daughter that their guest had arrived.

I walked into the kitchen as Mrs. Darcy took off oven mitts to shake my hand asking if I wanted anything to drink. I thanked her for her hospitality and asked if there was anything I could help with.

"No, thank you," as she checked the oven.

I sat down in the dining room as Mr. Darcy said "well, the lawn does need mowing, and the fence could use a fresh coat of paint," with a chuckle.

"I'd apologize for my father, but I'm sure you already know him."

I turned around to find the owner of the voice to be a slender yet voluptuous frame silhouetted by the light from the kitchen. The wisps of her deep-amber hair that floated on the top of her head were illuminated from behind like a halo, and I could see the outline of her elegant legs through the thin fabric of the maxi-skirt that flowed from her thin waist and cascaded down her hips.

I stood up and reached out my hand, "Alexander."

She stepped into the light of the dining room to meet

my hand, and I could see her beautiful face, “Delila” she replied and smiled.

She was a sophomore at Twain, I’d seen her around before; everyone knows of everyone else at that school, but I never had the formal introduction until now. She sat down at the table opposite me, and soon dinner was served. They talked about the normal things, work, school, and asked me about school and extracurriculars and writing; they were such a smart family, they read books and talked about them, talked about current events and politics, it was great. Lila’s older sister was a sophomore at NYU, she was staying up there for the break, she loved it there and loved the city. Mr. Darcy and family were going to fly up and visit her for a few days after New Year’s. I was glad I caught them for dinner in the window after Christmas and before their trip. They had a beautiful Douglas Fir minimalistically decorated with only white string lights in the corner of the living room. They were spiritual, but not religious, from what I had gathered, like just about everyone else these days.

My mom, on the other hand, was pretty Evangelical and my father fairly Catholic. We didn’t talk about it much, and my Agnosticism was kind of a don’t ask, don’t tell subject; I was as Christian as they were in their minds. If you think about it, everyone’s an atheist to other religions, I’m just an atheist to all of them.

There was sorbet for dessert and coffee. We finished our meal, I thanked them and said goodbye with a handshake from the Mr. a hug from the Mrs. and a wave from the youngest; I already felt welcomed by this

family.

I drove home through the cool dark down The 5 from La Jolla to Point Loma with the top down, my windshield picking up the stippling dew of the marine layer mist, blasting 'Semi-Automatic' and the rest of my new CD of twenty-one pilot's *Vessel*; such a great night-driving song, I feel like I'm Ryan Gosling in *Drive*. I love driving, but I love night-driving even more. I had the aux cord ready to be plugged into my charging phone, but tonight the CD felt better. My parents were asleep by the time I got home, but the porch light was left on to greet me. I curled up in my covers and slept until the next afternoon, happy. I envied Lila and the life she had at her home.

## CHAPTER 10.

### Going To Pasalacqua

I THANKED MR. DARCY again once school resumed, handing him a bag of Café Moto coffee beans I picked up in downtown as a thank you. I also friend requested Lila, she accepted the same day. Later that month, after some weekends of cramming, I'd take the SAT for what I hoped to be the first and only time, and by the middle of February, I got my results. Twenty-three-hundred, I was damn happy I didn't have to sit through another day of standardized testing until the AP's came around. My parents asked what happened to the other 100 points; though I was hoping they'd instead congratulate on the 2300 I did manage to score. I was instead reminded that nothing was ever good enough for them, or at least for my mother, who really hammered the point home; my father, on the other hand, had checked out some time ago. I, on the other hand, was quite happy with good enough. But it's still ridiculous what an average kid has to do to get into college nowadays, barring extreme extenuating circumstance and extreme money; *on top* of good grades a kid needs multiple extracurriculars, work experience or internships (not

like the kind my grandpa had), hours and hours of community service, and a good helping of pure luck to have a chance of beating an acceptance rate under 10%. We wear ourselves thin by the time we graduate, and for what? Debt and the absence of employment? I don't know.

. . . . .

Junior year would begin to wind down, then wind back up as finals and APs came around, and I continued the normal apathetic crawl towards summertime. I'd row, go to regattas (competitions), and go to regionals and then the season would be over; I'd study, do homework, take tests, then take AP's and final exams and the scholastic year would be over; I'd hang with Dan, and complain about falling into what seemed like the trap of being a confidant to Ken; I'd listen to, talk to, and read Kenneth's writing; I'd sit in my room, listen to music, and jerk off and wonder how many future Einstein's or future Hitler's I'd just thrown away in that tissue.

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I'd go to two dinners and one Saturday barbeque, at the Darcy's before summer came. At the barbeque, I came guessing that I'd help cook with the Mr. but was mistaken when I was only there early to watch him grill. He refused to let me help prep, saying that he'd love for me to cook for them some other time, but this was his

treat, and he loved grilling. And so, while he flipped meat and vegetables on his big Smokey Joe, humming Clarence Clemons' closing sax from 'Thunder Road' and drinking a San Diego craft beer, Lila and I chatted next to him. When Mr. Darcy began to sing Bon Jovi, she invited me upstairs to listen to 'good music' in her room.

She opened the bedroom door and showed me her pastel room, illuminated by fairy lights; that's always such an intimate experience, being shown someone else's room, you've just been let inside someone else's world. I looked around, saw Polaroid photos, shelves of books (some were beautifully old and hard-covered, others were wonderfully worn paperbacks that she must've read five times apiece, including all seven *Harry Potter's* as well as John Green's entire canon of work), and a trunk of LP's. She was the kind of girl that had a record player. She sifted through the vinyl's passing every Beatles record, *AM*, *Pure Heroine*, *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, *The Queen Is Dead*, *Born to Run*, *Blood on the Tracks*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *Contra*, *Bookends*, *Making Movies*, and a plethora of others, until she picked out the brand new *Born to Die: Paradise Edition* LP, put down side A of record 3, set the needle, and let it play. As she reclined on her bed the record began its soft crackly whisper; violins swelled, a piano pulsed, and then a sultry voice cooed out the line "I've been out on that open road, you can be my full-time daddy, white and gold..."

I looked around, and noticing there wasn't a chair, I sat at the edge of the bed, looking around the room as

the next song began to play, "Play house, put my favorite record on, get down, get your crystal method on, you were like, tall, tan, driving 'round the city, flirtin' with the girls like, you're so pretty. Springsteen is the king, don't you think?" I was looking at Lila stretched out pretty over her white sheets.

In that moment I felt the feeling of butterflies fluttering inside of me, and a sinking fear gripping me as my heart swelled in my chest. What was I doing, I should just digest the butterflies and move on. But in that moment the walls of apathy I had built up, the constant compulsion not to fall in love, the urge not to put my heart on my sleeve only to be broken, were all beginning to be shattered. That moment seemed to last forever as I looked at her hair unfurled out above her, her taught, porcelain stomach stretched out from under her blouse and above her blue jeans, her thick and dark eyelashes, her blood-red lips, and her slender limbs all laid out atop a downy cloud of bedsheets in-between four posts, one of which I reclined on.

And as the violins swelled into the next song, Lila's father called out that dinner was ready. She got up, removed the needle from the spinning record before the lyrics started, and walked me downstairs. We all ate, I helped Mr. Darcy with cleaning the grill as Lila, and the missus did the dishes. And I left, listening to the road and the music in my head on the way home. I wish I could have just shrugged it off, but she was already the voice inside my head. And when I got home, I laid in my bed in my dark room and saw her illuminated,

imagining her beside me. So yeah, I guess I started to fall in love the way I fell asleep, jerking off to forget the day and then reluctantly.

. . . . .

Okay, so I wasn't really head-over-heels in love immediately, I was more so just in lust at first. But that still scared me, I didn't want to want someone. I didn't want her to open up to me (well, you know what I mean), I didn't want to get to know her, I didn't want to really fall for her. Because I know how it would end, she'd just turn me down. No wonder Ken's so fucking depressed, he puts himself out there and is rejected all the goddamned time; I just can't do that to myself. So, instead, I just tried to digest those butterflies in my stomach and move on. I failed miserably.

## CHAPTER 11.

### Modern Jesus

THERE WASN'T MUCH ceremony for the end of junior year, we just got 'senior' class shirts and were then 'promoted' at an assembly, and then it was summer. I was expected to drive up the coast with my mom to visit colleges (at least only to the private schools, UC schools didn't take visits into account when tallying applications), write a personal essay, fill out a bunch more applications, and be ready in every way to hit 'submit' on the Common App and UC system app by the time November rolled around. But aside from those haughty tasks, I was free to spend another aimless summer doing next to nothing.

The closest thing to ceremony was the last lecture of the year Mr. Darcy gave us in class, and us all reading our last pieces out loud.

Finally, Mr. Darcy talked about what he said was the most important sentence in the English language, *Jesus wept*.

"Jesus wept," he started, "the shortest sentence in the whole Bible. Two words, probably only one in Greek because of the stuff that they do with subject-in-verb endings. If Occam was right, this means it's the most

important sentence in the Bible too. The most important sentence in the most important book ever written. I'm not making a religious statement, I'm just going by the numbers. The Bible, it's in the top of every bestseller list ever, everywhere, #1 New York Times Best Seller every week since King James read it himself; the only question is, Fiction sellers list or Non-Fiction? But that's beside the point. It's the most translated book in history, the most copies printed of any book ever, it's a bound collection of words that have shaped human history, caused wars, inspired invention, progress, destruction, hatred, hope, and everything in between.

"But anyway, back to the main character in Part 2. 'Jesus wept.' Why is this important? It's because it's the breaking point, it's the humility, it's the humanity in a literal God shown for the first, last, only time in the whole religious text. Jesus was a man, plain and simple, and in two words he's stripped of all of his divinity. The miracles, everything, they all mean nothing in the face of death because just like every single other human on this earth, Death terrified Jesus. God the father never had to contend with that, immortality has its benefits therein; but when he decided to become man and live that life on earth, walk in the footsteps of his own creations, Death terrified even Him. Jesus wept because he was staring into that same abyss that we all one day look into, and in that moment God was no more of a man than any other sack of meat meandering through his hour upon the stage. So, Jesus did weep, not for our sins or our souls, but for his own life. And in that

moment, he was man.

"Dante said that the greatest sin a man could commit was Despair because Despair is the loss of hope in salvation; when Jesus wept, he cried tears of desperation. He was as scared and naked as Adam and Eve cast out of Paradise, he was as hopeless as the drunken Noah, he was as lost as Moses in the desert, and he was as desperate as Job. God had to face the one thing he never had to before, the one thing he dangled above his creations since the beginning of time, Death. Cold, black, empty Death. He wept," Mr. Darcy paused for a moment, the class rapt in his attention, "I'd dismiss class now, but this is a pretty grim point, so I'll say this, what I hope you've learned this year in this class is that words have power. You have power. Do you want to know the one thing that all writers have in common?"

The class nodded "yes."

"They Write. As a high school student, you have all the building blocks you need to be a writer, that's it. Now all you need to do is write. Write every day, write anything, just write. And read. And live. Get as many experiences as you can and put them to paper. Writing is an incredible gift and an incredible responsibility, you can help people, educate them, and shape the world. Or you can just write for yourself, and in doing so becoming a better, more empathetic, and wiser person along the way. And that's what this class has been about. Writing is an incredible and positive tool, but every single person in this room can use it and get better at it too. I can't wait to see what you all accomplish. And

it's been a pleasure reading and hearing from all of you this year. Thank you, and have a great summer."

The class left with their thoughts about words, and power, and death. I thought about death. I wondered why this was though. I wondered why people were so afraid of death, why we couldn't all just be like Meursault and not care. Then I wondered why we not only fear death but hate suicide (aside from the aforementioned sacrificial suicide). Why do we hate suicides so much? Is it because we're angry? Is it because we think that it is the most selfish thing one can do? No, I started to think. It's because we're jealous. We are supremely jealous of the courage that it takes to truly do the one thing that takes your own life into your own hands. We think about it, we think about it all the time. That's why we're so afraid of heights. Because we know it'd be so easy, just one step further and we end it. But we're afraid. More than pain, more than our suffering, more than anything else we're afraid of death, and we hate those who prove to us that they are not. So, why do we hate suicide so much? Jealousy, envy, fear. I didn't want to think about that more though. I didn't want to fall into despair ever again.

For the last assignment, Ken and I both wrote poems, I thought it might have been a weird copout to write about rowing, but I really like the poem.

*"The world is a different place when you look at it backwards.*

*In rowing, as opposed to life, you watch the world move*

*away from you,  
And get smaller as it turns into the past.  
In life, you are always expecting,  
Moving forward as things grow and pass by quickly,  
Things become inconsequential as you always expect to  
pass them.  
In rowing, you wait, and watch,  
As the world moves from you, you can watch things, and  
places, and people as they get smaller and disappear.  
It allows you time, beautiful time,  
To sit and watch and think on all that is around you and  
in you,  
As it moves away from you and into the past.  
I feel time and control slip away from me,  
Like sand between my fingers,  
And I surrender."*

Ken wrote a more direct and classically, hopelessly romantic poem. He read it aloud like he was The Bard reincarnate.

*"I am a fool and a beggar at the feet of a goddess,  
I am not in your shadow, but always behind you,  
You are there and always have been, just as I,  
Yet I know nothing of you,  
Except what you have told me and the little I have heard.  
But yet, this that I know, I love, and want to know more.*

*I have been a fool, and not chosen to know you,  
And now that that is all I want, I am left to beg.  
Looking up at you, in perfection and perfect humility,*

*As grace, and beauty, and kindness, and genius,  
And everything that I miss and am without.*

*Words escape the feeling you give me,  
When you are near, or in my thoughts.  
The words home, and warmth, and contempt, and  
security, and peace and belonging,  
And Love,  
Cannot even come close,  
Cannot even come close because with each of these things  
Is the pain that Love and Want carry on their backs.  
The deep pain of seeing you and knowing you,  
And knowing that we are not together, and knowing  
Knowing that I do not deserve you.  
So now, all I can do is tell you.  
I Love you.  
I need you.  
I Love you."*

I wondered if it was about Brooke. Maybe Beatrice, he'd mentioned that name before too. Either way, it was met with the same reverent eye-rolling a poem of such subject should always inspire. And then that was it, I'd never be in a class taught by Mr. Darcy again. I mean, I'd see him around, but I'd still never be his student ever again.

## CHAPTER 12.

### Mr. Fish

ONCE SUMMER BEGAN, I spent a lot of time with Dan, I spent time with Ken (being out of school seemed good for him, though being home did not), I emailed with Mr. Darcy, I occasionally messaged Lila over Facebook to say 'hi,' and I started reading *On The Road: The Original Scroll*. Lila told me she was in the middle of re-reading *Lolita*, a favorite of hers, as was *The Bell Jar*, (something I would later be told is known as a 'red flag'). But, of course, she also love-loved *Gatsby*, which was good to hear, not that I needed more reason to respect her tastes in things. She was really smart, she was close to if not at the top of her class, but she was far from nerdy, she was just very driven. As if I didn't need more reasons to like this girl though. I tried to take it all in stride, to try to just be friends with her, and to see if anything happens, but I don't really care if anything doesn't though, I tried to insulate myself that way.

Dan and I would hang out and toss around the idea of going on a cross-country road trip that summer, no, next summer, after we graduated, as a sort of victory lap or something. We entertained a lot of great fantasies,

backpacking through Europe, taking the Trans-Siberian railway, summiting Everest, but this one seemed more tangible though, and it sounded pretty great. I couldn't appreciate Dan more for being such a constant support in my life. I'd call him a brother again, but I do realize how weird that is coming from an only child, so I'll leave it at 'bro.'

Ken would complain to me about finding out about 'his group' doing summer things he wasn't told about or invited to. He told me he was 'falling hopelessly in love with Brooke' again. And he'd send me passages from his typed journal for my review.

*I spent all of yesterday and today reading a Tumblr blog that I found accidentally, it was Brooke's. Well, I didn't find it, my friend Reuben did; he told me about it the day before, he said he came across it when he was Googling himself or something, even though I don't think he's mentioned on the blog at all. I think that it was just meant for her and her friend from her old school. She doesn't really say anything about me; I don't know if that is a good thing or a bad thing yet. She did have a post about her ideal guy, so I think I might just try some of those things out; I'm not adding muscle anytime soon, I'm still a fucking twig, at least I've got the tall, and dark hair down.*

*I think the title of the blog was 'Limerence' (I don't actually know what that means though). I don't remember many specifics, but this was one of the first things I remember seeing:*

*"Things I love:*

*•How inexplicably cute Kurt Cobain is in the music video for 'In Bloom'*

*•The word 'ampersand'*

*•pet·ri·chor*

*•Boys who..." (and I don't remember the rest)*

*Things I love: Brooke.*

*Two weeks later I looked up Brooke again on the internet, but when I searched for her, I found nothing. Only echoes of her presence on others' pages, memories of her existence. I talked to her again on the phone though, I am really loving these late-night conversations. We talked, and I still skirted around telling her I liked her. We talked about so much. That night, talking to her, time evaporated, as we became lost in each other and the conversation and the hours passed without meaning. All of a sudden it was 12:30 in the morning tomorrow, and we could barely grasp where the time could have gone. I think it will be these nights that I should remember the summer by, I already hold them so dear.*

*Thinking back, a few months ago I started writing down all my dreams. I stopped after this one dream. In the dream, I was on a beach in Italy, looking out onto some canopy tents set up on the bank, when a beautiful girl ran up to me. We embraced and fell into the sand. And as I looked up at her, I knew that she was my wife. I stopped writing down my dreams after realizing the happiest I've ever felt was not even real. And then, talking to Brooke, I thought I would be able to tell her, but I couldn't. The conversation just went around in circles as I kept almost being able to say something, getting*

*right there with the words on the tip of my tongue, and then backing down or changing the subject, because I just couldn't bring myself to tell her. I just couldn't do it, I wasn't able to; she even asked, although not directly, but I couldn't, I just couldn't. I could not tell her that I loved her –I told her so much else, but not that which mattered the most. The story of my life. That is how the conversation went, even though I don't remember most of it.*

*I'd call her again next weekend too. We talked, I told her how highly I think of her, and we talked some more. She told me how much she appreciates me, and how I'm always there for her, listening and helping her. She told me she does not want a boyfriend –and that's okay, I'll be a friend, and a good one, and I will look for a less meaningful relationship elsewhere. Because (no matter the substance) I need a girlfriend. I do so much, I try to be such a nice guy, I deserve to have a girl that'll reciprocate that.*

Wow, that was quick. I dunno, Brooke sounds pretty cool, and as Michael Scott said, 'engaged ain't married,' though I didn't really want to put this idea in his head. I'm sure he'd be throwing his heart at someone else by the next week. I mean I think he should worry about the substance of the relationship though, that is, if anyone would have him. I don't know, I don't want to get his hopes up, but I don't want to crush them either. I just hope he's happy. Wouldn't it be nice if everyone could just be happy (excerpted from my Mr. America acceptance speech)?

I'd finish *On The Road* and start *This Side Of Paradise* instead of re-reading *The Stranger* or *The Catcher in the*

*Rye*, my two favorites (something I would also later be told is known as a 'red flag'). I'd see Ken that week, and we'd hang out in his massive house, in his room, in his other room, outside, and in the pool. Ken's family was napkins in the bathroom rich. His parents were nowhere to be found, and his sister was away at summer camp, he told me this was normal. He seemed really eager to show me a funny video on YouTube, some music video from Korea. He said a friend of his had shown it to him the night before, I guess that's how internet videos spread. And, I have to admit, it was pretty funny, bizarre, but hilarious, it was called 'Gangnam Style.' I'm surprised it only had a few hundred thousand views though, I was getting pretty sick of hearing 'Call Me Maybe' by that point in the summer.

After that, we sat by the pool after a swim and chatted. I worried he was sliding into apathy, but I wondered if that was better than remaining in rage or in love. I remembered that poem about the 'hostilere' again, I guess that when I was young, I imagined that depression was some big, dramatic, and recognized remorseful failure; but it's not, it's worse, it's not even giving up, it's not knowing that you've given up. It's apathy. It's the waxing and waning neurasthenia, it's the crushing boredom, routine, and petty frustration that life is actually made up of, and it's apathy toward this terrible waste. But it's still just so much easier, so much safer to just not care. Kenneth felt so much, I didn't really want him to stop feeling, I didn't want him to lobotomize himself with apathy.

"I don't know man," I immediately regretted that I'd started, but I was too deep into that sentence not to continue, "you don't have to give up on everything if one thing doesn't work out. There are a lot of people, a lot of girls out there, and you're a good guy. You do just have to admit you feel a lot more than other people, y'know? And that makes things harder, you love more, and you get hurt more. But when things work out, and they will, it'll be so much more meaningful then."

"Thanks, Alexander," he sighed, "I know."

"Don't worry man, things'll work out. Maybe not with who you imagine, or how you imagine, but they will."

"I hope so," sighing again, "Oh, so I was in school today getting a locker—"

Dammit, I thought, we have to get lockers.

"—and all circumstances led me to meeting with this girl, Olivia, Livi, this cool freshman girl who I'd seen before but never really interacted with. She's really pretty, I mean really pretty, and I had always noticed her because she dressed really uniquely; she was really artsy and pretty, almost gothish at times, really gorgeous and obviously not caring what other people thought or were into at the time. An extraordinary girl—"

I rolled my eyes internally. Also, another fucking girl?

"—I've always kind of liked her and thought she was really neat and original. So anyway, we exchanged numbers."

I was actually a little bit surprised, "Oh wow, good

for you, man.”

“Well, I gave her mine, clumsily and rushed, eagerly scrawling it on a sheet I ripped out from the notepad I keep in my pocket,” he admitted, kind of unnecessarily. That sounds more like it though.

“Uh, oh, okay.”

When I went to the bathroom, I had to go through his house and his room to get there, passing the study where Ken told me his dad kept a gun. Ken mentioned that gun to me in passing more than once. I hated guns, always have. I thank God that I didn’t grow up with a gun in the house because I know I probably wouldn’t be here now if there was, it would have been so easy, so quick, and that’s not something you can recover from, not like knives, not like pills, a gun is pretty final.

Ken’s room was huge and completely full wall-to-wall with stuff. He even had a two-screen computer set up, I think he played a lot of those anti-social escapist MMORPG games. I spotted a notebook on the bedside table with the words ‘*The Son of Rage and Love, The Diary of Kenneth Chester*’ written in sharpie over white-out on the cover, on top of a ‘League of Legends’ strategy book. I hesitated, consulting with the metaphorical angel and demon on opposite shoulders, and turned to go to the toilet. Then I immediately turned back around and opened the famed journal and read.

*It’s a fact that men think about sex once every six seconds. Therefore, as a man, I should think about sex once every six*

*seconds. But if I think about sex once every six seconds, then I think about killing and killing myself at least once every twelve. Suicidal ideation.*

*This is not angst, this is anger, this is rage.*

Aaaaand, I immediately closed it.

When I got back, Ken then told me about the confirmation retreat he went on, he was still religious I think, or maybe that was the point in time he stopped being religious, I don't know.

"Do you want to see my dad's gun?" Ken asked almost out of the blue, but still as if he'd had it on his mind for more than a while.

"God no," I reflexively let out.

"What?"

"No, I- I really don't think so."

"Here, let me show you," he said as he walked indoors.

I protested in vain and anxiously waited outside for him to return. When he did he was holding a handgun in one hand and a clip in the other and smiling proudly.

"Ken, I really don't want to—"

"Check it out, man," he said as he put the clip in and scanned the yard with the handgun in a swiping motion, back and forth, doing his best impression of a rogue cop. I ducked and scuffled to stand far behind him, I fucking hated guns, I was actually scared.

"See how cool I look man?" he said as he turned around to me, extending the gun in my direction, "Here,

wanna hold it?" he asked.

"No, now please, could you just put that thing away, I told you, I don't like guns," pleading, dodging his delighted and lackadaisical aim.

"Fine, you're no fucking fun," he said as he went back to pointing and aiming the gun randomly around the yard. He then straightened his aim, relaxed his shoulders, and pointed the gun straight in front of him, looking down its barrel, and made a shooting sound, "pssheww," he slowly moved the muzzle to his temple and made another slow "pssheww," then opening both of his arms up and out like he was on the cross he grinned satisfied. It seemed so rehearsed like he'd done it a hundred times before with either his fingers or the gun that was in his hands now. Without looking at me, he went back inside and put the gun back away.

I left soon after.

I mean I don't know what to do, really. I'm kind of in over my head now, I guess. All I can do is help, but really, what do I know to be able to give advice? I don't know if I should be scared or worried. I'm really just a kid too, two years older than him, but really, what does that even mean. I'd just become jaded and apathetic over those two years, and I'm giving him advice on romance when I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing with Lila. I guess I should just keep doing what I've been doing, texting her, having dinner there, etcetera. I haven't had dinner there in a while, come to think about

it. I don't know, maybe I should just stop trying, stop talking to her, and just not risk it. I mean, if I fuck it up, which I'm sure I could, I'd never talk to Mr. Darcy again. I mean it would be nice though, even just to get to know her more, she's pretty damn cool, I mean, how could she not be though. I don't know, I really just don't want to fuck things up, and I really just don't want to get hurt. I better just suck it up and let it fade away.

I texted her that night.

## CHAPTER 13.

### Do I Wanna Know?

THE DAYS OF SUMMER were getting dangerously numbered, and as the last throes of August belched out the heat that had been withheld all summer, I knew I'd be heading into a year of lasts. From the last first day of school to the very last day of school, it'd be the last everything by the time the year was through. I was eager though, or at least I was eager to be done with that first semester of college application shit, I've heard senior year is pretty fun after that. I wanna get drunk, get high, and get laid before I graduate. Like, I know that's not the pinnacle of the high school experience, but I still want to leave from here having done at least those things before I get to college.

One summer afternoon, I was talking to Dan about Lila, as well as venting about having to listen to Ken.

"Follow your own goddamned advice, Alex."

"What?" I asked.

"Dude, go for it, keep going at it, don't be so fucking mopey, so 'oohhh, aww, I don't know if I'm good enough, what if I mess up' that's bullshit man, and besides you'll never get anything if you don't risk losing

something."

"Gotta risk it to get the biscuit..."

"Haha, exactly. But seriously, man, I don't know, I'd be so happy for you, you deserve a good thing like that."

"I know, it's just—"

"It's just what? Alex, we're gonna be seniors, and then we're gonna be out of here, what have you got to lose?"

"Okay, okay. I'll text her and ask her if she wants to hang out."

"Good. Oh, speaking of taking risks, did you ever go over to see Ken like he kept asking you?"

"Oh my God, I totally forgot to tell you, it was absolutely insane. I mean, he's absolutely insane."

"What happened?"

I explained what happened to him.

"Jesus Christ, dude."

"Yeah. I mean I don't know what to do, really. I'm kind of in over my head now, I guess. All I can do is help, but really, what do I know to be able to give advice? I'm giving him advice on romance when I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing with Lila."

"Lila? Whatever, you're fine, don't worry about it," Dan said quickly; he then quickly became stern, "But Alex. Ken. He has a gun, this is a big fucking deal, Alex. Is he dangerous?"

"I haven't had dinner there in a while come to think about it."

"Whatever, just text her tonight. But Alex, what are you going to do about Ken?"

"I don't think he's dangerous, he's just depressed, and I get that; and I mean, it's his dad's gun anyway, and the clip didn't look loaded so I'm sure the real ammo is locked away and he's not gonna really let anything happen, I'm sure Ken was just showing off."

"If you think so, just stay on his good side, and put in some good words for me just in case."

"Will do, and I'm really sure it's noting, he knows I'm here for him if he needs me. And anyway, Lila's gonna be going up to NYU in New York with her sister."

"Oh so that's where New York University is, I would never have guessed. And still, text her when she gets there then, ask her how it is."

"I know, I know. Also, when she texts she says 'haha' instead of 'lol,' I appreciate that. She's truly cool, in the most Fitzgerald sense of the word."

"You know, Alex, sometimes you say things that make me seem like the straight one."

• • • • •

I texted Lila, I forget about what, but I just texted. And we chatted, she was getting ready to leave for NYU to help her sister move into a new place as well as go to some college parties, she said; I told her to have fun. I told a few more jokes, and she typed out 'haha' instead of 'lol,' (not that it makes much of a difference though). She said she packed *On the Road* to start reading on the flight along with another book, *On Chesil Beach*, for the way back. It was nice talking with her, I liked it, I liked

her, and she was smart, funny, nice, and cool. Maybe I even 'like liked' her.

I texted her again a few days later, the night I knew she'd have arrived at NYU; she texted back and talked about how much she loved the city, and how she'd be going to a 'real college party' that night.

She was going to go to a college party.

In New York.

At a college.

A party.

Fun.

Shit-

And in that moment I knew I was in over my head because my heart sank into my stomach the second she said that. I wasn't just concerned, I was jealous, possessive even.

I hesitated to text again, I didn't want to seem overeager, or concerned, or jealous, or especially possessive. So, I just waited for her to text and waited. She texted at 11PM, with the time difference that made it 2AM there in New York.

"God night alez" [thus was it written]

Wow, the first drunk text I've ever received, I really guess I'm getting closer to being a college student. Not counting, of course, the many angry or disappointed missives I'd wake up to find my father had emailed me in my youth. But I won't dwell on that, back to Lila.

