

**LOVE**  
FROM  
**A**manda TO **Z**oey

Ian Mark

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# Chapter 1

“Will you marry me?” The words hung in the air like a slowly deflating balloon. As soon as I asked I regretted the question, and I knew what the answer would be. To her credit, Amanda took it in stride. Her pencil-thin eyebrows raised ever so slightly in surprise. I glanced away, wondering if any of the other patrons had heard me. Our waiter, Ramon, walked past as I spoke, and our eyes met. I hated him. He’d talked down to me the whole meal, correcting my pronunciation of *arroz con pollo* and flirting with Amanda by complimenting her Spanish. She loved that, just about any compliment would put her in a great mood, no matter how small. That’s why I so rarely complimented her.

Amanda continued not to say anything, and I hated silence. I felt the need to fill the air between us. This was not going as expected. I looked her over as she looked me over, and I saw the curly brown hair, the mole just above her cleavage, and the pearly white teeth that were just slightly crooked. She hated wearing her retainer. She tucked her hair behind her ear, a movement she had performed thousands of times in her life, while she prepared to turn down a marriage proposal for (I assumed) the first time in her life.

“I know I don’t have a ring or anything, but-”

“It’s Wednesday,” she said.

“What?”

“It’s a Wednesday.”

“I know the date,”

“We’re eating at *El Cantinero*, where we’ve eaten at least a dozen times in the year we’ve been dating. It’s a Wednesday night, I’ve been working all day. You don’t even have a ring.”

“I love you.”

“Don’t say that.” She seemed visibly upset at the idea.

“I know it’s not the most romantic-”

“Not the most romantic? Zach, how could this be any less romantic?” She put down her utensils and wiped her mouth with her napkin. Apparently the thought of marrying me had made her lose her appetite for her Tasty Tasty Tacos.

“Do you even want to marry me?” She continued. She plopped her napkin on her food in front of her. She always did that. She never took her leftovers home. Even if she didn’t want them, I would eat them. I always told her that, and she always said, *Next time*.

“Of course. I wouldn’t ask otherwise.” I cut off a large piece of *arroz or pollo*, whichever one means chicken, and ate it while trying to meet Amanda’s eyes. My dull brown ones searched for her brilliant blue ones, but couldn’t find them. She looked down at her lap before speaking.

“But do you really? Think about it right now. Do you want to spend the rest of your life, some sixty years-” She knocked on the plastic table painted to look like wood in front of her- “with me?”

I considered it. She was pretty, hell, she was beautiful. A little short, but great legs, a nice chest, and a symmetrical face. But she was kind of annoying. She wasn’t quite as smart as I was, and she would always talk during movies, asking for clarification or wanting me to repeat what Leonardo had just said. And she snored sometimes when she slept over. Not the kind of snore you could ignore, either. I snored like a normal person, consistently making the same sound so that the person next to me could get used to it and still fall asleep. That’s just being considerate. But her, her snores were like a succession of different dying animals calling out, ranging from the low bellows of a wounded elephant to the scared shrieks of a trapped mouse. It was infuriating really. I’d turn over and over again, and no position could get me away from those noises. Even worse, it wasn’t every night, so I couldn’t prepare for it. We’d be sleeping and everything would be fine, then at 3:23 in the morning I’d hear a whinny,

and I'd know I was trapped until six, when I could duck out and say I had to work early.

"No," I conceded, "I guess I don't want to marry you."

She softened. She sank back into the plush red booth and took a sip of her burgundy wine. Ramon brought the check over and glanced at Amanda's mole. *I should punch him*, I thought, before suppressing my primal desires.

"Look, Zach, I know you've been through a lot," she said after Ramon had finished eye-fucking her. She leaned forward and put her dainty fingers over my slightly-less-but-not-as-less-as-I'd-like dainty ones and smiled a sad smile.

"Brian's death is making you recognize your own mortality, and that's *normal*."

I sighed. Amanda was a psych major in college, and even though she worked now in a law office, she never let anyone forget that she took two classes in grief counseling. Misinterpreting my annoyance as another sign of my depression, she went on.

"You're afraid you'll die alone. And you think marrying me will make things better, make you more secure. But you don't want to marry me. We haven't exactly been great the last few months."

A pause. She leaned back and took out her phone. Ah, a text. Much more important than breaking my heart. I finished my Dos Equis with a swig and reached for the check. I slid my card in and looked for Ramon. Of course, now that I needed him, he was nowhere to be found.

"Sorry," she said, "Where was I?"

I looked around the sparsely populated establishment for Ramon. An elderly couple a few tables over looked at me, and I stared blankly at them. *They must be so happy*, I thought. They looked away, and went back to their silent meal.

"You were telling me why you don't want to marry me."

She looked at me, the way she looked at me when she thought I was being intentionally stupid. Most of the time I wasn't, no matter how incredulous she was.

“No, Zach, we were discussing why you don’t want to marry me.”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but you just admitted you don’t want to marry me, because this is just an impulsive reaction to Brian and your newfound mortality.”

“Yeah, and you snore.”

“I what? I don’t.”

Her brow furrowed. The corners of her mouth turned down. I knew I should leave it there. But I didn’t.

“Yes you do. It’s worse than any girl I’ve ever slept with.”

“Stop it, Zach.” I could tell from her voice that she had heard this before. How many men had complained about it to her? How many ways had she tried to make it stop? I handed the check to Ramon as he walked past, and he almost dropped the tray he was carrying. So sloppy.

“It’s awful. It keeps me up even when we’re not together, the echoes of it.”

“Fuck you Zach,” she said quietly. She got up.

“Sixty years of that, I’d probably kill myself.” There. The last straw. I broke her.

“You selfish, idiotic, fucking asshole,” she said, no longer bothering to keep her voice down. The old farts two tables over looked up, surprised. I waved.

“You don’t care about anybody but yourself.” Her cheeks were red, and her hair was in her eyes. Her mouth contorted into an ugly snarl. *She’s really not that pretty*, I thought.

“We’re done,” I said. I squeezed a few grains of rice together with my fingers and ate them. She hated when I did that.

“Oh no,” she said, almost yelling, “You don’t get to dump me, I’m dumping you. You asked me to marry you ten minutes ago. *I am dumping you.*”

“Okay.” I smiled at her. She stormed out of the restaurant. I watched as all the other patrons watched her go, then turned to see what had caused such a ruckus on this quiet Wednesday evening at *El Cantinero*. I watched them watch me. I smiled.

“Show’s over folks. I apologize if we disturbed your boring lives.”

Ramon brought the check over and grinned at me. He was missing a tooth. I tipped him ten percent. Asshole.

## Chapter 2

I lie on the ground. The dirt presses into my back. A voice speaks ominously from somewhere above me. I look left and right. Tombstones. Am I dead? I try to get up and I float in a way that tells me I no longer have a body. The rabbi speaks but I can't understand him. There is no one else there, so I guess he is talking to me. I look down on my dead face. Lightning crashes, and I float away from my funeral. I see Amanda, home with Ramon. My mother and father are eating dinner nonchalantly. I float to the edge of the table that I sat at for so many years. We are in my childhood home, even though they moved shortly after I went off to college. I search my mother's appearance for any sign of distress or sadness at my passing. There is none. I glance at my father, and he is the same, stoic as always. Maybe they don't know. I try to tell them. No words come out of my mouth, because my mouth is miles away in an empty graveyard. The rabbi has left. Two blind men bury me while quoting *Hamlet*. I float to another room and Ethan Hawke is there. He doesn't look at me. He says to his wife, "Isn't it just terrible to die alone?" I try to cry, but no sound comes out. Suddenly, I feel a presence next to me. I turn and Brian is there. He looks at me, his eyes are dead and he doesn't speak. His nose is red. I try to engage him, but he turns and leaves. I follow. We are at a lake. He grabs me, ethereally, and I am forced under the water.

I rolled out of bed and grabbed my phone off my nightstand. 9:47. One new text message: *You wanna grab a beer tonight?* It was from Kevin. *Sure*, I texted back. I found my slippers and trudged to the bathroom. After a luxurious fifteen-minute shower, I looked myself over in the mirror. I looked good. Not too big, not too thin, I had a bit of a six-pack going today and my hair looked sharp. I dressed

and was out the door in five. I zipped up my hoodie as the harsh wind hit me. I hated the weather here. I walked the two blocks to the Starbucks on West 4<sup>th</sup>. I gave a nod to Jimmy, the homeless Jamaican man who hung around there. I pulled open the door and joined the long line of stressed out NYU students. I remembered when I was one of them, just a few years ago. Miranda smiled when I got to the front of the line.

“What’ll it be Zach?”

“I’ll have a grand caramel macchiato with a double shot of espresso and cream.” I winked.

“One large black coffee it is.” We both laughed. I thought of something.

“Actually, could I also get one of those scones?”

“Sure.” I paid and received my order.

“Thanks, Miranda. Have a good one.” I left and removed the scone from the bag. I passed Jimmy and handed it to him. He grinned a toothless grin. He really was an ugly motherfucker.

“Tanks, mon,” he said. “God bless you.”

“Take it easy, Jimmy,” I replied. I shook my head as I walked away. I don’t believe in God, and my life’s not even that bad. How Jimmy, a homeless man who spent his day being ignored and treated as subhuman by stuck-up college kids, could believe in God was beyond me.

I entered through the revolving doors of 200 Mercer Street and nodded to Marvin, the security guard. The warmth of the lobby enveloped me, and I unzipped my hoodie. I put my hands in my pockets.

“Zaaach,” he said, “How’s life? How’s Amanda doing?”

“Dumped her last night. Soooo probably not too well.”

We both laughed, but I don’t think either of us thought it was funny. It’s interesting, the differences between what we think and what we say when we interact with people we’re not that close to. The elevator came, and I nodded goodbye to Marvin. He was already greeting the next yuppie coming in.

I got off at the seventh floor. I worked as a programmer for a small start-up that made social video games. Basically, the founders wished they had come up with Farmville, and were now desperately

trying to create the next Farmville so they could profit off the insatiable desire of humans to spend as much time as possible performing strange mundane tasks instead of working.

As a programmer, my hours were pretty flexible. I rarely showed up before ten or eleven, and almost always left before four. I was the fastest programmer there, but nobody knew that. If they knew, I'd have more work to do but wouldn't make any more money.

I checked my email and found my assignment for the day. There was a problem with one of the games I was working on. Apparently the fish in *Hunter-Gatherers: The Game* had been exiting the lakes and "swimming" on land. Easy enough to fix. It took me fifteen minutes to figure out what I was going to do and about an hour to write the code. Then it was onto the internet for the rest of the day. I loved my job, but I also hated it. Sometimes I wished it were more challenging. And everything there was just grey. Grey, grey, gray. My cubicle was grey, the walls were grey. Even, Bob, my nearest coworker, was grey. He was in his early forties, and he worked harder than any of us to keep up. Poor guy didn't grow up with computers. He's grey. He's like a normal person with all the color drained out of him, just faded to grey.

I thought back to a conversation Brian and I had had one day early in sophomore year. Neither of us had any work, so we were playing NHL '09 on our suite-mate's xBox.

"Have you ever seen *Say Anything...*?" Brian's baritone cut over the country music playing in the background as we selected our teams.

"The John Cusack one?" I picked the Bruins and Brian went with the Sharks.

"Yeah." We advanced through jersey selection.

"I think I saw it a long time ago." I waited for Brian to press A to start the game.

"You know the buy, sell, process part?" I looked over at Brian. He was looking at me, not talking at the screen like we normally did. He scratched his chest through the pink v-neck he was wearing.

"Press A." I put my feet up on the edge of my bed and leaned back in my chair.

“What? Oh, sorry.” He hit A and the game went to a loading screen. I looked at him again. His hair, while by no means long, was getting to the point where I knew in a few days he’d start talking about needing it cut, and in a few weeks he’d actually go get it cut. “Anyways, Cusack’s character, he’s asked what he wants to do when he graduates high school. And-”

“He’s the slacker, right? And he dates the valedictorian?” The game started. I won the opening face-off.

“Yes, and he says he doesn’t want to buy, sell, or process anything for a career. He doesn’t want to buy anything sold or processed, sell anything processed, or-”

“Let me guess, process anything bought or sold?” Digital Patrice Bergeron fired a wrister towards Digital Evgeni Nabokov, who caught it in his glove.

“Yeah.” Brian went silent for a few minutes. We had a lot of conversations that went like this: eyes always on the screen, long unmentioned pauses, little coherence to anyone but us. “Give it to ‘em Joe!” He yelled as Thornton beat Rask stick side high.

“Always go stick side.” I started the riff.

“Hell of an effort, you love to see it.” Even though I wasn’t looking at him, I could tell he was starting to smirk, the right corner of his mouth bending upwards.

“You know, it just looks like the Bruins don’t want it enough out there today.” I started to smile too.

“Coach Claude Julien irate on the sidelines, calls over his star defenseman Zdeno Chara-”

“He’s saying, listen son, I know you’re an all-star, but you gotta show all these fans you’re one.” Brian lost it. He started giggling. I did too. A girl on our floor freshman year had described the way we played these games as “One of you says one word, and you both just start giggling for five minutes.”

“So what’s your point?” I asked midway through the second period, after we had quieted down and I had restored order to the game. I had a 2-1 lead.

“My point is, I’m just like Lloyd Dobler.” Brian answered quickly. He knew what I was referring to, even though we had talked about several other things since he brought up the Cusack movie. “I don’t want to do any of those things.”

“So you’re dropping out and becoming a kick-boxer?” I remembered how the movie played out.

“Shut up, let me finish. I have no major, right? And I figured out today that I don’t want to do any of them. I don’t want one career, I want to do a lot of things, and what I really want is to act.” His normally confident voice got higher here, as if he was asking me what I thought of acting.

“Transferring to Tisch? Don’t go all artsy on me now.” He scored to tie the game with a few seconds left in the period. We both mashed A to skip through the replays and pause screens to get back to playing as soon as possible.

“That’s just it, I feel like it’s a waste of money to do Tisch, but I want to be in Tisch. I don’t know, don’t you ever think you won’t wanna do Comp Sci?” I had declared my major towards the end of Freshman year. I didn’t love it, but it was practical and I was good at it.

“Not really, it’s what I’m good at and there are a lot of jobs.” Rask grabbed the loose puck and froze it. While the game went to a replay, I picked up the scissors on my desk and poked my desk.

