JAMES THE THIRD

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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May, 2012
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I lie on Big Bed Rock. I watch the first star wink and wake. My legs hang over the rectangle ledge, fifty feet above the leafy treetops. This is one sky-high outcrop. If there is one good hidden place in Ohio, here it is, all trees and hills and breeze. People fall in love and die here.

The sun sets with every warm color, and the night comes with every cool.

I kick my feet, swinging my purple Velcro shoes, which look cooler than you think.

A whippoorwill whistles from the cliff pines. It’s like a sunset clock, a reverse rooster, a call as surreal and beautiful as the steeping dusk. I sit up, expecting something. The whippoorwill stops. The overlook gives me a view of dark hills, folded like fabric and fading with distance. They breathe with silence. I breathe the silence. It washes me of the stupid reasons I’ve come here. It becomes the reason, and it pulls me closer to the edge. I rock on Big Bed Rock.

The breeze picks up the night and pours the air over my face. It feels purple.

If I fell—if I let myself fall—the world wouldn’t be against me any longer. There wouldn’t be a world, not this one.

I sweat and shiver. I feel so good I could die.
We were entitled.

We were raised as royalty. Welcome, they called to us, you are the new princes and princesses and one day this will be your millennium. They gave us everything except work. Even the basics were luxurious: free meat and sweets, water clear as air, suburban castles with central heating and cooling. We could have more, have it all without consequence. Time, technology, wealth, the unbounded freedom of life without burden.

Y2K came. We bought cigarettes.

We were unrevolutionary. We fought nothing more tangible than concepts. Not that we didn’t have anything to revolt against—the last war in Iraq, right—but we cared only to revolt against the consumer choices presented to us. So we revolted by not revolting, by spending money on things we were never told to spend money on. We bought small press graphic novels, lo-fi indie label records, silkscreen tees, knit scarves, all the items that until recently were never advertised. This is our culture, we said, a capitalism of ideas, a competition of expression, a market of art.

Art happened. A lot of it wasn’t so bad. Some of us made the music, and in doing so, made names for ourselves. Some of us were entitled to live our dreams. Yeah, that was us making the uncool cool. Overall, it had been a pretty good party. Many of us
are still out there, drinking cheap beer, singing punk rock karaoke, sleeping with strangers. We migrated to the havens of Brooklyn and Los Angeles and Portland and grew beards and chose abortions. The flyover states we abandoned to those that could not keep up, those that did not have the money to move or whatever. Some of us were left behind.

I was one of the left behind.

I sat bored and alone in my parents’ attic. I watched cable, and during commercials I turned my gaze to the circular window. Outside, twin oaks glowed in the late October light. If the window opened, I could have reached out and traced the veins of the leaves with my fingertips. The leaves turned. The colors changed. The leaves blushed in the slanted sun, at the thought of autumn, and turned before my eyes from pond green to blood red. New commercial, and the dark leaves were falling, already a layer on the ground, a community, falling for one another. Fall already. So this was how time moved here.

I knew I should get up, move around. I knew I should rake the leaves before my parents got home from work. Twenty-four years old and this was my only job.

The commercials ended and the cable show—sweet, delicious, nutritious cable show—resumed my attention. A cynical asshole made an ass of himself on my small screen TV. Whatever he said to anyone, it was wrong. Whatever he did to fix the problem was wrong. He suffered embarrassing, rippling consequences that reaffirmed his hatred of the world. I laughed. I imagined I related. When I looked at the window again, it was black with night. The sun had set while I sat. The circular window showed
me nothing but my distortedly long face, cut into pie slices with a structural brass cross and flickering in the TV show glow.

I looked sad and alone. I looked pathetic and severe like a republican candidate. Republicans suck. Things would have to change.

My cell phone rang. My friend was calling me. Maybe I wasn’t so alone.

I answered the call. “I need to change my ringtone,” I said, which was my way of saying hello. “Time to Pretend. Remember that song?”

“Change it already,” said my friend. “We’re not pretending anymore.”

“But that’s all I do. That’s all I can do.”

“Seriously, this is serious shit, man,” said my friend. He was laughing. “Time to grow up.”

“If I pretend to be a grown-up, will I be one?”

“That’s how it works,” he said.
CHAPTER II:

BLOG

The whole world was against me, so I started a blog. I sat at my tiny childhood desk and typed nerdy critiques of my favorite band, The Broke. You probably never heard them. Not the early years, the young stuff before the major label release, before that car commercial brought my music into your living room. But I’m not going to go on a crazy rant about The Broke. I said enough online.

I blogged it all in my parents’ attic. I foresaw buckets of fans and followers. Torrents of comments. Friends. I needed to believe that someone cared about this obscure band, about me. Really, I couldn’t expect anyone to read my blog, but obsessing over a band’s musical evolution was something to do and think about other than my sorry ass self. Blog therapy, or at least distraction.

Every day was a rainy day. Too rainy to rake. I slumped over my desk, laptop-tip-typing to the sad drum of autumn rain on the circular attic window. Rainiest fall ever. It was totally global warming somehow. Weird how well it complemented my feelings, like I was a cartoon character with a puffy gray cloud over my head. The cloud stormed dash lines of stupid self-pity, regret, blah blah blah.

I gazed alternately at the window of the Interwebs—yeah, I said Interwebs—and the real attic window. The rain made perfect conditions for daydreaming. If I squinted, I
could almost see my home through the rain. It was not my parents’ house. I gazed into the gray sky and saw a new color I had never seen. The color showed me everything, and everything was painted in the newest color.

Out there was someone who tells you, “I have something to tell you.” Out there were bands that dissected your soul. Pills as plentiful and colorful as crayons. An owl with lazy eyes tattooed on a strong upper arm. Mix tapes, yeah, some of us still made mix tapes. Dumpster tulips. Way out there, the hazy horizon line, an ocean of friends. The friend ocean. And between here and there, the hills—we need more hills—like holy mini mountains, great green breasts, fertile and fuckable. Forever. It was so pretty you would forget shit and know it all at the same time.

I fell through all of this.

I landed back in my hometown of Lockend, Ohio. The destination described in Ohio Road Trippin’ as “car window quaint.” This meant Lockend was a “drive thru village too small to be legally defined as a town.” Moody knew this much. That’s the guide’s prosaic guide, gender neutral Moody Flakes, who recommended in one economic paragraph a pullover at Lock’s End Park, though with no other note than “to stretch your legs.” Moody must have had more in mind, perhaps to shoot a stream of piss between the old walls of lock rock—my favorite—or squat-piss directly onto them, it was not clear. Moody missed this and other Lockend gems. No mention of Canal Corner, our only and quite convenient store. No dutiful traffic light. No canal-era opera house (always closed, sarcophagus), no Canawler’s Lounge (always open, cacophonous), no almost-postcard-perfect rolling hills cradling in their bosom the thousand and some old townsfolk of a
forgotten little village. Moody missed all of this, and what Flakes really failed to nail: Everyone was old here, even the young. This was more than unvintage polyester.

For me, old was toddlers swearing “fucker fuck trucker fuck” while their dead-eyed parents pumped coffee the color of mud puddles into Styrofoam landfiller cups. Overhead the Canal Corner speakers looped tired old rock songs between modern rock misogyny anthems. Don’t let Lockend’s bricked streets charm and deceive you. This was grizzly shit. Everyone was disaffected and shuffling and old here. I figured if I stayed much longer, the same crap would happen to me. Maybe it already had.

I fiended for weed, just one big bong rip. I quit cold turkey. Involuntarily. I didn’t have any pot and didn’t know where to get it. My bowl was dry, the black resin cracked with drought. My dealer had disappeared on a jet plane, and I would have fled with him if I could. Webster Mullet, my former dealer, roommate, music analysis peer, couch sympathizer, drug buddy and, perhaps, best friend forever—say “bro” if you have to—moved to Brooklyn when our Columbus lease expired. He flew away on a ticket of drug money. Since his conceptual art was still in the conceptual stages, he became one of those bike messenger delivery guys. In my mind I saw a bear wearing Webster’s double-wide glasses, toddling on a bike between yellow cabs, while calliope pipes played bouncy, tireless circus songs. He kind of was a bear. He was round, hairy and at least half gay. Webster was the last of several close friends to go. He was also the friend who called me and told me to grow up.

“I couldn’t wait any longer, man. I had to get out of Ohio.” His voice was booming and goofy, even from ten million miles away in New York. Behind him, the urban roar of busses and taxis stopping and going. “I see shit everyday. Five minutes
we’ve been talking I just saw the most beautiful guy in the world. No shit man, he was
an angel. Like fucking glistening. Maybe he was a vampire, they glisten, right? A
vampire angel eating asparagus. Five minutes, I’ll see something else.”

Webster had some personal mission to find the most beautiful guy in the world.
Every other guy was beautiful, every third guy more. If he filmed and documented his
findings, it could have been his first big conceptual art piece.

“What the shit, Webster. You said the same thing about that guy at the show.” I
sat at my desk while silver rain drizzled against the dark window. “The drummer was the
most beautiful guy in the world.” We had gone to a noise show in Columbus barely a
month before. The drummer was hot, sure—plugs and pierced lip like me—not that I
was one to really know. I liked girls. “You can see hot guys in Ohio.”

“No. Not an angel eating asparagus. You have to live in New York to see
angels.”

“Whatever, Webster. Angels are so nineties. Kind of gay, too.”

“Hey man, I’m kind of gay and I grew up in the nineties. What I’m hearing from
you is that I’m an angel. Say it. Tell me I’m an angel.”

“You know I hate you.” I stared at my desk. I traced the initials carved into the
soft wood by a younger me: J H J III.

“James Henry Jameson the Third.” Webster liked to say my name, really get the
rhythm of the title. “Like I said, I had to get out. You know.”

“Right.” I knew intimately the need to leave this state. We had this long term
relationship, Ohio and I, with an eternally looming breakup. I just needed the thumbs up
from Burn, my favorite website. I interviewed with their New York office via webcam
shortly after I moved into my parents’ house. The plan was to work as a music researcher, reviewer, interviewer and all around awesome young man for the fourth most-viewed music website, Burn, the one with free downloads and the acclaimed Naked Unicorn Music Fest a.k.a. the Climate Change Disaster of the Moment Relief Benefit a.k.a. hipster orgy. I knew they needed me like I needed them. Modern technology awkwardness aside—convincing people on a screen seemed both easier and less certain—I thought the interview went pretty smooth.

Burn (skinny black guy, girl with big glasses, early thirties): So what’s the deal with your college degree? Can you explain this?

J.H.J. III (skinny white guy with piano tie—they smiled, bought the tie—mid twenties): Yeah, I’d be happy to talk about that. You can design your own degree at a lot of colleges now. So that’s what I did. I came up with the name and everything. A Bachelor’s in Creative Cultural Memes. The best way to put it is that I took a lot of courses in Art History, Philosophy and Communications. It even added up to a Minor in Art History, for all that that’s worth. The Major is what matters. (I didn’t mention that Creative Cultural Memes, by my set standards, required credits in Music Devotion, Fourth Wave Feminism, Postmodern Love, Fucking with Fashion, Vices Verses Sobriety, Nutrition after Midnight, Friend Multiplication, Friend Division, War [Current], Viral Video Theory, Community and Me, New Dictionary Word Additions, Busting Modern Myths, Tuning in and Turning On, Climate Change Nihilism, and Drugs [Multiple courses, up to the Five Hundred Level]. Some of those classes I learned outside of school.) My degree means a lot of things. It means I can research and analyze and provide a new critique on the way we think. (I told my college advisor the same thing.)
As you’ve seen online, my final project was a massive multimedia essay. I like to think the name says it all: “All Your Ideas Are Belong to Us: Youth Culture Expression, Experimentation and Exploitation in the Top Forty Pop Radio Hits of the Bush Era.” Rather than submit a stapled paper, I set up a sweet webpage with music and video links. It took about eighty hours of work. (I should have said a hundred. A hundred thousand.) Last time I ego surfed, the site is still the number one search result if you Google James Henry Jameson.

Burn (faces leaning into screen): Yeah, but what does your degree mean?

J.H.J. III (pulling piano tie): It means I can tell you the memes that are shaping the way we think. Like (um) especially the memes in music. Recently I was thinking about the prevalence of plastic bags as modern metaphor. Yeah, plastic bags, the kind that float around in the breeze. Plastic bags are twentysomethings. It’s like we’re leftovers, litter. We’re ubiquitous and sometimes pretty. And like all youth, we’re unique to our time and culture. The whole plastic bag thing started way back with American Beauty, for better or worse, then parodied on Family Guy and now everyone gets the image because Katy Perry has totally nailed it into our cultural brain. In “Firework,” you know, the first line about being like a plastic bag floating around. Ha, really, a lot of young people relate to that feeling of aimlessness. (Um.) Speaking of Katy Perry, I can tell you that her breakout song, “I Kissed a Girl”—yeah, remember that?—was youth culture’s—popular youth culture’s—acceptance of hypocritical (um) objectification of women (um) veiled as a kind of pop feminism. It’s an expression, well, whether intended or not, an expression of the conservative reclamation of thinking during the Bush years. Same with other songs of the time, like “My Humps,” and that said, I’ll
Like, you’re not going to hear a pop music artist like—I don’t know, Eminem? Kid Rock?—sing something about kissing a guy and liking it. Hahaha. (Um.) The point is there’s a double standard in pop music, which is really just an unfortunate expression of mainstream thought. The art reflects the defect. So what I want to do is do this with good music, like research and review independent music in this way. I want to really look at what our music is saying. Or really hear it. You know what I mean. I can go on.

Burn (leaning back into chairs): Why do you want to live in New York?

J.H.J. III: (Fuck.) New York. Who doesn’t want to live in New York? I don’t know, my parents, right. Ha. (It’s my Big Dream. Start from beginning.) When I first moved to Columbus from a little Ohio town, talk about culture shock. Basically the world blew up in my face in a good way. It’s like I was suddenly part of all the things I knew had to be out there. By things I mean awesome shows and crazy clothes and the best freakin’ falafel in town. This sounds ridiculous. What I’m saying is that it was kind of a big deal to find other people, to be blunt, who gave a shit. There are communities everywhere, but it took me awhile to find “my people,” as some would say. Here were people that understood everything from good music to gay rights, from zines to global warming. I’d been looking for this community my whole life, and didn’t quite know what it was until I found it. (Then everyone up and moved.) That should tell you about the kind of town I originally came from. I always knew there was more out there and I’ve been looking for more ever since. So New York. Damn. If Columbus is a culture shift, New York is a paradigm shift. All I can imagine is being part of the community of people, to be blunt again, who give a shit. I’m not saying that Ohio doesn’t have
opportunities. And communities. I'm not saying that people from my hometown aren't doing the best with the resources that they have. I'm just saying that New York is the place for someone like me. (The shit is, I don’t want to hate people anymore. I just have a hard time understanding. We’re so fucking stupid. We can do better than this—better than working and watching away our lives. This whole ridiculous system of buying our freedom in mortgage and satellite television. Don’t get me wrong, there are some pretty sweet shows on TV these days, and it’s hard to argue against the security and comfort of a home. It’s just that humans are fucked up and always will be and there’s nowhere else to go but New York.) I know. I was out there a few months ago. (Webster and I had visited some mutual friends.) I woke up. I thought, This is the place for me. Like, take the New York Minute. There’s a cultural meme for you, and the mainstream understanding of it is warping. What is the Minute, an instant? All the stuff that happens in an instant in New York takes like a minute everywhere else, right? Right. I’m going to say that the New York Minute is not just about the pace of life, it’s about thriving in the moment, like really being mindful of what it means to be human and responding right now. It’s adaptation and growth. It’s happening, it’s happening. And the Internet has doubled the New York Minute. Like now it’s the Internet Minute. It’s all happening twice as fast, and everyone contributes. (Come on, sell yourself.) With Burn, I’ll give with my love of music. My addiction. I’m not just another bedroom blogger. (Not entirely.) I give a shit. I absorb the music. I really hear it. I hear what others yearn to hear and need to be told to hear. Or nothing at all.

I don’t know. I mean I do. New York is where it happens. It’s my Big Dream. And all my friends live there.
Burn (completely bewitched, amazed, awe-struck, blown away and totally impressed): Okay.

I knew I had totally passed. I expected to hear from Burn any day, but they had interviews and formalities to wrap up. When Webster called, I got pumped for one excited moment, thinking it was Burn. I was still happy enough to hear from him.

