

THE BLUE VELVET REVIEW PRESENTS . . .  
THE LOST NOVEL EBOOK SERIES



A MACAQUE FROM THE  
ROCK OF GIBRALTAR  
NAS SAFA

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Following a housewarming party where I imbibed somewhat of a large amount of the complimentary jungle juice, I moseyed into a bar downtown and took note of a girl I was almost positive I had a lingering, bordering on unhealthy, crush on in college—she had an indecipherable aura about her; it appealed to me. It was a peculiar thing; you really had no choice *who* you were physically attracted to, yet you will be fiercely judged based on *who you are involuntarily physically attracted to*. It was a peculiar thing; you really had no choice *how* you felt, yet you will be intensely scrutinized based on *how you feel*, these feelings you *can't control*. It seemed like such a waste of harsh judgment, such a misallocation of perfectly fine vitriol, yet it was human nature—I found women with peculiar auras appealing. In the bar, by contrast, there's a pretense of *suspended judgment*; the bar tells you, “Buddy, *personally*, we're fine with how you feel, be attracted to whoever you want to be attracted to! You can say *whatever* what you want to say here, feel *whatever* you want to feel here, all the things you *can't* say and feel anywhere else,” but of course that freedom only induces guilt; guilt about *wanting* your judgment suspended, and fear; fear of being *caught wanting* your judgment suspended. But that's, ultimately, the end game of all freedom: it turns victim into executioner—the victim executes herself out of fear and guilt. But that's simple economics; that's the advanced economics of the food and beverage industry.

In any case, I was clearly attracted to this girl who seemed so indecipherable due to how *anomalous* she was; I was actually somewhat of an anomaly myself—being of Macaque descent and all. Yes, a *Macaque of Gibraltar* was who I was! Yes, I occupied the

peculiar position of having respected scientists—as well as racist internet trolls—in agreement about me: I was descended from a rare population of native European monkeys. A rare breed indeed! As you can probably imagine, my background posited me as somewhat of an enigma within the confines of White America—an *awkward fit* at times to be sure. For example, an industrialist who employed my uncle once said, “Now, let’s see...according to my calculations, we have seventy two white men working for us, seventeen black men, and one ‘other,’” to which my uncle replied, in a quizzical tone, “*Oh...who’s the ‘other’?*” to which the industrialist said, “*You.*” My uncle asked him how could *he* be the *other*, what did that *mean*? It was either black or white, wasn’t it? The industrialist told him, well, he wasn’t white... and he wasn’t black... so he checked the “other” box for him. More recently, my good friend’s grandmother glanced at a picture of me on his phone then asked him who the black kid was. Having said that, from a strictly utilitarian standpoint, where else could they really put me? I’m of European descent! The fissures of Caucacity are indeed abundant; 9/11 was a major wakeup call for me.

In any case, the girl waiting tables at the bar downtown reminded me of a girl I went to college with—I seriously considered that it *could be the girl I went to college with* for more than a few seconds. I knew it was an ominous sign that I was reminiscing while intoxicated. I sat at the bar, visibly intoxicated, having drunk somewhat of a large amount of the complimentary jungle juice at the housewarming party, and reminisced about going to college with a petite girl with an indecipherable aura who lived in my building. She was a year younger than I was; I thought she was one of the best looking girls I’d ever seen, and also that she may have wanted my shit a little

bit. Now, to be clear, that feeling was entirely based on a five minute drunken conversation I had with her in an elevator on a brisk Saturday evening, an evening where I felt like there was a genuine spark of mutual interest—a spark that would haunt me for years afterward, solely because I was scared to make a strong move, *solely because I had no game* and, most likely, glancing over at the girl waiting tables in the bar downtown, *still didn't*. In the elevator, we'd made eye contact in a way that I felt was somewhat profound; even in college I was aware I had a tendency of obsessing over impossibilities. By mid-semester she'd started dating some Greek kid who I thought looked just like me, granted with larger and more defined muscles—but very similar to me in a generic sense. It was possible I had a tendency to hold onto fairly negligible bonds and, needless to say, I lived in a silent state of desperation for my last two and a half years at school, defeated and obsessively thinking about how that *could've been me*, how she just had that type of aura about her, how no one else seemed to have that type of aura about them, how she ended up dating some meathead who looked just like me. The small girl draped in a flannel shirt, mellifluously waiting tables at the bar that night, had the same aura about her, no one else had that aura about them; it was an *indecipherable* aura; she reminded me of my college crush to the extent that, at the time, I thought it *could be her*—I wouldn't have been surprised if it *was her*. Was anyone Greek at the bar? Did I see anyone who reminded me of me? I felt euphoric, like I'd been gifted a second chance, a chance for redemption. I knew I had no choice but to try to pursue her and also knew it would all end terribly, that—given *my rationale*, given *my temperament in general*—there was absolutely *no way* it could be considered a good idea. It was a terrible idea, I thought,

sitting visibly intoxicated in public, having drunk a considerable amount of the complimentary jungle juice at the housewarming party.

The next day I agreed to go to a party I didn't have an adequate excuse for not attending with one of my good friends, Maurice "Mo" Aureliopoulous. I'd recently found myself acquiring an unusual amount of acquaintances I had next to nothing in common with—people I didn't *dislike* but who I didn't enjoy being around; ninety five percent of my acquaintanceships seemed dependent on me feigning in interest in things I had no interest in; it seemed like a recent phenomenon to me, but I couldn't recall if I'd always been that way. Nevertheless, walking into the party *all* I could think about was the girl from the bar downtown—my love life was fraught with calamity, hurting people I didn't care about, being hurt by people I cared about, absconding from stability, proposing to promiscuity; it was terrible. In the end, I'd always invite betrayal rather than deal with guilt; I couldn't *endure* guilt; contrary to popular belief, sociopathic tendencies are one of the greatest blessings anyone can be endowed with—I found solace in indignation and melancholy. Yet I felt like I was being gifted with some sort of second chance, a second chance I couldn't afford to squander; I suddenly had *no* interest in conversing with anyone; I wanted to be *completely* alone in my ruminations regarding the girl from the bar downtown.

I'd decided to wear a white tee I got for free from a discount gym inside-out and an old pair of khaki shorts that were mid-thigh high—but the print from the white tee was, unfortunately, still visible even with the shirt inside out and I, unfortunately, dropped a chocolate covered strawberry on the shirt within minutes of

entering the home. I embarrassingly exclaimed, “Ohhh, chocolate covered *strawberries*?!” when I noted a platter of chocolate covered strawberries in the kitchen, and I immediately reached to pick one up but didn’t have a firm grip on it as I lifted it recklessly toward my mouth. Despite the relative warmth of the afternoon it was, unfortunately, about forty degrees out at the home (it was on the water).

I walked onto the deck with Mo and noticed a medley of liquor on a table, noticed a stack of red solo cups, and I considered the socially acceptable timeframe between stepping onto the deck and pouring myself a drink. With no regard for societal norms, I immediately reached for a cup and immediately heard a shrill voice utter the words: *sup bro?* Frozen in place, I rotated my torso, with my right hand still grazing the top cup in the stack, and heard the voice repeat, “Sup bro? ...name’s Blake.” A guy named Blake stood in front of me. He was wearing a hemp necklace, a maroon branded t-shirt, an adjustable hat backwards, and khaki pants with sandals. I thought vaguely about the amount of alternate universes that would need to be birthed until one existed where Blake and I were genuine friends—not necessarily in a negative way but rather thinking purely mathematically, and we shook hands after awkwardly attempting to pound fists. Blake stepped toward my body and the cup I was now gingerly gripping in my right hand; he asked me my name because he wanted to write it on a cup; he had a black sharpie in the breast pocket of his t-shirt and pulled it out. I told him my name in a tone that suggested perhaps I was unsure of my name? He plucked the cup from my loosely gripped fist and wrote my name in cursive below the brim, told me it wasn’t a problem, told me he didn’t wanna have people losing their cups or not knowing whose cup is whose, you know, and then the

cups are lying around and everyone is wasting a bunch of cups! I thanked him and held a red cup with my name written in cursive below the brim.

I poured my cup half full with the sky blue bottle of vodka on the table then filled the rest with ice cubes and lemon flavored seltzer—there were no lemons on the table. The booze only intensified my feelings about the girl that worked at the bar downtown, and it was now clear, *beyond a reasonable doubt*, that I was becoming *obsessed*, and I wondered what I could do to stop this obsession; what could I do to slow it down; how could I truncate it, but I thought this *as I was basking in the obsession*, already creating all sorts of scenarios in my imagination. I knew the effort was futile as I considered what I could possibly do to truncate the obsession as I simultaneously *basked in the obsession*. I took a sip of vodka and glanced to my right and saw Brian Tabouli; I had no idea Brian was going to be at the party; in fact, he looked like a completely different person. I'd experienced somewhat of a "falling out" with him a few months prior, due to somewhat of a "he said, she said" argument I had with his now ex-girlfriend and, in the interim (he had stage four brain cancer), I'd heard he'd gone legally blind because of the tumor pressing incessantly against the back of his eyes.

He sat with an attractive girl I recognized as the on-and-off girlfriend of one of Brian's friends. His friend was also an *acquaintance* of mine, but I didn't know him well enough to know his on-and-off girlfriend all that well (or well enough to make a point of saying hello as soon as I saw her on the deck)—I kind of doubted she knew who I was. She looked a little like Jessica Alba, or someone told me they thought she looked like Jessica Alba, back when Jessica Alba was more popular, and I agreed and in the interim years following the



conversation continued to tell people she was attractive, saying, “She looks a little like Jessica Alba, right?” whenever she came up in conversation.

Brian’s face was bloated nearly beyond recognition, maybe three times the size I remembered it being pre-cancer, and his hair was disheveled, but not the in the intentionally disheveled way he used to style it, and a look of permanent bewilderment was scarred across his comportment. I greeted him as I walked over to the table gingerly, sat in an open seat, and identified myself—in case he didn’t recognize my voice. Surprisingly, he claimed it was great to see me then paused and gazed in my vicinity and clarified “not *see you*,” but that I knew what he meant, and we both laughed—I laughed hesitantly, unsure of whether or not I should be laughing, feeling guilty about laughing, glancing nervously at the other people seated at the table, looking at me laughing. I cleared my throat as I asked how he was doing. After a slight hiccup in conversation, he asked me about my new job; when he said “new job” I chagrined slightly then felt guilty about chagrining then remembered he couldn’t see me then felt guilty about remembering he couldn’t see me, and I told him my true feelings about the job; I told him my feelings concisely; I used profanity, and he chuckled, possibly unaware of my sincerity, and told me he was happy for me—he congratulated me on the job again. I didn’t detect any ill-will regarding our “minor falling out” in his tone, which was reassuring, but the jarring change in his physical appearance overwhelmed the ill-will reassurance.

Given the height of my shorts—which I now regretted wearing (both aesthetically and functionally)—the weather was making it difficult for me to genuinely enjoy myself; I felt severely underdressed and convinced Mo to

leave after three drinks. When I said goodbye to Brian his stare still seemed only empty and jarring—but only jarring from a solipsistic standpoint, in the sense that it only made me think about how I’d somehow neglected to feel properly bad about his condition, how I’d probably continue to do so. He told me it was great to see me, that we should hang out soon, and I said something along the lines of, “*Yeah definitely!*” and immediately imagined calling his house phone, his mother answering in a tone that strongly implicated I was selfish for allowing a *minor falling out* to occur with a person who had *stage four brain cancer* then reluctantly handing him the phone as I paced back and forth nervously in my apartment, strenuously and anxiously waiting for her to hand him the phone—with *no idea* of what we could possibly discuss once he got on the phone. The fact three-fourths of my legs were exposed in the brisk forty-something degree breeze was excruciating. A person I’d considered a decent friend for some time was dying a slow death and I refused to make a phone call.

Walking back to the car I continued to obsess over this *obsession*, this *obsession*—wondering why was I being tormented by *this* image of *this* person (who, by the way, I’d never even conversed with!). Was it nostalgia? Was it a “second chance” I couldn’t afford to let pass by? Was it I always felt these types of strong feelings but *never* pursued them, that I always allowed myself to endure the pain of inertia over and over, the logical endpoint of which was always a type of insanity?—that I always allowed myself to endure the pain of inertia, even as people would comment on how I was so *quiet*, so *in control all of the time*, and I’d *take the compliments*, of course, knowing full well that by agreeing to the compliment I was negating my *very nature*, that if

people knew the real me, the me that was innately obsessive, who played these dangerous games of inertia, they'd enter a state of shock, they'd take strong offense at my deception, how could I seem *one way*, yet *be* another?! I seemed like such a nice, quiet guy—until you got to *know me!* Whenever anyone complimented my perceived stoicism (and I obliged) I immediately knew I would have to cut all ties at some point, that, at some point, I would simply be *unable* to maintain my stoic facade and have to abscond completely. It was socially taxing. It was morally exhausting.

One summer afternoon, while fishing with my uncle, the thought occurred to me as I watched the worm, *still living*, decapitated on the line, the hook piercing through its body, its decapitated body still flailing in the water, *only to be eaten alive after being decapitated*—when the thought occurred to me: all morality must be some kind of rebellion against an autonomous order. I was disgusted! It occurred to me: to become conscious was to say, “This autonomous order of decapitation, mutilation, exploitation (in other words: *nature*)—is not something I wish to be a part of. It actually disgusts me (albeit autonomously!)” And isn't that movement against autonomy, *in its essence*, suicidal?—an autonomous disgust against all that is (presumably) autonomous and irreversible (i.e. *nature*, in other words: *life*)? You're not conscious as much as *you just no longer wish to live*, otherwise you could just “go with the flow,” unaware of what you're even doing! That's the truth of sentience as it occurred to me, fishing with my uncle, disgusted at the mutilation, decapitation—*the inhumanity* of the bait. (The irony is I was actually really excited to go fishing and still enjoy seafood immensely.)

In any case, I knew with a fair amount of certainty the logical endpoint of the afternoon was going to a bar by

myself—which I should *never* do, no one should *ever* do, but my love life had been admittedly fraught with misinterpretation, *disappointment*, passion, *complete and utter elation*, suicidal thoughts, *betrayal*; it was all in your imagination. I knew love was an impossibility, a conspiracy that existed on the deep web that could never be proven—that if it ever *was* empirically verified I'd immediately lose all interest. I started aggregating unrelated anecdotes in my head and began to poorly construct an argument for drowning my sorrows solo—as it seemed like drinking by myself was no longer just an option to benignly consider but rather a *burden* thrust upon my shoulders. I had no problem drinking by myself but going to a bar by myself seemed totally out of line—yet was there any other choice? Everyone I know is either relatively happy or utterly miserable, I thought. But what about me, I thought. What's wrong with *me*, I thought. What *is* it that's preventing *me* from being relatively happy or utterly miserable too, I thought. I could be, couldn't I? Of course I could—I could be relatively happy or utterly miserable too—and, *if* I could, what better place to *become* relatively happy or utterly miserable than drinking at a bar by yourself? At the time it made sense: my friend was dying a slow, excruciating death and hoping to hang out with me soon, so I should go to a bar by myself to maybe “bump into” a girl that reminded me of a girl I had a crush on in college. Of course, at the same time, I also felt an intense and unrelenting disgust with myself for even contemplating such things, such things were so beneath me, I thought—yet also completely in line with my character.

Back in my apartment, I sprawled out on my bed, flicked on the TV and watched, mid-episode, a cartoon where a Chinese restaurant owner with a politically incorrect

accent kept screaming, “*Goddamn Mongorians!*” at a group of Mongolians that repeatedly ruined his business, Shitty Wok Chicken. I was thoroughly lifeless but also moderately amused when I got a phone call from Mo. He actually ended meeting up with his dad, downtown—it was an impromptu type thing, you know—at the same bar I’d been nauseously considering attending; the bar I was about to go to by myself, considering what going to a bar by myself could do to whatever was left of my self-respect (or could it make me a *stronger* person?). *Fortuitous*, I thought to myself with a Cheshire grin, on the phone with Mo, and said something disingenuous about being tired, but that I’d “stop by” “in a little bit” then threw on some pants and a light jacket and left.

When I walked in the bar downtown Mo’s dad was sitting at the bar buying shots. The girl I was clearly obsessed with was working; she was talking to a bouncer, and I, of course, immediately recognized her and glanced away in a way that was so rushed I thought it made it obvious I was *trying to look away*. I continued to excoriate myself for *feeling this way* as I saw her; I was always in the process of *ceasing to feel things* when something like *this* would happen—I would always be so *close* to finally coming to terms with rationality, with courting logic, with marrying consistency *when something like this would happen*. And I’d treat my obsessions with pure inertia, treat them as *concepts*, until the *ascesis* resulted in a bout of *insanity*—which I could *not* let happen again! This is the last straw, I thought to myself. *Ascesis* is insanity, I thought to myself. *This* time it is simply a matter of *self-preservation* that I *allow* myself to succumb to my own obsessive nature—to deny it any longer, to remain inert in the presence of insatiable thirst, would be the end of me. There was no question of that, I thought,

standing in the bar downtown, occasionally glancing at the girl talking to the bouncer, feeling slightly euphoric, as if I'd hatched some incredibly complicated scheme that was going just as I planned, like I flipped a coin over and over and over until it landed on the side I'd guessed.

Glancing over again, I noted her butt protruding upward and outward into the desolate bar space; I felt as though maybe I should have been looking elsewhere? Was I acting like a male chauvinist—gazing at asses with reckless abandon in public? I looked away. Her black hair was gelled curly; she wore large heels that still didn't make her all that tall—there was an intangibility to her eyes that made them seem deep and/or seductive. I considered her physical features morosely—taken aback as I noted her posture was very professional and began brainstorming ways engage in conversation, began to form the opinion she was too attractive to even speak to; even though I considered myself a pretty good looking guy if you were into body hair. I started nervously chugging the cans of beer Mo's dad continued to graciously buy me at an above average pace; she walked over to the bar, and I held a can of beer in each hand, drinking at an ill-advised pace. Mo was moping to an absurd degree (at the time he was going through a contentious divorce); he shouldn't have even come out.

I told the both of them I thought it might be a good idea if I ordered a beer from that waitress; I nervously said, "She's hot, right?" and walked over—she stood unoccupied by the bar—and ordered a beer. She turned around and said, "But you already have two in your hands?" then asked me if she knew me from somewhere. I actually got that a lot—"You Bobby Salami's older brother by any chance?" "You the assistant manager at LA Fitness by any chance?" "You ever see that movie Aladdin by any chance?" Personally, I thought I had a

unique look, but in any case I found it ironic *she* thought she knew *me* from somewhere? I contemplated if it was *actually* the same girl for a moment. She told me her name was Sophia; I replied in English; she was clearly a different person—Sophia wouldn't have been my first guess. She smiled and told me I needed a thicker coat; she had no idea I was wearing thigh high shorts six hours earlier. “Yeah, it's kind of cold out...for this time of year I mean,” I said. She suggested a bubble coat. Not a chance, I thought (I hated bubble coats) and nodded my head agreeably as the conversation continued. I was experiencing the entire conversation at a remove; my consciousness was displaced outside of my body as I watched myself smile stupidly, trying to gesture with my hands, with both of my hands holding cans of beer, trying to extract the last remnants of wittiness out of my rapidly dwindling sobriety. She said something about me eventually drinking the beers, that maybe she could come around and get me a drink then, if I wanted?—and I was still at a remove, experiencing vivid flashbacks of being in an elevator on a Saturday night, similarly inebriated, talking to my college crush, what a similar spark, what a similar aura! Amazing!

In a restrained giddiness, I made my way back over to Mo and his dad and shouted for a round of shots “*on me!*” not thinking I could have ordered the shots from Sophia. I then waved my index finger around in a circular motion while also recoiling slightly—nervous she would see me order shots from the bar and take offense. Mo's dad shouted phrases jubilantly, with the spirit of Dionysus resonant in his voice. A few minutes later, while leaning against the bar, I saw her start talking to a customer who, I thought, had my look about him and an oppressive sense of unavoidable calamity enveloped every organ in my entire body. *Well that's that, I*

thought; college all over, I thought; oh well, I thought; honestly, I'm probably better off, I thought; definitely, without a doubt, better off, I thought; *that type a situation?! I thought and scoffed to myself in a relieved way, not feeling relieved in the least. Ten minutes later, she approached us and asked us if we needed any drinks? Mo's dad tilted his head back and shouted, "Whoa, who's this cutie?" shouted, "Ohhh, I love your eyes!" She shrugged, smiling, and admitted they were actually colored contacts.*

Mo's dad pinched my cheek performatively, made a kiss-face, and drunkenly said, "Look at this handsome guy," as he waddled back and forth on his barstool—as I also waddled back and forth, but I was standing up while waddling. I found myself standing somewhat uncomfortably close to Sophia at different junctures of the night. Thanks to the more gregarious natures of Mo (who had, unsurprisingly, perked up once she asked us if we needed drinks) and his dad (and the fact the bar was completely dead), Sophia was actually *hanging out with us*. I kept excitedly shouting, "I'm not even drunk yet!" to Mo and his dad, yet I knew on some level that I was thoroughly inebriated. *Yeah*, I am a handsome guy, I thought with select reservations as I looked into her eyes again as our eyes locked again, briefly; I may have pulled away prematurely, possibly rudely, or maybe it was her. At one point she whispered to me, "You're a *nice guy*, right?" and I said, "Of course!" only briefly considering the possible motivations behind her, or anyone else, asking me, or anyone else, if I'm/they're a *nice guy*. Mo did most of the talking: she was half Vietnamese; she had a four year old daughter; she was born in Long Beach but spent some time in Minnesota before moving all the way here; her underwear was riding up her ass. "Ugh, I think I need a new pair of underwear," she said sincerely. Mo's



dad exclaimed, “Minnesota?!” Sophia exclaimed, “I know, right? It was terrible!” She spoke with more amicability than I’d sensed in her previous statements. Mo—normally amenable to drinking until at least two am—had to meet with his lawyer the next morning (divorce related); his dad never stayed out past ten pm; they both left.

The bar was empty as we sat. Another waitress wandered over; she looked at me quizzically and asked me if I was from Bracciole. After a slight pause, I told her I wasn’t; she told me I *looked like* I was from Bracciole, and I took a fake sip of beer. I told her sometimes people said that to me—the implication being everyone in Bracciole was one hundred percent Italian—but that I was, “actually a Macaque from Gibraltar.” She said, “Wow, I could’ve sworn you were Italian,” then told me *she was* from Bracciole; she said it in a tone that suggested she was clarifying an inquiry (an inquiry I hadn’t made) before Sophia interjected and said “*Girl*, have I told you how much I admire you for riding that motorcycle into work?!” The other waitress immediately adopted an excited tone, equally excited as Sophia’s, and said, “*Girl*, that’s nothing! You should see when I ride on it with my son!” They both cackled and Sophia told the two of us how she rode a motorcycle a long time ago, when she had a crush on *this boy*, then her eyes drifted—as if she was experiencing the memory for the first time as she spoke—then she told the both of us that the boy drove like an asshole though! That, after him, she said *never again*, then she rubbed her hands together like she was wiping away the memory with her hands.

The waitress from Bracciole meandered back to the kitchen as a slurred set of vocals echoed loudly behind us. The voice wailed, “Lift up your shirt! ...Lemme see it!

...Yeah, you won't—*cause you got a bomb unda theeuh!*" I looked in the direction of the shouting and saw an Indian guy making an incredulous expression sitting behind us—behind him I noted a morbidly obese pale man with a forward comber of noticeably dyed red hair, with a gut that commanded his entire torso, sitting at the bar. His chin was one with his neck; he was yelling, presumably, at the Indian guy, a younger guy, probably around my age, from a few feet away. The Indian guy shrugged incredulously in my direction (possibly a plea for solidarity?) as the old guy continued to shout slightly varied versions of the same insults, and I shrugged at him, apathetic, then stopped paying attention and turned back to Sophia, then the Indian guy walked past us—wearing a noticeably disgusted expression—and a minute later the same set of vocals shouted, "Hey! ...Yeah, you! ...*Why don't you lift up ya shirt!* ...Yeah, you won't. *Because you gotta bomb unda theeuh!* ...*Piece a shit!*" I looked around pensively, attempting to confirm there were no other bodies in the immediate vicinity with the exceptions of myself and Sophia; I asked her if she thought he was shouting that *at me?* I forced a nervous laugh as she shrugged noncommittally. I chuckled again and noted the Rock of Gibraltar, where the majority of my people historically resided, was actually under Moorish rule, an Islamic Caliphate, for literally hundreds of years, possibly like seven hundred years? So I didn't know... I told her my last name—pronounced then re-pronounced it; I wrote my full name on a napkin for her. I wasn't sure if she was familiar with the the tumultuous history of the Iberian Peninsula at all...?

Over the bigoted shouting, I pensively chose to ask for her number. She said, "*Ummm,*" looking up at me, drink tray still in hand; she said it was, well, you know, kind of

frowned upon to give out numbers... I suggested I could just act like I was typing something in my phone while we pretended to talk, and she could recite the number—she hesitated to reply, and while I was waiting for the reply I unlocked my phone and started drunkenly mashing keys, then she began to recite a number; she said if we ever met up maybe I could teach her to *pronounce my last name*. I immediately replied, “Sure!” and she said, “Because we’re about to close.” When I got back to my car I made sure to immediately text her my number, but after I hit send I noticed I spelled her name *Sophie* instead of *Sophia*, so I sent a follow-up text that read *\*Sophia*.

I’d feel a tremendous amount of anxiety about the whole thing (specifically misspelling her name and being left with no choice but to send an asterisk text) the next morning as I un-ironically played the John Tesh “NBA on NBC Theme Song” on my phone; I was sitting at a new Bolivian restaurant that was gaining a sterling reputation around the city when Mo walked in. I’ve already gotten further with Sophia than I ever did with my college crush, I thought giddily, still steeped in anxiety, as I greeted Mo without lifting my head. His Gucci brand wire-rimmed glasses floated above his bushy black beard; he looked miserable and sat down. I suggested Mimosas; Mo suggested Screwdrivers, and we ordered two Screwdrivers. The place specialized in breakfast and brunch buffets, so we walked to the buffet area where they had a solid selection of fish, including tilapia, which I thought was an underrated and underrepresented fish that at a later date my uncle would tell me was a “dirty fish.” The thing about thinking not everyone realizes is it’s not *entirely* under your control. High school teachers will educate you on

Descartes' postulate: "I think, therefore, I am," and that kind of imputes a certain *control* over thought, like your existence as a sentient being derives from *voluntarily thinking*, but that's actually not even how thought works. A lot of people don't know that. You can wait in line at a brunch buffet with *absolutely no control of your thoughts*. You can explicitly think *I do not want to think this*, that it's absurd that I keep thinking about this—*while you're actually thinking about that very thing*. It's a difficult to thing to comprehend, especially when you're trying to comprehend it *while thinking about the very thing you're trying not to think about, while thinking about not thinking about the thing you're thinking about as you think about the thing you're thinking about*.

The Bolivian restaurant cooked everything on the spot, you just threw whatever you wanted into a bowl. We walked over to the buffet area and Mo sighed, "Ayyyyyyyy," longingly as he picked up a pair of tongs and started to fish through a container of capicola; we stood at opposite ends of the omelette section. Mo sighed, "Ayyyyyyyy," longingly as he dropped a modest scoop of the heavily processed meat into his bowl. Why hadn't Sophia texted me back yet? Mo began to exhibit physical tics that led me to believe he was about to start discussing his estranged wife then told me he thought he might *actually* still be in love her—then paused and turned in my direction and asked what I thought, asked what would I do, if I were him?

I dropped three chunks of tilapia into my bowl, didn't make eye contact, and told him confidently he should probably take some time for himself, to assess how he *really* feels, knowing for a fact he had no intention of doing that—that the last things in the world Mo would be interested in doing were taking time for himself and

assessing how he feels. I kept thinking about Sophia—I couldn't stop; every second my phone didn't vibrate needed me torturously, and when it vibrated and it *wasn't* her it needed me even more! All sorts of imaginative scenarios were being generated in my head; I was repeatedly violating the backbone of Cartesian metaphysics—there was no doubt in my mind, the fraction of my mind that I continued to control, that I was clinically insane. Yet Mo didn't seem to mind—he didn't judge me; he told me, emphatically, that he didn't *want* to stop seeing his estranged wife. I was perturbed but, admittedly, took a perverse pleasure in indulging said types of questions.

Mo was three months younger than I was but was also relatively inexperienced in that he'd been with his wife for nearly ten years (including their time as boyfriend/girlfriend; they'd only been married for eighteen months or so). He entered into a life of monogamy with her at a very young age. He had minimal adult dating experience outside of his time with her—I actually had reason to believe his only extramarital sexual experience was a blowjob he received when he was seventeen, so I made salient, rational points that I personally wouldn't have taken into account when it came to my relationships, and Mo agreed with me. He told me my advice was the right advice—that, as hard as it was to hear, that I was absolutely right. He scrolled through what looked like days of text messages and shouted, “Look at this!” and pointed at his phone, anxiously rotated it into my periphery and asked me to read a particular exchange; his tone was legal—but also desperate and broken.