“Yeah, but how many years can you do the same thing before you wanna quit?” Brian leaned forward and put his feet solidly on the ground.

“I don’t know man, I don’t know.” We both fell silent. I thought about Dobler as the game went on. With a minute left, I said quietly, “What else is there?”

“What do you mean?” Brian asked. He fired a shot and then collected the rebound and shot again. Rask grabbed the puck and I pulled the right trigger to get him to spit it out.

“Well if you don’t buy, sell, or process, what do you do?” Thornton stole the pass. The sticks on Brian’s controller clacked as he aggressively and quickly turned and fired a shot just under the stick of Rask.

“Create. You can create.” I pulled my goalie, but the game was over.

“You wanna play one more?” I looked at Brian. He grinned.

“I’ll play a few more.”

Stuck in a rut now, I knew what Brian’s advice would be. “Why don’t you just quit?” He had asked me numerous times. I hated that question, and had been glad in the months leading up to his death when he stopped asking. It was only later that I had two epiphanies: He stopped asking as he withdrew into himself and confronted his failure as an actor, and I hated that question because I didn’t have any good answers for it.

\* \* \*

“So you and Amanda split, huh?” Kevin said as I brought over the first round to our usual table at Brad’s. I sat down, leaving the chair between us open, a ritual we had faithfully carried out since Brian died a month and a half ago. A semi-cute girl came over and asked if the empty chair was taken.

“Yes,” we said in unison. The girl glowered at us and walked back to her more attractive friends.

“How’d you know?” I asked Kevin. Had Amanda called him? Were they closer than I thought? Did they ever sleep together?

“She updated her relationship status.”

“Ah.” I knew I had forgotten something. Now it really did look like she had dumped me. I hadn’t even wanted to make it Facebook official, for this very reason.

“We’re just going to break up,” I had told her as she kissed my neck and snuggled up next to me. I pulled the covers over our naked bodies and wrapped my arms around her.

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” she chided me. “I want everyone to know.” She bit her lip and looked up at me. She was so damn cute.

“Fine,” I said.

“You wanna talk about it?” Kevin interrupted the memory. “Are you-”

“I’m fine.” I said. “Let’s just get fucked up.”

“Hey,” he said. “You don’t need to tell me twice. You done with that?” I sucked down the rest of my Budweiser and nodded. He went to get another round. A busboy came to take the empties. He had a hideous chinstrap beard and a scar across his forehead. I nodded to him and surveyed the bar. As usual, it sucked. Barely any women, and what girls that were there were seated at tables. It’s weird hitting on girls when they are sitting down. Creepy, really. I was still stuck in a relationship mindset. I needed a few more beers to get back in the single-guy mindset. Kevin came back with a pitcher and I laughed.

“So what’s our game-plan?” Kevin asked me a few beers later. “Let’s find you someone to take Amanda off your mind.” I laughed. I liked Kevin. He played with the top button of his dark blue button-down and gulped down some beer. I took charge, relishing being single again. When I was eighteen, I arrived at NYU knowing almost nothing about women. I soon learned I had a certain effect on them, and while it still surprised me at times, I enjoyed the benefits of it.

“First off, if you’re debating it, undo that.” I gestured to the button he was playing with. He did so.

“How’s my hair?” He said. I looked pointedly at his crew cut as he ran one hand over it. We laughed raucously. Life was good.

“Sexy as always. Now, this place is dead as usual. I say we hit up Josie’s.”

“Sounds good.” We rose. I went over to the coat rack and grabbed our stuff. I had traded the t-shirt and hoodie for a polo and a pea-coat. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I looked damn good. I brushed my dark brown hair out of my eyes and smoothed it down by running a hand over the top of it. *One of these days I’ll buy a comb*, I told myself. An undergrad nervously looked at me, and I grinned at her. I was warming up. We left Brad’s and its poorly lit grungy decor for the just slightly classier Josie’s across the street. I pulled a cigarette out and lit it. Kevin frowned. He didn’t like me smoking. Cancer, he said. I don’t want to live that long anyways, I always replied.

“You don’t have to wait for me,” I said. We both knew he would. We stood in silence for a few minutes. Finally, I threw down the cigarette. Kevin stamped it out with his loafer. He dressed up for these

nights. We went down the stairs and handed our ID's to the bouncer. He nodded to us and we went in. The bar smelled like sex. The mix of perfumes and colognes combined with the stale beer and sweat that was everywhere to produce an aroma found only in bars like Josie's. Everyone here was here to get laid, and most of them would. I went to the bar and bought four shots of tequila. Two girls were sitting at the bar. One of them smiled at me.

"Me and my friend are going to do shots," I told her.

"What?" she said.

"Shots!" I yelled.

"Okay!" She squealed and grabbed her friend to get her attention. They each wore low-cut tops and short skirts. I signaled Kevin over to join us.

"This is my friend Kevin," I said. Kanye drowned me out.

"What?" she said.

"Kevin!" I pointed at Kevin.

"Oh. Carol!" she pointed at her friend.

"What's your name?" I said. I pointed at her.

"Becky!"

"Zach!" the shots arrived. I gave the bartender my card and opened up a tab. We threw the shots back. I caught Kevin's eye. He nodded at Carol. I nodded at Becky. We smiled. We were in agreement.

## Chapter 3

I lie in the grass. I stand up and walk over to the track. I am on my high school's football field. I stretch. I head to the starting line. A voice from somewhere announces the results of the last heat and the names of those participating in the current heat. My name is not said, or if it is I do not hear it. I stand in the ninth lane and take my position. Amanda is next to me. She wears neon shorts and a white top. I can see the outline of her breast beneath her top. Her nipples are hard. She does not look at me. A gun goes off. Amanda takes off. I try to as well. My feet don't move. It's like running in Jello. I slowly move my way down the track. The other runners are all ahead of me, and none are as far away as Amanda. She looks back once, right before she wins. We make eye contact. She shows no emotion. I look to the stands. Brian and my mother sit in the highest row. He is eating pure sugar by the spoonful. She is crying. He makes no effort to comfort her. The other runners finish. Brian and my mother get up and leave. I trip and fall. I curse, but no one hears me.

\* \* \*

Morning. A throbbing headache woke me. The hangover was worse than I expected. I wished I was eighteen again. I looked up. For a second I believed I really was eighteen. Same cinderblock walls as my old dorm room. I reached for my nightstand. I didn't find it. I noticed for the first time the girl sleeping next to me. Or on me, really. The bed was so small I was basically pinned between her and the wall.

"Shit," I said. Kate, or was it Becky? She woke up.

"What's the matter?" She said. "Go back to sleep."

"You're a freshman," I said. "You told me you were a senior."

“So?” she said. “It hardly matters now. Go back to sleep.”

“I have to go to work.” I climbed over her and realized I was naked. And I still had the condom on. I went to the bathroom and discarded it in the toilet. I peed and looked in the mirror. I looked like shit. I walked back out into the tiny dorm room and noticed the Justin Bieber poster above her bed. A wave of nausea hit me. I grabbed my jeans and shirt. I couldn’t find my socks. She sat up and watched me. Her dorm was too clean. When I lived here, my dorm was always littered with clothes, smelled like weed, and had beer bottles behind every nook and cranny. Hers was almost sterile. It was like a hospital. The aqua blue bedspread was the only color in the room. Her roommate, who evidently had been made to sleep elsewhere the night before, had a black comforter and black sheets. While Becky (or Kate)’s bed had a headboard, her roommates didn’t. It occurred to me that when I had lived in a dorm like this, she would have been twelve years old.

“Where do you work?”

“Small Monster Games.”

“You’re in the legal department there?” She reached for her phone.

“What? No, I’m a programmer.” I found my socks and put one on. The other had a hole in it. I sighed and put it on anyway. She typed on her phone while I talked. She didn’t look at me. She was a little chubbier than I remembered from last night. Or from what little I remembered of last night. She had a zit right by her left temple. The makeup that covered it the night before had worn off. Her neck was covered in hickeys. I had way too much to drink last night, I decided.

“So we both lied, then. You told me you were a lawyer.” She looked up at me, her brown eyes filled with a strange combination of regret and apathy. I found my shoes and headed towards the door.

“It hardly matters now, does it?”

Amanda’s face flashed through my mind as I asked the question. She wasn’t impressed by my conquest, but disgusted. I wasn’t winning the breakup, I was losing any chance I had of getting back together with her. I recalled bitterly how we got together in the first place...

Shortly after graduation, Kevin, Brian, Amanda and I had crashed a wedding. We had all started hanging out senior year. It was an interesting dynamic. People always assumed Amanda was dating one of us. She was just one of the guys, and we had made a game of tallying which one of us outsiders thought was dating her. I was winning by a large margin.

The wedding was in Brooklyn's Botanic Garden. Amanda wore a shining black dress that hugged her as she gracefully walked away from our table to the bar. The three of us wore black suits, with different color shirts and ties underneath: white and blue for Kevin, blue and silver for Brian, and maroon and black for me. Kevin waited until she was out of earshot, then turned conspiratorially towards us. I watched the bride smiling and laughing as she was congratulated by a procession of beautiful guests. I saw the groom watching her and smiling to himself. Something stirred inside me.

"Are you guys ever uncomfortable hitting on girls?" Kevin's question snapped me back to our table. Kevin was uncomfortable? He had never seemed it. Granted, he normally needed a few drinks in him to get going, but I always figured that was nerves. I waited for Brian to answer. He liked to talk about things like this, various aspects of society that are taken for granted but rarely discussed.

"Not really. Nervous, maybe. But that's what this is for." Brian raised his champagne glass as he talked, scanning the dance floor for lonely bridesmaids. "Why else would you crash a wedding?" He chortled. Kevin seemed unsure. He looked down into his glass. It was mostly full.

"I don't know, Amanda's certainly not here to pick up girls." I watched her order a drink from the bartender. He wore a white jacket and black bow-tie. He nodded and smoothly grabbed a Corona from beneath the bar and popped the top off all in one motion. Amanda took it from him and smiled, then turned to come back to our table.

"I think she has a different reason for being here." Brian and Kevin looked at each other knowingly as a tall black man wearing a blue suit approached her. He placed his hand on the bar next to her and smiled. His teeth were strikingly white, and he had a

goatee and mustache combination that would have made Clyde Frazier jealous.

"I guess," I conceded. Amanda smiled back at him. With her mouth at least. Her eyes didn't have the twinkle they normally did when she really smiled.

"Here's how I look at it," Brian declared. "When girls go to bars, they are going out to meet people. They know just as well as we do why we go there." Kevin listened intently. Amanda extricated herself from the man at the bar and picked her way through the tables and dance floor towards us. "They dress up because they want the attention. As long as you listen when they say no, and are polite, there's nothing wrong with it." As Amanda approached, Brian sped up, eager to end the conversation. "I look at it as meeting new people, no lines or ulterior motives. If I make a new friend, great. If I get laid, even better. What'd you get?" He directed the question towards Amanda as she sat down between Brian and me.

"Just a beer."

"You're hardly taking advantage of the open bar," I said. I raised my Long Island Iced Tea. "You gotta get creative."

"I'll keep that in mind. What is that, your second already?" I nodded. "What are you guys talking about?"

"Football," Kevin and Brian said in unison. They nodded at each other approvingly. I sipped from my glass.

"You know what? You're right." With that, Kevin got up from the table and approached a lonesome perky blonde girl wearing a revealing aqua-blue dress and drinking a cosmo. I watched him go.

"I hate hitting on girls," I said, still looking at Kevin. Brian raised his eyebrows, but didn't say anything.

"Really?" Amanda didn't believe me. "*You* don't like hitting on girls?" Brian laughed at her emphasis.

"I really don't," I protested.

"But you do it all the time. And you're good at it." Amanda took a swig of her beer and continued. "It's like if Brian said he didn't like acting or if I said I hated drinking beer. And Zach," she took another gulp of beer, "I love drinking beer."

"I don't like it. It's just that, I, well, I don't-" I searched for the words. I would have had no trouble telling Brian this, but with Amanda there I wasn't sure how much I wanted to admit. "I want a relationship, okay? But it terrifies me. So I do this. But I don't like it. It's creepy." Brian laughed.

"It is not," he said. "They want to be hit on." He sat back, satisfied he had won the argument. I wasn't done.

"I don't care if they do, it's still weird. It's just better, I guess, then trying and failing at having a relationship. Which I know I will." I slumped in my chair. I felt strangely tired. Amanda looked at me with a strange expression on her face. *She pities me*, I thought bitterly to myself, *this beautiful girl thinks I'm a loser*.

"I'm going to go... help Kevin." Brian stood up suddenly. He winked at Amanda and headed over to Kevin, who had moved on from Blondie and was now talking to two similar looking brunettes. Sisters, probably. I remembered that we weren't supposed to be here. If I had any respect for marriage, I probably would have left. But marriage had always struck me as the end of your real life, of being young and having fun. After you got married you had kids then you raised them then you were old and then they put you in a home and it all passed in the blink of an eye and then you needed a walker and then you died.

"Wanna dance?" I asked Amanda glumly. I was too tired to talk to girls. She smiled and offered me her hand. I took and it led her on to the floor. A slow song came on and Amanda wrapped her arms around me.

"He's right, you know." I felt her breath on my earlobe as she whispered.

"About what?" I asked. We swayed with the music. I looked over her shoulder at the band. The singer had his eyes closed and was holding onto the mic stand with two hands. He was alone with the music. I wished I had a similar passion for my work. I had just gotten my job at Small Monster Games, and the work was easy and rarely interesting.

"About girls. Most of us like getting hit on. It makes me feel pretty." I pulled back and looked at her. She blushed.

“You do know you are pretty, right?” My question made her smile shyly.

“I guess...” I laughed.

“I always used to assume that hot girls knew they were hot. I guess a lot don’t. Amanda, you are gorgeous.” She blushed deeper. I put my head back next to hers. She later confided in me, that she did know she was pretty. “Guys like it when I pretend not to,” she had said. Manipulative bitch.

“You’re not too bad yourself.” She pulled back and looked me straight in the eyes. The song ended. A fast song started playing.

“I guess we better-” She kissed me mid-sentence. I hesitated, then reciprocated. I cupped her face with my hands. She stroked the back of my neck. I moved my hands around her waist. We stood there motionless, as couples all around us danced feverishly to the fast-paced jam. The singer was bouncing around the stage, mic in hand. After a while, we went back to our table.

“Bout damn time,” was all Brian said when we sat back down. I laughed.