“B t dubs,” said Webster Mullet over a blaring honk, a tour bus.

“B t dubs?” I said. “What are you, fourteen?”

“Just my young lovers. They’re rubbing off on me.” Webster’s voice crackled in the city static. “And I’m picking up their slang, too. By the way, old man, I ran into Alex. That’s why I call.”

Webster had to bring up my ex-girlfriend. Alex, my former reason to exist without complaint. “I saw Alex on the subway,” he said, “and she has something to tell you. Said she wants to talk to you herself. Said you should give her a call.”

I laughed and it spilled out the side of my mouth, twisted and insane like a mad villain. “Alex has a boyfriend. She doesn’t need to talk to me. We’re not even friends online. She unfriended me.”

“You need to call her, all I’m saying.” The static of sidewalk traffic. “I got to run. The subway doesn’t get any reception. Ttyl.” He said sorry and the line cut. I don’t know if he meant sorry about my ex, or sorry about moving without me, or if it was a generic, all-purpose apology to cover every hairy inch of his big sorry ass. Weak as it was, I had to accept. I needed my friends.
I sat and thought about a new ringtone. I stared at the circle window, watching nothing, expecting nothing. I did that a lot. The muted TV flashed light like a fireplace. Some seconds or minutes passed.

I craved snack cakes, but didn’t want to go downstairs. Dad was stomping around down there. He might try to talk to me.
CHAPTER III
LOCK

One thing about living with parents was the free stuff. Free dinner and rent, cable and snack cakes. Almost better, free of responsibility. And all the free time. Time to sleep in, surf the Interwebs, look for jobs and fail, decide to go on a country ride on my sweet bike—my addiction to cycling balanced my smoking one, I figured—listen to sad songs, cry like a baby, nap like one, and start a lonely little blog about my favorite band. I caught up on my reading, too.

Here’s a full quote from *Ohio Road Trippin’*: “Stretch your legs at Lock’s End Park, home of the last lock on an unfinished branch of the Ohio and Erie Canal.” Moody Flakes, broody cakes. He-she missed a scoop. One skimmable sentence could be pages of traveler revelations. There was more to the questionably named Lock’s End Park than stretching legs.

While the lock granted Lockend its clever name, no one referred to it as “the last lock.” If Moody had sniffed for some tidbit of truth, he-she might have called it “Lock Thirteen,” which is what the nearby historical marker certified. I was pretty sure. I read it maybe once. I had at least glanced at it. And what it said is that the lock was the thirteenth on this unfinished branch, Lock Thirteen, and this was how the old canawlers referred to it. (And how do you pronounce the “w” in “canawlers”?)
I knew the place from a lifetime of nowhere else to hang out. It was like a miniature manmade cliff. It was deep and old and too far to jump across, about as wide across as Hill Street. Two sides dropped twenty foot or so into the ground below. The high walls were built of huge sandstone blocks. One of the blocks read the date 1888 in faded chisel font. The lock didn’t look like it’d been touched since. The blocks were melting to sand in spots. Moss and lichen splotched the walls green and gray. The bottom was filled with brambles and muck, generations of frogs and bottles, nothing. It once contained a deep canal, so they said, but I’d never known it as more than a shallow swamp, and barely a puddle beyond Lock’s End Park. Out of town, the canal was mostly filled in, leveled over and gone.

As for its name, every Lockender knew the story of Dead Lock. Back in the very late eighteen-hundreds—around 1888, say—the Lockend lockkeeper raged insane over the town’s newly installed rails of the Iron Devil, the canal-killing locomotive. He rampaged. Wielding a muleskinner’s knife, he sprang onto a boatload of nighttime revelers and had at them like Jack the Ripper. Attempting to cover his trail and save his sorry hide, he buried the bodies in the nearest graves he could find, which were somewhere in or around the lock. That’s why we called it Dead Lock. I’d heard every variation of the story, including one where the lockkeeper waved a canal boat into the lock and closed the wooden gates, literally locking the boat inside. He then jumped onto the boat, moonlit knife shining in his gritted teeth like a movie pirate, and slashed and hacked his way through the passengers. In the ultimate version, a pair of young newlyweds were canaling north to Columbus. The lockkeeper cut their honeymoon
short. Whatever the tale, the lockkeeper’s ghost was said to stalk the lock on moonlit lights, his knife still glinting with fresh blood after all the years.

All fake. My sister was a local history buff, and she said there was no documentation of any lock-related deaths in the archives she’d seen, and she’d seen it all. Sorry to spoil the fantasy—there’s no ghost killer, kids!—but the lack of any confirming death certificate or newspaper article pretty much degraded the entire awesome legend into a local tall tale, the kind you could find along every mile of the canal. That, and the contradicting fact that the lockkeeper, angry over the canal-killing railroad, attacked the very people that supported his livelihood, the poor boat-riders. You could argue, “He was so mad he was insane!” You could. But why, when no documents supported such a canal era event, such a bookmark tragedy?

Granted, I myself hadn’t dug deeper than the Lockend Historical Society Museum, which was open once a year in the three-story brick building next to the opera house, exhibiting during the summer street festival—Lock Fest, what else?—its collection of pottery pieces, yellow photos of dead-faced canawlers, and twigs of rust that must have been nails. The pottery and twigs were excavated from the lockkeeper’s house, which had for my life been an unnaturally squarish patch of grass to the side of the lock. You could tell something once stood there. All we were left with were shards and nails, as well as one buffalo head nickel and a soul-staring doll’s head, the porcelain uncracked. The old doll’s head was as creepy as an old doll’s head. But no bones or anything. Not a single tooth.

My sister figured the lunatic lockkeeper was another relic, a saloon tall tale—a drunken warning to the railway operators to steer clear—retold again and again, aging
over generations into a warped fiction. There was no proof for that, either. It was just easier to believe, and accounted for the mixed facts of the story.

The lock itself was weird enough. When I read Moody Flakes I tried to see the lock in its hazy canal days heyday. It was all out of context. It was impossible to imagine a busy waterway, the ungraceful, functional canal boats lining up and clunking about, waiting for their pass through the lock. All I could picture were big bumper boats manned by guys with old-timey curly mustaches. Weird.

After I moved back in with my parents, I was again within easy walking distance of Dead Lock, but I didn’t even look at the thing. Not a passing glance. When I biked, which I did as often as days passed, I stuck to the cornfield roads that led to Groveland, the nearest small city of strip mall sprawl and fast food choices. I never biked all the way to Groveland—it was fifteen minutes by car, and I didn’t own a car. When I walked down to Canal Corner for a pack of cigarettes, I took the sidewalk rather than the shortcut through the woods and park. And I preferred the shortcut. What was stupid was that I couldn’t separate the stones of Dead Lock from the face of my first and only love. I couldn’t pass the lock without thinking of Alex.

 Barely a year previous—the summer after college—we had sat on the sandstone ledge, our legs dangling into the dark. Just us and a couple packs of cigarettes, the winks of lightning bugs, the grinding rhythm of katydids, and the heavy air that smelled of mud and honeysuckle.

“I need to ask you something,” said Alex. She wiggled an unlit cigarette in her round lips. I lit it with my lighter, and in the flare of light her eyes met mine. Her wide eyes were dark as the pit of the lock. She was serious, certain. The cigarette lit and I
pocketed the lighter. Alex was again in darkness, now a ghostly pale face and black bob of hair and an orange trail of her cigarette and the sound her smoky voice. “Do you want to move to with me?” she said. The question smelled like menthol.


Alex made a noise like a chuckle or a cough. I don’t remember, and maybe I didn’t know what it was then, with the katydid's loud around us.

I said, “Now you’re cool with moving to New York?”

“That’s why I ask.” Alex chuckle-coughed. “I mean, yeah. I decided I’m ready.”

“So let’s do it.” I put my arm around her shoulder, over the owl tattoo on her strong upper arm. That tattoo, one of a vegan baker’s dozen, is what first drew me to Alex. I’d say the owl hypnotized me with its big eyes, but they were lazy and impossible to lock eye contact with. They stared in separate directions. I was pretty sure owls couldn’t do that. The owl charmed me in a different way, like a work of art, which good tattoos can be. It said things and stirred feelings and made awe.

When I had first met Alex, the owl tattoo told me that this girl with a boy’s name, this girl who sat next to me on a frameless futon pad, our jeaned legs nearly but not touching, was both interesting and subtle, unique and comfortable and, perhaps, flawed on purpose. That, and I was stoned out of my gourd. “I’m stoned out of my gourd,” I said, passing the joint to her. Some guy across from me let out a dumb laugh of agreement. There were six of us in Webster’s dark dorm room, all cramped and cozied on the floor. Webster was the common link, the pot angel. He had a bunkbed, a sweet music selection, a window with a fan and no roommates to spoil his plan. His immediate college goal had been creating a stoner pad, which he’d pulled off with a perfect 4.0 (or a
He’d pushed futon pads against the walls for back support, and they faced each other with a gap of maybe two feet. You knocked knees with anyone sitting across from you. The small space and good weed created an intimate social setting—you were within bowl-passing distance from any other college kid in the room. You wanted to interact. Combined with dim lighting and chill music, Webster’s room became the calm weekday alternative to the weekend keg-draining scream-for-alls. Webster’s room was where and how I met pretty much everyone I knew, and a lot of new music, too.

Sitting on the futon next to Alex, I spaced out, staring at the owl tattoo and thinking the phrase “stoned out of my gourd” was in turns profound, ridiculously stupid (I gave a goof-grin), and somehow vaguely sexual, and I wondered with slight paranoia how this girl I had just met, and who now was puffing the joint in what also appeared to be a profound, stupid and vaguely sexual way, was likewise judging me. Her big eyes met mine as she exhaled into a toilet paper tube stuffed with dryer sheets. The room smelled like sweet smoke-scented laundry. It was so safe and obvious. Alex lowered the blowtube and said, “Gourds are so five minutes ago. I’m stoned out of my pumpkin, man.”

We became instant friends, even while her then-boyfriend rubbed her leg on the other end of the futon, and we would stay friends through all of college. At that moment I knew without knowing that this girl was naturally hip, the kind of person that would get an owl tattoo regardless of whether or not owls were sold out (which by then they were), because she could pull off an owl in any season. She was an owl, a rare bird with nocturnal black hair and big eyes that looked as if they could see the secrets behind mine. I looked away from her eyes, her curves and cuteness. She didn’t need to know that I
wanted her to jump on my lap—the several other people in the room weren’t part of this fantasy—to straddle me, lock lips and blow smoke into my lungs. This would happen, but not until senior year, when we started dating. And now here she was under my arm, Alex, much more than an attractive owl-girl. She was a Sunday nap, a lip-lick of a strawberry ice cream drip, a very friendly therapist, a knit scarf soft on my cheeks, a warm smell of baking bread, a thrift store winner, a good friend. Know the Girls song “Alex?” No? Well, I related as if Girls had made the song for me and my girl. She was Alex and she loved me, and now she was proposing that we move to New York City together. This was like the next big step, a big deal. I felt like we were on the edge of a life-impacting decision.

“This is awesome,” I said. “I’ll go. I’ll follow. I should have the money by then.” Turns out I didn’t have the money by then. I’d never had much money after I graduated, though it seemed like everyone else did. I couldn’t figure where they got it. No one I knew had a trust fund or parents above middle-middle class. They must have got their money from real jobs. I didn’t know where to find those, either.

Alex made smacking noises as she smoked. She was really sucking it down. My arm hung limp around her shoulders. The owl tattoo burned hot under my skin. Alex wasn’t leaning back into me the way she should have. “What’s wrong?” I said, though I knew.

Alex coughed a definite cough. “I need to know. I need to know that you love me.”

Fail. Stupid me was still trying to say the three damn words. Stupid assface bitchhead me was still struggling to shed my insecurities and embrace openly another
person. The problem was that I would have to open myself to equal embracing. We were lovers and best friends, yet I couldn’t trust Alex with this final revelation. I’d never loved anyone like this before. I rationalized that we didn’t need to say something so obviously expressed in other ways, like jokes and orgasms. I swore to Alex I would say the words, I just needed time. But as the months of senior year passed and our one-year anniversary approached and also passed, I sank deeper into myself, becoming more depressed and insecure about the whole thing, which only made it more impossible to tell her. I loved Alex, and she must have loved me to put up with me for so long. One whole year. In the moment on the lock I didn’t know what to say. I had been instantly high with the New York proposal and brought instantly down by our core issue. What should I have said? Probably “I love you.” Instead I lit a cigarette.

The lighter flame was abrupt and revealing and I put it out. Everything was more visible without the light. We were better in the dark. In the dark night, we were two young lovers that loved one another. We were best friends. We were trusting, grasping, satisfied, thrifty, sketch comedic, clever, pillowed, bookish, lucid, free-floating, in love. In the dark, words didn’t have to be spoken to be understood. Surely she felt this too.

Alex spoke. Her smoky voice was deep and raw. “Tell me. Tell me what I need to hear by the end of summer, and I want you to come with me. But if you don’t, I can’t commit to moving with you.” Her voice wavered, grew watery. “I can’t,” she said, and stopped whatever she was saying. She inhaled sharp and loud. It was like she was going to cry.

I wanted her to. If she cried, I might have cried, too. This would have said the words for me. It would have been our vow of love. It might have opened me up.
But Alex didn’t cry and neither did I. I felt shut and distanced from the person I loved the most, whose summer skin burned under my lame arm. I couldn’t have been closer and farther away at the same time.

Smoke seeped out of my mouth. “I need to say it, or you’ll break up with me. And move without me.”

The silhouette of Alex nodded its black bob.

This was her killer ultimatum. Our love, however unstated, was at stake. To live my Big Dream, I had to overcome the self-conscious self-pitying self-stupidness that had cut my tongue. And rather than address this, I became swallowed by the emo feelings I should have fled from. I craved Alex. She was better than cigarettes and biking. She was the best song I’d ever heard. I needed to tell her I loved her—I will, I kept telling her—“I will,” I told her then—but with each tired month of our dragging relationship the words were further locked by a dense apprehension. I couldn’t say it and I didn’t know why and I hated myself. My arm dropped from her shoulders. The owl stared me down with its one good predator eye, the other eye peering past my head. It looked less unique and more like the sketchy work of a poor tattoo artist. I’d never viewed its lazy eyes this way, and my shift in perspective brought darker thoughts. In one puff of my cig, I self-prophesized that Alex would move without me. In the dark of the lock I saw a vision of Alex drinking and laughing on a Brooklyn rooftop. “I left that asshole in Ohio,” she said, and the crowd around her raised their beers and cheered. I was an asshole. I hated myself.

Later I would hate Alex, too. She was an asshole for using my Big Dream as an ultimatum. She had waited a year for me to say it, I figured she could wait forever or at
least until we moved. New York would fix things. I would fall in love with the city and
my life. Then I would finally say, “I love you,” and it would have all the depth and
feeling it was meant to convey, and we would be awesome.

“Hey,” said Alex. Her voice was back to its normal rough tone. “I love you,
James. I need to know that you love me, too. I need to hear you say it. If you can’t, I’m
sorry. I’ve given you a year. I’ve given you everything. Now I’m giving you a month. I
believe you, James. I believe you can say it. I want you to say it.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

Alex flicked the cig into the lock. The darkness consumed whatever orange spark
may have been. “You’re my best friend.” She called me my pet name. “Jimmy Three,
whatever happens, I promise.” Her hand wrapped around mine and held tight. “I
promise we’ll always be friends.”

I wondered if she could feel my pulse pounding in her palm. “I like that
promise,” I said.

That happened over a year before I moved in with my parents, more than long
enough to tell myself I was over the breakup. Maybe I was. Time had made our
friendship look like a college thing, our Senior relationship an experimental mistake.
We’d tried, we’d failed, we’d moved on. Well, Alex had moved on. I was still stuck in
Ohio, with no hookups or relationships or other good news to sweeten the funk of failure.
I still avoided reminders like Dead Lock. Even its name was bitter and resonant with
meaning. It was a place where things went to die. Things like Love and Big Dreams.
Things like the summer after college, what should have been a time of hope and renewal,
forever dead to me. Things like a simple, loving promise of friendship.
“Whatever happens,” Alex had said, and a lot of whatever happened since that night. Alex moved to New York and I didn’t. She scored a job as a legal assistant—it paid her pricey Brooklyn rent—and hooked up with some hipster fuck that lived in Bushwick but was really from Iowa. Webster said the new couple made out on the late night subway, got wasted at one-room gallery showings and took the train to Queens to eat at the most affordable, authentic ethnic restaurants in the United States. They were young and in love and in the city. Their life would probably never be better. I hated them. I was sure the new boo said “I love you.” Worse still, I knew I would probably like the guy.