He read the text bubble aloud before I could fully register the text; he asked me if he should tell his estranged wife he drove by her mom's house the

previous afternoon, and I told him probably not. He said he was going to—that he wasn't the type of person to lie about things, although we both knew he was the type of person to lie about things, all *sorts* of things (as was I), but the state of shock and hurt he was enduring had apparently turned him into a temporary ascetic, which wasn't uncommon, I thought, having endured similar episodes myself. I was actually feeling a little off myself. He hand-plucked a piece of capicola and popped it into his mouth; his desperation was gradually lifting my spirits. He told me if he drove by her mother's house *she deserved to know it*, that he wasn't gonna lie; he was gonna tell her how he felt because that's who he was, that she needed to know that, and I told him he should tell her how he feels.

The rest of the day was empirically excruciating for me—what was she doing that she couldn't text me back? What could *possibly* be so important that it superseded *texting me back*? What was a text in the grand scheme of things, anyway? Not receiving, *no—receiving* texts is huge in the grand scheme of things and beyond. I'm talking about *sending*: to send a text? Sending a text is *nothing*: to type a quick reply? Later that night, a plastic bag holding six cans of beer sat on my passenger seat as I drove to Mo's mom's house—he'd been living with his mom and stepdad since his separation. Despite the fact I never directly discussed my problems with him, he really understood where I was coming from on a plethora of issues. I walked around the side of the house, through the stone patio, and walked in the back door where inside Mo's mom was serving crab cakes—she offered me a few after I cracked open a beer. Initially, I told her I'd already had dinner, which was true, but ate two or three at her insistence; they were good. I asked her where her

husband was, and she shouted, “Still working!” as she had a tendency to make statements at unnecessarily loud decibels.

I was still waiting for a text from Sophia, silently vacillating between rational thoughts about how different people text at different intervals and apocalyptic thoughts about how she’d never text me back, cursing her name and indicting her character before thinking things like: *then again, maybe she’s just enjoying a day with her daughter*. Mo fiddled nervously with his white wine glass, a quarter full, and leaned forward against the seven foot long island in the kitchen; his ass stuck up in the air—he began to finger an open wine bottle and asked me if I heard about that idiot Enzo? I shook my head no. I began to lean into the island too, sticking my ass out too. His mom asked me if I wanted a glass of wine, and I declined, telling her I had these beers, holding up my plastic bag of beers. Mo moaned, “He’s taking that fuckin girl to *Italy*,” then stood up straight and said, “You believe that?!” I repeated the word *Italy* with a somewhat forced incredulity—I didn’t find it that surprising. Enzo was *from* Italy and was the type to fall in love on a whim, so even though taking this girl to a foreign country this early was excessive—it was a terrible idea—it wasn’t as excessive as it would be for anyone other than Enzo.

I was nibbling on my second crab cake when Sophia texted me; it’d been about eighteen hours since my text, and for the majority of the day I’d been silently vacillating between rational thoughts about how different people text at different intervals and apocalyptic thoughts about how she’d never text me back, cursing her name and indicting her character before thinking things like: *then again, maybe she’s just enjoying a day with her daughter*. The text read, “so

wen r u gonna teach me 2 pronounce ur name.” I told Mo’s mom the crab cakes were delicious! Mo asked what kinda message does that send? Taking a girl to Italy *that* early? ...Was Enzo kidding him? You know how much a ticket costs to get over there? And he’s buying *two!* And I thought if someone *texts* me—I text back. *Immediately.* That’s just the type of person *I* am. I sent a reply text that read, “lol this weekend if u want.” Mo said, “Ayyyyyyyyyy.” Mo’s mom said she couldn’t listen to anymore of his shit! Mo said, “I know. I’m a pathetic little bitch right now!” He shook his head, stuck his ass back out, and grabbed a piece of sliced cheese and popped it in his mouth; he continued to sip his wine with an urgency that was somewhere between his normal pace and one imbued with genuine stress. His mom asked me if I needed anything before she went to bed. Mo received a phone call; he told the person on the other line we were “on our way,” hung up the phone and chugged his glass of red wine. He filled up the glass again; he slid the phone down to the other end of the island.

We were still standing around the island in his mom’s kitchen when he asked me if I’d be *ready after this next glass* and held up his wine glass; I looked down at my glass and nodded. We were looking at a picture of Sophia that Sophia sent me that night, during the course of our admittedly brief text exchange—he’d asked me if I had a pic of her, and, fortuitously enough, I’d just received a picture *of* Sophia, *from* Sophia, during our admittedly brief text exchange. He told me, “*No offense,*” glancing down the picture (now darkened slightly as the phone prepared to revert to its lock screen), “but I’d let that girl play eight rounds of tennis then sit on my face,” and I was completely unoffended; I didn’t care. I shook my head in a way that said, “I’m not offended.” I’d,



personally, let her play *nine* rounds of tennis then sit on my face! We were in agreement about the letting her sit on our faces—we simply disagreed on how many rounds of tennis we'd let her play before sitting on our faces.

I asked him to fill me up a little, noticing my glass contained maybe just one more gulp of wine, noticing there was maybe just a glass and a half left in the bottle. He asked me how much money I thought she made a night as he filled the glass; he chugged his glass again; he dumped the rest of the bottle into his glass, and I rocked my head back, completely speculating, and found myself revisiting the *wen* in her text message, thinking about how even though most people—myself included—seemed to stretch the rules of grammar in text messages, you rarely ever saw anyone drop the *h* in *when*. Mo suggested she made *at least* fifty thousand dollars a year, and I agreed; it seemed reasonable—his stomach protruded just slightly over his pant line.

Prior to getting Sophia's number, I'd met some Italian girl at a bar and made out with her at the bar; it was an impressive kiss, very passionate, but we went quite some time without talking to one another. When we started talking again the style of her interactions consisted primarily of being effusive, incessantly texting me for days, then dropping off the planet, then resurfacing to tell me she really liked me, then blowing me off whenever we made plans. It was obvious she had a boyfriend. Following a particularly arduous text exchange, she told me she was moving to Florida, which didn't particularly surprise me because I'd already scrolled through her social media and found an attractive looking guy with a bio noting he lived in Florida. It seemed so depressing but, at the same time, I didn't know why I cared—it felt like I should care less.

I'd recently gone on a date with another girl, before the Italian girl told me about Florida, and after I heard about Florida we went out for sushi, me and the Italian girl, and she wore sandals, and I noticed for the first time she had abnormally large toes, which made me feel better about her moving away. The other girl had a kid, which didn't bother me; I could see where people would say she was attractive; she was objectively attractive, and I should have kissed her probably the second time we went out but didn't. I regretted not kissing her—specifically because my cousin's friend had set us up, so I knew I would be thoroughly lambasted in the presence of people I knew and respected. "What's ya cousin *gay a somethin'?*!" I could already hear the refrain. We'd mutually avoid one another for the next few weeks, putting in the minimal acceptable amounts of effort vis-a-vis texting and, to be honest, I didn't really care, but I wasn't sure why I didn't care more—it felt like I should care more.

Yet none of this is an example of some kind of *bad month*, some horrible *aberration*, some unexpected drought—no, it was actually indicative of *pure normalcy*: liking people who didn't like me, not caring about people who cared about me, feeling like your soul mate was *decapitated into a dating pool*—their traits perpetually scattered across three partners, never to be recombined! Around the same time I'd decided to start drinking vodka in place of beer. I had about a quarter of a bottle of vodka in my apartment, and I stared at it—the Celsius breeze of the freezer gently wafting in my face. I figured I'd bring it over my parents' house that afternoon for my sister's college graduation party. Optimistic thoughts meandered through my body as I held the ice cold bottle of vodka in my right hand—as my right hand began to endure sharp pains holding the ice cold bottle.

I jubilantly considered the benefits of not having to stop to pick up beer as I strolled into my parents' house wearing an oversized t-shirt my sister bought me the previous Christmas; I said, "*You know who got me this shirt?!*" to my sister in an overly enthusiastic, borderline mocking tone. I was the first one to the party. My sister and I had a similar "look," although neither of us resembled our mother or father; we were close. Logistically speaking, what hindered my transition to beer to vodka was pace. I drank vodka at the same pace I drank beer. So despite the fact that vodka was an overall healthier choice of drink in terms of carbohydrates entering my body, it was less healthy in terms potential long-term damage done to my liver and kidneys due to the high levels of inebriation I reached while drinking. My sister's boyfriend and her friends trickled in over the next half hour, extended relatives too, and I felt an intense urge to indulge in nothing but silence, to be in the company of nothing but *a complete lack of sound*, as various iterations of small talk began to generate organically, like bacteria or mitochondria or other things scientific.

I'd had a one night stand with one of my sister's friends and she stopped by too. The vodka crept assassin-like as I sipped out of my heavily iced glass; I was drinking it with just a splash of seltzer, which on some level I recognized was most likely ill-advised. I began to confirm it as ill-advised as my dad glared at me—as he manned the grill I'd volunteered to grill earlier in the week but was now visibly too intoxicated to grill. Yet it was too late to turn back. I couldn't *undo* my drunkenness. In fact, I felt as though at that point my only real option was to *embrace* said drunkenness, to run toward it with abandon, to unapologetically *carry* this drunkenness to its logical conclusion. At the same

time, I loved my sister dearly, and I didn't want to ruin her college graduation party, but being in the company of people I had no interest in speaking with was more than I could bear. I began to realize small talk with extended relatives is one of the most acute forms of torture in America—mandatory *get togethers* with people you never explicitly expressed affection for, *not* because you need to celebrate some *event* everyone is equally unenthusiastic about, but *because* you fear *being alone*. *Fear of solitude* is the primary cause behind all first world torture—small talk is the primary mode of said torture.

My dad said, “Slow down,” to me sternly under his breath; I could barely speak English. He lowered the arm he held his spatula slowly. I nodded and said something agreeable then walked off the deck and onto the grass. My awareness with regard to where I was was rapidly decreasing. I found myself having a conversation about a garden hose but felt like I was slurring my words (and leaning backward involuntarily), so I extricated myself quickly and stumbled over to talk to my sister and her friends. I ate some of the buffalo chicken dip her friend brought over; I thought it was incredibly delicious and started making small talk, asking my sister's friend for the recipe for the dip, telling her she should come over more often, *but with the dip*, as my sister sat in a lawn chair with sunglasses on.

I scooped up one of the last crackers on the plate and moved it liberally through the dip; I asked my sister if she wanted to go out later, which she immediately rebuked; she told me my mom would *never* let me leave; she said it incredulously, as if she couldn't even *believe* what I was saying, as if she thought I was saying something else, as if leaving the graduation party was absurd, as if it was a physical *impossibility*. I was still

chewing the cracker when I replied, “*Really?*” in a genuinely curious register. The possibility of teaching Sophia how to pronounce my name occurred to me acutely, and I became flushed with anxiety, feeling as though time was running out, that if I didn’t meet up with Sophia soon, *as soon as possible*, then the moment would be irretrievably squandered. *Will this spark be irretrievably lost*, I thought and thought about the Italian girl and the girl with a kid—girls I liked *exponentially* less than Sophia—how sparks were so fickle, how they came and went with no regard for social norms then shook my head incredulously. My sister avoided eye contact and said, “Yeah.” “You *really* think so?” She repeated herself before leaning in gingerly and grabbing the last cracker on the plate. After a brief pause, I asked her to watch me, to watch what I was about to do; I placed my drink on the see-through glass table with the umbrella hole in the middle and walked a few strides backward, then I sprinted full speed toward the four foot high wooden fence that traced the backyard. I leapt upward. The crowd of my extended relatives and my sister’s immediate social circle all presumably looked on—probably around the time I reached full sprint—and witnessed my flailing body *nearly* clear the gated wooden fence. I reflected briefly back to my high school years, when I qualified for All State in in the triple jump as well as the long jump, as the tip of my right foot got caught on the top link of the fence, and I descended rapidly, face first, into the rocks aesthetically scattered at the entrance of the gate.

The next morning I woke up naked, face down, on top of a dollar burrito. The dollar burrito was tightly woven in its original packaging, and I unwrapped it and took a bite—surprisingly, it tasted pretty good. On my phone, I

had a somber voicemail from my sister, a few angry texts from my dad, and a note that read, “u owe Sophia 50\$”. The last edit was recorded at two am. I considered absconding—maybe starting a new life in a nondescript foreign territory with a more accommodating climate? Then I thought about my sizeable student loan balances, the United States government’s expansive database of its citizens, its legal right to garnish wages, and my unwavering monolingualism. I took a shower, threw some pants on, and went to a restaurant called Chilango’s on the west end; it had some of the best Mexican food in the city, and it was cheap too; it was the first place I’d ever had a “beer-rita,” which was a margarita with an upside down Corona placed in the glass, which I actually found to be a pretty asinine idea in concept as well as execution—I hardly ever ordered it. My head and stomach both felt like shit. As I opened the door to the restaurant a very pasty prostitute—a prostitute most likely of Northern European ancestry—shouted something in Spanish, *angrily*, across the street; I hesitantly glanced in the direction of the shouts before walking inside.

Three young Caucasians with mustaches sat in the far right corner (the mustaches were possibly ironic). I sat at the table closest to the entrance and ordered the taco appetizer, pointing to the taco appetizer listed on the menu as I ordered the taco appetizer. The waitress, who admittedly didn’t have the greatest handle on English, jotted down the order and flashed me a sad smile, and I contemplated if it was possible she was staring into the depths of my soul as she stared at me, smiling sadly, before she walked away. Sitting alone at the table, I began to question my ability to rationally interpret the social cues of others. I ate four sizeable tacos for five dollars and drank two beers; I didn’t feel any better

about anything; I may have actually felt worse—I headed to a dive bar located on the city river. I sat on its sparsely populated deck, sitting at a cocktail table by myself, and looked over the river into the three large cylindrical, industrial constructions spewing out dark grey gas. I figured I'd just keep ordering beers—how could things get any worse? It was fairly clear that they couldn't—they definitely could, but the probability of things materially deteriorating seemed slim; it was no time to start worrying about things getting worse. The venue had a cocktail waitress on the deck that day, so I didn't have to continually get up; she had tan skin juxtaposed with Norwegian white teeth—her thighs were exposed, and they were, like, pretty much *painted* tan. She might have been Portuguese—twenty two or twenty three?

While I was sitting on the deck by myself an acquaintance of mine, Bobby, walked by me multiple times without saying hello. Years ago, around the time of The Great Recession, he'd hired me to work in the backroom of an outlet, stocking sneakers for a poverty level wage, which was magnanimous enough of him I suppose; my parents were *thrilled*. I had a *job!* They didn't understand that wide-ranging systemic changes to our employment system necessitated more left leaning policies, that you couldn't just *work your way* out of thousands of dollars of student debt (that you couldn't expunge via personal bankruptcy) making a dollar above minimum wage, with no health insurance, with no guarantee of hours, that any further deregulation to the system would have garish consequences, that as the world population increases exponentially, as technology drastically reduces the demand for labor, free market capitalism must be tempered with socialist caveats. But it was nice of Bobby to hire me. He was absurdly skinny with aspirations of being both a male model and an

entrepreneur; he was a few years older than I was; he had a high opinion of himself; he got fired from the job a few months after he hired me—fired for allegedly stealing funds from the store’s safe, which I didn’t hold against him, nor did I presume him guilty of embezzlement, and even if he *did* steal the money it didn’t offend me personally; if anything it probably made me respect him more—taking life by the balls and stealing from safes?

I’d seen him out that past winter when he poked me, wearing a googly-eyed smile as I sat in a bar booth perusing an article on the tenets of Buddhism on my phone. Following a brief back and forth, I asked him, perfunctorily, if he was, “still in New York?” I felt like I had no choice—you have *no choice* but to inquire about a person’s latest status updates when they say hello to you in public; it doesn’t matter if the hello is solicited or unsolicited, you *must* feign interest in the things they’ve been recently doing. Are they still doing the same things? Have things *changed*?! If so, why have they changed? What are the *drivers* behind these changes (let’s analyze the drivers together, see what kind of conclusions we can draw)—and, if nothing’s changed, you can congratulate them on “staying the course,” the course that led them to you, in public, saying hello, catching up. Last I’d heard, Bobby managed a retail outlet in Manhattan, and following a smug pause he told me he still was, that he was “back and forth.” He asked me where I was, “living these days,” and I told him where: on the north side of the city. Immediately, his expression melted—until the condescension, previously latent in his face, became thoroughly palpable, until I could *taste* the condescension on his face, even while sitting ten feet away from him, and he told me, “*Man...we gotta get you outta here.*”



The man in his mid-thirties, who managed a retail outlet in Manhattan, was telling *me* that *I* needed to get out of *here*, that *I* had apparently allowed my life go horribly awry somewhere, somewhere that wasn't Manhattan—where he was a manager at a retail outlet, in his mid-thirties. The smugness was so suffocating I couldn't speak for ten minutes, and by that time Bobby was long gone. Then again—maybe he was suggesting I was *better than here*; maybe he meant it as a compliment? The next day, with the comment still gnawing at me, I posted an extremely sarcastic note on a social media website excoriating Bobby for his condescension—but I didn't reference him by name. Yet only hours later I received a notification that @triceps\_ had requested to send me a direct message on a *separate* social media website—which I knew for a fact was Bobby's "handle" on said website. *Is Bobby stalking all of my social media accounts*, I thought nervously staring at my phone, knowing for a fact that Bobby didn't "follow me" on the website I posted the note. I never checked the direct message; I was too scared to read the potentially vengeful text and felt slightly remorseful if I'd hurt Bobby's feelings but, at the same time, wondered how Bobby could have *possibly* seen my note, as it seemed completely absurd to me that he would be regularly checking *all* of my social media accounts—of all the things someone could be doing on the internet. But, at the same time, *why else would Bobby send me a direct message on a social media website?*

At the dive bar that day, when Bobby walked by me at least three times and blatantly avoided saying hello—when he *even avoided* engaging in the simple, totally innocuous, act of a corroborative head nod, it seemed to confirm, *beyond a reasonable doubt*, that Bobby had indeed stalked all of my social media

accounts, that the subsequent direct message was indeed a vengeful rebuke to my note. *Why else would Bobby direct message me out of the blue like that?* We had nothing to discuss. The presumed loss of his acquaintanceship didn't bother me as much as the randomness of him, apparently continually, anonymously viewing my social media accounts—despite the fact I'd had *maybe* two to five truncated conversations with him over the prior four years. All of it seemed disconcertingly random, jarringly stochastic, something that would make a normally rational person question his or her very method of living.

After Bobby left the deck I sat satiated in silence for two to three hours until the sun started to set—genuinely enjoying being drunk in the sun by myself, genuinely concerned my father, mother, and sister all now despised me due to my deplorable behavior at my sister's college graduation party, genuinely concerned about the note on my phone that implied I'd seen Sophia the night before. How could I “owe her 50\$”? Clearly, I knew the answer. There was only one answer. Yet I had barely thought about it all day, at least not *specifically*—instead I disingenuously occupied a *general* malaise. Yet I was genuinely concerned; I'd spend the next day at work—from two pm through five pm—repeatedly, *without pause*, changing the shades of a block of three Excel cells from *dark gray* to *light blue* then *light blue* to *dark gray*, obsessing over the note, contemplating what it could mean, knowing exactly what it meant, brainstorming scenarios where it could mean something *other than* what I knew it meant. I galloped up both flights of ragged, asymmetrical cement steps to my apartment's entrance holding a chicken falafel wrap I'd just bought at a small, family-owned, hole-in-the-wall bistro (Mediterranean/Middle Eastern) in a truncated

strip mall connected to a gas station down the street. The keyhole to the entrance was stretched out a half size too big for my key, and I was moaning onomatopoeias standing twenty feet above the five small businesses below my studio apartment, struggling to open the door to my apartment complex.

I entered my apartment; I ate the chicken falafel wrap; I continued to contemplate the note until—following a handful of restless nights, following a plodding, incremental mustering of courage—I walked through the double doors of the bar downtown already decently drunk. I found myself surrounded by the octagonal walls of the bar, eighty five percent of them mirrors. I faced myself from all angles; it didn't suit my mood. I walked up to the bar and nauseously ordered a beer, thinking I could have just *let this be*, considering that fifty bucks isn't the *end of the world*, thinking she'd live either way. I could easily avoid this *one bar* for the rest of my life—I excelled at avoiding things; it wouldn't be a problem for me. I ordered a shot. I felt butterflies in my stomach in a non-enjoyable way. The bartender asked me what kind of shot; I replied vodka; she asked me if I wanted it chilled; I said no. I thought, retroactively, that I definitely should have ordered the shot chilled, and while shaking off the aftertaste of the shot I unintentionally made eye contact with Sophia.

I suppose it was a good and bad thing she was working: good that I didn't completely waste my time and money by coming in; bad that I was now in a position to speak with her. It's incredibly difficult to get comfortable when you're standing in a bar by yourself. The wait staff is there because they *have to be there*; the majority of the patrons are there *because their friends asked them to be there*—and then there's *you*. Why are you there? You

have some kind of agenda, don't you? You banging the bartender? Trying to bang the bartender, right? Some kind of run of the mill alcoholic? You gotta bomb *unda theehuh?! This is clearly what people are thinking as they walk by you, as you stand there unsuccessfully trying to be casual, perusing bullshit on your phone, bullshit you aren't paying attention to in the least, because you're preoccupied thinking about what people are thinking about you as they walk by you, as they glance in your direction—but you know what they're thinking, don't you? My heart dipped down into my large intestine then rose up, Christ-like, with a little gut on its tip as I reluctantly, maybe autonomously, waved her over, waved her over with my head down, and she strutted slowly into my vicinity, tray in hand, and asked, "How are you?" softly. I greeted her nervously, said *good*, cleared my throat violently, said *good* again then said, "So I woke up the other day...with, um, a note on my phone that...said I owe you *fifty dollars?*" "Oh, really," she replied coyly; she said she didn't know if it was *fifty*, and I asked if it was more, and she said, "Ummmm..."*

I let out a nervous laugh and put my hands flat on the bar; I put my head down for a second; she leaned on the same bar and faced my direction; I faced the bar. My embarrassment, my shame, my discomfort, my self-loathing, my discontent—I assumed they were all fairly palpable. She told me she didn't think it was as bad as I was making it out to be, that people came in the bar embarrassingly drunk all the time; it happens to the best of us, you know? She shook her head agreeably. "You just came in here at like eight o'clock really drunk. You had your shirt unbuttoned like...*all of the way down.*" "Was my face bleeding at all?" She stepped back and tilted her head and squinted her eyes—I thought the blue contacts complimented her complexion. I asked her what

happened *then*, then I stopped talking mid-sentence as she glanced across the room. It seemed like she was losing interest in the conversation; maybe there was something more interesting occurring in a different part of the bar? Maybe she had to wait on a table or something? I asked her if she wanted a drink—when she got off work I mean, if it was the end of her shift? Of course it was foolish thing to ask. *Did she want a drink?* Who was I kidding? With *me*? The Shirt Unbuttoned, Like, *All Of The Way Down* Guy? The Guy With His Face Bleeding? Yet it was at times like those—times of utter calamity and maximum embarrassment—that I'd find myself *most* at home, *most* in my element, *most* confident. (To be clear, I had no issue *owning* the darkest recesses of my personality; I had an issue allowing them to see the light of day.) She said it wasn't the end of her shift, but she'd be getting off soon—*if I wanted to wait*. She smiled in a way that temporarily made me believe maybe it wasn't *that* bad, that maybe I'd been rotating my mind into knots for a week for no reason. But my shirt unbuttoned, like, *all of the way down?! My face* bleeding?! No, I felt at home; I felt in my element; I was totally confident.

On the right side of her right calf she had an intricate tattoo of a sign that looked familiar, maybe from other tattoos I'd seen? Was it a stock symbol? Something a respectable tattoo artist would give a twenty percent discount on? It looked like a name was printed in cursive letters across it—she told me it was her daughter's name; it was the only tattoo she had, the only tattoo she'd *get*. She looked around quickly, like there may have been some event she was scheduled to attend, that she was running late for, and I began to conclude the interaction was objectively going terribly, that this idea was

objectively as poor of an idea as I had instinctively known it be all along, that my life had objectively taken some dark, irreversible turn somewhere—that Bobby was right, that my life *had* gone horribly awry somewhere, probably at some traumatic juncture of my adolescence, that maybe I could blame it on one or both of my parents? The bar always put two shots of vodka in their vodka sodas, Sophia ordered an energy drink with vodka—the bartender didn't seem surprised in the least.

I apologized, apologized again; she told me it was ok; she giggled; I asked her why she was laughing, *giggling*. She glanced at the ATM, fifteen feet to our left, and asked me if she could *tell me something*, still giggling, then asked me if I saw that machine over there. “Of course I see it. It's an ATM machine. Probably charges a ridiculous transaction fee,” I said. She told me when I came in I repeatedly shoved my debit card into said ATM, because I needed to pay her tab (the bar didn't take Discover), and the ATM repeatedly denied my requests—she told me I began yelling, barbarically shouting that the ATM was outrageous, that it was some sort of tragic mistake, a vast injustice, as the receipts piled up—that I threw said receipts into the air as I yelled these barbaric statements, that I caused a total scene in the bar, throwing ATM receipts, receipts that repeatedly stated my current checking account balance was thirty six dollars and two cents into the air, yelling barbaric accusations at the currency dispenser, wholly outraged that the ATM machine refused to deduct monies from my checking account, which had a current balance of thirty six dollars and two cents.

She mimicked me by lowering her voice into a baritone register when she repeated these statements: a *vast injustice*, a *tragic mistake*, *I got money!* She told me, honestly, Tommy was about to throw me out—she said it

in a serious but good-natured tone and patted me on the shoulder sympathetically. She told me she bought me a bottle of water as I sat on a stool by myself before I stumbled out; I told her, to be honest, I keep most of my money in my savings account. Sitting on the stool watching her giggle, I thought *she's giggling*, started to think that—through *self-deprecation*, through *booze*—perhaps the encounter was taking a turn for the better? “*Well*,” I began, trailing off, attempting to rapidly construct my disgust with myself into some sort of moral narrative. “What do you do?” she interrupted. I noted a moving object and tried to guide her forward with my right hand as a drunk patron volatily rounded the corner, with no regard for where the bar stools were placed, then I told her what I did. I of course denigrated the profession, used a little profanity in my description, and she said, “That’s nice.” She seemed sincere. I told her I was a little taken aback that she would buy me a bottle of water, considering how I acted, that I felt like most of my *friends* wouldn’t even do that for me; she said, “What kind of friends do *you* have?”

We continued to drink; I switched to liquor too—I liked vodka too. I asked her if she wanted me to walk her to her car, said, “Sometimes this section of town can be a little iffy late at night, you know, or at least in my opinion it can,” and as we walked through the parking lot, without thinking, I kissed her. She kissed me back; I was elated. We kissed for like twenty minutes straight; it was a passionate kind of kiss, similar to the first kiss I had with the Italian girl, even more similar to the passion I had with my last serious girlfriend, Anastasia, a Russian girl who betrayed my trust in an incredibly pernicious way—it was terrible. The *last* thing I needed in my life were kisses like *that*, feelings like *that*. With *that* type of girl?

Sophia could be elusive—which was actually preferable to me because, as I noted, the last thing *I* needed was to spend a bunch of time with someone who made me feel real feelings; the onset of real feelings would always portend terrible things for me—but I also found her to be emotionally mature and fiscally prudent, at least more than I was. I slowly began to reconcile feeling like a total jadrool going to a bar by myself. Sometimes she'd text, "wanna get white girl wasted w me," wait thirty seconds then text, "so i guess not..." She'd call me a young guy, even though I was three months older than she was. She'd tell me, in marveling type of way, that I was mature for my age, even though I was belligerently drunk nearly every time we hung out. She'd kiss the back of my neck, wearing her bright red lipstick, to see if I had another girl at home, and I'd tell her that, you know, I could just wipe it off, you know, if I wanted to, then nervously corroborate that I didn't have any other girls, why would I? I didn't have any reason to, you know? She said she didn't care about *looks*; she didn't care about *money*; she didn't care about *dick*—or she cared about all three to such a degree she said she didn't care because she may have been desperate to discover if saying something could make it true. On occasion she'd get upset if her daughter was too busy to hang out with her; she'd tell me proudly she could do math at a fourth grade level, even though she was only five!—then ignore my next five texts.

"*Take this,*" I barked one night as I opened my wallet. She said, "What is this?" as she looked at my credit card, which I'd just placed in her palm. She wanted to know why I handed it to her, and I said I didn't know but take it for the week. The next time she saw me she immediately scampered to the kitchen and grabbed the



credit card; she said, “*Here,*” bluntly as she handed me the card. I stared at my credit card, which displayed my first and last name, like a foreign object; she asked me why I would think she would charge anything, “*Like, you know who I am,*” and I meekly placed the card back in my wallet. I wasn’t overly concerned with monogamy as she sighed, “I need a prince charming,” her face bobbed over her shoulder, back toward me, as she leaned back into my body, and I cupped her body awkwardly, struggling to hear what she was saying while considering the fact she didn’t seem completely turned off by watching me throw receipts in the air in the middle of the bar with my face bleeding, screaming barbaric insults at an ATM machine was a positive that I still hadn’t fully comprehended—that it seemed possible it could mean something. It could definitely mean something, I thought, leaning into her body at the bar awkwardly. I can’t just flippantly *disregard* this event because she has a kid and I’m selfish—that’s ignorant, I thought. I can’t hold preconceived notions about people based on who they are and how I’m selfish—monogamy is fascism, I thought, leaning into her body awkwardly at the bar, struggling to hear what she was telling me over her shoulder.