She'd 'lol' and apologize to me the next morning. We texted more that afternoon, and into the night. Just talking about things, but talking with a certain feverish

compulsion like we had to talk to each other, like the other was the only other person in the world worth talking to, and like absolutely nothing else mattered in that moment or in any moment before or any moment after. Pacing in my shut-off bedroom, clutching my phone in my hand, heart leaping with every ding and vibration when I'd immediately and clumsily thumb out a reply, checking it intensively for any grammatical, syntactical, or social errors and making sure subtext matched with context matched with intentions. My god, texting a crush is such a delicate and calculated game. Insert BuzzFeed listicle gif of some person and/or puppy and/or baby doing something that visually embodies that sentence; a picture's worth a thousand words, right? Fuck me. A picture's worth a thousand words, but a word is worth a thousand feelings. That's why Salinger wrote stories and not 'which *Freaks and Geeks* locker are you, and what they look like today.' But I digress.

Lila and I kept texting, and texting, and the things I wanted to say kept becoming bigger and more difficult to say, and I didn't want to not know the tone in which she was responding, or if everything she's said so far has been complete deadpan sarcasm, because I can't tell over text.

"Can I call?" I typed out then deleted.

"Let's talk over the phone." Deleted, again.

"Wanna talk over the phone, my fingers are getting tired." Deleted, I didn't want her to think I was anything but diligent with my fingers.

"Can I call?" Deleted. Retyped. Sent.

My phone began to ring. I picked up after letting it ring once more.

"Hey, Lila, how's it goin'?"

"Good, haha, you?"

"Good good, hahah."

We talked on the phone for a little while, I tried to keep my composure and put the same thought into what I said as I did into what I'd texted. (I know, I know, cutting out of the 'showing' and going into the 'telling' of describing a conversation, but how can I be blamed, I can barely remember what I said, let alone what she said. My heart was racing, and my mind had to keep up.)

"So, did you have fun at the party, any cute guys there?" I let out with baited breath.

A pregnant pause.

"Umm... yeeeah actually..." she said in a way that had me picturing her on the other end of the phone doing one of those corner-of-the-mouth smiles of satisfaction and desire. Goddamnit. Why did I ask?

"Oh." Uh-oh, I thought. I let her continue.

"Yeah, there was this guy —"

Shit.

"—and we were dancing —"

Piss.

"—I was pretty drunk at that point —"

Fuck.

"—and we started making out on the dancefloor —"

Cunt.

“—then he took me to another place inside and we made out more—”

Cocksucker.

“—and then he asked me if I wanted to go upstairs—”

Motherfucker.

“—but I said no, so he just stayed on the couch, kissing, and feeling me up—”

Tits?

“Oh, god, I’m sorry, why did I tell you any of that,” she said laughing.

“It’s fine Lila, I asked.” Yeah, I did.

I asked her about it a little more. She said it was fun, but, of course, it didn’t mean anything. I started to ask her what she wanted, or where she saw herself in the dating scene. I was steering the conversation in that direction, and there was no turning back. There’s that moment in a conversation, a moment where something is said that cannot be unsaid; whether you learn something about this person, or they truly let you into their life, or they just say something special, but whatever it is, from that moment on, everything is different. You can’t go back to not loving this person. You can’t help falling in love. After this moment, the conversation changes, and you both inch toward that one truth, and with each successive step, there’s no going back. You just go deeper, the innuendos become less subtle, the hints more blatant, and then you get to that point where there’s nothing else to do other than to just say it. Nothing else to do other than to open your heart and let them inside, and never to go back.

She said she never thought much about it but that it would be nice to be in a relationship. I said I felt the same. I also said that I had really enjoyed getting to know her so far and that I enjoyed her company a lot, but I hesitated to go so far as to say 'had we but world enough and time.' I think at this point she knew where the conversation was going, so I just came out with it as best as I could.

"I don't know, um, well, what would you think about, y'know, what if we tried it." Real poetic shit, marriage proposal material right there. God, I'm so pathetic, but I continued, "I dunno, neither of us have done anything like dating before, but we want to, and I don't know, it'd be fun, it'd be nice, right?"

"You think so, Alexander?" she said, enunciating each syllable of my name, as if at that moment she was creating an image of me in her mind that she could see herself being with.

"Yeah, I mean, you're absolutely great, and I—"

"Sure, why not?"

Wait what, really? Shit, this actually worked? I actually did something right? Really? "What? Um, okay, wow, yeah, okay—"

"Haha, yeah."

"So I guess we're..."

"Yeah, I guess we are..."

"Soo... I'll talk to you tomorrow?"

"Yep, talk to you tomorrow. Have a good night, Alex."

"You too, Lila. Night."

Um, wow. It took a little while for what had just happened to sink in, and even then it still didn't seem real. I was so unbelievably happy in every way, words can't really come to mind, just a love-drunk euphoria. I just hope that I'll wake up tomorrow morning and this all will still have happened.

## CHAPTER 14.

### First Date

LILA WOULD BE BACK home in San Diego in two days, I wondered if she talked to her dad. I talked to Dan, and all he could say was 'I told you so.' There were less than two weeks of summer left, and I was almost ready to begin the end of my high school career. When Lila got home, I went to see her. She opened the door to her house, and we just kind of looked up and down each other thinking 'this is it, this is her' and 'this is it, this is him.' She stretched out her arms for a hug, and we embraced as boyfriend and girlfriend. Her parents were home, and so I drove with her down to the beach at Crystal Pier. She hadn't told them anything yet. I parked at the park, the grassy outlook above the cliffs and beach, opened her door for her, and we walked up and down the Cliffside and down onto the beach.

Walking next to each other, chatting, our hands brushed up against the other's as I made that nerve-racking yet ever-hopeful slow crawl of my fingers to meet hers. Heart pounding, I was barely paying attention to what was being said, let alone where I was walking, as I thought how so much depended upon on

such a small gesture. Then our fingers touched again, and I made the smooth move to interlace mine with hers, and her hand was quickly in mine. She looked up to me with those big, beautiful eyes and smiled. She squeezed my palm affectionately, and she swung our arms back and forth as we continued to walk.

The sun was starting to set, and so we wanted to get somewhere nice to watch it, but as late summer days go, the sun crept down to the crepuscular horizon quicker than we had thought it could and we were soon in the dusk. Time flies when you're with a person like her.

"Um, where do you want to sit?" I asked.

"Here is perfect," and she just sat down where she stood in the damp sand as she pulled me down next to her by my hand.

Keeping our hands held, I swung my arm around her shoulder, and we sat close, watching night follow day, moon chasing sun. And it just felt so very right. It was so completely new for me, for the both of us, everything we were doing was pretty much a first for both of us, so we were just making it up as we went along, but it still just felt so right, everything we did felt right, and secure, and just nice.

There was a small break in the conversation, and I turned to look at her, looking from her eyes to her lips and back again as she did the same to me.

"Well..."

"Well, I know what you're thinking," she said.

“You want to?” I asked with hope and interest.

“Well, talking about it is only making me want to do it more.”

I reached my free hand up and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, resting my palm on the back of her neck and pulling us together. And then our lips met. I could feel all of her in my arms as she opened her lips, ever so slightly, and closed them again, as I mirrored her mouth with mine. She drew back slowly, looked at me again and smiled, I couldn’t help but smile what was probably the goofiest, involuntary, full-faced smile; a smile that continued into the next kiss.

I didn’t care that I was cold, or that my pants were damp, or that there was sand in my shoes or about anything else, and I hoped she felt the same way as we continued to kiss. Just kiss, which was nice, only employing a tasteful amount of tongue. And it was perfect. I can’t think of any other time in my whole life where everything had just seemed so perfect in every way-

“As absolutely perfect as this is, Alexander, I’m so cold.”

“Oh thank God you said something about it because I wouldn’t have moved otherwise.”

I got up, helped her up, and walked with my arm around her holding her close all the way back to my car, shaking off the sand on the way. I opened the door for her, taking it all in on the walk around the car to my

door. As I sat down in the driver's seat, I reached the key to the ignition as a motor reflex and then thought better as I put the keys in the cup holder and leaned over to kiss my girlfriend. My girlfriend, I thought. This time she went at it, tongues dancing, her fingers running through my hair, I still couldn't help but smile that goofy smile of pure elation as I ran my hands softly over her supple curves over her clothes.

*Lover's Spit* played on the radio on the drive back as I held the wheel with one hand and held her hand in her lap with the other.

*And she's so pretty that you're lost in the stars, as you jockey your way through the cars... and you're in love with all the wonder it brings, and every muscle in your body sings as the highway ignites.*

I dropped her off two houses down from her door, she had told her parents that she was out with a girlfriend of hers, she didn't want to drop the bomb on them just yet. I put the top down, and drove home with the wind in my hair, still smiling wildly like a happy idiot.

"Woooooooooooooooooaaaaa!" I shouted to the heavens and oncoming traffic, thrusting the fist that wasn't attached to the wheel into the air. I had just had the first kiss with my first girlfriend, and so I felt that I was allowed to embrace clichés for a night.

I texted her when I got home, as she asked me to, and we said goodnight to each other ten times before

finally letting each other go to bed. I didn't mind though, not at all.

And I knew I could just mentally zoom out through the lens of my depression and know that none of it mattered at all, but for now, not in that specious present, but in that spectacular now, it was all that mattered.

## CHAPTER 15.

### 400 Lux

DAN AND I would fantasize some more about the trip we said we'd be taking in less than a year, but nothing in the future seemed quite real. Not a cross-country road trip, not college, not adulthood.

As the start of the year of lasts approached I went to dinner at Lila's one more time, this time, her parents knew that she and I were more than acquaintances, but I'm not sure how much they really knew or imagined. I felt like we went through the introductions all over again, and that something, somehow was different. Mr. Darcy was less cordial, more paternal, I just wanted him to like me like he did. Mrs. Darcy was still as chipper as always though, which was nice; Mrs. Darcy more than anything made me feel at home there. I was always happy when I was a part of that family, it's just now I have even more reason to feel a part of it, even more reason to be happy. I hadn't really thought about how Mr. Darcy would react until now, though.

Dan and I had Hodad's burgers, fries, and shakes at the cliffs the night before the first day of school; too bad this only became a tradition of sorts in the last two years

of high school. I don't know how I'd describe the feeling I had that night: reluctant, hopeful, relieved? High school's been a long fucking climb, and I'll be glad when it's over, this college application shit has just become tedious and annoying, and I'm tired of the cliques and trivialities and the drama, but at the same time I'm looking forward to this last year, and looking forward to whatever comes after, and I'm so happy to have someone like Lila in my life.

It's moments like this though, infinite moments that I know will be over so soon, when I just want time to stand still. Times when I remember my dad would play with me in the yard as a boy, when we'd go camping, or when my mom would come into my room and kiss me goodnight. Times when I'd fall asleep on the couch in my parent's arms and wake up safe in my bed. Back in a time before time was valuable before the weight of the adult world was on my back. Goddamn, I really fucking miss Mister Rogers. I wish I could go back and tell myself to live up those days and moments, but I don't even know if I'd do a single thing differently. I wish I could stay here, I wish I could just sit right here with Dan, and the sun would never set. I wish I were holding Lila in my arms for an endless night. I wish the summer would last forever. *It feels so scary getting old.*

. . . . .

*Wake up you need to make money.* Well, the year of lasts had begun with the last first day of school. Among the

populars, tubby juniors came back as skinny seniors having spent a summer on oxy and in gyms; that was just what happened. I saw Ken in passing in the halls, I asked him how his first day was going, and he just shrugged. Classes were pretty normal and the year seemed pretty much like any other. And then, in that time after school and before practice, Lila and I sat and talked on a bench overlooking the small valley behind school. We talked the small talk of 'how are you' and 'how was your day' that, with her, meant the world to me. We'd make a habit of alternating talking in that hour with driving off-campus to some hidden residential nook to make out in the back seat of my car or hers (I liked driving, but I liked the fold-down back seats of her big new Subaru even more). I loved spending any time with her, I'd enjoy just talking with her, about her day, her friends, and her life, and I'd love sitting with her in her room watching Netflix, and I'd love cooking with her, all like real grown-ups.

One day after school we stopped at a Starbucks before finding a parking spot. We both got the seasonal Peppermint Mochas in the red cups, and as we soon found out, they taste great when shared over a kiss. That taste on our lips and tongues, our lovers spit. And after that, any day after school, 'let's go get peppermint mochas' became shorthand for 'let's go make out,' even after winter had passed. One of the best was when we went to get a gas station automated drive-through carwash to get her car washed, and we kissed as the colors of soap ran down the windshield like a cotton

candy sunset.

Homecoming came and went, and it was really nice. There was already a shit-ton of hype for the *Gatsby* movie coming out next year, and so the dance was 1920's themed. I asked Lila to the dance with less than a room full of flowers, but she accepted me anyway. That was the first dance I'd been to in a long time, and the first dance I'd ever had a date at, but also the last homecoming I'd ever go to too. And we had fun, and damn did I find out she's a good dancer. Ken would tell me he spent the night pining over Livi, who left the dance early for some reason.

The weekend after that, when we'd planned to go to the bookstore by her house and have coffee at the little shop next to it, we instead just laid in her bed, holding each other, talking, laughing, and kissing. Pillow talk became one of, if not my favorite thing (well we haven't had sex yet, so there's always that too); but anyway, pillow talk is that incredible thing, where we could even just stare at each other or hold each other and be happy. I'd hold her in my arms, laying in her bed as a record would quietly play, her head nestled at the space in between my shoulder and my chest, smelling her hair, feeling my heart beat against her head. In that moment I was simultaneously completely vulnerable while also completely comfortable, we saw and experienced a side of the other that no one else knew; that was intimacy. And then we'd hear a stirring at the front door, and immediately sit up, pull out her laptop, and turn on Netflix. We were making our way through all of *Mad*

*Men*, a show that more often than not had the wonderful effect of turning her on quite a bit.

And then I'd drive, or she'd drive, she'd take me to The Pannikin, and I'd take her to The Living Room, she'd take me to The Baked Bear, and I'd take her to Bud's Lighthouse Ice Cream, she'd take me to Puesto and I'd take her to Rancho's (now it's called Hugo's, and it still has the best Mexican food in the city); we'd each let the other into our worlds, I knew she was from a different world, that she'd grown up happy and never had to want, but no part of me resented that about her. I was happy that she was happy, and that's a great thing to feel for someone else.

And we'd talk. And then we'd have the big talk.

"I mean why not?" I just put it out there.

"I don't know, I never really have before, ever. Have you?"

"No, never. But really what's the difference?"

"I know," she smiled, "do you want to?"

"I've never been more sure before in my life."

"Really?"

"Of course, Lila. I mean, you know, we 'like like' each other, we do everything else but say it, so why not just say it? Because that's how I feel, Lila, that's really how I feel."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay." (Ugh, did we just...? Yeah, I think we just... Eww, gross.)

We each drew in a breath and said to each other "I

love you," as if it had never been said before.

We smiled.

"I love you, Delilah Darcy," I said, and I kissed her.

"And I love *you*, Alexander Kaoruac," and we kissed again.

. . . . .

One night, when we said we were going to some school football game we drove back down to Sunset Cliffs in her car, leaving mine at school, and parking a few distant blocks away from my house; in all four years of high school, I never went to a single high school football game. Lowering the back seats, we settled in, making out, and feeling all of each other. As we made out, and the windows began to fog up, we began to take off more and more of our clothes in the back of that humid SUV. She was so beautiful in her matching underwear. We were both in our underwear as I began to kiss her from her neck, around her earlobe and down, down her neck, down her elegant collarbone, grasping her breasts; I reached under her bra and pulled out a breast, sucking and kissing her nipple, and she gasped with pleasure as I continued downward, kissing and licking and pecking down, down her stomach, and further down. My head was between her trembling legs as I kissed her over her underwear, feeling the warm and the damp underneath. I clumsily undid her bra strap, reaching around her. I kissed down and back up her legs, grazing the stubble on my chin across the inside of her thigh and to that

place again. I looked up at her, she bit her lip and smiled with a nod as I ran my finger under the hem of her panties, and pulled them gently aside. She shook and quivered and moaned underneath me, her hand running through my hair, and the other hand held mine over her breasts.

I had no idea what I was doing, I mean I'd watched a lot of porn (a lot of porn), and, well, that was about it. And what she knew, she knew from gossip, and from her sister, and from Lana Del Rey lyrics. But we did pretty alright. She reached up to the foggy glass of the backseat window and let her hand slide down it, fulfilling a boyhood fantasy of mine I'd had since watching *Titanic* at an impressionable age. Our bodies moved together as skin met skin and I found myself lying down as she inspected me, grabbed onto me, and began a curious hand-job.

Neither of us finished, but it didn't matter, we just held each other, semi-naked, in the back of her car in an abandoned cliffside parking lot as ignorant armies clashed with the shore below.

The next day we had a concerned conversation about 'things moving too fast,' and I agreed in understanding, but not much else. I'd do anything for her, so I was fine with anything, I'd do anything not to lose her or what we had. I did love her.

## CHAPTER 16.

### Shake Me Down

OL' KEN SEEMED to like this Livi girl a lot. She was a freshman that year, and I think Ken planned to love from afar until something either changed in him or around him. I hoped he wasn't holding out for fear of failing, but I don't know, with a guy like him, maybe it is just better to not get hurt.

My parents had been fighting again, and I was getting ready to submit some of the last pieces of my apps one night in early November when Ken emailed me out of nowhere, he seemed like he'd been drinking and he told me he'd been writing (a dangerous combination). He sent me his newest true-life journal excerpt short story thing whatever.

*The weekend before Halloween was the Twain Elementary's Halloween carnival, and I went with Reuben. There I was, so happy with my childhood memories, the sights and smells and the old buildings brought me back to a time of innocence. After the carnival, we walked a couple of blocks down over to my cousin's Halloween party (dad's side, she's in her senior year at La Jolla High). We arrived at 8:30, and everyone was already drunk. Her sister, one of my other*

*cousins, a junior at SDSU, who works at a Sports Clips (the Hooters of haircuts), hit on me, a lot, and without any restraint.*

*Being there, I was appalled and truly lost, like I didn't even know where I was, just taking in the sights and horror of this foreign yet so familiar experience. It was just the same as it would be with the kids at my school, the parties that I'd hear about (not that I would ever be invited). The next few days at school I'd always overhear the gossip about who was drunk, who hooked up with who, which party got rolled, and the brutal and unflattering pictures that I would hear about as they percolated out online; all told and done with the confidence and nonchalance of normality without consequence.*

*Being there though, it was unlike anything else I had ever experienced but exactly as I would have imagined; the red cups and the tiny clear plastic shot glasses everywhere, the individual water bottles almost definitely not filled with water that everyone clung to, the people draped over each other, the guys hunched over girls wearing almost nothing, the locked rooms that let out the sound of fucking even over the loud and shitty music that was playing, the crowded bathrooms and other closed rooms people were all stumbling to get a line in, the booze inside and pot outside, those acrid smells filling the whole house, savage and bacchanalian, and absolutely bewildering and overwhelming to every part of me. I felt out of place and unwelcome. I hit up the frothy, watery keg until some people asked who I knew and I left as soon as I could after that. And with that, it was over as soon as it had begun, like walking through a dream, a horrible and foreign dream.*

*School goes on, and I'm left behind in life.*

*And all I can think is that I love Livi Mardling. The feeling has just been building for so long. I love her, and I know that it's all that I've wanted. Olivia Price Mardling. She's all that I want to think about anymore and just being around her makes me so deeply happy, that deep, warm, happiness, like what home should feel like. That feeling that I haven't truly had in so very long. I love her, and there's nothing that I can do about it. I want to be with her, I want to listen, and I don't want to say a word. I love Livi Mardling.*

*But Livi, I have resolved, does not like me. I feel nothing anymore. Elementary school was the best. I remember that it was just so simple and fun, and nothing really mattered, but I tried anyway. I had friends, such good friends, and we all just had fun. Then middle school hit and a whole slew of new faces showed up. Everyone knew so much, but it seemed like I was the only smart one. They talked about sex, and other things I had never been exposed to or even heard of. It was such a shock, such a different world. I was bullied too. I was smart and a bit of an asshole about it. And because of it, I was called queer, fag, retard and all other kinds of things, and I let it happen, I fed it. I just remember it was horrible, but I still hung out with those guys because they were all there was, all I had, so I put up with all of it to be accepted. It was bad, and I don't ever remember it getting better. I was able to move away from those people enough to be okay, and that's when I met everyone in the group when they all came to the school in 6th grade. Things were better after that. Things were good then. I just can't imagine them being that good again. I think I have to let Livi go, let Brooke go, let it all slip away.*

*Forgetting you but not the time.*

Oh fuck me, I just don't want to deal with this tonight. I told him I'd see him at school in the morning.

. . . . .

In the morning he seemed agitated and tired. He told me he wanted to tell Livi, but he didn't know how.

"Well, how'd you tell Lila?" he asked.

"Tell her what?"

"That you liked her, how'd you get her to go out with you?"

I had to think about that, "Well, I didn't really. We just kind of texted and then talked it out."

He seemed dissatisfied with the answer and said, "I should write Livi a letter."

I hesitated to shoot down that insane and out of touch idea. "Sure thing, man," I said instead. I was about to walk away, but before exiting, I turned to ask, "Do you really love her?"

"Yes," he answered with a concerning amount of self-assurance.

"Well, Ken, I mean, that still might not be love."

"I think- I believe that it is. I know it is, it has to be."

## CHAPTER 17.

### In The Aeroplane Over The Sea

THINGS WITH LILA and I had gotten pretty regular. We were a known “item” around campus; as a couple, we were something people didn’t expect but also thought made so much sense when they heard about it. We had our routines, we’d see each other when we could during the day, and we’d park in some hidden place to make out, take off our clothes, and do ‘everything but’ in that hour after school. I know how lucky I was to have a girl like Lila, she was great, and she was so adventurous and so sexy. It was incredible. She’d go and read Cosmo articles in her free time and ‘report her findings’ to me orally. I’m just glad she never tried to eat a donut off of my dick. And while she read Cosmo and listened to Lana’s sultry sexuality, I read Vice articles about cunnilingus and did everything I could to make myself the best person for her.

I submitted the rest of my college apps and was happily done, it was out of my hands now. And so, that weekend I wanted to celebrate. Lila and I hadn’t really

been on a proper date in a while, or ever I thought so I picked her up, and we got dinner at a place by her house, a cozy-fun little place called the Prepkitchen in La Jolla and then we went to the movies at the Arclight, what an incredible theatre. Nice seats, they served booze to the adults, I felt fancy as fuck there. It seemed like everything was nicer in that part of town, in her life. They were all the same things that were in my life, just nicer, better versions of them. We went to see *Moonrise Kingdom* while it was still in theatres, it was fun, and we held hands and cuddled up with each other. And then, on our way out of the cinema, we passed by a theatre that was playing an old screening of the 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*, and she grabbed me by the hand and ran in. It was one of her favorites.

It was such a beautiful movie, it was also an incredibly erotic film. We held hands, and she cuddled up close, and then, out of nowhere, her other hand found its way down my pants. And so, my hand found a similar home up her skirt. The theatre was nearly full. I continued to move my fingers inside of her for what was the majority of the movie. And when the star-crossed lovers arranged their accidentally simultaneous suicides (oh irony, it was just that the time was wrong), I began to withdraw my hand, but she gently held my wrist and kept my hand in place, her other hand moving again into my pants. *Oh happy dagger, this is thy sheath.*

She kissed me passionately when the credits rolled, and I wiped my fingers on the seat as we left. It was late, and so I drove in the direction of her home. I was about

four blocks away from her house, turning off of a larger street when she told me to turn into the parking lot of a church at the corner. It was sometime around midnight, and the neighborhood was empty. I parked behind a wall under the yellow-orange tungsten glow of a parking lot floodlight. We moved to the cramped back seat of the Mustang, like we had so many times before, and did what we did best.

Our clothes were off, and our bodies were pressed against each other, the windows to the outside world fogging and becoming more opaque with each consecutive breath. She straddled me, naked, and rubbed up and down against me, moving her hips. I could feel her warmth as I was perfectly nestled up against her.

"If we're going to keep doing it like this, I think I should wear a condom," I whispered to her after nibbling her ear.

"You're right," as she shifted over and allowed me to reach in the compartment between the seats to get out a condom.

I rolled it down over myself slowly and cautiously as she watched.

She straddled me again and gyrated her hips against me, kissing my neck.

"Do you want to?" she asked.

"Really? Do you?" surprised and barely containing my joy.

"Put it in."

Before now we'd only practiced the 'just the tip'

routine on her bed. Each time it was too painful to continue. We had the condoms for that purpose so we could keep trying until it didn't hurt. This process frustrated her each time, but I never minded, I always tried to be as patient and understanding, and at her pace as I could. I never expected it would turn into sex though, I hoped of course, but I had no expectations and wanted whatever she was comfortable with.

I slid inside of her with complete and surprising ease. She gasped with pleasure with me.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

She smiled incredibly, "not at all."

She raised and lowered herself slowly, and our bodies moved together immaculately.

And then we clumsily tried to switch positions, bumping knees, elbows, and heads and doing the Kama Sutra proud with the flexibility needed to do coitus in the cramped back seat of an American muscle car. I wish I could paint some beautiful, erotic picture like the one I will forever have in my memory, but sex is nowhere near a perfect or pristine act in real life. It's fun, it's messy, it's funny, our bodies make noises and produce various fluids and involuntary exclamations. It's not some soft-focused act of missionary love in the light of a hundred candles, it's two bodies moving with and against each other in sweat and in love. And that is more beautiful than anything I could imagine, because what we had, what we did, that was perfect in all of its quirks and imperfections. We wanted nothing more than to share that with each other, and when I finished, panting,

I tied off the condom, and we held each other in our warm sweaty arms, catching our breath, and pecking each other's lips, smiling.

We put our clothes back on, and I drove her home through the cool night, walking her to her door with a kiss and a smile.

## CHAPTER 18.

### Sappy

LILA CALLED ME on the phone saying that it hurt immensely to pee.

Aww, fucking come on. Can I just have one good thing, please?

We talked, and then she went to her mom with the problem who soon drove her to Planned Parenthood. Her mom wasn't worried in the slightest while Lila and I had, on the other hand, no idea what was going on. She left the building with a prescription for antibiotics and a bottle of cranberry juice for her run of the mill urinary tract infection.

"My mom said she used to get them all the time when she started having sex," she said. Well, I guess the cat's out of the bag now, or the pussy or something, no more meeting the parents for me, "she told me I just have to pee afterword, and this shouldn't happen again."

Goddamnit. Well, I'm glad it was fairly innocuous, I'm damn sorry I caused her that pain though. Nothing the miracles of modern medicine can't fix though. And by the time my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday came around at the end of

November, we were back in business, as I started to come to glad terms with the fact that I was now a sexual being (protected fully under the Romeo and Juliet Law, I think).

. . . . .

Ken told me he had written a letter for Livi, and he wanted to give it to her before school got out for December break.

"I put a lot of work into it, and I think I've perfected it, will you take a look at it tomorrow?" he asked after school one day.

The 'tomorrow' in question was Friday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, a day that started as unassumingly as any other. Until around lunchtime, when I walked around campus and passed a person crying, then another, and then another sobbing while on the phone. I went online to find that some sick fuck had just killed 20 little kids in an elementary school in Connecticut. I tried to find Lila, and I held her as she cried. I called home and left a message simply telling my parents that I loved them.

Kenneth didn't seem as affected as I thought he should be, and he still gave me his letter during break, "Here," he said handing me the folded up, printed out sheet. I didn't read it until that weekend.

*Olivia Price Mardling*

*Livi, although it is impossible to say what I mean, I will try to tell you in writing, the only way I know how.*

*The heart of an artist beats inside her. And I want her to know me as I want to know her. I want to be hers, and I want to be in her arms. I want to listen, and I don't want to say a word. She is all that I want to think about, all that I can think about anymore. My heart aches when I see her, when I pass her when she smiles. It hurts so profoundly to see her and not be with her. But the hope that she will feel the same way, and just being around her, makes me so deeply happy, that deep warm happiness, like home.*

*Lying is usually easy because lying is usually easier than telling the truth. Telling her that I don't like her amongst suspicion and rumor, is the hardest lie I have ever told.*

*So I tell you now, Livi. I Love You. With all my being and all my heart, I Love you.*

*Ever since I first saw you, so many years ago, I knew you were different, I knew you were special. And now I know your heart as you have stolen mine. I Love you Livi, I love your kindness, your humility, your boldness, and your elegance, I even love your laugh. You are so beautiful in every possible way, and just being around you makes me feel alive, warm, and at peace. I love everything about you and am willing to do anything for you. Just being around you makes me the happiest I have ever been, but it hurts as well. Just to see you, in all of your beauty, it hurts to see you and know that I am not with you, it hurts to think about you and not be with you, it hurts to be right next to you, and know how far away we are. I love you Livi, and I love your heart. The heart of an artist beats inside you, kind and loving, the heart of an artist beats inside of you, and I want to be right there with you, because now I know that's all I've ever wanted.*

*I Love You.*

*Kenneth Chester*

I didn't know whether I'd rather her break his heart later or break it myself right now. The poor, goddamned, hopeless, romantic sop. He wanted to give it to her on Monday.

Monday evening I'd get the Facebook message explaining that Livi wasn't at school that day.

"I don't know maybe I shouldn't give it to her; maybe nothing ever works out for me. Maybe this is just how it is. I don't know anymore."