“Shut up.” Amanda and Brian shared a look. It occurred to me that she had confided in him about me. I wondered how many signals I had missed, how many chances I hadn’t taken.

We danced the night away. Kevin and Brian were talking to a couple of beautiful women when we left, though I never found out how it ended. Amanda and I spent the night at her place. She admitted that she’d had a crush on me for a long time.

“I wasn’t going to do anything because I thought you were kind of a player.” She was making coffee in her red bathrobe. I sat at her kitchen table in boxers. My suit, undoubtedly now wrinkled, lay forgotten somewhere in the bedroom.

“What do you mean?” I watched her work.

“You’re always hitting on women, and I thought you’d just...” She stopped.

“Sleep with you and never call you?” I finished her thought. “What changed your mind?” She placed a cup of coffee in front of me and sat across from me.

“When you said you didn’t like hitting on people, and that you are scared of a relationship. I guess I thought we could, or would...” She trailed off, looking at me for some confirmation. She wanted to date me, I knew. The idea still kind of scared me.

“Well then, congratulations. You were the target of the longest play I’ve ever run. I had to pretend not to like it just to get you into bed.” She started to look upset, and I stopped the joke. “I’m kidding. Maybe. You’ll never know.” She still seemed hurt. She got up and turned away.

“You’re a jerk.” She said it softly.

“Amanda?” She turned to me. “Can I take you to dinner tonight?” She smiled and nodded.

So began the longest relationship I’d ever had. I never really got comfortable opening up to her. I had been telling the truth—I didn’t like hitting on girls then, and I liked it even less the older I got. But I still preferred it to the emotional intimacy of a relationship. I was a solitary person, and I figured I always would be.

\* \* \*

I sat in my cubicle at work. I hadn’t even pretended to start working when Bob came by. He looked grayer than normal.

“What’s up, Bob?” I plugged my phone into the charger. It had died sometime last night.

“Not much, Zach, how are you?” He leaned against the wall of the cubicle and crossed one leg over the other. I logged onto Facebook to see if I had posted anything dumb last night and find out what happened to Kevin.

“I’m alright, a little hungover. Anything I can do for you?” There was nothing of note on Facebook except a notification that Amanda had changed her relationship status. I changed mine to “it’s complicated” to be as much like a petty eighth grade girl as possible.

“I was hoping you would drop in on that meeting later, you know, throw your two cents in and whatnot, just to show we’re on the same page with this.”

“Sure,” I said. “Will you email me the details so I don’t forget?”

“Course.” He pulled at the loop of his waistband. Bob was the kind of guy who didn’t like the casual dress code. He was more comfortable wearing a suit than the polo and khakis he wore today and every day. “See you there.” He made the short trip to the other side of the cubicle walls. I listened to him sit down. I could picture everything he did even though the wall prevented me from seeing him. Sit down, write a note to himself to email me, cough, take a sip of the shitty coffee from the break room, decide to send the email now, type out the details, sip the coffee, hit send.

I heard a ping. I had one new email. I checked my phone. No calls from Amanda. Three from my mother. I decided to listen to the voicemail she left. It was a long message of little importance. She sounded frail. I hated that she didn’t sound as strong as she used to. She was a tough woman, my mother. She used to beat me and my dad in arm-wrestling. He didn’t like that. Always said she had an advantage because her arms were so short. My dad was an engineer.

The only interesting thing my mother said was that she wanted me to meet some girl that was the friend or daughter or cousin of some acquaintance of hers. I called her back after I got off work.

“Why are you trying to set me up with girls?”

”I saw on your Facebook that Amanda broke up with you. Are you OK?”

I sighed. She would think that. I crossed the street to stop at the food trucks outside the NYU Stern building.

“First off, I broke up with her.” I joined the line in front of the hibachi truck.

“It doesn’t matter sweetie.” She didn’t believe me.

“I did, Mom, why don’t you believe me?”

“Oh, of course I believe you. Why didn’t you tell me?” It was my turn to order.

“Can I get the shrimp and fried rice?” I handed over a ten. The old Korean man nodded and began making my meal, the wrinkles around his eyes becoming more pronounced as he worked. I stared at his ear hair.

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to have this conversation.”

“What conversation?” She knew what I meant. She was going to make me say it.

“The one where you ask if I’m okay and refuse to accept that I’m fine.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” The vendor put my food in a Styrofoam container, which he placed in a plastic bag. He added a few napkins and a fork and passed it through the window of the black and red truck to me. I nodded in thanks and headed off to eat my food. I cracked open the container and scooped out a little brown rice and a piece of the succulent shrimp. Just as I spooned it into my mouth, my mother decided I wasn’t going to say anything more and it was up to her to end the silence.

“It’s just that... Zach,” I could see her searching for the right words. She stood in the kitchen of her new house, but I pictured her in our old house, like how she used to stand when I was a little kid and I would come home from playing outside and I’d be all muddy and she’d be on the phone. She would just look at me and smile and hold up a finger to tell me, *wait*. She used to lean against the door frame and curl her finger around the cord of the phone. She still used phones with cords to this day because she couldn’t understand how cordless ones worked. We had a bright red telephone that my dad brought home from some novelty shop. It had a rotary dial, that’s how old it was.

“You always take breakups so hard. I don’t want you to react like last time.” She was referring to me crying after my ninth-grade girlfriend, Susan, broke up with me after three weeks. That was the last time I told my mother about any of my entanglements until Amanda insisted I change my relationship status.

“I’ll be fine, Mom, really.” What I didn’t say was that my new strategy of coping was to get fucked up every time I thought of Amanda until the memory of proposing to her was completely erased due to alcohol and drug abuse.

“I have to go, Mom.”

“Okay, sweetie. Call me soon, I want you to meet Zoey, I really think you’ll like her.”

“All right, Mom, fine.” *Who knows?* I thought, *Maybe Zoey is the one.* A cynical smile crossed my face.

“I love you,” she said. Every single phone conversation we’ve had since I was a freshman in college had ended like this one.

“Goodbye, Mom.” I tapped end call. *Finally,* I thought, *Now I can eat.* I removed the Styrofoam container from the plastic bag and sat down. I had wandered without realizing it into the middle of Washington Square Park. It wasn’t too cold, so I decided to stay. The trees were beginning to rebound from a harsh winter, and their variety of greens cheered me up. It never ceased to amaze me the effect simple colors can have on our brain chemistry and subsequently our moods.

I carried the container and the bag in each hand as I walked towards the fountain. It wasn’t on, of course, and a group of kids were standing in the middle of it. A middle-aged woman was organizing them for a photo with the arch in the background. I walked around the opposite side so I was directly between the kids and the arch. I threw the plastic bag in a black metal trash can as I moved. I found a space in between two of the shorter kids where I could see the woman’s camera. I heard her counting down to take the picture. I pulled my hood on with my left hand and put on the goofiest face I could while staring into the camera. The flash went off, and I moved on.

I sat down on one of the benches along the middle circle of the park, around the fountain. The difference between now and what it would be like in a few months was striking-- there were few kids, fewer colors, and the mood was more just one of persistence at getting through the day rather than hopefulness. I saw students rushing to class, businessmen talking loudly on their phones and none of the carefree people, of all ages, that fill the park when it’s warm out.

I ate slowly, making up stories for the students as they passed. There goes a pre-med who just wants to be in Tisch but her parents won’t let her. There goes a Sternie whose GPA has steadily dropped over the course of the semester and now he won’t get a job while all

his friends start working on Wall Street. Watch as he tries to hide the quiet desperation that has filled him since he realized one year, 3 months, two weeks and five days ago that he just wasn't good enough, no matter how hard he worked, to succeed in the field he had spent years and thousands of dollars in loans studying. It was the eyes. They could never hide the eyes. He dressed in the business casual of a Sternie, and he looked good. Maroon button-down with a black skinny tie, and black pants. Handsome, his shoulder-length black hair and strong jawline gave him the face needed to succeed in business. But his light brown eyes cried out as he walked by, revealing the shortcomings of the brain behind them. I surmised all this in between bites of shrimp and fried egg, in the five seconds it took him to walk across my field of vision. I did not turn my head to watch.

Bzzz. A text message. I removed my phone from my jeans and noticed a stain near the crotch. Damn. It looked like I might have to put on a new pair for the first time in a few days. *Yo wassup man?* It was Randy. *Eatin lunch.* Randy had graduated summa cum laude a year before me from CAS. That's the College of Arts and Sciences. He was unemployed. *Just picked up. You wanna swing by after work?* He spent his time getting high and yelling at his mom for yelling at him to get a job and move out. *Sure.*

I finished my shrimp and rice. I grabbed a few strands of rice and squeezed them together. I licked my fingers as I stood and threw out my container. The trash was full and I struggled to squeeze it in. As I walked away, a gust of wind blew the uppermost trash off the pile, including my container. Fuck. I ignored it. I pictured my dad lecturing me as he stuffed the trash down in the kitchen of our old home about being responsible. Then I went back and got my container and carried it to the next trash can.

\* \* \*

When I got to Randy's mother's apartment, it was evident he had started without me. I had gotten off work later than usual. The walk to Randy's always took longer than it should too. I got so distracted. Randy lived out on Avenue C in Alphabet City. I walked

down West 8<sup>th</sup>, and the transition from upper class Greenwich Village to run-down Avenue C always caught my eye. Each block was a step lower down the social ladder. As you went, the number of boarded-up buildings went up, and the number of white people went down.

I arrived at Randy's mother's dilapidated apartment building and pressed the button next to Amendola. I noticed the increase in graffiti since my last visit. FUCK IT, it said in curly black letters just to the left of the door. Under that was an unintelligible symbol presumably indicating authorship of the above. The buzzer rang. I pushed the door open and stepped over the broken vodka bottles in the entryway. A middle-aged black woman with wizened skin and thin curly hair dyed black looked me over. She turned away. She didn't dislike me, she felt no emotion towards me whatsoever. I climbed the three flights to Randy's tiny one bedroom, taking care to skip the step I knew our mutual friend Clyde had puked on recently.

Randy opened the door wearing athletic shorts and an open blue button-down over a beater. He was barefoot. A wave of smoke followed behind him. The smell hit me like a man finally giving in to temptation and beating his wife.

"Kev's already here." Randy smiled. I hadn't said anything funny, so I figured they'd been smoking for a while. The corners of his mouth poked out from beneath his bushy brown mustache, and he ran a hand through his greasy hair.

"How's the job hunt coming?" I walked past him and grabbed the joint he was holding. I placed it in my mouth and inhaled deeply. Pinching it between my teeth, I was able to continue smoking while removing my shoes and jacket.

"Fuck you," Randy said. I wasn't sure if he was referring to my question or my theft of his marijuana. I took the five steps through the kitchen and past the bathroom, barely looking at the mounting pile of dirty dishes stacked in the sink and general messiness of the apartment. "There's a lot of people out there looking for the Art History major that's going to put their company over the top." I turned to look at him. Five years ago, he had been on top of the world. His whole future ahead of him. So many paths to choose from. He had

chosen badly, and all the potential in the world couldn't help him walk back the other way down that path and choose again. I finished the joint and threw it in the overflowing trash.

"That sucks, man, you know I'm just messin' around." I nodded towards the disgusting kitchen. "Devin leave again?"

"Quit calling her that."

"That's her name, ain't it?"

"She's my mom."

"You want me to call her Mrs. Amendola?" I smirked at him. He walked past me into the bedroom that was apparently now his.

"Whatever man, let's just get high." No argument from me. I followed Randy and his personal smoke cloud into the bedroom. Kevin sat on the bed, shoes off, head leaned back against the wall, eyes closed. I could barely see him from all the smoke. He was still wearing most of his suit from work, though the jacket was discarded over by the window, lying on the floor. I noticed the tiny wire pulled from the smoke detector above me. Randy joined Kevin on the bed, I took the only chair in the room, an old cushioned rocking chair, the color of which could only be described as burnt mustard. It had patches on it where Randy's cat Washington had scratched at it. Kevin passed Randy the blunt he was holding. He picked up a bong. I caught Randy's eye and looked at the vaporizer in the corner. He nodded.

Kevin started coughing. He put the bong down quickly. After a few moments, he took the blunt back from Randy, who picked up the bong. Kevin took a hit.

"So what happened with that Kate girl last night man?" His voice was lower than normal from the smoke. I packed the vape and answered without looking up.

"I got laid man. You?"

"Nah, she just wanted to fool around." Randy and Kevin laughed. I wasn't high yet.

"They were only freshman, you know that?" I looked up now. Kevin and Randy were each tugging on the bong. The blunt had gone out. I pulled open the dresser next to me and took out a pre-rolled

joint. I tossed it on the bed. Randy won, and Kevin dejectedly picked up the joint.

“Yeah, I kind of figured when we went back to Hayden. The Miley Cyrus poster also gave me a clue.” He looked around for a lighter, dramatically patting his t-shirt as if he had a breast pocket and then checking his back pockets. He knew he didn’t have a lighter, he was just making it obvious he wanted one. I reached for my peacoat.

“That doesn’t bother you? They said they were seniors.” I unzipped the inside pocket of my coat and pulled out a condom and my Bic. I tossed the Bic to Kevin and put the condom back in the pocket. Kevin missed the lighter and it fell next to the bed.

“Nah, man. Look, you’ve been out of the scene for a while with Amanda. But that’s just kind of the way it works.” Kevin found the lighter and expertly lit up the joint. Randy coughed from behind the bong.

“What do you mean?” I noticed for the first time what was bugging me. It wasn’t the cliché Bob Marley posters Randy had put up in Devin’s absence, or the strikingly incongruous Van Gogh copy that he had hung up above the headboard. There was no music playing.

“Well as you--”

I cut Kevin off. “Randy can we play some tunes man? It’s so quiet in here.”

Randy jumped at his name. “Sure man, I just don’t wanna be too loud, the landlord’s been looking for rent and I don’t have it.” He got up off the bed and grabbed his MacBook. It was still covered in NYU-related stickers. Macklemore quietly filled the silence. Kevin looked vacant, but was alert enough to take advantage of Randy’s absence and grab the bong. He passed the joint, which was down to a stub, to Randy as he sat back down.

“What were you sayin’ Kev?” I wanted to hear this. I wanted as many girls as possible in the next few weeks. I needed to win this break-up, to show Amanda she should ask me to come back. I needed any advice I could get, even from Kevin, who could be kind of a creep when it came to women.