I asked her where she lived, and she paused like I thought people—myself included—usually paused before they said something false. She gave me a location, and I paused then told her I didn’t think I believed her; she said, “*You knowwww meee,*” and clapped her hands together, kept them together for a few seconds and gave another location, one that was closer to the bar. Her smile widened as I noted that things seemed to be going well; it was the fifth time I’d seen her: the first time I was drunk off jungle juice, hypnotized by her resemblance to a college crush who dated a guy who looked just like me;

the second time I got her number; the third time I was blackout drunk with my face bleeding; the fourth time I was apologetic and we made out passionately for almost twenty minutes straight. When I asked her to go out to dinner with me the next night she told me she was usually against dating people who came in the bar—that, *actually*, the only person she ever met outside a bar that she met *inside* a bar was her daughter's father. "Oh, you don't play around then?" I said. "I'm too old for games," she sighed dramatically. She was the same age as I was; I was three months older; she told me her daughter's father's first name was the same as my first name—that it was bugging her out a little. I thought about it for a second then quizzically said, "*Really?*"

She told me she was gonna get busy soon; she shifted around on her seat; she stood up and placed her small hands on my kneecaps then tilted her head almost absurdly far back and looked up into my face and said, "Thanks for coming in to see me." I smiled sincerely and felt like a genuine bond was forming between us, like this was a good thing even though, on some level, I felt like trying to pick up girls in bars was considered a faux pas in many corners of the world—a quote-unquote *fool's errand*. At the very least it was a major faux pas in American *bourgeois society*. Yes, the *bourgeois society* that holds everything *not bourgeois* in contempt; the *bourgeois society* that is, in turn, comically held as a *standard*—something that needs to be *upheld*, something that's actually desirable!

What a *comedy of errors*, I thought in a somewhat euphoric mood as I watched her walk away, staring at her ass and thighs, as I continued to confirm to myself that I didn't care about societal faux pas. What a *comedy of errors*, I thought—wondering if I should stay for another drink, feeling as though I definitely should leave

but wanting just one more drink—a world, the majority of which is certainly *not bourgeois*, campaigning together for the *right* to be *bourgeois*; the blood sweat and tears of the proletariat, of the underrepresented and the disenfranchised, the misunderstood and the systematically oppressed, *all spent for the right* to be *bourgeois*; the *bourgeois* that's never held anything but *contempt* for the proletariat, for the underrepresented and the disenfranchised, the misunderstood and the systematically oppressed! The *bourgeois* that is *itself* the *most* contemptible; *this* is what we've deified as our *standard*; *this* is what we fight, *not only to uphold*, but to *distribute*?! We all *must* be bourgeois?! This monotony, this inanity—*these* are our *rights*?! We all *deserve* small talk?! No, I agree: the contemporary state of humanity is, beyond a reasonable doubt, wholly contemptible, in need of major overhauls but—actually, *no*, I thought, my eyes squinting in rumination, my head tilted to its side just slightly, self-consciously sitting alone at the bar—no. The majority of our species does in fact *deserve* to be *bourgeois*: feeling as though you have a problem when you know you have no reason to have a problem is perhaps the greatest “problem” you can endure. Is that the only logical conclusion to our species?

Despite her elusiveness, or maybe it was a byproduct of her elusiveness, but one thing I appreciated about Sophia was that she never spoke about herself in a way that *lazily baited people into asking about her*. Her general reticence was an aphrodisiac to me. This thought occurred to me *specifically* as the bartender, smoking a cigarette behind the bar where Mo and I sat the next night, said, “Yeahhhh, like, if it wasn't for *alcohol* I'd probably be successful like my two sisters buuutttt...” as she stared blankly ahead, surrounded by a few benign

clouds of cigar smoke. Mo replied eagerly, asking what her sisters did for a living as I sat sipping my beer, forcing myself, with all of my strength, to be polite and pay some modicum of attention to the ensuing conversation. “Well, *one of them* is an *anesthesiologist* and...” She was a tall blond that had a boyfriend, a legitimate boyfriend that she lived with—Mo was interested, apparently despite the boyfriend, because I’d said something like, “It *could* get messy...” in a critical tone imbued with my own experience, that trailed off with the intent of not seeming overly critical, and he said something about how he *technically* was single and the limited liability he believed that entailed. “But yeah, back when I lived in Virginia this girl...we were out and she called me that. A pig,” the bartender continued; she squinted her eyes and glanced at empty space, as if she was imagining the girl was behind the bar standing in front of her, then said, “That’s *liiike* the one thing you do not call me. So I was like. *Actuahl-lee*. You’re a trough. You’re what pigs eat out of.” And it seemed to me she *may* have been unintentionally implying she *ate out* the girl that insulted her?—that if she was a *pig*, and the other girl was a *trough*, and *pigs eat out of troughs*...

Mo said, “Oh, there you go!” enthusiastically. The merit of this type of *describing* and *confessing* was definitely on the rise; it was indisputable—*everyone* had a confession to relay, a real life anecdote to describe in vivid detail; it was a movement that would, I thought, in all likelihood, *define* this generation. A generation that inhales and exhales on *describing* and *confessing*, that knows only tracing and regurgitation, that denigrates critical thinking in favor of developing “technologically advanced” methods of voyeurism. Amazing! Describing, confessing, relishing your status as *victim*, *inventing* your status as victim, as opposed to *analyzing concepts*?

*Disrupting without ruminating*—that’s what will define this generation. Screaming about dismantling the oligarchy on the *canvas the oligarchy provides it* and calling it revolution. *Diversify* the oligarchy, only *then* will we be satisfied!

What a joke, I thought, sitting uncomfortably at the bar next to Mo and across from the bartender. They both took a shot; she’d poured two shots without asking me if I wanted one. She lit a cigarette behind the bar and there was loud jazz playing. Very loud jazz. “What the fuck is *that?*” I asked, sincerely and urgently inquisitive, covering both of my ears with my palms, the jazz assaulting my eardrums, and an old man in the corner murmured, “Dat’s my high school jazz band.” He was leaning over a glass of red wine on the end of the bar and, amazingly, heard what I said—despite the insanely loud music, despite being at least fifty years my senior. His hair was white, and he wore an equally white half-zip pullover sweatshirt. Mo replied, “*Oh really?*” then told the old man he played the *skin flute* in high school! The bartender cackled in the register of a person attempting to curry favor; Mo imbibed the cackling then turned to me and told the old man that I played the *rusty trombone!*

It quickly became apparent the old man was serious, that it actually *was* his high school jazz band, that somehow the recordings were not only preserved, but the old man was narcissistic enough to ask the bartender to play the recordings in the bar at an unreasonably high decibel. Mo apologized for making the lewd comments when he realized the old man was serious, that he actually wanted to discuss jazz, and they discussed jazz and the local music scene, and I realized there had yet to be a discussion I was even moderately interested in participating in the entire night and began to consider

that maybe it *wasn't* everyone else—maybe it was *me*. Eventually, one of the old man's acquaintances, a middle-aged man who I'd noticed professing his love of college basketball earlier, who wore a nondescript baseball cap, said the name "Tricia." "Yeah. Tricia's son plays the clarinet, I think..." he said or something to that effect, and the old jazz man said "Tricia?" in a portentous tone then repeated "*Tricia?!*" angrily then took a step back and screamed, "*Tricia fucked me up the ass! Why you'd bring her up?!*"

The loud jazz continued to play as old man continued to yell, "*Tricia fucked me up the ass!*" like a sort of mantra, robotically at a certain point. Quite frankly, it was a little disturbing—how people, even old people, could just radically shift so quickly. One minute you're talking about your old jazz band—the next you're screaming about how Tricia fucked you up the ass. Words just never *expressed where a person was truly at*. That old guy wanted you to *believe* he was a simple, mild-mannered man who enjoyed discussing his high school jazz band while playing said band's recordings at an unreasonably high decibel in public but, *deep down*, all he really cared about was Tricia. How she fucked him up the ass.

Again, Sophia told me that she didn't care about *looks*; she didn't care about *money*; she didn't care about *dick*—that stuff just didn't *matter* to her. We hadn't fucked but I was good with it. How could we? She'd set the expectation that meeting outside the bar was something that required *effort*. *It was something rare*. (Or she was just unapologetically playing me.) I liked that. Why rush things, I thought. Why does everything always have to be about *fucking*, I thought. Honestly, I almost *prefer* oral, I thought. The night before she'd asked me how I liked her hair, and I told her straight,

and she said she'd wear it that way at work the next night if I'd stop by, so I agreed then made a sincere compliment about her butt, which she seemed to accept sincerely.

To be honest, for quite some time I'd seemed to shamelessly gravitate toward girls with "fat asses," to the extent that I made a silent mandate to myself to only try to date girls with "fat asses," if for no other reason than to ensure that I maintained physical interest, which I thought was an important part of sustaining a healthy relationship, which I didn't feel that badly about because I felt like everyone had certain physical preferences in potential partners and to deny that immutable fact of human nature was disingenuous and, ultimately, probably an exercise in futility—but maybe I was superficial. I'd had a debate with Sophia the night before about the color of grape soda—she thought it was *blue*—so when she texted me to come by that night I decided to text like she texted and wait a manufactured amount of time to reply. I waited maybe half an hour then typed, "i'll come by if u admit grape soda is the color purple," and she immediately texted back, "yes its freakin purple! Lol now come by," and I found it interesting that her response time seemed to contract as mine expanded.

I strutted into the bar nonchalant and buzzed off about eight beers and a shot as she rounded a bend right by the entrance, and we made eye contact; she blew me a kiss, putting her palm over mouth, kissing her hand, then blowing the hand back down to her torso. "Don't leave!" she shouted before she hurriedly resumed scurrying table to table. *Is it possible I've become too cynical on life and love*, I thought as I stood in the middle of the bar by myself, approaching the bar, noting a drink card

promotion displayed next to a container of lemons. I confirmed with the bartender that *if* I bought one of their cards, *then* I got *twenty five dollars* of bar credit for *twenty dollars* cash? Mo called me; he wanted to have “one more beer.” I told him I was at the bar; he said, “*Ayy*,” that he wanted to have one at his mom’s house. He was trying to save some cash; I told him I’d buy him a beer. He said he didn’t want me to pay for him; he didn’t want me to do that—I insisted. Sophia wanted me to stay for a little bit, if possible. “Can you stay for a little bit?” she asked softly as I leaned in intimately toward her, just to make sure I could hear what she was saying. I looked down at the top half of her head and maintained a muted facial expression as I gently placed the gray bar card into my wallet. I told her my friend Mo was stopping by, that it shouldn’t be a problem.

Earlier that night, Mo and I had been with Enzo ordering shots at a bar—the bartender poured us shots the size of juice boxes. We took them in a tightly enclosed circle where Enzo told Mo, “*Ugh*, your breath *stinks*,” and I agreed; I’d smelt it earlier and was relieved Enzo brought it up rather than having to broach the topic myself (I, most likely, would have never told Mo; I would have, most likely, made a pejorative comment regarding his breath to Enzo privately). When Mo arrived we sat at the bar, leaning onto the bar with our forearms, and I said something conciliatory but nonsensical about his estranged wife, and he immediately replied, “*Mannn*.” He moved his hand back and forth in front of his nose, wafting air; he told me I *needed to check my breath too*. I paused, recoiled slightly, and tried to comprehend the comment, feeling almost as if Mo was speaking Spanish, or a similar language where I understood select phrases but was unable to speak proficiently, as I looked at him intently



as he looked across the bar unassumingly. I cupped my hand over my mouth and nose and exhaled and sniffed simultaneously. I said, “What is this? What is this, like, *payback*?” He shrugged his shoulders and his eyes darted back and forth, his attention seesawing between the various parts of the bar and my gaze. “Is this like payback....because I agreed with Enzo that you’re breath stunk earlier?” I said. He pulled his head back; his Gucci glasses shifted slightly, and he said, “*What ....you think....I’m still—no, man! I don’t care. I’m just saying...*”

*No, Mo wasn’t out for vengeance—how could I be so cynical?! He simply wanted to reinforce that we both had terrible breath, that’s all. At the time I found him to be a total piece of shit, completely contemptible; I told him maybe my breath did stink, but what could anyone expect after drinking all the beer we drank?! “That’s what I’m saying! My breath stinks too!” he said. When Sophia came back to the bar she held two breath mints in her right palm—one for her and one for me, like she had made a habit of doing (I’d told her I really liked how the bar’s breath mints tasted; they were almost like candy). I, *thoughtfully* I thought, cracked my mint apart and split it with Mo. He popped the half mint in his mouth. Sophia sat next to me, and I introduced her. She said, “Has anyone ever told you guys you kind of look like brothers?!” Mo said it was nice to meet her jovially—he shook her hand in a motion that made it seem like he might kiss her hand. I was petrified at the possibility my breath stunk and immediately tried to broach the topic of leaving, but Sophia seemed disappointed when I said, “Uh, I think we might take off,” so I agreed to stay for another beer, but spoke into my palm for the rest of the night.*

When we exited the bar I noticed Mo parked next to me in the parking lot! He leaned his lower back against his driver's side door handle and sighed sincerely as I placed my ass against the end of my passengers' doors, one buttock on each, and ran my fingers sensually over the lining of the window. Mo nodded at my silence and leaned against his car drunkenly. He had his hands buried in his jacket pockets; he was hunched over and his expression conveyed thirst—the way his thick glasses sat above his bushy beard made him look hand drawn. He said he wanted to be over his estranged wife and wasn't. I looked at the cement noncommittally and told him I'd heard divorce is tough. He told me he thought fucking other girls would have helped more than it did. I told him it was a start, "You gotta get back out there, you know?" "How did you go about it?" he asked, "Or how is it going in there....*with her?*" I took a second; I hesitantly told him it was good so far, and he told me that it "seemed it," that "she was all over you!" which I appreciated him saying, regardless of whether it was true (he would definitely lie to me about something like that). His expression was both congratulatory and disapproving. I felt a strong urge to never discuss my romantic involvements again—to layer my feelings with various modes of deafening silence. I said, "Sure, I guess," that I didn't know, that she had a kid, that shit, you know; he said, "*Ayyy*," He cocked his head; he told me as long as I was happy man—he adjusted his glasses; he told me, "Fuck money, that's for sure!" I told him I tried to take things day by day, and he said he didn't do that at all; I said, "Yeah, *you've been jumping in head first!*" I checked my phone—it was half past midnight. I said *fuck* then said I should probably leave to, you know, go get a burrito in an overly concerned tone. Mo checked his phone too but seemed unconcerned. I told him the

place had a great steak and cheese, we both knew that, but that a lot of people had no idea how good their burritos were too. We were both waddling drunkenly in between our cars.

“But *I don't know man...*” I said, not thinking as the words left my mouth, words that I hadn't consciously approved to exit my mouth, still anxious about the burrito but also feeling a fluid need to continue to speak. “It's like, *I don't know...*” I didn't know why I was speaking, and Mo's eyes perked up as he lifted his head from a despondent position into an intrigued position, an intrigued position that made me reconsider even bringing the topic up, and he said, “Oh, *about what?*” with his head slowly moving toward me. “I mean, *she has a kid,*” I moaned like a child, not particularly thrilled Mo's head was slowly moving toward me. I said there was other shit, too—I felt like there was....I didn't know....and his tone shifted into an uncharacteristic baritone as he said, “Personally,” he paused, “do you wanna know what I think?” I said, “Go head,” feeling strongly that I knew exactly what he was about to say. “I think you're fuckin crazy!” he said, his voice rapidly approaching crescendo, “You're not ready to settle down like that! *You kidding me?!*” I nodded agreeably—not that I necessarily agreed, but I felt like disagreeing would be shortsighted, and it seemed like a reasonable enough statement to make; a child *definitely* complicated things, there was no doubt about that. It was a statement that I could see myself making if I was Mo. He told me I'd figure it out, and the conciliatory—but ultimately superficial tone—of the comment felt familiar, and it occurred to me that perhaps the *tables had turned*, that maybe I had suddenly *transformed into Mo*, that I was now, actually, speaking with myself, receiving superficial life advice from myself. I contemplated which amalgam

was more contemptible: myself as Mo, Mo as myself, myself as myself, or Mo as Mo—then I said, “Maybe I’m crazy!” and Mo said, “Ayyyyy,” and we left the discussion there.

We both needed a break from the discussion—the girls Mo fucked that failed to get his mind off his estranged wife, my “girl” who wouldn’t meet me outside of the bar who had a young child...we needed a break from discussing all that. We wouldn’t even recap the discussion the next day, when I found myself wearing brand name sneakers while grilling hot dogs and hamburgers at Mo’s mom’s, when I found myself looking down at the brand name sneakers and began to feel strongly they really weren’t my style, when I started to seriously question why I even wore them and glanced down at the sneakers again, because the skin on my heels was getting scraped to the point it was painful to take a step and, finally, under my breath, cursed the anonymous manufacturers that knitted them so crudely around the heels—then thought they were probably knitted by underpaid Chinese child labor and retracted the previous thought, considering the possibility my heels deserved to suffer.

The lake that sat behind the single level house had a family of four struggling to canoe their way across the murky, seaweedy water. I vaguely registered hearing their cries, saying things like, “Just row a *little bit* harder, Dale!” Things like, “Yeah, just like that! Just a *little bit* harder, Dale! You can do it!” I didn’t turn around. I wasn’t about to get roped into helping any *boat people*, I thought. I just didn’t feel up to it. Plus, I had plans to hang with Sophia after we ate—so what was I gonna do? Get all wet with lake water before I went out? I didn’t have time to take another shower. Mo’s dad

strutted in wearing a leather jacket, his characteristically blank expression, with a skullet of linguine-like gray curls. He said it was great to see me; did I wanna cigar? He held out a medium sized stogie. I grabbed it politely and said thanks. It was pre-cut, and I became concerned that, for potentially the second night in a row, my breath might stink as I lit it with the grill lighter. I thought extensively about how I didn't want to have a reputation for bad breath, how I'd have to make sure I cleaned my teeth thoroughly after dinner. Even then, *cigars linger*, I thought anxiously—aware that things like bad breath can have dire consequences early into seeing someone, before you're on close enough terms to tell them to go brush their teeth, when it's still acceptable, even expected, for communication to just cease with no explanation.

I guzzled a can of beer and continued to flip meat (I was actually in the process of trying to eliminate meat from my diet) with a black plastic spatula. Mo's uncle came over too. He walked in by himself with a solid head of black hair, wearing a black button-up with acid wash jeans and tan loafers—he said it was great to see me; where'd I get the cigar? I told him ask Mo's dad. Mo's uncle was Mo's *mom's* brother. I turned to Mo, who was also chugging a can of beer, and told him the food was done. After Mo's dad divorced Mo's mom, he married Mo's uncle's ex-wife, or Mo's uncle married Mo's dad's second ex-wife after Mo's dad divorced her—I wasn't entirely sure. The point is: they were eskimo brothers. Eskimo brothers, but they both *married* the girl that made them eskimo brothers (at separate times, of course). Eventually they became best friends because of it. “You see Mary Lucia lately?” Mo's dad asked Mo's uncle. The family in the canoe was still struggling. “*Mom*, where do you want this shit?!” Mo yelled to his

mom. “*Not lookin gud,*” Mo’s dad replied to Mo’s uncle, in reference to Mary Lucia.

Later that night, the bar was busier than I’d expected, and I felt my patience with constantly meeting Sophia at work waning severely. Is she *playing* me? I thought anxiously, but it didn’t seem make all that much sense financially speaking, which would be the only sense she could really be *playing me*, I thought, beyond being purely psychotic, which made me feel like my impatience was possibly ill-founded—which tried my patience. I stood on the fringe of a plethora of local politicians that ranged in age from early to mid-twenties to, statistically speaking, people most likely to be dead within five or so years. I recognized a pudgy Spanish kid with yellow teeth from a local social club that, *with no sense of irony*, called itself a *Millennial Professional Group*. It was a group I despised in concept as well as in practice—I felt borderline insulted by its existence: a group created to perpetuate the word *millennial* and to market the idea of *networking*. *Networking*: the single best argument *against* capitalism I’d heard to date. I’d rather be an indentured bureaucrat in the former Soviet Union than discuss *job prospects* over drinks. Ugh, I thought, shuddering to myself in the bar, preparing to order a drink. Sophia was wearing a midriff top with a little belly protruding out, not necessarily indicative of any serious weight gain, probably just a heavy meal, as I sat at the bar and drank a beer and silently fumed, silently aware that, relatively speaking, I didn’t have all that much to be mad about. Not thinking, I told her she looked good in a monotone register as I registered her presence standing next to me, playfully not speaking, which made me feel better—that she was playfully not speaking despite the level of irritation evident in my voice. She tilted her head

and said “*Thank you,*” then handed me a mint and I wondered if it was just a gesture or...

She looked around and asked me if I wanted to go out to the patio—she had a couple tables out there. On the patio she excitedly said, “See? *That’s* the test,” as her knee knocked my knee; she was scrolling through my phone, going through the music I had on my phone, and found my selection of Tupac, my selection of Bone Thugs N Harmony. “If you didn’t like Tupac...I don’t know if this could work,” she said and the sentiment—that she viewed our relationship as something that could *work*, which was complimentary in a vacuum—irritated me in the context of constantly meeting *at the bar*. *The bar*, I thought. Could it work—between us? How could it work, confined exclusively to *the bar*? In all honesty, the truth was: not only did I have a rudimentary selection of Tupac on my phone, I actually knew Shakur’s oeuvre down to the Teddy Riley vocoder outro at the end of “California Love (Remix),” the version that appeared on the retail version of All Eyez On Me. But I didn’t brag about it—even though Mo and I used to sing it drunk, back when we put gel in our hair and lived with our parents and/or weren’t separated from our wives, when we went to the casino in his generic mid-size sedan with the tinted windows screaming, “Puter, putah, *puuuteehh!*” in synchrony with Teddy Riley, screaming out the windows at four am.

I said, “Love is love,” softly as she typed a Bone Thugs song into my phone, a song she said she and her younger brother *always* used to listen to when they were growing up (apparently they still repped Long Beach fairly thoroughly). I placed the phone’s speaker against my ear and struggled to listen; I could barely hear it but told her it sounded pretty good. “I looooveeee that song,” she said and took her hand off my knee, put it next to her ear like

she had a headphone in her hand and began bobbing her head with impressive rhythm. “*Ooh!*” she cackled, leaning into me, and told me that it sounded like they said my name! I grabbed the phone from her with both hands and anxiously rewound the song a few seconds. I continued to listen and, with a quizzical expression etched onto my face, said, “Ummmm,” then told her the lyrics sounded like gibberish to me, and she said, “*I know,*” and winked, smiled, then began to laugh and slap her knee, and my shoulders inched up toward my ears and my lips became slightly puckered, and I said, “You know, my *actual...*” but mid-sentence, unamused but also entering into a state of revelation, I realized I didn’t even know *her* last name! I suddenly felt like my lack of knowledge was absurd—that I should almost be *offended* that I didn’t know her last name. How could I not know her last name? You know who wouldn’t tell you their last name, I thought—*someone who’s playing you.*

I asked her, “What’s your last name?” and she stopped laughing abruptly—as if I said something that ruined the moment. Her face went blank. I briefly considered saying something, anything, to break the awkward silence that ensued but instead just looked down at my sneakers, wondering why she had the reaction she had and again regretting wearing the pair of sneakers I wore; I felt so absurd wearing brand name sneakers. She reluctantly told me her last name then specified the pronunciation as well as a common mispronunciation. After she wrapped up emphasizing her hesitancy in telling me (*or anyone else*) her last name—which I won’t repeat here—in a direly serious manner, wrapped up emphasizing how she *never told anyone her last name* in a direly serious manner, I said, “I mean...it’s uh...*nice...*name...” where the pitch of my voice rose just slightly as I uttered the *i* in *nice*, and I noticed that her



eyes widened a little as I said *nice*, and I took it to mean she was possibly receptive of my hesitant compliment? That I should probably strongly consider changing the subject?

As I strongly considered changing the subject, the song playing on the patio concluded—a longer than normal pause ensued before the next song started. I stared at her, considering changing the subject but unsure of what else to discuss (I was actually really enjoying our Tupac discussion), as she stared in the direction of a goofy blond man in a long black peacoat as he sat down at the patio bar. She told me she should go say hi, said he came in a lot, said she'd be just a minute and left her drink at our table. I glanced in the direction of the patio bar and felt nearly positive the young bartender had ass implants as she smiled innocuously at me. A minute went by—then a few more minutes went by. Then a few more minutes *went by*. Then I glanced over, which I had been arduously trying to avoid doing for the past few minutes, and witnessed a new drink laid out in front of her, and—as I witnessed the new drink—I felt, perhaps foolishly, like I took an uppercut to the gut, *multiple uppercuts to the gut*, then began to mutter angry non sequiturs to myself under my breath.

I considered just leaving but thought that could escalate things unnecessarily? I tried to avoid looking visibly upset and eventually began to angrily unlock my phone, then realize I didn't have anything I wanted to do on my phone, then lock the phone and put it back in my pocket then whip it back out again, angrily, until I said *fuck it* to myself and stood up and stormed back inside but, when inside, found the same static cluster of local politicians. I looked around, unwilling to maneuver through the entire constituency of *The Millennial Professional Group*; I shook my head disgusted then thought *could it have*

*been the cigar?!* An ominous revelation: I turned back around and stormed back outside, silently cursing myself for so capriciously accepting the cigar from Mo's dad. How could I have been so *short-sighted?!* I thought apocalyptically, blowing my breath into my hand, my hand pressed against my sizeable nose as I walked back out to the patio where the first thing I saw was Sophia sitting across from my abandoned drink—looking angelic and conciliatory, like she'd somehow *inferred my irritation* from fifty feet away (or just glanced over at me angrily locking and unlocking my phone before I stormed away).

She had two drinks in front of her and said, “Hiii.” She spoke in a tone that was more gregarious than necessary. I asked her for a taste of her drink, pointing in the direction of her drinks as I plopped my ass back down on the futon, smiling slightly, unable to wholly contain my excitement she was sitting beside me, and she said, “Sure, which one?” I clarified, “The *new* one.” I'd already tasted the other. She handed it to me; I tasted it—it was ok. Our gazes met as I put the drink down and she apologized for taking so long, “You know how it—” “No worries!” I interrupted, swatting my hand violently through the increasingly chilly air. She fidgeted her hips back and forth and sculpted her ass into the cushion of the futon. I sat back down and sipped my drink—I told her I'd just went to the bathroom, you know? That I really had to pee, that peeing regularly is important for bladder health, that, sure, maybe I peed more often than normal, maybe even more often than *necessary*, but it was better than holding it in all the time, right?

The next day I was drinking a foreign liqueur on the rocks with Mo at his mom's house, outside on the patio a few feet from his stepbrother's trampoline. The

trampoline was netted in—I'd jumped on it a few times and considered it somewhat of a death trap, especially if you jumped on it after drinking heavily. Mo had managed to have sex with a few girls on it since his separation, and I'd told him I was proud of him for it—what a great way of getting himself back out there. “Before you know it, the thing'll be fuckin outta season,” he said, noting the chilled, schizophrenic late summer air. He raised his rocks glass and asked me if I wanted to jump on his stepbrother's trampoline...*when we finish these?* I'd sent Sophia a text earlier in the day and still hadn't heard back. I considered the possibility she was having sex, then thought it was definitely a possibility, then thought I didn't care either way, then thought that wasn't true; it was unfortunate that thinking about things logically, using tools like *probability* and *rationality*, could rarely change how you felt about things; it almost made me question the worth of things like probability and rationality.

The sculpted rocks on Mo's mom's patio looked nice—they probably cost a lot of money. Mo brought out a portable speaker system and starting playing select tracks off of Big Punisher's Capital Punishment, and we cackled listening to Pun rap, “dead in the middle of Little Italy little did we know we riddled some middlemen who didn't do diddily,” and I couldn't help but think about how thinking about women I genuinely liked having sex with other people who weren't me—and the sensations those thoughts produced—reminded me of my previous relationship with Anastasia, who was born in Moscow, who came to the United States at a young age, who betrayed my trust in an incredibly pernicious way, who spoke English as a second language, who was disgustingly materialistic—but also really funny and sensual. The deterioration of our relationship would

have an embarrassingly long term effect on the nature of my decision making.

Her mother, if she didn't hate me, immediately disapproved of me and forbade Anastasia to see me—mostly because of my Macaque heritage. Because, as she said: *all Macaques are pigs*. Fair enough, I thought at the time. I didn't particularly identify in any meaningful way with *being a Macaque of Gibraltar*. I possessed little to no cultural pride—in fact, the only reason it meant anything to me at all was because people consistently misidentified me as something *other than of Macaque descent*, or, I should say: persons consistently insisted on *identifying* me (i.e. insisted on clarifying exactly *why* I deviated from *authentic* Caucasia—and to what degree. Was I some kind of Italian? Maybe Persian? You ever listen to that podcast Serial at all?), which, ironically enough, highlighted to me how there was a *complete lack of Macaque identity in America*—that, in America, Macaques of Gibraltar occupied a perpetual state of *misinterpretation*, as many Caucasians were understandably skeptical of us—especially online.