I was with Lila and didn't respond, and it seemed like he was getting the right idea, anyway.

He messaged me the next day.

"I gave Livi the letter at school today; I handed it to her and told her that I had written it for her and I said thank you and so did she, taking it and walking away. I hope this works; I hope that this will get her to see so she can like me."

He didn't hear from her or see her until the next week, on the last day of school before break. I don't know how he handled the anticipation. I saw him after school just standing by his locker, I asked him if he'd heard from her.

"Yeah..." he let out.

"What's she say?"

"She said that I am a great person, she wants to be friends, she's too busy, and she will cherish the letter. I don't know what to feel, I don't know how to feel."

"Jesus man, I'm sorry."

"It just sucks, you know? When your heart has been completely shattered, and there's no one to blame but yourself. I put everything into that letter, how could she turn me down?"

"I'm sorry, man."

I wouldn't see him until we got back from break in the New Year.

## CHAPTER 19.

### Just Impolite

LILA'S PARENTS BEGAN to be a lot more comfortable with the idea of me being her boyfriend, and so I'd continue to have dinners with the family and when her parents weren't home I'd spend the night over with her in her bed, (though I had to assure my parents that her parents were home, and Lila had to assure her parents that I was in the guest bed). After a week and a half, Lila again went away for vacation, but we Skyped and texted, so it wasn't too bad to be apart from each other, and when school resumed it was like we didn't miss a beat.

Lila and I laid together, semi-clothed, in the back of her car chatting after school the first day back.

"Are you nervous about getting letters back from colleges?" she asked.

"I mean, yeah, I guess, but I know things will work out, they always do even if they don't."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the worst case scenario isn't even that bad; worst case is I don't get accepted anywhere, and I just go to community college for a year and reapply after

that. I'll still be healthy, have a roof over my head, food on the table, and I- I'll still have you."

She kissed me.

"I mean, *you* won't have to worry, you're a genius," I said.

She sighed, "Don't you say that too, please."

"What?"

"Everyone says that, you know what a burden that is, Alex?"

"But it's true though, you're incredible, and smart, and kind, and I love you."

"I love you too, but I just work hard, like everyone else."

"You don't have to be modest with me, Lila, you deserve to brag."

"It wouldn't be bragging, I've had to be like this Alex, do you know how hard it is to go to a school where your dad's a teacher, and a good teacher and everyone automatically expects you to be smart and to do well? It means you don't get congratulated for your successes because they're taken as a given, and you get chastised even harder for your failures." Her eyes welled with tears as she spoke, and I held her close.

"I'm so sorry, it's okay though, I love you, I love you, Lila," I said to her as she began to cry, "it's okay, just let it out." She cried for a little bit more, and then I asked, "But your dad, I'm sure if you just told him he'd understand."

She drew back a bit, "Alex, you don't understand. I don't know what you think my life is like at home but—  
"

"I'm sure it's better than fighting, your parents love you, and they care and they —"

"Alex. At least your parents fight. Mine don't even fight anymore, they barely talk about anything anymore, it's this horrible status-quo, 'if we don't talk about it nothing's wrong' mentality, and it's terrible. My dad is completely checked out, they both are, all they barely even care about is work, and he drinks all the time because he's so sad but will never show it or try and get help. He comes to school every day with a thermos full of coffee and just enough whiskey to make it through the day but not get drunk. And I can't tell anyone because then he'd lose his job and then he'd really have nothing. And ever since my sister went to college, there's been no one I feel like I can talk to, and I feel so alone at home without her there and —"

"I'm here for you, Lila, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I'm here for you, I love you."

"I know, Alex, I'm sorry I yelled, I love you too, so much," she said wiping her face of the tears and kissing me.

We held each other and pecked each other's lips saying 'I love you' and 'I love you too.' I texted my coach saying I was sick, and Lila and I stayed in her car until seven at night when I had to get home from 'practice.'

## CHAPTER 20.

### Talk Show Host

THINGS WITH LILA and I were still perfect. It was a different story with Ken though, it seemed the world had gone upside down on him. He told me Livi was dating someone now, that Brooke hates him, that he has no friends, and that he wanted to just die. He was going a mile a minute, and I tried to get him to just slow down and tell me one thing at a time. He just said not to worry, which made me worry even more.

That night he apologized for being so brash and sent me some entries explaining the things that had happened.

First:

*I just got off the phone with Brooke. It was good though, good to talk to her about it. And she told me about everything that happened last year, everything in their lives that I just wasn't a part of. She told me about the summer before freshman year, when Carl was with Jamie (summer relationships never last), they ended it before school started. She told me about the night before Homecoming when she talked with Carl, and they decided that they liked each other and decided to go out without really telling Jamie first. She*

*told me how they had made out and talked outside during the dance. She told me that Jamie found out when she came outside to look for Carl during the slow dance and saw them together, Brooke said that Jamie 'just knew' and she ran into the girl's bathroom crying and then left immediately. Brooke and Carl stayed outside even then. She told me how upset Jamie was when she found out and how she was crushed and has been upset to this day. Brooke told me how she'd felt and feels horrible, and how she hates herself for being so selfish and putting her feelings before her friends. She told me how she is still haunted by it, and how Jamie brings it up every so often.*

*Last month I remembered sitting down with Jamie one day after school when she looked particularly distraught, and I found the words '365 days' written on her arm with a black sharpie. After considerable talking and comforting, I got her to tell me what happened. When I asked her what was on her arm and what it meant, she told me that that was how long it's been since Carl had broken her heart. She took it hard, and I can tell things like that really affect her. She seems melancholy about it even now, bringing it up at times as if only for dramatic effect though, and to make those around her think about her. A true writer.*

*At the time I did not know the full extent of the story, but I do now. I think they all just need to get over themselves and move on so they can be the friends that they were meant to be. Also, a lot of the fault can be put on Carl anyway, not knowing what he was doing. Tomorrow, I will pick up the phone with Brooke again. I will also talk to Livi, soon I hope, and figure things out. Brooke really has no idea what a good person she is, and how bad others (like me) are.*

And it only seemed to get worse:

*It's over, Facebook fucking official. Livi is with Toby. That fuck, fuck them, I'll find my own way, but just why him? I will confront him, and then find my own way, I have to now. Fuck it. I have so much, but I can never have the one thing I want.*

. . . . .

*I'm at least a little more calm now. I just couldn't deal with it. It was just at the top of the Facebook newsfeed, and I hit the wall, and I just walked outside, ran. I just ran, down the cement alley. The sky and air were at that point of it almost raining, so everything was wet, and the air was thick; I was panting, and my bare feet smacked against the wet ground as I just ran. I just fucking ran. I ran down the alley, down the street, ran until I had to catch my breath, ran until I hurt all over. And then I walked back home. Damp all over, my face cold and wet and stinging. The cold air hit my face so hard and fast that tears streamed down my face. Everything was dark and grey. The pavement, the sky, the old wooden fences and cinderblock walls of the alley, the road, even the air was grey. I walked back home, catching my breath and collecting my thoughts. How, just fucking how? Goddamn it! What am I going to do now? What can I do? I'm just going to go to bed for tonight, if I can, I hope that takes me away at least until tomorrow. Just Goddamnit. Why can't I be the happy one, why can't I ever just be the happy one? These girls deserve so much better than the idiot jerks they're with. Stupid whores, they think they're too good for me? Why can't I ever be happy?*

And worse:

*Nothing happened, nothing ever does. I didn't do shit today. Last night I went from mad to sad to hopeful to determined by the time it was morning. I didn't sleep at all. I was so fucking happy this morning. I felt like I could do something, like I was kind of free and could finally ask a girl out, Beatrice, or someone. But as the day went on, my happiness was slowly chiseled away until now, I'm back to being just as sad and angry as I was. I feel like I have no power, and I need that. Is it even worth resolving to do anything anymore? I could talk to Beatrice tomorrow or Monday, or just give up on that. And I have so much, Alexander, Reuben, I have so much, just not her, not Livi. I just want a girlfriend, someone to hold, and nothing more. Just that.*

*What could fucking Toby have that I don't? Or even Alex, he's no different than me, and he still gets the girl, and fuck, he could have stopped me giving that goddamned letter to Livi and ruining everything for me. Goddamnit.*

*In the morning, I was so pumped up, so very happy and hopeful. But as the day went on I just felt worse and worse, heavier. Until I had just given up.*

*I don't know, I just don't know. I just know I don't want to be here, I don't want to be at school, I don't want to see people, or hear them, or deal with them, or any of this. There are times I just feel like I want to go away, to disappear, to shrink behind something, be hidden and then just disappear. Like I used to do when I was in 5th-grade violin; I was taller than everyone else, and I didn't know any violin so I always stood in the back row and bent my knees so the teacher wouldn't see me not playing behind everyone else. I just*

*wanted to shrink away and disappear. Like when I'm near the ocean and look into the dark water, deep into it, and just want to fall in and sink and be gone. I can't do this anymore.*

*I really can't do this anymore. I don't want to feel this, I don't want to be here. It's late at night now, the house is so quiet. The night is so dark and so quiet, I can hear dogs off in the distance barking though. The house feels so empty. I feel so empty and so angry.*

*I got a zipper bag from the kitchen, tiptoeing back to my room, I put two sharpies in the bag, I put them on top of each other in an 'X,' and I put it on the floor and pressed down in the center of the 'X' until I heard two snaps. I'm looking at the bag, the black ink with tones of deep iridescent blue and purple is smearing the bottom. I shake the bag, and now I'm just looking at it, I'm still writing this, and I don't know why I just feel so empty. Empty.*

*I opened the bag and put it over my nose and mouth; I took a big breath in through my nose, exhaled outside of the bag and then took another breath in it. I dropped the bag on my desk, picked this up, then I sat down on my bed. The head rush was instantaneous, I feel light headed now, I feel tired. I'm done. The sensation is overwhelming. I wanted to be anywhere, but here, I feel everywhere but here. My head just hurts, and I just feel dizzy and tired. I'm tired. I'm done. I'm done. Night.*

*And with that, he said 'goodnight' to me. I thought back to the first time I met that confused emo kid, and about the violent reputation that preceded him. I worried about what was going through his head.*

The next day at school Mr. Darcy saw me in the hall and beckoned me into his classroom.

"Hey, Alex?" he said once the door shut.

"Yes, sir?"

"Ken showed me a thing he'd written this morning," he shuffled through some papers on top of his desk and handed me one of them, "here, this, do you know about this?"

I looked over the page, it looked like a more edited version of what he'd sent me last night, "umm, yeah, actually, he sent me something like this last night."

"It's not fiction, is it?" he said, not wanting it to be true.

"No, I don't think it is."

"It reads like a manifesto, Alex. Has he been acting up lately?"

"No, not really, he's just been down I guess, he's not violent or anything I don't think." But as soon as I said that, I had to think twice about whether I really thought he was or not.

"Well, when I read it, he waited for me to read it, I told him he should think about talking to the school psychiatrist about it, Doctorrrr..." he trailed off searching for the name.

"Kindlon," I said.

"Yes, Kindlon, Dr. Kindlon. But when I said so, he just snatched the paper up and stormed out of the room. Teenagers scare the shit out of me, Alex, what should I do?"

"Jesus, I don't know."

"Neither do I, maybe you could talk to him about talking to someone about what he's feeling or going through, maybe it'd help hearing that from a friend," Mr. Darcy put forth to me.

"Maybe he thought you were that friend."

That night I got another email from Ken.

*Alexander, I don't know what to do, I don't know, I just don't know what to write, what to do, anything. You're the only person I can talk to anymore. Today was bad, really bad, this entire week I've just been receding further and further into myself. I want to end this, Alex. Last week, whatever the fuck happened, was bullshit. I don't know. Now, it's all gone. I don't feel anything, and I know that this all sounds like poetic bullshit, but it is true. I'm disgusted with Brooke, who is with that fuck Carl. Why, why, why? Who the fuck is he but a fucking beta queer? So fuck him, fuck them. Jamie means nothing anymore, nothing, she hates me, and I hate her. The fucking cunt, selfish, stupid, bitch. And I can't even bring myself to think about Livi. What is her problem, the one person in the entire fucking school that doesn't like me, and the one person in the whole fucking school that I loved? Fuck her. I can't stand those fucking sluts and what they've done to me, this involuntary celibacy, fuck them. And Mr. Darcy. Mr. Darcy, I trusted him, I thought he was a friend, but he just fucking rejected me like fucking everyone else. And god fucking damnit Alex, you spend so much goddamn time with Delilah now that I barely see you, this is what all these fucking girls do, try and ruin my fucking life, I hate this. I just want this to stop. I wish I could come home, I wish there was*

*something good here. I want to feel something again. I wanna be a celebrity martyr for all the lonely fucks like me out there. I just wish I could kill myself, but I'm even too much of a fucking coward to do that. I don't know what to do. This could be my own private suicide. I just don't know what to do.*

"Ken?"

Nothing.

"Kenneth?"

Nothing.

"Kenneth, please, just talk to me."

Nothing.

I had no idea what to do. I thought I knew him enough to know that he wouldn't hurt himself, but still, I don't really know. I'll talk to him when I see him at school tomorrow. He deserves not to feel the way he does, no one deserves to feel like that, and if being there for him is what it takes then I need to do that. I just need to talk to him tomorrow and figure out what's going on in that head of his.

## CHAPTER 21.

### Disarm

THAT MORNING I TOLD Dan about what Ken had said, and he told me that Ken was never my responsibility and that I should just let the kid be angsty if he wants but strongly suggest that he talks to someone professional about all of these feelings. I told Lila only part of what Ken had told me, and she said I had already done what I could to help, she told me to be safe and be smart, and that if I thought that Ken could do anything to himself or others to just call the police. I told her that I didn't think that it was that serious because I didn't want her to worry. I hated that this was suddenly all on me now, and really I didn't want to call the cops on the kid. I was just in over my head, I had no idea what to do at all.

I looked for Ken at school, but I didn't see him all day. I texted him to ask if everything was alright but got no reply. After a normal day of classes, Lila and I drove out to the neighborhood around school to find somewhere hidden to park. On the way there, my phone buzzed, but since I was driving, I asked Lila to read it for me. She pulled my phone from my pocket.

"It's from Ken," she said, "do you want me to read it?"

I pulled into a parking spot and shut off the car, "no, it's fine." I was relieved that he had texted, and that put me at ease. Lila and I had quiet sex in the back of my car until dusk, and I missed practice.

After getting home, I read the text, "Alex, can we talk?" I texted back to ask what was up, but he didn't respond.

That night, at around three in the morning my phone buzzed on my bedside table. It was a text from Ken, "Don't go to school tomorrow Alex, please, and tell Lila to do the same, I know how happy she makes you."

Shit, shit, shit. What am I supposed to do? What's Ken going to do?

I tossed and turned and couldn't sleep for the rest of the night, and I left early enough to be at school before the gates opened, before the sun was even up. I waited in the library in the nook I knew Ken liked to sit. I waited anxiously, terrified, looking out the window at every student as they came into school. I'd grown to love this place and the people here, despite all the shit I still loved it, and I was terrified.

"Alexander?" a voice called out from behind me.

I turned around, it was Kenneth. He was blatantly out of dress code wearing black jeans, an *American Idiot* t-shirt, and a black leather jacket, carrying his backpack in his hand.

"Ken, what are you doing?"

"You're not supposed to be here Alex, why did you

come to school, I told you not to, I told you not to," he seemed flustered and angry.

I got up and walked towards him, "Ken, buddy, what are you doing, what's up, talk to me."

"I told you not to be here, I fucking told you not to come to school!" he was shouting and pacing, grabbing his hair.

I put my hand on his shoulder and spoke as calmly as I could, "Kenneth, just sit down, take a deep breath and talk to me," he pushed my hand away, "Ken. Please, it's me, just calm down, breathe, and just talk to me. Okay? Please?"

"You weren't supposed to fucking be here, Alex!" he shouted, his eyes wide and crazed, but beginning to well with tears.

"Kenneth," I said as calmly as I could, "please."

"I just can't fucking do this anymore, Alex, these fucking people, these fucking girls, I don't deserve this! And they don't deserve to be happy when I'm miserable, when they made me miserable. Alex, they've forced me for years to live a life of utter loneliness, and rejection after rejection after fucking rejection, I've never even kissed a fucking girl. Fucking sluts!"

"Ken, please, just breathe, calm down."

"Don't fucking tell me to calm down! I've done everything right, I've tried so fucking hard, and I've gotten nothing for it, nothing! They deserve to suffer for it."

"Suffer? What are you talking about, Ken?"

He gripped onto his backpack.

"Ken, what's in the backpack? Tell me what's in the backpack," I pleaded.

"Retribution."

"What?" I asked.

"I've suffered too much, I've been such a good guy for too long. Fuck them, fuck the friend zone, fuck those stupid fucking cunt sluts!"

"Ken, Kenneth, please. Would you hand me the bag?" no one else was anywhere near this part of the library, that's why Ken liked coming here, but that also meant no one was hearing what was going on. I'm terrified in this moment, and I don't know what I'm doing or what Ken is capable of right now.

"They have to pay for this."

"Ken, tell me what's in the fucking backpack."

"Alex, I'm asking you to go, now, please. Just go."

"Ken, give me the ba—"

"You weren't supposed to fucking be here!" he shouted.

"Kenneth Chester. Look at me," he did, my eyes beginning to tear up too, "please."

*Peace will win, and fear will lose.*

He looked up at me and into my eyes, I didn't breathe for that moment that seemed to last forever. His eyes became glossy as they welled with tears. He slumped to his knees and began to weep with his face in his hands.

I quickly sat down next to him, leaning against a bookshelf and moving the backpack to the other side of me away from him, it was heavy. I put my arm around

him and pulled him close, and he cried into my shoulder. Heavy, heaving sobs.

"I can't do it, Alex, I'm so sorry,"

"It's okay Ken, it's okay," patting him on the back, clutching him for his life.

"The world is just too much with us in it," he said, taking another sobbing breath.

"What?"

"I just wish I wasn't here, Alex, I wish I could just kill myself."

"Kenneth, please, no you don't. No, you don't. Because, listen to me, it gets better. It does get better. Two years ago, I never imagined things would have turned out the way they did for me, I never would have. Ken, it gets better, and I can't say that enough, it does get better."

He just bawled in my arms until he ran out of tears. And when he finally did, I picked up the bag, stood up, and reached out my hand. I pulled him up and walked with him to the parking lot and to my car, and I drove in the direction of his house.

"Hey, Ken?"

He was staring at his feet, sniffing, "Yeah?"

"I'm hungry, want some food?"

He let out a single breath of laughter and smiled, it was good to see him laugh. I went through the drive-through at In-N-Out, and we ate in the parking lot there. He seemed happy like he just remembered another thing on the long list of things worth staying alive for. After we finished I called his parents and told them about what had happened, they rushed home

immediately. I drove Ken to his house and walked him to the door, his parents were waiting outside, anxiously. They looked relieved when they saw me. I handed Ken's dad the backpack, and he reached for it, but I kept my hand on it and looked at him.

We'll always be children in our parent's eyes. Those faint, vignettied memories of our young childhood years are as fresh to them as our current image is to ourselves. To us, being who we are now as informed by our past is all we can be, but to our parents we are that continual amalgamation of infant to adolescent, and sometimes they find it hard to piece together that gap that begs them to ask the question, *'whatever happened to my sweet little boy?'* That was the heartbreak in the eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Chester when I returned Kenneth to them that morning.

"Thank you," Ken's father said, his eyes quivering, Ken's mother sobbing next to him.

I handed off the backpack, and Ken hugged his mother.

"I'm sorry," he said to her.

"No, Kenny, I'm sorry, we're sorry too," Kenneth's father said as he hugged his wife and son.

Kenneth turned to me and smiled through tears.

"Never again, okay Kenneth? Please. You can always come to me."

"Thank you," he said.

"Don't mention it."

"Thank you."

## CHAPTER 22.

### Kitchen Sink/Migraine

I KNEW THAT THINGS were far from being over. I didn't go back to school that day, I just went home and slept until the afternoon. I drove back to campus after school ended and found Lila. I kissed her right then and there not caring about the PDA, and I told her that I loved her with all of my heart. We sat down, and I explained what had happened that morning and she seemed awestruck.

"Alex, you shouldn't- you can't keep doing this Alex. Not for him."

"What?" I was taken aback. She was upset now.

"You could've died, Alex, he's not your responsibility, and you shouldn't have dealt with this on your own."

"Lila—"

"Why didn't you call the cops? Alex, you could have died!"

"I'm sorry, I know but the police would have killed him."

"Alex, he could have killed *you*. You have to tell someone, you have told someone, right?"

"I know, his parents know, and I emailed your dad and I emailed Dr. Kindlon, she's the school shrink that helped me a lot two years ago."

"You never told me about that."

. . . . .

I'd talk to Dan that night, and he'd congratulate me, which I didn't think I deserved. And then we'd talk more about the road trip that became more real with each passing day. I'd sent an email to Mr. Darcy as well as Dr. Kindlon, who would both contact Ken's parents about what to do next, and it was finally not just my responsibility anymore. Ken swore to his parents that it would never happen again, and he was quickly scheduled to see Dr. K regularly, with the school's awareness, keeping silent tabs on his wellbeing. The incident was dealt with quietly and behind closed doors, much like a teenage pregnancy, and the school as a whole was none the wiser. And just like teen pregnancy, prevention is a hell of a lot easier and better than treatment.

. . . . .

When Ken came back to school the next week, I told him that I was the one that reached out Dr. Kindlon, not his parents like he was upset about, I told him about how I tried to kill myself sophomore year and failed, back when I'd wear my hospital wristband like I'd gotten it at

Coachella. I told him how Dr. Kindlon was the reason I was here today after I gave in and went to see her. I told him that he could trust her. Therapy ex machina.

"It's not weakness admitting that you might need help or need to talk to someone, it's strength," I told him as I walked him to the door of the good doctor's office, "you have to go in. But I'll be out here when you're done."

## CHAPTER 23.

### A Martyr For My Love For You

AFTER A FEW WEEKS of going in to see Dr. Kindlon, I saw a noticeable difference in Ken. In the way he talked, in the way he carried himself, in his smile. And I was so happy for him.

Ken sent me the first thing he'd written in a while.

*I'm so close to being done with my sophomore year of high school, but I really don't care anymore, I just don't want to go back there for a long while. I'm happy now for the first time in such a long time, and I know I don't need anyone but myself to be happy.*

*When I was leaving school today, I saw Livi walking with Toby. She was wearing tight bell-bottomed jeans that went to her shoes (she was either wearing a pair of those brown leather calf high boots or UGGs like she always did), and a billowy white linen blouse tucked into the jeans, with a big leather belt wrapped around her waist. Her golden-brown copper hair was down and reached past her shoulders. She was wearing a pair of big sunglasses; her pink iPhone was to her ear, and an iced whatever from Starbucks was in the other hand. A step behind her and to her right was Toby: gangly, small, and awkward, wearing his signature beret ball cap (which he doesn't take off*

indoors) and a preppy polo and jeans; in his hands was a designer water bottle that he was fiddling with. She was uncaring of her surroundings, just talking on the phone, trivially. As I walked by, Toby dropped the water bottle in front of himself, and it rolled in front of Livi's feet; she stopped, kicked it aside, and kept walking, all the while on the phone. Toby awkwardly picked it up and walked fast to catch up and tag along. What animal has she become? Just another prep school girl; when she wasn't texting she was on Facebook, her eyes rarely lifted from her phone anymore. That is not the Livi I knew.

*I hate everything about you, why did I love you?*

*Odie et amo.*

*I still do long for Livi, and I have never felt for anyone how I feel about her. I still can't stop thinking about her. I just don't know. I wish I could say that there is a girl for every guy, and that we all have someone out there, and that we will all find love; but that's not true, that's just not true. So I need to learn to be happy with myself before I can even start to think about being happy with someone else.*

*The regrets are useless*

*She's in my head.*

*I'll never turn back time.*

*Thinking about her now I wonder if it is really her I love or the idea of her that I created. That girl with the cell phone, kicking Toby aside, maybe that is her, and I just kept pushing that reality harder and harder away. The more I find out about her, the real her, the less there really is; but still I hold the perfect image of her, and I love that still. But I know that's not her, and even if it was, I'm not with her, and I won't be. And*

*I move on...*

*The other day I found out that the group, my group, had a journal, and a secret Facebook group and chat without me. The journal was what hurt the most, because how could they not have known how much I loved to write. This journal, it was passed among them weekly, and each person would write an entry to the others and pass it on to the next person. It sounds so great, and like they're all so close. Finding out about all of that really hurt, but I'll move on. It'll be okay.*

*Well I guess this is growing up.*

April 1<sup>st</sup> came around, and I opened the letter telling me I'd been accepted to Cal on scholarship, and I knew I was done for the rest of the year, and I knew my parents finally had something to be proud of me for. But, of course, thinking about going to college opened up a whole unavoidable and looming can of worms for Lila and me to talk about. But I didn't want to talk about it, and I didn't want to think about it. I just wanted to make the absolute most of the time we had before I graduated. Prom was coming up soon anyway too, and I knew I had to do something grand for this love of my life.

I worked all weekend on writing, preparing, and buying items for a scavenger hunt that I'd send her on around campus on Monday. That morning I got to school early and hid the gifts and notes all around campus and then gave her best friend an answer key in case she got stuck. Dan and I got into a semi-bad habit of not going to many of our classes anymore (last

semester seniors and all), but our teachers liked us so we got away with quite a bit. And so, I pretty much had the entire day free to watch her go through the scavenger hunt and make sure things went as planned.

I'll spare the details of the scavenger hunt because it's long, so I'll just say that it was damn cute, and I waited after school by her car with a bouquet of roses for her. She did a good job solving the hunt and arrived by her car with all of her friends.

"Lila, will you go to prom with me?"

"Yes, Alex, I will go to prahm with you," she said as she laughed and kissed me for the Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram photo op her friends had been waiting for.

She had been elated by the whole thing, and I was over the moon that I could do something like that for her.

. . . . .

The seniors and their dates all took pictures together at Balboa Park before the dance, which was being held in downtown at the House of Blues. I can't describe how beautiful Lila looked in her dress. I also can't tell you how ludicrously incongruous it was seeing so many parents taking pictures and sending their freshly made up daughters off to get fucked. But hey, that's high school.

The dance was a lot of fun, it was really a night for the seniors, and I really felt like a whole unified class,

and I loved everyone there, I really did. Especially Lila, who I clutched and kissed as we swayed to “Same Love,” the slow dance of the night.

At the after party, the first I’d really ever been to, what should have been the whole senior class (everyone was invited to this one very generous senior’s giant Mt. Soledad house), was really just most of the populars and their dates to start with. But then more people came, and soon enough I saw the whole grade come together in this way too. I just wish it hadn’t taken until the end of senior year for it to happen.

I shared a joint and a bottle of some flavor of Bacardi with Lila and a circle of the cool kids, passing each around. One of those cool kids, Chris, used to bully me when I first came to Twain, but he wasn’t a bad guy, and he certainly wasn’t now. We all talked about memories and the future. He was going off to USC, others of them to TCU or SMU, and the like; all going to that kind of school for that kind of person. Chris passed around some cheap cigars to roll blunts with, I pocketed mine.

I remembered a morning on a school bus to a field trip, I had to sit next to him, Chris Justo-Serpa, sitting in alphabetical order. He had been nothing but mean or unkind to me since I’d first gotten to Twin; he and his friends would tease, pick on me, call me names like fag and retard, or just ignore me in the locker room, or at lunch, or just around, as you’d expect him and his group to do. On that bus ride, trapped next to each other for presumably an hour, I listened to music through dollar store earbuds on an old iPod nano, first gen. Sometime

into the silent trip, as I changed songs on the small device, Chris tapped me on the shoulder and showed me the screen of his iPod, a new one, with the same song displayed on the screen, as a gesture; he smiled at me, I smiled back. We still went our separate ways though, through the years in high school.

In that circle at prom, he took a pull from the bottle and handed it across to me, and I did the same. We shared a smile that thought of what things might have been like if things had been different, if we'd been friends, if some differences had been put aside, knowing now that there was never any difference between us to begin with in such a small school. But we went our separate ways again.

Lila and I got drunk as well as high (my first time, but not hers) along with the rest of the party, and we held each other and made out in the cold grass, along with the rest of the party. Lila looked at me, and then looked at every other couple hooking up, and in that moment she knew that we were *that* couple, the one that the others were looking at. We were the unexpected pairing that, once paired, seemed like it should have been so expected. She could see us as the high school power couple that we were, almost comically, like F. Scott and Zelda at their best. But in her heart, she also knew that we possessed that intangible element that is so seldom found in other high school couples (especially on prom night): love. And as we held each other that night and made out apart from every other couple doing the same thing, we were conscious that we were not only

a handsome pair but a unique one, distinctly apart from the lesser lights that fluttered and chattered elsewhere. We knew that what we had not only felt special but was special. We also knew that nearly every other couple felt that what they had was love or some form of the same too, but somehow we felt that we knew that our feelings were deeper, truer, and more adult. We could each see that we were holding the person that we could very well spend the rest of our lives with, and then we fucked in my car like every other couple would that night, only we did it knowing that to us, and in truth, it was different; we were in love.