More friends followed Alex to New York. Sara and Mikey, the too-cute couple who had met in Webster’s dorm room, and who I had met in Webster’s dorm room, and who were always reliable buddies for hanging and smoking, took off on a no-notice whim. The Peripheral Friends migrated as well and Brooklyn became the seeming next step after college, though I had called it first. Everyone took my original Big Dream. Everyone, no lie. Countless party faces and Peripheral Friends, too many to name. Kids that shared good music and the same dream: to get out. It was like this generation migration. Some went to Portland, Chicago, anywhere in California, even Omaha, but New York was the main place. They had all been friends, kids that flew with the hipster-fuck flock, bowl-packers and joint-passers, kegger debaters, fair-weather friends I now knew through online updates about their perfect and awesome big city dream life.

I didn’t understand how all the assholes got out. Other than Webster, the few other kids I knew in Columbus were online leftovers. I hardly remembered their names, and I was pretty sure they didn’t like me. My sister lived in Columbus, too, but we didn’t
hang out much outside of family dinners. I talked to cool-looking people at shows and in coffee shops, sometimes getting some pretty good conversation going about the Broke or Wes Anderson or whatevs, but our friendships started and ended there.

Stuck in Ohio, I got a fourth tattoo, a map of the Earth’s continents wrapped around my thin upper arm. It was a promise to see more of the world. If Alex couldn’t keep her promises to me, I could keep my promises to me. I widened my plugs another gauge, big enough to wiggle my pinkie finger in. I’d been meaning to do it for years. Small steps, right. Plus I thought the bigger gauges would get me laid. They didn’t.

Larger steps. Webster and I made the grudging last-minute decision to renew the lease on our Columbus apartment. Good old C-Bus. At least Webster was around, but without the community of college, he turned into a stoner homebody. He was happy with his retro video game collection. His collector friends came over for Atari and Nintendo competitions, and some of them were okay, kind of like manic nerds. Webster’s buyers came everyday, bought bags from him, and split bowls. Some of them were okay, too, though some of them were sketchy, stinky and angry. I wouldn’t have smoked with them if it weren’t for the stuff we were smoking.

Though I sulked at another year in Ohio, I was happy that at least Webster stuck around, and I figured I could save money to move. For that I needed a job. I wasn’t getting leftover trickles of student loan money anymore for rent and beer. Now I had a degree to pay back. The money was suddenly real. I applied everywhere and got a call from a temp agency. They hooked me up with data entry in a dusty Columbus office. It paid rent and not much more.
I hated everything about the place—the arbitrary eight to five hours, the farty cubicle stuffiness, the chain-restaurant pizza parties—so naturally I was completely miserable and jaded. I’m not going to lie, I was a total assface. My only work friend was my mp3 player. I listened to music my office mates had never heard of and could never understand. I could hardly mumble hi to them. They were total fails, real-world slaves who never realized that they were. They talked adoringly and unironically about the worst movies of the year. They reeked of cologne and perfume like fashion magazines. But they didn’t get fashion. When I walked by in my tight pants and argyle sweater, they gave each other glances, like, “Who is this guy?” They never said, “Cool sweater.” They thought a collared shirt, buttoned to the throat and tucked tight into pleated khakis, equated masculine success and sexuality. They talked about marriage like an obsessive fetish, a kinky orgasm for life. The things their little kids said, which they shared loudly in the lunch room, and which were mostly contextually cute phrases like “You have very big nipples, Mommy, I don’t have big nipples,” expressed my coworkers’ deepest understanding of art and abstraction. They could have printed a whole book of those phrases and it would have been their reader’s choice of the year. The only actual books people read in the lunch room were the kind with the thick spine where the author’s name is larger than the title. Someone always had a cold and was always sneezing germs into the air we shared. Everyone within earshot would shout “Bless you” like it like a contest. I could never understand why the sickos didn’t stay at home. It was like they had to be at work, like their job allowed them to ignore the dull reality of their lives that would reveal itself in a silent suburban house. Someone was always wearing a cross necklace, a different person every week, no lie. And some of them were definite outspoken Fox
News republicans. Nearly worse, they were dreamless. They were office drones for life and had accepted their roles as number-punchers and paper-shredders, all in the name of Cowtown Natural Gas and Dust. The office was pretty dusty. I believed I didn’t belong there, and it showed, and my workmates learned to let the young temp enter his numbers and file his folders in angry, smug peace.

In lucid moments I wondered what was wrong with me. My inability to connect with my coworkers suggested that maybe I was the problem, not them. Despite my constant inner criticisms, they seemed happy. Their grins and smacks on the back showed a blissful Midwestern acceptance. They were happy with their terrible moves, their little babies. Their chummy good moods clarified, day by day, that I was the one who was unhappy, and so something about me was wrong and off. I sucked. I grew more confused, clammed-up, crazy. I spiraled inward, indefinite and awful, like my problem with Alex all over again. The more I felt isolated and hateful, the more I isolated and hated myself.

In desperate times I tried to get along. I attempted small talk, but it came out petty and awkward, and I slumped away, defeated and lame. I gave up. I’d already ruined my first impression and every impression after. And besides, it was a temp job. I’d be gone soon enough.

The work itself was repetitive as a factory line: F4, Enter, Enter, F5, Control, (Enter client number), Enter, (Enter field number), Enter, (Enter gas number, whatever that was), Enter et al. Repeat infinitely with sneaky breaks to surf the web.

Without anyone asking me, I began to organize the wall of filing cabinets. These were feisty days of cooped-up cabin fever, the kind of days cannibals are born. I needed
to do something other than enter numbers, and the files did indeed need organized. Most of all, I liked the photos. The files contained photos of the natural gas wells and pumps that Cowtown owned, which were as many as the files numbered, thousands plus. I had faith in those photos and examined them like sacred paintings. They were all I had. I squinted at the pictures of stoic mechanical pumps, some of them peeling strips of paint, some of them dripping a fresh coat, all pale green like hospital scrubs. I took in the blurry farm hills glowing gold in the background, the tall ticky grass in the foreground, and the occasional shadow of state forest hemlocks. The photos showed secluded, rare places that spoke of a lot of human investment but little human presence. Sacred, secret places. Though the photos were low-grade digital printouts and meant only as site documentations, they sang of summer. Standing under the florescent tubes, a file shaking in my hand, I sometimes felt waves of humid heat and could hear, dreamy and faraway, the chirp of a solo cricket. The photos were the peak of my career, so you’d think I would have been happy to be let go. I got fired, more or less, one fine Friday after nearly a year. The endless numbers ended. The economy soured—even for natural gas—and the temps were the first to go. It wasn’t unexpected, after all. The firing was a formal inevitability. I sat down to another dumb day and found no customer order forms. They’d all been given to the office admin against her consent, and I was given a speech-walk to the door: “Thanks for your help, but you know. I’m sure they’ll find you something else.” The temporary staffing agency didn’t me find something else, which they blamed on the recession with an uncomforting enthusiasm. The temp agency was totally republican anyway. I scored some unemployment dollars and applied for anything—foreclosed home photographer, statue garden security guard, the guy at the
zoo that sells you a limp cup of sardines to toss at the seals. (The one job that got back to me was Music Reviewer and Researcher for Burn.) Then my lease reached its expiration date, and roommate Webster fled to New York and I got screwed in the bad way. A year out of school and jobless, my unemployment dollars dried up, my hope broke and beat, I moved back in with my parents. This sat on the bottom rung of my ladder of expectations, but at least it was somewhere to go. At least I could sleep in and bike the drizzly roads and wait for Burn and, when I walked downtown, avoid looking at Dead Lock. I kind of liked Dead Lock, too. It was part of my life and I wanted to see it.

Moody Flakes was right, the park was a good place to stretch your legs. I ignored it. It’s not just Alex and our love I was trying to ignore. On that summer night of katydids and cigarettes, I didn’t say the three words. Stupid, sure. But I made my own promise in the dark. I swear, I said to my cigarette, by the end of the summer I will tell Alex that I love her. Not every summer promise went up in smoke.

Rainbow Town Crier

A reason to live! Major announcement blowing up everywhere, or at least everywhere that matters, including right here and linked for you: **The Broke finished their super secret new album!** I’ve waited a long, cold year in the real world for this shit. I’m so excited I started this blog. Welcome to the Rainbow Town Crier, and thanks for being here.

I’m shocked that no one else used **the early B-side song** for a Broke webpage title. “Rainbow Town Crier” is a defining track in that it shows the full range of anxiety
and ecstasy in their so-called indie-art rock. It’s effing epic that the song was made by two dudes from Wichita (Kansas!?). It sounds like a flash mob of drums and guitars and 8-bit synths, the rare kind of flash mob that works like it’s supposed to. It’s music magic that foretells the blown-up wide-screen quality of the newer stuff. Do you understand? Do you care? Does anyone?

I mean, Broke is my Jesus. Just when I thought it wasn’t worth waiting anymore, The Broke saves my crappy day, my loser life, and the shreds of dirty tissue that are my soul. The Broke is my Buddha. My suffering is ending in this moment. But I’ve got a lot of desire for the untitled album and the enlightenment it will certainly bring. No tracklist yet, but the first single is rumored for release soon.

I like The Broke so much, I’ll buy the freaking album instead of downloading it. Now I have a reason to get a job. That should say it all.

Music: The Broke – “Rainbow Town Crier”

Comments: 0
CHAPTER IV

TICKS

My first months in Lockend were the loneliest in my life. I had no friends and no idea how to maintain long distance friendships. A feeling of distance settled between me and my Brooklyn crew like all of Interstate 80 between Ohio and there. That’s a lot of highway. I emailed, yeah, I commented and posted and liked. I maintained that much. I even spidered onto the Interwebs and spun a new friend request for Alex, since she had unfriended me and all. No ex flies responded.

Texting, which had formed and developed many college friendships, now felt out of context and strangely personal. There was no sticky shield like on the Interwebs. When I posted something online, it was like posting a message anywhere, electronic graffiti that may or may not inspire a response. If someone liked my comment, sweet, and if no one typed a word, whatever. It didn’t mean I wasn’t liked. Texting, by contrast, meant sending a message directly to someone. Texting required faith that the text receiver actually wanted to hear from me. I lacked faith. I typed texts and stopped myself from hitting the send button. It felt unwelcome and my messages, upon second reading, came across as too clever and pleading for a response. I was also a little vindictive and emotionally masochistic. I was waiting for friends to text me. Rejected by Webster, abandoned by Alex, forgotten by Sara and Mikey.
So I did things like sit at my parents’ dining room table and read every newspaper story, even the sensationally headlined and poorly edited local story about deer hunting and school hours: GROVELAND SCHOOLS SHUT DOWN for the “first week of hunting season.” Then I put down the paper and watched the wall, studied the loopy floral wallpaper, spaced out. Forty minutes. I expected friends to text. Expected friends to care, as if my life was their fault. All false, my brain said, but it was hard to tell the difference between bullshit emo feelings and the more generalized bullshit of reality. Anything could trigger stupid self-pity. Online updates, another missed music festival, the opening credits of Saturday Night Live when the cast hoots and grins at the active scenes of Manhattan (even though, on a Saturday night in New York, the SNL cast is working, not partying). That’s all it took to lose emo control. It’s like my bad feelings were invisible zombies who rose at the smallest sound. They were, they did. They stumbled from unseen graves, their arms stupidly erect, and chewed on my rational brain. Then I became a zombie and nothing was right. The whole world was against me.

One weapon subdued the emo zombies. The feelings didn’t die, but at least got buzzed off and buried for a while. I biked. A couple years before, I thrifted a sweet frame in Columbus—eighties flames in red and orange, no joke—and rigged it with new brakes fat as steaks, road tires thin as plates and cycle-racing antler-grabbers. Tighten some screws and squirt some oil, and the twenty-one gears shifted seamlessly as music notes. Webster christened the bike with an old arcade game sticker. “I dub thee the Space Invader,” he said, slapping on a sticker of a pixelated alien. “May you ride free and never get hit by a bus. That would suck.” His words worked. From then on, the Space Invader and I whizzed around the busses (big and loud as dinosaurs), loopholed
through red lights (after carefully looking all ways, right) and ditched the commuters downtown (my dad among them—in rush hour, he drove an hour or more back to Lockend). After work I pedaled fifteen minutes tops to my place with Webster. I felt free as a kid flying on a banana seat down Hill Street. Bikes still rocked. The Space Invader became my car, my transportation to work and an extension of my self. We were connected through motion and bumps, through the Short North arches flashing overhead. We dinged the bell and yelled to other bikes, like Mikey on his fixed gear. We saw cops arresting, couples kissing, dogs pissing. Biking made me a breezy witness of the city and my role in it.

Stupid zombies. I missed C-Bus, too.

All the roads were rural around Lockend. When I biked the back roads, the scenery was really pretty okay. Woods and fields, like the office gas pump photos. I wasn’t part of some city scene, but I still felt like I was part of the calm landscape. As for the rain, I got used to that a long time ago.

Then when I came in and peeled off my wet clinging clothes and sat at my childhood desk and listened to music and screwed around online, I didn’t feel quite so bad when Webster updated his status as “Going to Pussy Fest, who’s with me?” followed by a string of comments from Sara and Mikey and Peripheral Friends and new urban peeps I had yet to meet. I wanted to go to Pussy Fest, who wouldn’t? Lucky fuckers, I typed, and backspaced before I could post the dumb message. The emo zombies twitched and stopped. Self-pity was easy enough to deal with when I had years of experience and a good bike ride and some salty cheese snacks. I munched junk food, opened a new tab and searched for jobs in data entry, the one field in which I had brain-plowed experience.
I applied for a few office jobs (at least one of them was probably a scam) so I could watch TV guilt-free. I clicked on cable and thought about raking the stupid leaves and wondered how I got where I was. I felt introspective and generational, entitled and epic, alone and bored, pathetic and severe. I felt a lot of things, as usual, soundtracked to the song stuck in my head. Then my ringtone exploded—the earworm “Time to Pretend” by MGMT—and it was Webster calling to tell me not about his life, not to ask about mine, but to tell me to call Alex. A business call from busy diplomat. That’s all it took. All the emo feelings jumped fast-forward from their graves. You can’t bury zombies forever with bike rides and cheese crunchers.

After Webster called, I spun my phone on the desk and craved more junk food. I’d been doing pretty good not thinking about Alex, so of course Webster had mess it up. I spun my phone and sang “dreidel, dreidel, dreidel” and stopped when I realized what I was singing.

I kept spinning the phone. I had no idea what Alex wanted. She couldn’t want me to move to New York. That had been clear when she broke up with me a year before, despite a certain fulfilled ultimatum. I didn’t want to think about it. I did. My mind fast-forwarded over the glossy proclamation, the positive part where I told Alex I loved her, and went straight to her negative response. I was too late, she said, and it wasn’t going to work either way. Truth burns your skin long after the fire that burned it is out.

Alex left me in Ohio with nothing more than an obligation, over a year later, to call her. All the Uno cards on my table. We used to play Uno a lot. And now Alex was pulling some kind of Wild card, dictating what I had to do. Was this part of her promise, I wondered, a call of duty to renew our friendship? Why not call me? I spun and felt
blurry. Webster’s basic form of speech was hyperbolic exaggeration—I imagined his asparagus angel was merely attractive—so I wasn’t sure just how desperately Alex wanted to chat. It’d been a year since a single email. I wouldn’t forget—she unfriended me, and still no response to my new request. Alex probably just asked Webster, “How’s James?” In my head I heard her saying it with concern, then with disheartening indifference, then with a playful, painful sarcastic rise. I didn’t like it. The phone twirled and I envisioned a desperate fantasy. The call was a white lie, Webster’s faulty plan to reconnect the imperfect couple once referred to after a few beers as Jalex. I had seen this soft side of Webster, the teddy inside the grizzly. Perhaps Webster was trying to help me get to New York. Make friend amends. I spun dizzy with these and other thoughts. Alex couldn’t be trusted. She had tested me before. And I couldn’t let her see me all lost and lonely and weak, and that’s what the call would be, a weak, submissive order followed out of needy desperation. After all of the zombies declared these opinions and conspiracies from their emo podiums, I knew I had to call Alex. I didn’t. I felt like shit. I let phone spin itself dumb and went downstairs for some more good junk food.