Yes, we were certainly *native* to Europe; yes, we had essentially the *same* DNA as the modern European, but wasn't it possible, just from looking at us, that there was—over the course of the admittedly tumultuous history of Gibraltar—I don't know, some kind of *mixing* that *may* have occurred? Was there a risk that, by identifying the Macaques of Gibraltar as Caucasian, whites were *compromising* their purity? (Yet wasn't it that very obstinance with regard to “purity” that was putting their race on the brink of extinction?) For that reason, many Caucasians approached us with a sort of *cautious acceptance*. Conversely, for people of color, the privilege the Macaques of Gibraltar acceded was sufficient reason to approach us with a reciprocal kind of

cautious *skepticism*. Certainly it seemed as though, just from looking at some of us, that maybe over the course of the tumultuous history of Gibraltar there was some kind of *mixing* that occurred? But if we benefitted from the privileges of Caucacity—well, what did that *mean*?

Frankly, it was all very confusing. The veracity of our European ancestry would always be debated, yet we were a surprisingly tough sell as a minority group. At bottom, we were of a totally inconsequential genus, detached from any broader cultural movement (*no major language! no major religion!*), true nomads of an ethnicity—an ethnic identity that, in its very essence, acts as the convergence point of all of the *inanity* of ethnic identity—yet we are, *allegedly*, the DNA Western Civilization was extrapolated from! Truthfully, I'll never be able to forget the *unadulterated irony* of growing up in a small town “post-9/11” and being repeatedly told how I “looked like a terrorist”—*me*, a “Barbary Macaque,” from *Gibraltar*, whose ancestors were mercilessly occupied by an Islamic Caliphate, the Moors, for *seven hundred years*—now, being mistaken for an *Islamic terrorist*. The irony! Oh, the unadulterated irony of *identity*! Then again, some natives of Gibraltar have blond hair and blue eyes.

Anastasia told me she had reason to believe her mom had a messy breakup with a Macaque guy when she was younger (I wouldn't be surprised if, in retrospect, Anastasia viewed that anecdote as portentous with regard to our relationship), and I agreed that it definitely seemed plausible, and we laughed about it a lot when we were together, which was almost every day. When we started fucking Anastasia had a boyfriend, although she was allegedly on a break with him at the time, which may or may not have been true. In the end, she married the boyfriend she may or may not have been on a break with,

a childhood friend turned boyfriend—and after she got engaged, which was proposed more or less *while* we were still fucking, I distinctly remembered feeling physically sick at just the *thought* of her having sex. It ruined porn for me for at least a month, which was unheard of at the time. I was embarrassed publicly; I was devastated; I deserved all of it. A few months after the engagement, I stumbled upon an album of photos her dad posted on the internet of the night she got engaged, the family *celebrating* the engagement, her smiling while showing the ring off with her mother—I felt an urge to blow up the entire planet, wondering how she could smile in a photo like that, wondering how I could gain that ability. How could I have miscalculated so miserably? How could I have believed this person *actually* cared about me, *loved* me, whispered she was *in love* with me, when she was showing off her engagement ring for photos like that? It really taught me something about humanity—it really opened my eyes to the appeal of paying for sex. At the same time, I was young—more naive about things, using alcohol to run from my anxieties rather than lubricate my social settings. Things of that nature.

I'd recently heard, directly from Anastasia, that she was having her second child soon. Since things ended we'd vacillated between sincere friends and minor acquaintances, *keeping in touch* and occasionally meeting up for coffee. I actually had no interest in being friends with her yet somehow found myself drinking coffee with her on an almost quarterly schedule. I wasn't sure if it was appropriate to send a congratulatory text for the birth of her second kid. I didn't particularly feel one way or the other about it; I didn't know the correct way to phrase that type of congratulatory text. "*Two kids?!*" Mo replied incredulously when I brought it up, both of us jumping on his stepbrother's trampoline. I

asked him if he thought I should send a text and he replied *no!* I clarified that I was talking about *congratulating* her, and he became ambivalent about the whole thing—he clearly didn’t care and, to be honest, jumping on the trampoline, trying not to bump into him as we both jumped on the trampoline, feeling a little buzzed off foreign liqueur, I couldn’t blame him.

Since I had Sophia’s last name I figured I’d stalk her on the internet. Actually, to be honest, I’d been searching her name on the internet for a few days, possibly a few weeks, most likely since I met her—it’d been gnawing at me while jumping on the trampoline with Mo that I was jumping on a trampoline instead of searching her name on the internet. In the past, my searches came back barren, clearly because I lacked a surname—but it was three pm and I was vegetating, half-dead, prepared for, perhaps *inviting*, death in my cubicle. *No social media?!* I thought, wearing an incredulous face, in an Allen Iverson “We talkin bout *practice?!?*” voice in my head. I started throwing phrases next to her name like pastels then remembered her kid’s father’s name—*my name*. The results weren’t that great; I spent the rest of the afternoon mumbling incoherently to myself—it was sad. I knew something like that would happen, and the worst part was I only had myself to blame. It was sad you never found anything uplifting stalking people on the internet.

The next night she wore designer glasses with ocean blue colored rims; they pointed up at the corners and made her look like a different person, to the extent that I had to look over two-three times just to make sure it was her. She approached benignly, and I waited for her to greet me then said, “*I gave you a napkin with my full name on it.*” It wasn’t my planned intro. She asked me what I

was talking about in a tone she'd never employed with me before—she took half a step back with a posture that, to me, suggested she may have been considering an animated dash for the exit. Her neck was angled; she was looking up at me. I told her I needed her to burn that, *the note*—undeterred by her shift in mood, by her absconding posture, then she squinted her eyes angrily as I told her, “You know, do what you wanna do with *your* life,” but that I couldn't have people knowing *my* name. I started punctuating select syllables with my right index finger then asked her, “You know what comes up you when you search my name on the internet?” I paused. “...My *mother!*” I slammed my index finger down through the air as I angrily uttered the first syllable of the word “mother.” “Her address, I mean!” I clarified as a few ounces of life seemed to exhale from her body. She asked me what was I talking abo— “*I fuckin googled you!*” I shouted.

“Well, if that's what you want me to do, then ok. I'll *burn your napkin for you*. No *problem!*” she retorted irritably, knowing full well where my irritation sprang from—and, even in my flummoxed state, I specifically noted it as the first time she'd been irritable with me, noted it as possibly the first time I witnessed her *genuinely react* to something I said. I felt vindicated in a way; I found myself valuing authentic anger over manufactured congeniality; I found myself marrying sincerity to irritability, divorcing congeniality from authenticity. I replied in a retracting tone; I felt like I was sweating profusely as I exclaimed, “Maybe I don't care that much about the napkin, but you couldn't *tell* me?!” She closed her eyes, fatigued, as I was in the midst of finishing my sentence then grabbed the top of my hand and nodded toward the corner of the bar; she asked me if she could explain. I raised my eyebrows cynically



and replied, “Yeah,” pronouncing the word with more of an *ah* than an *eh*. She grabbed my hand, and we walked in the direction of a quieter corner of the bar. I grabbed her lifeless forearms from her lap; she didn’t seem to care, or at least she didn’t resist—I started examining them intensely, up and down. When she asked me what I was doing I replied, rabidly, that I was *checking for needle marks*, refusing to look up from the petite forearms I was thoroughly examining, and she shouted, “*Shhh!!*” She placed the index finger of the arm I wasn’t holding over her mouth and blew out air urgently. Her breath was mint scented, and I looked up eagerly and said, “You don’t do that stuff, do you?!” “*No!*” She hushed me with both of her hands. I looked over her exposed thighs, up and down her petite, almost child-like, arms and failed to note any needle punctures. “What did it say?” she whispered curiously. “...What?” “When you searched for me.” “*Nothing fucking good!*” “Oh, gawd...”

She placed her face in her hands, and I told her, “You know...I knew you were hiding something. I’ve got a good nose for this stuff. I couldn’t sleep last night.” She put her index finger over her mouth again, side-eyeing the bartender fifteen feet to our left as I whispered, “*Killed a guy?!*” at a high decibel, a decibel that was the apex of what a whisper could logically be defined as, then said, “The fuck am I supposed to think of this?” She didn’t immediately reply. “I mean, you’re...” I lowered my voice and whispered, “*married?*” After a brief pause she said, “Technically.” I shouted, “You have *some balls!*” She overlapped my shouting, shouting she was sorry in a series of desperate tones—even for a quiet corner of the bar we were getting fairly loud. Of course she didn’t wanna meet outside of work! She looked down and away and told me she couldn’t look at me. “I can’t even *look* at

you right now,” she said. She looked at me. She asked me if she could *try* to explain?—after she explained, *if* she could explain, “you can leave if you want,” saying she understood if I wanted to. My heart was pounding, but my sweat glands were slowly drying up. Without going into too much detail, without boring you with superfluous details, Sophia’s daughter’s father—who I was under the *impression* she was separated from, who she was indeed *separated from*, just not in the *way* I thought—was incarcerated for homicide, and she was, legally, still married to him. But, at the same time, listen....*murder happens*. It’s a fact of life we can’t avoid: people are going to die of unnatural causes at times—and there are *degrees* of homicide (three degrees plus manslaughter!). Are the specifics here absolutely necessary? Somebody died; her husband was, ultimately, found culpable (*to a degree*). Is our legal system perfect? Absolutely not! Conviction is an opinion. Empiricism is art as much as it is science. At the end of day, what do we *really* know about anything? The article I read stated the nature of the relationship was “on again, off again,” and I thought *is this what she’s like? is she on and off?* ominously as I re-read the paragraph.

Sitting in a quiet corner of the bar, she told me she knew it was gonna be bad when he moved next door, and I didn’t share my immediate thoughts. I again contemplated her spelling of *when* (as *wen*) in her first response to me via text—I thought about when she informed me she didn’t graduate high school, how she wanted to go back for her GED, thought about how the socioeconomic state of this country was nearly at a caste system level, wasn’t it?—how growing up in destitute communities seemed to radically alter a person’s probable life outcomes but that middle class communities, like the one I grew up in, also saw a

similar, *finite set*, of probable life outcomes, that it was possible Sophia and I were simply two nonessential inputs in a larger probability distribution, that our entire conversation was emotionally resonant but systemically inconsequential.

They got married after she got pregnant; she said she called her parents after she got pregnant—her parents seemed more traditional, more *nuclear family oriented*, than I would have expected, given the adjacent topics we were discussing (homicide, life with the possibility of parole, etc.)—and they told her if she was pregnant and she loved him they should get married (i.e. if she was pregnant and she didn't hate him they should get married). “They're *very* traditional,” she said. It seemed as though her parents knew literally nothing about her life. It was fairly typical stuff: you start getting involved in “things”; you lure a girl in with fast money; you get arrested, maybe you get shot, somewhere along the line have a child; eventually there's an article online about your criminal case, *your wife Sophia*, and I see it online and enter a state of shock sitting in a cubicle on a Monday afternoon.

So she was married to a guy who was found culpable of homicide in a court of law—I was outraged. She exhaled and looked away, looked back at me and sighed, “*My life is so fucked up*,” dramatically but sincerely—told me it was funny, that before I came in she thought the glasses would hide her, make her a different person, but it was like... She trailed off. My beer was getting warm; she scrunched up her face—I didn't know what to do. She told me she understood if I never wanted to see her again, but I didn't feel that way; I told her, “Nah, it's not like that,” sitting in the quiet corner of the bar, no longer sweating profusely. Immediately, I was drawn to a binary interpretation of her predicament: she could have

genuinely stumbled into a terrible situation and was now faced with the impossible task of extricating herself (i.e. she was a victim; how could I penalize her for being a victim?); or perhaps she was *complicit* in some way, perhaps she *sought* this type of situation, went in with “her eyes wide open,” and had no one to blame but herself. Obviously, binary interpretations are rarely accurate and/or appropriate, but we seem to be almost genetically predisposed to constructing them, like, *all the time*. At the same time, was I going to stop seeing her because I was *scared*? Because she was married to a guy who was possibly a homicidal maniac? I was exceptionally frightened, but I could never admit that. Saying goodbye would be *admitting* that—that I was *scared*. Was I some kind of pussy? You kidding me? I was exceptionally frightened, yet I couldn’t live with myself if *I* knew that *she* knew that—that I was exceptionally frightened. So she lied about a couple things—could you blame her? Would I go around telling everyone I met my husband was a homicidal maniac? That would make *me* a maniac! Marriage can be tough when you have a kid. Would *you* file papers? Divorce can radically alter the emotional trajectory of a young child. How many attractive people a year do you meet that you *genuinely enjoy* being around?

The next night I was lying on my side in a Z shape drinking a fruit smoothie directly out of the blender cup with a purple straw and wondering if it had too much sugar to drink before going to bed when I noticed my phone vibrating beside my butt. By the time I’d turned myself around to pick up the phone the call went to voicemail, and I muttered to myself with a tired expression—no longer concerned with the potential sugar content in my fruit smoothie, feeling fully

reconciled with falling asleep within five minutes, no longer concerned about answering phones and speaking English. Then the phone started ringing again; the caller ID was blocked—I picked it up and forcefully said *hello*. A brief pause ensued, then a meek voice said, “*Hiii*.” “Who’s this?” “Your favorite little person.” “...*Sophia?*” She was wondering if I was interested in *grabbing a drink with her*—my voice immediately elevated into an embarrassing falsetto as I said, “Like, *tonight?* ...Like, *outside* the bar?” Her vocal tone seemed pensive, possibly a little inebriated? Nervous? I gazed at my smoothie and asked her where she wanted to go? She didn’t know. I started throwing out landmarks. “*Zucchini Park?*” I repeated after she said, “Zucchini Park?” after she rejected the previous five locales I’d suggested. “They have places open this late there?” I asked skeptically, and she told me we’d figure it out. I giddily agreed.

Zucchini Park was possibly a neighborhood but also a shopping plaza? To be honest, I had no idea what people were referring to when they said Zucchini Park, but I knew how to drive to a shopping plaza that I personally identified as Zucchini Park, so I drove there recalling the last time I’d been—when I was in a rapidly deteriorating relationship with a plus-sized Greek girl from Cyprus, when we’d gone to visit her friend, a manager at an outlet on the least busy strip of the mall, and it was awkward, mostly due to my anxious avoidance of normal small talk. Later that night, after going out to a bar where I could only hear, at maximum, fifteen percent of what she said to me, after grinding on the dance floor and feeling equally embarrassed and libidinal about it, we fooled around for over an hour in my tan Oldsmobile; we briefly tried to have vaginal intercourse after I told her, “It’s ok, I’ll pull out,” after she said, “Did you know

pre-cum can get you pregnant?” as I played the Def Squad CD I got for my birthday in eighth grade on repeat. The car ran the *entire time*. The CD started again from the intro, and it was a little jarring, because I was pretty sure the CD was on track *two* when I started feeling her breasts, and it was at least an hour long album (like so many rap albums of that era). On my way home, I distinctly remembered wondering if we could have died from carbon monoxide poisoning from spending that amount of time in a running but immobile vehicle—if we *should have* died from carbon monoxide poisoning for spending that amount of time in a running car. The car’s alternator died a month later.

Prior to Sophia arriving, when I initially took a left into the plaza, I noticed a stand-alone store that sold a rare type of frozen steak. My great aunt used to order me special bundles of said frozen steaks for like forty bucks a pop; the steaks were fairly delicious, but I’d never seen a *stand-alone* store. I found it curious—I was intrigued. I sat in my car and did nothing. As I waited I thought *is it possible that I’m really the only guy outside of her daughter’s father that she’s ever met outside the bar?* I began to lightly rummage through the coins I’d tossed in my cup holder. It seemed like some type of accomplishment, but also possibly false—*probably* false? But also *possibly* false, but also *probably* false, but also *definitely* false? But also possibly *true*? At a later date I’d go into the frozen steak store and discover the deals my great aunt used to get were only available online. Now, from one to ten, how good of a father figure would I be? I thought, sitting in my car, doing nothing, as Sophia’s white SUV pulled into the lot.

She was on the phone, on a cell phone the size of her head, and flashed me a smile, apologetically motioned for me to wait a second as I continued to rummage

through the change in my cup holders—I nonsensically began to separate the pennies from the nickels, dimes, and quarters. She wore ripped jeans and a tan-cream loose-fit blouse when she plopped out of the large vehicle and walked in a slow strut around her car into my car. Her head barely made it above the bottom of my passenger side windows as she walked. “This door’s so *heavy*,” she gasped as she swung it open and sat her ass in my car. I told her it was a luxury vehicle, it was what it was, you know, then told her she looked nice, very nice. She did; honestly, I felt my penis expanding in size as it relaxed against my left thigh. She leaned forward and placed her large phone in her large pocketbook as I leaned back and noticed she wasn’t wearing underwear—as I witnessed the cellulite of her upper butt stretch until the skin turned lighter and lighter, watched intently as the pigment gently pulled itself apart, the top sixth of her butt crack becoming visible for three-fourths of a second.

Before I left, I’d queried the general vicinity of where we met and still found no resolution as to what logically defined “Zucchini Park” but did find a Cambodian restaurant that was open late down the street. I fidgeted awkwardly with my steering wheel as the engine hummed and asked her if she was hungry? She was a little hungry. I continually reminded myself of the alleged significance of the situation, continually reminded myself of the skepticism I held regarding the empirical veracity of the significance of the situation as she sat in the car, visibly pensive, with sparse eye contact occurring between us. I told her there was a Cambodian restaurant down the street that should be open. Yeah, she was interested in that. I knew she would be. I thought her sentences seemed truncated as I nodded and shifted the car in reverse. She complimented the reverse

camera, flashed three-fourths of a smile, told me she had one too. I shrugged my shoulders, told her it came in handy, you know? She glanced at herself in the visor mirror as I drove down the street. I glanced over as she hand-sculpted her hair and audited her make-up. “*Hey...*” she said, with considerably more spirit than she’d exhibited to that point, and closed the mirror and turned to me and asked me if I *really* thought she looked good? That she knows I *said* she looked good, but did I *really* think that? I’d never seen her outside the bar, so she was just a little curious. I said it was a little dark out, but yeah—she looked the same to me. She liked that; she seemed genuinely surprised and even more spirited than when she said *hey* thirty seconds previous. Having said that, she was still relatively muted—I would have felt better if she was a tad more animated. I nodded and smiled, and she seemed more reticent than I’d expected in returning my smile.

We crept in the side door of the Cambodian restaurant, and she asked me if I was gonna be a gentleman and pull out her chair for her? I wafted myself, similar to a littered fast food wrapper in an autumn breeze, and landed on her side of the table then begrudgingly pulled out the chair. “Don’t get too used to this,” I said sarcastically and smiled slightly. She asked me if I could give her a minute, did I mind, as she grabbed her large bag and walked into the bathroom. I thought, if she *had* to go to the bathroom, it would have been nice to go *before* I pulled out the chair. Was I a butler? Was that the expectation here? I was opening doors, pulling out chairs, driving cars? Was I expected to pull out the chair *again* when she came out of the bathroom? I sat alone at the small wobbly table. An older, presumably Cambodian, lady greeted us at the small wobbly table—it



was just the three of us; there were no other patrons. I felt bad; how could this establishment possibly stay in business long-term with this kind of traffic? Sharing a building with a Jiffy Lube probably didn't help. She asked us what we wanted to drink, dropped two rectangular black menus on the table, two rectangular black menus with the restaurant's name printed in muted yellow font. I asked for a water with a lemon; Sophia asked for water, no lemon—please. I glanced at the menu, perused it, estimated the bill. “We doing apps?” I asked in a tone that was as reticent as it was inquisitive. When the waters came, the lady gave me an extra lemon and I appreciated it, thought I may need to reflect that in the gratuity and began to revise my estimate.

Sophia looked into her glass of water, looked around the place, turned around toward a painting on the wall of poorly drawn people dancing—she told me it reminded her of the Vietnamese dances she performed growing up then hit the home button on her phone. I contorted my neck and noted a seductive selfie with the caption “I Love My Life” printed in cursive over her forehead; that was her home screen. I sat there, attempting to give off an appearance of glancing at the portrait, feigning interest in the traditions of Eastern dance, thinking *that's ridiculous*—that people who have to outwardly promote that they *love* their lives probably hate their lives to the extent of being on the brink of no longer being able to *even endure* their lives! I mashed the lemon at the bottom of the glass with my straw. I glanced at the painting again—was this going well? I couldn't tell... Should I act more interested? Less interested? More of a dick? Give off a little bit of that dickhead vibe? That good-natured prick vibe? That “I'm an asshole, but I'm not *really* an asshole, you know what I mean” vibe? I

considered delving further into the nuances of traditional Eastern dancing, but I doubted my ability to feign any further interest (I'd always felt a strong disdain toward dancing)—I asked her what she was gonna order; was there anything in particular I should be aware of? The menu seemed to deviate drastically from Chinese? Was there any chow mein I was missing? Was that ignorant—to be looking for chow mein in a place like this? Conflating Chinese with Cambodian? Was it ignorant to assume she would know if that was ignorant?

She suggested the pho. She pronounced it *fuh*. My eyes wandered up and down the menu and I said, “Now, where would that....” trailing off as my eyes continued to meander. She took her index finger (it was painted turquoise; it was a ridiculously skinny finger—even given her height and frame) and tapped the line item that read “Pho - \$11.99 [add \$1 for shrimp].” “Beef or chicken?” She usually did the beef. In my head, I screamed *she ordered the Kobe beef like Shaquille O'Neaaaaa!* Whenever I was in the presence of a female who *chose beef* I'd involuntarily scream the statement in my head. As we prepared to eat, unwrapping our chopsticks, arranging our plates and bowls, she spoke softly, like someone could be listening in, and told me that *it was good* that I liked to try stuff like this. She was always telling me that *it was good* that X was the case—implying that if *X wasn't* the case that maybe that would be some type of *problem?* (Would it be?) And it was almost always in reference to something completely asinine. *Oh*, if I didn't like *Tupac*, this could never work? If we couldn't sing *Shorty Wanna Be A Thug* together our relationship would irreparably dissolve? *Oh*, if I didn't know how to *use chopsticks....then* this wouldn't work? *That's* the breaking point here? *Not* your marriage certificate? *Not* your husband's parole board? *Not* his

history of homicide? What about his parole board, let's talk about that—let's leave my *above average* chopstick skills out of this, I felt like saying as she held her chopsticks over the bowl. She asked me if I knew how to use them, smirking slightly, and I said, “You fucking kidding me? I'm a pro!”

The tab came to thirty something. I waved a hand she hadn't raised away then shoved a credit card into the jacket and asked if she had to head back in an overly friendly tone, a tone that I regretted as the words left my mouth. She hit the home button on her phone again and said, “Ummm...” I twirled my thoroughly chomped on straw around my almost empty water glass and asked if I could ask her a question. Did she mind? She stared at me gregariously; I asked her if she was *talking to her sister* in the bathroom?

She'd told me the first time she went out with her daughter's father she asked her sister to wait by her phone, so she could call her and let her know she was safe—I was wondering if she did the same with me. She said, “*Maybe,*” then made a scrunched up, kind of playful face. I relinquished my grip on the straw and dropped my shoulders a few inches dramatically—she took a glance around the place; I reflected on her personal history via the internet, thought I needed to stop dwelling on her personal history, especially via the internet, that it was lame to dwell on things, then I shrugged my shoulders two times, furrowed my brow faux-contentiously, and asked if she *really* thought I was going to, like, kidnap her? It was possible I was slightly offended. I told her I had no room in my *studio apartment* for anyone else—I told her that was *absurd*, and her facial expression shifted as I began to intensely regret making the statement; I began to nervously

wonder if it was *too soon* to make “jokes,” then I smiled wide-eyed, severely doubting what I said was amusing in the least but hoping the self-deprecating elements of my comment superseded the offensive elements. “*You’re funny,*” she said, stoically for a moment, then we both smiled, then I drove her back to Zucchini Park, completely ambivalent as to whether or not things were going well.

After we said goodbye, after talking for a few minutes in my parked car, she pushed open my passenger door and moaned *ughhh* as she heaved hard with both arms. I think that *may* have gone well! I thought optimistically. I hit reverse and a muffled voice exclaimed “*Hey!*” I hit the brake and rolled down my window and looked back—she was still in the elongated process of slowly strutting around my car, standing in the middle of the parking lot asking me if I was trying to run her over?! She smiled slightly and shook her head. I apologized with my head awkwardly sticking out of the car window—I placed my palm around the level of her head and smiled back.

On my way home she called me; I was barely on the highway when she called—she told me she had a really good time; I was equally elated and relieved. I agreed and tried to think of other compliments to say before she asked me again if I *really* thought she looked the same as she did the other times I’d seen her—in the bar, you know? I reiterated she was extremely attractive, inside or outside of a bar atmosphere, that she was one of the most attractive girls I’d *ever met*, and I wasn’t even trying to gas her head up; I’d actually rather *not* say something like that to her—I definitely did *not* wanna gas her head up but, at the same time, if she kept asking me I might be tempted to tell her no. “Just making sure,” she said softly then asked me if I’d heard a song on the radio I *had* heard but I didn’t like—yet rather than

judging her taste in music (we actually had similar tastes in music for the most part) I instead considered how calling someone immediately after you went out with them was an indicator of being seriously interested in them romantically and felt good.

After meeting with Sophia and eating Beef Pho in a quaint Cambodian restaurant in Zucchini Park things were good. Things were obviously incredibly contentious at times—I felt like I was losing my mind, but they were steady, relatively speaking. Mentally, egotistically, I was surprisingly satiated by seeing her outside the bar, continuing to see her; it felt like things were legitimized, like the stochastic interaction of events that led us meeting one another possibly *meant* something—like discovering she was married with a husband incarcerated was the best thing that could have happened to us. Fate is a difficult thing to gauge when you feel as though, ostensibly, you have the option to make your own decisions—when you feel like the world is *real manifestation* composed of things that are separate from other things, where you're an *actual individual* (separate from other actual individuals and things), with a functioning set of motor skills that allow you to make conscious decisions, but fatalism can be a convenient way of interpreting the world. “I said to myself, if he's ok with *this*? Then maybe this was meant to be,” Sophia said, disclosing that she clearly had a fatalist bent to her thinking as well. I got the impression her fatalism was possibly a byproduct of inertia? (We had so much in common.) That she was hoping that *fate would happen*—maybe in a way that could save her from having to make difficult decisions, decisions like leaving a husband? That I could somehow google her way out of her marriage for her, and we could call it fate?

“He’s told me he’ll murder me if I ever leave him and I believe him,” she said, in reference to her husband, and I replied that I didn’t “give a fuck!” in a sort of automatic, heat of the moment retort, and she shot me a disapproving, embarrassed glance, and I told her you know what I mean, that I was speaking *metaphorically*, which was, of course, completely untrue. She said, at a point, initially, she’d tried to lose all contact with him—at least she tried to after visiting him in prison a few times, realizing he was changing for the worse, and also apparently gaining considerable muscle, and had no idea about the terms of his incarceration, and I said the website I visited stated he was up for parole relatively soon and felt fairly emasculated while saying, “Well, the website *I* visited,” and also noted the website gave visitors the option of becoming pen pals with him, but he was serving a life sentence, so it seemed unlikely that he would be released at his earliest possible parole date, but it was concerning either way, and she agreed. She said, given her daughter, it was obviously difficult to just *cut off* contact—that, honestly, she really had no idea how she could ever go about “*leaving-leaving*” him.

She also told me the phone number she initially gave me was her sister’s. Interesting. She also told me her sister’s phone was thrown in the toilet over the weekend, so she had a new number. Who would throw her sister’s phone in the toilet? Her sister’s kids’ father threw it in the toilet. Oh, why would he do something like that? *Some dude* kept texting her... Oh, some dude? Yeah. (Obviously!) She kept telling him it was no big deal, but he wasn’t buying it. So it was *some dude* that kept texting her sister’s phone? Her sister’s phone—the number that Sophia initially gave *me*? Yeah, that was the one. So her sister’s kids’ father got so mad that some dude—*some dude* (who was me) kept texting her....he got so mad he

*threw the phone in the toilet?* Now, she needed a new phone. Ugh, it was so annoying. Phone stores?! They're always trying to, like, upsell you and stuff? Those installment plans can be so misleading! How they sell you on lower monthly payments, but you, like, pay more for the phone over the long run?! Ugh!

So that night she gave you her *sister's* phone number?! I thought in disbelief. Is her sister's kids' father currently attempting to track me down because he believes I'm trying to fuck, or is *already fucking*, or *previously fucked*, the mother of his children?! I thought in disbelief. I mean, he threw her phone in the toilet, right?! I thought in disbelief. But would he remember the number if he threw the phone in the toilet? I thought, slightly optimistically. And was he technologically savvy enough to track me down by a phone number alone? I thought, slightly optimistically. In addition to her husband potentially tracking me down when *he* gets out?! I thought in disbelief.

She told me she told her manager, Wu, that I knew her background then again noted her relief that I knew. "Looking back, it was tough..." she said, seemingly relieved. She was wearing a nineteen fifties style dress with a large bow as a belt around her torso, her hands politely placed around her glass, her eyes directed down to the floor. She didn't know how to tell me; she felt like when it came down to it...that *that* was gonna be the breaking point...one way or the other, you know? Once I found out... She spoke with an apparent optimism that caused a mild euphoria in my lower gut region as her eyes approached mine—as I continued imagining being viciously hunted down by her sister's son's father and her husband in disbelief. Dying an agonizing death when I least expected it. This *meant* something. I understood what she meant. It made sense. It totally made sense. It

wasn't out of the realm of possibility that I could perish sooner than later.