## CHAPTER 24.

### Butterfly

LILA CALLED ME, overjoyed, with the news that she had gotten the internship she had applied for at the New York Times for over the summer. She accepted, and she'd be living with her sister for the entirety of the summer up by NYU. And that's when it hit me, that's when it hit both of us. We wouldn't see each other for the entire summer, and I'd be going away to college after that, and she'd do the same a short year later.

We went to see *The Great Gatsby* in theatres instead of talking about whether or not we wanted to do everything in the world with each other.

"My goodness, I'm glad we lost our virginities after watching the good Romeo *and* Juliet and not '+' *his*," Lila said as we made out in the empty theatre after the movie had ended.

"Hah, definitely," I just wanted to keep kissing her.

"Honestly, I think Baz Luhrmann's on a single-handed quest to destroy all the great literature in the world by turning it into sensationalist, flashy garbage," I kissed her again, she continued, "He's a visionary with poor eyesight. If they ever make a movie about my life,

I hope to God he doesn't direct it," Lila said as we then moved the making out from the theatre to my car.

. . . . .

There was less than a month left in my final year of high school, and Lila and I sat in my car to have that other talk. What do we do about our relationship after the school year ends and we end up on different coasts, and then I go off to college after that, and then she does the same the year after that.

"I love you so much, I hope you know that," I had to say.

"Of course, I really don't know what we should do. I mean I know what I want, I want to stay together, I just don't know what's best."

"You do want to stay together?"

"Of course, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," I had to say. And of course I wanted to be with her, but honestly, I also had the new feeling that I didn't want to go off to college tied back to my hometown, that I wanted the full, unencumbered, college experience. I realized deep down that was what I felt. I just didn't know what to do.

And so, we talked and talked, and she cried, and it didn't sink in for me one single bit. It would be best to break up before next year, and it would be best to break up for the summer because we wouldn't see each other anyway. In truth, I'd have loved to be together for the summer, but I didn't want to be holding her back from

doing everything she could want to do while living at a college in the city of New York. It would be selfish of me to keep her for that time and let her go when I went away to Berkeley. And she cried, so much.

• • • • •

We wrote each other letters for graduation.

*Lila,*

*I can tell you now with such clarity and such honesty that you, Lila, are the best thing ever to happen to me. You have made me happy more than you can ever know and you have made this year truly the best of my life. You know how much I love you and how much I value you, but I will say it again, I do. Thank you for everything you have given me, for your caring, your support, your companionship, and your wit, but most of all thank you for giving me you. I know that opening up is something difficult for you, and so is getting close to someone new, so I thank you so wholly for doing that for me and know that I give my whole self to you as well, always.*

*Like you said to me, you feel lucky. I feel lucky. You are one of the most incredible people I have ever known, and you will become so much and do so much; I am honored that you choose to spend so much of your time and who you are with me. Honored, and still in complete awe and love. You also mentioned the numbers, statistics, and the whole sea of others, but the way I see it, I know I couldn't have spent this year with anyone else. It was pure chance that brought us together; but of all those other people, there was only you. I cannot think*

*of anyone else who I would rather have spent this time with or experienced these things with. This has been the best time of my life. I love you so much. We shared so much, so many moments, and so many mutual firsts. And it was the absolute best place for those to happen. In a place of trust, curiosity, compassion, and love.*

*This has been the very best of times. I love you so much. And I can't thank you enough for sharing so much with me, for sharing this time in each other's lives and making it the truly best thing. But, like the many great books we've also shared, when one chapter ends another begins. And this time, even better than before, with even more promise and even more hope. Loving you was the best thing that ever happened to me. And I will never stop loving you. That love just evolves, it matures, and it gets better and stronger with the time that will pass. I loved you as a girlfriend, and I will love you as a friend. And that's what I look forward to so much. I've found the best friendship I have ever had in you, and I never want to lose that.*

*What started as an accumulation of significant glances across your dinner table turned into so much more.*

*I'll say I wouldn't change a thing, and that it was all good. And it was. All of it, good and bad, was for the better because it is a part of us. One part of our lives is over now, but another soon begins. Something that I look forward to so much. You have what should be one of the most fun summers of your life ahead of you, and I want you to embrace and experience it fully. Our time is not just a memory, but it is who we are, it is a part of us. And that is something that will never change. What we shared can never be taken away from us. I love you,*

*Delilah, I love you with all of my heart. And I look forward so much to being your friend. Because, after all, that's what we are. The best of friends.*

*I love you so much,  
Always,  
Alexander.*

*And hers to me.*

*My Dearest Alexander,*

*I can honestly tell you that I have never been happier. It had been a true and deep happiness. I can also tell you that this might have been my worst and toughest year of high school had it not been for you. So, thank you, Alex. Thank you for your constant love and support, I have never had a friend like you, and I want you to know always how much I love and value you. You make me want to be a better person every day, every minute, every second I am with you.*

*I still remember one time when you were driving, early in our relationship when we were at a four-way stop, and you let the other person go even though you got there first. A tiny bit annoyed, I had to ask why you let them go. And you simply replied that maybe now that person would let someone else go. Now, I still do not give up the right of way to anyone, but I realize that the principal behind it, and the principal behind you is so pure and good. You are so ever optimistic, and it is so beautiful. In the little things you do, and in the big ones to, and in all the times you'd hold me as I cried complaining about my mom or my dad or my sister, or in helping out poor old Kenneth, you are the kind of person that makes the world a*

*better place, and it honestly inspires me to do the same.*

*You are probably the only one who bothers to strike up a conversation with our librarian or our lunch ladies, you never fail to ask how you can help. So, just know that I notice, and so do other people. And every time I see that I am so proud to call myself yours and to call you mine. You are the most caring person I know. Truly. I love you.*

*We both always tell each other how lucky we are. And honestly, what is the probability of finding someone else with which one is so compatible in our lives? It seems that we are pretty damn lucky. I have never before found someone with whom I can trust absolutely everything. Being with you just feels natural, comforting. But at the same time, it also feels special and exciting. Those butterflies from the first day I actually saw you after we became a couple are still there.*

*When we started this, to tell you the truth, I didn't really think twice about you, you were just some kid my dad liked. And then, well, I don't know, I just tried to play it so cool. And then, one night, you gave me a phone call. I had no idea if we could last at all, or if it would work. I was hesitant to commit myself to someone who I never really had any romantic feelings for. And I'll admit that for the first few weeks, I continued to be a bit hesitant. I wasn't sure how I felt, but then, at some point, I can't even tell you when, I transitioned seamlessly into a state of complete love with you. And I've never gone back. Alexander.*

*I couldn't have found a better person to share my first Peppermint Mocha with. It's been absolutely perfect. I couldn't have found a better person to share my first experience in love with, both romantically and physically. I*

*love everything about you (except that we never did go record shopping together). This has been one of the best rides of my life. Thank you.*

*I am so grateful to have you in my life, and I know that sometimes it might not always seem like that, but I am still so head-over-heels madly in love with you. You are my best friend, and you will always be so very special to me. I may never be able to fully grasp or express how I feel about you, or what you mean to me, so just know as I tell you now that I love you. You are and always will be so very special to me, you'll always be my first. I love you and thank you for everything.*

*You graduate today. We knew that this was coming, but I still cannot believe this has actually arrived. You must know how very proud of you I am. It feels like yesterday and forever ago that we were sitting on that beach that was so ridiculously cold, pressed against each other. We were so awkward, yet so comfortable in our awkwardness. Was it okay for me to lean here, put my hand there? I didn't know where we stood. But I also knew that of course it was okay, because I already felt your support and trust, even before I could tell it was there. It really seems like just yesterday that we held each other and kissed on the cold grass in that person's yard after prom with every other couple somewhere else doing the same thing. In that moment I knew that we had something else that no one else did. Love. I love you. We were that high school power couple, like F. Scott and Zelda. And here we are today.*

*We have reached an end of sorts, but we both know, despite the cliché, that this is a beginning as well. As we part ways in a few weeks I am reminded of a line that Daisy says to Gatsby.*

*Something along the lines of "I wish I'd done everything in the world with you." Now, as much as I hate to quote Daisy Buchanan, I feel the same way. I wish I had done everything in this world with you, Alex. But, we are our own people, and I know that.*

*We would probably drive each other crazy at some point, although maybe not. Nevertheless, you are off to start a new chapter in your life. And you are going to have the time of your life next year. Of course I wish we didn't have to, and I want you to remember me, and I know you will, but I also want you to fully embrace next year. Be a college student, you only have once in your life to do so. I am so excited for you. I want you to report back to me every so often of all your adventures. And know that I will always be here for you. Our relationship may be ending, but our friendship never will. I love you, Alexander Kaoruac.*

*Love always,  
Lila.*

And so we'd be together until she had to leave for New York in the beginning of June. And after that, we'd play it day by day how close we'd stay. Above all else, I didn't want to lose her. I didn't want to stay together only for the relationship to end horribly when I'm away at college, and then we'd never talk to each other again. I wanted to be able to end on good terms, and I wanted to be able to be friends, and maybe when the time comes if the time is right, I could get back together with her. I wanted it all, but of course, I couldn't have it all.

## CHAPTER 25.

### Lay, Lady, Lay

GRAD NIGHT AT DISNEYLAND, graduation day, and grad night at school and then it was all over. With the turning of a tassel on a mortarboard I had gone from student to alumni, and from in love to single.

I said my goodbyes to my teachers, to the peers I know I'd never see again for the rest of my life, and to Ken. I wished him a happy summer, and he invidiously wished me a fun trip. I feel like he wished he could've gone, and I started to feel bad leaving him for the summer, especially after what had happened. But I knew he was swimming on the good path now with Dr. K. And Dan, and I would talk in vague, hopeful terms about the road trip, but it was the last thing I could think about.

I spent all the time I could with Lila before she had to leave, but she stopped wanting to spend time with me for a little while, she said it was too hard. But she assured me that she just needed time, and she'd talk to me when she was ready. I didn't like that she was sad when I wanted to make the most of that time, but I understood too. I'd still try to be with her all I could.

The last time I knew I'd lay in her bed, the last time we'd hold each other after making love, I kissed the top of her head as I always did and took in all of the moment; with her body on mine and Dylan singing 'lay lady lay, stay lady stay,' I simply wanted that moment to last for the rest of my life. But I knew that it couldn't.

Nothing is more profound than the silence that two people in love can share.

The day she left for New York I spent the whole morning with her, and when she was set to leave she looked up at me and said, "Well, I guess this is it."

"I guess it is. Have the best summer, Lila, I'll see you soon enough."

"You too," as she went in to hug me she said, "just like how it started, with a hug."

And then it hit me that it was actually ending. It hadn't truly hit me until then, and when it did, it hit me all at once, and I cried in her arms. I told her I loved her, I told her that she was the best thing that had ever happened to me, and I told her again to have the greatest time in New York. And then she left.

## CHAPTER 26.

### Story Of My Life

DAN KNOCKED ON the front door of my house, and I answered. He seemed like he had something to say, but like he was trying not to let on. We climbed up to my roof and sat on its slope looking in the direction of the ocean and chatted.

"Well, Lila left for New York yesterday," I said.

"Shit, man."

"Yeah, it's over."

"I'm sorry, man, that sucks. I know how happy she made you and everything."

"Thanks, Dan."

"You still think it's best, I mean, how do you feel?"

"It sucks, but I know it's for the best. I want to be able to be friends, I don't want to go through some shitty long-distance breakup once school starts because things weren't working out."

"Yeah..." he sighed.

"And honestly," I added in a bout of actual honesty, "I want to be able to do college right, y'know? I don't want to be tied back to home, I want a fresh start, and I want to be able to experience it all; girls and all."

"A bird in the hand..." he started.

"Come on man, it sucks enough without having to second guess it."

"I'm sorry," Dan said earnestly.

"I don't know, maybe I was wrong. But honestly, this last month has really just sucked, it was sad, *she* was sad. I don't know, I'm at least a little glad that this part is over."

"Alright."

I thought for a second and said, "Nostalgia," out of the blue.

"What?" Dan asked.

"Nostalgia, that's how I'll remember it. Fond and painful," I thought again for a moment and added, "Nostalgia means pain, but we go to it now for comfort."

"Who?"

"We do. Or our generation."

"Talkin' 'bout my geeeeneration," Dan sang the line.

"I never understood why he stuttered so much in that song," I pondered less than earnestly.

"Drugs?"

"Drugs."

"Anyway, what do you mean, like, Buzzfeed?" Dan asked.

"Yeah, exactly, all of it. We are like this new Lost Generation. We have no real identity, and so we steal and copy and latch onto the identities and styles of other generations; our music sounds like it's from the 80's all over again, our clothes are 60's and 80's, and our

references are all 90's. We're looking for some significance, some meaning to latch on to, because we have none of our own. We've grown up to find all gods replaced by products and celebrity, all wars distant and never-ending, and faiths in the American Dream shaken and dissolved..."

"Things were better then."

"Once but never again."

"But, you know, it's all really because we have no counterculture," Dan suggested.

"What?"

"We don't have a counterculture, every other generation had one. What's our counterculture? Hipsters? They're a parody of themselves, their identity has been bought and sold, and you can find it on the shelves on any Target across America. Everyone just tries to be a goddamn contrarian."

"Huh," I said.

"Every other generation had a counterculture, the Beats, the Greasers, the Hippies, the Punks, but we don't. That's why we're a lost generation, homogeny."

"Apathy," I added.

"Exactly."

"The irony and the apathy."

We sat in silence and watched the sun as it began to dip past the horizon. I smiled as the last sliver of sunlight turned an iridescent green as it crossed the horizon for only an instant.

"Alex, I got the job for the summer," he said into the silence.

"What?"

"My mom was able to get me the job at the law office with my uncle that I didn't think I could get."

"That's great! When is it?"

"Now, the whole summer, I'm sorry, man."

"So, wait, what do you mean?"

"I'm going to be working here all summer, we can't do the trip."

"What?"

"There's always next summer, man, I'm sorry. I can't let my mom down on this one, I'm really sorry about the trip not working out, man."

I didn't know what to say.

"I'm really sorry Alex," he added, "but we can still hang out here over the summer. I'll be here all summer."

And then it clicked. I wanted to get out of here, and I wanted to try to see Lila again, just to see. I felt as though I needed to now, all of a sudden. I needed to take that trip.

"I'm still going to go," I said.

"What?"

"I'm still going to take the road trip, even if I do it alone, I have to go, Dan, I just have to go. I need this, and... and I need to see Lila in New York."

"Alex, it was just an idea for us to go anyway, a fun one, but still a crazy one. This isn't something people just do, it's something people only dream about doing."

"Well, I'm going to do it, Dan, I'm going to, I need to."

"Okay."

"I need to, Dan."

"Well, have fun, man. I'm happy for you, I really do hope it's the greatest thing."

"Thanks, Dan, really. I'll see you on the other side."

• • • • •

I called Ken and asked him if he had any plans for the summer.

## PART Two: *American Road*

## *This is a story of The West.*

DAY 1. JULY 1ST. And so it begins. I hugged my parents goodbye, and I drove to pick up Kenneth before the sun rose. The Mustang was packed light with two sleeping bags, a week's worth of food and drinks, a small fishing pole, clothes (for me: a pairs of socks, two pairs of underwear, a pair of shorts, a waxed canvas jacket, a sturdy denim over-shirt, a black t-shirt with a breast pocket, and a pair of flip-flops; I was wearing blue jeans, a pair of socks, a pair of underwear, one of those black t-shirts, and my simple leather walking loafers), and a backpack each with our effects (I brought a journal, a pen, my phone and charger, an aux cord, a half-full pack of Marlboro Red's, the prom cigar, a lighter, multi-tool, a tiny spool fishing line with a small hook, and books: *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, *Walden*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *Self-Reliance*). After I picked him up we drove up the block to a bank where I had to withdraw some more cash from the ATM; in the parking lot, there we set the triptometer to zero, and we drove, first taking The 5 to The 8 and then we settled in for the long journey.

We planned on taking The 8 as far as we could and

seeing where we'd end up. About two or so hours in, we stopped at an old corrugated sheet metal Quonset hut in the middle of nowhere to urgently use the bathroom. At this, our first stop, we met Gary, an old man working in the machine shop, he let us stop to use the bathroom, a bathroom that was nearly all black with years of soot and wear. Our first interaction of the road. We continued onward towards the Salton Sea.

Lila had stopped talking to me for some weeks now, and I respected her desire for distance. I miss her too though, but I know this trip will be good to keep her off of my mind.

Ken and I stopped at a huge Cattle farm and took in the oppressive sights and smells. We knocked on the door of the lone trailer office. A burly man that oversaw the operation was both kind and excited enough to show us around, and honestly, the dairy farm was worse than the slaughterhouse.

We drove on from there and soon found ourselves at Salvation Mountain, the pastel and Papier-mâché monolith to all that people believe is good about religion, and it was gorgeous, and from its summit, the flat desert stretched out for miles in all directions. From there we drove further into the slabs to check out East Jesus, the arts collective that I'd heard of.

After looking around the sculpture garden, we sat under a tree and had a bite to eat from our packs. While we were sitting there, the curator, Caddy, a bearded, shirtless, and dread-locked man carrying a sun-umbrella came out to us for a guided tour of the

sculpture garden, after which he invited us inside the recycled-glass bottle walls of the compound and under their tent for cold water and conversation. He told us a little about the self-sustaining history of the site and all of its many comforts.

We sat on old couches and car seats around a repurposed pool table and chatted with three of the residents there; Caddy, our guide (who we soon found spoke almost exclusively in internet memes), Jenn, his wife, and another slabite who called herself 'Gypsy Angel.' We talked to them about our travels, or at least our plans for them, and they talked to us about the sustainable home they had built for themselves out in the slabs. They were brilliant people, idealists but current on world events, funny, and hospitable.

As we sat and talked a car blaring LCD Soundsystem's "North American Scum" through rolled down windows and with a 'HE < i' sticker on the back bumper pulled up and parked next to ours. The music and the engine shut off and two young girls got out and entered the sculpture garden to look around as Caddy went to greet them and give them the tour. They soon sat down with the rest of us to get out of the sun and chat. Cali and Anne, they were two teenage girls, high-school grads, my age, and they were on the first day of a journey taking them from home (Arizona) up the west coast to Canada and back. We were on nearly the same journey, but different directions, different lives, and meeting somewhere in the middle on the first day. Caddy asked if the lot of us wanted to have dinner and

stay the night. Ken wanted to move on, just because he wanted to make up a lot of miles on the first day, but after a chat with him we decided to stay the night, to say yes to every experience.

It was 113 degrees, but at least it was a dry heat, and the four of us youngins drove into the nearby small town to pick up some groceries for dinner with the top down; it was the least we could do to repay their hospitality. We chatted with the girls and found out that they'd graduated from high school in Arizona, hating the small town, and they both looked forward to heading to college. Cali was valedictorian at her high school and was going to USC to study music, the other girl was going to BC for communications. They were really nice, and smart, and pretty, especially Cali. She was adventurous, outdoorsy, smart, and contemplative; like Marylou from *On The Road* crossed with an archetypal manic pixie 'Sad Girl' type of girl, with a healthy dose of Halsey thrown in the mix. She wore high waisted jean shorts, a crochet bra top, and an unbuttoned sheer blouse, her wavy suicidal ash-blonde hair tied back with a bandana. She had a tattoo in cursive across the side of her ribs that read, "*And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.*" The sticker and the car were hers.

When we got back that afternoon it was even hotter than it had been before, so we went down to the river in a big pickup truck chassis that was built up all around with planks of wood to look like a boat, 'the land-boat.'

We all piled in, picking up some more people on the way. The river wasn't really a river, it was actually the Coachella Canal Aqueduct that fed the Los Angeles municipal water system. Caddy was the first to strip down and jump in, and I thought 'fuck it' leaving my clothes draped over the bow of the car. Cali did the same, and she smiled at me as she took off her bra and let down her hair. She ran and jumped into the water, and I followed, jumping in quickly before the blood thought to run into my penis. Ken hung back for a second, hesitating to strip, and jumped into the water in his boxers. The river was cool and immediately pulled me North in the strong current. It was like an infinity pool, you had to swim or hold on to the side just to stay in one place. More hot and haggard slab residents showed up as time passed and they jumped in as we all swam. We'd climb out, jump back in, let the current take us, swim back against it and repeat. And after exhausting ourselves, we'd lay in the sand and dry off in the sun; I looked at Cali lying naked, glistening in the sun, beside me less than a foot away, *her body tan and wet down at the reservoir*. After we were all sufficiently dry and sun warmed, we'd drive back to the compound, dropping off the various slabites on the way.

When we got back to the compound, we all took turns showering and after that we sat in the main room around that pool table and talked, talked for hours, all until sunset, which we watched from the solar-panel-covered rooftop of a shipping container. We drank cool beers and ate dinner after dark, courtesy of our groceries

and Caddy's impressive culinary skill. The adults of the group packed in for the night after showing us the many guest sleeping quarters.

Ken and I sat with the girls around a fire pit as the night got cool. Anne pulled out a grinder and a pipe from her backpack, and Cali pulled out a bag of weed from hers. We passed to the left around the circle, getting high with the girls. After killing the bowl, the four of us climbed up to the top of the shipping container and watched the stars from the rooftop there, the most beautiful stars I've ever seen. The grand celestial theatre played out above us, shooting stars and all.

We looked up at the moon, filling a hole in the big desert sky. I don't remember which of us was the first to start, but we all began to howl at it. Long deep howls reverberating out into the vast ocean of dark around us, it felt primal, and it just felt right.

We laid back and watched the night a little while longer. Then Ken and I went to go to bed in a sunken bus as the girls stayed up chatting a little while longer. The bus had been converted to a two-bedroom motel; Ken took the compartment at the back, and I took the one in the front. I settled down to sleep, thinking that nothing could top this incredible first day on the road.

I heard footsteps in the sand outside the bus, and then a soft knocking on the door. Cali popped her head in and smiled when she saw me.

"Hey," she whispered.

"Hey yourself," I sat up in bed, "what's up?"

"Oh, nothing, I just wanted to sneak away from Anne and say hi,"

"Well, hi," I said matter-of-factly as she sat down at the edge of the bed, leaning up against a post as she brushed her hair behind her ear; she moved closer, "Cali...?" I asked softly.

"Yes?" she asked back.

I hesitated to say anything, I didn't know what to do. The moonlight was pouring in through the window, and she glowed in the light, she was absolutely stunning. I thought of Lila. I thought about these two gorgeous women, Cali and Anne, and then Lila, there are gorgeous women everywhere I thought, and I wondered what the difference was. It's like the difference between gray and silver, I thought.

"Yes?" she asked again.

"I-I have a girlfriend," I didn't know what else to say.

"Even on the road?"

"Even on the road."

She got up and walked towards the door, but before exiting she turned to ask, "Is it love?"

"I love her."

"Just because you feel it doesn't mean it's there."

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Day 2. Ken and I woke early and said our goodbyes to everyone; the man, the wife, the Gypsy Angel, the beautiful pot smoking valedictorian, and her companion. And then we hit the road.

Ken drove. Riding in the passenger seat of my car with Ken driving was a bit like that scene in *Annie Hall* when Christopher Walken drives Woody to the airport after explaining his desire to drive into oncoming traffic, but after a little while, I could actually begin to relax in the passenger seat. We drove in shifts across the long flat stretches of desert highway into the horizon.

At one of those routine Border Patrol stops we were of course stopped, but instead of being routinely waved on, the agent asked to see my ID. I was still sitting in the passenger seat, and I mentioned this, but he repeated his strong request. I complied while Ken sat silent and confused, and we were eventually waved on to continue after the agent gave several scrutinizing back-and-forth glances from my face to my ID and back again.

We hauled ass through the rest of California, through Arizona and New Mexico to El Paso, Texas, where we had dinner at a southwestern place called 'Los Banditoes,' determined to taste the local flavors at each stop. We did stop briefly in Arizona to pick up a few more road things at a 99 Cents Only store, but then we were on our way.

I took over driving as Ken slept and we hauled more ass through the night to and through San Antonio, and made it half-way to Austin by daybreak, alternating driving and sleeping between the two of us twice more throughout the night. We parked in a vacant home-lot as the new sun lit up the marshland that surrounded it, and we put shirts over our heads to block out the light and slept there.

*I fell asleep in the front seat, I never sleep in the front seat,  
I'm too tall.*

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Day 3. Ken woke me up after only about four hours of sleep when a car pulled up in front of ours. The man inside stepped out, took a look at us and made a phone call. The sticky humidity hit like a physical force once we opened a car door. The guy was very business, and so we guessed he probably owned the vacant lots. I drove us into the town for a Starbucks pick-me-up before we headed on to Austin. Texas is really the first different state we've been in, and it felt really different. Bigger. Everything was bigger. It was nice too, it was bigger, and it was less crowded because of that. We drove Austin, then San Antonio where we snuck past the line and toured the Alamo. We then drove down to Corpus Christie and took a dip in the clear blue of the gulf.

Ken was exhausted and didn't want to continue, he hated sleeping in the car. I didn't want to not sleep in the car though, being on the road and all, I wanted to feel rugged and live that life. But we (he) broke down and bought a motel room for the night, he said he'd pay for it. I didn't want this to become a pattern at all though, I knew Dan would never have slept in a motel on only the third night. But Ken and I had a good talk before we went to bed and he told me that he'd be up to the road and living on the road after the night's rest.

We unfolded the AAA map in that motel room, and we traced out in ink on the paper the paths we had carved in the asphalt on the highways and veins across America, and we kept tracing those lines like the nervous fibers of the nation as we'd drive them, drawing a living journal of our journey across the pulsing arteries of the country, flowing down the rivers of taillights and headlights, running red into the distance in front of you and flowing yellow from afar towards you into the night.

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Day 4. The 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Waking up late in CC, Texas to a complimentary motel breakfast, then driving to the beach at Padre Island. We swam in the gulf. We got sunburnt. We drove to Houston. Driving on this state's endless highways, where the blown-out tire scraps blended together with the big-game roadkill stretching across the shoulders of the roads through small towns and winding asphalt. The drive to Houston took us on The 35, which we found out was not a main highway, but one that snaked through small towns and under stoplights that hung across the streets on wires.

We stopped in one of those small towns, Bay City, and had the best barbeque I've ever had. We then stopped further down the road and bought a shit load of completely legal fireworks and drove down a backwoods dirt road and parked. Moss hung from the trees, and fireworks cracked across the sky in the

distance as we set off some of our own. Sharing the cigar I'd brought we both laughed frantically and in sheer joy as we played with fire, filming each other on our phones, lighting off each different type of pyrotechnic we bought. And as the dusk turned into night, we lit off of the last of the explosives, and the light from the rockets would cast great stretching shadows of the trees and branches across the ground as they flew up into and across the sky, the smell of black powder smoke still in the air. Goddamn that was fun.

I drove the car on through more small town and highway intersections, I smiled at Ken and he at me. We turned the music up and drove on through the night. I was really starting to love being on the road and appreciated having Ken. We passed through more towns, under trees, street lights, and-

A loud crunch and the steering wheel pulls against me, as I swerve back and forth, slamming on the breaks. I fishtail and spin around, not even thinking, just experiencing terror, shock. Ken holds tight, braces himself against the glove box. Tires and brake pads screech. We come to a stop, facing the wrong way after what felt like minutes but what was really a second. We see an old pickup truck with a freshly busted right headlight stalled in the middle of the intersection look at us, turn its engine, and drive away into the night.

"Jesus Fuck." I stammer, "Are you alright, Ken?"

"Yeah, holy shit, you?"

"Yeah, just a little shook up."

I drive to the side of the road and put on my hazards.

It's the dead of night, and no one else is around. We walk to the back of the Mustang, the glass or plastic of the right tail light is busted, but the light itself still shone, it looks like we were only grazed. We could wait until we got back home for a repair.

After collecting ourselves, we didn't want to drive much more for the night so we drove on to Houston and slept in a dimly-lit corner of a U of Houston parking lot and slept like death.

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Day 5. We woke up in humid Houston, drove around, and then drove in the direction of New Orleans. There went the sound of the freeway as small, disordered roads led through the backwoods and we stopped on the way in a small Louisiana town, a place where we were immediately judged because of our California-plated Stang. We ate cracklins and boudin balls in an eatery/small convenience store/general gathering hall full of families, the old, and everyone white in-between, and we left quickly. The plastic and bleach smelling room was filled with folding tables covered in those generic restaurant red-checkered plastic table clothes and surrounded by those white plastic Monobloc chairs that were the same everywhere. We sat and ate quickly as all eyes were on us in that surreal, new-guy-walks-into-the-town-saloon type of thing that you'd think only happens in 1950's westerns. The food was great though.

We drove around the bayou and into New Orleans,

making a visit to some random historical house, then into the heart of the city. Everything was crowded, but Bourbon Street was alive, it was electric. After several walks up and down the famed avenue, we settled at an outdoor jazz club at the Café Beignet. Ken enjoyed staying there, relaxing, and I'll say I did too. It was a nice night, made even better by a hand-made cigar from a shop down the street. By about midnight, when the old band retired for the night, we headed back to the car to spend the night.

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Day 6. We woke up covered in bug bites, itching all over. That's one thing I absolutely hate about The South, the bugs. Well that and the systematic racism and homophobia, but that's another thing altogether. We walked around the French Quarter and had shrimp po'boys and crayfish etouffee for lunch. Good stuff. More walking and driving. We stopped at another Civil War park, Jesus this place was just littered with them, and I found an almost full pack of KOOL Menthols' below a Jefferson Davis memorial. I took the cigarettes, lighting one right there. I hardly ever smoked in high school, like I probably smoked less than a pack in all four years; but over the trip I found myself smoking more, still not a lot though, it just seemed so much more integrated into travel and these other parts of the country. From the Marlboro Red's in the Southwest and now to the KOOL's in the South, this was just another

thing that changed slightly but remained congruent across the nation.