My mom hid her stash with the pots and pans, as if my dad and I didn’t know where to find her cream sandwich cookies and orange-powder cheese crunchers.

I bit into a flat brown cakey thing with a smashed jack-o-lantern face, one of those seasonal specialties, when Dad announced my presence.

“Look at this,” he said. Dad was home from work. It was somehow six already. Time was weird in Lockend. “James is here.”
“So are you,” I said. I hated the way Dad referred to me in third person, as if I weren’t there, or as if I were still his little baby, his toddler. I was the tallest damn toddler on earth, Dad, a six foot four inch record breaker.

“Put that pumpkin down a second and help me,” he said, and stomped into the living room. Like me, he was tall. Unlike me, he was big. Big and tall and stompy. He worked out at the gym sometimes after work. He wasn’t buff or anything. He just had extra size to his shape, like muscle plus fat.

The emo zombies told me the whole situation was wrong. Not Dad demanding my help—I could get over that—but the fact that I was nearly a quarter century old, and I still had all this indignant teen anger, and I hated teenagers. When Dad told me to “put the pumpkin down a second and help me,” I really heard, “stop being useless if you want me to love you.” Maybe I was a toddler. I felt a disregard of whatever I was doing—perhaps Dad never absorbed his records the way I did—in the name of some inane housekeeping, like once, I’m not fucking kidding—I must have fourteen, fifteen—telling me to abandon Bowie mid-“Heroes” so I could help him “pull a couple weeds” out of the front yard. A couple weeds, my teenaged ass. Fistfuls of fucking dandelions. I always thought they were prettier in the lawn than out of it. If there is any human action that’s inherently pointless—besides stadium sports—or getting a college degree—or voting—it’s pulling dandelions out of a lawn. Plus they’ve got a deep-ass taproot that you’ve really got to tug or they’ll grow back overnight. That’s what makes them weeds. They’re resilient and incessant. Ever since those dandelions, Dad’s little commands really pissed me off. I didn’t like being pissed off. Moping zombies were easier to keep caged in their pity party than raging blood-mobs. I knew I shouldn’t get upset over a
fatherly request for help. I didn’t know if it was me or my parents, but this kind of bullshit needed to end. I had assumed by then my parents and I would forge an adult relationship, a kind of balanced and mature respect for one another, but this wasn’t possible if every stupid, simple thing my dad said triggered the rage zombies inside of me. They were much meaner and faster than the emo zombies.

I slunk into the living room, mashing the whole pumpkin cake in my mouth.

Dad pinned a cat to the floor.

“Hold her down for me,” said Dad.

I grabbed Grammy’s fat old cat, gripped the bulging red fur. Grammy moved to Pine Ridge Residential Center not long before, after an unfortunate, shoulder-snapping fall, this time a misstep in the bathtub. Like me, her five cats moved in with my parents. Each was named after a president.

I swallowed the sweet junk. Cake time was over. “Hold still, Clinton,” I said.

Dad kneaded his fingers on the cat’s scalp. It looked like a massage. It was the most affection I’d seen him show an animal in years. His college class ring shined scarlet in the fire-red fur. “Why don’t you get Clinton a collar or whatever?” I said. “Like flea killer stuff.”

Dad plucked a tick, smaller than the red gem on his ring, and dropped it in a Mason jar. The bug was brown and ugly cute, like a baby crab.

“James,” said Dad. He was referring directly to me, no third-person stuff, so I knew he was serious. “We need liquid poison packets. You squirt it between the shoulder blades. Reagan absorbs it into his bloodstream and bugs bite him and die.”
“This is Clinton,” I said, and Dad said at the same time, “Clinton’s the little gray one.”

“No, that’s Nader.”

“Nader will never be a president, no matter what Grammy thinks.”

“Good name for a cat.”

“Not a cat person,” said Dad. He didn’t mention fish, though he had, years before, been very much been a fish person. The tanks were still in the basement.

Clinton looked like she thought poison packets were a bad idea. Her claws pierced the flat beige carpet. Her tail fluffed and flicked. She was going to bolt.

“Damn it, hold the cat,” said Dad.

Clinton’s paws ripped threads in the carpet.

“James,” said Dad, looking at me. He was real serious. “Look. It’s October. It’ll snow in a week and the ticks will die. That said, we’ve got five cats to cover. A pack of flea poison for just one cat costs more than a tank of gas, and I’m sure you know gas prices, even without a car. My commute is killing my paycheck more than ever before, and they just cut my pay at work. Again. After thirty years.” Dad’s eyes focused on an unseen screen. “Anyway, Grammy’s house is on the market, but no one’s going to buy that rat shack right now. Even if we do sell it, we’ll never get more than she paid for it.”

I couldn’t understand why people expected to get more money for their homes than they paid. I couldn’t think of anything you’d buy and expect to get more money for later. Stocks and bonds, right, all the intimidating investments of the adult world. Gold, maybe, because humans are always crazy enough to value a shiny rock. But not a house.
I figured people would get used to the idea of homes being worth less than invested. I was.

Dad went on. “Insurance is covering some of Pine Ridge, but funding has been cut like everything else, and we’ve got to cover the rest. A hotel would be cheaper.” Dad examined the mason jar and shook his head. A couple ticks tried to climb the sides and slid down again and again. Dad raised his eyes to stare at mine. He looked really tired. “We’re tight as towlines. We’re paying for everything. And we can’t pay for everything.” His eyes were dark and shiny as the basement floor. “We can’t pay for your student loans while you’re here. You need to get a job.”

Red fur flew. Clinton whipped out of my hands on a gust of wild cat wind.

“You guys are really that broke?”

Dad stood, his knees cracking. “You need to work,” he said, huffing air. He sounded like the voice of society. I hated that voice. “We’ll let you borrow the old van, you can work weekends in Groveland. Charlie’s Steak House and Buffet is hiring.”

“I don’t know about Charlie’s. This society is stupid. I don’t want to work in this society. It’s stupid.”

“What’s stupid?” said Dad. He looked down at me and smacked his cracked lips, like he had something else to say. “James Henry Jameson the Third.” He sighed and turned. “You have student loans to pay.” He stomped away.

“I’m on it, Dad,” I said. “Really, I’m applying every day.” This was the truth. I just wasn’t applying anywhere near Dad’s town or state. I didn’t mention Burn. My parents didn’t know my plans to get the hell out of Ohio. It was an unseen obsession like my smoking. If my parents knew either secret they would be hurt, and that would hurt
me. Sometimes a little nice part of me felt like I was deceiving them, packing my mental bags to flee the Jameson homestead, the Lockend land we’d pioneered. A larger part of me didn’t give a shit sundae. Kids grew up and left. That’s what we did. That’s what kids have always done. Fly from the nest and explore the Manifest Destiny of our youth. But the guilty toddler in me felt like leaving meant neglecting family, history, Grammy’s cats. I needed a tangible escape route, a reason. A thumbs-up hitchhiking me clear out of there. I needed Burn to say yes. I wouldn’t walk into Charlie’s Steak House for anything more than curbing the hardcore munchies. I’d sell my own plasma before I sold my will to get up in the morning. I was just killing time. A time killer, a Space Invader. I wasn’t home for good. “B t dubs, Dad,” I said, “I’m pretty sure you can get cheap flea poison at the store.” The “b t dubs” slipped right out against my consent. Webster had rubbed off on me.

Dad didn’t question the textese. He stomped to kitchen sink like he was going to fight it, like a problem that needed fixed. Everything was a problem that needed fixed. Faucet water ran. “With this bad economy,” he said, “take what you can get.” I don’t know if he meant Charlie’s or cheap flea poison. “And hey, flush those ticks, would you.” He rubbed his fingers with Spiced Apple soap. I could smell the fake foam from the next room. “And you still need to rake the leaves, James.”

“It’s raining,” I said, and burped. It tasted like cinnamon and nutmeg.

Dad didn’t respond. Pots and pans clinked in the kitchen, signaling the conversation was done and over. Plastic crinkled. Dad was helping himself to a pumpkin cake, too. Rake leaves. Call ex. Get a freaking job. This was way too much responsibility for a twentysomething living in his parents’ attic. I started with the job.
In my room, I tipped the tick twins into a cardboard jewelry box with cotton, so it was like a little bed for them. The box sat open on my desk. I watched. I thought the ticks would go for one another, the winner sucking the loser’s juice. Course not. No one wants to suck loser juice. The crabby guys lay dormant on their cotton pad, a kind of arachnid stupor, or patience, looking like little pendants of disease. They looked like all the ticks I’d seen in Lockend, little leggy boogers with brown butts. When I was a ten year old boy, in those sugar-dizzy days of tree limbs and frog skins, smoke bombs and squirt guns, my friend Bernie and I would pop the ticks off our skinny summer legs like simple pimples. The embedded ticks—the fat ones engorged with our blood—we’d tweeze off with practiced ease. Never got Lyme or any other disease. It wasn’t until I moved to Columbus that I heard most towns suffer mosquitoes and methheads. Everywhere is infested with pests. Lockend had loads of ticks (and probably a trailer or two of methheads, though they’d never bothered me). Not that the ticks were ever a big deal. Ticks were as summery and common as ice cream. Even in autumn days they lurked in the leaves. No human or cat was safe until the first thick snow. “Hi, this is James Jameson,” I said, watching the ticks tick away the time in their box bed. I named them Tick and Tock. Cute, I know. I couldn’t tell the damn things apart. “I interviewed a week ago for the Music Reviewer and Researcher position. This is a follow up call.” No shit. This was how you talked professional, all polite non-sequitur, right? One tick waved one sticky leg. My desk lamp must have warmed the lazy bugs. I looked at the black circle of the attic window, the brass cross shining dull in the middle. “When can I expect to hear a decision?” I looked down, and the ticks were loose, playing creeper crawler on my desk. Slow as sloths, so you wouldn’t think they could jump or anything.
They must have freaking leapt out of the box. “Again, thank you for your time. I enjoyed the opportunity to talk about my future with Burn.” Ticks tocked on my desk, wound their spring-loaded legs. “I look forward to hearing from you.” The blood bugs launched, landed on the blond prairie of my arm. “I’m not going to lie. Burn is awesome. I love you guys. And I would love to be part of your team.” Open up. Let them know that you’re friendly, that you care. The clock was ticking. Tick and Tock dug for red gold. I gave my name and number again. “Thank you,” I said and hung up. Thank you for hiring me. The Blood Brothers began to push their heads into my flesh. Maybe I should have sold plasma, but not this day, not for free. I yanked the sticky tickies before they could tap a vein, their little legs spinning spastically, hooking hairs of the blond pasture, fighting lust-drunk, so close to the dream they could taste the salty harvest. Ticks can jump, I guess, and in that moment I swear they could scream. I heard a ringing wail a pitch higher than the ringing in my ears. I was pretty sure the term was tinnitus. My ears had been ringing for a year easy, sometimes noticeable, sometimes not. It was almost ambient. It only sucked when I noticed it. “Sorry, bugs,” I said. The era of cutesy names had ended. These ticks were just bugs. They tried to bite me, after all. They proved they were vermin, terrorists. I felt bad, but what else can you do? What did they do with Bin Laden’s body? That’s right. Flush.

Rainbow Town Crier

I’m so excited I’m gay, and I’m straight. I’m so pumped for the new Broke album that I would totally make out with Blake. Probably not Andy. Sorry, drummer boy. Singers
always get the strange. The point is, this shit just in and all over the Interwebs: **Broke duo Blake and Andy now a trio.** The new member is the most obvious yet unexpected, like fate. Joni effing Sue. The same Joni Sue who dated Blake for three years, the same girl who, **according to this druggy interview**, at least partially inspired The Broke’s name when she broke up with Blake. I’m talking about Little Miss Whine and Benign, the soundtracker of manic dream girl movies, the solo singer of acoustic songs the color and taste of chamomile tea. Good stuff, but it won’t wake you up.

And yes, according to questionable Interwebs sources, **Joni Sue is a primary player on the new album.** She came back to sing with Blake.

I guess Joni needs a job and misses her ex, too.

Everyone that cares, all eight of us, have to wonder why The Broke kept Joni a super secret. Would knowing have spoiled my expectations? Would the hype have been too heavy a pressure for recording a solid album? My guess is that Blake wanted privacy to the point of insane secrecy. Like any great artist, he’s an asshole perfectionist, a jerk whose grip on control is so untiring that Andy threatens to quit at least once a year. Blake is one more reason The Broke is so good.

More important, how will the new shit sound? It’s easy to imagine the songs of Joni and Blake’s unfinished side-project, **Flower and Guns.** Their chill sound indicated the name was more a hippie reference than a nod to Guns N’ Roses. The production ended with their relationship. The **leftover demos**, leaked a couple years back, are beautiful ruins from the couple’s time together. Like their name, Flower and Guns is pretty and powerful. If the new Broke leans this way, we can expect star-gazing guitar fuzz, long-call lyrics and heartbeat bass.
Or can we? The Broke might be more like Fleetwood Mac Two if the Rumors are true: Joni Sue sleeping with You-Know-Who. Dandy Andy. Drummers get sloppy seconds. What would Blake think? He may accept it because he’s a cool liberal, ridicule it because he’s an insecure asshole, or beg to join it because of his bisexual crush on Andy and history with Joni. Probably all of the above, in that order, over a number of days. How band-incestual will this go? Maybe their live performance of Britney Spears’s “Three” won’t be ironic anymore.

Of course, Blake’s “crush” on Andy has largely been eye-rolled as The Broke’s running inside joke, not a real thing, just made-up band mythology, a reason to play the gag song “My Drummer Won’t Sleep with Me Unless He’s Totally Blacked Out”. Regardless, the situation is already weird enough with an ex in the studio, and adding any further relationship drama, combined with The Broke’s evolving musical maturity, as well as Joni Sue’s unique voice and songwriting, could make this the best and genuinely newest-sounding Broke album yet.

Or, to use the pun in every single Broke review ever—seriously—it could get Broken.

Music: Flower and Guns – “I Miss You Like the Eighties, Baby” (demo)

Comments: 2

Hipsterfuck: First! Always first!

steviesdreams: i found ur page searching for fleetwood mac two, which u should know is a very good cover band. this broken group sounds interesting
CHAPTER V
GARAGE

The day I moved back into my parents’ house was the day the economy crashed. It was a hot summery September afternoon. I backed up the rental truck myself, awkward and unwelcome, onto their cracked concrete drive. Everyone was at work. My parents paid for the truck. They paid for me to move back in with them. I unloaded, box by box, my life. I shoved, hoisted, dropped and sweated. I stacked one side of the two car garage with towers of cardboard and crap. The other side of the garage sheltered my dad’s undrivable project Mustang. I uncovered my old boombox on a spidery shelf. The player skipped CDs like stones on a lake, so I settled for npr, which told me in detailed ennui, and I realized it then, that the economy was tanked, bombed, raped and gone. Everyone knew this, everyone said it every day, we were all sick of the words, but filling my parents’ garage with piles of my shit, broke as my favorite band’s name, unemployed and unneeded, cashed and crashed, I finally knew, finally felt it for myself, what the recession meant. It meant moving back into my parents’ house.

Almost immediately Dad pressed me to free up the loaded garage. A month passed—it was late October—and I knew I had to start on the mess. I wasn’t sure what to do about the big stuff, the futon and recliner and entertainment center. Webster Mullet gifted me this shit. The cardboard boxes I could handle. I’d been going through them,
throwing stuff away, moving some to the basement. I would have put them in my room, but my attic cell was hardly big enough to hold me.

The rain continued, too cold and steady for raking. Endless layers of gray dash-lines. If this kept up, I’d man up and rake the damn leaves into wet, heavy piles. The rain didn’t stop me from riding my bike, after all, but that wasn’t really work.

Npr was depressing and dull. No surprise, right. I found an unlabeled cassette tape in my stereo box and popped it into the boom box. The tape grinded and fuzzed, but at least it didn’t skip. Modest Mouse started the set and continued it. Alex had made the tape, I remembered, a mix of music from her favorite bands. I hadn’t heard the tape since freshman fall, five years before, though I knew all the songs from mp3s. The tape had been my first taste of post-punk good shit. It was like my entrance into a darkish bar with youngish bands. The singers on stage were as confused and sad about themselves as they were at the world. Some of them were ironic, many whiney. Alex called it indie rock. I never left the bar.