"Like...*now*—we can move on," she said, and I smiled genuinely, although I felt slightly anxious about the phrase *move on*, then looked to my left. "That's him, right? Wu?" He was the only one at work that knew; she didn't even show people her license—*actually*, she could get "real ghetto" if anyone tried to even look at her license. I nodded perfunctorily. *Having said all of that*, she noted her husband and his mother taught her *how to be polite* (she apparently used to "be real ghetto" (her words not mine)), and she had to admit that she felt indebted to him as well as his mother for helping her hone those bourgeois social skills, and I set aside any feasible jealousy for a moment and genuinely appreciated the anecdote—felt a form of vicarious indebtedness to her husband and his mother as well. The bourgeois *was* ultimately the standard we all aspired to achieve—behaviorally and economically. We all need to acculturate ourselves to middle class Anglo Saxon values as soon as possible.

"*Round and round and round and round*," Wu made a twirling motion with his index finger in the air as he spoke to me later that night, "I've been seeing the same shit for twenty seven years," he said. *Oh nice*, I thought despondently as he wiped an unspecified fluid from the bar counter. His hair was slicked back but wavy, pompadour style; short and slender, he always wore an oversized button up t-shirt over slacks and dress shoes. I thought he might be, like, some kind of Made Guy in the mafia—if those guys still existed—before Sophia told me he was half-Chinese, which immediately laid that notion to rest, because according to mafia movies I'd seen you could only become a Made Guy in the mafia if you were



one hundred percent Italian. Enzo would, technically, be eligible to become a Made Guy in the mafia. Wu, however, would find his career forever halted as an associate—which meant a Made Guy (potentially Enzo?) could, *technically*, put a hit out on Wu *without approval* from one of the bosses of the five families. He could just do it. Enzo, if he was a Made Guy, could literally kill Wu, if he was an associate, with *no repercussions whatsoever*. Those were the rules of the American mafia, according to movies I'd seen.

Overall, he seemed like a pretty nice guy. However, at the same time, I was still hesitant to get into too deep of a conversation with any of the staff—up to and including Wu. The fact of the matter was I didn't even trust *Sophia* (at least not one hundred percent) to keep my best interests in mind if things somehow went south (which seemed to be the most likely outcome), never mind trusting *Wu*, never mind trusting *some kid* getting paid eight bucks an hour to mop piss off the floor in the bar bathroom. What am I gonna shoot the shit with these people? Let key biographical details unwittingly slip out of my mouth? Not a chance. What if her husband came in looking for me? He asks Wu where I live; he knows I'm banging his wife, and now he needs to murder me in cold blood, but in order to do that he needs my address, right? What's my last name? Guess what? *Wu doesn't know my last name—because I'm not telling anybody my last name*. Not even Wu.

The next morning, considerably hungover, I was heating up a cup of coffee for the fourth time that morning when an old lady from the logistics department walked into the kitchen. When she saw me she muttered a comment in a deadpan tone that, frankly, isn't worth repeating. I genuinely attempted to avoid eye contact. Pasty-skinned,

she wore unnecessarily dressy slacks and had really long fingers—she was in her mid-to-late sixties, possibly older? What did it matter? We'd already found ourselves in the kitchen at the same time a few times that morning. I pretended to check something on my phone as the microwave hummed in the background; the refrigerator made an exaggerated wailing noise, and I think we both wondered why it wailed in the tone that it wailed—it was an orgasmic type of wail. I'd put my cup of coffee in for fifty seconds, inspired by the thought that I didn't wanna come back to the kitchen again before lunch, then thought, in retrospect, *maybe I should've just added ice and made an iced coffee?* I definitely should have. Technically, I still could. The only question was: were there ice cubes in the refrigerator? The old lady hunched over the kitchen sink and began to rinse her coffee cup.

The last time we rendezvoused she shared her thoughts with me about the expired quarts of milk; frankly, she couldn't believe nobody threw out the expired quarts but her! Who are these animals, these *pigs*?! Would they do that *at their home*?! She doubted it! Who were they—because there was a goddamned quart of milk that expired *three weeks ago* in here! Chunks and everything! She started sniffing the open containers; you know sometimes they go bad *before* the friggin expiration date, right? (Is it *really* an expiration date if it expires *before* the date?) I opened my camera phone, turned the lens in my direction, and began to monitor how my hair looked with little to no intent of taking a picture. She opened the freezer door; she scooped out an ice cube (inadvertently confirming I could make an iced coffee if I chose)—she dropped it immediately; it shattered on the linoleum floor, and she cried out, “How does *one* ice cube break into *all* these big pieces?!” There were eight or so small pieces of ice cube scattered on the linoleum floor.

She shuffled over and arduously picked up one piece—a fair amount of unappealing grunting was involved in the retrieval of the piece of cube. The microwave went *ding!* behind me. She continued to shuffle around, trying to pick up the stray pieces of ice cube that, I estimated, would most likely melt before she could retrieve them all. I crept quietly around her and walked back to my desk; I wasn't really in the mood for iced coffee anymore. I pulled out a crumpled up napkin from the side pocket of my laptop case, brought it up to my eye level, and glanced at it inquisitively. "Thank u for being awesome," read one line she wrote in exemplary cursive. "I think your [sic] amazing," read another, and on the back we both signed our names, which, admittedly, even at the time, seemed embarrassingly sentimental—but also seemed touching, even if we were both pretty inebriated, borderline obliterated, when we penned the signatures.

I felt like, given everything, I probably needed a gun. My dad told me he thought my hair looked good as we sat on the back patio and watched his platinum tinted grill cook meat. He told me the grill used an *infrared beam* to cook after we'd stared at it in silence for about thirty seconds—then he asked me what I'd been doing to make my hair look so good? I knew he had a gun; I was strongly considering asking him if I could borrow it. I told him I wasn't washing it as much, that I found it thinned the texture without the greasiness of using hair gel. I had coarse hair, *extremely* coarse hair, some referred to it as *nappy*—a racially charged, politically incorrect term, and I considered that interpretation slightly hyperbolic, in addition to being generally inappropriate. Anastasia used to call it *nappy* then say, "Ewww!" and point at it. I considered the possibility my relationship with Anastasia may have been indirectly

informing my current mode of decision making—that maybe I was some kind of stereotypical, quote-unquote broken individual. It bothered me—more so the possibility of being stereotypical than the possibility of being broken. Women generally find stereotypically broken men attractive, don't they? My dad was listening attentively with his eyes fixated on my scalp before he told me I needed to be careful, scalps have scents, and if you didn't wash your hair frequently enough you would start to *smell* like scalp. I was skeptical; personally, I didn't think scalps had scents; I'd never *smelled* a scalp—I wouldn't even know what a scalp scent *was*, even if someone's scalp was stinking right under my nose.

My dad told me a guy he worked with smelt like scalp all the time as he sat with one leg crossed on top of the other—he wore short navy blue bathing suit shorts; his sandals were scattered on the ground around his feet; his skin was tanned deep beige, and his salt and pepper wavy hair was salon cut, his goatee trimmed neatly. I said I washed it every couple days—it wouldn't be an issue, right? “Actually, all it *takes* is a couple days,” he said and asked to smell my scalp. I asked him if he had a gun. He repeated the phrase “*a gun?*” wanting to know—once I also repeated the phrase “*a gun.*”—why I would want a gun? “Why would I want *a gun?* ...In case I have to clap back!” I grinned nervously. He didn't even know where he had it; he didn't even know if it worked. He took a sip of beer—he didn't think it did.

At the time, I felt fairly confident I wanted to postpone informing either of my parents that I was: A) seeing a girl who was married, B) seeing a girl who was married to a person currently incarcerated on a charge of homicide, C) asking for a gun in preparation for her husband discovering we were seeing one another. I just

felt like certain things were better left unsaid. Yet, at the same time, I wasn't one hundred percent certain how they'd react to the situation—for all I knew maybe they'd be encouraging about the whole thing, maybe we'd all sit at the dinner table enjoying a fine three course meal one night and maybe they'd lovingly tell me, "Oh, really? *Well. We actually love* how you aren't judging the girls you choose to shove your cock in! We love how you're transgressing the exceptionally flawed institution of marriage! We love how open-minded you are when you have an erection! Exactly how we raised you to be: *open-minded and erect!* And for all of those reasons we support you! And here, please, take the thirty eight, just in case you have to clap back! We loaded it for you and everything!" And I'd smile ear to ear, wholly taken aback; I'd say, "I'm just...*so glad* you understand!" as I gleefully accepted the gun and skipped off to my car, a bag of leftovers in my left hand, a loaded gun in the right.

There was no doubt in my mind having a gun would do me absolutely *no good*, that if anything it would definitely make things worse for me, that it would *increase the likelihood of my death* exponentially! But it felt like *the thing to do*. You bang somebody's wife? You get a fucking gun. That was how the world worked, and who was I to go off script? But why can't you *at least* tell your *dad* about this shit? I thought, sitting in my chair, staring blankly at the grill. Aren't you, in your own way, indicting her entire situation by refusing to disclose to your dad even *part* of her situation? Aren't you just as bad as the people that unjustly judge people *solely* based on being a single mother, on what they do for a living, on the extenuating circumstances of their lives—lives, like all of our's, that are equally the result of broad socioeconomics as they are individual choices? And they were all valid points. They were all valid—yet I also

wanted to consider the *preconceived notions* of these concepts...you know? How, wouldn't it just be *better* if my family got to *meet her* first—and *then* they could form their own opinion, without having any opportunity to prejudge her based on A, B, or C? I was worried my mother would prejudge her—which, admittedly, I found slightly odd because, historically speaking, my mother's feelings rarely factored into my decision making, but it was also possible I was conflating caring about *what she thought* with caring about *having to deal with her commentary*. (Also: To what extent was I conflating blood relation with innate understanding? To what extent was I some sort of *simulacra* with regard to my own *bloodline*?!)

And that, in short, was how I justified “lying” to my parents, yet again, about my romantic involvements. Although, to be fair, I wasn't technically *withholding* any information, per se; I wasn't withholding any more than I would *normally withhold*—to be fair, my parents were barely aware I was heterosexual until my mid-twenties. Rather, I was being *prudent* as to when the right time would be to *disclose certain items*. When (and if) Sophia met my family, then I would have no problem disclosing any of these items, I thought. But, until then, why go around being imprudent *just* to be imprudent! For the time being, I was simply asking to borrow an unregistered revolver for a finite period of time.

“You know you need a license to have one, right?” my dad said, also staring blankly at the grill. I replied, “Do you have one?” He told me he didn't think it was a good idea. Him getting a license to own the gun he illegally stored in his residence wasn't a good idea? No—giving me the gun wasn't a good idea. He wouldn't feel comfortable giving it to me. There was no doubt in my mind he was making an intelligent decision, that he was

doing me a *favor*—I was the last person (in temperament and execution) who would benefit from possessing a firearm. I'd recently read an article online (a local news outlet with subpar editing standards and an even more abysmal comment sections, even by internet standards) about a kid down the street getting shot in the neck and killed in front of his girlfriend in a home invasion—a grisly scene that concluded with his mom getting shot in the jaw and the invader *biting her index finger off* in a struggle for the gun! I figured I'd put a steak knife under my bed instead; I imagined myself slashing the ACLs of an imaginary home invader like a seasoned martial artist then shouted, "*Mom! Is the salad ready?!*" toward the small window that looked over the kitchen sink, where my mother's expressionless face was displayed, probably chopping up vegetables, draining a bowl of noodles. "She can't hear you when you're in the same room with her, why are you yelling through a wall?" my dad asked. Maybe it was better I didn't have a gun. What was the upside of having one, really? Statistically speaking, it seemed unlikely I would die from a gunshot wound related to this particular situation. It was definitely *more* likely that I *wouldn't* die from a gunshot wounded related to the situation. Carrying around an illegal firearm wasn't going to ameliorate the situation—there was no doubt about that.

It could've been worse, I thought, standing with my back against Mo's mom's front door, standing on her porch drinking a glass of white wine with Mo—who was wobbling over me—asking, "*Isn't it possible she could change?*" My glass of wine was wobbling up and down, the wine swishing back and forth at the bottom of the glass like a pendulum, and I told him I wasn't sure; I paused to consider how to phrase my—for the most part,

*acutely negative*—feelings on the matter. I told him every time he talked to me about it he told me a different set of circumstances, that every time he told me a different set of circumstances he told me *that* set of circumstances was the truth. Mo walked down the porch to urinate and said, “*No, keep talking,*” as he pulled out his penis and began to urinate on the lawn. I continued to speak; I felt a social obligation to continue sharing improvised views on the matter. I looked out onto the opposite side of the deck, looking away from Mo urinating as he spoke loudly from the grass, “So, you think there’s *no* chance this girl...” he paused as he placed his penis back into his sweatpants and jogged up his mother’s porch stairs, “So, you think there’s *no* chance this girl has just been misguided her entire life—and now that she’s been called out on it...now that I called her out on *all of her shit*...that there’s *no chance* that she could turn her life around? With me...” I told him I thought anything was possible, love was love, but also reiterated she was thirty two years old.

Ultimately, I had to let matters such as Mo’s go—they were only my concern *to an extent*. I left to meet with Sophia, and the nonchalance of her speech juxtaposed against the relative scorn of her content as she relayed her skepticism with regard to guys who went to the gym frequently, guys who were overly concerned with *aesthetics*. “Fuck that,” she said, “why do you have to put on a fitted to go to CVS? To *fuck with some other bitch?*” Following a two second pause, I nodded my head sagely. I was slightly afraid of her but also silently flexing what I hoped would eventually turn into a six pack under my thermal. We’d agreed to meet at a hole-in-the-wall hipster bar downtown; it was hidden around a clandestine corner in the business district; its decor was



aesthetically pleasing but also claustrophobic. There were an above average amount of finger tattoos on display, and the median price of a beer was three dollars and twenty five cents.

Sitting at the bar Sophia said she “just didn’t know,” and I asked what about?—hoping she was reconsidering her feelings on wearing a hat to CVS, that maybe she’d recognized the sentiment as slightly overbearing, and she told me that sometimes, her eyes meandered solemnly, sometimes she just wanted to move somewhere where nobody could find her, in the woods somewhere, you know? I glanced over the bar, noting the venue had a limited selection of beer. Personally, I’d always slept better in urban locales. Rather than verbally replying, I touched the side of her hand and smiled; she smiled back in a more muted way than I smiled. An older Asian man walked in the door with a female Caucasian partner, and Sophia noted him; she continued to orchestrate her talking points with her right hand (the right hand was, to my eye, about the size of a smaller green apple, excluding fingers) and told me, “It’s like every Asian nigga that comes in the bar always looks at me with the *most* shame...like, “The *fuck* happened to you?”” She laughed a little, and I raised my hands a few inches from my lap in a “what’s the deal with airplane peanuts?” posture and asked, more or less tautologically, “Why? Because you’re Asian? And you’re a waitress?” “You know what I mean!” She took a slurp of her tequila and said, “Like, I was supposed be better at math or something...”

When she was impassioned about a topic she had a tendency to drop the N-word with a soft “A” at a decent clip. I’d noticed it with a few other people of Southeastern Asian descent I’d known on an acquaintance basis—at first I was a little taken aback, thinking things like, “Asian people use the N-word now?”

It occurred to me Sophia may have experienced similar cultural ambiguities I had at times, perhaps a similar sense of *displacement*—she also grew up in a town with a large population of people of Puerto Rican descent. Did that make it more acceptable? I wasn't offended by it; it seemed as though an increasing amount of people were using the N-word with a soft "A"; it seemed like it was gradually becoming more acceptable for people of all different cultures and creeds to say, yet at the same time the country as a whole was experiencing a disconcerting increase in racial tensions. It was curious; it seemed like the country was enduring some kind of crisis of *mortality*—that it was some kind of old ass plutocrat on its death bed, dying of natural causes, looking around for someone to blame, as if the laws of nature, of mathematics, should never have applied to it in the first place. At the end of the day, it's obviously *easier* to look around and discern the shade of your neighbor's skin than it is to determine the astronomical GDP growth rates of the latter half of the twentieth century are statistically unsustainable, but should that make it *acceptable*? And, more importantly does it even *matter*—does who or what a country chooses to blame for a most likely inevitable decline mean anything at all? If a large comet is on an unavoidable collision course for the planet, and the general populace blames Muslims what does that mean and, in the long term, why does it even *matter*?

Sophia tilted her head and shouted loudly, excitedly greeting her friend, who had just walked in the door. At that point, I noted Sophia's outfit was *completely* red as we sat at the bar, that the outfit was lingerie-like but hugged her body tightly—she was definitely overdressed for the venue. I still thought she looked good; I wasn't offended by the incongruity, but I did take note of it. Her

jet black hair was straightened, and the straight-thin hair follicles juxtaposed against the cushioning of her ass cheeks. I was objectifying her body without her permission, there was no doubt about that. Her friend said hello almost as loudly as Sophia as they embraced. “Girl, *sit down!*” Sophia instructed then noted she had to pee. She asked me did I mind? I told her, “Go head.” I motioned hastily toward the bathroom and said, “*Don't fuckin pee your pants!*”

I introduced myself to her friend, Emily. She looked at me, squinting her eyes in a scientific manner, then asked me if I was Portuguese? “No, actually, I’m a Macaque...from the rock of Gibraltar?” I thought I saw her recoil slightly before she told me she had a friend who was a Macaque from Gibraltar! I nodded my head unenthusiastically as I voluntarily cleared my throat then asked her about her ethnicity; clearly, it was a more or less mandatory question. Oh, what are *you*? Oh, I’m this—what are *you*? It would have been rude not to ask. She told me she was Puerto Rican, went on to tell me how she lived close to Sophia, told me a little bit about her and Sophia’s friendship, how it extended across multiple bars, how they sometimes went clothes shopping together. “She really likes you,” she said, trailing off with a muted importance. I found the *really* she included before *likes* struck me acutely—I ominously thought about how it was possible that the *really* implicated that Sophia was capable of giving off the *impression* that she liked people when she *really* didn’t (of course, I was guilty of doing essentially the same thing with a potpourri of acquaintances over the entirety of my sentient life), and it suddenly seemed possible (*likely?*) that Sophia was only giving off an *impression* of liking me, that maybe *that* impression was *actually* false, that maybe I was involving myself in a shell game of

likes, a shell game that perhaps *her friend* was intimately involved in? After all, they did work together at a bar that was nothing if not a *shell game of likes* (tips?!)—so was it that paranoid to think that they could *still* be in collusion? In a shell game of likes?

I ordered her a mixed drink and told her I really liked Sophia too. I handed her the drink, and she rummaged through her purse; she said she just wanted to make sure...she trailed off, fiddling with something in the purse...that I was a nice guy. I nodded. That made sense. She said she liked the place—it was different! That was actually my intent in suggesting it. I felt as though hipsters inveterately understood bars needed to be chill. Sophia came back from the bathroom, and she and Emily talked benignly as I stared blankly into the distance of the smallish downstairs. I was imagining a rail thin middle aged guy, sitting in a booth wearing a sad face, going back to his apartment every night and weeping while masturbating, feeling legitimately somber for him and the fate I was imagining for him when I overheard Emily say, “Yeah, I thought he was *Portuguese*,” then saw Sophia surreptitiously glance in my direction before she said, “I think he’s got that *7-Eleven look*,” and giggled.

I hunched over as I held my beer between my pectorals. Unsolicited, I began to lean further into their conversation then asked, “What’s that supposed to mean?” in a tone that was intended to be equally inquisitive and confrontational to Sophia. She turned from her friend and into me and looked up and told me I had a *...handsome...* “*7-Eleven look*” as she gazed around my Adam’s Apple and looked up into my eyes. She smiled and touched my torso as she moved around me to sit back down. “Oh cool,” I said, noting for a moment the word “handsome” was uttered in a tone that was more

interrogative than assertive. Yet I was placated—more so by her touch than her words, and I sat down next to her, between her and Emily, and said, “Well, you know, *historically speaking*, the Iberian Peninsula has been a region of intense tumult; it was actually occupied by an Islamic Caliphate, the Moors, for over seven hundred years, and that was *after* the region was discovered by the Ancient Greeks, and *to this day* Gibraltar is a territory of the United Kingdom! And, as for the *Macaques* of Gibraltar, well, needless to say...”

“*You licked her asshole?!*” Mo asked as he shot the basketball poorly. He wasn’t any good. He was totally out of practice. “Yeah, *so?*” I retorted. I didn’t give a fuck and didn’t see anything particularly objectionable about the act as long as the area was clean. He told me this was a new low for me. I asked him what all that “I’d let her sit on my face after playing eight rounds of tennis” talk was about? Was he just saying that to say it? It was so typical of Mo to be disingenuous like that. I jumped up and grabbed his miss before it hit the concrete and asked him why she couldn’t have a great overall genital region, asked him how he could confirm the cleanliness of a comprehensive genital region without first-hand experience of said genital region? Licking ass was, in my opinion, a *progressive* act. It wasn’t something that should be denigrated with little to no contemplation with regard to *why* someone would be denigrating it. He asked me if I was gonna shoot. I bricked a midrange jumper and watched the ball bounce onto the grass as we both stood there. I told him it wasn’t like I was marrying the girl—and by saying the words *it’s not like I’m marrying this girl* immediately reminisced about thinking *man, I should marry this girl* after Sophia told me she bought me a bottle of water on the night my face

was bleeding. It seemed so nice at the time, and, even though I had serious reservations about the institution of marriage as a whole, I felt like I was being peer pressured into disingenuous statements regarding who I would or wouldn't marry. Maybe I would marry Sophia, and what was so wrong with that if I did?

The unmitigated sunlight made the blacktop oven-esque, even if you were wearing sneakers, and I asked Mo if I was persecuted now, because I ate ass? Was that it? One day, he too would do it. He'd lick ass. He knew it. He agreed. He told me he was actually looking forward to the day it happened—now that he was separated, he wanted to open himself up to those types of new experiences. Maybe he'd lived a sexually repressed life? What did it taste like anyway? He dribbled, all right-handed on the left side of the court (which, for the record, was generally considered a faux pas to the majority of the basketball community), to the basket and made a lay-up. He told me as long as I was happy, man... then made a statement that poorly mitigated his previous statements, probably feeling bad for denigrating a girl that, given my butthurt comments (no pun intended), I genuinely seemed to like. What Mo may or *may not* have been aware of is that the vagina hole is a lot closer to the butthole than a ballsack is. Girls don't even really have grundles, and it can be hard to thoroughly clean those areas.

“No, *you* need to be careful,” Sophia said playfully after I made a teasing, sexually motivated, comment then told me *this pussy's crack!* It wasn't the first time she'd made the comment—*this pussy's crack!*—and I wasn't sure if I'd go that far, but at the time she said it I couldn't verify from a penile standpoint, first hand at least, but it was definitely well maintained and scented. Which is

something I doubted Mo fully understood—that maybe he lacked experience in genital cleanliness, maybe he *lacked a sophisticated appreciation of symmetry, hue, scent*, etc. when it came to the female private areas. After Sophia told me her pussy was crack, I made a sarcastic comment, and she said some of the girls she worked with stunk. “Some of these girls here *stink!*” she said in a disgusted tone. I nodded. She told me her head hurt; her head sat on my shoulder. I asked her if it was from the accident she got in the previous weekend? She sniffled and said, “Ugh, I think I need a tissue.” I looked down at her face, resting on my shoulder, and said, “Wanna get your nose off my thermal then?”

Of course we’d been fooling around beyond making out hesitantly—on some level we both knew everything was wrong and immoral, which neither of us addressed except abstractly, outside of the times things occurred, which was bad, although I thought that on some level sexual interaction (libidinal urges) were a sort of *biological function* that were maybe only tangentially related to genuine bonds between persons? You become more philosophical about infidelity as you age; the weight of any given fuck decreases gradually as you approach your natural expiration. That’s probably why large age gaps in relationships (as well as pedophilia) are so frowned upon. As a society, we feel as though *the weight of the fucks* are *morally*, sometimes *legally*, out of *balance*. All sovereign territories necessitate *balance*. All extremities eventually lead to anarchy.

“The doctor said I had a *slight* concussion,” she told me, finally lifting her still running nose off my deltoid. She held her head in her right palm; the hand covered her temple. I told her that, honestly, she should keep an eye on it. She smiled in acknowledgement. I didn’t find the smile sufficient—I said, “*Seriously*, that stuff with the

NFL? You kidding? You can end up mentally retarded.” She told me she was going to see her lawyer on Tuesday and said, “*Soooo...if you wanna hang out after...?*” “*With you?*” I sarcastically replied. She pushed the arm I held my drink in and told me to shut up—a little vodka spilt from my glass onto the dark counter.

Later that night Sophia, Mo, and I were playing Monopoly—Mo was high. He was in the process of smoking a bowl of medicinal weed his younger brother sold him as I prepared to roll the di. “Listen,” I said to Sophia, who was drunk (I was also drunk); I was sitting on my chair leaning to my left, hovering over her as she sat on the floor—the eight properties I’d purchased were laid out on the beige coffee table in front of me, and I offered to trade her Baltic for Connecticut. Despite my plethora of properties, I still needed a monopoly. She scrunched up her face. “*But hold on,*” I interrupted, “I wanna *compensate* you for the difference in value...” She was sprawled out on her side with her hair straightened, wearing a white, flowy shirt that extended to her mid-thigh region. She owned Connecticut Ave. and was drinking white wine out of a plastic cup. “Wait, what?” she retorted, seeming a little confused.

I stopped for a second. Basically, as compensation for the greater value of Connecticut Ave. (compared to Baltic—the cheapest property on the board), I was going to forego charging her rent on *any* of my other properties, *until they had a house on them*. (I was, of course, planning on using the profits from my Connecticut monopoly to fund houses on my more expensive properties.) Mo was really impressed by my shrewdness; he was extremely high (I was also slightly high)—I smiled at him deviously, stared down at the coffee table, and asked the both of them to look at all of



the properties I owned. *Eight* properties?! Did that register? I moved my palms back and forth over the properties; Sophia looked over them for a few seconds. I told her she'd still own the purple block; she stroked her chin, her face flushed magenta, inebriated a little—she took the deal. With my first three property monopoly consummated, along with the ample cash I had on hand, the game was over within half an hour.

With Mo fast asleep on the couch, she told me she didn't have any social media, "but I'm *always* taking pictures," she beamed proudly. I asked her why she didn't post them anywhere, although I understood why she wouldn't; I found social media more or less deplorable—in fact, I assumed most people found social media deplorable, but most people did *nothing but* peruse and engage social media *all the time*, so they could say things like, "Oh my god, did you *see* what she posted?" screenshot it and send it to their friends in group texts, where they'd skewer people on social media *privately*, discuss their disgust with social media *privately*, engage with social media *privately*, and *of course* this was all what Zuckerberg expected—these were the *strings he pulled*, to harvest this *hatred*, to indulge in the human *need* to hate in a way it had never been indulged before; the new Page Six *but with your second cousin talking shit to your ex-girlfriend on the front page*—equipped with poor grammar, of course. This innate human *need* to loathe, extrapolated to its logical extreme! And once that hatred is harvested, once that hatred becomes like a heroin in the veins of people who simply can't *bear* to *not* receive the latest updates of the people they loathe, then you pump the fuckers with ads, and then *every click clicked leads to leads*—you wipe your ass with a bath towel (because you assumed

your *significant other* bought the toilet paper; because your significant other assumed *you* bought the toilet paper), and a promoted ad for discount toilet paper immediately pops up on your iPad, which, of course, you brought to the toilet with you, and Zuckerberg makes *billions* off of it all, and he donates it all to *charity*, but of course it's *not a charity*—it's a tax free *discretionary fund*: a fund that disperses at *his discretion*, so he creates a small government! You're spending your Tuesday night looking at *album* after *album* of people you despise, while Zuckerberg is running what's, *functionally speaking*, a shadow government the size of a small country in Africa.

She said she didn't even like *showing people*, that she kept her photos in a box under her bed, just so she could look at them whenever she wanted. She let me know she actually supported the guy she dated before her husband—that perhaps that relationship informed her current mode of thinking? Similar to how my relationship with Anastasia perhaps informed my current mode of thinking? “His *studio*, the *reclining chair*, three-quarters of the *Tupperware!* Motherfucker was living off *me!*” she said, and I told her I thought that sucked and nervously contemplated if I came off as sarcastic; I didn't think I was being sarcastic. “After that...*after that*, I said *never again*,” she said. She brushed her palms together, back and forth, dusting them off. I cleared my throat and told her that, “Yeah, my student loan debt is, well, *somewhat concerning*, but, with income based repayment options, it's manageable,” then nodded my head agreeably.