I'm not for smoking, but I'm not against it either. Do what you want, and I'll do the same. And of course it's terrible for you, but so is a lot of stuff, and we do all die, but still, it is the literal worst thing for you. And if anything those bullshit 'truth' ads made me want to smoke more instead of less, but maybe it's just a campaign funded by Philip Morris to make not smoking look as uncool as possible. But I digress.

We made a visit to the closed-off Fort Macomb, just outside of the city, and found that it was completely desolate. We hopped the three separate fences that enclosed it and explored the ruins. We drove around (got lost) in the swampland, and then finally we were out of NOLA. One thing that caught us both off-guard about that city was the insane number of sirens, police, and paramedics. Drunk people abounded. Leaving NOLA, we headed to the coast and looked around the path of Katrina where the levees were and are. Did you know that hurricanes with female names do more damage and cause more casualties? It's because people are less inclined to take the threat seriously. Anyway, onto Jackson.

We parked for the night in a public park/baseball field, it seemed like a nice spot; it was open, although a bit dark, but that was okay, or so we thought. We settled down for the night, took our sleeping pills, put on our eye masks, and began to doze off. A cop car soon pulled up. Ken got out, shirtless and with an eye mask on his

forehead, the officer asked what we were doing.

"Changing the oil," the scrawny, shirtless, Ken replied.

I put a shirt on and got out to address the officer. I explained to him that we were traveling, and traveling through and that we'd be leaving in the morning.

"This ain't a good spot to say" he started explaining, "it's dark here, and you see that?" he said pointing to the tree line at the edge of the park, "right on the other side of those trees, that's the hood. It isn't safe at all here. Staying the night in Jackson? This isn't a nice place; go to a Walmart parking lot or somewhere well lit, not here."

"Thank you, officer," I replied.

"You boys know you've got a busted tail light, right?"

"Oh, yeah."

"You should get that fixed soon."

"Thank you, officer, have a good night."

And so we left, unintentionally high on Diphenhydramine, we drove to the parking lot of a local Walmart, and we spent the rest of the night there.

. . . . .

Day 7. I found myself doing more and more of the driving as Ken would just listen to his own music on his phone and sleep while I drove. I didn't mind though, I loved the road.

We also listened to the same music at times too,

blaring it over the car's speakers, cranked up to eleven or whatever. Ken was the kind of guy that if a Foo Fighters song came on shuffle after a Nirvana song he'd say 'man, Dave Grohl's sure getting a lot of air time.' And I appreciated that. We'd also sing along unashamedly to all the terrible songs I remember listening to in middle school.

I drove from Jackson to Memphis. In between there was a short stop for food and then more driving. Once we arrived in Memphis, we stopped by Graceland, the commercialized home of the dearly departed king, Elvis Presley. Old white people. That distinct population's love for this one man astounded me. For them, Graceland was a destination, they could have saved for a year to be able to come here, this was their mecca, and they had made it. For us, it was just another pit stop.

We spent some time at the river, a lot of time actually; we cast a line into the Ole' Mississippi like Tom and Huck, and we just sat there on the rocky, sandy bank and enjoyed the time. I made good use of the straw hat I'd bought at the 99¢ Only Store when we passed through Arizona. We talked to another guy fishing there, a nice ancient guy who left us a sinker and the rest of his night crawlers when he left. He was there before we were, and he'd be back again; we wouldn't. I began to feel the transitory nature of our existence sink in at this point in our journey. After giving up on catching ghoti, Ken and I skipped stones and threw firecrackers into the water for the rest of the afternoon, eating the last of the beef jerky we'd packed, and taking a good dent

out of the nut mix we'd brought too.

We drove on to the cemetery (closed), and then to the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel (in the process of closing). It soon closed. We will return tomorrow. Now, we sit in a nice, clean, well-lit McDonald's, and sip our one dollar big plastic cups of Coca-Cola from same cups we've been saving all day for the free refills. I enjoyed entertaining the fantasy of being homeless.

We parked and slept in the parking lot of a CVS, because apparently, according to the woman protesting outside the Lorraine Motel, Memphis is the 5th most dangerous US city. This woman, Jacqueline Smith, has been sitting in her hovel outside of the Motel, which turned into the Museum in 1988, since she had been evicted after having lived in the motel as a young girl working at the front desk when King was there. She refused to leave after the assassination, and after she was evicted and the Motel was converted, she defiantly stayed on location. 25 years, 126 days, and counting. She sits in protest of the gentrification that the museum caused, and the money used for it that she says should have gone to helping the impoverished, "this is what King would have stood for" she argues. It made sense, but I just don't know how much I could've agreed with her because of how truly great the museum is.

How stupid is racism? Race doesn't matter, or at least it shouldn't, we're all just people, that's all. Ethnicity should matter, because that's what makes us who we are, and that should be celebrated, but race itself

as a divisive descriptor just shouldn't exist. We are all just people, and it baffles me that people think there's any difference between any two people; to put it into perspective, we're the only species that does this, zebras don't give a shit what each other's stripes look like, dogs or cats don't care about each other's fur or even breed, but we humans care about how much melanin one another possess, and for years we've separated, segregated, enslaved, and injusticed each other because of it. If an alien species could look at us doing this, they'd think we're insane, and we are. I hope it can change, I hope we can get past race, to simply celebrate who we are as people, but I don't know. And I know too that I can really only say or even think this from a place of privilege. Oh well, though.

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Day 8. We woke up muggy and musky in the car in that same CVS parking lot, the same CVS parking lot across this whole country. We went to a McDonald's and had a breakfast, it was nice inside. I can't believe how curt people in the service industry are in these parts of America. But I guess they do have to deal with a lot of shit. Inside, it was the same McDonald's across this country, just in a different but same place, with different but same people. I am struck by how similar and how different the places in this country are. I could sit inside the tiled walls of a McDonald's bathroom and open the door back up to anywhere. American Placelessness.

The Old Crow Medicine Show's "Wagon Wheel" soon became the song of the road, or at least it did because Ken kept playing it on loop in the car. He heard it on the radio, downloaded it, and fell in love with it. I didn't mind much though; I came around to liking it pretty fast. It is a Bob Dylan song after all.

On our way to Memphis city, we pulled over to watch a ten-story-tall construction crane monster devour an entire apartment complex.

My vision fogs up each time I step out of the car, it's that humid.

First off, we went downtown to the Peabody Hotel to check out the famed Duck Walk, but it wasn't time yet so we walked down the street to the Southern Folklore Museum; we were lead there by a curator who just happened to be sitting around the Peabody. He heard us ask a concierge about directions to the Museum, he interjected and said he could take us; he was very apologetic for eavesdropping. But we didn't mind, he walked us there and opened up the small basement museum and gave us a little tour. It was really nice. The walls were all painted, and bottle caps were haphazardly nailed everywhere, it was all very folky and eclectic, it was fantastic. He played us a short documentary about Beale Street and the music scene there in the 40's and 50's and 60's, and then he showed us a short video of pigs obeying a folky old man. Aretha Franklyn's personal piano was in the museum, it was just up against a wall, behind some tables and trash cans, gathering dust and growing old; that was the kind

of museum it was. After a little while longer, we left in time to catch the morning march of the Ducks at the Peabody, and Ken enjoyed that a lot; Ken really does like ducks.

From there we looked into the lobby of the far too expensive Rock + Soul Museum, and then to the stunningly beautiful Gibson guitar factory. We walked down Beal Street, stopping in the bars lining the street and listing to all the live bands; when we reached the car, we drove back to the MLK museum where we got in at a student discounted rate after some haggling. It was great, any amount of money would have been worth it, and it was absolutely fantastic. We then toured the still-in-use historic Elmwood Cemetery, home to a shit-ton of confederates. After driving around the heavily paved cemetery, we made it to Mud Island and a weird model fountain of the Mississippi River. We waited for the park to close, and then Ken and I once again said 'fuck it' and bathed in our underwear in one of the fountains. We hadn't showered since Texas.

We left the park promptly and then slowly made our way to the Peabody Hotel, where the ducks now resided in their coop-house on the roof. Ken stayed with them for a while I roamed the hotel in its entirety, floor by floor. I managed to eat pretty well from the room service leftovers on each of the different floors of the hotel. I was also able to pick up various Peabody and duck-themed swag, like stickers and a notepad, from the maid carts and conference rooms for Ken. We left the hotel for the last time and drove across the bridge to West Memphis,

which is actually in Arkansas.

By the time we left the hotel it was completely muggy outside, wet and thick. And by the time we were in the car and on our way, a plain mutherfucker of a storm had erupted in the sky, and it was pouring buckets as percussive lightning lit up the sky. It was terrifying, and it was absolutely gorgeous. Once we made it over the bridge, we made our way to the first rest stop in the state, a really nice one, and planned to stay there for the night, I really didn't want to drive in rain like that anymore.

It was pouring, and bugs swarmed around the lamppost that was above our car, and as soon as we opened the door to get out and use the bathroom, a group of those bugs swarmed inside of the car. So, we had to abandon our home and sleep inside of the rest stop for the night. We brought in our sleeping bags and laid them out in a corner in front of two closed and locked restroom doors. We slept on the ground that night; I used my shoes as a pillow. I know now that by the time we're home I am not going to be the same person that I was at the beginning of this journey, and I know Ken won't be either.

All night, and I mean all night, people came through the rest stop to use the bathrooms, one took a picture of us, another asshat just talked out loud really loudly "oh, I wonder where the bathroom is" and so on. One guy tried the locked bathroom doors several times, stepping all over us as he confusedly fumbled with the concept of a door that wouldn't open before noticing the clearly

open ones that didn't have two homeless teenagers sleeping in front of them that were directly adjacent. Most people just walked by though. Ken wrote a note and hung it up on the wall beside us with two duck stickers from the Peabody.

"Hello,

*We know this is irregular, but our car filled up with mosquitoes which refused to leave, and we don't want to be eaten alive tonight while we sleep. We are very thankful for this rest stop and its shelter from the storm. We'll move ourselves first chance we get tomorrow morning. Thank you, and we apologize beforehand for any disturbance our presence may cause. Thank you again."*

And that was my night.

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Day 9. We woke up a bunch during the night, but eventually, we woke up for good sometime in the early morning. And for sleeping on the ground with a pair of old loafers for a pillow, it wasn't that bad. We drove back across the state line to Memphis and then onto Nashville, on the way stopping at some Native American burial mounds, or 'Indian Mounds' as all the signage said. Then we made a stop at a plantation, Belle Meade Plantation, our first real southern plantation, slave quarters and all; onto a quick drive through the Vanderbilt campus and then to Nashville.

I'm beginning to understand the obesity problem in this country; the cheapest food, the easiest food, is

always the worst food. Fast food and soda. Salt, fat, and sugar. And that's pretty much all we ate too.

We entered Nashville from the roundabout way of coming from Vandy, we drove around, circling the city center like a cat until finally parking and finding a visitor center. We walked in and out of the Country Music Hall of Fame, and then we walked down the main drag, sitting in on some of the musicians in bars, good musicians, really good musicians. There are so many good musicians, but so few lucky ones.

We walked by the Cash museum and then to the waterfront, after which we visited Jack White's Third Man Records shop, which was really cool. Ken bought a *Sixteen Saltines* 7" vinyl, even though he doesn't have a player; record shopping was fun though. We did a few more circles around town, and then we left.

I drove The 24 through the mountains and trees, dipping into Georgia, and then swinging back up into Tennessee, driving through the cut-stone mountains, the roads like scars across the earth, with dense forests shrouded in fog and mist and clouds hanging low over the vistas and lush green valleys. We settled in our final resting place for the night in a parking garage in Chattanooga. There is nothing I'd rather be doing.

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Day 10. Waking up in Chattanooga, we left the car in the parking garage and walked around the town center. It was really nice, like wow, it was like the Portland of the

South (I'd propose that as their new town motto if there wasn't already an actual Portland, Tennessee). There were bike shares everywhere, a gorgeous waterfront, plants and shit, and organic food 'bistros' and 'eateries' everywhere, probably 'artisanal' too.

We checked out the Choo-Choo, a hotel where the rooms were in train cars. That place would've totally been the shit when I was a kid, but now, maybe not as much. We drove up to Rock City, which was just ridiculously expensive, so we didn't go in, but we were still able to see the Seven State view from another place on Outlook Mountain, where we walked to a Civil War park that commemorated 'The Battle of Outlook Mountain.' It was a park that had no trashcans in it whatsoever, which was weird and sucked because I wanted to clean the car out. The park, however, was a perfect place to see a really quality slice of Southern Americans. I really do wish they all could be California Girls.

People here, in the rest of the country (and in the South in particular), are pretty astonishingly predominantly just a lot of pasty, soft, small-eyed blobs, people whose round, featureless faces had to put them somewhere on the spectrum.

On our way down the mountain, we stopped in the world's first Coca-Cola bottling plant, which was strictly operational and not open for tours. The lady at the front desk gave us Cokes though, which was nice.

We arrived in Atlanta, Georgia in fairly good time, and took a look at everything that was closed by that

time in the afternoon, already planning on returning the next day. We walked around the park in front of Coke World, and the Aquarium Pavilion, and the Olympic Park, and all the way to the CNN headquarters. We picked up lemon pepper wings, and then we parked and slept in a sketchy city lot.

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Day 11. "The World of Coke." A place that was pretty cool, past all the weird propaganda and the fact that a museum dedicated to a beverage was right across the way from a Civil Rights Museum and an Aquarium. The weirdest part was that schools were on field trips there though.

We paid to get in, and I consumed an amount of soda that no human ever should. It was sickening, but it was great. It was really fun, I thought upon reflection, as I staggered out of there.

We drove on to Savannah, a place where the Spanish moss hung from every even semi-tall plant. So fucking South. We drove around and just soaked up the South-ness, confederate flags, Civil War shit, Spanish moss, and all. I really love that Spanish moss look. We parked and walked the cobblestone paved roads under the old brick buildings that lined the shoreline; and however much of a tourist trap each shop was, it still just had a feeling, an aura, and a weight of time that sort of just swept me up into that whole romanticism of the South.

And in the afternoon, we'd sit in our waterfront parked car, barely clothed, and sweating profusely. It's so hot down here, the windows are all fogged, and even with them rolled down it's still like a goddamned sauna in here. I am physically wet as the sleeping pills kick in.

. . . . .

Day 12. By the time we woke up, the inside of the car had developed its own rainforest ecosystem, hot and steamy. We thought it'd be better once we got outside. It wasn't. Hot, humid, rainy. I didn't know rain could be hot until now. We drove to a visitor center, an old train depot, and a Revolutionary War-era bunker, our clothes soaking and sticking to our bodies. But despite the climate I still liked this place, it was rainy, and everything was a shade darker and a shade wetter, the moss hanging from the trees dripped with rain, and the cobblestones glistened with each drop. I really liked this.

Ken was quiet, he took things in, or he didn't, I don't know. He was swept up by the little things; by the bright and alluring, the living and the dying. He'd pick up rocks, and feathers, and little creatures, and keep them for the moment and then forget about them or move on to the next thing. And when he got behind the wheel, he drove across the great American night like a madman in flight. Chasing something big, or being chased, but living, living. And we'd take all of this country in and let

it wash over us in a great tide, and we'd let the highways carry us to wherever we'd end up next.

I hesitated to tell Ken that I'd lost some of my virginity in the passenger seat, and the rest of it in the back seats, and that since then I'd made fast love to Lila in that Must-bang countless more times. I thought about Lila more than I wanted to, and I started to miss her. I'm starting to look forward to being able to see her in New York, I don't know, maybe it was a mistake to break up, I do miss her. I don't know though.

There was nowhere to jerk off on the road either, so I was a little sexually frustrated, and in that, I was able to empathize again with the virginal Kenneth. This was one aspect of the road trip I hadn't thought about, but it wasn't all that bad.

We visited Fort Jackson in time to catch the daily firing of a cannon, and then we carried on to Fort Pulaski, and we kept going because everywhere and everything costs money. Onto a beach, something that didn't cost money. I stripped down to my underwear and chased something intangible into the Atlantic Ocean.

Ken hung back, sitting somewhere on the shore and wrote this in his road-diary:

*In that gloomy and sleepy and grey place that called itself Tybee Island, nothing ever happened. A great cross-section of humanity moved in and out like the tide; always different, but ultimately always the same. I saw families, individuals, groups, young, old, American, local, and foreign. A great*

*diaspora to this singular place. The coarse sand is pock-marked with the falling drops of rain. It is simultaneously hot and humid yet grey, and a cold wind sweeps the stinging cold drops of rain onto my skin.*

*Where am I?*

*There are long-haired teenagers, tan and fit, carrying boards to and from the shoreline across wooden piers to the sand. This is the middle of Georgia, but hey, it's a beach. The beach town was filled with the same neon tourist clothing and wears as everywhere else, the only difference is the name stamped on the front of each shirt in bold white lettering:*

*"TYBEE ISLAND, GA"*

*Obnoxious neon tank-tops to fit perfectly our generation's aggressively irreverent sense of fashion. "It's a new art form, showing people how little we care," Alex would probably quote.*

*I rock back and forth in a beachside swing as I look out onto the waves and the sky and the place far off where the two met. Alex left me for the ocean, he's swimming now I think. I didn't want to go in because I didn't want to be all salty after. What kind of beach doesn't have showers? We haven't bathed since Memphis.*

*Everyone walks by, I think I can see oil derricks off in the distance. People have sun umbrellas up, why? It's so grey here that there are no shadows. Just sand, grey sand, grey sky, grey shore, grey ocean. Even the people seem grey to me. All the same, yet I know that each of them does have a reason to be here as Alex would probably tell me, each one of them has a story and a journey, just like I do. Only I'm the one writing this.*

*And as I looked out onto that tide of people, the great cosmic ebb-and-flow of humanity materialized before my eyes, and I saw everything.*

We left Tybee for the mainland and headed up the coast to wherever we'd end up next. The journey, the drive. We headed to Charleston, South Carolina, and stopped in a little shop for some boiled peanuts (they are actually a bean and not a nut) and a bottle of peach cider. It was delicious, and apparently, South Carolina is the real peach state; "those Georgian bastards are just imposters," a man at the roadside peach stand told us.

We talked as I drove, music turned down low. We loved the road, but we've both had dreams about home.

"You know what I thought about last night, when I saw you changing from one of your two shirts into the other, both of them dirty and road-worn?" Ken asked.

"What?"

"I thought about how whenever my mom does laundry she always folds her clothes into my sister's pile, I don't know if she was telling herself or us that she thought she could still fit into them. How fucked up is that?"

"Jesus, man," I said, "you know, one time, my mom had her laptop on the couch with her; she had it perched on the arm of the couch, and I walked by a few times, and then all of a sudden I heard a smash and came running out. After a second, she just started yelling at me. At me! Saying 'why didn't you tell me not to put it there' and 'why didn't you tell me that was a bad idea,' she literally can't take the blame for anything."

"Jesus man..."

We both laughed.

"Fuck them," Ken said, and we laughed a little more.

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I've found myself thinking about Lila a lot here in this romantic South. "*Hey there Delilah, what's it like in New York City?*" I'd think. I hadn't talked to her since before we left, she didn't want me to I'd guess. I don't know, I know that this is for the best and all, for college, for this year, but after that, I don't know. I don't know if it's just the loneliness I'm feeling right now, but I still feel like I miss her. I'm not just missing being with someone, I'm missing being with Lila. Am I forgetting the bad stuff, or was there really just not any? I feel like I could be together with her again, I could honestly think of myself marrying her somewhere down the road. I still do love her, but I know that what we did was for the best, it has to be.

South Carolina is nice; Charleston's a lot like Savannah, except it's nicer, less muggy, more colonial, and more palm trees, a lot more palm trees, less Spanish moss though. There's a lot of great Sheppard Ferry work scattered throughout the city. We checked out Fort Sumter, well, the on-land museum for the fort, the ferry to the island was already shut down for the night. We drove up the coast and found some plantations, which were also closed.

We parked in a public park on the waterfront and sat on a pier until long after nightfall, smoking. The car

reeked of the off-brand 'OFF!' bug spray we bombed it and ourselves with.

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Day 13. Well, we didn't die of DEET inhalation, which was good. Ken's hand was a bit swollen from a bite he probably got overnight though, which wasn't good. We drove and came across the USS Yorktown (the second, 'to confuse the Japs,' as a curator told us), and we checked out a few more plantations before making our way out of South Carolina and into North.

We entered Wilmington and Cape Fear (yup, a real place) and swam in the ocean. Wilmington was a small beach town, like Tybee, but more vibrant. Touristy, but not trashy. We swam in the ocean, and then brought a bar of soap each to the beach shower and bathed thoroughly.

The town had its own beachy funk to it that reminded me a bit of home. We went into a burrito joint called Flaming Amy's to see how the East Coast did Mexican food. I felt sorry for the poor bastards. I really missed home now, well not really home, just good Mexican food. And Lila, I missed Lila.

We consulted the map, spreading it out on the table in the restaurant. Looking around the eclectic eatery, I saw a 'hot sauce wall of fame' in the corner. Seeing that they lacked a bottle of Tapatio, and thinking then that this was some Southwest only sauce I went into the car to get the bottle we'd picked up for less than a dollar at

the 99¢ Store in Arizona (though, in truth, I'm more of a Cholula man). I brought the bottle to the front desk and graciously presented it to the cashier.

"All the way from San Diego, just like us. I thought I'd leave this here as an addition to your wall of fame," I said, handing over the bottle.

"Oh, wow, that's so nice of you, that's so cool... Kirstie, come look at what this guy just brought us," she called out.

Kirstie arrived and looked at the bottle, "Oh."

"Isn't this so cool? He said he came all the way from San Diego with it," the first cashier said.

"We get these all the time when we reorder hot sauce, we're just running low on everything right now," Kirstie flatly said.

"Oh," both the first cashier and I said, both disappointed.

Kirstie insisted that we take it back with us on the trip. And so, dejected, we carried on. We sang "Wagon Wheel" all the way to Raleigh. That and "Thunder Road." The former being Ken's choice and the latter being mine. We sang those songs at the top of our lungs with the top down, sharing that moment and just living. I thought of Lila as I listened and sang, as I don't doubt that Ken might have been thinking of Livi.

Go listen to "Thunder Road" right now, or go read the lyrics or both. Go, seriously, I'll wait.

*"Don't turn me home again, I just can't face myself alone again."*

I would sing to the road long into the night on our way to New York City. On our way to Lila. There was

hope in that song, and there was hope growing inside of me.

We settled in Richmond by 3AM, driving around for a little while before finally finding a parking lot to settle in. The little parts of our routine becoming more and more comfortable and familiar. We'd move the snacks and backpacks from the back seats and into the trunk with the rest of our stuff, we'd then recline the driver and passenger seats all the way back (I slept on the driver's side, he on the passenger's), put on eye masks, took sleeping pills, and settled in for the night. This became home for us, this was our new normal now.

After we got the car ready for sleep we realized that we were both pretty hungry, so we found a good place to park by a McDonalds and went in for a snack. As we left the restaurant to go back to our car to sleep, a man approached us outside. He shook my hand, then Ken's, then mine again; beads of sweat trickled down from his bald head. From what we could tell and smell, he was very homeless. He began talking to us, a lot, about a lot of stuff that didn't make much sense. Ken was a bit speechless, I don't think he'd ever talked to a homeless person before. I told the man that we were travelers and didn't have much we could give him, but that we had food if he wanted it. He went back to asking for money. I offered to go into McDonald's and get something for him or give him some snacks from the car. He went back to money, and that's when I knew it wasn't food he'd get with the money, so I tried to disengage with him. He wouldn't. After some more talking, he finally was done with us, and Ken gave him a nickel that he had in his

pocket. He said goodbye, and we started to walk away. The man then bent over, putting his hand to his ankle, now I was on edge this whole time, but this really put me on high alert. I could picture him pulling out a sock knife and embedding it into my stomach before I could do anything about it. But he just scratched his ankle and moved on. We got in the car and caught our breath, then drove to another McDonald's parking lot and went to sleep.

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Day 14. Tired, we left our parking spot in Richmond to pass the closed Poe museum and head onto Jamestown. I feel so clean after swimming and showering yesterday, and that's such a nice feeling. I feel clean, bug bitten, and tired, but most importantly I feel clean.

It was a hot, humid, mutherfucker of a day. Our phones said it was 100 degrees outside by the time it hit noon. From there, and yes, I know I use that phrase a lot, we snuck past the ticket booth and into Jamestowne Settlement. I don't feel all that bad about sneaking in places though, as President Truman said, *we must cut down on the cost of living*. There were two parts to the area, reenactment Jamestowne and Historic Jamestowne. I've loved the Jamestown story since I was a kid, and so this was really really cool to be here at the very start of America as we know it. This trip's been an incredible hell of a fortnight so far.

We drove around Yorktown, the historical landscape of the country changing from Civil War to

Revolutionary War the further we made it up the coast. When we got back on the highway, the sky opened up with an absolutely torrential pour; white-knuckling the wheel, I hydroplaned almost the entire way to UVA, where we parked in a structure and then ate a whole pizza by ourselves. We talked, I talked about my thoughts about Lila, and Ken seemed to agree that I should talk to her when I see her. I feel like I'd probably be happy taking Lila back now, at least for the time being. I feel bad about putting her through the breakup to just realize this, but I know she'll be happy anyway. We slept in the parking garage, the tobacco leaves Ken picked (and stole) from the Jamestowne reenactment field hung up to dry in the back of the car.

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Day 15. As it turns out, we parked in the most expensive parking lot ever. \$27.50 by the time we left in the morning. I told the young attendant that we couldn't pay and she called Sam, an old dude who came out to talk down to us. He was a dick. We said we couldn't pay, he said 'find it.' Well, okay, we drove backward up to a spot and came back with \$13.43 in change. He wouldn't accept it. We were arguing on principle now, not just out of being cheap.

He kept saying, "If I came to California, and didn't pay, you think someone would just let me leave?"

Well yes, because Californians are nice. But I didn't say that. I just drove back up, parked, and the two of us snuck out down the stairwell to get change for a \$20 in

one dollar bills. We drove back down to the gate and said that 'some people had been really nice to us,' and we gave him \$22.43.

He just seemed done with us at this point and handed us an envelope with a return address and a pay request for \$8.07, the exact fucking change, plus \$3 more for the time we'd spent in the parking garage haggling with him.

"You better pay that quick, I'm writing down your Cali license plate."

First, fuck you; second, don't call it 'Cali' you prick.

We peeled out of there as soon as he opened the lift-gate. Yes, we were being cheap, but it was a matter of principle, we could have probably gotten a motel room for that much.

From Thomas Jefferson's school to Thomas Jefferson's home, UVA to Monticello. We looked around the museum, well I did, Ken stayed in the atrium with his phone. Much like at Jamestown and everywhere before, he was far more interested in his phone, or the ducks, or the pidgins, or the seashells, or the rocks. I didn't mind though, I don't like feeling as if he's not enjoying somewhere that I am.

From the museum, we trekked behind the museum and hiked up a landscaping path to avoid paying. I know that it's stealing and that we've done it quite a bit now, but I don't know, I feel like certain things should be free, those certain things that every American should have the right to see, like the how most things in DC are free, that's a good policy. Ken found a turtle on the way

up the path, he wanted to bring it back with us, but I was eventually able to convince him not to.

I fell in love with the building the moment that I saw it, everything, the symmetry, the detail, the library, the inventions, everything except the whole slavery thing. This dude wrote the Declaration of Independence, read in six languages, was an architect and an inventor wrote a Bible and was just awesome. Again, except for the whole slave thing. Ken kept curiously trying different doors to the building, and eventually an attendant asked him if he needed help, he said we were looking for the entrance, and she asked to see our tickets so she could tell us what time our tour was. We said we'd check and left. We then joined a tour just as it was about to enter the house. Things were going well. Well, until that same lady saw us with the group and asked to see our tickets again. She asked us to leave. At least I got to see the atrium or the foyer or the anteroom inside. And we left.

We traveled onward to the capitol. Ken slept for most of the drive, Ken sleeps a lot. I had fried catfish for lunch at a roadside stop while he slept, then we found a spot to park in DC and walked around. I've been wearing the same pair of pants for the past fifteen days, they just feel crusted and hard, but they've done well so far. I felt a little bad wearing them in front of the white house, though. We spent the night in the capitol.

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Day 16. After we woke up, we went everywhere that wasn't open the afternoon before, and I still know there was so much more we could see, but we left that night for Annapolis.

I really like DC, it just feels important. I wish I were the kind of American that would weep at the site of the Star Spangled Banner, but I couldn't be. I've loved driving so much. Just watching the vast landscapes change in this incredible expansive country. Driving from coast to coast gave me such an idea of the scope of the country, but it also brought it so much closer together. For how vast and different each place is, the sprawling deserts, or the dense swamps, or the thick forests, each gradually turning into the next as the land rolled out before us, it brought the coasts together so close. After all, we did drive it all, and fast.