“I don’t remember.” Kevin looked at me. His eyes were bloodshot.

“It’s simple, Zach.” Randy cut in. He finished the joint and looked at me. I reached into the drawer and tossed him another. The vape had heated up, so I leaned down and took a deep, long hit. I looked back up. Randy was preparing for a speech. He always talked the most when we got high. Amanda frowned at me in my head and I felt a headache coming on. I took another hit. God, I wanted to be high.

“You, well, we, are getting older. The age of girls that are looking for one-night stands has remained the same as it was when we were freshman.” Randy enunciated each word clearly. It was like he was back in college, serving as a TA and loving it. “The women that are our age are starting to look towards stage two, and they don’t want a guy who will sleep with them and never call them.” Kevin pulled at his tie in discomfort.

“Just take it off man,” I said to him. He didn’t respond. I took another hit of the vaporizer. And another. My chest started to feel warm. Ahhh.

“Kevin.” He looked up. “Just take the tie off if it’s so annoying.”

“Ahhh, I would. I just always forget it when we leave.”

“I’ll remind you.” I looked back to Randy. He appeared to have forgotten he was talking. He ran his hand through his hair. “What do you mean, stage two? What is that?” I took another hit of the vaporizer. I blew the vapor out towards the smoke detector and laughed.

Randy brightened. He had all these theories of life. I was sure this was another one, that he would describe passionately until he tripped again and came up with a new one. “It’s my new theory. There are two stages to life, right? Potential and realization. We spend the first twenty-two years of our lives talking about potential.” He stopped talking suddenly. He looked out the window. “Did you hear that?”

Kevin and I glanced at each other. “What?”

“I thought I heard the doorbell.”

“You’re getting paranoid, man,” Kevin started making strange faces at Randy. “You scared of your landlord? Or your mommy?” Randy punched Kevin’s arm. I took a hit. Kevin punched Randy’s arm. I laughed. They both looked at me and started giggling. Randy

stopped and got serious. A bead of sweat glistened as it slid from the side of his left eye down his scruffy cheek.

“So for two decades we have people helping us. Tryin’ to get us to be our best, and helping us pick a career. We have so many options. Then we pick. That’s the end of stage one.”

“Okay...” I said, unsure of his point. “So what’s stage two?” My phone vibrated. I pulled it out. It wasn’t Amanda.

“Stage two is we get married and have kids and guide our kids through stage one. That’s all there is to life. Our parents prepare us to get married and have kids and we prepare those kids to get married and have kids and they prepare those kids to get married and have kids and--”

“I get it,” I cut in. Kevin giggled.

“Kids and parents, that’s all we are.” He pulled out his phone and looked at it. Kevin grabbed his phone and looked at it. Not wanting to be left out, I checked the message from earlier. *u comin to Louies thing tonight?* It was Murph. Everyone needs a friend like Murph. If they’re named Murph, that’s even better. Murph makes it his mission to get all the old college boys together every couple of months or so. He only graduated last year, so he’s still making the effort to keep in touch. I was like that last year, calling everyone up and having them over. Not this year though. I loved Murph. Louie too. Hell, I even loved stupid Kevin and smart-ass Randy.

“So basically, stage one is all excitement and possibilities.” Randy continued. He looked at me sternly. “Stage two is realization of one of those possibilities, and normally includes the realization that you realized the wrong possibility.” Kevin patted him on the back.

“C’mon, man, shit gets better.” Eloquent as always.

“Then you force your kids through stage one and try to get them to do what you never did.” Randy was killing the high.

“What are you guys doin’ tonight?” I asked Kevin and Randy, eager to change the subject. They seemed confused.

“This.” Randy had little desire to go out these days.

“You guys wanna hang with Louie and Murph?”

“Muuuurph,” Kevin said, laughing. “Of course, I love Murph.”

“Hell yeah man, when we goin’?” Randy said. We all giggled. I turned off the vape and gestured for the bong. Randy passed it over happily. Kevin gave me my lighter back. I took a hit. Kevin and Randy started arguing about the Yankee’s chances this season. I had no interest, and my mind wandered...

I slammed the door to our apartment as Amanda and I came in. It was a Saturday, towards the end of our senior year at NYU. “Zach?” I heard Brian call out weakly from his room. “Is that you?”

“Yeah,” I called back. I scanned the mess. No food left out, that was good. Both Kevin and Murph’s doors were half-open in a way that suggested they had gone out.

“Come in here man.” I looked at Amanda, her smile as she surveyed the apartment the same as it always was. I jerked my head to tell her to follow me, and made my way to Brian’s room. I stepped over someone’s dirty jeans and put a hand on the door, which was slightly ajar. I stepped inside.

Brian was lying on the bed, wearing athletic shorts and a white v-neck, which he was holding onto with both hands. Most of his belly was showing. He smiled at me lazily. I turned around and stopped Amanda from following me in.

“You wanna do something later?” I asked her. She tried to peer past me. I shifted with her.

“Suuuure,” she said slowly. “I thought we were going to hang out now?” She brushed her hair out of her eyes.

“I remembered I have to do something. For class.” I noticed the bag of shrooms lying on Brian’s desk, just out of Amanda’s view. There was still about half an eighth left, I guessed.

“Um, okay, I guess. Text me?” Amanda clearly didn’t believe me. But she left. As soon as I heard the door shut, I started eating the shrooms. They tasted dirty.

“Hurry up man,” Brian said from somewhere behind me. “I’m an hour in. They are... potent.”

“Patience is a virtue,” I said between mouthfuls. I went to the kitchen and drank some water to wash them down. I returned to Brian’s room and sat on the chair by his desk.

Twenty minutes later, they started hitting.

Forty minutes later, Brian and I had started talking.

An hour later, we were bouncing off the walls.

We would talk about something so passionately, debating and agreeing for ten or fifteen minutes, then reach some satisfying conclusion. Thirty seconds later, we had no recollection of what we had been talking about. I only remember one conversation from that trip.

I got a text from Kevin. There was some frat party that night that he wanted to go to.

“You wanna go to a frat thing?” Brian looked up from the bed spread he had been thoroughly examining.

“Not really,” he said. “Watching jocks who wish they hadn’t come here hit on girls who aren’t smart enough to be here?” He stopped abruptly and looked around. “Actually, I’m in. I think in this state of mind I just might be able to deal with the amount of testosterone in the room.”

I texted Kevin asking why we were going to a frat party. He shot back quickly that a bunch of the girls from our sophomore floor, Six East, were going.

“Ah,” I said to no one. “A reunion.” I directed my words to Brian. “It’s a Six East event.” He laughed. I texted back that Brian and I would go.

“I don’t like this whole community thing we have going on,” Brian said. He sat up. I felt the air in the room shift. We had reached an important topic, something worth discussing in great detail for at least ten minutes.

“Whaddyou mean?” I scratched my chest. I felt grimy, like I always did towards the end of the trip.

“I feel like everyone thinks we all stick together because we lived on the same floor and had this great big community.” Brian looked at me. His cheeks were red.

“Yeah, but really, I’m just friends with some of the kids that lived on that floor,” I agreed, as I was obligated to do. We had long ago laid down ground rules for these trips: It was a safe space where we could say anything, no matter how crazy it sounded, and the other would

either agree or just listen. It was part of the reason I liked tripping with Brian, but not with my other friends, who I always felt were restrained with me, or were judging me when I said crazy things.

“Exactly. I don’t give a fuck about Six East.” Brian scratched his chin. I ground my teeth. They felt weird. I looked around for a piece of chewing gum. “Here,” Brian said. He tossed me a piece.

“Like, I’m not going to hang out with these kids after we graduate.” I unwrapped the gum and slid it into my mouth.

“Well, I might, but it won’t be out of any real kinship.” I chewed as I thought this over. It sounded kind of like a disagreement. When I didn’t respond, Brian continued. “I mean, I’ll hang out with Murph and Kevin and Randy, but not because we lived on a floor together.”

“Because we’re actually friends.” My voice rose as I finished the statement. I wasn’t actually sure what he was getting at.

“Sure, in some sense. But we’re only friends because we are similarly aged men who do similar things on the weekends. Not like...” He trailed off.

“Us?” I asked. We had never really discussed our relationship. He was my best friend. Hell, I loved him. But I would never say it.

“Yeah, I guess. Basically, what this boils down to, is you and I, we’re best friends. Zach, you’re my best friend.” He looked away. I did too.

“Right.” I laughed. “It took almost four years and a lot of drugs, but we can finally say it. You’re my best friend.” We were both uncomfortable.

“And with these other guys, I just feel like, we have so little in common. I mean, our friendships are so superficial. What do you really know about Kevin?” I considered the question. I knew biographical stuff, sure, and some of the things he liked, mainly his sexual preferences. But did I know him like I knew Brian? I didn’t.

“I guess that’s just how it works, though, isn’t it?” I gained confidence in what I was saying as I spoke, mainly because I was just repeating what Brian had said. “Men, and I’d guess women, have only one or two truly close friends, and everyone else is just kind of out

of... convenience.” I took out my phone and considered writing this down.

“Yeah, and so we hang out, or hung out, with Six East, because they lived on our floor and they were kinda like us.” He lay back against the wall, looking at me again.

“But aren’t we like that? We were friends because we were roommates.” I knew what he was going to say before he even opened his mouth. He spoke quietly.

“At first, of course. But I think we’ve changed. This boils down to, you and I are friends. And that’s all we’ve really decided here.”

“Great. Now I’ve gotta take a leak.” I got up and walked towards the door.

“Zach?” I turned. Brian looked hyper vulnerable, his eyes were wide and he leaned towards me as he spoke. “I love you.” We looked at each other, then both collapsed in a fit of laughter.

Kevin and Randy had finally agreed that the Yankees were pretty good. I looked at both of them. Not much had changed in the two years since we graduated. We hung out, but it was mainly to avoid making new friends. I didn’t know much about them, and frankly I didn’t have much interest in learning about them. It was kind of sad. I missed what I had with Brian, what I had with Amanda. I rolled another joint and lit it, smoking it to the very end.

\* \* \*

We left sometime later, I’m not sure how long it was. I was high, but nowhere near as high as Kevin and Randy. We walked to West 4<sup>th</sup> street to take the subway into Brooklyn. *I wonder if Amanda will be there*, I thought. I resisted the urge to text her. I tuned in to what Kevin was saying as we walked.

“So basically, the computer buys it, and sells it a fraction of a second later. And if we do it with enough money, we make shit-tons without doing anything.”

“That’s sick man.” Randy was watching the dog walking in front of us intently. The dog’s owner, a middle-aged soccer mom with

wavy black hair and a large wart under her right nostril, eyed him suspiciously.

“I get paid to just sit there and count how much money we are making.” I laughed at that, and Kevin laughed, and Randy snickered. We passed a policeman standing on the corner, and he looked at us. We all shushed each other.

It started to drizzle just as we got to West 4<sup>th</sup>. We walked down the stairs, which were covered in tobacco stains and chewing gum. I avoided touching the handrails. Kevin and Randy slid their cards and went through the turnstiles. I couldn't get mine to work. After it had said “Swipe again at this turnstile” for the fifth time. I looked left and then jumped it. Or tried to. I tripped and landed almost head-first on the dirty ground. Kevin and Randy laughed. I cursed. My hands were disgusting. I wiped them on Randy. He hit me. I had an idea. I went over to the Indian man running the little store they had there and bought a People magazine. Kim and Kanye were on the cover. I wiped my hands on Kim's boobies. We laughed.

The A train pulled up. We piled on. Randy and I sat down. There was an old black man sitting next to me. He sniffed me. I recoiled. He smiled at me. He had all of his teeth, but they were as crooked as Nixon. “I'd like some of that,” he said.

“*No hablo ingles.*” I shrugged my shoulders sorry at him. I turned to Kevin, who was trying to stand without holding on. He wasn't wearing his tie. I laughed at him. He looked at me with blood-shot eyes and raised one bushy eyebrow. I didn't explain. The train started, and Kevin fell. Randy, me, and the old black man all laughed heartily. A blond woman and her mixed-race daughter with braids got up and moved farther down the car.

We got off the subway at Atlantic Ave. I realized that I didn't remember where Louie lived in Brooklyn. I called him for directions. After a confusing half hour or so that involved a near-altercation with a homeless gentleman, we arrived at Louie's apartment in Williamsburg.

A girl I had never met opened the door. She was tall, almost my height (Six feet, or close enough). She had on a Harvard sweatshirt

and tight black jeans. The apartment was surprisingly large, and decorated with all sorts of eastern stuff. I couldn't process it, there were swords and robes and kimono dragons.

"Hi," the mystery girl said. Or I should say sang, maybe. Her voice was lyrical. "I'm Erica. You friends of Greg's?" Her intonation rose and fell as she sang. I loved it immediately.

"Well hello, madam, I am Zacharias Henry Johnston the third." I bowed and offered her my hand. Kevin pushed past me. Randy was preoccupied with the doorknob.

"You both talk funny," Kevin said. "And his name's actually Zachary," he added to the princess. I nodded. She laughed.

"You wanna drink?" She offered me a bottle. I grabbed at it eagerly. "Woah, settle down." I laughed. Then I saw the label. Everclear.

"Oh boy," I said. "Somebody made a run to Jersey." I looked for a mixer, but found only Hawaiian Punch.

"What do you mean?" She asked. I noticed she was swaying a little bit.

"Everclear's illegal in New York." I poured both drinks at once into a red solo cup I found. I had a flashback to freshman year...

"What is it?" I asked Brian. He laughed and leaned back in his chair. We were sitting in our dorm room, him and me and two girls who are no longer important. His shirt was unbuttoned, revealing his toned and tanned six-pack beneath. He smiled at the girls, showing them his white-teeth, before explaining to me: "It's Everclear, it's 95 percent alcohol." I remembered marveling at the business model of watering down rubbing alcohol and selling it at fifty times the price. Brian took a swig and I took one too. It burned on the way down, and left a stinging sensation in the roof of my mouth. But Brian smiled so I smiled. He winked at me.

"Are you going to drink that?" Erica looked at me like I was wearing a tinfoil hat and complaining about the government stealing my mind-waves. I realized I was just holding the cup. I tossed some of it back.

"You don't need to worry about me drinking..." I said.

"Good." she giggled and looked at me sideways. I felt like I had known her my whole life.