I flicked the garage light switches and pulled the cords. Both bulbs were burned out. I left them that way. Lightless, the rainy day grayed the air and dulled the colors. I tackled a small stack of boxes and got stuck on one marked Card Table. I ripped open the duct-taped lid to a whiff of musty, musky air, the smell of mold and men, of my place back in C-Bus. Contents: Stuff I Should have Pitched Sooner: An uncomforting number of dead moths, CDs in broken cases, one dried French fry, snapped incense sticks, pot seeds—I flicked them in the flower bed—an instruction manual for an old video game I never played or witnessed, and what looked like a small gray potato. What interested me most, and the reason for a Card Table box, was the small stack of photos.
They’d aged. They were scraps of a life I was no longer part of, like a time when I still developed photos.

Most of the pictures were from college, party pics of Peripheral Friends I hadn’t seen since, friends of friends of friends. A few of these people were still in C-Bus, but after college they went professional or got new cliques, and were now no more than online peers. The kids I really cared about were long gone. I fingered a photo of Alex. In the one year we dated—our last year of school and the longest relationship I’d ever been in—I was at her place a lot, sneaking pictures. She hated having her picture taken.

I studied the photos like gas pump photos while the rain soundtracked an ambient pitter-patter on the open garage.

Alex and Dishes: Triangular composition, realism. Shifted focus from her sudsy hands up her tattooed arms—the tree, the owl—to her face, which featured a round and open mouth because she was singing. Above her lips, the rest of her face obscured by dark black hair. Shiny hair complemented bright, wet hands. Figure framed within background movie poster. We ate some brownies before we saw that movie. It was hilarious. I didn’t remember any of it.

Alex and Cheshire: Semi-profile. Huge Maine Coon on her lap, fat as a pregnant raccoon, blinking at the camera. Alex admiring cat. Profile of Alex’s round nose and rosacea cheeks. The rosy, raised cheeks proved a smile at some comment I’d made about the cat as fat as a pregnant raccoon. Alex’s fingers interwove with fur. Her curves like an Appalachian backroad, all up and down and around. A nice view around every turn.

Alex and Friends: Group portrait, unforced pose, epic setting. The spring we graduated college together. Four friends, all hugs. Five friends, really. I was the one
taking the picture. Alex a foot taller than Webster, though she was a good foot shorter than me. Arms around each others’ shoulders. Sara and Mikey embracing, too cute. All faces glowing with bright eyes and toothy, clenching grins. Alex’s actual dimpled smile. She was comfortable with cameras when she was on ecstasy. Behind the group, a gorge overlook. A view ten thousand times the one from my parents’ backyard, and they had a nice view. The spring-green hills folding like fabric and fading gray with distance. Massive, hazy ghosts.

This was Big Bed Rock. It was obviously named for its rectangular outcrop of rock that jutted over a deep gorge. It was a hiker’s hidden place in southern Ohio, and known fondly to those that knew of it. It wasn’t even on the Interwebs, which meant it didn’t really exist. Sara had learned of it from a friend of a friend. I never got to thank them.

I hungered for a good roll like sex. I needed it. Ecstasy felt fucking fantastic, like all your skin was made from the most pleasing parts of your genitals. That was real nice, and there were even better reasons to take it. When I was on ecstasy, when I was really rolling balls, it was like hearing the best song of your life for the first time. The moment was lucid and clear and the whole world walked hand in hand. Everyone was with me. This feeling was as rare as a true friend.

The photo pulled me out of the garage and sat me next to Alex, Webster, Sara and Mikey on the hot sandstone ledge. We were chain-smoking, chain-talking. Every word and expression sunlit with clarity. The four friends understood me more than anyone ever had, more than my parents, my sister, my old dead dog. “She was such a good dog,” I said. My friends agreed and poured some precious water over the ledge in honor of the
dog and in awe of the beauty of water splashing and shining. We saw all beauty in the view. It was the overwhelming future before us. The distant hills were opportunities, waves rolling to us. “Rolling,” we laughed. We were unbounded by life and bonded by youth and love. We were rolling balls. It was special and important. We were freshly graduating from college and in this crazy new life together, and we would always be perched on the edge of tomorrow, together. I stared into the bluest sky in my life and blinked and it was the flat gray ceiling of the garage and all I had was this photo in my hand.

The boombox blared a track by Ladytron. It didn’t suck, but it wasn’t indie rock, and it wasn’t what I wanted to hear. The song reminded me of Webster’s dorm room, our bullshit debates on electroclash as a genre. I found a more recent tape made by Sara—she’d mailed it to me after she and Mikey moved, which meant more to me than she knew—and slapped it in. Modest Mouse kicked off the set again. This was a much newer single. I sat in Webster’s recliner in my parents’ garage and lit a cigarette. I wanted to feel the song.

Drugs aside, I had never believed the experience on Big Bed Rock was a lie. I reconsidered. Sure, on the rock we had bonded, been intimate and huggy. But maybe the love lasted only for the moment. In the glare of ecstasy and sun, I had believed that there were people I could count on forever. I had thought that friendships so deep and close merited a kind of unspoken marriage, a commitment to one another. Now Alex was a faraway nobody, Webster had his own shit going on—installation art with cat litter, last I heard—and the cutest couple ever, Sara and Mikey, were lovestruck with their New York lifestyle. When I talked to Mikey, he didn’t ask a question about my life. He raved about
some dubstep DJ and five dollar PBRs. All four friends went out Fridays for the pricey Papst at bars that didn’t close until four in the morning. Good new bands played at the bars. My friends made new friends, unknown names on the online comment threads. Connections happened. Jokes I’d never get. Stuck in the gray garage, sunk into a ripped recliner that stank of spilled bong water, and gripping my old photos, I let pathetic loss and envy rise from their zombie tombs. I got sad. My stupid party pictures—there we all were, dancing to New Order in our underwear—proved I had been part of a flash mob generational experience. All spontaneous, a community calling me into their smoky apartments and dim bars. The hypenatural cliff photo was as far from our urban dens as we ventured, and it was the worst, framing a family of friends and the love they took with them. Both my past and New York were too far away, the zombies said. If I didn’t get out soon, I’d miss the fucking boat. It was like the Modest Mouse song titled, what else, “Missed the Boat,” which barked like a taunt from the boombox. It was like I had missed the boat already. My friends jumped Big Bed Rock and landed in the boat I missed. They rode the boat into our view, over the waves of hills, and disappeared into the sea-blue horizon while waves broke aimlessly around me.

I could still make it. I could build my own boat, a big clumsy canal boat of hope and resentment, pulled by a pack of towlined emo zombies. I had a launching-off lock and everything.

I really didn’t know what to do if Burn said No.

I stored the photos in my little desk in my attic cell.

I kept some of the CDs and a random mix tape labeled Fall Party in a loopy hand not my own. The rest, trash. I shook the Card Table box over a metal garbage can lined
with a big brown paper bag, the kind of trash bag you stuff with leaves and sticks for the refuse guy to pick up, the kind of bag I needed to stuff with leaves I needed to rake.

The potato thing dropped from the box. That’s what I thought it was, a small, shriveled potato. I would have been no less surprised. It hit bottom with an unpotato-like ping. It was something else.

I reached in. It was dead gray, like an ancient potato rolled under the shelf in a root cellar and scavenged in draught. I rubbed it in my palm.

And the gray faded. Its makeup was ash. Old incense ash came clean off on my fingertips. Under the gray potato skin was a pale stone the color of old bone. Not quite white.

It was one of those whitish rocks littered like acorns in the shortcut woods behind my parents’ house. This was a big one, about the size of an oblong golf ball, dimpled like a jelly bean, paper-weight heavy. I wanted to throw it away—part of me wanted to throw everything away, as if I could cleanse myself of the past—but I couldn’t. Alex had given me the rock the summer after college right there in Lockend. We were in love.

The weight in my hand was heavy proof, in a way the party and druggy photos weren’t. I squeezed the rock, rubbed the dimples. I had really had something, once. Life had been real and tangible, and surprising and beautiful, once. I had assumed the rest of my life would be, too.

I set the rock by the kitchen sink to rinse it off. Of course I got distracted by Fall Party. The tape clicked and looped in my cobwebby boombox, which fit fine in my room. It hummed a long moment of silence—rain blurred the window circle—and the songs started. I listened to a lot of good, sad songs with titles like Autumn Beds and
Autumn Sweater and Autumn Insert-Nostalgic-Sounding-Thing-Here. I’d never heard the mix and had no idea who had made it. Good stuff, not really party music, unless spiced cider with a close friend is a party, and it kind of is. What really got me was freaking Four Seasons. Here was a violin concerto wedged on a mix of sadsack indie tracks. Who invited Vivaldi? I didn’t know, and I didn’t know until then that something so benign, so classically Baroque, could rock. “Autumn” is the ultimate autumn song. There was a reason everyone knew it. I absorbed the flying, feathery strings and the sauntering movement in between. I forgot Big Bed Rock. Ten minutes in, I was convinced that all that matters in life are leaves and death.

Rainbow Town Crier

No tracklist. No single. No album name. No reliable confirmation on Joni sleeping with Andy, or proof for speculation that she and Blake are back together. No nothing.

I’m stuck waiting in Ohio like a Broke song. My life sucks.

Music: The Broke – “Waiting, Ohio”

Comments: 4

Hipsterfuck: Always first, bitch!

BETAVHSDVD: Your bragging to no one, hipsterbitch.

Hipsterfuck: YOU’RE bragging to no one, BETAPOOHEAD. Bam.

Homemade: I’m waiting for the new album like crazy too. I’m a big Joni Sue fan so it’s double sweet for me. It will be better. Your life I mean.
CHAPTER VI

FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Friends are the New Family. This is a new true meme. It was for me, anyway. In my world, friends were cohabitants, support systems (emotional, financial), and centers for our strongest desires, i.e. comfort, acceptance, love. My generation was so in touch with our social networks that we couldn’t bond with anyone outside of our own understandings. It was impossible for me to connect in any way beyond superficial with similarly aged peers that preferred Eminem to The Broke, buck hunting to dance parties, G. Dub to Obama, let alone connect with another generation. Like my Columbus office coworkers. Like people like my parents. Sure, I had a mom and a dad and a sister. They lived their own days and interests separate from mine. Actual traditional family members were linked only through biology and an arbitrarily shared domestic history. The nuclear family was a faded dream, a memory of a mushroom cloud. A fallout family. No one in a fallout family connects beyond homey nostalgia and maybe food. My generation had something to do with it. We responded intimately to those we trusted, the peers we vetted through likes and dislikes. We could not trust our parents, isolated by age and antique opinions, to understand us. They raised and loved us, true enough, but we grew into something else, raised also by the glowing influence of television and the Interwebs, worlds our parents could little control. We liked it. Friends were the new family.
I had no family in Lockend. After high school, when I ran into a forgotten Lockend friend during college breaks, I would wonder with guilt and paranoia if I had done something wrong, if I had left them behind. I was peering in the opera house window one Black Friday after Thanksgiving—home from college for four days—seeing nothing but my reflection in the dark window, when good old Bernie appeared next it.

“See any ghosts in there?” he said.

Bernie looked like a ghost. He was my childhood friend and best high school buddy. We watched zombie movies and set off homemade smoke bombs while the rest of Groveland High yelled at football games, got drunk for prom. We sat on the lock and fantasized about getting drunk, about having a date for prom. Here was Bernie, wearing the same tie-dye shirt from high school, the one with the logo of a jam band he’d never seen, only now it was faded. It looked more authentic that way.

“No ghosts, Bernie,” I said. “What is this? Are you balding?”

He shook his thinning head. It wasn’t a bad kind of shake, more a simple, perplexed affirmation, like it was all too much to believe. “Course I am. Nothing surprises me anymore. If a ghost popped up in the window right now, I might be startled, might throw me off a minute, but I don’t think it would shake me up. You can’t react to anything cause the crap just keeps coming. I got a job at the cardboard factory over in Groveland. What’re you doing, college boy?”

I almost said Drugs. “I’ll be done with school in a year. Then I’m moving. Maybe New York.”

Bernie shook his head. “New York. You look like a guy that would live in New York, don’t you. I mean, you squeeze into those jeans everyday? You walk like this?”
Bernie took a few spread-legged steps and laughed to himself. “That’s how I’d walk in something that tight, anyway.” He pointed at the opera house. “Man, remember when we tried to break into this place? I wonder if that stuff we spray-painted is still on the roof.”

I shrugged.

Bernie shook his head. “Want to see? Bet we can get up the back gutter.”

I said I had to study.

Bernie nodded. He did it slow and sorry, so I could see the top of his scalp. He was definitely balding.

I hadn’t talked to him since. I wondered whatever happened to the goofball. He wasn’t online so he didn’t exist. Only a strange memory, a fallout friend. Seemed like all my friends were memories. Unreal how friendships came and went, and it was everyone’s fault. We were all fairweather friends. We were all living our own entitled lives and screwing each other over in the process. I had disappeared to Columbus and, amid a haze of music and drugs and freedom, Bernie blurred into the past. I wondered if I had done something wrong by going my own way. I wondered if I had left Bernie behind.

I didn’t believe in karma, but it sure seemed the universe did.

My meme needed revision: If you live in the same city, friends are the new family.

I sat in my attic cell, thinking these thoughts and getting drunk. “Bottom’s up,” I said to myself, and took another gulp of rum. I grimaced. It came from my parent’s liquor cabinet and you could tell. This stuff was so vintage it’d make you crazy sick. It
was older than me. Seriously, just sniffing the rum would burn a good and queasy hole in your gut. I felt better already.

Nothing out the window but a hearty smog of rain and rum. Should I say harrtty smog, like a pirate? I’m saying the rum was something. Beyond the smog screen—I had to squint real hard—the color of the sky was New York Blue. Funny stuff, it was the same as Ohio Blue but sprinkled with planes and pigeons. Under it the friend ocean glistened and churned. I got a text from Webster that said he had too many pills. He said it was getting out of hand. That was saying a lot coming from him. I told him the answer to his problem is to mail me some. Mail the pills in flying packages over the beautiful hills between us, those perky big tit hills. I wanted to taste those hills. Run my rummy tongue over the rough fuzz of trees and lap at the leaves. All the leaves had changed to blazing reds and golds and were falling and there was no one to rake them in the rain, a shame.

That’s what I saw after a few drinks.

Except the future, sorry for me. My powers were limited to daydreaming, yearning, staring. I was no enlightened monk or weatherman. I didn’t know when the gray rain would end and my life would begin, but the rum gave me momentary optimism. The rum said it would be soon. Probably the day I got off my window-gazing ass and raked the stupid leaves. The weather will turn nice very soon, said the rum.

I touched the phone key that would call Alex. I lightly compressed the button. I pulled back and made another promise to myself: I will call Alex after I hear from Burn. Then I would have something to tell her, too. No word from Burn, despite the professional call.
I was pretty sure the rum tasted like piss mixed with rubbing alcohol. I downed some more and stared at the desk, at my hand on the desk. There was the stupid tattoo on my wrist, the first of four. It must have been the rum, because the tattoo brought me back to Bernie, more Bernie. More messy memories. The day I turned eighteen, Bernie and I celebrated like fools given freedom. We whooped it up in the convenience stores of Groveland. Columbus was still too trafficked and unknown to understand, and almost an hour north. So, Groveland. I earned my eighteenth. I bought losing lottery tickets and nasty porn. I said to the gas station clerk, “I want the strongest cigarettes you have.” He raised his eyebrows at my license, snorted and said, “Happy Birthday.” He handed me my first pack of smokes. Unfiltered Camels. Those really were the strongest cigarettes I’ve ever smoked. In the gas station parking lot, Bernie and I shared a couple cigs next to the propane tanks with the “No Smoking” signs. After a few hits—I sucked the cig like a joint—my head ballooned a foot off my shoulders. I felt airy and alert and ready to win a war, or at least a debate. I wouldn’t call cigarettes a gateway drug, but in that moment I fell in love with the idea getting high. As for nicotine, our love smoked away with the years. We were just stuck in our codependent relationship. Smoking kept me sober and awake, nothing more.