“You know my friend, right? Emily? The one from the other night?” she asked while sitting on top of me, her legs straddling my torso in the back of the now dimly lit

living room, our faces really close together. She was assiduous with her dental hygiene; it was nice—I wasn't comfortable. I remembered her, yeah. "She seems nice." I said, and she told me she asked her about me and she thought I was cute, and I told her that was cool, I was flattered. She said, "Yeah." I said, "Yeah," and felt sincerely flattered but was unsure how to reply. She said that sometimes they fool around, and I said, "That's cool," and she said, "Yeah." I asked if I burped in her face; I said, "Sorry, did I just burp in your face?" and she said I did not, and I told her that was good, that I'd felt a little gas bubble and wasn't sure and just wanted to make sure. She said, "Well, I mean, she's gone down on me, I've never gone down on *her*," and I said, "Oh, I don't blame her," as select hair follicles on Sophia's head moved ghost-like in the light breeze generated from the fan above us, fifteen feet up. "I've never gone down on anybody," she said. Oh, yeah? "Yeah, but I don't go down on her though." Right. Right. "But yeah, she thinks you're, like, really cute. She told me. Because I asked her about you," she said and shifted her ass on my thighs in a surprisingly asexual manner. "That's cool," I said. "She said we should all—" "Oh—" "*hang out again*—" "*yeah?*" "But you're not like. ...One of those guys. Who would wanna..." Wanna-uh...? Because she's selfish. She doesn't like to share. So if I wanna fuck with her then go right ahead. Because there's other guys; she doesn't care. She doesn't share. It's all the same to her.

I made eye contact with the fan; I considered the situation, my present state, for a moment—I tried to hurriedly trace the evolution of the conversation, thought about methods to reign in the intense feelings of aggravation currently streaming throughout my entire body. I brushed Sophia softly off my lap and expressed my displeasure in an aggrieved, indignant tone, and she

replied quizzically, in a tone that I thought betrayed the fact that she knew exactly what I meant, and I replied by accusing her of “baiting me,” and she replied by repeating the word “baiting” in another unconvincingly quizzical tone. I stuttered a little as her left and right legs, from the thighs down, were lying flat on the floor and, from the calves down, were now stuck underneath my right and left legs, as the right side of her body was lying down crookedly on a few medium sized pillows. Our lower bodies were very tangled up. I asked her why she would suggest a threesome, or at least *allude* to a threesome, then bait and switch like that? To see if I was a “pig” who liked threesomes?!

I was genuinely hurt as she looked down at me from her flat-on-her-side horizontal position and unsuccessfully began to try and sit up vertically as she rebuked my accusation, as if I’d horribly misinterpreted or misconstrued her statements, even though she said, “I’m just saying, it’s all the same to me,” less than two minutes ago, and I leaned over her and said, “You can admit it!” No, she didn’t mean it like *that!* She was just saying— “Of *course* I like the idea of a threesome,” I interrupted, “Who doesn’t? How could you not? *FFM?* At least in theory. I just don’t understand how you could penalize me for liking the idea of a theoretical threesome! I didn’t know you were like that.” She recoiled, still tangled with my torso, struggling with my torso via her left leg, and argued that she wasn’t like that! She was just selfish! Like that. And she thought I should know! I told her there were better ways to bring it up; she agreed. For example, she could have said, “Hey, I’m selfish with men, and I just thought you should know.” And then that would have been all I needed, that would have been totally sufficient for me. Just, “Hey, I’m selfish with men and wouldn’t be interested in a

threesome with my friend, even if she, *theoretically*, was interested in having a threesome with us. Just in case you were wondering.” That’s all I needed; I wasn’t secretly fiending for some kind of no holds barred threesome with her friend; it wasn’t a deal breaker if she wasn’t into inviting third parties into the bedroom. Would I have been amenable to a threesome proposition with her friend Emily? Sure, it was definitely possible I would have been amenable to something like that, but it wasn’t a deal breaker by any means. “Well, she did say that,” she said, “that she thought you were nice looking, I mean. So I thought it would be a nice thing to bring up!” “Well...” I thought for a moment, processing the compliment and silently admitting to myself that it *was* a flattering comment. “Well, I *am* flattered,” I replied, and I was being sincere about that. I trailed off and she paused, probably waiting to see if I was going to finish my thought, then said, “I’m serious!” Sophia hugged my torso, clung to my torso genuinely later that night, and the next morning I sent her a wordy text clarifying that I would never engage in a threesome on immoral grounds.

In any case, looking back, there was *no way* she couldn’t have known—I’d been sending effusive texts to her on a semi-regular basis in the weeks that passed between me getting her number (technically her sister’s), finding everything out, and then hanging out, outside the bar. She said *she wasn’t sure it was me*, but it was her sister’s phone, and her sister’s kid’s dad *had* to have been monitoring the phone—because he threw it in the toilet. What were the odds her sister was fielding *multiple* texts from *multiple* dudes on a phone that her kid’s dad was monitoring? No sibling could *possibly* be that courteous. That was absurd. So if she only gave her sister’s number to *one guy*, or even two or three, the idea that she

*wouldn't know* who was texting her seemed...unlikely? Was it possible I was higher on the pedestal than I felt I was? That she was understating her interest level? Was it possible that she had been embarrassingly thinking about me, just like I'd been embarrassingly thinking about her? Was she attending parties, solely because she lacked an excuse to not attend them, wearing inside out t-shirts and thigh high shorts, and manically considering her *obsession*? With *me*?

*Or was I misconstruing the entire situation*—much of which (the phone numbers, the people owning the numbers, and the people monitoring the people who owned the numbers) admittedly seemed inherently unknowable to me. I guess the main problem I saw with caring about dishonesty was that it required you to relinquish all self-awareness—as soon as you began to think about all of the lies *you* told people (constantly, every day) it was harder to justify caring about the lies people told to *you*. People did it all of the time, don't get me wrong, but, personally, I tried to avoid hypocrisy whenever possible. I was drinking vodka by myself, anonymously looking up the online profiles of people I used to know in various capacities, thinking *what's the point*, existentially, as I browsed through tab after tab of online identities that I found to be, for the most part, completely incongruous with reality, that I found to be logically sound when repurposed as arguments for a large scale extinction event. *Of anything?* I asked myself in my thoughts. *Of anything*, I confirmed in my thoughts. Maybe I should give her a call, I thought, then thought but...wouldn't it be better...just left latent and...*unexpressed*?

Hours later, I sat on a stool considerably more drunk than she seemed; she was drinking an energy drink with

no liquor; I'd just shown up to the bar; she looked at me innocently, her eyelids decorated congruently—it was the beginning of her shift. I told her I'd thought about it, I'd given it a lot of thought, and I thought that she should *be with me*, and the intensity of her gaze immediately increased at a concerning pace; at first with what seemed like a mix of shock and anger, then maybe with just annoyance, as she exclaimed, "What are you *crazy?*!" I shook my head so vigorously my coarse hair nearly blew in the breeze generated by my violently seesawing cranium. I asked her to, "just—hear me out." She maintained a serious, intensely unflinching expression and asked me if I knew how *crazy* that'd get?! Her tone seemed to contain an undercurrent of fear, and I let my hands drop to my thighs and opened my eyes wide, wider than normal, wider than they'd ever been, looked away and told her that was fair—then paused and said, "*But still.*" She was apoplectic, but she didn't explicitly shut it down. I prodded, telling her it wasn't *impossible*, that *anything's possible*. "It would never work," she said, but then her face shifted contemplative, as if she wanted to retract the *it would never work* and consider the proposition isolated from the conditions currently surrounding it. "Keep an open mind," I said, now unapologetically spewing platitudes I didn't believe, then muttered three to five non sequiturs and trailed off as she sighed deeply—in an almost *performative* way, I thought, almost as if she'd been *waiting* for me to propose this arrangement and was equally apoplectic at *how long* it took for me to propose it as she was with the *actual conditions* surrounding the proposition. Now her hands were on her thighs too. We both had our hands on our thighs facing each other. She told me we'd figure it out—I ordered another round of drinks; we continued to drink liquor until we were both completely and utterly

inebriated, until her friend Emily came around and, noticing I was completely and utterly inebriated, offered me a ride home, which I politely declined, because I had to go to work in the morning, but to this day remember as an incredibly generous offer.

Sitting at work the next day, I began to seriously contemplate how the toilet paper in the company bathrooms was becoming increasingly coarse; I decided I'd try wiping my butt with a wet wipe instead. I'd heard someone mention something about wiping their butt with a wet wipe a few months earlier. Apparently, it was significantly more cleanly, so I figured I'd give it a shot. I grabbed a box of wet wipes from the printer area and snuck them into the men's room and shat. When I started wiping at first it felt great, then I finished wiping and pulled my pants up, then I started to feel a burning sensation. I didn't think much of it at first; I had a tendency of discounting bodily discomforts, at least initially, and used the same source of wet wipes until I found out, later that week, they make wet wipes specifically for butt wiping, and the wet wipes in the office, in turn, did a number on my buttock. It took a number of weeks for my skin to fully heal; I had reason to believe there may have been a deep puncture wound to my grundle region when I got a text from Anastasia.

I took the opportunity to congratulate her on her new child. She was consistently artificially effusive in her texts to me, so I tried to make my congratulatory text similarly artificially effusive. It all inadvertently reminded myself of how terrible our history was: how we'd almost immediately started fucking vociferously—on couches, in bathrooms, on blow-up mattresses, mostly just at her friend's house. Sometimes I snuck into her parents' condo after her mother fell



asleep. We fell in love, more or less—eating chicken nuggets outside a fast food drive-thru after you fuck, talking to each other on the phone on the ride home, then for hours after you got home—things of that nature; things that, after the feelings fade, you're more embarrassed *by* than nostalgic *for*. She gave a great blowjob. After about eight months of all that she called me, it was a couple days before Christmas, December Twenty Third to be exact, and I'd just finished working a four am stock shift, making a poverty-level wage; it was already a terrible day. I'd just finished working four am to noon then attending an obligatory lunch with my boss at a restaurant I didn't particularly enjoy when Anastasia called and told me, "*I'm engaged,*" as if she was *inconvenienced* and/or perturbed by the very act of making the call, like she was going out of *her* way to do *me* a favor—to tell me she was engaged to another man, despite the fact we had fucked less than a month earlier, or at least that's how I framed it; I thought *we just fucked less than a month ago, I thought we were working on things!* as I sat in my car, simultaneously unsurprised and in a state of shock. I felt something inside me irrevocably break and wrote it down in a notepad I kept at the time and dated the entry. She'd got engaged to her alleged ex-boyfriend, who had some sort of high-profile job that, at the time, I didn't wholly understand, whose parents owned a house on an island somewhere, who'd lived in another state the entire time—I should've seen it coming. Yet my experience in fucking at the time was, admittedly, *extremely* limited; I was a mark for that type of situation. I was a late bloomer. She started whacking guys off when she was thirteen. It was amazing it took twenty four full years for it to occur, I thought, sitting in my car simultaneously unsurprised and in a state of shock. Granted, I was also

an asshole in my own way—especially after she announced her engagement and blocked me on the internet, calling her fiancé *Santa Claus*, typing, “Santa Claus was extra good to me this year!!” next to a picture of the engagement ring in a post she wrote on the night she got engaged, one I’d see months later when I finally convinced her to unblock me on the internet—but *at the time* I didn’t see it that way: Anastasia was a dirty, filthy Russian whore (with a pompous, prejudiced mom) who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with was how I saw it. That was how I saw it, and no one could convince me otherwise. I was physiologically convinced. I was incredibly stupid.

It was possible my reaction was more rooted in being forced to accept the loss publicly than genuine feelings—it’s possible there are no genuine feelings; it’s possible nothing exists. That night, the night she told me, “*I’m engaged*” in a voice that made it seem like *she* was doing *me* a favor, I went to the wine bar we frequented at the time and kept sporadically shouting, “*She got engaged?!*” until the bartender asked me if I was ok, and I told her of course, why wouldn’t I be ok? then continued drinking heavily until three thirty am when I had to leave for work, where I worked in the clothes I wore to the bar the night before and briefly, *pathetically*, sobbed in front of a few of my co-workers—some of whom were ex-cons. Anastasia and I continued *hanging out* after that and *being friends*—because I was *weak*, because I was *completely* and *utterly defeated*, because I imploded in a way that was unheard of for me, and I was someone who had a long history imploding! There’s still no doubt in my mind I was *organically altered* after Anastasia told me she was engaged; I felt something inside me irrevocably

break and wrote it down in a notepad I kept at the time and dated the entry.

I'd become overwhelmed with jealousy whenever she spent a weekend with her fiancé; she'd sneak into all of my shit whenever she was home, see who I was *fucking*, because I was *clearly fucking* someone, *that much was clear*, which, of course, I wasn't—I did flirt with the idea of making a move on a really cute eighteen year old Mexican girl I worked with. We started texting a little bit, went to grab a coffee or two, maybe a bubble tea too. *But was that so wrong?* Of course not! To this day, I consider it a Kierkegaardian feat that I didn't try anything with that girl. To this day, there are times when I'll be in the midst of something *totally* irrelevant, I'll be cooking a half pound of salmon in a frying pan, and the thought will occur to me: Imagine if I fucked that eighteen year old Mexican girl after Anastasia told me she was engaged? That summer Anastasia moved away with her fiancé to another state and got pregnant. She typed to me, "i have something i need to tell you," and I typed, "sup," and she typed, "pregnant." I, again, felt a part of me irrevocably break but didn't write the date down in any notebooks. I realized I should have made a more aggressive move with the Mexican girl—first hand, I learned the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard was the philosophy of a fucking asshole. What a joke.

After she got engaged, but before she moved away and got pregnant, we'd gone out for drinks with a few friends on the west end, right around the time hookah bars were becoming prominent—when the street as a whole was shifting from Italian to Lebanese. I emailed her as I sat across from her at the table, writing that I was *going insane haha*, which was actually, sadly, one hundred percent true. We left after a few drinks; she started slamming her bag into my shoulder as we crossed the

street, as we walked to my car, and I asked her what she was doing as I grabbed my shoulder gingerly. “I *hate* you!” Anastasia screamed, continuing to slam the overpriced designer bag, the bag that only someone disgustingly materialistic could justify purchasing, into my innocent body. We got in the car—she sat behind me sliding her hands over my eyes as I drove and I screamed that if she *wanted* to crash I’d *gladly* crash, that I didn’t care one way or the other!

I sat with my arms and legs probably a little too close together in Anastasia’s passenger seat as she reiterated a few talking points about the dual income economy to me. I said, “The minimum wage in this country is absurd.” She told me managers at fast food restaurants are usually entitled to competitive benefits packages. I was intensely remorseful for bringing up the subject of Sophia, for agreeing to meet for coffee again, for getting involved in the first place, for engaging in sexual relations, for breathing oxygen. She just wanted what was best for me; I totally understood. Her hair was somewhere between brown and red; she had large breasts she was proud of; the emotional weight of childbirth may have made her more pragmatic financially; she recently had her first injection of Botox. She was insistent it was necessary, even her age, and I made a disparaging comment about it without qualifying the comment by saying something like, “but you’re pretty as is, you don’t *need* Botox,” although I briefly contemplated saying something like, “but you’re pretty as is, you don’t *need* Botox,” but felt like, given everything, the comment would have come off as insincere. Plus, I didn’t mean it—I felt like getting Botox at any age was absurd and somewhat deserving of derision. I told her I appreciated her concern in an

aggravated tone, hoping to put an abrupt end to the topic of Sophia, and she, more calmly, told me she had to pick up a few things for her son. Did I wanna tag along? I said, “For your *son?!?*” with mixture of scorn, incredulity, and curiosity. Historically speaking, whenever I feigned agitation about anything Anastasia would use it as fuel to approach things calmly—with the explicit intent of feeding my agitation via remaining calm. “Oh, *c’mon,*” she laughed (she had a jovial, endearing laugh), “it won’t be *that* awkward!”

I still had a slight indentation on my right knee cap from a time we fucked, both of us black out drunk, on a couch without cushions. I held a pair of tiny overalls and asked her if she was all set. Was she almost all set by any chance, because I was kind of uncomfortable...? She asked me if I could hold a couple more things; I begrudgingly tried to absorb the parcels of clothing onto my arm without dropping the overalls, wondering why we couldn’t have just gone to the grocery store instead? Fresh produce would have been a great silver lining for me. Standing there, holding Anastasia’s son’s clothes in my arms, daydreaming about fresh produce, there was no longer any doubt about it—*Bobby was absolutely right*. The fact of the matter was I should have been listening to him from the start. The fact of the matter was I’d lost an *irreplaceable acquaintance*, an acquaintance who perhaps knew me better than I knew myself! What was I doing—talking to a girl who got engaged behind my back about my relationship with a girl who was in the midst of contentious marriage, holding onto her son’s clothes in public?! Bobby’s palpable condescension, his acutely smug expression, his unapologetic derision, they didn’t signal some kind of *deep-seeded insecurity*, some *infinite pettiness*—no, they signaled knowledge, *pure* knowledge! Of *me!*

She told me she was gonna be out with a friend that night, “if you can *sneak out* for a drink,” needlessly fiddling with the stereo volume as we sat back in her car. I asked her if she liked my t-shirt; she scrunched up her face disgusted and said “*ew*,” glancing at my plain white tee. I asked her if she remembered when— “The first time we met?! Uh, *yahhhh. Trashy!*” She laughed. I thought about how absurd it was to believe a white t-shirt was *trashy* in that day and age, how it was actually pretty stylish—perhaps even endearing? I made sure my face and tone shifted apologetically serious as I asked her to do me a favor, “Keep what I told you on the—” “*Obvioussssly.*” She smiled again in an endearing fashion. I considered texting her that night, maybe meeting up with her and her friend, and I did, and we met up in the quasi-clandestine way we always seemed to meet, and it was nice—it was a nice, wholly nonsexual, time. I felt mature about it; I thought *not everything has to be about fucking, you know*, and felt like I meant it, felt like it may have actually been possible that Anastasia and I could actually *be* genuine friends, despite the fact that I had actually been vehemently opposed to being genuine friends with her since the day she announced her engagement. I shuffled back to my car thinking that her advice was pompous and biased—but also rational and cogent. It felt good to get some things off my chest.

I’d recently made a visit to a big box retail store with my sister and ominously found myself in the kids’ section. I was strolling through the aisles minding my own business, and I recalled Sophia telling me her daughter was *obsessed* with Luigi from Mario Brothers as I stumbled upon a Mario-themed checkers set. I bought it. For a four year old kid, I thought it was a great value for

ten bucks, but while I didn't doubt the quality of the gift I was hesitant to actually give it. I wondered why I'd even bought it, when and if the right time would ever arise, as I thought that, ultimately, what sticks with you is the *kid*—at least when the kid has redeeming qualities, and not all kids have redeeming qualities, but when he comes off like a kid with a solid amount of potential, in a potentially deleterious environment, and you're just trying to fuck with a girl that reminds you of a girl you really liked in college, that dated some guy that looked just like you, where your inaction haunted you for years afterward, and of course you're falling for her, but the last time you *cared* for someone they got engaged behind your back; they made you look like a total asshole, and you imploded in a way that was both embarrassing and unhealthy, and now you have the fate of an ostensibly innocent child on your conscience, and she's *on* your conscience, but, at the same time, she's not *your* business, so why's she on *your* conscience, you ask yourself, because it's not *your* kid, but yet your actions will still ostensibly one way or another have some sort of palpable impact on her future, on how she turns out, on the environment she does or doesn't grow up in, and it haunts you; it haunts you for a long time, probably forever, and there's no redemptive quality to the suffering; there's no silver lining, no beautiful metaphor, no euphoria in the melancholy, because it's not even your business; you're just a bystander—a suffering bystander, a crying witness, a second rate Jesus Christ on a cross; a second rate Jesus Christ *voluntarily* nailing himself to his *homemade* cross, so people don't even look at you as some kind of martyr, as some kind of pariah, as some kind of savior, *no*—they *deny* you the pleasure of *deifying your suffering*, and you wonder

what's the point of suffering if you know you'll never be deified for it?

I continued to bite into my burrito across the table from Mo; we were on the east side of the city in a hole-in-the-wall Tex Mex place. It was hallway-shaped, and I considered it a great restaurant, regardless of what others may have thought (“Isn’t that, like, a *fast food* spot?” acquaintances of mine would occasionally note, derisively). Mo stared at me across the small table and asked me if I wanted to go to the beach on Wednesday. I stopped thinking about the Luigi checkers and contemplated the proposition, consuming the last third of my burrito. He told me he wanted me to meet this new girl he was talking to; I hadn’t finished chewing or audibly replied, and he said, “You know...” in a philosophical tone; he told me she was a really great girl, that he thought I’d really like her a lot! The moral conundrums of seeing a girl with a young child who seemed like a really good kid continued to percolate in the back of my mind as I told him, “Sure,” that I could probably take Wednesday off, I didn’t see why not. Perspiration formed, continued to form, on my temples—mostly from the mixture of the medium hot sauce and the liberal inclusion of banana peppers in the burrito, per my instruction. I lifted my tray and slid my empty burrito wrapper into the trash then grabbed a few napkins and blew my nose; I asked Mo if he was ready to go while wiping my nose. He shoved a final, sizeable, bite of his burrito into his wide open mouth; he tugged his jacket in toward his belt buckle and asked me if I was still *talking to that girl* in a muffled way (because his mouth was full). I’d been trying to avoid the topic to an absurd degree over the past few weeks, even as things had been overall going well, and, for that reason, it made the question seem somewhat awkward, almost tense. I



knew Mo was hurt because I wasn't keeping him updated, and it hurt me too. I covered my mouth with a loose fist, held a burp half in, and hesitantly said, "Chea." He shouted, "*Nice!*" as we walked out onto the street.

She'd told me she liked this purple lipstick but couldn't find it anywhere. I asked her if it was the one I kind of stole from her (around the time we first met I, somehow or another, found one of her lipstick containers in my pocket and ended up holding onto it for a week). She paused contemplatively, probably trying to recall the instance herself, then nodded her head affirmatively, and while looking into her eyes I became skeptical as to whether she actually remembered; I wondered if she was just humoring me by saying she recalled I was in possession of her lipstick for a week or so. Later that night, Mo and I decided to go to a strip club called Balloons—it was unanimously known as the grimmest in the city. We'd been driving around aimlessly at eleven pm before he shouted ecstatically that he wanted to get grimy! I agreed, replied, "Me too!" He suggested we go to Balloons. I asked him, "Isn't that the *grimmest* club in the city?!" and he replied, "*Easily* the grimmest!"

In the passenger seat, I pushed the purple lipstick, which she'd given back to me after I'd promised to try and find it online, out of my pocket and into my right palm surreptitiously. I could just barely make out the item number printed on the bottom in the dark backseat; she *clearly* never typed the number into an internet search engine, because as soon as I typed it into my phone more than a few websites popped up selling that *exact* lipstick. I clicked one as we parked; I kept my phone out of Mo's general line of vision as we walked in the entrance, which was surrounded by a dirt parking lot where I was taken aback by the number of decrepit men

alone, sleeping in their cars, to the extent I seriously contemplated whether I was enduring some type of hallucination for a few moments, wondering who these people could possibly be as I walked by the decrepit, zombie-like, elder male strip bar patrons. It struck me as a cliché dystopian wasteland—all of these older men, literally *zombie-like*, sitting in their cars, outside of the grimmest strip club in the city. It seemed like there *had* to be a better way to go about paying for sex. Maybe if I was of the more *innately entrepreneurial* type I would have attempted to flip my disgust into a serious business plan—a startup, *but for whorehouses* (“disrupting” the brothel market), where I’d inevitably alienate a plethora of venture capital firms in the process. But, honestly, I’d grown weary of the *narrative* surrounding entrepreneurship to the extent the thought only faintly crossed my mind. It was mostly Mark Cuban—I found him *so disingenuous*; it totally turned me off. The idea that entrepreneurship was some kind of societal panacea was laughable to me—as if we, as a society, needed to *encourage* our youth to indulge in greed?! While I don’t oppose entrepreneurship in concept, the idea that we must *promote it* seems, to me, to arise out of crucial misunderstanding of human proclivity.

A guy wearing an army jacket with his entire face and shaved scalp covered in tattoos sat in a bulletproof glass booth; we slid the cover through the slit in the bulletproof glass and walked in. It was practically pitch black, half the light in the place emanated from open phones. Balloons didn’t have a liquor license, so it never had to close, but it also didn’t have a bar, so you couldn’t buy a beer. It did, however, have a vending machine, and on top of the vending machine sat an eighteen inch TV, which sat on top of a light gray VHS player, which played gonzo pornography (anal gaping) on the eighteen inch

TV, which I noted as we took a few seats against a wall. A few dancers meandered around aimlessly among the dozen or so patrons sitting in the dark. The lack of a bar or formal stage made the seating unavoidably incongruous, like a dream where the scene is clearly nonsensical, but everyone is acting normally.

I glanced again at the gonzo pornography playing on the eighteen inch TV. I opened my phone again and started perusing the website for the purple lipstick. Eight bucks? Not bad, I thought while perusing the page for the lipstick, flicking my fingers apart on the screen to zoom in, thinking I probably shouldn't have bothered, that it seemed almost like a lame thing to do, buying girls who were married lipstick; it seemed totally lame, but I had reward points from my credit card, so I ordered the lipstick; it only took one click—it was wasn't that big of a deal, right? Not at all, I thought; it was probably fine. As I was consummating the purchase, a skinny Spanish kid with an absurdly thin mustache and full goatee, wearing a plain black fitted hat and plain black t-shirt, nudged me and said, "Sup bro?" I turned around, flummoxed, and said nothing. Unphased, he asked me if I wanted some beer, told me he could get some if I wanted, and I stared at him blankly, suddenly extremely self-conscious about the website for purple lipstick that was still displayed on my phone (it was also one of the few sources of light available in the immediate vicinity). It was as if the Spanish kid with the skinny mustache instinctively *knew* who I was buying the lipstick for, and I sat in silence, anxiously waiting for him to accuse me of buying purple lipstick for a married woman, to judge me, to excoriate me, tell me my life went off the rails somewhere.

"Yeah," Mo replied, leaning into our conversation unsolicited. The Spanish kid with the skinny mustache

told us he could get twenty bottles of Coronas for forty bucks. “*Can you get Corona Lights?*” Mo inquired eagerly. The Spanish kid said it would depend on what they *had in stock*. I wasn’t particularly interested in buying bootleg Coronas at Balloons or even staying at Balloons; I didn’t want to stay at Balloons—a longer than normal pause ensued. Balloons was either *grimier* than I’d expected or equally grimy but just a different *type* of grimy than I’d expected—like I’d expected *upscale public orgy* grimy when it was actually *five dollar handjob* grimy. I shifted my gaze out into the general population and noted a stick figure blond dancer with the skin tone of a blank canvas meandering around our vicinity; I noted a morbidly obese black woman with the skin tone of a triple creamed coffee doing the same. She had a jheri curled ponytail; they both wore ill-fitting bikinis—to my point, the blond had been walking around blatantly offering handjobs to visibly reticent patrons since we first walked in.

I straightened my arm and extended it in front of Mo’s heart as he bartered for the Coronas. I turned to the Spanish kid and asked him if he could give us a second, then Mo and I turned around and formed a two man huddle. “I don’t really wanna stay here,” I confessed, staring at Mo point blankly, then Mo dug his head deeper in the huddle and whispered, “Well, we already paid the cover...” trailing off to insinuate that it was worthwhile to stay and get our “money’s worth.” I dug my head deeper in the huddle, until our foreheads were about half an inch apart, and whispered, “Yeah, but I’m already losing my buzz...” and Mo nodded agreeably, like he always did when he didn’t agree with you, then paused for a moment, recognizing he couldn’t dig his head any deeper into the huddle, and asked me if I wanted to *get those Coronas*, and I paused, glancing

again at the gonzo pornography on the small TV screen again (noting the anus was gaped to the extent that the scene could hardly even be considered erotic), then told him not really, but if he wanted stay that was fine with me, I didn't care, and shrugged my shoulders. It was pointless to argue with Mo, especially after he and I drank more than one beer each. You could never go out for *a* drink with Mo. It *had* to be excessive. Not that I was any different. *Countless* times I'd told him, "Yeah, I'll meet out for, like, one or two," and ended up drinking excessively; for probably three years straight, every time I met up with Mo I'd tell him, "Yeah, I'll meet out for, like, one or two," then drank excessively—it was actually a material appeal of our friendship.

Having said that, I'd regret the nonchalance I displayed about staying at Balloons by mid-afternoon the next day, when I was sitting in my car with Sophia, considerably hungover, seriously considering vomiting, saying, "I mean I used to steal Playstation 3s. I used to, like, steal Italian-made men's dress shoes when I was in my early twenties..." nodding perfunctorily then magnanimously informing her I wasn't perfect either, congratulating myself for doing relatively risky things in my youth (granted there was a sliding scale of risk that may have wholly undermined my congratulatory tone), then turning around and congratulating myself for turning out *well adjusted*, benevolently working a job I didn't particularly enjoy, mired in debt. The American dream, at that point, was all about building debt—*insurmountable debt*, and who had better debt than me? I had so much debt! I dug in my pocket and told her, "Before I forget...I got this for you." I handed her the purple lipstick; she looked at it with a puzzled expression and said, "You got this," she stared down at

the lipstick, “for *me?*” She looked up in a puzzled register, as if she thought it an impossible task, me finding said lipstick online, and shouted, “*Thank you!*” clapped her hands together one time, kept the hands together, leaned over her seat and embraced me enthusiastically. I recoiled slightly, but only out of surprise, as she shouted, “You found it! This is so nice of you!”