A few drinks later, she was sitting on my lap. I still hadn't seen Louie. I began to wonder if we were at the wrong party. I looked for Kevin and Randy. Randy was examining the doorknob. I heard a yell from another room that sounded like Kevin. I was going to investigate, but Erica chose that moment to shove her tongue in my mouth. I kissed her back harder. She grabbed my hair. I hate that. Why do girls think I'll like that? It just causes me pain. Amanda never did that. She told me once, "The golden rule of sex is don't pull or insert anything without asking." I laughed into Erica's mouth. She pulled back.

"What's so funny?" She asked. I noticed she didn't seem as drunk as I was.

"Nothing," I said. I took a swig of the drink I was holding. It was empty. I threw it on the ground. The place had emptied out. My phone was vibrating. I ignored it. "Come here." I grabbed the back of her head and kissed her forcefully. I pulled her hair. She moaned. I guess some people like it.

I opened my eyes. Her's were closed. *Why do we close our eyes to kiss?* I wondered. Does it have something to do with the shame our society has made us feel for having sex? We're taught from an early age that sex is dirty and that we should avoid it because girls will get pregnant and boys will get STD's and have to have their dicks cut off. So is the closing of our eyes an extension of that? Are we so ashamed we try not to look at our partner? Why am I not high? Am I drunk?

I noticed a freckle between her brows that I hadn't seen before. I fumbled with her bra strap. She pushed me away. I came back and we kissed again. I played with her nipple through her bra and shirt. I noticed a woman take a picture of us. She moaned. I hardened. She straddled me.

"Wait," I gasped. "We can't do this here."

"Why not?" she kissed me.

"You wanna go into the bedroom?" I spoke without disengaging our lips. To punctuate the request, I squeezed her boob.

"Okay," she breathed. I felt her hot breath on my neck and smelled the Everclear. We got up as one and walked to the bedroom, our fingers intertwined. I stepped over a dark figure and almost tripped. *I*

*guess I'm drunk*, I thought. As we approached, the door swung open. Two guys came out holding hands. I didn't know which one to high-five or bro-nod to. We slipped past them and the bulkier one nodded at me, so I figured he was the dominant one and nodded at him. But the other one, who wore a large cross around his neck and was shirtless, dapped me up as we passed. Very confusing.

We stepped through the doorframe. To my right was a dresser with a half empty bottle of Captain Morgan's on it, next to a hairbrush that had several long blond hairs in it. I grabbed the bottle. Erica went and sat on the bed. I unscrewed the top and threw it against the wall. She removed her shoes, then her pants.

"Take off your socks," I commanded.

"Whoopsies, I didn't notice." she removed the articles and we giggled. She reached out to me. I gulped down some rum and spilled some on the ground.

"Youno whatI liketodo whenI'mdrunk," I slurred.

"What?" I sat down on the bed next to her and kissed her neck. I took off her shirt and kissed down between her cleavage. I stopped and took another swig.

"Go downtown." I kissed her belly button. I tried to take off her bra and failed. She removed it with one hand. She kissed my hair and pulled it. Ugh. She leaned in.

"I'll be right back," she whispered.

"Ah," I said. "The mysterious pre-coitus visit to the facilities. Make haste, my darling, I yearn for your flesh." She ignored me and went into the bathroom. I wondered what girls do in there when they leave right before sex. Put out a welcome mat? Comb? My head drooped to the ground.

A wedding. But whose? I see all the groomsmen. Kevin and Randy and Murph. Oh, it must be Brian's. Where is he though? Is he in the bathroom? And who is he marrying? I see Amanda and my mother looking at me. I go over to talk to them. But I don't get near them. They keep pointing towards the front.

"Are you ready to go downtown? Zach?" Erica was back from her venture to the other side of the plaster. I awoke with a start.

“Being a God-kissing carrion.” I knocked on the headboard and placed my ear up to it. I looked at Erica. “Yep, I’m drunk.” She looked so beautiful. I had to have her. I grabbed her and threw her on the bed. She giggled. I took off her panties and buried my face between her legs. She moaned with delight. I thought about how silly it is that we drive on a parkway and park on a driveway. I wondered what Kevin was doing. I thought about the Jolly Rancher story that people always talked about on reddit. I hoped it wasn’t true. I felt my eyes grow heavy.

Wait. I realize it can’t be Brian’s wedding. He’d never get married. He always told me that. “Why limit myself?” he’d say. I realize in this instance that it was fear, not bravado, that made him say that. A second later the thought is gone, it slips between my fingers without a sound. So whose wedding am I floating at? Because I am floating, I notice. I am above all the other guests. An invisible hand, like Adam Smith prophesied, delivers me to the stage. It is my wedding, I surmise. A unicorn runs past. I giggle. Then I start to freak out. Who am I marrying? Music starts playing. It’s “Black Magic Woman” by Santana. I never got why they are called Santana when he doesn’t even sing. I turn, and a woman is walking down the aisle. Is this my wife? She is so beautiful. She turns and sits down. I reach for my lighter and a cigarette and pull out a carton of silly string. My hands start to melt. A woman wearing a wedding dress and a veil walks down the aisle. A Mexican Mariachi band starts playing. All of the band members have facial hair that goes from ear to ear, but skips the chin and goes over the mouth instead. “Here comes the bride,” I sing. “Who will she be?”

“Zach?” Erica’s voice startled me. I awoke with my face still in her nether regions. *Never woken up in one of these before*, drunken me thought.

“Well, not for a long time anyway.” I said.

“What?”

“Huh?”

“Are you too drunk for this?”

“Of cour not. Where a condom?” I kiss my way back up to her lips. I was naked. Huh. That was new. I saw a condom and put it on. At first I tried the wrong way, but I got it eventually.

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this.”

“How old are you?”

“What? I’m 21.”

“Hmmm. So you are a stage one. I think I am a stage one still as well. But maybe not.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Looking for love in all the wrong places.” My singing was off-key. Strange, I was normally a good singer.

“Look, this was a mistake. We are too drunk for this. I should go.”

“Okly dokles. Look both ways before you cross the street, Erica. You little cutie you.” Erica stands up and gets dressed. I stare at her left butt cheek. Why does such a shape arouse me? It causes a certain set of neurons to fire, which causes other circuits of neurons to fire, which eventually sends a signal down to increase blood flow. Funny, the way evolution prepared me to attempt to drunkenly hook up with a stranger in a two-bedroom brownstone in Williamsburg. Erica put on her necklace.

“I’m going to leave now, okay?” She stood in the doorway.

“I think I’m at the wrong party...” I moaned. She left. I passed out.

We are off on our honeymoon. Wait, what about the wedding? I can’t see her face. Every time I turn towards her, she is looking away. She has dirty blond hair and a mole on the left side of her neck. That’s all I know. She doesn’t do it on purpose. I look at her and she is looking out at the water. I look at her and she looks for a waiter to order. I look at her and she dives into the pool.

We live out our life. I never see her face. We raise two beautiful children and I never see their faces either. All of this happens so fast. Then, I am somewhere different. The smell of freshly mown grass overwhelms me. I am lying in a graveyard. I get up. I see a tombstone. “Alex Foster, born 1924, died 1938.” A part of me cries for this forgotten stranger, who lived fourteen years and will never think again. The amount of energy that went into creating him is overwhelming. And it was all for nothing. He never left stage one. But why am I here? I see a mass of people and walk over. My feet don’t touch the ground.

She is dead. She lies in the coffin. I beg for them to open it, to let me see her face once. They think I mean one last time, I mean for the first time, let me see the woman I married. My children hold me back. I look at them and they turn to their wives. Their identical, cookie cutter wives with long brown hair and wonderful bosoms. Each has a single tear run down their cheek. I scream and yell and cry and they take me away.

## Chapter 4

I woke up and looked at my phone. 4:27. I didn't know where I was. The smell of puke filled my nostrils. The recognition it was mine sent me running to the bathroom. I didn't make. *Fuck it, this isn't my apartment.* I threw up on the floor. I lay down and curled up into a ball. *I'm never drinking again.* I just wanted to pass out and wake up the next morning. The room was spinning. I squeezed my eyes shut. I put my hands over my eyes. I moaned. "Fuuuuck." I fell back asleep. I didn't dream, for once.

I was woken by a surfer-looking dude the next morning. He had spiky blond hair and a long face. He was frowning at me as he shook me awake with his right hand on my right shoulder.

"Who are you, man?"

An excellent question, though I believed he meant it in a more of a logistical sense than an existential one. I, however, was still a little buzzed from the night before.

"Who are any of us?" I sat up and found I was clutching a pillow. It was puke colored with puke colored stains.

"Oh, great man. C'mon. What's your name?" Spiky was annoyed. I wasn't feeling too great myself.

"Listen, brah, I really better be going." A little man had started to pound his hands against the inside of my skull.

"Alright asshole, I was just going to kick you out. You could at least give me some money to pay to clean all this shit." Now he was getting aggressive. Jeez, some people. I sighed. He had a point, no matter how much of a douchebag he was being about it. The little man had switched to some sharp object, it felt more like a fork than a knife, that he was digging into my temple.

“Fine.” His deep v was both too deep and too tight. I could see his nipples.

“Your shirt is pretty tight.” I stood up and took out my wallet.

“Oh, is it, stranger I found passed out in my bedroom?” I tossed a twenty on the bed.

“I’ll be going now.” I moved past him and he shouldered me a little bit. I would have retaliated, but he got a little puke on him from my shirt, which he hadn’t noticed. *Karma’s a bitch*, I thought. I tapped my pockets to make sure I had my phone, wallet, and keys. I did. I nodded at Spiky, who glowered at me. The little man had recruited his children, who were stomping around on the edges of my brain.

Outside, I noticed that the horrible smell of the apartment had followed me. Intuitively, I figured it was actually me that smelled, specifically the puke covering all my clothes. I didn’t want to ride the subway back looking like a homeless man, so I called Louie. I figured he must live nearby, as I was supposed to be there the night before.

“What’s up, man? Where were you last night?”

“Sorry man, we were so high we went to the wrong party.”

“Oh, that’s crazy.” I turned left and hoped I was walking in the right direction.

“Yeah, I had a pretty crazy night. I got mad cross-faded and passed out in some surfer-dude’s bedroom.”

“That sucks man. You should have been here.”

“Yeah. Listen man, I’m a mess. Can I swing by and shower before I go back uptown?”

“Oh, ah, sure. You know where I live? Gonna find me this time?”

I chuckled. So did the little man, which made my head hurt. He gave me directions. I was pretty close. He lived in a brownstone just a few blocks away. I got there in no time. I pressed the buzzer. It was obvious he had just moved in, the line where his name was written had another name that was crossed out. It said, “~~Anderson~~ Reynolds. 5b.” Most of the other apartments were vacant. Or at least they didn’t have names listed.

Louie buzzed me up. The place was a complete mess. Boxes were strewn everywhere, the kitchen counter was covered with empty

bottles, the sight of which caused my stomach to lurch, and there was a faint aroma of puke. Oh no, wait, that was still me. Louie came forward to greet me, then stopped short at the sight of me. There was a full-length mirror lying against a pile of boxes marked “Clothes and shit.” I looked, and regretted it. My shirt, once white, was a pinkish-orange in spots and a brownish-yellow in others. My jeans were torn at each knee, and they seemed darker in spots jeans shouldn’t be darker.

“Here.” Louie had grabbed a trash bag and offered it to me. “Why don’t you just throw those out? You can wear some of my clothes.”

“Can I?” Louie was a good five or six inches shorter than me, and probably twenty or thirty pounds heavier. I regretted the remark as soon as I said it. Louie’s face darkened. I could see the gears turning as he tried to decide how to interpret my response. I did my best to arrange my face into what I hoped was “grateful.” Apparently I was successful, because he cracked a smile.

“Of course man, I’ll always help out an old Six-Easter.” He was referring to the floor we had all lived on our Sophomore year. Sometimes it seemed like I didn’t have any friends that didn’t go to NYU. I thanked him profusely and stripped. I dumped the shirt and the jeans in the bag.

“Bathroom’s that way.”

“Thanks.”

“Here, you can use...” he looked around, walked over to the mirror, and grabbed an Anakin Skywalker towel from the boxes marked “Clothes and shit.” He tossed me the towel. I caught it and slung it over my shoulder. Louie eyed my dollar-sign boxers. I walked away to the bathroom.

As the water washed over me, I examined the blue-green tiles beneath my feet and felt sober enough to reflect on the last night. In all likelihood, I figured, I had simply added another member to my Never Contact Contacts list. Basically, anytime I got too drunk and hooked up with some girl but didn’t sleep with her, I would normally wake up the next day to find she had given me her number in the hopes I would call her and we would date. I have never ever contacted one of these girls. I just wouldn’t know what to say. “Hi, we made out

last night and I'm pretty sure your name is Francine, want to come over and fuck tonight?"

I examined Louie's shampoo selection, of which there were a surprising number of them. I just had shampoo and conditioner, but Louie had all different scents and effects. I selected Aquatic Breeze and sudsed up my hair. It was getting a little long. I was approaching the point of no return, where I'd have to cut it or invest in a comb.

Louie was waiting for me when I got out of the shower. He had picked out some sweatpants and his stretchiest t-shirt for me to wear. I dried my hair.

"I don't have any food, but we could go to a diner or something if you want."

"Nah, I just want to get back and lie down." I dropped the towel and put on the pants.

"Oh, well. It would be good to catch up sometime, it's been a while." Louie picked up the towel. I felt bad.

"You don't have to pick up after me, I was just leaving it there for a second."

"It's totally fine man. You're my guest." I put on the shirt. It was loose in the chest but did not quite reach my waist. I pulled the cord on the sweatpants as far as I could. They almost reached my ankles.

"Well. Thanks. And we should catch up sometime. Just not when I'm insanely hungover." I grabbed my phone and wallet and keys and slipped them into the pockets of the sweatpants. I checked my phone. One missed call.

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Huh? Uh, I don't know yet." I looked up.

"Well me and Kevin were going to pick up some brownies. From California. If you wanna join us you could contribute right now..."

Hmmm. Edibles. Well, they would keep me from drinking. I'd be too fucked up to want alcohol. "Yeah, that sounds good." I threw him a twenty. "When did you see Kevin?"

"He came to the party last night. Said you hooked up with some hot girl." He handed me a ten back. Cool. Cheap edibles. My favorite kind.

“Yeah, I guess I did.” I headed for the door, bracing myself for the cold walk to the subway. “Text me tonight.”

“Peace bro.”

“Goodbye Louie.”