After lotto tickets, porn and cigarettes, there was still one last legal foolish freedom to plunder. This was how I got the ridiculous and emo tattoo on my wrist. The tattoo artist went along with it like another day on the job. From his photo binder, I saw his shittier work, abused cartoon characters and flaming flowers. “Whatever’s clever,” the guy said. My eighteen year old ego figured the artist was acknowledging my clever concept. The artist probably said the same phrase to every eager loser with fifty bucks.
As he worked, a grungy radio hero sang about acting stupid. It’s contagious, I guess, so no wonder I believed the tattoo was an awesome idea. I was breathing the museum air of a thousand stupid tattoos. The artist needled and stung and finished my first tattoo by the end of the song. It was small. Tiny scissors—the blades and handle loops in black—opened onto a black dotted line across my wrist. It was like what you see on a bag of frozen peas, the scissors and dash lines: Cut here. Whatever’s clever.

When my dad saw it the next day (it was foolishly unavoidable) he grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the basement. He yanked me over to the tub sink in the fish room. We were surrounded by three walls of glowing fish tanks and cast in a watery aquarium light, as if underwater. I watched, more dumbfounded than upset, as Dad dumped aquarium cleaner over my wrist. This was industrial, professional shit, the kind zoos used. I was overwhelmed with the dizzy chemical stink, and thought I’d get high off the stuff—the bad kind of high—if I had to smell it another second. Dad set it aside. He grabbed a rough aquarium brush and began to scrub at the scissors.

“Stop, that burns,” I said, and it did. That tattoo was fresh and raw. “It’s real, Dad. Don’t mess it up.”

Dad looked into my face. This was the first time I noticed his eyes were the same gray shine of the cement basement floor. There were things there I couldn’t understand. “James Henry Jameson the Third,” he said, letting go of my arm and turning around, addressing his audience of fish like some Shakespearean monologue actor. The fish waved their fins and watched Dad raise his arms. Perhaps they expected to be fed.

“Why does James try so hard to be different?” Dad asked. He dropped his arms. “Why does my son . . .”
He dropped his head. Dad’s voice thickened like cement. His words hardened inside of him. “My son,” he repeated, and nothing more.

The show was over. The fish resumed their meditative rectangular swimming patterns. I left my dad standing in the middle of their glowing tanks and ran upstairs. In my attic cell, I examined my swollen wrist and swore death curses at Dad.

“Because I don’t want to be you,” I said to my desk, with the epic reactive passion of a teen.

I escaped to college soon after the tattoo incident. When I came back for Thanksgiving break, all but one of the fish tanks was drained and dark. I watched the last fish and it watched me with teeny black eyes. It was fat and long and gray like a miniature whale, and waved its tiny fins soundlessly.

I hadn’t thought much about the tattoo in a long time, and there it was forever. I still felt it sometimes.

The rum was poison, a suicide drink. It had secretly energized the emo zombies. They were shuffling to a sad song, having a pity party. Why was I playing Bright Eyes? The old rough shit? It sounded sick and soothing, which is how it sounds when you’re really down. I let several songs play through. I couldn’t turn it off. I was sobbing too hard. This was cleansing, as if my tears and snot were releasing the poison rum from my blood. When the album was done, so was I. There was nothing else to cry about. I awoke to my surroundings, seeing everything as if I hadn’t seen it all before. The short bed looked safe and nest-like, the ceiling—slanted because of the roof—a solid tent to shelter from all the rain. Only the TV remained a TV. I felt hyper-aware of the length and weight of my skeleton. My body buzzed. It needed to get out of its shelter and
move. I dumped the rum in the toilet, where piss and ticks belong. The Space Invader was waiting in the garage. Must have been the rum, because I swore it greeted me like a dog, wagging its rear wheel. We were happy to see one another. The plowed fields smoked steam in the rain. Clouds spirited across the roads. That was real country smog. In a runoff pond a big heron stood still as the water. I only knew it was alive because it was in a different position whenever I biked past. It hadn’t migrated yet, if herons migrated. Several miles out, there was nowhere else to go but home.

Rainbow Town Crier

My life is better! I have readers. Thank you for being here, if you are here, and you probably are because the new Broke single is out! Like I said, my life is better.

It’s confirmed. It doesn’t suck. The new single, “Dawn to Dawn,” which I’m sure you listened to about a hundred times by now, shows progression in pretty much everything I like while condensing The Broke’s more sprawly, spacey traits into a tight little indie pop present. Joni Sue rocks. The music lifts her up and she brings it down, so it’s like a perfect meeting in the middle. She gives us her always bittersweet and sometimes abstract lyrics, with a voice both deeper and softer with age: “I set the wine and poison / they never came to see / we drank red wine from dawn to dawn / you drank poison for me” and “the antidote is letting go / for wanting to live like / we lived.” I admit that shit got to me. I admit that I apply my own relevance onto the lyrics, a meaning that is mostly mine. As for Andy’s role, he drums just fine, and adds sunshine with an old-school synth loop that sounds like U2 attempting a trance anthem with a
Nintendo. I don’t listen to U2 or trance, no thanks, but I love this shit. It works and it’s beautiful. As for Blake, he tears a totally spectacular and instantly catchy guitar riff would carry the track on its own. When he joins in the chantalong, lift-your-drink chorus—“Dawn to dawn / tomorrow is gone / the sun burns on / the old are the young”—it’s a hyper-compressed form of The Broke’s profound and psychedelic tracks. It’s ecstasy. It’s good.

Is it great? I don’t know. I’ll get back to you after another hundred listens. Would it be better in another time, a time of drink-lifting youth and chantalong friendships? Or is the song better now that those times are gone? That’s what the song’s about, right? I guess the antidote is letting go for wanting to live like we lived. See? I apply it to myself. “Dawn to Dawn” is totally about Joni and Blake’s relationship, all the shippers out there agree. But it’s kind of about me, too. It’s about all of us, like any great music. Is it great?

All I know is I got to rake leaves now from like dawn to dawn.

Music: The Broke – “Dawn to Dawn”

Comments: 6

BETAVHSDVD: Look who’s first now.

Hipsterfuck: First!

Hipsterfuck: Fuck!

BETAVHSDVD: Hipsterpoo.

Homemade: I think Dawn to Dawn is about the time no one showed up to Joni’s gallery opening except Blake and they got wasted on three bottles of wine. The
poison Blake drank was Joni’s disappointment, but by committing himself to Joni, their lives were poisoned by their relationship. They need to let go, which is the antidote, but they still want to live like they lived. Yeah, I’m a total shipper.

_Hipsterfuck:_ You’re ruining the song, Homey. It’s catchy and cool.

_BETAVHSDVD:_ Have you seen Joni’s fabric art? No wonder no one went to the gallery opening. She should stick to singing.

_steviesdreams:_ blake and joni forever!
I was showering one morning when I found a big tick behind my balls. I rubbed an Ivory bar on my junk and felt a plump bump on my very inner thigh. The bug was bloated to the ticky gills. He gripped my pubey taint like a little crabby fist and was swelled to the size of a cranberry. You’d think he’d had all he could eat, but his tiny head was still ostrich-holed in my flesh. You’re supposed to get them out with tweezers. My instinct couldn’t wait. I freaked and plucked the fucker. What happened was sick in the bad way. The tick popped. It was like an overripe blood berry. A scarlet streak ran from my balls to my knee. My first period. I must have been maturing. As for Ticky McSuck, the harvest was too much. Its remains washed down the drain with my blood. Another watery grave for another bad bug.

It was disconcerting to find something on my body that didn’t belong. It startled me into noticing myself, how comfortably unaware I cleaned my violated self. I shivered and wondered where I got the pest. I knew. It came from leaves, leaves, leaves.

The tick was the least of it. I’ll start with the day before I found the bug. Here’s how it all happened. The day before, I had finally got around to raking the damn leaves. I woke up early, like before noon, because a bright circle of sunlight lit up my room. Cue the miracle music, the rain had stopped. The sun showed up to work after a vacation of
outsourcing the sky to spitty drizzle, drowsy crows, clouds as gray and matted as dryer lint, depression. Refreshed, the sun burned a big bright beautiful fall day onto the Lockend stage. The leaves were just right, the porch pumpkins juicy ripe, the flying Vs honking with migratory glee. Wooly bears wiggled across the road past their flattened peers. Getting the mail—a notice from my student loans, which I chose to ignore—I squatted to read the caterpillars’ furry coats. More black than brown on the little guys. We had a cold winter coming, so they said. I was super not looking forward to it, but I couldn’t waste worry over winter. The moment called for fall. It was like the cartoon clouds drifted away into the blue sky and I was okay. The air was so crisp and snappy I bit and lapped at it. I breathed fall, the sweet musk of nostalgia and loss. Somewhere someone was burning what smelled like leaves and manure. It was comforting. This and the sun awoke a vibrant appreciation for the moment. I really felt like raking.

“Here I am, autumn,” I said. “Give me your leaves.”

Colors fell like the economy. I raked the tannic stink, the rustling shush. I raked and sang a song about fall. I stuffed big brown compost bags full of front yard leaves, took a short two-hour afternoon lunch and Interwebs break, and by early evening raked my way to my big backyard—a big yard overall—singing an endless song, edging closer to the woods on the slope of the hill.

“James,” called a voice over the song. “James Henry, what are you doing down there?”

The song was gone. My ears ballooned with pressure, like when you’re on an airplane. My head felt like a bubble. I spun dizzy to face the voice from the top of the hill. Perhaps it was my sister. She was due to show up in the evening.
Mom peered down at me from the side of the shed. I yelled to her. “I’m making a huge leaf pile to jump in. What do you think?”

Mom leaned and picked up something unseen by the peak of the hill. She lifted and shouted, “Why are you raking? We have a leaf blower.” She hoisted what looked like a sci-fi gun you use to flame aliens. It was sleek and black and long. She scurried down the hill. “You know how to use this thing?”

I nodded, looked at the setting sun. I preferred the rake.

“Good, because I don’t,” said Mom, handing it to me. Her voice sounded muffled, as if underwater. “Just hang it back in the shed when you’re done. Now I wish I knew when your sister’s coming, I texted her and she hasn’t gotten back yet and—”

And Mom told me a bunch of stuff that amounted to dinner at six, meatloaf, and thanks for taking care of these leaves.

“Dad told me to,” I said, and my ears popped, quick and sharp. The bubble broke. It didn’t feel good. I clenched my teeth and grimaced, or at least frowned, which wouldn’t have looked weird coming from me. My ears rang a pitch higher than normal tinnitus. It was like a couple ticks crept in, got trapped and were screaming for their lives.

Mom went back to cooking and I went behind the shed to smoke. If anyone asked, I was watching the sun set. It was pretty perfect. The laser rays set the worth of gold, turned everything they touched to gold. The liquid air and tree leaves all glowed. Even the gray shed—gray than the spider sacks in its corners—was made warm, a varnished slate. And the treetops, cardinal red and gourd orange and squash yellow, such brilliant bright hues. As bright as if I were rolling on ecstasy.
My lighter clicked and sparked and did not light. I sighed and stared into the sunset. I gave up and gave in to the shedside view.

Down there, downtown—the ancient and nonfunctional opera house, the streetlight gone green—nestled in what some called the canal valley, what was really a low dip between hills like small breasts. (My parents’ place was one nipple.) Took ten minutes to get downtown by sidewalk, or seven by shortcut through the forest. (The ferny woods of my youth, the bright treetops between home and down there.) At the bottom of the dip, what was left of what some called the canal and what was really a big ditch. It hid unseen behind squat brick buildings, beyond the streetlight blinking yellow. High, young screams echoed from the park. (I once hated playing soccer there too.) Up the other hill-breast across from me rose the church steeple, thrice as tall as me and white as bone—the other nipple, erect over an areola of housetops and treetops. The sunball setting behind it. The sky orange as a pumpkin. The air not too warm, not too cool. The kind of evening even my dad would smile at the neighbors. Beyond Rockwellian, too ethereally lit, somehow, for Mom’s framed Kinkade painting, too real, a here-and-now bucolic fall sunset in little Lockend, Ohio.

“Look at this shit,” I said, as if someone were there. The streetlight flashed red. I heard no car motors down there. No one was there. I was the only one who saw the light change. I didn’t feel well. My good morning feeling was setting with the sun.

Damn it, cigarette, I need you.

I gave the lighter another go. I clicked and clicked and a backyard dog barked and barked. It was like I controlled the dog. My ears rang between the spark barks. I
stopped clicking and the dog kept barking, metronome-steady. I didn’t control anything.

The whole world was against me, it always was, and what a nice evening it was.

I shook the lighter. This was not right. Hiding behind my parents’ shed, not smoking. It was a huge contrast, fucking giant, to how I should have been living—smoking wherever, whenever—and would be again soon, I thought, once I got my feet back on the ground, as my dad said. As if I was floating in space.

“James.”

Someone was calling my name.

“James Henry Jameson. The Third.”

Someone was calling my full name. People freaking loved to say it.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m watching the sunset,” I said, and turned to face the future.

The future had the smile of my sister, her classic, the kind that reveals pink upper gums. “Yeah, I’ve always liked the view here,” she said. Her face peeked around the shed. A big fancy camera swung from her neck. “Come on, you’re still smoking.” She eyed the poorly hidden cigarette in my hand. She knew my secret. “You told us you quit. You liar.”

“Damn, Sam.”

Sam rounded the shed, pivoting her hand on the wooden wall, flaking gray paint. She was sure-footed yet jumpy, somewhat equestrian in grace and appearance. She bobbed and bulged, no insult. We shared obvious genes. Our faces were horse long, hair mud blond, skeletons tall. We were all part of the family funny farm here. Welcome.

“Look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Sam said.
I didn’t get up. I sat there. I didn’t do a damn thing. “It’s that time of year, isn’t it?”

“You’re like really pale.”

“I’m pale. Have you looked at a mirror today?”

“You’re shaking.”

“You surprised me,” I said. “I need a cigarette. I’m fine,” I said.

Sam laughed. It was whinny-like. This was her answer for anything she couldn’t answer. “Wow. Well then,” she said, and looked to the sunset.

We both looked. The sunset gilded us gold. The treetops were so bright now, they were functioning as visual art, variously contrasting and complimenting the sky, which was flaring every color of fire, as if it were all designed by someone who hardcore studied color concept. Which it was not, right. There wasn’t any kind of god, just the mystery of existence and the science that would one day explain it. We watched the colorful mystery. We were silent and so were the kids that were screaming. The dog stopped its barky beat. The streetlight blinked colors. Maybe Sam saw it. I heard a couple cars go now. Engines revved and tires hummed on the brick streets. The few commuters like my dad were getting home from the city, from Columbus, forty-five minutes to an hour north of Lockend, depending on traffic. Sam lived in the city, and I may have visited her if I had a car. Cars cost money, and I didn’t need one in Columbus, with the Space Invader and the dinosaur busses and Webster’s stinky Celebrity.

“This is really nice,” said Sam. “I feel like this kind of evening only happens a couple times a year. So are you ready?”
“Dinner’s not ready yet,” I said. I didn’t want dinner. I didn’t want anything.

“Dad’s not even home.”

“Exactly. Are you ready to walk to Dead Lock?”

“No. No I’m not. Why?”

Sam shifted from sunset to me. “Because I’m your sister, and this is a beautiful fall evening. Come on, kid.”

* * *

We took the sidewalk. We walked past every single house of our childhood. We knew every one and everyone in them. Some of the colors had changed, new paint and plastic siding, but the people were pretty much the same. Miss Titmouse, who had always been ancient, now had a corn yellow front porch. I swore it used to be green. A sign said from the railing: “Autumn Smiles.” Pumpkins and mums accented the message with autumn orange. It was unsightly bright. “God, just seeing these houses,” I said. “It makes me feel so old.”

“Old? You’re full of it. I’m near thirty,” Sam said. Sam was twenty-seven and she may as well have been thirty-five. She was an adult with an adult job, a living wage and insurance, must have been nice, a social worker, it was so weird to think, with an apartment in the Short North and a history of boyfriend failures attributed to bad luck and, as she put it, “Creeps and jerks. Creepy jerks.”

Aside from the occasional dating webpage, Sam logged a lot of online time on her own blog, oldohio.com. Old Ohio may have been related to her singleness. Her
weekends were given to road-tripping and her heart committed to history, to exploring abandoned children’s sanatoriums and stagecoach factories, the creepy settings for ghost hunter shows, though Sam rolled her eyes at photo orbs and magic mist. We had this much in common. Sam was haunted by other spirits. “You have to see The Blue Phantom,” she said, and I had seen her photos of it, the rusty rollercoaster with trim maples growing through the tracks. She said that someday I would go with her on these little local history adventures. For now, Dead Lock would do.