Each town we passed through or stayed in had its differences in dialect, the evolving twang as we moved East and South; and each town had its different little quirks or regional landmarks, though they all shared certain things. The golden arches are the same, the way Coca-Cola tastes, the inside of a gas station bathroom, or the parking lot of a CVS, they all stayed the same. That is the placelessness of modern America, but I love it nonetheless. And I love the journey as well as all the destinations. And Ken, oh Ken, with a gun for a hand and a head full of troubles. I love Ken, really, in spite of everything, he's been a great companion on this adventure.

We made it to Annapolis by nightfall and slept. On

the backroads there, fireflies darted in and out of view in the gloaming mist as we drove through the tall grasses, meadows, and trees of the backstreets of the town; it was magical, I'd never seen anything like it.

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Day 17. I feel like a pubescent teen again, I woke up to find that I'd jizzed in my pants overnight. I guess that's what I get for not jerking off for like 15 days. Oh well, at least I won't have to deal with this again for another two weeks I guess.

After sleeping in, we walked around the small town, having really good seafood and ice-cream, and checking out the town hall, and the Naval Academy (Ken's dad's alma mater). Everything there was Old Bay, food, potato chips, everything, and it was awesome. We swam in a muddy river, a gorgeous river that the houses went right up to, each with its own private dock, each sadly lacking any green lights though. Swimming down the river we found quite a lot of semi-sunken and abandoned sailboats that were fun to play on like kids. One boat, half-sunk in the neck-deep water was still roped to a completely submerged section of deck, *'only memories of its firmament jutting above the murky surface'* Ken wrote. We spent some time just messing around there, and I expected at any time that it could turn into that scene in *Jaws* where the head pops out of old Ben Gardner's sunken boat.

Anyway, we made it back to shore, and we hosed off

quickly in someone's yard before returning to our car. We had Jimmy Cantler's and Rita's Ice and Custard and then headed up to Baltimore.

We walked around the Raven's stadium, talked to two kind security guards about the gas mileage of the car because they were in the market for something sporty and fuel efficient, and had Five Guys, overpriced Five Guys, for dinner in a mall. I drove around inner-city Baltimore, full-on-fuck-you-inner-city Baltimore, really wishing I'd never watched *The Wire*; all to find what Apple Maps said was Edgar Allan Poe's house. And either they tore that historic landmark down and built projects, or it's a different Po man's domicile.

We drove up to Philly and walked the campus of UPenn in the moonlight (my former dream school) before settling in a Walmart parking lot for the night. I know now that it was Lila that I was missing, and not just someone. And I know now that I'm going to have to talk to her, and apologize to her, and take her back in New York. I could spend the rest of my life with her, I love her, and I intend to do so.

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Day 18. We went in the Walmart after waking up, washed off in the bathroom, and then had McDonald's at the in-store restaurant, the two monoliths of middle America, together in one building. Walmart is like the 24 hour, all-blue Target where the employees aren't really paid enough to care. I don't know, I'm part of the

only 10% of Americans that don't live within ten miles of a Walmart, so I guess I didn't ever grow up with it as a staple of life. It was still convenient though, and they encouraged travelers to sleep in their parking lots, which was a plus.

On to Philly, we drove the city. Okay, yes, I know I've been using certain phrases a lot, but I just like them, and they make sense. Anyway, so we drove the city, and it was really nice, bustling, and active. Active, historical, and modern. We parked and walked to Independence Hall, which was absolutely incredible.

Ken can just be an interminable self-centered bore sometimes. I honestly couldn't tell you what he wanted to do, his mind either focused on one thing a second, or on one thing for a day and nothing else, and I don't know which was more annoying. The fact that we haven't been apart for more than a few minutes for the past eighteen days has really started to wear on me.

A family that was leaving the Hall was kind enough to give us tickets, and so we got in. There was a first draft of *Common Sense* and the early handwritten iterations of the Declaration with notes and edits in the margins from TJ himself. We took a tour of the signing hall, and I really don't want to be melodramatic or sound like a nerd, but it was absolutely incredible. You know what, fuck anti-intellectualism, I'm a nerd, so be it. I could feel the weight of that room, I could hear the debate and the cracks of musket fire in the distance. Ken liked the fucking leaves outside. I asked him about this, and he said he'd rather 'just read about it online.' I don't know,

maybe I'm just a more visual or experiential person, or maybe I'm just not a goddamned sociopath. I don't know though. Speaking of sociopaths, there was a pasty group of adults and their offspring that I'm almost sure were in a cult. Or at least the very soft-spoken, tall, pale kids with bowl cuts wearing enough khaki to make the British Indian Army say 'tone it down a bit, mate' all extolled the virtues of homeschooling, and all of a sudden my road companion Ken didn't seem all that bad.

Before we left, we had to get Philly cheese steak at both Pat's and Geno's. And as much as I hate to take sides, Pat's really did it for me with their grilled onions, Ken liked Geno's better. A house-car divided. And really I've just been trying to do or think of anything to keep me from thinking about the fact that I'd be seeing Lila that night. I texted her that I'd be arriving soon to the one letter response of 'K.' I didn't know what the fuck that meant.

I drove to New York, terrified, hopeful, and uncertain, taking the Jersey Turnpike as it revealed the magnificent city to us. I wanted her back, if all this time away has taught me one thing, it's that I really wish I had done everything in the world with her. And I feel so goddamned awful for putting her through that whole horrible breakup for me to realize this; but I hoped, I knew, that I'd see her, that we'd talk, and then we could just start back like we didn't miss a beat. God I've missed her, and I love her so much.

As we parked and I walked to the door of the

apartment complex, she was living in my heart swelled with anticipatory hope, and I felt those same nervous butterflies that I had the first time I saw her as my girlfriend. I heard her voice as she buzzed me in at the front and my heart skipped a beat.

We took the small, rickety elevator up to her floor; I took a deep breath as I walked down the hall to her door, imagining that maybe when she opened the door, she'd leap into my arms for a huge hug, that smile of hers I loved so much lighting up her face, or maybe she'd even open the door and immediately kiss me. I knocked on the door and held my breath as I heard a rustling on the other side towards it. The peephole went dark from the looker on the other side and then lit up again as the figure drew back. Okay, I thought, here we go. Lila. The door swung open.

On the other side stood a college-aged girl wearing only an unpadded flesh-toned bra and gray sweatpants, who seemed to have showered less in the past month than Ken and I. She was curt too, which just compounded the effect.

"Lila's in the living room," she let out like saying that was even too much effort and went back into one of the other rooms.

I shook off the dust of my shoes or at least tried to at the threshold, but still walked in with dirty loafers. I walked towards the main room, and Lila turned the corner to greet me, with a hug, like the kind you give an old acquaintance you hadn't seen for a while.

"Hey Alex, hi Ken. How was the drive?"

What, the drive all the way from San Diego to see you, or just the drive into the city?

"It was fine, not a lot of traffic at all," I said.

Okay, so, friends, play it by ear, as friends. Okay. It was nice to see her, nice to be physically with her, but there was also that hesitation that loomed over me. Ken and I had had a long talk about Lila on the drive from Baltimore to Philly. All in all, Ken was hopeful, and I was nervous, and I wanted to wait to see how she was before I'd think about bringing anything up with her, though I had hoped I wouldn't even have to and things would just work out. That was the plan.

*I wanna bring you home myself, bring you home myself.*

The three of us went downstairs and started to walk, saying goodbye to Lila's nice older sister, her curt roommate, and the two other roommates, the lot of them like something out of *Girls*. Ken hung back, following Lila and I, giving us space. If he believed in anything, he believed in love. We walked through Central Park, the sun shimmering behind clouds in a blue sky. We sat for a while together on the grass, silent, just existing in the same place as each other, but it was still nice. And as we kept walking, we started to walk closer to each other, the time and the distance fell away, and I felt like I was hers again. We laughed, we talked, and our hands would brush up against each other's as we walked.

I still couldn't believe we were in New York, I still couldn't believe that I was with Lila. We went to a place she liked for dinner, it was okay, but it was really expensive, I could see she hadn't changed in that regard.

I just ordered soup and said that I wasn't that hungry. It was dark in the city by the time we left the restaurant. Lila looked stunning in that golden-hour light streaming between the tall buildings and onto the rain-sheened streets. She had adopted the metropolitan New York summer look fully, and it did suit her well.

The three of us walked to the Metro and took it to Times Square; we emerged into a city illuminated, it might as well have been daylight at street level, it was incredible. Looking upwards from the commotion and the dense mass of people, under cover of complete black darkness above as the buildings scraped the sky. The city was absolutely electric. The city was alive, it was a living entity, and even the ground was breathing, belching out hot steam at every exhaling manhole.

Walking then to 30 Rock Plaza, the city didn't stop. New York is really two cities, the one looking up and the one looking forward. The metropolitan monoliths looking up, and the people of all sorts and the waste they leave behind looking down. The waste, and the debris, and the constant repairs, and the scaffolding (I love the look of scaffolding), and the overflowing trashcans, and the jackhammered potholes. I looked at both cities in awe and fascination. *Moloch the unforgiving*.

After walking through and back through the electric and living night, we eventually made our way back to the Metro and took it back to what was Lila's home. She loved the city, she wanted to stay there, she wanted to go back there after the summer, and she dreamt of NYU or Columbia or Fordham, and of the Times, and of the

city she saw as her own.

We were greeted in the apartment once again by Lila's sister and her roommates. Her sister was interested in city boys of all sorts, the roommates spouted their litany of label-obsessed neo-feminist privileged East Coast hyper-politically correct opinions like they were rehearsing for a Lena Dunham/Noah Baumbach script, and the brilliant and womanly Lila was somewhere in the in-between. These two girls were the kinds of girls that hated everything I was, no matter who I happened to be; girls that could say anything and never be wrong because it's their right to expression, but anything anyone else said contrary was completely incorrect, bigoted, or hateful. Girls who spoke vehemently against their systematic objectification and body shaming, but talked in the same breath about how hot Channing Tatum was and how, even though he was funny, they'd never date someone who looked like Jonah Hill. I don't mind opinions, in fact, I strongly believe in feminism and equality, I just can't stand a hypocrite.

As a generation born into the crisis of a Fourth Generational Turning, we are predestined to see our place in the world as change-makers and moralists. The young adults of the 40's, the 'Greatest Generation,' rebuilt a post-war America into a moral and patriotic metropolis, destroying what they perceived as the amorality of the 1920's they saw as young children. Their morality was based on nationalism and religion, and now ours is based on political correctness and social

justice; we practice rightness for rightness' sake, even for the sake of personal freedoms of speech. But where are our Beats? Where is our counterculture in the face of this conspicuous morality? We might just be the first generation in history to be less subversive than our predecessors. We can be the next greatest generation, we only need to direct this energy to things that matter.

To us, watching a YouTube video or liking a Facebook post is activism, Converse and a flannel is an identity, Sperry's and a polo is a personality, a phone is a status symbol.

We can't each fix every problem, and being an SJW doesn't help, it only makes you feel better about yourself and better than everyone else; if you want to make a real difference don't like a hundred Facebook posts, or just talk about injustice, actually go somewhere and do something, a quantifiable something. Clean up a beach, sit down and talk with someone who seems sad, hand out meals or blankets to the homeless, just do something; volunteer your time not your opinions. We're a passionate and a conscious generation, let's not also be a selfish one, let's actually direct that energy into change and progress and good. Go out there and do something; don't see all of the dying fish and say 'look at all of these problems,' actually pick one up and put it back in the ocean. But who am I to say anything, I don't know, it's just that hearing people like that always aggravates me so much. The progress of one group doesn't come from the degradation of another, it comes from the elevation of that one group, benefiting

everyone; a rising tide lifts all boats.

But oh well, we're still fucked. Take away my home and give me student loans, but they'll say it's all our fault anyway; I'm a millennial blame it all on me, we can only make it out of here alone. But I don't know. If post-modernism is what fucked the generation before us, then post-irony is what's fucking ours. That and the boomers.

I'm really just trying to think of anything to distract me from the reality of the situation, and the gut-wrenching confusion coupled with the heart-lifting elation of being with Lila right now. Anyway, Ken and I were given the couch, and it was nice to have a place like that indoors to sleep, which he did almost immediately, leaving me with the girls and Lila. They continued to talk amongst themselves and go to bed one-by-one as Lila, and I had that talk. We walked outside and sat on the stairs that lead to an elevated city park across from the apartment complex, we talked until 3AM.

She told me how hard it'd been for her, and how because of that she actively tried not to think about it, that she was good, she had moved on, and that there was nothing to worry about. She was ready to be friends.

I wanted to play it by ear, but this was not what I had planned on hearing.

To what looked like her surprise and confusion, I told her the truth, I explained to her how I was feeling, about how I still, of course, love her. I told her that I'd thought a lot about the possibility of getting back

together if we found that that was what we both wanted. We talked and talked, and not just about us, but about everything; sitting together, next to each other, on those concrete steps under the light of the warm singular streetlamp. She seemed taken aback by the things I had said, and so we got to the point where we said we'd talk about this more after she had time to process all of this new information. She said she'd worked so hard to get to a place where she was okay not being with me, and she was ready to be friends. I told her that I did too, but then I started to miss her more and more each day. She just wanted the time to think about things, and with that time and this new perspective, she'd see where she stood. If we wanted to be together then, that was the answer.

I know in my heart that I was missing Lila, and not just missing having someone; she didn't know which I was feeling, and so she didn't just want to be the girl to fill a void. She wanted time, and I was fine with giving her time. I'd give her anything to just get the possibility she'd come back. I wanted so desperately to go back. I just want to hold her hand, I want to go on a drive to the coast, and sit and know we're in love.

We walked back inside and sat on the steps outside her door and chatted a while more, this time just about the day, and her friends, and her internship, and my trip.

And then there was a short silence, we stared at each other closely, she let out a laugh.

"What?" I asked.

"Nevermind," she said like she always said.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing."

"*What?*" I asked again.

"Oh, well, I'm just feeling a bit horny right now."

"Really? Well, what do you want to do about that?"

She asked the same question back at me.

"Well Lila, what I want and what's probably best are two different things."

I could tell she felt exactly the same way. She smiled with only the corners of her mouth and looked at my lips.

"I'd like nothing more than to kiss you right now though," I said.

"Well, talking about it is a good way to not do anything, and I—" I put my lips to hers, and that stopped her talking. She opened up to me once more, and it was absolutely exhilarating, like the first time we'd kissed. It felt like I had just found something that had been missing.

Scientifically, a breakup does the same things to a person as drug withdrawal. It affects every part of the brain and the body. There is real pain and real heartache. And there is real relapse. That's where that desire for one more hit comes from, one last hook-up. I was deep in the throes of girlfriend withdrawal, and sex is the methadone of a love addict.

We sat and laid on those stairs, grasping each other, grasping at what we had, and we kissed deeply and passionately. I felt like I was floating almost, time stood

still, I felt the most right I'd ever felt, like this was what was missing, what I'd been waiting for. It felt pure and righteous, and right. And then it was over. She drew back and apologized, and I did the same out of impulse, we'd quickly call it a mistake, and a lapse in judgment, and say that it changed nothing of how we felt or of what we talked about. She insisted.

We talked a short while more, she asked if that was an act of wanting something or wanting each other, and we said we didn't really know. But we did agree that what we'd talked about before was right, and we'd just have to see. She needed time.

And then we went back inside sometime after 4AM, and went to our separate beds, and slept.

Thinking about it, it's never the first kiss that's the best, but it's always that first kiss back. After a breakup, after a break, after time or distance or circumstance, the unexpected, anticipated, taboo kiss. And it was.

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Day 19. We woke up, well, I woke up, Ken slept a little while more as I stared at the ceiling. We got up slowly, and then the three of us set off. We walked to the Metro and took it to Upper West Manhattan and walked up through China Town, west through Little Italy, and down through SoHo and into the artsy districts. Of all the places we've been, I could see my life there the most. Everything here is great. The people, the electric yet still relaxed atmosphere, the buildings, even the graffiti, and

Lila.

We had brunch at Russ & Daughters, I had a bagel, and I had Lila's leftovers like I always did, a few bites of chocolate babka. The whole morning might as well have been one of those beautiful New York montages from an episode of *Louie*. I was happy, I was experiencing Lila's city with her, and I was in love with the world again, through the eyes of a girl I'd try to love again.

From the deli, we walked Lower Manhattan to the Freedom Tower and Memorial. We didn't go into the museum, those two holes in the earth and the names and the memories were more than enough. I have to say though, that was one of, if not the most, appropriate and well-done memorials I'd ever seen.

We walked to the financial district, then to the tip of Manhattan and stared across the gray, storm-swept waters to look out at Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. We walked to the dilapidated Chelsea, and I thought of all the great loves that had happened there, and of the time I loved Lila as Leonard Cohen crooned softly on her record player. And she'd tell me again that she preferred Lana's rendition. We walked on the High Line and settled in Bryant Park. Ken wanted to do that thing where you pay one of those old guys and play chess with them, and so he contented himself doing that as well as staring at the park's carousel like the Kenneth Caulfield he is. Lila and I laid on the grass next to each other.

She asked if I was feeling any differently.

"No, I'm not. Today was really nice with you, Lila."

"It was," she said. She asked what it meant to be friends. We'd been close all day, and it was so nice. She said she wasn't ready for more, and I thought of what an idiot I'd been, and what an idiot I'd be if we couldn't get back together.

"I want to be with you, but if I can't be with you, I want to be friends. I never want to lose that. Ever," I tried.

"Alex, it hurt so much when you broke up with me," she said. When *we* broke up, I thought but didn't say, "and now, Alex, I just don't know, it took so long, and it was so hard to move on, I just don't know if I can go back now. I don't know if it's just one of those things I've shut off and can't turn back on again."

We laid in the grass next to each other until she pulled out her phone to respond to a text, the screen turned away from me.

"In that first month after the breakup, I cried almost every night, and there was this song I'd listen to and think of you and what all had happened," she said as she hit play, holding her phone to her chest.

The song was "All I Want" by Kodakline, and as it played, tears fell down the sides of my face as I laid there next to her listening to it. "Peace" by O.A.R. was that song for me, which I listened to in that last tumultuous month of our post-talk, pre-actual-breakup relationship. We laid there on the grass next to each other watching the sky as the song played from her phone. I've heard that every human needs seven significant touches per day, I reached for her, and she wasn't there.

The sky was growing dark, and the park and city were once again illuminated by lesser lights. We made our way through Times Square and into Grand Central Station and took the Metro again to her place. I liked New York public transit, it really felt very democratic, everyone rode it. Lila said her sister would be more than happy to have us another night, and we could leave in the morning after a good night's sleep, but I said we wanted to keep moving. I really did just want to put my mind back on the road, it would've been too hard to stay.

When we arrived at the apartment, Ken said goodbye to Lila and walked to the car. I walked with Lila. I hugged her, and held her, and looked at her, my eyes welling.

"Drive safe," she said and pecked me on the lips for an instant that I wanted to last forever. When she drew away, I chased after her lips again, but she drew back again and whispered, "just one," as the elevator doors opened behind her.

"Bye," I said as she stepped inside the elevator. We just stared at each other, and I watched her as the doors closed. As soon as she left my sight, I wept. I pressed my hand against the cold metal and wished that that wasn't it. I collapsed to the ground, and sitting there I heaved deep sobs trying and failing to catch my breath. They were the kinds of tears that were hot as they left your eyes, the sobs that hurt the corners of your jaw. But I caught my breath, dried my face, and I just fucking drove.

*And you'll find her somehow you swear, somewhere  
tonight you run sad and free until all you can see is the night.*

• • • • •

Day 20. We woke up parked in front of a Connecticut rest stop and drove on to Boston after McCafe coffee and some breakfast burgers. Boston was a cool city, a really nice mix of historical and modern, and they like beans. We drove past BU, and through Harvard, stopping to check out the boathouse, and that was about it. So begins our journey West.

Heading into Pennsylvania, we stopped at a kids park and sat on the swings and played on the jungle gym for what seemed like at least an hour. I walked barefoot through the grass. It seems to me that grass has gotten courser over the years, more irritating than relaxing to walk barefoot through or lay on. Or maybe I've just started to notice it more.

You know, sometimes I try to think I'm an adult, and sometimes I feel like I'm the only adult in the room. But it's times like this when I really forget that I am. I forget how much I'm terrified of growing old. I guess I'm just stuck somewhere in between the two. You know, if I had to say, Lorde's "Ribcage" is what I could call the song of my generation. Lorde, Halsey, TØP, there's a new generation of young artists giving a voice to this generation, and I hope they can help change things and people all for the better.

And thinking of any of this just made me miss Lila all the more.

And we kept driving; stopping, exhausted, thirty miles out of Scranton.

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Day 21. Three weeks on the road. We drove into Scranton, The Electric City (because of all the electricity), which was a sadly underwhelming city considering how much I cried during the finale of *The Office*. Jesus, I'm probably making it sound like I'm just some emotional wreck of a guy that cries all the time. I'm really not, but then again what would be wrong if I was? I hate the phrase 'be a man,' I really fucking hate it. Ken thinks being a man is shutting out feelings, bottling them up, not letting anyone else in, and I used to be like that because that's what I was told was right growing up. It's what I was forced to do at home, when my dad would shut me out and tell me to get over it and my mom would always qualify my problems with her problems, or tell me how upset what I had to say made her. 'Be a man and take it' I'd tell myself, 'suck it up and deal with it.' It's honestly the most damaging thing for young boys to hear, and for everyone else too, Jesus, just look where it almost left Ken.

We drove on to Ohio, through forest and farmland, the landscape of the country once again changing. We ended up at the Rock and Roll hall of fame in Cleveland by twilight, closed, but we looked around anyway. The story of Ohio is the story of music coming from nothing, so many bands, so many people who just had one dream and kept at that dream. It was absolutely inspiring to be

there. Power to the local dreamer. I just wish I could have that conviction. I just wish I had something to be convicted about. I don't know now what I have without her.

We parked in a Walmart parking lot, Ken chased some geese there, and then we slept.

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Day 22. Cleveland to Burton, a sleepy, one-street town in the middle of Amish Country. They did have a Walmart though, so we knew we'd spend the night. We walked around the main drag, a perfect American small town, except this one had buggy lanes, the Walmart even had specific buggy parking; can they even shop at Walmart? In town you could immediately tell an Amish person apart, if not for the clothes then by the bowl cuts and the beards, even if they were wearing 'Yankee' clothing, as one of them told us it was called. Our dirty jeans and t-shirts were Yankee clothing. To the Amish, we were the outsiders, and as everyone has the tendency to do, they had a name for those outsiders. To the Amish, we were Yankees, to the residents of East Jesus we were from Babylon, and to New York we were from 'Cali.'

Smoke from trash fires billowed into the sky above the tree line at the edge of town. We had some local cuisine at Mary Yoder's Amish Kitchen and called it a night, I was just getting tired of driving, I was just getting tired. I felt like I was running, but I didn't want to run anymore.

I've been thinking about Lila so much since we left New York. I know I can't do this anymore. Maybe it's the fact that I'm not the one who's in control this time. And I want her, but now she's the one that's decided to not be together. I hope that this isn't it, I hope I haven't lost her. I'm jealous, and I shouldn't be. I wanted her to have fun in New York, and I still want her to, but the thought of her in someone else's arms, the thought that she could want someone else, it just makes me feel physically sick to my stomach. And that's not fair to her for me to think that. I don't want to feel this way, all tangled up in blue.

And despite how I feel, there's still that gnawing doubt somewhere in the back of my mind that goes back to the reason we broke up; it was so I could have college, and so she could have New York (and then college). It's just that, right now, I could care less about that, I could spend the rest of my life with her. I want her to be happy, but I want her too, I just hope that those two things can be the same.

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Day 23. We slept in as much as we could, something that's always a bit of a challenge when you're sleeping in a car in the parking lot of a busy store. Only today the clop of hooves woke us up instead of the screech of tires or the honk of horns.

We drove past farmland and factory and through Detroit. Through the abandoned factories, the decrepit decay, and the wretched refuse, laid the city, that proud,

powerful city; still standing, still moving, in spite of a whole country that said it couldn't. We drove down 8 Mile road, had 313 burgers at McDonald's, and drove through a neighborhood that no one gets out of. Seeing the burned-out buildings, the boarded-up shacks, I kept thinking 'people actually live here.'

We kept going up the glove, or the mitt, or whatever, to the tip of what I'd guess is the middle finger, Traverse City, where one of Ken's uncles lived. It was a beautiful little city on the shore of Lake Michigan. Ken's uncle, aunt, and toddler cousin were all very welcoming, they even offered up their washing machine for our use. I showered, washed my clothes, and sat down on a couch indoors, in a house. Wow that felt good. We had a quiet night in, this will be a nice change of pace, I thought. No alarms and no surprises tonight.

Ken and I each got our own beds, his in a guest room and mine in a cot in the basement, I don't know if I'd ever been in a basement before, we don't really have those in California. I showered before bed and washed my clothes in their machine, and went to bed in an actual bed, and I was so incredibly comfortable.

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Day 24. The family's old, smelly, sad-eyed, big, gray mutt woke me up as he feebly climbed into the low bed with me, I welcomed him though; he's a good dog. The adults were long up and had already left for work, the

kid already at summer school. I made a pot of coffee as suggested and fed the dog as instructed, and I sat on the couch and read from one of the books I brought. I knew it'd be a long time before Kenneth got up. At the risk of sounding old, I have no idea how teenagers sleep so goddamned much all the time. Lazy piece of shit.

When he finally did wake up, we drove up to the Sleeping Bear Dunes. We parked, left our stuff in the car and went to play in the sand in shorts. The big dune looming above us, towering and sandy, we made our way up, looking forward to rolling down. Ken said there was water on the other side.

"Okay," I said.

Well, after an abysmal uphill trek, we made it, only to find more sand. So we pressed on. There was water soon, wasn't there? Ken assured me of it. And we kept hiking, and the sand kept coming after each summit, and eventually, the sand just turned into rocks that were burning hot in the sun. And so, with nothing on my feet, no water, and no sunscreen, Ken started us on a hike that I anticipated being a stroll. It was an actual hike, we passed people using those double hiking stick things and CamelBaks, prepared assholes. Each next peak we thought, and he said, was the summit, it had to be. But it wasn't, there was just another level after it that could only be seen from on top of the next peak. And it continued to be like this, a mountain you scale without thinking of size. Again, actual hiking people were doing the thing we were doing. I'm not one for melodrama, or

maybe I am, but I was prepared to eat Ken in a heartbeat, I was dying. Five fucking sun-beaten miles of uphill sand and rock later we arrived at the shore, and I just kept walking until I was swimming. As Ken searched the shores for Petoskeys, I laid on the pebbly shore and simply existed, closing my eyes and listening to the waves wash up against the rocks, one after the next.

We walked the five miles back, exhausted, I was too tired to be angry. The time on my phone kept changing as we walked up and down each hill. We took naps when we got back to the house and then biked around the town in the twilight of dusk like a couple of local kids. Ken's uncle had a few spare old bikes in the garage that we used.

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Day 25. Another day of rest, it's good to have friends on the road.

I honestly just don't know how to feel about Lila. I'm sorry, I hate complaining about this, I hate going on about this, but it's just about all that's been on my mind. I guess I'll just wait and see what happens, I guess that's all I can do.

What time is it? 3PM? She should be free, right? No. I'm not just gonna text her. I can be okay. She wanted her space, and I'll give it to her it's not fair of me to ask more of her, it's not fair of me to worry about her, it's-

I texted her at 8PM. Waiting, waiting.

"I'm here," she texted back, 8:35.

"Hey."

"Hi."

"So, how are things going, what've you been up to? If you want to talk, of course," I texted.

"Sure. Phone?"

I dialed. Ring... ring... ri- she picked up.

"Hey, so, how've you been, what's new?" I asked.

"Lots, I'm having a great time. You?"

"That's great Lila. Yeah, things are good, we're at Ken's uncle's house in Upper Michigan; it's nice, relaxing."

"Fun."

"So, what've you been up to? I'm glad to hear you're having fun."

"Yeah."

"Anything new at work?"

"Not much... Work, reading, movies with my sister and her friends," she said flatly.

"Oh, great, that sounds really fun," I was really trying.

"I went to a student film festival yesterday, and then I went shopping with some friends from work. I run in Central Park a lot, it's nice. You know, the usual."

"Run in central park, when?"

"At night usually."

"Jesus Lila, be careful."

"I'm an adult," she said. *No, you're not*, I thought.

"Please be safe, okay? I don't want to have to go to a charity run with your name on it, you know I hate running."

"Okay, Alex."

"What else, how're the roommates?"

"Good. I'm going clubbing tomorrow, my sister knows a club promoter. He can get us in for free, and get us free drinks."

"Oh wow, that should be a lot of fun, that's great," I said, wondering if it's wrong that I felt jealous, even protective, when she said that.

"I bought a veeerry short dress for it, I'm almost embarrassed. It's so sleazy, they get paid to find good looking girls."

I didn't really know what to say to that.

She continued, "He told us we had to wear heels and that we can only take drinks from the bottle, no middlemen."

"Wait what? What is this? What're you talking about?"

"So no one can put stuff in our drinks."

I didn't know what to say, why was she telling me this? Did she know how saying that was making me feel?

I interjected, "but Lila, you're there being ornaments, literally objectified pretty much, I mean—"

"Yes."

"He told you how to dress, he—"

"I know, it's so bad," she said, cavalierly, nonchalantly, almost amused with herself.

"Lila, that's wrong."