I took out my phone and saw that I had never checked the missed call. My heart skipped a beat. It was Amanda. I wanted to call her, but I was at the subway station. I texted her: “Bout to b on the subway. Wats up?” I pressed send and shook my head sorry to the homeless man sitting on the stairs. He nodded in response and wrapped his brown blankets tighter around himself. I shivered.

When I got off the train I had a text from Amanda asking me to call her when I could. So I did. It’s... interesting how easily I follow her directions. She asked to meet me for lunch tomorrow. She didn’t sound happy or sad. I wasn’t sure how I should feel either. Lunch certainly isn’t a “I want to get back together and spend all night having make-up sex” kind of event, but it’s also not a “please don’t be at your place at this time so I can get my stuff” thing either.

\* \* \*

Louie texted me around 9 telling me to come over. I had forgotten about the edibles. I was still recovering from the night before, drinking cup after cup of water and sitting absentmindedly in front of the TV. But I did want to see him, to reminisce. So I put on my most comfortable jeans and a purple polo I had recently bought that was the softest thing I had ever worn. I was about to leave when I remembered I had a stress ball I had gotten at some work event a few weeks back. I dug around under a pile of dirty clothes I had lying next to my bed for the sweatshirt I had worn to that event. I hadn’t worn it since because I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror there, and before my brain recognized me, it said, *that is an ugly sweatshirt*. I’ve always found it hard to accurately appraise my looks. Context clues have told me I’m good-looking, but I don’t see it. I look in the mirror and all I see are flaws. My nose is crooked, my skin is blemished and pale, and if you look closely you can see the tiny hairs between my eyebrows form a unibrow. I’ve found the only time I can accurately

tell how good I look is when I see myself in a mirror when I'm not expecting to, and my subconscious evaluates me just like it would any other person, with none of the esteem-protectors it has built-in when I look in a mirror. And I normally like what I see. But this sweatshirt made me look creepy.

I found the sweatshirt under a neon t-shirt that a coworker gave me and that I had worn once so that he wouldn't think I didn't like it. The stress ball was in the pocket. I transferred it to my back pocket. I also grabbed a bag of low-calorie rice cakes for when I got the munchies. I headed out the door and reversed the path I took that morning. The sky was a hazy blue. It never really got black here. Too many lights. I read a study once that said if you judged city limits by luminance, the borders of New York City stretch from D.C to Boston. So I guess I didn't really move away when I went to college, I just moved to a different part of the city. I bounced the ball once on the ground and regretted it. I considered washing my hands. Then I decided I'm 24 years old and I'm not going to be intimidated by the filthiness of these streets. I had lived here for six years. A siren went off in the distance and I jumped. A little black boy walking past with his mother laughed and pointed at me. I glared at him and his faux Timberlands clomping on the sidewalk.

"Excuse me." My words stopped the woman in her tracks. She eyed me suspiciously, then softened. There was that effect. I smiled at her. The boy frowned.

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't happen to have any raisins, would you?" I'm normally staunchly against pick-up lines. But in situations like this I don't have much of a choice. I can't just strike up a normal conversation like we're at a bar. So when I do have to use a line, I go corny. And I mean really, really corny.

"No..." She's intrigued, but also put off. I noted the hastily applied makeup, the loose sweatshirt and the functional flats on her feet. She was a single mom. She didn't have time to worry about what men out on the streets think of her. But she was also... voluptuous. She hadn't walked away yet. It's times like these where I think I must

be attractive to women. If I was ugly, they would leave when I started acting weird, instead of finding it cute or even endearing.

“How about a date, then?” The wheels turned in her head. I watched with a bright smile. Junior scowled at me. She got it. She laughed, way more than the pun deserved. I won.

“Okay, well, that’s unique. Sure, I guess. Let me give you my number.” My phone was already out. She told me the number and I faithfully tapped it in. I looked at Junior, he had crossed the arms of his mini peacoat and was watching the interaction with disgust.

“And your name?”

“Grace.”

\* \* \*

I buzzed up to Louie’s unsure of what the scene would be. I hadn’t done edibles in a while, and I hadn’t done edibles with Louie in even longer. Kevin was already there. He’d dressed down, for once. His Saturday attire still involved a button-down, and today’s version was a sleek black with white buttons, but he was wearing jeans and the button-down was untucked.

“The fuck are those shoes, man?” I said. He was defensive. Maybe this was why he always wore loafers.

“They’re my new vans. You like ‘em?” He flexed each ankle to show off his new shoes-- a pair of bright pink canvas sneakers that screamed Flamboyant Gay Man.

“I love ‘em. Where can I get a pair?” He thought I was being sarcastic, but I supported anything that made him look like more of an asshole. I found it amusing.

“Louie went out to pick up, he’ll be back in a bit.” Kevin walked into the kitchen and I followed him.

“Cool.” I opened the refrigerator.

“When’s the last time you ate?” Kevin looked at me, serious.

“A few hours ago, why?” I closed the fridge and grabbed an apple from the handmade fruit basket on the granite counter next to the silver oven-grill combo.

“You should probably eat something. These things will really fuck you up on an empty stomach.” I put the apple back.

“Good,” I said. I walked out of the kitchen.

“I’m serious,” Kevin called after me. He followed me into the main room. I plopped down on Louie’s beige pleather couch. I kicked off my shoes and placed my feet on the glass coffee table.

“Pretty impressive furniture for a... what is Louie doing these days?” Kevin looked shocked at how comfortable I was. He hated relaxing sober. He also didn’t appreciate the change of subject. He sat on the recliner adjacent to the couch and turned it to face me. After a few seconds, he reluctantly answered.

“He’s a writer.”

“Still pursuing that? What’s he been in?” I picked up a magazine off the coffee table and flipped through it.

“Nothing that I know of.”

“Kim hates being pregnant... surprising. So then how’s he paying for this?” I managed to tear my eyes away from the cover story to look at Kevin. I could guess how he was paying for it, I just wanted to see if Kevin could confirm it. He nodded.

“You know,” he said.

“Ah,” I said. We sat in silence for a few minutes. I learned more about Kim Kardashian than I wanted to know.

“Look,” he began. I snapped out of my fantasy about a butt implant gone horribly wrong. She probably wouldn’t die anyways. “I know that the last month and a half has been tough for you. It’s been hard for me too.”

“Oh boy! An inspiring speech about dealing with grief!” I clapped my hands and bounced up and down.

“Amanda breaking up with you on top of Brian’s death. It’s a miracle you’re still working.” He nervously met my eyes to gauge my reaction. It wasn’t good. I clenched my jaw. Kevin was my second best friend. Or, he was my new best friend. I’d let him finish.

“But I think you are not dealing with this the right way. And maybe I’m not either. We’ve been getting fucked up. And I know we always get fucked up. But we’ve been getting really fucked up,

especially the last few nights. We spent hours at some drug dealer we didn't know's party last night, Zach."

"I'd been meaning to ask, when did you leave that? I didn't make it out till morning." I laughed. Kevin didn't. He looked up and met my eyes. There was water clouding his dark eyes. He scratched behind his left ear, and I noticed a patch of skin in his crew cut.

"Stop changing the subject. I know it hurts. But drugging yourself up isn't the answer." His face changed abruptly. He seemed to have just realized this himself.

"Then why are you here?" I had caught him being a hypocrite. He had no choice but to change the subject.

"You're right." He stood up. He walked over to the coat rack and grabbed his jacket.

"You're leaving?" I got up and walked over to him. This was not what I thought was going to happen.

"Yes, and you should too. We don't need to do this. Let's take a night off from the drugs and the women. Let's talk about Brian, about what happened to him." I opened the door for him.

"See you around." I refused to look at him, focusing out the door. Louie appeared in the doorway. He was disheveled and his hair was wet.

"Jesus, it's pouring out there. Where you guys goin'?" Louie marched in without an answer and pulled out three purple packages. He placed them on the kitchen counter and looked at Kevin, then me.

"We're leaving." Kevin looked at me.

"Kevin doesn't want his cookie. Here, I'll have it." I handed ten dollars to Kevin without making eye contact. He stared at it, then took it and nodded goodbye to Louie. I shut the door behind him. Louie asked me with a look for an explanation. I just shrugged my shoulders.

"Forget him. We're gonna have a good night," I said. I returned to the couch and sat back down.

"Feet off the table please."

"You can't be serious."

“fraid so. I can’t have you dirtying up the place. Bad for business.” He sat down in the recliner and pulled the lever to lie down.

“You sell pot. You think anyone cares?” I took my feet off the table. I got up and grabbed two of the packages. “Jesus, these things have nutritional info?”

“Yep, they’re legit.” Louie smiled. He walked over and grabbed his. He had missed a spot whenever he most recently shaved, and there were a few hairs on his right cheek.

“Regular smokers of cannabis should consume 1/2 a cookie,” I read aloud from the back. I opened the package and wolfed down the whole thing.

“Woah,” Louie said. He chewed slowly on his. I remembered a meal I had with Brian a few months ago...

“You take forever,” I said. Amanda and I were waiting for Brian to finish. Haley, his latest girl, his last girl, was in the bathroom. “Why can’t you just eat at a normal speed like everyone else?” Amanda chuckled. She reached for my hand and smiled at me. She was wearing a black dress and the necklace I had bought her for her birthday a few weeks before. The light caught the emerald around her neck and for a second, she sparkled. Brian finished chewing, looking at Amanda the whole time. He swallowed. He looked at me.

“I’m sorry Zach, I know you do everything quickly. I like to take my time.” Amanda laughed. I chuckled politely.

“Is that why it always takes us so long to leave when you just have to ‘run to the bathroom’ before we go?” Amanda guffawed. Brian had no response. It was the last time the three of us ate together.

“What do you want to do?” Louie asked after he finished his cookie. I opened the other cookie and ate it.

“Let’s go sit somewhere where we can reminisce.” I knew where we were going to go. I didn’t want to have to dictate, so I tried to guide Louie to it.

“I got an idea, why don’t we go sit at Brad’s? For old times’ sakes?” Bingo.

“I don’t know, you sure you wanna?” I was just messing with him now. I imagined I was starting to feel it. I knew that it took an hour

or so, but I always had a giddy effect right after eating something like this. The anticipation of it almost made me high.

“Yeah, let’s do it.” Louie giggled.

“Okay,” I said. I put my shoes on slowly. “We could even call Murph and Randy to meet us there.”

“Sounds good man.” I got my coat.

We got there really early, around ten or so. I hadn’t started to feel it yet. We got a table. There was almost no one there. I got a cranberry juice from the cute bartender.

“What’re you on your period or something?” she asked, with a too-strong-to-be-real Boston accent. I laughed at the reference.

“Are you a cawp?” I mimed smashing my glass and hitting her with it. She smiled. “Isabel,” her name tag read.

“Great movie,” she said. I agreed. She was wearing an engagement ring.

“When’s the big day?”

“A few months.”

“You love him?” she seemed taken aback.

“Of course.” How lucky she was. And she didn’t even know it.

“Congratulations,” I said. I tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice, but from her frown it was clear I failed. I walked back to Louie.

“Randy’ll be here in a few. Murph’s gonna meet us later. He’s out to dinner with Jackie.” I sat down next to Louie. We had our backs to the wall. This would be our entertainment for the evening.

“How’s that going for him?” I took the stress ball out of my pocket and squeezed it a few times. Louie watched me play with it.

“Good, I think. They’re getting pretty serious.” I bounced the ball off the wall and caught it.

“How long has it been now?”

“Almost eight months, I think.”

“I meant since we ate them.”

“Oh.” He checked his watch. He was the only guy our age I knew who wore a watch. It wasn’t even a nice one either. It was one of those velcro watches that aren’t water proof but are “water-resistant,” whatever that means. He wore this green and grey thing on his right wrist

too, even though he was right-handed. "It's 10:17." He looked at me. "When did we take them?"

"I don't know. 9:30 maybe?"

"I think it was earlier."

"You feel it?"

"Maybe a little. You?" And just as he asked I felt it all at once. A rush of warmth straight to my chest. I felt it in between my peccs. I sighed.

"I think... it just hit me." I giggled. It was coming on quick.

"Oh... boy. Me too." Louie's features sagged. He leaned back against the wall. I did too. We waited.

Sometime later, Randy showed up. We were a mess by then, giggling and snorting. Randy was wearing a bizarre outfit. He had on a bright red onesie, and some sort of mask. A bright yellow lightning bolt was emblazoned on his chest. When he entered and saw us, we devolved into yet another fit of helpless laughter. He stepped around a few tables of drunk college guys, and sank into a chair across from me. The cushion had a hole in it. I had switched that chair with my chair earlier to avoid the hole. He shifted uncomfortably while he talked. His predicament made me laugh. I sipped the same cranberry juice I had been drinking since we got there. Isabel brought a drink over to the table next to us. I smiled at her. She looked at me like a mother looks at her son when he brings home a bad grade.

"Aw, shut the fuck up," Randy said before either of us spoke. Well, not before we laughed and pointed at the lightning bolt.

"Is it...Halloween?" I gasped, choking back tears.

"No, I was at a purim party." I grabbed Louie's watch and checked it. 10:32.

"How was it?" Louie laughed as he asked.

"It sucked." Each response only made us laugh harder. I put my head in my arms and folded them on the table. Randy looked at us.

"What's up with him?" he pointed me out to Louie, as if Louie was any better than I was. Louie looked at me and said, "He has terminal cancer." I whooped, spitting out my cranberry juice on Randy's costume. He jumped back, angry.

"It's okay," I said. "The colors match." Randy scowled at me.

"What are you, man?" Louie asked quietly out of the side of his mouth.

"The Flash," Randy answered. I laughed. Louie didn't. I turned and followed his eyes. In porn terms, a couple of barely legal busty coeds had strutted through the door. In fairy-tale terms, a few fair damsels had just taken the first step towards becoming distressed. Louie smoothed down his hair.

"You sure you're up for this Louie?" I asked. "You're pretty high."

"I am? I never thought of myself as pretty." I giggled. He was serious. Well, as serious as he could be in the situation. I licked my hand and ruffled his red cowlick.

"Stop it man. Cut it out. You coming with me?" I shook my head. Randy perked up.

"I will," he said. "Just let me get a drink." Isabel appeared as if summoned.

"What'll it be?" She asked.

"A waitress and a bartender?" I said. "What versatility." Isabel stared blankly at me. I smiled. She gave a small smile then looked to Randy.