The screaming soccer kids were somehow gone. I would have preferred their innocent noise to the sulking, swearing teens that they’d apparently grown into within fifteen minutes. On the baseball diamond, some high-schoolers in sports jerseys kicked dandelions and spit tobacco. They had no ball or bat. In the picnic pavilion, teen Goths in sweaty black squawked and stared like a murder of crows. “Fuck Lockend,” a Gothy brat said, loud and clear, obviously for the benefit of Sam and me. “Suckend,” he said, “Fuckend.” Others laughed. I couldn’t disagree with the statement, but I still hated the teens. I hated them for taking over the park, spurring strangers for reactions, spitting underage chew luggies. They didn’t have anywhere else to hang out in town—when I was their age, Bernie and I sulked at the park plenty—but they weren’t making Lockend any better. Fuck teens.

We ignored them and shuffled under the squirrelly oaks. No one had raked here. The thick layer of leaves shooshed underfoot and shushed the teens. We headed for the main attraction.

There was nothing unexpected to see at Dead Lock. The steep sides dropped twenty feet into the lock pit, which was wide across as Hill Street. The sandstone was
forever mossy and forever marked with the date 1888. The lock had to be older than that. It was an ancient foundation laid for other times, some kind of system for battling elevation. I attempted to see it in use. Mules towed the boat in, lockkeeper closed the wooden gates—there were now none—and opened the opposite gates, water level rose or dropped, the boat returned to a canal many feet above or below the one they’d just left. That is, if the crazy lockkeeper didn’t jump at them with his gleaming pirate knife.

Right. I got the mechanics, I understood the clunky boats and towpath mules, yet seeing Dead Lock as anything other than two crumbling cliff walls was like science fiction—both tangible and unreal.

As for Alex, I felt nothing. This was relieving until the guilt set in at the fact that I felt nothing. I’d been avoiding nothing.

Sam clicked her camera. I kicked fat acorns into the lock. The nuts fell fast and plopped in the foot of brackish water far below.

“Don’t you already have tons of pictures of this?” I said.

“Yep. But I can never get a good one. The lock looks smaller in the photos than it really is. Hey look, I got an orb.”

“Dust speck.”

“Yep. No ghosts here. Come on, sit down,” said Sam, sitting. We hung our legs over the edge of the lock. It was somehow always the stupidest and best thing to do. It wasn’t like I’d ever fallen. Bugs buzzed in the half-light like bonfire sparks. Migratory songbirds collected in the trees, chitting and chirping. All around us, all around town, a surround sound militia of crickets emitted a high-frequency buzz, steady, forgettable,
ever present. Not unlike the ringing in my ears. The crickets would be silent by the fourth frost.

I clicked my dead lighter. A cigarette drooped useless from my lip.

Sam waved her hand at my face like she was going to knock the cig out of my mouth.

I jerked back. “Dude, what?”

“Dude, wait,” she said. Her fist clicked. She had a lighter and held the flame for me. “I burn a lot of candles. Kills the smell of litter boxes. Better?”

Sam slipped the lighter into her peacoat, which looked like felt and was the color of plums. The last ray of slanted sun gave her hair a golden halo. “Now tell me you’re going to quit,” she said.

I said okay. It came out oh. “Oh. I’m going to quit. Someday.” I tapped the cigarette over the lock. No ash fell. “I don’t know when. When I move out. When I fall in love or something. When things start to happen.”

“So what, nothing’s going on in little old Lockend?” It was a joke. No one laughed. “James, what are you doing here?”

I inhaled wonderful smoke. “What I’m doing,” I said, exhaling, “is trying to get out of here.”

Sam pulled on her tight ponytail. It was her strange habit for life. “Mom will miss you. She really likes having you around.” Sam smiled an autumn smile.

“Mom likes having a grown child moping around the house? Eating all the pumpkin cakes?” I breathed the cigarette smoke. It didn’t taste like anything. It was great. “Recycling the crappy newspaper she was going to save?”

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Sam shook her head and the ponytail swayed. “Mom told me she’s happy that you’re around, you know, more than you used to be.” Sam watched the smoke drift from the cig, or stared into space, I’m not sure which. “So find any good job offers in Columbus? Anything promising?”

“I’m not applying in Ohio.” I blew smoke up away from us. “I have to get out of here. I’m applying in New York City. I haven’t told the parents yet.” Now Sam knew two of my secrets, which were too many. “You know too much about me. Look, my friends live in New York. Everyone lives in Brooklyn. Once I get a job, I’ll just crash at Webster’s until I save enough to move.” I shifted and smoked and said, “It’s just, everything that I care about is happening in New York.”

Sam nodded. Her gold halo disappeared I didn’t know when.

I tried to enjoy my smoke. The teens hooted and laughed. I told myself it wasn’t directed at us. I also told myself the lock wasn’t so bad. The nicotine helped. I expected some emo zombies to rise from the muck, crawl up the walls and pull me in. Nothing happened. A lock is a lock is a crumbling place to sit. The sun’s final rays lit the tiptops of trees, and though I couldn’t see it from there, I knew the glare was cutting through my circular attic window up on the ridge. Between the hill breasts, we were in the shadow of the canal valley. It was getting chilly. I pulled my red hoodie over my head and yanked the white strings. “It gets cold soon as the sun goes down,” I said.

“So New York is where hipsters go,” Sam said.

“I’m not a hipster,” I said. “Not a hipster.” No other way to say it. “I don’t even know what a hipster is. No one does.”
Sam laughed. She fucking laughed. “Look at yourself. Smoking. With your swishy bangs and your skinny jeans, they’re tighter than anything I’ve ever put on. You’re like a hipster skeleton.”

“Good, that’s the look I was going for,” I said. “Really, I’m not a hipster.”

“How many tattoos do you have?”

“I’m just a member of my generation,” I said. “Four.”

“And what’s your favorite band? Broken?”

“The Broke, Sam. I love The Broke so so much. I’m could go on and on about them.”

“Only you and your friends know who that is. I have no idea who that is. Why am I still talking?”

This made me happy and sad. “That’s why I need to move.”

“Okay, but what are you going to do, James?”

“I’m going to live my life.”

“What I mean is, I’m working at the clinic downtown.”

“Clinic, what?”

“And I actually like what I’m doing.” The ponytail swung with enthusiasm. “Overworked, sure, underpaid, hell yes, but I care about my work. I may not be at this clinic forever, I may not be in Columbus forever, but I know this much. I know I’ll be doing this kind of thing for awhile. And in the meantime, I’m paying my bills. And I’ve got Old Ohio. That’s what I’m doing. What are you doing?”

“Doing?” I said. “Doing? I don’t know. Am I supposed to be doing something? Why do I have to do anything?” I didn’t understand why we had to be doing something,
especially when “do” meant “work” to so many people. Like after college, when I met someone at a C-Bus party or show, they would always ask, What do you do? And I’d say I work in a dusty office that smells like farts. But that’s not what I did. What I did, and what I wanted to do, was blare music and sing along loud, order pizza like an event, hang out in greasy diners and drink too much coffee and debate everything, eat a massive sticky bun for breakfast, pop painkillers and ooze into the floor with Fennesz on the stereo, dance like a jerk, get a spontaneous tattoo because of a life-defining moment like telling someone you’re in love with them, buy fresh red raspberries at the farmers market, drink too much coffee with friends and open up about what we need and hate and who we are and how we got that way, rush to download and listen to and rate the newest album released that day, draw half-ass but intimate portraits of one another, gossip about one another with no guilt, play Uno and chess and old-school video games, chain-smoke like a sick chimney, go to shows early and suffer through the opener just to be close to the stage when your favorite band comes on, flip through art books and point at the pictures and argue Cool or Not Cool, bike fifty miles into the country to picnic with a friend in a random soybean field, watch awful forgotten horror movies and one-up each other’s comments and laugh yourself breathless, search stinky thrift stores for vintage treasures, get high and get the munchies and go to a buffet that turns out to be pretty gross, hang out in a grassy park with your friends watching clouds make trippy and hysterical love to other clouds because the acid is really kicking in, read Neruda’s poems out loud and yearn to feel the same passion for anyone, and sleep away the day. That’s what I did, what I used to do. Those days seemed to be floating on and away. As for my Broke
blog, I didn’t mention it. It couldn’t compare to Sam’s website. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” I said.

Sam snort-laughed. “You don’t know. Jeez, I’m sorry, James. You really are a member of your generation.”

I squished the cig butt into a hole in the sandstone ledge. A hole which was shaped like a certain rock I had known. “Jesus fuck,” I said.

“That’s not a nice thing to say. You should say ‘jeez’ instead. That would be a nicer thing to say.”

“What? Does that make me an asshole? Am I an asshole?”

“Sure is getting cold out here.”

“Look, I’m excited. This hole right here, this is where Alex dug out a white stone. She gave it to me.” The sandstone ledge was pebbled with whitish lumps, embedded stones. The potato stone would fit the hole like a children’s puzzle piece. The rock shape goes in the rock hole.

“Your ex,” Sam said, glancing at the hole. “Yep, you get a lot of quartz in this sandstone.” Her expensive looking camera made a beep that sounded cheap. She picked it up, eyed the screen and pressed buttons.

I traced the hole with my fingertips. This was exactly where Alex and I had sat and chain-smoked the summer after college. After Alex promised we’d always be friends, she’d started scratching at the sandstone with her car keys. I had lit another cigarette.

Alex elbowed me. “Got it,” she said, followed by a fake triumphant laugh. “Hold out your hand,” she said, and opened hers over mine.
The stone fell into my palm. Cool and white, snow in the humid night. Pale as bone, smooth as skin. Moon-glow white. The stone was the size of an oblong golf ball, dimpled like a jelly bean, paper-weight heavy.

“It’s milk quartz,” said Alex, returning her hand to her mouth, to the familiar pose of her fingers with cigarette. Her moony face, framed by dark hair and night forest, glowed pale as the stone. Her eyes starlight glints. “I used to collect these with my mom. She said if you care about someone, you give them one of these stones. She threw most of them in the gravel driveway, so I don’t know. I guess she didn’t have too many people to give them to.” Alex leaned on but did not look at me. She gazed into the black hole of the lock.

“And?” I said.

“And that’s it,” said Alex. She flicked a cigarette into the lock. The darkness ate the spark. “I love you, James.”

Of course I loved her. My kiss said it for me. Alex said it back, soft and quiet. I love you. We said it louder, we sang it. We kissed like young people kiss on baretoed summer evenings. It probably tasted like cigarettes. Cool air like cave air crept up from the lock. It rose from our bare toes to our hot mouths. It melted like ice on our tongues. We breathed this night into one another. We were hot and cold, young and old. We would be this way forever. We were in love.

“This lock is dead,” said Sam. She was standing and stretching. The camera hung tame from her neck. “Mom just texted me. Dinner’s ready. Don’t want to keep Dad waiting.”
I stood, leaving Alex and the stone hole an eternity away. In romantic comedies and bad movies, the insecure ex always needs an obscure feeling they call closure. I got it. It was like a good feeling that came out of a bad feeling. I felt alone and renewed at the same time in my loneliness. Closure was loss and knowing that you’re stepping away from the loss. I stepped away. I could call Alex now, with or without Burn.

We left Dead Lock. Leaves shuffled under the park trees. The Goths were flocking out of the pavilion and swooping our way. “Hipster sighting,” the bratty one crowed, and the others cackled.

“Jesus fuck,” I said.

“James.”

“Sorry. Fuck.”

“Jeez.”

We crossed Goth’s Path.

“Hey,” said the teen. He was bony and small, the kind of kid that grows into a guy with a wiry goatee and a meth addiction. He stared at me with beady, underdeveloped eyes. I stepped past him. He grabbed my arm like a hungry zombie.

“What the shit?” I said.

“Whoa, chill,” he said, letting go. “I just want to say I like your pants, man. Where’d you get them?”

“Oh.” I checked out the brat’s pants. Baggy black with straps and buckles, the faux- BDSM style you’d find at Groveland Mall, in Hot Topic. Maybe he wanted new pants, was thinking of going emo or something. Maybe he wouldn’t be a goateed methhead after all. I told him where I got my skinny jeans. “In Columbus. American
Apparel.” I wondered if I should tell him more, enough to fill two lines at the end of a paragraph at the bottom of a page. That would be meta.

His face twisted into a beaky smile. He held his arms out to his friends like a crow spreading its wings. “Told you,” he said, and they all cawed. He turned back to me. “Hey man, you got a cigarette?”

How could I say no? I mean, really?

“That was my last one,” I said, pointing my thumb at the lock. I walked away, kicking the leaves and thinking the teens should be made to rake them.

* * *

James Henry Jameson the Second, my preceding namesake and Dad, was the kind of man that would make a good bull. He had bulk. He was tall as me but stocked with layers of gristle and muscle, somewhere between big-boned and gym-toned. He wasn’t fat or built, just meaty. His disposition was eighty percent chance of clouds. Clowns and the color red would probably have pissed him off.

I zipped my red hoodie.

Dad raised his bull head and glanced at me from seven feet across the oval dinner table. It was a big table. I didn’t like sitting at it. I was there for a free handout, a mom-made meal. On other evenings I could scan the newspaper comics while I ate, pretending that Hagar wasn’t horrible and Garfield wasn’t depressing. The comics sucked and I read them anyway. Not that night. This was family dinner night, right. I obeyed the unspoken curse of familial blood, the truce of living, eating, possibly interacting together.
I would tamely endure, I thought, I would at least eat okay food and comment the minimal amount needed to appear as if I gave half a shit. I’d play along. This was my rent. Plus, I was broke as my favorite band’s name and had no car. I couldn’t make a run for the Groveland border for an order of General Tso’s if I wanted to. And I wanted to. A thought crossed my mind—if I was agreeable, nice even, if I played their game and added a line or two to the conversation, I’d fly free. I’d win Burn and be gone. I’d be gone before the next family dinner and wouldn’t have to do it again until the obligatory Christmas get-together of tinseled joy and bullshit. Just make it through dinner, I figured, and I’d be clear. It made total sense at the time. Desperation can do that. I had no other outs, and pleading with the universe felt as good as complaining about it. The deal would at least get me through the meal. I caught Dad’s eyes. He looked at his hands just as I let out a big, genuine smile. I couldn’t help my stupid self.

Dad watched the fat fingers of his hand fold around the fist of the other, pressing on the table with poser patience. I felt their weight. My end of the table tilted an inch higher. I would have to set my drink carefully.

I stared at the table. It was decorated with a tablecloth decorated with scarecrows. They had smiles stitched into their potato sack faces and they guarded pumpkins heaped around their flimsy cornhusk feet, because, naturally, crows go caw-caw for a peck of sweet pumpkin flesh. Scare those flying flockers good, scarecrows. Their flannelled arms, strapped Jesus-style to cross of sticks, were outspread, open, forgiving and inviting all, even the crows they were supposed to be scaring. The lumpy black birds squatted on the scarecrows’ shoulders, grinning and unperturbed, like they’d got some great farty little inside joke, shitting on Old McDonald’s flannels. The colors were right. All
October field, the usual rusty range of yellows and oranges and browns. The name of the design, I imagined, was Autumn Smiles.

“Go away,” said Dad. Clinton had arrived on the table, rubbing his cold nose on Dad’s fist. Dad jerked his hands back and huffed like a hoarse cow. Clinton puffed fire-red fur. Dad smacked the table and my glass shook.

Sam appeared, scooped the cat and plopped him on the rug.

“Let’s say grace,” said Mom, sitting to one side.

Dad glanced at her and back at his refolded hands. Sam, sitting on my other side, watched Mom. I did too. She was big and tall but less bulky than Dad. Every morning for my whole life she sprayed and styled her dyed brown hair, which was streaked with blond highlights. It was probably white as quartz under the dye. Her hair was always whatever style you see middle aged women sporting on family-friendly reality shows of the time, the kind of hair that needs regular upgrades from soft to sharp, long to short. Here, a chin-length cut with sideways bangs sprayed flat on her forehead and spunky-funky spikes jumping up from the back. It was nice looking but in no way natural, and the style made Mom’s face look fatter. She was the only member of our family without a long face. She was cheeky. She had a high, whiny voice, like the book nerd on npr. Though she was tall and all, I’d still call her mousey.

Mom squeaked grace. “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for this food.”

The prayer didn’t rhyme when I was five and still didn’t, but Mom had it down to a song. “Let’s eat,” said Sam.