I was playing a Cam’Ron song that noted something about being mature, handsome, mixed with a lotta ignorance, about sticking your dick in her intestines, bout to poke her chitlins, and Sophia scoffed at the lyrics, “*Ew*, those boys are ignorant,” as she peeled her body off my body. I’d taken the day off work to hang out. Ten minutes earlier, I was in a coffee shop where I’d made eye contact with a Spain-Spanish brunette wearing white capris, or maybe she glanced at me as I glanced at her; I took particular note of the glance as I held a tray with two iced coffees on it and wondered what she did for a living. She had an upper class look about her, but I also considered it possible she worked in a service industry but just dressed traditionally proper, or was in business school, or just had rich parents. I felt a decently strong attraction to her physically, and as I carried the tray of iced coffees I wondered how long Sophia and I would continue talking—how things would end, if and when they ended for good, thinking specifically about socioeconomics, how Sophia had, again, recently told me she was pursuing her GED; I thought about articles I’d read that mentioned that America was increasingly a *dual income economy* (didn’t Anastasia just say something about that?); it was the American dream, you know—two parents working, with the cost of daycare usurping the vast majority of the supplementary income; I was

thinking specifically about my sizeable student loan balance (*who had more insurmountable debt than me?*), the average salary of workers with a high school or equivalent level of education, *my salary in relation to my debt*. I thought about supporting a family with a small child, myself as a father figure and a role model, as I walked out of the coffee shop, now despondently holding a tray of iced coffees.

“Wanna get some oysters?” I asked in the car; I took a sip of coffee then winced and noted, “This coffee is like *eighty five percent milk*,” as my phone vibrated. I reluctantly checked the phone. The amount of vibrations human beings were receiving on a daily basis seemed concerning; it seemed unhealthy, narcissistic even—why do we need to communicate so incessantly all of the sudden? Whatever happened to, you know, just being silent—not talking to people and stuff? I felt like I needed to turn off all notifications, maybe get a flip phone or something; I immediately checked my phone. As I was sighing in disdain, Sophia asked where they had oysters around here. We ended up staying at Balloons the night before and, after we accepted the twenty Coronas for thirty five dollars (Mo talked five dollars off the kid’s initial price), a guy with red hair and a thick chin beard interrupted our conversation, which had shifted to oysters, and said, “Excuse me, *I don’t mean to interrupt, but*,” that he’d managed oyster bars for the past seven years, and the oysters they served at his former job were *some of the best in the state*. “I know this place—*they have some of the best oysters in the state!*” I replied enthusiastically.

She shifted her head toward her lap, and I noticed her eyelashes drooping down; they practically kissed her eye sockets. She said she didn't know; it wasn't a busy place, was it? I told her it was three o'clock, happy hour just

started so... She asked me if it was nice, and I said sure, it was pretty nice, and she said she didn't wanna go anywhere nice, and I pressed the home button on my phone; I looked at the time and irrationally toggled the child lock for the windows on and off. “*Actually*, it’s kind of a dump...to be honest.” She asked me if it was far away, her limbs were pulled close to her body, and I said, “Ummmm...couple minutes?” She asked if there was anywhere closer. My lower lip protruded as I nodded my head up and down violently; I asked her if she wanted to eat at the coffee shop—I was pretty sure they sold sandwiches, probably even pizza! She replied, “What’s that?” turning her body around in the seat, her mood now improving by the syllable. I turned my head and looked back—it looked like a Red Lobster: one of the worst *possible* places to order seafood (I considered myself somewhat of a seafood connoisseur). I trailed off despondently as she sat with her knees on the seat, her ass pressed against the dash, and she held her hands around the head-rest intently as she looked out the back window. “Aren’t they in like Chapter Eleven or something...” “*Oooh*, have you ever been?” “What about Yen Ching?” Her eyes were fixated on the lobster logo above the double doors; she asked how far it was to Yen Ching. We went to Red Lobster.

The next night was Mo’s twenty ninth birthday, and he threw himself a party at his mom’s house. Well aware it was ill-advised, I reluctantly asked Sophia to go with me; it probably wasn’t the best idea, but I shrewdly used the Red Lobster visit as leverage. “*C’monnn*, I went to Red Lobster with *youuu*,” I moaned, and she hesitantly relented. A five foot six Cape Verdean kid I’d never seen before stood in the kitchen speaking enthusiastically with Mo about a new pop song. “You hear that new



Bieber?!” he asked anxiously. “*Ridiculous*,” Mo replied. The fuck is this kid? I thought. He adjusted his wire rimmed eyeglasses, and I wondered why I only knew maybe half the people at the party when Mo and I were such close friends. There were a dozen or so people in the kitchen, including myself, Sophia, and Mo’s mom and stepdad. I was drinking my second margarita when Mo’s friend, Vera, looked at me from across the kitchen and asked if I wanted another one—“They’re good, right?!” She held up a pitcher of piss-colored liquor. I smacked my lips together and told her they were...spicy. “*This Bieber is banginnn!*” Mo shouted, “Have you heard it?” “Nah not yet. I’ve heard it’s, uh—” “*Banginnnnn!*”

I was wearing a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles t-shirt under a gray cardigan, but had I known the guest list in advance, or if Mo just warned me a plethora of people I didn’t know would be in attendance, I probably would have dressed more conservatively. Dressing ironically in the company of people you didn’t know was always a magnet for asinine conversation: people commenting on your shirt, noting how they *ironically appreciate* you *ironically wearing* that shirt, and then you feel pressure, like there’s some kind of *ironic bond* you’ve entered, that you’re now *involuntarily* a part of, with someone you barely know, and there’s nothing more misguided than becoming *bonded* with someone you barely know. That’s why I always try to dress as blandly as possible amongst all but a few individuals. Ideally, I want to keep the potential conversation pieces to a minimum, *especially* if they’re ironic.

But there I was, in the middle of Mo’s kitchen wearing a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles t-shirt ironically: a fucking *bull’s eye* for ironic conversation. Mo’s mom said hello. She sipped a glass of white wine; she ate some crackers dipped in guacamole. I introduced Sophia and

felt nervous about the whole process; I think she may have felt the same; she definitely did, and I made a point, at least at the beginning of the night, to steer the discussion away from any talk of relationships, not that I *cared*, but I thought she may have, that I might have. My ironic t-shirt didn't help matters; who knew where that type of small talk could lead? Ironic people love discussing the mundanity of the modern day relationship. How would I respond if someone asked, "Is that your girlfriend?" If someone *ironically* asked, "Is that your *girlfriend*?" The bottle of white wine stood cork out in the middle of the island, and Mo slouched next to his mom, leaning on the island—slouched next to him was a slender brunette he'd just met; she was posed meekly; she was a *shadow-like figure*—she actually stayed in that exact same pose, a *shadow-like pose*, for more or less the entire night. If Mo was by the stove, shoveling a meatball in his mouth, there she was—leaning in, wearing a blank expression three feet behind him... If Mo was by the island in the kitchen, chugging a glass of red wine, there she was—smiling sadly and loosely hugging his torso... If Mo went to the bathroom to take a piss, there she was—noncommittally twiddling her thumbs under the archway outside... I didn't see the appeal.

A few minutes after urinating Mo's face appeared two inches from the bridge of my nose. His bushy black beard was disproportionately concentrated in the goatee region, and he told me he wasn't smoking any weed tonight, how about me?! I exhaled and made an unappealing groan-like sound, stretched my arms above my head and agreed—I probably wouldn't smoke any weed either. I didn't feel a pressing need to get high. "Want some of this scotch?!" he shouted excitedly as he pulled a large brown bottle out of a wooden case. After

he shouted, “Look at this!” he told me the scotch was distilled twenty nine years ago; it was just as old as him! I held out the glass he’d handed me then simultaneously made a sincere but effeminate hand motion and moaned, “*Ohh*, that’s *too* much,” after a few ounces immediately settled at the bottom. “You want some of this?!” Mo asked Sophia, moving the bottle a few inches in her direction as she politely declined, raising her wine glass gingerly.

Mo held up his seven-eighths full rocks glass jovially, then he nodded his head and suggested we take the drinks outside. The slender brunette, who had been standing mute seven feet to our left during the entire exchange, forced a brief smile, and I smiled back awkwardly, recognizing that Mo was *clearly* acting differently around her, that he was acting considerably *less ignorant* than he normally would act, especially on a special occasion, especially on his *birthday*. I found myself resenting his manners, resenting his muted ignorance—who was he turning into? Inviting a bunch of people *I* didn’t know to his birthday? Acting polite? Being even-keeled rather than vacillating between depressing bouts of silence and manic bursts of drunkenness? I asked him who was out on the patio, and he said, “Vera has Cali Kush!” I tried to chug as much of the scotch as possible while walking. I turned back to Sophia and whispered, “Don’t act too meek,” in a concerned tone while walking. She whispered back, now clearly concerned she was acting too meek, leaning in toward me until our shoulders brushed together slightly. I told her no, she wasn’t acting *that* meek, but the other girl was being *so* meek—the other girl looked like a real asshole. She nodded uncomfortably and I went on; I said, “She can’t just interact like an adult?!” incredulously as we tumbled down the stairs and into the

fenced-in backyard porch area. She seemed too nervous (she actually seemed uncomfortable in a general sense) to vocally co-sign that aggressive of a proclamation—she just kind of nodded her head blankly.

When we got out to the patio, I asked Vera if her weed was really from California; she confirmed the weed was indeed from California, that she was out there last month, and her ex-boyfriend was nice enough to sneak some back for her. I made an incredulous expression as I replied, “*You can do that?* With TSA and...?” “Yeah,” she replied in a elucidative tone, “he just shoved it up his asshole.” “Oh,” I replied, “looks like...you have a lot of it?” I glanced at the large plastic Ziploc sandwich bag filled with hearty chunks of weed on the glass table; I pulled down on my eyelids and stretched out the fatigue. I suggested it was probably pretty strong stuff then and trailed off in an interrogative tone, and she replied in a truncated grunt as she inhaled, then told me that it was just a different *type* of high, then extended the piece like a finger roll in my direction. “You want some?” I glanced over at Mo—who was now standing in the corner of the patio, engulfed by his own shadow, and staring in my direction with his eyebrows flickering up and down excitedly. I turned back to Vera and jovially accepted the piece, slid my index finger over its blowhole—the first puff felt like oxygen in my lungs. I giggled a little. “Tee-hee,” I said then held out the piece, but Vera demurred and asked me if I wanted another hit. “*Take two and pass right?!*” I said.

Things declined precipitously from there. The mixture of margaritas, scotch, and Cali Kush apparently *dislocated* my consciousness from a strictly *linear* interpretation of time. I told Sophia my heart felt like it was going three—no, *eighteen*—times its normal pace. I

vomited in a plastic bag on Mo's mom's front lawn—I left the bag there. I forgot all the rules to the card game we played—I ruined the game. Sophia had to drive my car home. We left the party early and everyone was embarrassed for me. On the ride home, I felt like it was possible I was dying, that I was ominously fading to black, like my consciousness had grown some separate side—a darker, *deader* side that I never believed in, that was now coming for me in a sort of passive vengeance. I was almost positive I was going to perish and suddenly felt as though I *didn't* want to die, despite the fact I thought it healthy to occasionally consider suicide. Mo picked me up the next day and actually made me retrieve my bag of puke, which was still lying idly on his mom's front lawn, and throw it out at my place, per his mom's request.

I apologized to Sophia about the whole thing: the card game, the vomiting, etc., but she didn't seem all that concerned about it; it wasn't a big deal to her—she was rarely phased by anyone being incredibly fucked up; she had a tendency to find the humor in fucked up things and people. It worked well for the both of us—I liked fucked up things and people too. She whispered, “Look over there,” as she glanced at a hefty, Hispanic waitress wearing a short beige t-shirt with the word “PINK” printed on it in green, as I glanced at a guy I felt reasonably certain sold fairly large quantities of cocaine as he enjoyed a relaxing mixed drink at the bar. “You know who wore that first?” she flashed me a disapproving screw face and glanced back at the dancer. “They're all biting my style...” Given her stature, there was an incongruity to her when she talked shit, but—in her defense—I definitely remembered her wearing a t-shirt *like* that, yet I wasn't sure if she wore it before the

hefty waitress. To be honest, I didn't know enough about the waitress to say for sure. A raspy-voiced female bartender in her mid-forties with closely cropped hair, wearing a Harley Davidson silver studded belt, shouted enthusiastically that she thought we should be on that reality TV show—you know, the one about the people dating naked! I reflexively noted we weren't naked and she said, "Huh?" and I ignored her response, pretending I didn't hear her response but realizing she may have believed I was simply ignoring her, which I was. I'd actually bumped into that *same* raspy-voiced bartender at a dive bar the previous summer; she was making out with a guy wearing jean shorts—in the *geometric center* of the deck of the dive bar—and I made a disgusted face to my sister, who was sitting next to me, also (already) making a disgusted face.

It was almost eight pm. The sun was still up. Sophia fiddled with her outfit, and I contemplated the awkward pause as I made eye contact with Todd Cilantro. I asked Sophia if she wanted to go out to the patio. Todd was a childhood friend of Anastasia's, about six feet tall with crew cut styled bright blond hair—he was smiling in the middle of the bar like an asshole. Anastasia said he was the first guy she ever did more than make out with; she said she whacked him off at her parents' house when they were both in middle school, that it didn't take that long, that he was terrible in bed, that he took the fall for her when they got caught with beer on a local beach, when they were still underage, one summer (the summer they were fucking). She felt indebted to him for that.

The patio was a tiki bar huddled under the highway's overpass; the sun was sunk halfway behind the freeway; its glare firmly late summer as we sat on the sand-colored futons the bar was attempting to pass off as couches. Sophia held her drink with both hands and told

me her daughter was eating way too much peanut butter of late. She stuck her flat stomach out as she sat on the sand-colored futon and stretched her lower back. I asked her what was in her drink; she said, "Um, vodka and—" I asked her for a sip and went, "Mmmm," while puckering my lips as I tasted it, letting the liquid massage my taste buds. I told her it was good, "*really sweet though,*" still puckering my lips, then challenged her comment about the peanut butter. I told her I brought peanut butter and jelly to work sometimes; it wasn't *that* bad for you, right? "*Noooo,*" she moaned in a tone that suggested I was making a grave mistake by incorporating peanut butter into my regular diet, "it's not good for you at all!" I scratched my inner thigh by rubbing the denim against the skin and said, "What about the protein?" "*Nooo,* there's a lot of fat. *And not the good type of fat either!*" I shrugged nonplussed and looked around the patio blankly, disinterested in having my lunch choices denigrated any further.

About half a dozen people stood outside—two waitresses on their breaks smoked cigarettes and discussed their car insurance payments; their quoted rates sounded surprisingly reasonable. Her knees knocked together as she rhetorically asked me if I liked the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Obviously I did. She said, "We saw the new movie last weekend." I glanced at her bare legs; for a second I noted they were kind of shaped like very thin triangles—I thought about shapes: the both of us as richly detailed, yet two dimensional, figures made wholly of interrelated shapes. Wouldn't life be improved immeasurably if everyone was two dimensional? Richly detailed—but two dimensional? I thought our tans were comparable, but she insisted she was darker. "Was it any good?" I asked as my glance shifted back up, appropriately. I told her I was generally

skeptical of remakes, and she said, “It was good,” in an abnormal tone of voice, told me, “It was *family day*.” *Family day*, I thought while sitting on the sand-colored futon on the patio, listening to Sophia speak in what seemed to be an abnormal tone of voice. “We went and saw it at the mall...the one by the arcade...” she trailed off. I was genuinely unsure of the name of the mall’s arcade. She opted out of eye contact as she pensively said, “That’s near you, right? You ever go to that one?” and a minor pause ensued, and I told her, yeah, of course—I spent my days off there riding up and down the escalators all day, *you know*, just waiting to bump into people I know. “*Maybe you?*” and she punched me in the shoulder, after a decent wind up, with her right fist.

“I think I wanna be a phlebotomist.” Her entire face was engulfed by a wide-eyed look that resembled hope. She wore the same one piece turquoise dress she wore the night she told me about the ATM machine—about the face bleeding, about the shirt unbuttoned, like, all of the way down. I asked her what a phlebotomist was, thinking reflexively about lobotomies. “It’s like a nurse...but you just take blood.” It was midnight—the place was slow, and I’d unintentionally drunk the entire night away; she sat on the stool next to me, also having unintentionally drunk the entire night away. I looked at her; she wasn’t wearing underwear. I was immediately aroused but also hesitant to address it—she shushed softly, placing her index finger over her lips sensually, drunkenly. I thought about how I usually wasn’t that excited at the sight of an isolated vagina, how I was arguably *overly* excited at the sight of her isolated vagina.

Earlier in the night, I met a guy named Tony and his two friends—one of whom was an erudite, slightly



overweight blonde, the other a slender, slightly effeminate younger guy, and they both told me, somewhat despondently, they worked for Bank of America. “Oh, cool,” I replied unenthusiastically. All three were still in the vicinity as Sophia asked me if I knew phlebotomists could make like *seventy thousand dollars a year*? She pulled down her dress a little, still sitting on the stool, and I said, “Oh yeah?” as I ripped the stem off a beer can I finished half an hour earlier. I started chewing on the vodka tinged ice at the bottom of my glass. I was pretty sure Tony was either a drug dealer or a low level professional criminal or both—after about ten minutes of being around him, I remembered I used to see him at a neighborhood bar with what I thought was a mafia looking older guy about five years ago. “You look familiar....*I know you?*” he asked me while we were in the bathroom, while we were standing in front of urinals, while we were urinating side by side, while we were staring at the bathroom ceiling, while we were attempting to avoid looking at each other’s penis, while we were casually conversing.

Tony had a square jaw and slicked back black hair—his eyes were dark and beady, and he had a tendency to dart his eyes from one side of the room to the other, as if important events were continuously, spontaneously occurring (or he was concerned with the potential presence of law enforcement?). He wore a silk, baby blue button up shirt with open toe sandals and boot cut jeans and seemed to know everyone in the bar. “*Wendyyyy*. Great to see you, hun! Can we get a couple a shots over eah?!” he said before turning to me and asking if I enjoyed a particular light beer and saying, “*Take dat*,” placing a can of the light beer on the bar in front of me, where I sat by myself. Later, Tony’s slender male friend walked up to Sophia and said, “Oh...my...*god*...you

are...so...cute!" He petted her wavy black hair; he told me not to get offended, but I kind of reminded him of Drake, and I wasn't offended but also didn't take it as a compliment, and Sophia exclaimed, "Oooh," like a mother reacting to a compliment given to her first born son as he said the word "Drake." She walked over to a table then back to us; the slender guy and I made *small talk*—she whispered softly in my ear, "Don't let him steal you from me," then gazed at me sensually, and I said, "What am I? *Gay?*" with no regard for the slender guy's feelings (in retrospect, he may have been homosexual) and reflected briefly back to a homoerotic experience I endured as a preteen. I realized, on some level, it was irrational jealousy, psychotic envy that inspired her comment—which, of course, was disconcerting in its own way—but I let it go and continued to make asinine small talk with the slender guy. After Sophia walked away again, the blonde girl asked me if I knew *her*—in reference to Sophia—and I didn't know how to answer. I felt socially awkward; I was also, at that point, incredibly drunk. Before I replied, the blonde continued, saying, "She was all over you," in a pejorative and/or reticent tone, which I probably should have taken as a compliment, but I didn't take it as a compliment; it made me deeply uncomfortable, and I replied, "Oh."

Later, Sophia would tell me, "You can't have *everything you want*," with a fair amount of playfulness, but also with an undercurrent of sincerity, as I stood with my back against a wall feeling increasingly tired. It was twenty of two, and the bar closed at two. Her body was pressed up against my body from my chest down; her face occupied the space between my nipples; her nipples book-ended my belly button; her hair gel greased my light grey thermal just slightly. I made a mental note to

throw it in the hamper when I got home. She told me she should've never told me her last name, that she *slipped up*, then she dramatically sighed, her playfulness subsiding slowly, and I took offense, thinking about the "don't let him steal you from me" comment an hour earlier, and accused her of being capricious in my head.

I thought about a couple things at the same time—I gazed out at nothing in the bar with her forehead resting between my breasts: I thought about her husband sitting in his jail cell, where he'd sit possibly for the rest of his life, the girl taking care of a fatherless child because of his actions, me nearly peeing my pants at a Driving To Endanger misdemeanor court date after I almost killed a girl on a bike pulling out of a flower shop in my shitty Oldsmobile (the same Oldsmobile I would almost kill myself in, via carbon monoxide poisoning, a year later while trying to have sex with a plus-sized girl from Cyprus); I thought about going to meet my lawyer and shaking with anxiety; I thought about Anastasia calling me on December Twenty Third to tell me she was engaged—going home and drinking cup of coffee after cup of coffee until I couldn't feel my face. I thought about all of that, amorally, in a totally *nonjudgmental* state, as we sat back down.

Sophia remained more or less motionless with her arms crossed. Her eyes only fleetingly met mine as I stood back up; I tilted my head back exhaustedly then put my hand on her thigh and leaned over. She cocked her head, and I stretched my arms Jesus-on-the-cross like. I asked her if she wanted another one, and she told me, "I need to *relax*." She said it with a negative connotation in her voice, perhaps a little accusatory? I considered going home; I noticed Wu glance over at us but couldn't decipher the connotation of the glance. I wiped some perspiration from the tops of my eyebrows and said,

“Honestly,” I massaged the stickiness of my temple, “*Honestly*, I could use, like, I don’t know. A fucking *bath* or something... I’m so tired.” I paused then told her I’d heard baths were actually *filthy* to take, that they were apparently like a *cesspool* of germs.

We cracked open a couple cans of beer on our way out of town. Mo drove with one hand on the wheel, one hand on the rim of his beer; his large friend was squished into the backseat and asked me if I was aware he used to *bounce up here*? “Oh, yeah?” I said—although I was *more than well aware* Mo’s friend used to bounce, because I knew his friend *when* he was a bouncer, because his friend brought up his prior history of bouncing more or less incessantly. He told us, if we wanted, he could get us into Coconut Joe’s for free. “Coconut *Joe’s?!?*” I repeated, raising the pitch of my voice to an absurdly sarcastic falsetto and made an exaggerated jerking off motion to Mo—forgetting for a moment that his friend sat in the middle seat in the back and, by doing so, could easily see my hand moving up and down by my crotch. He replied in a tone that made it apparent he witnessed the exaggerated jerking off motion.

Sitting at a nondescript bar counter, Mo perused a menu and asked me if I was gonna eat anything. I told him I had a couple fried eggs before we came, although at the time I was perusing a menu myself. Taken aback somewhat, he told me he thought we were gonna eat out, that *we had an agreement* to eat out; I told him I’d probably get a burrito later or something—I didn’t look up at him. I felt more satiated from the eggs than I’d expected. Mo’s friend raised his head as if he was getting a whiff of something and with his index finger grabbed the bartender’s attention to ask, “What’s the deal with

the cheesy fries?” Mo grabbed my attention to point to a line on the menu that read, “Shots - Buy One, Get One Free!” and asked, “You wanna get a shot a tequila?” Mo’s friend grabbed the bartender’s attention to point to a line on the menu above the bar that read, “Jumbo Cheesy Fries - \$7.99!” and said, “Let me get an order a those?” Mo ordered tequila shots—the bartender poured too much and clumsily apologized, offering us the excess. I nervously inquired if those were double shots as the bartender handed us three rocks glasses three-fourths filled with tequila.

I drank the excessively large shot of tequila in two and a half gulps, and my phone began to ring—the caller ID was blocked. I stared at the screen, a little startled and also a little afraid, as I walked outside; I hit the answer button and said “Hello.” I spoke staccato as I stumbled out the door; I was swallowing my saliva violently—repeatedly. “*Are you drunk?*” Sophia asked on the phone, and I told her no, pensively scratching the tip of my nose, looking down at the cement—a group of Swedish tourists walked by. “No, not really, why?” Did I sound different? I was just out with a couple friends, nothing big. “*Oh,*” she paused; she was just calling to see if, “maybe I had time to stop by tonight,” to grab a drink after, or— The night before Sophia gave me a blowjob. “Oh really?” I said, “Well, I’m out of town right now, but when I get back I’ll—” “*Oh.*” “Do you want me to text you when I—” “*No, that’s fine.*” “Are you sure?” Yeah, she’s sure. I’ll text her either way, but that’s not necessary. She was at work anyway—she’d probably be busy later. I had a vision, quite vivid, of her standing in the kitchen with a sad face next to a sous-chef, her big ass phone pressed against her face. The word *blowjob* echoed in my brain, alongside a GIF-length memory of her giving me the

blowjob the night before (she claimed she *rarely* gave blowjobs; it was a big deal).

It was almost as if I'd completely forgot she gave me a blowjob the night before, almost as if I'd found myself in the middle of a terrible dream where I'd completely forgotten the *one thing I should have remembered*, only remembering the one thing immediately after I'd downed a large shot of tequila and found myself on the precipice of vomiting on a moderately trafficked sidewalk. I said, "Oh, ok," nervously thinking of things to say, and she repeated, "It's fine," and I repeated the words, "Oh, ok"—nervously thinking of things to say. She asked me if I needed to get back to my friends. I said, "Nah." She told me she *felt bad*—about what? She didn't wanna keep me from my friends! "Fuck that; how're you feeling?" She was fine; was she mad? No, why would she be mad? I didn't know, I just wanted to make sure she wasn't mad. She said, "You're cute," and I was surprised and relieved. I told her thank you; she said, "*Mmhmm*," I clarified that I was a grown man though, and that was good because she *needed* a man. "*I'm fully grown*," I said, "*I'm like completely done growing*."

In retrospect, maybe I should've hung around post-blowjob and waited for a call. I felt uneasy, but it didn't seem healthy to just wait around like that; it seemed desperate—but also possibly heartwarming. Mo leaned into me anxiously as I rubbed my hands together back in the bar and asked me, "*Was-that-the-waitress?*" Sadly, I found myself referring to Sophia as *the waitress* at times as well. It was wrong of me. Yet, I found myself so averse to discussing the situation—no, *of course*, I didn't want to get into the *homicide*, the *marriage*, but it was more than that: I needed to protect myself. And by myself, I mean my reputation. And by my reputation, I mean my ego. And by my ego, I mean a void that I

conflated with my ego; a void that had a voracious appetite for my brooding, my misery, my nihilistic tendencies. In any case, I couldn't have a repeat of *Anastasia's engagement*. I couldn't endure it. I was fine with lies—I'd reconciled myself to a pervasive dishonesty that had infiltrated nearly all aspects of my relationships—as long as they didn't make me look bad in public.

The following evening I'd find myself eating two artichokes at a pace where pulling apart and eating both artichokes would take upwards of forty to fifty minutes. I was enjoying the journey. I daydrank with my sister and her boyfriend earlier in the day, but we didn't do much other than drink Mai Tais at a renovated Chinese restaurant across the street and go to a bar that wasn't open yet. The artichokes made my hands exceptionally slimy, and I could feel the skin around my mouth was grotesquely slick as well. When I was with my sister and her boyfriend, who I didn't usually drink with, I'd felt a little awkward at first but increasingly euphoric as the day progressed, which I supposed was par for the course for daydrinking. Later, when eating artichokes by myself, I felt blasé, elated when I got a good chunk of artichoke, and abutting depressed and lonely. After I ate, I showered and went to visit Sophia before she got busy, which I hadn't planned to do; I was unsure of what I would do after. I walked in and waited maybe twenty minutes until I saw her, and she approached me and said, "How are you?" in a disaffected tone, like she barely knew me, or didn't want to know me to the extent that she did, or didn't want to see me all that much, or I was reading too much into her tone. I asked her if everything was ok, and she said, "Yeah," in a tone similarly disaffected to the one she said, "How are you?" in—then

we sat awkwardly for more moments than conversational silences should normally extend, then I said something aggressive, and she asked me why I was being so aggressive in a tone that was—*paradoxically*, I thought—*more* friendly than her previous tones. I should just let it go, I thought, sitting at the bar. Maybe just say, “Have a good night,” and go home—just recognize it isn’t a good night for either of us and cut both of our losses.

Instead I confessed my feelings—or confessed my feelings to an *extent*—feelings I’d mostly expressed indirectly, but that I reiterated more directly, to which she didn’t really confess to the same degree, or at least to the degree I’d have liked, which was probably, at the time, an impossible degree. Anastasia told me she didn’t *know how I felt* after I protested after she got engaged, which I had always assumed was a lie, but I felt a need to directly confess *how I felt* to Sophia, so she wouldn’t have that out, or at least so she couldn’t tell me she *didn’t know how I felt*, but she would probably have the same out—if she just lied like I assumed Anastasia did. She told me she was gonna get busy soon; we both stood against a wall in the back trying to keep our voices down, but I had a disconcerting feeling certain people were overhearing our conversation and tried to reconcile myself to that fact as I continued to speak and listen. “I know it’s probably not the right time, but I don’t know....I just wanted to, uh, make sure we’re on the same page?” She turned toward the middle of the bar and started to speak, trailed off, peered into the heart of the bar, which was getting pretty busy, then turned to me and said, “Go with your gut.”

She’d call me two times in a row at ten thirty the next night to tell me that she was feeling sick, that she’d taken a ride to talk for a little bit. The breeze was brisk, but it



was still pretty nice out, and I sat inside a Nuevo Italian restaurant when she called me twice at about eleven pm—the kitchen closed at eleven pm. Mo was wearing sweatpants; we'd just ordered seventy dollars of food. Our waiter was fair skinned with red hair; he'd been homicidally pacing around since we sat down. I mouthed, "Yeah, I'll have another," inaudibly to him as he walked by; I held up my beer bottle and pointed to it with my index finger, raising my eyebrows inquisitively. Outside, a male teen ran full speed from a sandwich shop across the street into a hookah bar without stopping or slowing down.