"Let me get a whiskey sour." Isabel walked back to the bar. Louie tapped his foot. I hummed "A Dustland Fairytale." The girl at the table next to us looked over.

"Hello. I'm LeDarius McQuinton." She looked suspicious.

"I'm Jane," She said slowly. She looked towards the bathroom, as if she was waiting for a friend.

"Have you ever seen the rain, Jane?" She got up and moved to another table. Isabel brought Randy's drink over. The dark brown mixture was almost overflowing. He stood up and placed the drink on the table. He took out his wallet to pay.

"Okay, I'm ready." Louie stood up too. Their targets were being engaged by a different pride of lions. I kicked the table stand. Randy's drink spilled a little.

"Hey, man, chill." He grabbed his drink and slurped some off the sides of the glass.

“Whoopsies.” I tickled Louie’s belly. He tried not to laugh.

“Stop it.”

“Just go,” I said, “Before those ladies are snapped up by some other leading men.” They walked carefully over, picking their way between tables, engaged in a discussion of the utmost importance. I surveyed the bar. It was a homogenous mix of white boys, white girls, and more white boys. The place itself was dark, with more tables than could be comfortably fit into such small place. The fake wooden chairs were spread all around, some tables had no chairs, and others had twice as many as they should. Those tables had invariably all female or all male occupants. The behavior of these groups depended on the sum of their Y chromosomes. The men all were on the prowl. At least one of them caught the eye of each girl that passed by. They spoke to each other only to formulate a game plan. They came here for one reason each night, to get fucked. The female tables, which were tables composed of females sitting at them, and not tables with female sexual reproductive organs, had a dichotomous purpose. Some of the girls looked around eagerly, gulping down bright blue drinks and pushing out their tits. They were here to get fucked. Others, particularly those who sat sipping on a glass of wine, looked around suspiciously, and often had a hand or two on their more eager friends. They had boyfriends, they were spoken for, they had found a mate and had no need to come to the local watering hole with all the other gazelles. They came here to make sure no one got fucked. The scent of desperation filled the bar. I loved it now. I’d hate it in the morning. Everywhere I looked I saw the funniest things I had ever seen in my short life.

A tall, strapping young lad made his way over to the table to my right, where a wench had sat and was intently staring at her phone. He engaged her in a conversation, which she reluctantly joined. He said something, and she twisted her hair around her finger. Then her phone flashed and she looked back down. Unperturbed, the Aryan sensation sat down next to her. *Aggressive*, I thought, *I’d avoid him on the Serengeti*. I eavesdropped by cupping a hand around my ear and leaning over. I don’t think they saw me.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“I’m actually waiting for my boyfriend.” Ah, the two most dreaded words in the history of sleazy bars. “My boyfriend,” which roughly translated to “There’s already a penis in my life, and I’m not looking to add another one.” Hercules stood up without another word and went back to his mates. They ribbed him a bit when he came back, I was sure.

I looked over to Louie and Randy. They were seated at their desired table, so they must have done alright for themselves. However, a closer look revealed three of the four women were texting, and the fourth was sipping water and glaring at them. The girl standing next to Louie stood up. She was unsteady. Her four-inch black heels clip-clopped as she made her way towards the bathroom. I figured I ought to help out my friends. I made my way to the bathroom. I also had to piss like a racehorse high on edibles. I tripped over the outstretched leg of some grey suit.

“Excuse me,” the suit said.

“Well, when did we teach clothes to talk?” I eyeballed the empty discount suit wearily.

“What did you say, bro?” It stood up. It was almost human.

“My goodness! Is that you Phillip? My long-lost brother?” I laughed and turned away, humming the Rocky theme song. I raised my fists in triumph as I found Louie’s target at the end of the line.

“Excuse me madam.” She turned to me. She smiled. Women are horrible at flirting when they are this drunk. Good thing I wasn’t here to flirt.

“What is your preferred moniker?”

“What?”

“What do the men shout out when they are with you?” I leaned against the grey wall, taking care not to cover the picture of Washington Square Park, 1886.

“I don’t know...”

“Sweetheart, what’s your name?” I sighed. Some people are dumb, others are smart.

“Karen.” I took her hand. It was surprisingly mannish, with thick fingers and callouses in all the wrong places.

“Karen, my darling, I am Leonidas of Sparta. I was hoping you could inform me of the name of your friend over there drinking only water...” Her smile died. Her inferiority complex grew. “And the name of her boyfriend.”

“How do you know she’s got a boyfriend?” She was clearly confused. The experience of a man talking to her here with no desire to fuck her left her almost speechless. She began looking around for someone to take her home. We were almost to the front of the line.

“Look, toots, when a man’s been leading safaris for this long, he learns to identify all species of the animal kingdom.” I waved my hands as I talked. They looked like bluebirds. Or maybe sparrows. I was never good with bird names.

“Um, well she’s Lauren. And her fiancé’s name is William.”

“Willy what?” She was reluctant. I gave her my most ingratiating smile and took her hand again. I stroked her ring finger to remind her she wasn’t getting any younger. It was her turn for the bathroom.

“Willy what?”

“Jamison.” She stumbled through the door to her left. A young Dominican gentleman with a chinstrap beard came out of the other one. He placed a bony hand on my chest and stood up as straight as he could. His Nirvana t-shirt stretched over his tiny chest.

“Hang on, man.” His voice was lower than I expected. “There’s a girl in there.”

“Aw, yeah man. Look at you!” He smiled and walked past. I continued. “Who fucked a drunk slut in a grimy bathroom? You did! Go Pablo!” I walked after him. He saw me follow and sped up. I wasn’t trailing him. I detoured over to Louie and Randy and Lauren’s table. I sat down next to the only person whose name I didn’t know. I became frantic.

“Are you Lauren?” I asked her.

“No,” she said. She looked at the real Lauren. They were apprehensive. “William Jamison’s girl?” I asked. I looked at the goalie. With

any luck, I'd be able to pull her and give my friends some time on an empty net.

"That's me," she said. "Who are you?"

I took a deep breath. "I'm Roger. Will's probably mentioned me. No? He hasn't? Well, it doesn't matter now. We were out drinking tonight and he was mugged. He's in bad shape. He asked for you, but none of us had your number."

"Wait, but he's been texting me." She looked down at her phone.

"I think that might be the guy who mugged him. Look, we can figure it out. The point is, he's in Washington Square Park right now asking for you. He told me you were here, showed me a picture he carries, and asked me to get you."

"Omgod. I'll be right there." She grabbed her purse and kissed her girlfriend on the cheek. I followed her as she went out the door, then grabbed her arm, maybe a little roughly.

"Are you nuts?" She wasn't even drunk.

"What?"

"You're about to follow a random stranger to an empty park in the middle of the night?" She tensed up. I was between her and the door.

"William's fine. I don't even know him. I just wanted to help my friends."

"You asshole! You fucking asshole!" Her tiny fists started hitting me. I snickered.

"C'mon! You were like Marty Brodeur over there! I needed to set a screen." She looked at me, incredulous.

"Asshole," she muttered again. She stormed back inside. I pulled out a cigarette. I needed to chase the high. A scary-looking Mexican man walked past. He asked for a cigarette. I have one rule in this city-- if someone asks for a cigarette, I give them one. I lit his and then mine. He took off. I wasn't in the mood to shoot the shit. Was I really better than Louie and Randy? I didn't creep on girls sitting at tables to get them to sleep with me, but I did just lie to a woman that her fiancé was in danger to try and get her friends to sleep with my friends. If that's not stage one behavior, I don't know what is. I

threw down the half-smoked cigarette and stomped it out. I went back inside. It hadn't even worked. Randy and Louie were waiting for me at our original table. I sat back down. None of us said a word. I checked my phone. Nothing from Amanda. I typed out a message to her, but didn't send it. My bladder reminded me that, like Amanda, its needs had not been met.

An hour or three later, I was sobering up.

"I'm not even high anymore." I turned to Randy and Louie. They were exhausted from a night of rejection. "I need a drink."

"I know where we can get one." Randy started smiling. I hailed a cab.

"I'm not walking anywhere." I said. I got in. Louie joined me. Randy pointed to the sign on top of the cab.

"Take us there please." The cabbie nodded. Randy got in next to Louie. I placed my forehead against the cool glass and reached into my pocket. I squeezed the stress ball while we drove. The lights from buildings blurred together, and before I knew it we were there. At the strip club. I didn't even know the name. We shuffled out, Randy and Louie excited, me thirsty. We showed our ID's to the large black man working the door. "Head on in, fellas." He pulled the red rope back and waved us in. We traipsed past the underage high schoolers who had thought for sure that their fakes would let them see boobies, even though they had more red marks on their faces than Tina Turner after a fight with Ike. They stared at us with envy as we entered the world of shaking and ogling.

The smell of cheap champagne washed over us. I looked around for a bottle, eager to drink the night away. A black-haired girl wearing a v-shaped onesie with enormous fake tits came over.

"I'm Misty." She spoke through her nose. "Can I get you boys anything?"

I reached into my pocket for my wallet. It felt thinner than normal, and I realized that I hadn't brought any cash, to prevent high me from spending too much. *Sober Zach is such an asshole*, I thought, even though I was almost him at that point.

“Buy me a drink,” I told Randy, who shook his head. His eyes were on a thin redhead up on the nearest pole. She bent over and flipped her hair up, catching Randy’s eye.

“No way man, I need to save this money for important things.” The song ended. The redhead hopped off the stage, landing gracefully on her fuck-me heels. Randy eagerly waved her over. Two other strippers came as well, evening up the sides.

“Hello, I’m Naomi, would you like a private dance?” She placed her hands on Randy’s shoulders. He salivated. Her eyes didn’t smile nearly as wide as her mouth. Randy wasn’t looking at her eyes, or her mouth for that matter. He nodded, and placed a twenty in between her breasts. She straddled him. One of the other girls, the blond, approached me.

“Hello, I’m Olive, would you like a private dance?” She placed her hands on my shoulders. The similarity in approach between her and Randy’s redhead was creepy. I shook my head.

“No money,” was all I said. She frowned and moved towards Louie, but the brunette was already there.

“Hey baby, I like your hair. How ‘bout a dance? I’m Paris.” Louie looked her over. He wanted to, that was clear. But he also didn’t have any money.

“Could we work out some kind of... payment plan?” I cracked up. Had he really just said that? Paris left. Louie ran his hands through his ginger hair and looked over at Randy, who was thoroughly enjoying Naomi’s company. He looked at me. I pointed at another table. We took a seat in front of a pole. A large black girl came out. “Introducing Quinn!” A Russian man with a thick accent said into a microphone. One guy clapped. A bunch got up and moved to another table.

“I’m too not high for this.” I turned away from the large girl who had removed her robe and begun to gyrate. “Why the fuck they got Precious up there?”

“Wait.” Louie had his hands in his pockets. “I just realized I have something that might help.”

“What is it? I’ll do anything right now.” I leaned forward and rested my chin on my hands. Louie placed a small baggie of white powder on the table.

“What the fuck is that?” I got up. My voice was too loud.

“It’s just coke,” Louie said. I wanted to hit him.

“Just coke, you fucking asshole? Just coke?” I grabbed his collar and pulled him towards me.

Louie understood his mistake and took back the coke. It wasn’t worth it, I decided. I pushed him back down. I felt tears, so I got up and left without another word. I walked briskly home. It started to drizzle. I walked faster. It started to rain. I began jogging, then running. A block from my apartment, I heard a crash of thunder and it began pouring buckets of rain. I stopped moving and looked up. I was soaked. I had never been more sober.

“I’m 24 years old. I hate my job, I hate my friends, and I spend every night getting too fucked up to think about it.” I spoke to no one. I walked inside. “And the only woman I’ve ever loved dumped me because I said she snores too much,” I whispered to myself as I unlocked my apartment and went in. I looked at my “home.” It was a collection of Ikea furniture and bare walls. There was nothing personal to it. I had a TV, a computer, and a bong. They were all I had to show for six years living away from home. I hadn’t truly had a home since I came home for winter break my freshman year and my parents had moved to the other side of town. We were moving up in the world, but I wasn’t really coming along. I sighed, then the tears I had felt came out. I cried for the first time in fifteen years. I stopped holding back. Big, racking, sobs came out of me. I grabbed an empty bottle of vodka off the cheap Ikea table and threw it at the wall. It shattered into a million tiny pieces. I searched desperately through piles of dirty clothes, hoping for a dub, a pill, anything to take the edge off, to close Pandora’s box. I couldn’t deal with it. I couldn’t find anything. I retreated to my favorite chair in the corner. I sat in it and looked at the mess I had made, had been making, had stuck myself in. The tears finally stopped. I was out. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hands and closed my eyes. Images of Amanda and Brian assaulted

my brain. I pulled my hair and screamed. I cursed. I flashed back to that night...

A text. It's Brian. We made plans to meet up, like we always did. He said he had something good for tonight. He'd been weird lately. Distant. Never seemed to be where we were. He was always off in some special place. I texted Amanda, but she was swamped with briefs to read. I figured I better put on some pants. I threw the joint I was smoking out the window. I was buzzed, but not high. I walked to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Mirror Zach, with two-days-too-many growth, stared back from inside the glass. I put my hand up against his. He smiled. I laughed. I reached for my razor and shaved just the mustache. He looked better now, I decided. I flexed my abs and was satisfied with how he looked shirtless. I brushed my teeth for the first time of the day. I spit out the bright blue paste and washed out my mouth. Another text. Amanda. She said she might join us later.

I looked for the best smelling pair of jeans on the mountain of clothes in my tiny bedroom. I could touch every wall in the room from my bed. I found a pair with no food on them. I sniffed. Smelled like denim, just like it should, with just a hint of mustard. I pulled them on, taking care with the zipper to not catch anything extra. I headed for the door, but noticed in the reflection of the stainless steel toaster that my grandmother had given me as a You Live Alone Now gift that I had a stain on my shirt. Fuck. I went back to the mountain and found a faded Hendrix shirt. I loved the freedom of having a girlfriend. I barely had to care what I wore; I knew I was getting laid anyways.

I headed out the door. "So what we smoke weeed," I sang to myself as I walked down the four flights of stairs and out the front door. My next-door neighbor Mrs. Johnson was coming in, carrying Jefferson, her orange tabby cat, with her. The cat hissed at me. Mrs. Johnson sang the next lyric: "So what we do druuuugs." I smiled at her. She was in her late thirties, but unlike most people her age she didn't resent my generation for being young enough to still have fun. We sang the rest in unison as we walked away from each other. "We're

just havin' fuuun." I jumped over a trash bag that had been moved to the middle of the sidewalk.