"What? Using sexuality to get ahead in the world?"

"Why are you going to do that?"

"You've heard Lana's song? Fucked my way to the top?"

"You can get drunk other ways, other than by being used."

"It'll be fun."

I didn't say anything, I didn't know what I could say.

"We're using him in a sense, if you think about it. No need to get upset, Alex."

"I'm not upset Lila, just—"

"Nah..." she paused "he's using us."

"Lila—"

"What?"

"I'm just worried, that's all."

"But I'm fine, I probably won't go home with anyone, I'll be fine."

Probably? I thought. "Please, just be safe, Lila."

"I hope I can get in, it shouldn't be too hard with that dress though."

"Lila, this isn't like you're at some party, it's the real world, if you're too drunk things could happen that'd be out of your control."

"I know, I know my limits."

"As a friend, I'm just asking you, please just be careful."

"Yes, Alexander...I will be..." another pause and then she retorted, "What, are you worried?"

"If I tell you I am it's a bad thing, but I am. Because I've seen how bad people can be, and I care about you, Lila."

"Oh, what do you know?"

"Okay, sure, yes, have fun in any way you can. Just be safe, please."

"K, I'll let you know if I'm still alive Saturday morning."

"You're smart, and I shouldn't worry, but... Okay, have fun, Lila."

"I plan to."

The conversation was silent for a few seconds, just dead air and the static between us. What could I say? Was she deliberately trying to break my heart? I could barely breathe.

"How's everything else been?" I finally asked.

"What's everything else?"

"Enjoying yourself, being happy?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's good."

"You?" she asked.

"Yah..."

"Good."

"Yah, I'm glad to hear you are—"

"You said that."

"I'm sorry, Lila."

"Okay."

"And I'm sorry I haven't been able to talk to you more, being on the road and all."

"Okay."

I took a breath, sighed silently, waiting if she'd just say something, anything. But there was nothing.

"Well, have a great time," I said.

"Where are you right now? A house?"

"Yeah, his uncle's house, in Upp—"

"Oh, okay. That's nice."

"I'm in a bed, which is nice."

"So how have you been? You made me explain everything I've done, you should have to do the same. I'm jealous of the trip you're getting to take."

"As I am of you."

"How so?"

"Miss Socialite."

"Ah, but you don't like people, Alex."

"I enjoy people, Lila, and I like certain people."

"That's nice... Huh, this is first time I've been cold outside this summer."

"Is it nice?"

"No. Coldness is usually uncomfortable, Alexander. But I'm always cold."

Especially those shoulders of yours, I thought. But instead, I said, "well, it'll change soon enough."

"True... So, are you actually having fun? The time of your life?" she asked.

"Something unpredictable, that in the end is right..."

"Ok, calm down."

"Yes, I'm *actually* having fun. I hope you are too."

"Right, we were talking about you, I think you're uncomfortable talking about yourself."

"Oh really?" I retorted, but then thought for a second, the last thing I wanted to be was hostile, "Well, you'd be right, I am. But, yes, I'm fine."

"Is it meeting your expectations?" she asked.

"The trip?"

"Yes."

"Yes, it is."

"That's good," she said.

"Fuck it's cold," she again interjected, "I should go inside."

"Where are you?"

"Fire escape, looking out at the park and the steps under the streetlight, it's really pretty out here."

Another pause.

"Well, goodnight I guess, get warm," I said,

Another pause.

"Alex, I have to ask where you are, where your feelings are," she said.

"Where are yours?"

"Nope, I asked you," she insisted.

"Does it matter now?"

"You can't do that, Alex."

"I'm sorry. Okay. Since we talked?"

"Yes, how are you feeling now?"

"I just don't want to have this conversation every time we talk, Lila."

"Fine."

"Do you not agree?" I asked.

"If you say so."

"Well, what do you think, Lila?"

"I guess I've just been thinking a lot, that's all; deconstructing. And I don't love what I see."

"And what would that be?" I asked nervously.

"In fact, it almost makes me angry, which I don't like at all."

"What does?" I asked again, nervously.

"Bluntly?"

"Yes, Lila."

"Well, you broke up with me, and now you regret it."

"And, bluntly?" I asked again.

"That's it. You realized your mistake too late."

"Too late?"

"Yup."

"Okay, Lila, please. I-I'm not defending myself, because I know I was short-sighted and dumb, but I think that I just needed time to process that transition. And, and..."

"Yes?"

"But I still feel the same, to answer your question, Lila, I still feel the same."

"Too bad it took this long," she said very bluntly, flatly, emotionlessly.

"I'm just trying to wrap my mind around how *you* feel, Lila."

"How I feel?"

"Yes. How you can be so detached after all we went through, how you can now feel how you do. I just want to know."

"Honestly, Alex, it was upsetting to see something that I wanted so badly but told myself wasn't possible suddenly become possible."

"I'm sorry. I just don't know how you could be

acting this way, Lila. And bluntly, how you could be so cold. It hurts, Lila."

"I'm sorry."

"But why?" I asked.

"Cold how? Because I don't want to be with you?"

"Do you not want to be together, or do you just want to make me feel how you felt?"

She said nothing.

"I'm sorry," I apologized.

"Yeah, okay, goodnight."

. . . . .

Day 26. I stayed in bed.

Ken was understanding.

"If there's a chance, any chance that something could happen, I'd drive back to New York with you right now, day and night. We could do it right now," Ken put forth. If Kenneth Chester believed in anything, he believed in love. And I seriously considered it.

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Day 27. I stayed in bed again, as long as I could. My pair of Goldtoe socks were starting to become all holes. I washed all of my clothes again that morning, and after they were done we packed up the car, said our gracious goodbyes and left. We were on the road again.

I'm not ready for forever. I want her, I want to be with her, but I just don't know when. I don't know if

being with her in college will make me resent her for 'holding me down' or if that's nonsense because it'll be love. But I guess it's not even up to me at all anymore.

*We drove to Chicago, all things go, all things go.*

We drove around Chicago at night and ate at the world's biggest McDonald's, our Mecca of the road. We thought better than to sleep in Hyde Park, so we drove into the UChicago campus and slept there.

*We slept in parking lots, I don't mind, I don't mind.*

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Day 28. We left the car parked and went to walk around the city, the "L" buzzing overhead. We had deep dish pizza at a hole-in-the-wall little Italian Ristorante joint that I'm convinced was just a front for the mafia, as it was quite nice but quite empty. We went by the Sears Tower and Millennium Park, and from there we went our separate ways around the city, each with very different ideas of what we wanted to do. I took the car and went to the Frank Lloyd Wright house and then to the Museum and Ken walked to the waterfront and swam or watched the birds or something. Being there just made me miss her even more though, I loved the city, and I know she would have loved it too, especially the museum. I wish I could stop thinking about her, or at least stop complaining and ruminating and torturing myself; I just feel like a whiney little Amory Blaine.

I went back to the car and parked somewhere on the waterfront and waited for Ken to make it there, I let him

take his time. I texted Lila to ask how the club was. She called and told me she was going on a date the next night, 'dinner and drinks, very classy,' with a guy she met at the party when she was 'embarrassingly drunk.' He was older, of course, a grad student; I didn't even stop to think how dinner and drinks would work for the only recently seventeen-year-old Lila, and wondered at the same time how much or how little regard this guy, Phil Raymond, had for the statutory laws of the great state of New York. I just agreed politely, and let her know that I was happy for her. She let me know that he was, once again, not only a grad student, but also an international one, and would therefore not see him again after her New York story had concluded; I didn't know if it made me feel better or worse to know that the people she'd chosen to be making out with would be conscious flings and not acts of love or even liking. This guy was an international grad student from Dublin, I can't fucking compete with that. I felt a horrible knot sink in my stomach, like all those butterflies had just died. My goddamned jealousy and I.

*You only hate the road when you're missing home.*

I have to enjoy the rest of this trip and just let her exist apart from me. I just love her too much to give up on that hope just yet. But I can't just dwell until then.

While I kept waiting for Ken, after the call, I kept thinking about her. I put in my earphones and tried to, once again, escape into music, but I only thought of her. So instead I just embraced it, I listened to all of those songs that made me think of her, I made a goddamned

breakup playlist. I chose each song carefully and meticulously, I created a story out of them, taking me through my own breakup, from that last terrible month, through the long summer, all up to the point where I was right now at this moment, confused and still hopeful, trying to piece it all together.

- *Peace*, O.A.R.
- *Landslide*, Fleetwood Mac
- *Let Her Go*, Passenger
- *Harvest Moon*, Neil Young
- *Simple Twist of Fate*, Bob Dylan [our time in New York]
- *I Miss You*, blink-182
- *Stubborn Love*, The Lumineers
- *Jealousy and I*, Torres
- *The One That Got Away* (acoustic), Katy Perry
- *Dark Paradise*, Lana Del Rey
- *Over and Over*, Three Days Grace [Ken's contribution]
- *Hero*, Regina Spektor
- *All I Want*, Kodaline
- *When It's Time*, Green Day
- *Say Yes*, Elliot Smith
- *Romeo and Juliet*, Dire Straights

These were songs that we had shared or songs that I had found or turned to in the months without her. I don't think I could ever bring myself to listen to *Lovers Spit* again. She had given me Lorde, Lana, and Torres,

incredible Torres; she had given me everything I thought. I grew up on punk rock, she was sort of hip-hop, and we listened to *Sweater Weather* in that first winter we were together when we drank peppermint mochas and stayed up all night making love, sleeping, waking up and making love again. Those were some of the best nights of my life, holding her naked skin against mine, feeling all of her lying beside me, watching the sky light up into morning through the gaps in the drawn blinds of her room. And she'd sit up, bathed in that golden-white light, and I'd lay with my head in her lap and I'd look up at her as she'd sing softly with her fingers running through my hair in that beautiful voice of hers "your big sad eyes, your crooked smile, your gap teeth, your widow's peak, my November baby" as if those words were written just for the two of us and just for that moment. Just lying with her in her bed, I may miss that feeling most of all, it was then that I felt closest to her, when I felt the most complete.

Ken arrived, and we drove off. I drove on that open road, hooking up with what I'd guess was what was left of The 66, that old mother road, to St. Louis. We drove deep into that American night with the top down, blasting music and singing at the top our lungs. We belted "Bring Me Back to Life," "Misery Business," "Helena," the whole *Black Parade* album, "Miss Murder," "Sugar, We're Going Down," "I Write Sins Not Tragedies," and all of the emo throwback crap we could think up. It was just great to get some of that angst out.

*Drop the dagger and lather the blood on your hands,  
Romeo. I've really been on a bender and it shows.*

I could either indulge my sorrow or kill it for the moment, I chose the latter. We stopped for the night at a trucker rest stop 100 miles outside of the city, falling asleep to the droning hum of the semi-truck engines idling beside us, warming their weary drivers.

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Day 29. We drove the remainder of the distance to St. Louis as soon as we'd woken up. When we arrived, we parked and walked Laclede's Landing all the way to the arch, which we went up and back down again. It was nice, I only thought about jumping half of the time I was up there.

Underneath the arch is the single most confusing, bizarre, and convoluted museum I've ever been inside of. From the creepy, offensive, and otherwise disturbingly anatomically incorrect talking mannequins, to the incoherent blocks of text strewn across and jutting out from the walls, to the oddest juxtapositions of images with historical quotations. One diorama of beavers building a dam was in front of a giant photograph of an atomic mushroom cloud, with a quote from Einstein about innovation; either that's a mistake or the most nuanced and profound exhibit ever created, and I'm just too dumb to understand its meta-symbolism. There was a man in one tour group who took a picture of every single square inch of that whole

goddamned place; he looked too stupid and unhealthy and touristy to be a terrorist though, so I didn't worry. The other thing about that place was that every single one of the signs there said 'Indians.' I feel like they've had a few decades to change that. We finally exited through the gift shop, a gift shop full wall-to-wall with all of the arch and arch-related paraphernalia you could ever want. We then walked through the still-confoundingly-offensive Dred Scott courthouse to our car.

While driving, we happened upon the magical 'City Museum.' It was incredible, caves caverns, ladders, ducts, sculptures, and slides like something out of *The Goonies*. I loved it, I adored the place. Ken and I ran around like kids with the actual kids that were there, while people more our age worked summer jobs as docents. It was the culmination of all of the things I would have loved as a kid; as a kid, that place would have been the most incredible place I'd ever been to. And, running around, not being able to do half of the things there because I was too tall, too large, too grown up to do them, that was really the first time in my life where I encountered something that I was simply too old for. The caves, and ladders, and nooks would have entertained me to no end as a child, and they still would have; I yearned to explore, but I simply couldn't. I tried, but I didn't fit in most places there, and that was it. I was simply too old. I was older than the absent-minded slide attendant, slowly picking off her pink nail polish, I was older than I wanted to be at that moment.

And so we left, returning to The 66 on our way to old Oklahoma. I tried not to think about what Lila might have been doing at the moment, talking with this guy, laughing at his jokes, smiling at him like she used to smile at me; anger would grip my chest, or jealousy would lay its nest in the pit of my stomach. But I'd keep driving, keep moving, keep running, and I would try not to think about it, and I'd watch the great rolling landscape of the flat land and fields of corn.

We chased the sunset Westward down The 66 to Joplin, Missouri, where we had a quick meal before moving onward. We crossed the border into Oklahoma after dark and settled in the first town there, Miami. 'Miama' as the locals knew it (my-am-uh). Oklahoma, a state that could only be described as 'OK.' We parked in the small town's giant Walmart and settled in for the night. Ken fell asleep quickly, and I was restless. I decided to see what the night was like in this small town and I walked in the direction of the main street with a cigarette and my thoughts, trying not to think about Lila.

The East of my past lay behind me, and the West of my future lays ahead, I thought to myself.

I pushed down the thoughts of Lila and what she'd be doing at this time of night, if they were dancing or drinking or found somewhere quieter, if he was holding her hips with authority or touching his lips to hers to quiet her. I pushed all those thoughts and more down, and I found the asphalt paved 66 again and walked down it to the center of town. I looked around in the

darkness; there were a lot of churches down that street, their neon crosses pierced into the night and swarms of bugs beat around them and the streetlights in feverous be vies. The midnight streetlight smalltown rain of bugs. It was a sunderous little town. The big-sky country we had driven into disappeared in that night. A few people moved around down the road in the inhuman nictitating fluorescent light of the streetlamps and storefront signage, but beyond that was darkness, under a seemingly starless sky. There was a darkness on the edge of that town, there was a darkness that surrounded and blanketed that town, a darkness that suffocated that town. In the darkness, that town was all there was, and from it there was no escape, because for the people that called Miami home, there wasn't.

I kept walking, and found a McDonalds with a bunch of high school aged kids hanging around out in front of it, sharing cigarettes and vapes, one kid chewing on the end of a Swisher Sweet; it was the only place in town open 24 hours, let alone past 10PM. I sat down at one of the tables, the unlit KOOL dangling from my lips. I quickly, if a little awkwardly, struck up a conversation with some of these kids. They were all in high school or at least high school aged, and they all hated it there. They wanted and talked about wanting pot, and booze, and sex, and then confined themselves to talking almost exclusively among themselves about those things and desires. Who got the most drunk, who hooked up with who, who has the current weed hookup, and I thought of how this wasn't all too different from Twain, at least

in the sense that we were young, and didn't want to be, and all sought our escapes in the same ways, all across the country, that's just what we, the kids in America, did; more unites us than divides us. But these were lost kids in a nowhere city, and they didn't hesitate to tell me so.

"Why would you ever want to come to Miami?" one asked. They all couldn't wait to get out, but they didn't know when or how they would. I found out that Ottawa County was the current meth capital of the US, and I was told to watch out for tweakers. I realized that my trip was someone else's reality.

The McDonald's crowd seemed like they would be there for quite a while longer into the night, it seemed like this is just what the kids there did because it was the only thing to do. I said goodbye and walked on, the sleeping pill I'd taken at least an hour before giving everything a sort of fuzzy sleepiness. I kept walking all the way through the two-block main drag of town, past the typical small-town brick façade shops and singular town landmark (here it was a theatre), all the way through the 'Gateway Sign' arch to a fork in the road that would either send me out of Miami to Commerce, Pitcher, Oram, or Quapaw, or turn me further into town toward 'The Stables,' a casino.

I walked into the casino wearing the same worn blue jeans, black shirt, and waxed canvas jacket I'd worn this whole journey, scratching my scruffy road-beard, with a cigarette dangling from my lips like I was meant to be there.

I sat at the bar and lit the cigarette, the fourth consecutive one of the night, ordered a bourbon old-fashioned and without the slightest hesitation was given one, the bartender stopping briefly only to look up the drink's recipe on a Rolodex under the bar. I sat at the bar, finished the drink, finished the cigarette, paid and left. There were ESPN highlights of a Padres game on the TV.

I walked back down The 66 towards the home that was my car. On the other side of the street and a bit behind me walked a group of what looked like three teenagers. I kept on walking as they moved to my side of the street. They followed, then stopped following, then followed again in a way that made me think that they were just walking unaware of my presence. With this thought in my mind, I let them catch up to me.

"Hey," I said when they did catch up. They said 'hi,' and we made small talk as I explained my travels and they explained their lives. They kept asking if I was a cop though, which I thought was a bit weird, but we kept chatting. The girl, Bethany, was sweet looking but tired looking, and dressed in loose hanging yet form-fitting clothes; she was the epitome of 'heroin chic,' though I think she only actively contributed to one of those two words. Her two brothers could not have been more different from each other; Timothy was a short, husky brute with a tuft of curly red-blond hair coming out from under a trucker cap, while Levi was a tall, thin, and dark-haired kid with a curious, kind, and big-eyed face, he sort of reminded me of Ken.

They asked again if I was a cop, which I still thought was weird, I told them that I was their age and they still didn't believe me. I reached in my pocket and got out my wallet, holding out my California driver's license to them. Bethany looked at it, then looked at me, then again to the card as she snatched out her hand for it. I drew back, and she laughed.

"I'm just fucking with you, don't look so nervous," she said.

Bethany was the kind of girl who didn't smile much, but when she did, she had a nervous smile, the kind of smile that could only have been born from years of not being told she was pretty for no reason in particular. The kind of forced, nervous smile that was still so hopeful. I thought about Lila as I talked with Bethany, her brothers chatting behind. Lila, on the other hand, didn't have to smile, but when she did, she knew she could make me melt. She would light up, her shoulders would relax, and her eyes would open wide and sparkle. When she smiled, her lips would part effortlessly, just slightly, showing only a glance of her white teeth. This smile turned into a laugh when I was lucky, and her long hair would fall back from her face as she parted her lips and let out a confident breath of amusement. I knew that people had always told her that she was pretty, and people had even told her they'd loved her before, but she didn't take any of it to heart until I was the one telling her.

When we were together, she'd say she was the one who felt lucky that I had chosen her, of all people I chose

her. But I, on the other hand, couldn't believe that she said yes, I didn't feel lucky as much as I felt wrong; like any nervous moment, she could realize that I wasn't great and slip between my fingers like warm, dry sand on a sunny day. I hoped that wasn't what had already happened. But I knew she was in New York on a date, I knew that she was meeting new people, meeting new guys, she was appreciated, and she was desired, and I knew that she saw this now, and I knew that she liked it. I tried to push these thoughts out of my mind as I kept talking to Bethany and her brothers got in on the convo too. That's one thing I've come to love so much about this country, the almost universal friendliness and the conversations people are willing and eager to strike up with complete strangers.

As Bethany talked, she seemed animated and antsy, she was very talkative. In between talking about dropping out of high school and the minimum-wage jobs she was looking to apply for she kept asking me where I was from, why I was in Miami, where I was staying, and where my car was. Her brothers were less talkative. They asked if I had any bud, and then if I wanted any. I said 'no' to both. She asked again, she really wanted weed, she then nonchalantly but agitatedly said she was tripping out after a few bumps of Klonopin and her brothers said that they were on their way down from a spice high, and then they all said something about parachuting and 'Tina,' and said that they therefore all wanted some bud to level out.

These were the tweakers I was told about at

McDonald's. Teenage tweakers. Teen tweakers. Tweans? I don't know.

I continued to walk with them, you know, real human condition shit. And I soon found out that we were walking towards a dealer's house, a friend of theirs. And all I thought was 'why not,' I'll keep a distance, but 'why not.' I'd already come this far with them, it'd be weird if I left, I still wanted them to like me.

When we got to the house, a small shack that faced a small park, Rotary Park, we sat on a bench that faced the house where a bedroom light was on indicatively. I sat, the two brothers sat, and Bethany paced back and forth in front of us saying how she had to pee. She kept asking about when they were going to get the bud. Apparently, now, there was a misunderstanding. They had no money, and I didn't want to buy any. I told them that I didn't have money on me, but they kept asking. I said I had three dollars in my wallet, lying about the twenty-four I actually had.

They kept asking about that and the all the other things, getting more and more edgy, more anxious. Bethany continued to pace in front of us and talk frenetically. She was upset, she wanted another high, she expected one, and she expected it now. I tried to just quell things, go back to chatting, and after about what seemed like a half-hour of this, I got up to say my goodbyes. She asked again about the money I had. I offered her the last few cigarettes in the carton of KOOL's, she took the pack, crumpled it, and tossed it to the ground, again asking about the money. I told her I

had to eat in the morning.

"So do I," she said, and after a pause added, "for two."

"For two?" I was taken aback, "what, how long?"

"Three months."

She had a  $\frac{3}{4}$  finished plastic handle of Kentucky Gentleman in her backpack, was tripping out on god knows what, and she was eighteen, just like her brothers, give or take a year or two each, and she was a full trimester pregnant. I told her I was sorry, and wished them luck, and said goodnight, and this time actually walked away.

I made it to the edge of the park in the direction of the main road when she called to me. I hesitated, and then turned around and returned. She asked me about the money again, this time with reticent puppy-dog eyes. I got out the four dollars cash and began to hand it to Levi, he looked at the crumpled-up bills quickly and returned them; he felt bad about asking for it.

I apologized again and again, I wished them luck, said goodnight, and turned to walk away. Bethany, after a moment, then asked if I'd walk with them back home; and remembering what I'd just learned about it being a fairly dangerous town, I offered to do so. The brothers walked ahead to the edge of the park as I walked alongside Bethany. Levi and Tim stopped behind the small, chest-high brick wall at the edge of the park, the ten-by-five section of brick wall that bore the words 'Rotary Park.' They stayed behind that wall as Bethany, and I walked towards it, her on my right; in that moment

I thought it was weird that they would do that, it'd be the kind of thing a friend would do if they wanted to hide somewhere to jump out and scare you, only they weren't even hiding that well, I saw them walk behind it, and I could clearly see them standing there, but I just shrugged that strange unease off and turned to Bethany an-

Bam! Right the fuck out of nowhere a burst of light flashed in my head as a percussive thump slammed into the left side of my face.

I was on the ground, and I no longer saw totally straight, Bethany was grabbing at my pockets, and Tim stood over me. She grabbed, clawed viciously at my pockets, but I kept swiping her hands away, trying to get up. I was doing fairly well, one hand swiping hers away over my pockets, and the other pushing myself up. I was about to stand up as I got hit again in the same fucking place, I saw a flash, and heard the thud in my head as I again collapsed to the ground. Bethany went back at her clawing, Tim stood hulking above me, and Levi stood behind them, hands in his pockets, hunched over.

She kept clawing, and I grabbed both of her hands, trying to get her off as best as I could, and I finally did. I got up, held her hands as she squirmed, and let her go, pushing her away and then keeping my distance from all of them. I tried to talk them all down, rather disappointed.

I said a lot of 'please, just don't' and 'why' and 'I thought you were nice people.' Bethany kept grabbing

at my pockets intermittently, Tim accusing me of being a liar and again asking for me to 'just give them the money.' I still just tried to keep my distance. I backed away again, and we all just stood, on edge, twitching, panting.

I couldn't see much at all. I told them this and asked if they'd help find my Driver's License, which I'd taken out of my wallet mid-scuffle, in case they managed to take the wallet. I asked them to be the nice people, the friends, that I thought they were. And, well, because of either the gentle indifference of the universe or because these guys really sucked at mugging people, they did. Well, Levi seemed really intent on helping, he actually looked around. Tim just kind of stood in place scanning the ground and Bethany followed me, making swipes at my phone as I used it as a flashlight.

I found the small plastic card glinting on the damp asphalt in the cool, wet darkness, and went to pick it up. And as I bent down, Bethany hit me in the temple, and she did again when I tried to get up, as she went back to making clawing snatches for my phone and pockets. But I again just pushed her off. I stepped back, we just stood there, all of us, as I was catching my breath, feeling my pulse in my cheek and my jaw.

"Jesus, I trusted you, I thought you were good people," I said, looking at Levi.

"Just give us your money, I've got a daughter at home, and she's hungry, okay?" Tim let out. Shit, man, these are kids, he's got a fucking daughter, and she's got a baby on the way. Jesus.

"Can I please just go? Please?" I said as I reached for my wallet, pulled out the twenty-four dollars, and handed it guardedly to Levi. He looked at the cash and looked at me. He handed me back the four dollar bills and stood contemplating the twenty. He told me he felt really bad, but his siblings told him to leave.

"It's okay," I said to him and stretched out my hand. He shook it with a weak grip, apologizing again.

"I'm sorry man, just, you know..." Tim said, and they turned around to leave. And so did I. I started to walk away, that became a brisk walk, then I started to jog, and soon I was just sprinting. I ran as far as I could, there was no reason, no need to run, I just ran, I wanted to be back in that car as soon as I could. I walked when I couldn't run anymore, and I panted my way back to the Walmart parking lot.

Ken woke up when I opened the driver's side door.

"Are you just getting back, its three AM, where were you?" he asked, not able to see the left side of my face.

"I'll tell you in the morning."

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Day 30. I told Ken the whole story when we woke up, my face was a little swollen, and my jaw hurt a lot, but I didn't look Michael in *Godfather 1* bad.

We had a hearty, heavy, all-American blue-plate special breakfast of coffee, eggs, pancakes, bacon, buttered grits, and creamed corn at Buttered Buns. After I finished eating the last of my creamed corn and

drinking my coffee I felt better, and we drove on to the abandoned, toxic, ex-mining town of Pitcher, circling Rotary Park before leaving Miami for good. We drove past the mountainous chat piles, and through the deserted streets and parked by a lot of abandoned houses that were completely gutted, the walls stripped for copper wires, sans windows or doors. It was eerie, like what things would look like after the end times. And so we went into one of the houses, looked around a little bit, and found some writing on one of the walls, "C+S '10" and a burnt candle under it. It was strange so we went into an adjacent house, and then we fucked shit up. I ripped a grab bar out of the shower wall and used that metal rod to take out a significant portion of a few walls, as Ken kicked and punched his way through a few other rooms like something out of a Graham Greene story. And I have to say, it felt really good to do.

After we exhausted ourselves in that house, we came across a dilapidated, rotting, old one-room wooden church, very symbolic. Above the entrance were the words 'Christian Church' in black paint over the peeling white paint of the churches slatted wooden façade. We went inside and smashed the remaining windows from the inside, and then, when outside, Ken swung a heavy branch and knocked out the single remaining support beam for the wooden canopy awning above the door, and it came crashing down, shutting off the entrance to the building; again, very symbolic for Kenneth to do. We thought of it as a public service, because it was dangerously close to coming down anyway, but we left

in a hurry still.

We walked around the outside of and looked in the windows of the town's abandoned high school. And then we, once again, hit the road. It started raining almost immediately. I don't think there's been a single place on this trip since the deep South that it hasn't rained at least a little bit for us. A constant raincloud following the two of us across the states.

The rain got a hell of a lot worse, and so we sought shelter inside a Bass Pro Shop in Broken Arrow. We ran across the parking lot in the rain and had lunch inside of a Steak N' Shake. And when the rain died down a bit, we pressed on, switching the wheel about every hundred miles because of how much it sucks to drive through rain like that.

We crossed the state line on The 66 into Texas, and we were finally out of Oklahoma. Fucking Oklahoma, fucking Miami. My jaw still hurt a lot, and thinking back, they were really bad at being muggers. Like, they each had bouts of inspiration, but nothing concrete or really planned out. If they'd done anything together, they could have probably killed me. It really just seemed like some sporadic, haphazard, and spontaneous act, like something I could expect from a group of three young kids on drugs, in over their heads. I was mugged, but I wasn't. I'll leave a constructive Yelp review for them if I ever get the chance.

The sky nearly cleared up by the time we were in Texas, and it was nice to be there again. We stopped in a Flying J for gas and walked into the attached Denny's. It

was 11 at night, and everyone there just looked sad. The cashier was talking to a man as he paid; well, he was more just talking at her, and she was surprisingly opinionated. You know, if you're in the service industry, the general mantra is 'the customer is always right,' and with that, you just agree with whatever they have to say and move on quickly. But here, she just said 'no, I don't agree with that' and it was awesome.

We slept at a rest stop across the state line in New Mexico.

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Day 31. Ken made the semi-short drive to Albuquerque in no time, where we made a brief Breaking Bad pilgrimage around town. The lady that lives in the actual White house seemed to be regretting her decision to allow filming there. She was surprisingly friendly to everyone that visited though, even though so many people did; I know I wouldn't be nearly as friendly. She said she had to take a pizza off of the roof almost every other week. We drove away just as a group of about ten hipster-looking twenty-somethings showed up with Polaroid cameras.