A few days later I'd gaze out into nothing yearning for vodka, walking with Sophia. She wore all black with the sky blue eyeshadow; she was telling me she could pimp me out in a tone that seemed pleasing to me, and I squinted and said, "*Like?*" with the *i* slightly extended. She looked like a Halloween costume. I had my shirt tucked in like an asshole. I looked at my reflection in the store window, and all I saw were eyebrows. "I don't know...to old ladies. Maybe some younger ones too," she said, somewhat proudly I thought, and I told her I'm not interested in that, and she told me that girls pay too, you know. I told her that's good to know, that it was nice she had connections, but no—I don't support sex trafficking. She grabbed my hand as we descended a set of stairs, and I went on; I shifted my gaze down toward her, accepting her small hand, a little rough in the palms, into mine. She giggled, and I acted as if I was serious for another few seconds; I looked at her stone-faced and said, "*I'm not for sale,*" then giggled in a high register. "*Neither am I,*" she replied, serious but still smiling.

We walked down the stone steps, and she took each one carefully, gingerly, still holding my hand as we reached

the bottom. She asked me, “How’s, um, what his name? Mo?” and I asked her, “You wanna go here?” as I turned my palm upward and extended my hand in a *voilà* motion toward a small, grey-bricked Mediterranean restaurant. “I don’t know...is it fancy?” Across the parking lot sat a large Staples, and I made the observation, “You never see Staples anymore,” and opened the door. The only people in the grey-bricked Mediterranean restaurant were the wait staff. I turned to her and said, “Too fancy?” She nodded and said, “You *knowww meee*,” then apologized and said, “Sometimes I just get nervous.” We ascended the stairs we’d just descended—it was fine. No worries! I thought. We just sat in my car for a few minutes, cooled down and rerouted elsewhere.

Sitting in the back of a dimly lit Greek restaurant on the east side I said, “I mean, I’m not trying to—” “I know,” she said sagely. “It’s just, I don’t know. I’ve been getting kind of mixed signals from—” “I know,” she said sagely, her tone reassuring. She smiled and I considered delving deeper into the issue but—enriched with the benefit of having not been drinking for hours on end—didn’t. I softly, considerately, sipped an overpriced espresso; she had a sugar free energy drink en route. She said, “You’re pretty hairy, huh?” I nodded toward my exposed forearms, which were definitely hairier than average, and said, “You never noticed?” I spoke in a surprised, skeptical but unoffended, tone. “No, I have.” “Yeah, I actually used to shave my entire body....but I’m trying to go for a more authentic look of late,” I said, which was true—the demands of manscaping, coupled with sheer amount of body hair I’d been endowed with, had seemed to reach the point of diminishing returns in recent years.

A handful of college students sat in the booth behind us. I turned around and glanced briefly at them; as I turned back around, I noticed Sophia lifting her right index nail into the vicinity of her right nostril and exclaimed, “You picking your nose?!” without thinking. She immediately whipped the finger under the table and vehemently denied the allegation then glanced, red herring-like, at the other booth. She claimed she was just scratching it, the outside of the nostril; she pointed to the outside of her opposite nostril with the hand that remained above the table—the hand that I believed she picked her nose with remained under the table. One of the college kids started speaking loudly, in an extremely nasal voice, talking about collective thought, how it wasn’t *interesting in isolation, per se*, then paused. I heard a gulp of water, then he continued to speak, incredibly pretentiously I thought. “*Ugh*,” I whispered carefully across the table, “these kids...” She sat unconcerned, not really engaging with my comment. “You don’t think they’re complete twats?” I prodded. Her face barely moved, and I noticed the hue of her cheeks seem to lighten in tone and wondered what it could mean—considered that all things had no meaning, that there was no God and life was wholly meaningless as she said she didn’t know, that they’re weren’t really bothering her, she guessed. The waitress delivered her sugar free energy drink; she asked the waitress for a straw. I told her, “I don’t know....they’re just so *pretentious*, you know? So *spoiled!*”

Back at my apartment, Sophia had her pants off; she was on my bed; I was on my bed too; I took my pants off too. I felt a light cramping in my legs as she sat on top of me—I noted the last game of three-on-three basketball I played that morning was probably superfluous. I cupped

her ass with both palms and told her we didn't have to do anything; we were both reminding one another we didn't have to have sex—that it was totally unnecessary, that we didn't even *want* to do it; there was no need; the penis didn't belong in the vagina—that was absurd. The penis in the *vagina*?! Ridiculous, we thought. She asked me if I'd fucked lately and cut off my immediate denial to say, “No. *Seriously.*” She'd never been with a Macaque guy before—she was barely aware where Gibraltar was on a map; geography wasn't her strong suit. I began to shift around glitch-like with her torso sitting firmly on my torso, as the light cramping in my legs became acute in my right thigh, and I screamed, “Ow!” repeatedly, and she fell back slightly then, with her knees, lifted her ass up off the most northern tip of my penis, both knees pressed into my thighs; she asked me what was wrong in a more insouciant tone than I'd expected. “Ahhhh, my *thigh!*” I replied and straightened my right leg as straight as I possibly could—she turned around to look back at it; the muscle continued to tighten. I continued to scream, forcefully grabbing the thigh as I catapulted my head backward in immense pain; she hopped off me as I squirmed around portentously, naked on my bed; my erection deflating like a lightly punctured birthday balloon—there was no doubt I had a severe charley horse.

As I was in the midst of screaming in agony Sophia said, “Oh my god, *what happened?!*” now sincerely curious and seeming urgent—no longer insouciant—cupping her hands around her mouth as I told her, in an excruciating fashion, that I played basketball for too long, that my muscle, it was all tightening up! “Oh my god, you never told me you played, what? In a league? You didn't have to hang out if you just had a game! I feel bad.” “*No-no,*” I clenched my thigh tightly, with all of my strength, with

both of my hands, “I just play *streetball*. Down the *street*, you know, with some, *ahhhh*, high school kids!” The muscle felt hard as cement as I gripped it. It felt like it’d turned itself upside down *inside of* my leg, and I told her to *feel this* and she approached gingerly—she still had no pants on; I contorted my neck awkwardly and caught an unobstructed glance of her naked thighs. She put one finger on my thigh and said, “*Ooh*, that’s hard.” Was I gonna have to go to the hospital? “Just get me a warm washcloth....*please*.” She turned around and jogged five feet to the kitchen and asked me where I kept the cloths; I said, “*That* cabinet,” making eye contact with her, nodding to the cabinet. “*This* one?” She opened a cabinet of dish detergent and disposable razor blades, and I said, “No. The one to the west of it.” “Oh, *this* one?” She opened a cabinet with a frying pan and a plastic spatula in it, and I clenched my thigh tighter and moaned, “The one to the *left*.” She moved her ass back three feet, opened the next cabinet, grabbed a cloth, ran the faucet until the water got hot, put the cloth under the hot water, then pranced over with the hot washcloth and dropped it on my thigh—I exhaled orgasmically as the cloth made contact with the muscle.

“*Have you ever been tested?*” she asked softly, with a decent amount of attitude evident in her voice, a few days later—almost a week later, after about a half hour of hanging out. I was playing a song by an artist that I prefaced with the caveat, “This is really weird, electronic, stuff, but I like it.” I’d finally put the pieces together—the mysterious “thing” she was doing the few times she said had an “appointment” before we met up; it was laser hair removal. She wouldn’t tell me where though; instead she said, “*Have you ever been tested?*” I was jotting a few ancillary items onto my grocery list in my phone,

thinking about how I'd be theoretically interested in laser hair removal, but how it was totally impractical for me financially; my eyes meandered up, and I said, "...like for *STDs*?" "Yeah. Have you ever?" "Yeah, of course. I had a urethral infection called 'Urethritis' when I was twenty one, which is actually the only time I've ever had any sort of infection in my penis." I placed the phone in a cupholder then said, "And even that, I'm pretty sure, was just from jerking—" I lowered the register of my voice and involuntarily cleared my throat, silently admitting to myself I hadn't meant to begin the sentence I'd begun, then begrudgingly uttered the words, "...*off into a sock repeatedly.*"

"Well, I knew *I* was good," she said, "I haven't been with anyone, but," she paused for a beat then told me you can never be too careful, and her voice rose into a squeaky, childlike register as she said, "*I can't be fucking around,*" and the squeaky register undercut the more serious intention of the comment. She seemed confident, *too* confident to be lying, I thought at the time. I furrowed my brow and told her that, just for the record, I wasn't that promiscuous either. The evening air was dense and getting denser in proportion to the daylight fading out; I made an attempt for eye contact and let her know she didn't have to believe me. "I was actually a virgin until I was twenty, if that helps corroborate." "We'll figure it out." Go with your gut. I involuntarily imagined her having sex other men and tried to train myself not to care. We got out my car and stood in silence for a minute; if she harbored any resentment, regrets, *fear*, anxiety, frustration, *emotion*—then she hid it well, because at the time all I inferred was a vague sense of fatigue.

Having said that, the next night she told me, “If you did all of this then left I’d fucking murder you,” after I said, “What do you think I’m doing all of this and I’m not serious?” The night before I thought for sure, when I thought I heard a subtle knock at my door, that her husband had broken out of prison and discovered where I lived. I didn’t answer the door and didn’t even check the peephole for twenty minutes, just in case he was gonna wait until I looked through the peephole then, once he saw an eye in the peephole, stick some kind of thin sword through the hole to stab me through the eye, into my brain, and kill me instantly. I didn’t sleep well. The simple fact of the matter—the fact that, quite frankly, I’ve never been able to get around myself—is that regardless of whatever bond you feel you’ve developed with another human being, you’ll never empirically verify how someone else feels about you; at best, your understanding of *your own feelings* are *foreground estimates*, and your level of knowledge with regard to *others* moves in tandem with your level of apathy—the simple fact of the matter is that, *as far as human relations go*, we still haven’t progressed past, “Nothing exists. Even if something exists, nothing can be known about it. Even if something can be known about it, knowledge about it can’t be communicated to others. Even if it can be communicated, it can’t be understood.” Twenty four hundred years after the fact, and that’s still the most accurate description of human intelligence known to man! Humanity’s greatest achievement is *without a doubt* artificial intelligence, you’ll find no argument from me there—because we still know *absolutely nothing* about human intelligence, and it’s sad! I, for one, am sincerely sad about it (it’s so sad). In fact, everything we *do* know about the world is actually *wholly* derivative of the fact we silently accept the fact

*we know nothing* about our own intelligence, of our own *feelings*, and never will! We've given up—and that, in my opinion, is why we have such cool computers.

Maybe somewhat intentionally, a few nights later I told Sophia, “You know, when I *first* saw you, I thought you were this girl I had a major crush on in college? She dated some Greek guy I thought looked a lot like me—” “You were better looking though, right?” she replied, not interrupting as much as taking shrewd advantage of a natural pause in the anecdote, smiling and leaning into me in a way that displayed earnest interest in my story. “Obviously.” I replied confidently, drunkenly. “Well, I don't wanna be a rebound!” she said, laughing but also genuinely concerned. I shook my head and pedantically informed her that: A) she was the one married, so wouldn't I be the rebound? And B) I never dated the girl from college, so I was pretty sure that, technically, she couldn't be a “rebound” on a girl I never had sex with or dated. “Whatever. You know what I mean,” she said. “Yeah, whatevuh,” I said and nudged her shoulder with my shoulder, then she nudged my shoulder harder than I nudged her shoulder.

She was telling me she watched the same VHS porno every time she masturbated—that it was a double penetration old school tape, and from the way she described it it sounded eighties-era, possibly late-nineties, Jenna Jameson-era but that would be at the latest, I thought. “But the girl looked like she really enjoyed it,” she said, “It wasn't fake like some others I've seen.” “*You whack off to a videotape? The same one? Over and over?*” I said. “Well, I have to be careful! I can only do it at specific times. And I have to be quick...” she said, and I pulled out my phone, went on the internet, and started scrolling through pornographic pictures and



GIFs posted hourly—sometimes even more frequently than that—and displayed the phone over my shoulder. “Where do you find that stuff?” she asked as she hesitantly touched the screen and expanded one of the images. “The internet,” I replied, “It’s like eighty five percent porn.” She looked at me wide-eyed then looked back at the phone as a run-of-the-mill double blowjob GIF repeatedly itself infinitely. “No, seriously,” I continued, “they’ve done studies. It is.” I gave her a few sites to check out, but she started watching full scenes, talking to me about how she only had time to watch one video—sometimes not even. “What do you mean it was like *half an hour*?” I’d scold, inquiring why she didn’t just skim to the good parts—the cumshots, the nutlicks, junctures of that nature—perplexed, almost in disbelief. Who doesn’t fast forward porn; is this some kind of joke? I thought and found myself making assumptions about her character, excoriating myself for making these unjust assumptions with regard to her character—but, then again, some of the things we’d done sexually were fairly deviant, which I appreciated, but those deviant acts possibly lent merit to my skepticism? Perhaps the most tragic mistake we ever made was engaging in sexual acts people should only engage in with people they view as objects—it was possible you should only engage in deviant behavior with people you’re intent on objectifying.

She told me she preferred to get emotionally invested in the scenes, and I thought about nothing for a few seconds then asked her how she did it, if she didn’t mind me asking... “I mean,” I shrugged once meekly, “I think we’re on close enough terms now, right?” She tilted her head at an angle skeptically and told me she had a vibrator, and I said cool. She told me she also had a small dildo, that if she did it right she could squirt,

well...yeah, she could squirt. I told her sometimes I used Vaseline. We were drinking iced coffee again; she wore one of the three necklaces she normally wore to cover up a scar on her chest; she didn't have the sky blue contacts in; her eyes were noticeably brown. I nodded and took a sip of my iced coffee. I felt dainty sipping out of the straw for some reason; I missed my mouth with the straw on the my first attempt and noted I never seemed to genuinely enjoy iced coffee unless I made it myself. Her eyelashes flickered up and down like a lightbulb on its last legs as she glared at me—I thought about dying, imagined a gunshot to my gut, me keeled over and dying a slow, painful death on a linoleum floor somewhere, thinking, keeled over, thinking *was it worth it?* then thinking *eh, it had its moments*, then collapsing on the floor to die a slow, agonizing death. To this day, I still feel it important to spend large portions of your life either *yearning* to die or, at the very least, *contemplating the possibility* that *maybe* death is preferable? (Or at least not as bad as it seems at first thought?)

“Things don't always go in straight lines,” I said as I pulled up a chart of a stock on my phone. I didn't personally invest in its shares or follow its stock price but went on to tell her, “It's like...things *zig*,” I pointed to a line on the chart with my index finger, “and...*zag*,” then pointed to another line. The metaphor was, of course, that our relationship was a *stock chart*—that it had its occasionally volatile ups and downs but over the course of time would ostensibly appreciate seven percent annually. And the eventual, inevitable, systemic stock market crash was, of course, when her husband found my address and murdered me in cold blood. She definitely wasn't impressed but seemed as though she may have appreciated the effort, the thought. She gazed

out—up on top of the plaza, above the laser hair removal locale. “It would probably be really cool to live in one of those apartments up there, huh?” she said. I leaned into her and gazed up as she asked me if I thought those were condos? I said it was definitely possible, squinting, my outer elbow on top of her inner elbow. “Yeah, they definitely are, I think. I don’t know, maybe someday...” “*But I’m a mother first,*” she clarified as she opened the car door, “I’m not some bougie chick. So if that’s what you want...”

The next day she texted me *hi*, then Mo texted me *hi*, and I took a screenshot of the two texts, one above the other, and sent the picture to Sophia and typed, “look at Mo lol,” then I laughed out loud to myself and typed, “what a bitch,” as I continued to laugh to myself then began to consider screenshotting the texts and sending them to a girl may have actually been the *bigger* bitch move of the two and began to regret sending the text. We were gonna meet up later that afternoon, and I felt slightly worried—more worried than I normally felt—that she would bail on the rendezvous. She called her husband her “ex” by accident the other night; she lamented not being able to *hang out* a few nights before that—but there was a subsequent, increasingly volatile, ebb and flow due to the increased intensity of the relationship; we were apparently feeling increasingly strong about one another. Actually, it was a lot like the stock chart I’d shown off, except the zigging and zagging seemed to bother *me* more than it bothered her—which bothered me. But it clearly bothered us both deeply, and it seemed likely that, at some point, one or both of us would bow out of the whole thing unless things broke one way or the other soon. I’d been feeling increasingly bothered, it may have been gnawing at me incessantly, by her daughter’s

father—more specifically, Sophia’s reluctance (or my suspicion of her reluctance) to reconcile how she felt about him as a father figure with his real life actions—or maybe just her ambivalence with regard to *what to do*, what her options were exactly.

Obviously, it wasn’t my place; I had no business even thinking about such things, but I genuinely felt like—regardless of what happened between us—the situation was subpar for a little kid. Was that wrong of me? Was it possible to disentangle my intense self-interest from any genuine concern for the welfare of a young child? I’d told her, consciously overstepping my bounds—well aware the answer to the first question was “most likely” and the answer to the second was “highly unlikely”—that the inherent risk of staying with a person who was involved in these types of “things,” who seemed intent on repeating the same destructive cycles ad infinitum, was, *to me*, slightly ill-advised; I gave an extended speech about it and, somewhat to my surprise, she told me I was “right,” that, “I mean, I can’t say *you’re wrong*,” but, realistically, at that point—even though I appreciated the reply—it was a neutered consensus, and we were both aware that it was a neutered consensus; any catharsis was truncated, as it was a neutered consensus. I was totally out of line.

Five minutes later, on a completely unrelated note, I shook my head disdainfully and said, “Yeah, I have a friend like that—*Enzo*—kid puckers his lips and checks his reflection in his phone *every half hour* whenever we go out.” I put my phone in front of my face, made eye contact with my reflection, then puckered my lips in an exaggerated fashion. “Ughh. I *ha-a-a-te* that,” she said, joyously agreeing with me that Enzo’s narcissism was off-putting. We were downtown at a bar that hired a

jazz band to play subpar renditions of songs that were popular when Jim Crow was in effect at a very loud decibel—a variety of Caucasians were dressed importantly throughout the venue. Through some permutation of small talk, Sophia started speaking about “investments” with the bartender while ordering drinks for the both of us, which I appreciated. On a few previous occasions she’d offered to buy drinks, but I’d always rebuked the offer, despite the fact I felt like I was consistently spending more than I wanted to, more than I could *afford*, on drinks. It wasn’t a great situation for me financially. She told the bartender her month to month cash flow was constrained—her sister had two kids and was financially dependent on her to a degree; her dad also needed influxes of cash occasionally—but she didn’t mention all of that to the bartender, she just said her month to month cash flow was constrained, but not in those words either; she said, “I don’t know if I could afford life insurance right now but thanks,” after the bartender said he sold insurance on the side, clearly trying to do anything within his means to prolong the conversation. I shook my head at the conversation somewhat condescendingly; she handed me a vodka soda and politely excused herself to the bathroom.

Her friend Emily was with us, and she turned to me and told me Sophia mentioned me *a lot* on their rides home from work (they carpooled fairly often). She mentioned it in a tone that was kind-hearted but also suggested she was sick of hearing about me. “About *me*?” I shrugged in a manufactured falsetto; I told her if Sophia felt *that* way, why was it like pulling teeth to get a text from her sometimes? I felt unusually open to having a conversation about where Sophia and I were “at” while Sophia was peeing—normally, I never felt open to having a conversation about where I was “at” with anyone. As I

waited for a response I thought, given her situation, having someone murdered in front of you, maybe even having the gun pointed *at you* after a person was murdered in front *of you* by a person who were intimately involved with, could reasonably cause you to be irrationally cautious when it came to love later in life—yet *still* found myself somewhat agitated that I was consistently more expedient in our correspondence than she. The remainder of my mind that wasn't consumed with agitation was ashamed I *still* found myself somewhat agitated; what was *wrong* with me—how could I possibly be so *unjustly agitated* like that? Timeliness was a pet peeve of mine I found hard to control at times. Emily's disdain for me as a concept seemed to wane slightly as we continued to speak—in place of the disdain was a type of sincerity, the level of which I was unsure of, as she said, "That's just how she is, she's not easy....*but she's one of the realest people I've ever met.*"

I'd consider the comment further later on when Mo was conversing with Emily in the corner of the bar. The comment stuck with me. "But she's one of the realest people I've ever met." It seemed significant. Mo'd asked me if Sophia had any friends; I told him, of course—her friend Emily would actually be out that night, but I wasn't sure if she was single. He said he'd *definitely meet up*. They looked as though they were kind of snuggling when I glanced over; his hand was definitely on her thigh; she leaned in until her nose abutted the bottom of his beard. I'd find out later he was asking her to feel for a small lump on the side of his neck—he was worried he had cancer. Mo was wearing a red flat-brimmed hat with a matching red hoodie and brown dress shoes, and I thought he looked absurdly Blood-like (save for the

brown dress shoes); in my opinion, he had no business wearing that amount of red at one time.

I sat across from Sophia and next to Mo. Mo waved over the waitress and ordered me two four dollar dirty vodka martinis after I said I'd probably be amenable to, "like, one more drink." "*That's right motherfucker,*" he said as the waitress walked away, leaning in toward my ear with his beer clutched in hand, "you're drinking *two!*" His register lowered—the poorly performed jazz was still playing at a decent decibel—Sophia was fucking around on her phone; the phone obscured the majority of her face; Emily was looking through her purse, and Mo told me that *he thought*, he leaned in a half inch closer, *he thought* I might have a *threesome possibility* here, and—he paused dramatically—*he thought* I should pursue it. I smirked genuinely then grimaced reflexively as I glanced diagonally and witnessed Emily's eyes rise from her purse and began to panic. "You know...I heard what you just said, right?" she said in a clarifying, *but not totally upset*, tone as she caught me catch her gaze. Mo and I looked at each other, then I looked straight ahead in an anxious silence—attempting to avoid making unavoidable eye contact with the people sitting at the same table I sat at. Sophia's eyes peeked over the top of her phone, then she glanced at Emily then back at Mo and I, then she shook her head disapprovingly, *but not totally upset*, and told us she heard it too.

The next night I was a few vodkas deep; I felt like I was on drugs—it was euphoric. My senses seemed enhanced; I loved it. I smiled deviously, jotted down a note in my phone that seemed both sincere and profound—that I would read the next morning in utter disgust. I asked her, "So you've *never* shoved anything up your nose?" She scrunched up her face and said, "*Ew.*" She told me

she'd told me that before. We'd barely discussed my extended comments about her husband, and I found that portentous and unnerving but was also hesitant to bring it up, because I knew it would put a damper on both of our moods. I told her, full disclosure, I'd snorted prescription codeine my senior year in college and tried cocaine maybe, like, twice? Two or three times? I went through a brief period of nostril-centric curiosity. "Ew." She made a sincerely disgusted face as I went on to tell her that it didn't do much for me—especially the codeine—that, to be honest, I was too fucked up to even tell with the cocaine. "That's because codeine's supposed to put you to *sleep*, dumbass." she said. Our arms brushed against one another; she excoriated me for *still* not believing her, that she really *was* a good girl. I nodded my head, flummoxed—feeling as though I would perpetually occupy a state of being thoroughly unconvinced, possibly about everything, possibly frozen in a state of intellectual suspense about the veracity of my own existence for eternity. She was right; I told her she was right. I sat on mute, smiling slightly. Sometimes there's not a lot to say. When I was twenty one, Brad Rosovsky accused me of stealing his iPod, months after I'd vaguely "threatened" his roommate in an unrelated dispute—a dispute where I felt strongly that *I* was ultimately the aggrieved party. To her point, I knew what it was like to be misunderstood.

Sophia's large heels clanked together as her feet dangled unencumbered, her high heels dangled with the wobbling free spirit of a young child, and she told me about a book she was reading she found interesting but lost it in her room and was still trying to find. I told her *yeah*—I didn't read all that much anymore. Used to though. "You're so smaht!" she said and nudged me playfully. I furrowed my brow pretentiously and said,



*“Actually.* I used to even read the *dictionary.* Used to write down six words a day. With their definitions and everything.” I smiled gregariously, and her eyes lit up; I imagined how my eyes lit up when she told me she could squirt—I compared the two faces in my head and said, *“Even wrote an example sentence with the word in it for each word too.”* “See, that’s what I shoulda done.” she said. I touched her elbow gently. “I don’t wanna be forty years old up shaking my ass between tables. I can already feel my ass starting to sag!” She giggled, and I glanced at her ass—it looked great but, to be fair, I didn’t know what it looked like years ago. I put my hand on my forehead and made a tired expression—rivers of jealousy nonsensically streamed through my veins. I pressed my lips together tightly and froze my eyebrows halfway up; she stuck her ass out while sitting, or maybe it was the natural pop. I said, “But anyway, yeah...I only got like halfway through the dictionary, then I quit.”

I found myself musing about reading Wikipedia articles referencing eras of human history where love ripping people to shreds had a certain cache to it as Sophia sat on my lap and told me, “You don’t want my problems.” She said it in a tone that was, as always, convincingly fatalistic. I had my head turned down and to the right as tears accumulated at the edges of her eyelids; she told me she needed time, “like maybe like a year and a half,” that she didn’t know what to do, that, *despite everything,* she knew she needed time, for herself and for her son, that that was more important than how she felt, *however she felt,* and I said nothing, and she shouted, “Sometimes I wish I’d just get hit by a bus!” and wiped a tear from her eye, and I felt more taken aback by the tears, the visible display of emotion, the emotion I felt like I’d been waiting for months to verify first

hand—the emotion that could never be empirically verified—than the fact that things were ostensibly ending. “Can you look at me?!” she asked eagerly and grabbed my face, but I didn’t. She held my jaw in her left palm. “What do you have to say?!” She was anxious as I turned my head and said, “Give me a minute, ok?!” I felt tears accumulating in my lower eyeballs but, having had a decent amount of experience in weeping by that point in my life, managed to hold them in place. I told her this probably happens to her all the time, and she told me, “No—this is different.” I immediately thought she pretty much *had* to say that, that it was probably ill-advised for me to even say, “This probably happens to you all the time,” but also felt relieved as the syllables emerged from her mouth. She said, “We’ll figure it out,” as we sat down, and I felt oddly euphoric; I felt like, for the first time, I knew she *cared*.

*She cares*, I thought, and I felt at one with nature in a very nihilistic way. I felt empirically validated yet emotionally drained. I told her she didn’t know everything I’d been through, that just because I didn’t discuss it didn’t mean it didn’t happen, and she agreed and told me she wanted to know more about me—that she felt like I didn’t tell her stuff, and I struggled to think of anything to share about myself, as if the things I wanted to share were superglued to my esophagus, like my secrets were action figures wholly melted into the pavement of my childhood driveway, like I was pointing them out to her, stuttering, saying, “See that there? That’s, uhh, my first sexual experience...” at a blob of HeMan-stained pavement. I started to believe maybe I’d developed some sort of undiagnosed mental illness; I recalled “mental breakdowns” I was barely adroit enough to keep concealed from family and friends, that latent for years maybe were even equal to the traumatic events

she'd endured—but just in different ways? Equally opposite trauma? What did it matter—we had so much in common.

I thought vaguely but acutely of suicide, not out of depression necessarily but just fatigue—maybe laziness. She knew she needed time and wished she'd get hit by a bus; I was elated she actually cared and wanted to end my life. It was healthy to think of suicide every now and again, you know? There was no answer—there were never any answers and, *if there were*, I'd always be there to obfuscate skillfully until I became too fatigued to care. Was it possible I didn't even belong to this species—this *genus*?! I told her it didn't particularly matter to me, the time we shared had been great but, at the same time, *if anyone has to suffer* it should probably be me (shouldn't it be me?), with the underlying point being that maybe I didn't mind suffering—that maybe I *preferred* it, and she didn't say anything. Finally, it was clear it didn't matter *how* I reacted to these obsessions; they were *all* impossibilities, they *actually* had *nothing* to do with me—that this entire reality had to be some kind of elaborate system where my consciousness was collateral damage. It simply didn't matter whether I reacted with inertia, whether I allowed my inertia to hurl me into an insanity of infinite possibilities, or if I submerged myself into the obsession until I reached *one reality—one reality* that hurled me into the *same insanity*! It simply didn't matter. Knowledge changed *nothing*. It was incommunicable—once it was communicated it mutated essentially.

Sophia walked into the kitchen and didn't come back out, and I realized I was too drunk to remember whether or not we'd said goodbye. I began to strenuously consider if I should wait for her and—if so—*for how long*? Should I smash my head against a large rock until

it no longer generated these thoughts? Should I write down my feelings before I did—my *manifesto*? What good was a cranium anyway? What *was* it—the only items that confirmed its existence were the sense organs it allegedly controlled! What good was a *manifesto*? What was thought, at its “highest levels,” beyond a convoluted form of masturbation? What did it produce other than dead capital and increased convolutions—it would never stop producing coils! I asked the bartender if she remembered if I tipped her the previous Saturday, because I had this lingering memory of not tipping her and I felt bad; I actually felt bad just by virtue of the uncertainty. She smiled meekly and told me she had too many customers to remember those types of things, then I left—