Waka Flaka Flame was blasting when Brian opened the door. He wore slacks and a navy button-down with the top three buttons undone, revealing some sparse chest hair and a few moles. He stroked his new beard as I came in.

"When you gonna shave that thing?" I greeted him with a bro hug. Clasp hands and pull in, then pat on the back once.

"When it stops drivin' girls wild." He took a big bite out of a red delicious he was holding. "So probably never." He spoke with his mouth full and little flecks of apple came out. We both tried to keep a straight face before cracking up. Brian was a ladies' man in the least frat-boy way possible. Killed 'em with kindness, or something like that. "You want something to eat?" he asked after he had finished chewing.

"You got any of those chewy bars?" I walked past him to the kitchen to find out for myself. A frying pan was on the stove, its handle facing out. I stepped past it carefully and opened the cabinet above the stove.

"Trying to eat healthy?" Brian followed me. He grabbed a silver tray off the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room. He held it up to me.

"Of course. Gotta stay fit for Amanda." I looked down at the perfectly organized lines. I pushed in my left nostril with my pointer finger and leaned down. Pffffft. I wiped my nose and opened the chewy bar I found.

"She coming tonight?" Brian snorted a line of coke off the tray. He picked up his apple and took a few big bites. His cheeks puffed out like a squirrel. His nose was red. He hadn't just started.

"Not till later. We got some time." I gestured for the tray. He handed it over. I snorted another line.

"Hey man, you mind throwing for this? Shit's mad expensive and I haven't worked in a few weeks." Brian took the tray back.

"Course man." I threw a twenty on the counter. Brian snatched it quickly. He didn't give me any change. "What happened to that commercial you auditioned for?"

“Shit was weird. I went in, right, and nailed the fucking thing. It was for the part of Son, okay?” Brian was animated as he talked, waving his hands and the tray around, a little coke spilled off the edge onto the table.

“Okay, easy man, don’t spill that shit.” I put my pointer finger on the coke and lifted it. It stuck.

“And I do everything great, I mean the dude was almost crying after a few takes. I really got into it.” I sucked the coke off my finger.

“So what happened?” I felt my pulse begin to race. Brian stood up and walked over to the window. He looked out.

“The guy says, ‘that was great. Unfortunately, you’re a little old for the part.’” Brian turned back to me. “Now, I know I’m out of college, but have you seen the kids they have playing high schoolers? Minka Kelly played a high school sophomore while dating Derek fucking Jeter.”

“How old was the character?” I took a bite of the chewy bar. It tasted like walnuts. I looked at the packaging. Fuck. I took the wrong one.

“That’s what I asked. They tell me he’s supposed to be eight to ten years old.” I burst out laughing. Brian scowled, then grinned. “Now, they had a headshot of me, they had my resume. They knew how old I was.”

“And when you got there.” I was laughing so hard. I doubled over. “They still had you do the lines even though you were--”

“24 fucking years old.” Brian started laughing too. I did another line. He walked over and did another line. He started laughing again and blew some of it out his nose. He had powder all over his face. I cracked up all over again. He laughed, and licked around his lips to salvage as much of it as he could. I grabbed a towel that was next to the sink and threw it at his face. He let it hit, then kept it there with one hand. He was wearing a large fake diamond on his pinky.

“So what did you have that’s so good tonight?” I asked, finally calming down. My cheeks hurt from laughing so hard. The fluttering feeling in my chest intensified.

“Besides this?” Brian did another line. I did too.

“Yeah, besides this.” I could feel my heart beating, pumping the oxygenated blood around my body.

“There’s this thing out in a warehouse in Brooklyn.” There were two lines left. Brian looked at me.

“All you,” I said. I had had enough. I jumped and touched the ceiling.

“We’re going to a rave? Really? Is it freshman year again?” I looked around as if we had been sent back in time and I was trying to figure out what had happened.

“I know the guy throwing it.” Brian did a line. Pffft. His nose was really red.

“Great, what’s that mean?” I put my hands up like a boxer. Brian laughed and held up his hands to me open. I punched his right with my right and his left with my left, then ducked. He took each hit and then swung over my head. “I’m too quick.”

“We get in for free, and we get free drinks.” I did the Ali shuffle. Brian went to the fridge and took out a beer. He tossed it to me. I snagged it and popped the top off against the counter.

“Drink that quick, I want to go. Just let me use the bathroom first.” I drank deeply. God, I loved beer. Brian disappeared into the bathroom and slammed the door. I jumped at the noise. I spilled a little beer on my shirt. I called Amanda.

“What’s up babe?” She sounded tired and distracted.

“You coming tonight?”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to.”

“Damn, you sound so sexy when you turn me down.”

“Where you guys going?”

“We’re going to a rave because Brian knows the guy who is throwing the rave and we are going to have a lot of fun because we get to go for free and drink for--”

“Woah, slow down. Are you okay, Zach?” I chugged the rest of the beer.

“I’m fine. We had a little, y’no.”

“Why, Zach? Don’t you think you shouldn’t encourage him?”

“He’s a grown man, okay? If he wants to he can. And when I want to, which isn’t often, I can too, okay?”

“Alright, alright, calm down. I just don’t like it.”

“I hope you can make it, text me when you finish.”

“Okay, have fun.”

I hung up. I realized I didn’t say goodbye. I hoped she didn’t mind. I thought she probably didn’t want to talk to me anyway, she had a lot of work. *She works so slowly*, I thought, *Not like me*. She was a lot more thorough though. She had better grades than me in high school. I saw her old transcripts once. I did better on the SAT’s though. I heard a crash come from the bathroom. I ran over to the door and banged on it.

“What’s goin’ on in there?” I spoke in a funny accent. Brian opened the door. His hand was bleeding, his eyes were blood-shot.

“I punched the mirror,” he said. I looked at him. He looked at me. I laughed, and went over to get the towel, which was still resting on the counter where he had left it. I tossed it to him. He wiped off the blood and went back into the bathroom to get a band-aid. He came out a few seconds later and brushed his hair behind his ears. He looked like Tim Riggins, or whatever the guy who played him was named. “Let’s go,” he said.

We saw the warehouse and both basically ran there. I had so much energy. “That’s it, right?” I asked.

“Yep yep yep.” He got there before me. We slowed and approached the bouncer. There was a line of about fifteen people waiting to pay.

“Excuse me,” Brian jumped in front of two college girls wearing neon tank tops and clearly rolling on Molly. They let him in front of them and looked at me with a dazed expression. I smiled and giggled. Brian addressed the bouncer, a surprisingly thin white guy with a scraggly beard and large Jew-fro. “We are friends of Dimitri’s,” he said. “My name is Brian Lewis.” The bouncer checked his list. He handed us 21+ wristbands and nodded. We skipped past him in to the warehouse. MGMT was playing. The MDMA girls watched us go, and one of them smiled at me. *She must not have seen Brian*, I thought.

The place was absolutely packed. Everyone there was on Molly or speed or cocaine. The music was so loud it sounded like it was inside my skull. I counted three couples violently making out within ten feet of the entrance. The only dancing being done was grinding, and everyone was dancing. I screamed with delight and followed Brian, who shoved his way past one particularly intimate couple. The guy took his hand out of the girl's pants and turned after us. She had blond hair in her eyes and was mindlessly pumping her fist and leaning on him. He had sharp eyebrows and angry cheekbones, and looked ready to fight. *Uh oh*, I thought. Just as I prepared to Ali shuffle his ass to death, the girl took his hand and placed it back down her very short skirt. He consented, and a crisis was averted. I caught up to Brian. He was talking to the bouncer of the VIP section, which was just a dance floor elevated two stairs above the regular person dance floor with its own bar. Two Asian girls danced on tables, wearing matching black trash bags and nothing else.

"Brian Lewis!" Brian shouted at the bouncer, a more appropriately sized, for such a position, white man with a bald spot and bad teeth. He checked the list and nodded, but when Brian attempted to pass, put a hand on his chest.

"VIP's ABC." He gestured at the girls. Anything But Clothes. Oh well.

"It's fine!" I pulled Brian away from the VIP area. We started dancing. After about two seconds, two tall brunettes approached. Brian grabbed one. The other eyed me. I smiled, and danced. She tried to grind with me. I resisted. Brian spotted two floaters at a nearby table (the only table in sight in the whole place) and drained one. He gave me the other. I drank it. *What the hell*, I figured, *Dancing never hurt anyone*. I grabbed the girl and she squealed with delight.

We danced the night away. Occasionally Brian would head off to the bathroom. He would shoot me a glance each time but I'd shake my head. I didn't use much, so I didn't need nearly as much to feel amazing as Brian did. I explained to each girl I danced with that my girlfriend was meeting me there, and suggested they speak with my more-handsome friend when he returned from the bathroom. At first,

most took me up on the offer, and Brian danced and hooked up with several girls. I lived vicariously, and was enjoying myself. As the night went on, Brian looked more and more deranged. His nostrils were more and more red, his hair was a mess, and he had undone his shirt all the way down to the last button. While he wasn't the worst there, the girls I turned down no longer agreed with my assessment of our attractiveness.

Around 2:00 or so, I suggested to Brian that we call it a night. He weakly said sure, and we left. He put his arm around me as we traversed the wooden dance floor for the last time. The crowd had thinned, but the place was still packed. Pairs of men and women were leaving in a steady stream out the door, and pairs of men and pairs of women were also exiting. As this was Brooklyn, the pairs of men were the handsiest with each other.

"I love you, man." He was slurring his words pretty badly. I started to worry a little.

"I love you too, bud. Are you okay?" His eyes were half-open. I shook him.

"Yeah, I'm fine, let's just go home." We took the elevator down into the subway. I swiped for both of us. A group of fellow ravers looked at us. I smiled. One of the girls was leaning against the wall. She had dim blue eyes and looked sick. Her friend was talking to her in a quiet voice. We exchanged empathetic looks.

The train came. Brian and I walked as one into the last car. We sat down. Sitting seemed to do him some good. He had perked up by the time we got to 8<sup>th</sup> St. Station. He wanted to get some halal food. I convinced him to wait. Or I thought I did. As we exited, he ran ahead to the nearest cart and ordered lamb and rice.

"You like workin' here?" He attempted to engage the Middle-Eastern man making his food. The guy wanted none of it, but felt obligated to respond.

" 's OK." The meat sizzled as it cooked.

"How long you in here for?" Brian stood obnoxiously close to the cart, his nose peering over the window at the food.

"It's not prison, Brian." I tried to get him to take a step back.

“I mean, how long are your shifts?” Brian took out his wallet.

“8 hours or so, depending on the night.” The man scooped yellow rice into a Styrofoam container. He had a bushy mustache and a dark mark on his right temple. He looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks. “You want sauce?”

All of a sudden, Brian looked worse. “White sauce.” I spoke for Brian. I stepped forward and he put his arm around me again. I took Brian’s wallet and opened it. It was empty. Sighing, I took out my wallet and paid the man. He eyed Brian.

“He okay?”

“He’s fine. Just give me that.” That was good enough for him. He had no desire to get involved. No one in this city ever did. He handed over the food. We stumbled the few blocks back to Brian’s apartment.

Brian insisted on taking the stairs when we got back. I didn’t mind, I felt recharged. I had stolen a few bites of lamb on the way. Well, not really stolen, considering I paid for it. We ran up the six flights to his apartment. Brian was way ahead of me.

When I got to the top, Brian was heading down. I stopped him with a hand. “Where are you going?”

Panting, he responded, “I dropped my keys, I think. A few flights down, I’ll be back in a bit.” I sat on the top stair and took at the halal. I had eaten half of it by the time he came back. Sweat poured down his face. “Got ‘em.” He opened the door and let me in first.

I was always surprised at how clean Brian kept things, especially in comparison to me. But at times like this I appreciated it. I sat down on the couch. Brian turned on the TV. We watched some shitty movie on Comedy Central in silence. Brian seemed to be coming down. He gave one word answers to any questions I asked. He took the halal and finished it in about thirty seconds.

I got up and went to the bathroom. It was a complete mess. The mirror was completely broken. Blood was all over the sink and tiled floor. A sign with illustrations depicting the proper use of a toilet seat that normally hung above the toilet was in the shower. The shower curtain had been pulled off the rings, presumably as Brian tried to stop himself from falling over. *What was he doing in here?* I peed and

washed my hands. I watched myself in the broken mirror. Bits and pieces of my face and hands were visible in the remaining shards of glass. I looked okay, I decided. Better than Brian, anyway.

When I came back, Brian was asleep. He was slumped in a weird position. I felt his head to make sure he was okay. He wasn't breathing. I freaked out. I started running around the room looking for a phone, but he didn't have a phone and I didn't know what to do and I was going to yell out the window for an ambulance when I remembered I had a cell phone. I took it out and dialed 922, cursed, and dialed 911.

"911, what is your emergency?" The deep voice surprised me. In the movies, it's always a woman answering. I explained that my friend had OD'd and I needed an ambulance. I became strangely calm. I answered all their questions, but I wasn't there. I watched from above as I set him as they described, and put the pillow where I was told. I noticed the half-line of coke that he had while I was in the bathroom and couldn't finish. I saw the next few hours playing out: the desperate journey to the hospital, the waiting and waiting, Amanda meeting me at the hospital, the stern looking doctor in blue scrubs coming out and explaining to us while scratching his beard and shaking his head that he hadn't made it.

And that's what happened. I re-watched it like a movie as I sat alone in my apartment. I did the only thing that made sense at the time. I called my mother. She didn't answer. I thought of how Brian died alone. I called my mother again. She picked up.

"You better have a damn good reason for waking us up at this hour."

"I'll meet her."

"What?" She was confused. Her voice was groggy and irritated.

"I'll meet that girl. The one you told me about."

"Zoey?" I stood up and began pacing.

"Yeah, I think. The one you said would be perfect for me. I'll meet her."

"Great, outstanding. I'm so glad you called me to tell me that."

"So what's her number?"

“You want me to get out of bed and track down the number of a girl I offered to get for you a few days ago and you blew me off?”

“Please, Mom?”

“I’ll text you in the morning. Calling her now would ruin any chance you have. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

She hung up without commenting on my deviation from our normal goodbye. I wiped my eyes. I suddenly realized I was absolutely exhausted. I fell asleep in my chair completely dressed.