We drove through Santa Fe and on to Denver. It was the most beautiful drive so far, the clouds touched down low to the ground, shrouding the mountains and the green planes that stretched out for miles. Desert lightning flashed through the mist sporadically, diffusing through the vapor, lighting up everything. We made it into the city by night and slept.

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Day 32. When we woke up, we wondered what there was for us to do before leaving. There were so many homeless people in the city, so many. Hobo Denver. Denver, high Denver; Denver, lonesome for her heroes. Denver in the sky, Denver in the streets, and Denver in the gutter, muttering for another fix. Reeking of pot, and stumbling with those who were homeless, Denver.

We ended up just getting an early breakfast indoors at a McDonalds, with the elderly early-morning crowd. It seemed like a real hangout for them, and it seemed like they came every morning. The same McDonalds that in the late-night would play host to the gangs of the young and lost kids of America who stood outdoors; maybe the self-same individuals would sit inside in the early mornings of their twilight years. McDonald's is the seat of America, the great chain respite. Drugs and music and roads connect these cities and the people of this country, and McDonald's stands as the place where they can all truly be the same. Because they are the same. The thousands of McDonald's splattered, spreading across the petri dish of America, colonies of fast food, the roads and veins of America feeding them, sustaining them, pulsing back and forth with new patrons across this old country. I have simply come to hate McDonald's and love it all the same.

We drove on from Denver to Grand Junction, I love driving through and across these grand, majestic

mountains, with their curves, their vistas, their bridges, and their tunnels, the spine of the West. It had finished raining, and we drove with the top down, and the air was the crisp combination of the two best smells on earth, wet asphalt, and wet pine forest, the air was crisp and pure. The rain brings out the best in everything.

We left The 70 at Grand Junction and headed down to Ouray, a spectacular and small mountain town sitting about 7,000 feet in the air. We parked and walked its few main blocks. Walked up Box Cañon Falls, and back, meeting a hitchhiker from the Midwest along the way. He was soft spoken and eating a PB&J sandwich, and like many hitchhikers, he had not rejected society, but society had rejected him. We parted ways as Ken looked for a branch he could make a walking stick out of.

We walked to the other side of the town, and up the side of the mountain there, towards what we were told was a great waterfall. And it was, but we were the only ones there at all. I was the first to disrobe and jump under to take nature's shower. Ken joined after a little bit. It was so nice, freezing cold, but incredible, and liberating. That involuntary exhilaration you get from jumping in freezing water.

Baptized in the waterfall, we each shouted a barbaric yop.

Ken soon shouted "fuck you Livi, fuck yoooooooouu!" and he smiled triumphantly.

"Fuck you Delilah, fuck you Phil Raymond, fuuuuck yoooooooouu!" I joined in

We dried off, shivering, and walked back into town

and to the Ouray Hot Springs Pool. We stayed until closing and slept in our car in the parking lot. We were woken up at about 1AM by a tap on the window and a light shining through it. I woke Ken and rolled down the window to do the talking. The officer was really kind, but he said that there were pretty strict no-overnight laws in Ouray, so he gave us directions to a camping site a few miles out of town, and reminded us of the fact that we had a broken tail light. I drove to the campsite, and parked; Ken was already asleep.

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Day 33. We woke up in a campground far more beautiful than I'd noticed the night before. Well, I woke up, Ken was fast asleep, and so in the lonely cool before dawn, I walked to the campground outhouse and jerked off for the first time in forever. When I got back, Ken was just getting up, and he soon went back to sleep. He just wanted to sleep. So I drove into town, parked in the shade, and walked by myself, exploring all the shops and things on the main street. And here I am, on the most incredible trip ever, and I'm still lonesome for a girl back home. I'm starting to be sick for home, or at least the comforts of home, but more so just for Lila.

Ken wasn't there when I got back to the car, and so I just went on walking, settling in the downstairs of the town library to read and snack on trail mix before it closed at 2. Ken texted saying he was at the hot springs, and so I picked him up from there, and we left; coming

through the mountains our tires hugged the turns like we were making love to them. The trees stretched up the sides of the mountains until they reached a distinct line of altitude where they didn't, the rusty red-orange peaks glistening in the rays of sunlight that streamed from behind a cover of clouds. The road snaked along the mountains on one side of a valley divided by a sometimes stream, sometimes river, with another range of mountains on the other side.

We stopped at an outlook, and from there the valley and the mountains were in full panoramic view before us. We could see the remains of an old mining town across the way, so we decided to hike to it. The river ran the same red-orange as the peaks, and it colored the rocks; as we ascended to the old town, a group of a few ATV's whizzed by before us. We walked around the old encampment, and I was pleased by its feeling of history, time, and general dilapidation. Walking back, we passed a small grouping of abandoned houses that looked like they were mid-century, built in that wonderful time when we knew about asbestos, but we didn't know that it was bad. For some reason, these houses were banded as 'historical' by a no-trespassing sign, but we trespassed anyway. We explored the broken-down domiciles, broke a few already broken things outside, and left. Why is destruction so fun?

We drove on, deep into the night, flashes of desert lightning in the distance keeping the sky living, a thunderhead looming big in the dark distance. We got to about 100 miles out from the North Rim of the Grand

Canyon by 2 in the morning. We parked at an empty rest stop in the middle of the desert under cover of darkness.

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Day 34. We woke up at first light not only to find that the orange-tan mountains, valleys, and desert plains outside were absolutely stunning, but also to find that we were parked at a rest stop in front of booths where Native Americans sold brummagem wears to rube tourists in RV's fully set up and selling by the time we awoke. We eagerly drove towards the canyon, passing and stopping by a rock-dweller encampment from the 1930's. As I drove, the rain became torrential, and because the land there is so flat, the roads quickly became completely washed out, so we pulled into a parking spot at a trailhead site where we could see nothing and waited.

I checked my phone and saw that I'd gotten a text from Lila, "Are you back in San Diego yet?"

I texted back, and then I called. I stepped outside the car and stood underneath the cover of a small informational trailhead sign, and map as the rain battered the car (with Ken safely inside listening to music); the huge droplets of rain splattered against the rocky, sandy dirt and obscured the view to only a few hundred yards in any direction until everything went gray-white in the haze.

"Is it raining where you are?" the only thing I could think to ask.

"No."

I asked, and then Lila talked about work, and New York, I told her about being mugged, and we talked like friends, and I think I can be okay with that, it was nice. I'd crack jokes, and she'd laugh, I missed that. And then, because curiosity and its bad child jealousy are instincts stronger than self-preservation I asked her about her date.

"It was really fun, we just got dinner and then walked around, it was really nice actually."

"That's nice."

"Yeah, it was, he's really good."

"Um, did you guys do anything else?" my morbid curiosity getting the better of me, but I needed to know, I just did.

"I don't really want to say, and it's not your business anymore," she said, something that almost exclusively means she did. Shit, I felt that pit in my stomach sink further.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I'm happy for you anyway. I'm happier for you than I am sad for me."

"It was really nice being with him, it was fun, exciting," she started again.

"What?"

"Yeah, on the first night we met, well, I met him at that party, I got embarrassingly drunk."

"What did you do?"

"I don't really have to say, Alex."

"I can take it, I want to be involved in your life I want to be able to talk to you about things," I said, though the

real reason was again that curious, angry, protective jealousy. That and self-loathing. Why am I doing this?

"Well, at the party, we danced there, we talked, and then we made out."

"Oh okay..." I said. My heart sank. But I guess it could have been worse.

"Well, then he kind of took me aside, and I blew him on a park bench outside," she continued. P-A-R-K, park bench? A fucking park bench?

"Wait, what, Lila, why are you saying this?" frantically, my heart skipping a beat in the worst way.

"You asked, Alex. And it was really nice, I gave him my number, and then he called to ask me on a date, I was so excited,"

"Lila—"

"So we just got food, and he bought me drinks, and then walking back we were just talking, holding hands, and I sort of just asked if he had a condom, and that was kind of it, he took me to his place, and we had sex. It was really nice, and he's really good looking and charming in that very European way and—"

"I'm really happy for you Lila," I forced through my teeth.

"Oh," she said.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

"Nothing, nevermind."

"Oh, okay. When do you get back?" I asked her just to ask her something, I already knew the answer.

"In six days," she said as I thought the same thing, "it's really gone by so fast. I'm going to dinner with Phil tonight, and then I'm meeting this guy from work for lunch tomorrow, I want to see everyone I can before I have to leave. I'm going to miss this city so much."

"Yeah, it seems like it's been great," I said on conversational autopilot, my mind and heart elsewhere, and my stomach being pulled to the center of the earth. I felt like cutting again all of a sudden, the skin on my arms itched and burned for it, I hadn't even wanted to do that for such a long time, I knew this was bad.

"Well, have fun," she said.

"Yeah, you too. I'll see you when we both get back."

"Sure, see you then, bye."

"Bye, Lila."

I hung up and walked outside into the drizzle from under the wooden map and sign that explained the historical topography of the view we couldn't see. I turned around and laid my fist into that sign, punching it over and over until my knuckles were numb and bleeding, not able to tell if there were tears or drops of rain streaming down my face. I clenched and unclenched my fist as I opened the passenger door and asked Ken if he'd be kind enough to drive.

We kept pounding West, Westward to home, to the West of my future, Westward through time, Westward to the last frontier of my adulthood. The West of hope and of promise, the final resting place of Columbia and that great American dream, and the final destination of my American voyage. My heart has always lived in the

West, and I'll always be drawn Westward, like the birds or the pioneers. My soul resides in the West, but my love, and my past, is still trapped in the East. But I have to put that behind me now. So I continue Westward.

I just don't know how one person can have that much power over another? I let her, though. I'd still do anything to get her back, I still love her. I won't let her be the one that got away. You can't repeat the past, but you can make up for it, and I intend to. I made a mistake, and I'm paying for it, I just hope we can get back to the way things were.

Ken and I stopped for gas at a station about half-way to the canyon in that dreary drizzle. When I stepped out of the car, on the asphalt and all across the gas station and beyond were hundreds upon hundreds of moths flapping helplessly on the ground, wings waterlogged and flightless. You couldn't walk without stepping on them, the ground already smeared with dead ones. The attendants there swept them up into piles that filled whole trash bags. Whole trash bags. It was absolutely biblical.

We filled up the tank and closed the distance between us and the canyon. We parked behind a row of trees, and walked past them to a visitor center, through that, and then the overwhelming beauty of the Grand Canyon revealed itself to us as the clouds dispersed. I was awestruck by the singular most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. After everything today, this was worth it. I sat on the rim for what had to have been an hour watching the low clouds that hovered through the canyon as far

as the eye could see. This was America in all of her pure, raw, natural grandeur and beauty.

Ken and I hiked a two hour round trip down the canyon, making it to the tunnel, turning around and going back up, really not up for a multiday trek down and back up the full canyon. I stayed and stared for a while longer before joining Ken who was in the visitor center, and on we drove to Nevada. The rain kept getting worse and lightning lit up the sky, illuminating for a brief second the outlines of the mountain ranges that surrounded us. How have we been in a perpetual storm this whole trip, I thought as I drove, this better not be a symbol or something.

We arrived at the Vegas summer tract home that belonged to Ken's parents by 1AM. I brought everything from the car in, did a load of laundry, showered, and laid in my own bed in my own room, and Ken did the same on the other side of the house. I looked around the furnished vacation house, and it was so nice to be in a place that felt like a home again, and it was nice to be clean.

Ken told me to help myself to absolutely anything there. In a kitchen cupboard, I found various fifths of alcohol at various levels of fullness or emptiness. I filled a coffee mug  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the way with Jack Daniels and took it into the bedroom.

"Hey, what do you call it when you drink booze out of a coffee cup?" I shouted across the condo to Ken.

"Alcoholism?" he shouted back.

"Mug-shot!" I answered, though I agreed with his

punchline too.

I brought myself to that pleasant level of drunkenness to go to sleep to, swaddled myself in the blankets and covers, and drifted off to sleep, forgetting it all if only for one happy moment.

. . . . .

Day 35. Waking up in Vegas to a mildly throbbing hangover soon pacified by a hearty breakfast from The Egg Works. We then drove around Red Rock Canyon, taking in its beauty in the just risen sun. We passed the ever-creepy Bonnie Ranch on our way out but didn't stop, and with that, we left nature. We then went to the strip, parking at Mandalay Bay and making our way from one end to the other. We got paid \$20 each at the MGM Grand to participate in a research study about TV that took half an hour, and we took that money to the slots at Caesars. Ken lost all of it in under two minutes, and I made eleven dollars out of five and walked away while I was still up. When we walked outside, it surprised us greatly that it was nighttime, you can never have any concept of time from inside a casino.

We decided to scour the town for lenient liquor stores to buy some more booze. And after about two unsuccessful hours of driving and trying, we finally found a small, run-down joint where I walked in and bought two 40's and two big Smirnoff Ice's because, fuck it, they're cheap and they taste really good; the place didn't sell hard liquor. It was managed by an

elderly Native American man.

"You don't have anything stronger here do you?" I asked as I paid for the booze.

"No, not here," he answered quietly.

"All good, I just wanted a little whiskey," as I took the brown paper bags, letting him keep the change.

"Whiskey's good," he said with a soft fondness.

*I got some beer and the highway's free.*

We returned to the condo and began drinking. We had a little trouble finding the music to suit the mood, I didn't want to be sad, and this certainly wasn't a turn-up, maybe a low-key turn-up though, so we settled on some mellow music. I have been drunk just twice in my life so far, and the second time was that night.

I saw Lila everywhere today, I saw her in every couple, heard her in every song, felt her hand clutching my heart. *She's holding on my heart like a hand grenade*, as Ken would probably say. But with each drink, I forgot a little bit more. Ken and I got to the point where we just sat on the couches and couldn't stop laughing at each other. It was really nice. I know I would've wanted to take this adventure with Dan, and I wouldn't want Ken to know that, but this has still been a great journey, and he's been a surprisingly good travel companion. Now I really can't imagine having done it any differently. This has been nice.

At a break in the conversation and the drinking, Ken turned to me, rather solemnly.

"Alex, thank you for this, and for everything. I can't remember having this much fun, being this happy, for a

long time. I wouldn't be here without you."

"It really has been a great trip."

"No, Alex, I mean it, everything, I mean, I really- I really wouldn't be here without you. Like at all, without you."

"Oh," I said, now I knew what he was really talking about, but I didn't know what to say, "of course, Ken."

Ken took a drink, and a long breath, "You know, that night, the night before- before I was going to *do it*, I thought of something, one thing..." I could tell he didn't know what to say either, or at least how to say it. "that night, late that night, I couldn't sleep at all," he continued, "I just began to sing this song that I hadn't thought about since I was a child, the words just came to me and I couldn't stop singing or crying. It was the most baffling thing."

I didn't say anything, I wanted him to be able to say what he wanted and take his time, and I was trying to process all of this too.

"The words just came to me out of nowhere, and, well," he sighed and then took a deep breath, "*Hey, this was really fun, we hope you liked it too,*" Ken began to sing, softly, quietly, and I immediately knew the song and the words, even though it was something I hadn't heard or thought about in over ten years, it all came flooding back to me.

"*Seems like we've just begun, when suddenly we're through,*" Ken continued and then I joined in, "*Goodbye, goodbye, good friends, goodbye,*" Ken choked back tears with these lines but pressed on, "*'Cause now it's time to*

*go, but, hey, I say, well, that's OK, 'cause we'll see you very soon, I know. Goodbye, goodbye, good friends, goodbye," I started to cry too, sitting on the floor, next to Ken, thinking about everything, everything from the first moment I could remember, the shows I loved as a child, growing up, my parents, Dan, Lila, and Ken, and I cried; good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, goodnight, goodnight, "Goodbye, goodbye, good friends, goodbye, and tomorrow, just like today. The moon, the bear and the Big Blue House, we'll be waiting for you to come and play. To come and play, to come and play."*

I reached over and hugged the crying Kenneth, we grasped each other and cried together, for different reasons, for the same reasons. Goodbye, goodbye, to childhood, and everything that was a part of it. Ken sniffled, and looked at me, "thank you," he said again.

"Don't mention it," I sniffled and replied, wiping the tears from my face, "I love you, man."

"I love you too. Goodnight Alex, I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow, Ken."

We got up and went our separate ways.

I laid in my bed, closing my eyes to the room as it tilted around me. I never knew that was an actual thing until I was drunk enough to experience it myself. Drifting off to sleep, I thought again of Lila. When I opened my eyes briefly to look out the window, it was a clear night, and I could see the stars. The rain that had followed us since the East Coast had finally cleared up. I just want time now, and with time, I'll feel less about

her, less hurt, and she will too, and then we can meet in the middle of that apathetic understanding. But would it even be the same now? Would it even be worth it? I hope so.

I made a mistake, a huge one, and I'm fully feeling the consequences of that now; but I don't know if I needed to miss her in order to know how much I really loved her. The whole love them, let them go, and they come back thing. Only I was the one that came back, and she didn't. Goddamnit, I hate that fucking Phil, I'd beat the shit out of him if I ever saw that smug prick. But why am I even mad at him, what fault does he have in this, I'd have done the same, I wish I could've done the same. I just don't understand how she could be so cruel. Why she'd hate me so much, hurt me so much, I mean, I hope she doesn't hate me. God, I'm starting to sound like Ken.

. . . . .

Day 36. We both slept in, and after gorging ourselves at a buffet, we then spent the rest of the day inside Red Rock Casino theatre, movie hopping. We saw the depressing *Man of Steel*, the depressing for other reasons *Iron Man 3*, and the really fun *Pacific Rim*, and by that time our brains were complete mush, sustaining ourselves for several hours on popcorn and soda refills alone. Ken also wanted to see *The Way Way Back*, but he agreed when I said I wanted to keep the movies fairly light-hearted. Movies are the great American escape. Okay, I'll stop with the sweeping 'America' statements.

We're so close to being home, and for a large part of me, that feels really good. We had dinner at the buffet and planned to go back into the theatres when I saw I'd missed a text from Lila.

"Can I call?" it read.

I called.

"Lila?" I asked.

"Yeah, hi Alex, are you free?" she answered.

"Yes, of course, what's up?" I said, motioning to Ken that he could go on without me.

"I was thinking, and I just wanted to say that I was sorry for saying all of that stuff to you, I didn't need to say all of that."

"Oh," I was caught off guard, pleasantly, "I really appreciate you saying that, thank you."

"I thought more about what we talked about before too, about how you thought you wanted to be together again, and how you said you'd made a mistake."

"Yes? And I did make a mistake, I know that now, and I'm so sorry for it, I'm sorry for everything I put you through, but I know now how I feel, and I know that I do—"

"Alex."

"Yes?"

"It wasn't a mistake, Alex. I don't think we'll ever get back together," she hesitated, "I *know* that we won't get back together. I thought about things, Alex, about everything, and I cared about you, and really Alex, it was the best time, it really was, and I thank you for that, but thinking back, I know that it just wasn't love. I know

now that it was just a high school thing, I never loved you. I never really loved you. It was fun, it was a great experience, but I know now that I never loved you. And I thought you should know that, Alex. Alex? Alex?"

"Yah, I'm here." I couldn't say anything. It was done now. It was too late.

"Okay, I'm sorry, Alex, I just needed to tell you, and—" whatever she was saying faded into silence, as the noises of the casino around me took over, though I didn't hear those either, they all just came together into a cacophony of that which was everything else; and I existed, silent, somewhere in the in between. I wasn't a part of my surroundings, but I hadn't transcended them either, the volume of the world had just been turned down, and everything else was out of focus.

"I still care about you, Lila, I never want to not be your friend, and—"

"That's your problem, Alex, you just want everyone to like you," she said, and I barely registered, "and I-I'm not some fantasy, I'm not the treasure at the end of a long journey, I'm my own person Alex, and I've made up my own mind, and I'm sorry, but I can make my own decisions too, and I don't choose you."

I was again on conversational autopilot when I said, "Yeah, of course, I'm sorry, thank you, I'm sorry, and when you're back in San Diego we should get coffee at the Pannikin, I'd love to see you and—" but I knew that that'd be the last time I'd talk to Lila, or at least to the Lila I once knew. We said our goodbyes, and I knew I wouldn't see her for the rest of the summer, I didn't

know when I'd see her. Christmas break? Her graduation? I didn't know, but I also shouldn't care after what she'd said. She'd just have to become a part of my past now, reluctantly, painfully, this was truly it. It was over. *Es muss Sein.*

Ken and I didn't see another movie, he just drove back to the condo for me. I took the sleeping pills, polished off some more of the bottle of Jack and tried to be asleep in a place that was not where I was.

. . . . .

Day 37. I was up early, I cleaned up the condo and did a load of laundry. Monotony was comforting. Order and cleanliness were comforting. And then the road was comforting. With the top down, I floored that faster horse across those long, flat, straight stretches of desert road from Las Vegas to Los Angeles. It's a long drive for someone with nothing to think about, traveling swallowing diphenhydramine. I weaved in-between cars on those long stretches of road, feeling my heart thump in my chest, knowing what it felt like to be alive.

We stopped to use the extra-terrestrial themed bathrooms at Alien Fresh Jerky in Baker, and in Barstow, we had McDonald's at the train depot and drove on to the coast, The 15 taking us all the way there, chasing our final sunset to the edge of America.

We drove that car as far as we could and found ourselves back West.

California. They used to think this place was an

island, it still is. *Isla de California*, that's what the Spaniards of the Old World called this foreignly undiscovered land commensurate with the boundless capacity for human wonder, a land having rumored to contain the Garden of Eden, Cities of Gold, and droves of virginal Amazonian women. And for the most part, they weren't wrong, except maybe about the virgin part. It's a beautiful valley of starlets, harlots, and saintly charlatans. And it's home to me. The dream of the West is the dream of all America, and all of the world. From the first settlers to the pioneers, to the Joads, to us, we all came or came back in search of something golden. And in one way or another, I'm sure we'll find it.

*And California never felt like home to me until I had you on the open road.*

We drove around LA, both having been before, and sat in our car eating In-N-Out, what we now knew to definitively be the best burgers in the whole damn country (that, and Hodad's), and knowing that it was good to be home. We stopped at the Pantry, the 24-hour beacon of Los Angeles, standing indifferent to time, like something out of a Hopper painting. We finished our damn good coffee, I quoted *On the Road* like a twat, and we found our way out of the city. We drove the coast through the darkness back to home. Oh, Columbia, you have been good to me.

*Blue, you sit so pretty West of The One.*

We listened to and sang "Wagon Wheel" one last time as we turned off of The 5. It seemed like it had all been a dream, the fact that we'd just driven coast to

coast, all across America hadn't hit us yet in the slightest.

We parked in that same bank parking lot that we started in, and knew that we were home again.

11821.3 miles.

Thirty-seven days.

Ken turned to me with a look of sincerity cutting through the exhaustion and said, "thank you for this, Alex, and for everything, really." He reached over the median and gave me as earnest a side-hug as possible.

"Of course, always."

As I drove Ken to his house, just after midnight, I could hardly believe that it was over. So many things were over. Even sitting in my room, unpacking my things, making the transition back to real life, I can't believe that it's truly over, almost as much as I can't believe that it happened in the first place.

I've been to places where the traffic lights hang on wires, where the cornfields stretch far away for miles, towns where people shoot the road signs, where they paint the back of streetlamps black, and I've been home. I love home the most.

I shaved my road-beard, showered, put on clean pajamas, and I laid down in my own bed. I drifted off into a long sleep, and I thought, not all who wander are lost.

. . . . .

Day 40. Pretty soon I'd be making another road trip, this time it'd be up to Cal with all of my stuff. I'd be starting a new chapter in my life, in college, hopefully having learned at least a few things. I know Ken would be going into his junior year a better person, or at least better at being a person; Dr. Kindlon would make sure of that. I know we'll keep in touch, and I look forward to it. I can only hope that someday, maybe even next year, he'll find some freshman in Mr. Darcy's class that he can help out because that's all it takes. One person can change the whole world for someone else. And no matter what, I know I can always remember that confused freshman kid from two years ago, full of rage and love and say, "Well, I helped that one."

And as for my parents, I know it'll be good to get away from home, for all of us, it's better that way; hopefully they'll be better without me there to fight over. I don't hate them, I don't at all, some things just can't be fixed so neatly. Some things just take time. And hopefully, in time, things will be better. After all, they're just people too; if Rivers Cuomo could forgive his foolish father, so could I.

And I thought,

*Lila, in my dreams I walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of your cottage in the Western night.*

And I thought the difference between stories and real life is that stories have to make sense. There would be no catharsis for me, no new lease on life, no grand

lessons learned, and no getting back together with Lila and I know that. Lila was no manic pixie, and I was no hero. And that's it. And even if I could get her back, after all that's happened it wouldn't be the same, and I know that; there's never the same love twice. And so, I move on. There will always be another sunrise, and it will always be beautiful. I remember when I used to think people our age were adults, but the truth is, we're still just kids, and we always will be, because we'll always have had this time.

Of course I'll miss her though. Lying in my bed tonight, I thought about her lying next to me. But that thought can only be a memory, all our yesterdays are all we have of each other now. But it still does seem like just yesterday that we held each other and kissed on the cold and dew-moist grass at that after-prom party, with every other couple somewhere else doing the same thing. In that moment I felt that we had something else that no one else did: love. And I refuse to believe that it was anything other than that, even if to her I may just be a brief, fleeting memory of a first time. But only love can break your heart. To her, I may only be a part of her past, and a small part, a place and a time in her life, only a memory, and I don't know if I'm okay with that just yet. I don't know what she'll be to me.

Sarcasm is a barrier. Apathy is a barrier. These are things that I'd used to protect myself from getting hurt for so many years. The less you put in, the less disappointed you can be, the further away you are, the

more protected, but the less you can get out too. I distanced myself from my own feelings through walls of apathy. I shattered these walls to let Lila in. And I'm glad that I did. But she was always in control, from the very beginning.

In that moment on the grass after prom, I thought that I was holding the person that I could very well spend the rest of my life with. I felt special, happy, content, and complete in every way, because that's how a great partner, the perfect partner, should make you feel. No matter who you are, if you've found that special person, you feel like a king, like a god, like everything is right in the whole world because all the little pieces just seem to line up perfectly and all your worries and troubles seem infinitesimal next to this big love of yours. But how do you reconcile young love with young lust?

It didn't matter if other people thought of us as that couple; sure, people liked us and saw us as the awfully cute pair that we were, but what mattered was that we saw ourselves as that. That was love. True love. Young love, maybe, even first love, but a love nonetheless. And I believe that. Maybe she was just the kind of girl that you meet when you're too young, and so you fuck things up because you think that there's just too much living left to do. I don't know though. Part of me still blames Lana Del Rey for all of this though.

I know that I really did love her, and I'd like to think she really loved me too. I know she did. It was that full-bodied kind of obsessive love. The kind of love you love

before you really know how to love yet. Because, in that kind of love, you love with all of who you are, and that other person becomes a part of your life and you of theirs; you're not only inseparable but intertwined, cosmically, you feel. And you don't think about what you're doing, you don't make plans, you just think about how you're doing it; you think, in your heart you know, that the two of you are together and will be for the rest of time because it's simply this pure sublime perfection, it's bliss. When you're in this love, there's no perspective, and that's the best thing, because every heartbreak of the past, everything before it fades away and becomes nothing. It's your first love, it may even be your best love, and it will shape the way you love for the rest of your life. And nothing can ever change that. Because, well, if I believe in anything, I believe in love.

And maybe we loved too fast, maybe in loving, I lost perspective or reason, and in that cloud, I lost something I could otherwise have kept, but still, would it have been worthwhile? And that's the thing, you can never know if what's not was ever meant to be. I can't say how it would have ended if we hadn't broken up, or even if it would have ended at all, but what I can say is that we had the time we did, and it was great. Maybe we burned too quickly, but we sure burned bright, like fire and powder. That's why I refuse to love moderately, for without risk there is no reward. It was just that, for us, the time was wrong.

Our relationship ended before it was over, and that's

just it. But as I lay in my bed, brooding on the old, listening to the breakup playlist I'd made, I still remember things with a fond melancholy, a true nostalgia, as we so often should of things past. Laying in my bed, I thought of Lila. And I thought, of all the words of mice and men, the saddest are, "It might have been." And I thought, April is over, April may very well be over, but we all need that one that got away don't we? Don't we?

-END-

# Acknowledgments

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And to you, reading this book, you are the reason I live and breathe, thank you for your support, your love, your understanding, even your hate, and thank you for reading this book. I can't express how much it means to me that another person chose to read my work, I put so much of myself into this I can't possibly thank you enough for caring and reading.

Never forget that you can make a difference, never forget that you can make the world a better place. If this story can be distilled into one thought, it is this: small people facing big

problems. By this I mean that individuals can confront monumental and systematic issues and make a meaningful difference through even the smallest acts of compassion and understanding, and that is how we can all shape the world into a better place for all.

And one more thing, we can end gun violence, and you can make a difference in the lives of others.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, with all of who I am, thank you,

Thomas Kenyon Marshall

## About the Author



THOMAS MARSHALL is a Southern California native, now living, working, and writing in the Bay Area. He grew up in San Diego and attended the University of Southern California where he studied both Business and Screenwriting, graduating in only three-and-a-half-years. An unashamed cliché, Thomas collects both books and vinyl and spends his free time enjoying both as well as cooking, adventuring with friends, and volunteering as a creative writing teacher for high schoolers.

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