Dad nodded. Mom reached for the meatloaf. Sam and I held our plates to her like we were really hungry little kids. Mom plopped a slice onto Dad’s plate.
We passed food in an oval. There was a conspicuous bowl of buckeyes I felt I should hand around. The Ohio nuts were set in the centerpiece, a harvest of phallic gourds. The dining room lighting was fake yellow sunset. It all made the mood of a dimly-lit country diner, food included.

I passed peas and looked up at the windows. The dinner table squatted like an alter under the double windows, twin rectangles of purple dusk. Out there, a streetlight haloed gold leaves. Dad’s bulk, across from me, filled the space between the windows.

I caught a scarecrow smiling at the scene. “Not Autumn Smiles,” I heard him say, though his sewn mouth didn’t open. My family was absorbed with forking their food. The scarecrow was freaking talking to me. His voice was chipper and goofy, like an eighties cartoon villain, perhaps masking his insecure need of a brain. “The name is Autumn Fall.”

That’s a little redundant, I told him.

“You’re a little bad decision,” said the scarecrow.

Get a brain, I said. That shut him up.

I’m not going to lie. I heard the tablecloth scarecrow say what it said, below and behind the ringing in my head, back in the brain where suffering meets imagination. The scarecrow was there to get me through the dinner. It helped me cope, a Websterification of the moment, a fantasy dinnerdream. I knew the scarecrow wasn’t really talking to me. I was talking to me, though the scarecrow thoughts were spontaneous and freestyle. I could surprise and delight myself. It was the kind of game I’d played silently with myself as a child, imagining the cartoonish friends and enemies of napkins and knives, and it now started as more or less an automatic response. I went with it.
“So,” said Mom. Sam tilted her head like a curious Clinton. The scarecrow waited smilingly.

No one gave Mom one word.

This was our once a month family dinner. Get through it, I told myself, and I wouldn’t have another.

I took a bite and my phone buzzed. It was a text from Sara of Sara and Mikey fame. I glowed as if the text were unexpected great news. “Hey JHJ III,” her text read, “How’s life? Been a while since I heard you.”

“Eating meatloaf,” I texted. “Wish it was your falafel.”

“Who was that?” asked Mom.

“Just Sara,” I said, taking a bite of meatloaf. It glistened the same brown as the muck at the bottom of Dead Lock.

“So why’d you do this?” said Dad. He spoke through a mouthful of meatloaf. His deep voice cut over the table. “You know I hate meatloaf.”

Mom shook her head. “I messed up again. I forgot to pick up something else. I can’t remember anything anymore. I messed up.” She said this with detached calm, as if pointing out that the day was sunny. “If you don’t like it, there’s leftover pizza in the fridge.”

Dad chewed and chomped more meatloaf. I wondered. We all knew Dad didn’t prefer Mom’s meatloaf. To his credit, it was almost as bland and mushy as its color suggested. I couldn’t tell if the meatloaf was really a menopausal mess-up or a preemptive strike from the army of Mom. Dad didn’t concede either way. He stuffed forkfuls into his mouth. “Could you pass the ketchup,” said Sam.
Dad grabbed it, popped the cap, farted a puddle onto what was left of his food and handed it to Sam.

“Jim,” said Mom, “Remember what Sam used to call ketchup?” Dad didn’t say anything. Mom kept going. “We were at Grammy’s and Sam said ‘Pass the cat butts, please,’ and Grammy went, ‘What did she say?’” Mom paused. “Cat butts.” She said it as if she’d inhaled helium. “Cat butts.”

“I know. I was four,” said Sam. She squirted the red stuff. “So you say. Thanks for the cat butts, Dad.”

Dad nodded.

Mom talked. “So then I said to Grammy with a straight face, you know, matter of fact, ‘Sam wants you to pass the cat butts.’” Mom laughed high. “I can’t even say it now without laughing, I don’t know how I did it then.” She poured some pop in Dad’s glass. I held up my own. Mom filled my glass and talked to me. “What was it Grammy said? It was something like, ‘You teaching this child to eat cat butts on my Sunday potatoes?’”

Mom expected a response. I’d play Mom’s silly memory game and then it would all be over. I stalled with a sip of diet pop. “What Grammy did,” I said, smacking my lips at the aftertaste, “is dip her potato in ketchup. She tried it and said, ‘This child’s onto something here. All these years I been using fancy herbs and oil.’ Something like that, anyway. Then she always used ketchup on her Sunday potatoes.”

Mom shook her head. “No no. That wasn’t it. What do you know? You were just a little thing.”

“You’re just a little thing,” said the scarecrow. I told him to shut his straw trap.

He was starting to look like an emo zombie.
Sam dinged her fork on her plate, beaming, like she’d got the answer to a game show trivia question. “After I said the cat butts thing, Grammy laughed so hard wine came out her nose. Red wine. It looked like blood, and that’s why I remember it. I was scared, but Grammy was laughing, so I was confused too. Maybe that’s why I was scared. Anyway, that’s what happened. Right?”

The scarecrow sighed. “Half the crop lost to sticky mold.”

We’re not talking about you, I told him.

His smile didn’t change. “I’m not talking about me,” he said.

A fork clinked louder than Sam’s dinger. “Cat butts,” said Dad, flat and loud, with the authority of an announcement. We all looked up, paused in motion, Sam with butter knife hovering over a roll, Mom with chipmunk cheekful of peas, me swigging the awful drink. I gulped loud and the scarecrow said everyone heard it. Dad’s food was cleared from his plate, just some ketchup smears and untouched peas and the discarded fork. He wiped a leaf-print napkin over his mouth, inhaling audibly, and said, “Cat butts never happened.” He crumpled the napkin in his fist and glanced at Mom. “Long time ago, Mom here had one too many glasses of red wine herself and cooked the whole cat butts story out of scratch. She was mumbling words to herself, and turned ‘ketchup’ to ‘cat butts’ all her own.” Dad’s eyes turned to Sam, though his head did not. “Next day, Mom wakes up with a hangover and a cute little story. I’ve been watching these different endings evolve over the years.” Dad leaned back in his chair, put his hands behind his head, and stared straight at me. His eyes were again the gray glare of a cement basement floor. “I thought it was time you heard the real deal. Mom was drunk.” His eyes pingponged between all of us. “Cute story, though.”
No one gave Dad one word. “What the coal,” said the scarecrow. “Holy woolly bears, old bottles and—”

Don’t, I told him, and he didn’t.

“Dad,” said Sam. She pointed the butter knife at him. “Dad, I swear I remember Grammy shooting wine out her nose.”

“I was drunk?” said Mom. “I always drink too much once I start, I know. But I swear Sam said cat butts at least once. I wouldn’t make that up, would I? I don’t know. Maybe I did. That was twenty some years ago, and you know how I am . . .”

I wanted to call bullshit. Mom had been playing nostalgia, the only game our fallout family knew how to play, and Dad one-upped her by breaking the rules. He won the game by invalidating it.

Dad shrugged and reached for another roll. His college class ring shined scarlet under the hanging yellow lamplight, the rock still gleaming from thirtysome years ago, when people cared about things like college class rings. Our alma mater was the same huge university in C-Bus, and though I spent a good four years earning my degree, I had no idea where Dad got his undying, uncloseted pride. From someplace before I was born. A lot of unexplainable weirdness happened back then, and then Mom had a C-Section, and now here I was in this leftover society. It’s like everything that could happen did happen. Everything that mattered was a joke now, and I couldn’t understand the rest. I may as well have memorized Star Wars line by excruciating line, started up a duck farm and ran for Lockend Village Mayor. It was all the same.

Dad grabbed the last roll. “Don’t, Dad.” I clanked my glass on the table. “I haven’t had a roll yet.”
Dad held the roll over the basket. “You’re the one that’s making stuff up,” I said.
“There’s proof for cat butts. I’ve seen it. There’s an old video somewhere of Sam saying it. I know I’ve seen it.”

Dad’s cheeks bulged, meaty with smile. “You got that much. Sam said cat butts, it’s on video somewhere. But all your endings are made up. I just added one more.” His hand went limp like a lame crane game and the prize roll plopped back into the basket.
“Guess someone was paying attention.”

Fuck Dad and his fucking with us.

“Jim,” said Mom, shaking her big face.

“Jeez, Dad,” said Sam, handing the basket to me. “Never trust anything Dad says.” She was talking more to me than anyone. “You know, I think I remember the video. Did Grammy spray wine out her nose? Did I dream that?”

“I’d remember that video,” I said. “I’d remember it so much that I’ll say it again. I’d remember that video.”

“You should have bought more rolls,” said Dad in a low tone.

Mom raised her voice higher than it was already. “There were only four left after the other night. That’s right. Why didn’t I buy more?” She let the question burn like the dim lightbulb over the table. She asked another—“Do you want another slice?”—and reached for the meatloaf tray before Dad could say anything. He didn’t say anything. Mom scooped seconds onto his plate.

This was the everyday lo-fi drama that made me examine the comics during the other nightly dinners with my parents. I would keep my face focused on the paper and think of stuff. Why is the high bar for a comic strip set mediocre low? Why isn’t
Dagwood obese after all those sandwiches? Does Hagar rape during his pillages? When will my parents just talk to each other like real people? Every taste of dinner was tainted with bad comics and the need to leave. Another week in this house and I would freaking freak out, I swore to our grace-song God.

“Screw it,” said the scarecrow, and I agreed with the guy. I’d made it this far, I could eat the meal and beat the deal. I’d already won the roll, after all. It was my victory cake. Sweet, buttery, flaky—an American croissant. I could have choked on its awesomeness. I was a big fan of rolls. Especially the ecstasy kind.

There was a reason the pills were called rolls. Drug lingo evolves from experience. When ecstasy hits, your brain sways on waves of serotonin. You get dizzy like a first cigarette. Each breath is higher, like a hundred first cigarettes, then a thousand, a million billion. Your brain is drowned in ecstasy and your eyeballs involuntarily flick and flicker and roll back in your grinning skull. That’s why we called it rolling on rolls.

“Are drugs all of your mind?” said the scarecrow.

At least I have one, I told him. He shut up. It was easy to scare a scarecrow.

“Hey James,” said Sam, “Are you okay?”

“I’m more than okay. I’m effing ecstatic.”

“Effing?” said Mom.

“Your eyes were rolling around weird,” said Sam. “Like a seizure.”

“Just rolling his eyes at everyone,” said Dad. “Like usual. Right, James?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “See?” said Dad. He ate his meatloaf seconds with no cat butts.
“So any Christmas plans this year?” said Mom. I probably rolled my eyes again. The scarecrow answered: “Vole nest apartment complex.”

“Are you asking me?” said Sam.

“I know you’ll be here. How about James?” Mom said, as if maybe Sam knew the answer. Now my mom was talking to me in third person. It gave me the floating feeling for a nanosecond that I wasn’t really there. As if I was floating in space. Maybe my feet really were off the ground. Mom waited with wide eyes. I decided to pretend the third person name thing was a grand tribute, like a royal title—“How about Your Highness, James the Third?” I could respond to that shit.


“I thought we could do something fun. As a family.”

“Uh oh,” said Sam, “What are you thinking about, Mom?”

My phone buzzed again, this time a text from Mikey of Sara and Mikey fame. I grew warm and excited, like I’d won two scratch-off lotto tickets in a row. The text read: “Hey man just heard the new broke single its tight. Reminds me of you.”

I responded “fuck yeah” or “hells yes” or something like that. It really was exciting, and not just the new Broke single. It was nice to get texts from friends that cared. I smiled and bit my roll.

Mom looked confused as if she’d forgotten something. Nothing new for her.

“So James,” said Dad. If he asks me about jobs, I thought, I will choke on this roll on purpose.
“So you started on the leaves. I saw the big pile of bags in the front. You get the
backyard?”

“I still need to finish.”

“You had all day,” said the scarecrow, with his stupid goofy cackle.

“You had all day,” said Dad. He combed his hand through his hair, straightening
the sharp part that he had maintained for my whole life. Unlike the rest of us dirty
Blondies, his hair was dark and thick, with skunk streaks of natural gray. The gray was
new.

“I’ll finish it,” I said. “I was cleaning out the garage, too.” And moping and
crying and being stupid.

Mom cleared her throat and cheeped on. “Anyway, there is this real cute little
tree farm where you can pick your own Christmas tree and cut it down.” She aimed her
words at the dim hanging lamp. “It’s out south past the pioneer cemetery.”

“There’s a lot of stuff out there,” said Sam, looking at Mom but pointing her
thumb toward the garage. Her long face was cast in yellow and shadow. She looked
almost Byzantine, one of those annunciation angels, big eyes, thin nose, small mouth.
Her answer seemed profound.

“I don’t know where to put the chairs and stuff,” I said.

“You’ll need a barn,” said the scarecrow. “I can make a recommendation.”

“Mark your calendars, we’re going to the tree farm this year,” said Mom, this
time to her plate. “We’ll get a real tree.” She turned to me. The dimness set her eyes
deeper. She was aging. “About the chairs, well, you can make room in the basement.”
Sam snorted like she was going to laugh. We raised our eyebrows at each other. The spare room in the basement was already loaded chest-high with stockpiles of junk: bar stools and boxes, chipped cement lawn geese, window air conditioner units, knocked-over stacks of old cooking and motorcycle magazines, a plastic Christmas tree in the corner. Half the stuff was trash, the other half broken and never fixed. It was hoarder storage, filling the whole wide room, all of it walled with empty, dusty aquariums. The big old fish tanks. The massive fifty-gallon tanks once housed everything from puffers to clowns, like our own pet store. The last time Dad kept fish was in my high school days, back when I got the stupid scissors tattoo. We still called the basement the fish room then.

“The tree farm sounds cool,” said Sam.

“Right, sweet,” I agreed. Dinner couldn’t be much longer.

More recently, Dad’s habits had migrated to the other big room in the basement, to the huge flat screen television he bought a couple years before and was probably still paying off. After dinner, I knew, he’d lumber on down and unmute the thing. That’s what happened when the kids moved out. You got gray hair and a man cave. Or you wanted the kids to stay kids, to go pick a real freaking Christmas tree, which also meant watery hot chocolate and Mom hosting as holiday DJ, karaokeing carols from hell, bah fucking humbug.

Then one of the kids moved back in, and I didn’t know what.

Dad chugged his drink. He slammed his diet pop like it was something worth slamming, like cheap beer—maybe that’s how you got the crap down—and clanked the empty glass on the table. “There’s room in the basement, James, and in your room. I
don’t care where you put it, as long as your stuff is out of the garage before winter hits. I need a place to park. Of course, you can always scrape the ice off my car in the morning.” The last bit was a Dad joke, but he spit it out like a warning.

“I'll finish it,” I said, and kept talking. I couldn’t stop my stupid mouth. I heard the words spill out as I said them: “I applied for some more jobs today, too.” Shit, how did that happen? Before anyone could ask, I said, “A couple office positions. Filing, phones kind of stuff. One of them is for a clothing company.” This was true. I just didn’t mention that it was for a tee shirt design webpage with an office and showroom in SoHo.

Dad’s eyes shined at me from under his graying eyebrows. “Good. That’s how you start, foot in the door, hands on the rungs. That’s how I got going, you know. You just have to keep at it. I’m telling you, we’re hiring all the time, biggest insurance company in the city, after all.” He was true. He worked in a huge skyscraper downtown. There really were buildings tall enough to be called skyscrapers in Columbus, like a whole three or four. “I hear they’re looking for another administrative assistant over in accounting, not much salary, but like I say, that’s how you get in there.”

What was this, an intervention? I said okay and took a swig of the chemical pop. My palette was not cleansed. BRB, I told the table, and wondered if I sounded stupid saying “BRB.” I left the room and dumped the pop down the kitchen sink. Over the sink was an open square, a window in the wall that looked into the dining room. There had to be a French word I couldn’t pronounce for those wall window things. Sam and I used to play drive-through with it. And there she was, there they all were, my family framed. The dining room looked like an unfunny sitcom studio. The diner lighting, the festive
table. The floral wallpaper like a garden best kept secret, like the cause of Oscar Wilde’s
death. I drank tap water and watched. Sam was asking Mom about her day at the
hospital. Mom was a pro, an anesthesiologist who worked scheduled hours in Groveland
Health Care. She’d never brought home tanks of nitrous or syringes of morphine or
anything like that. Trust me, I looked. No, Mom brought home harmless, pointless
stories that were sedative in an unfun way. She was going on about some coworker that
asked her to go to a Tea Party rally. Dad was vaguely watching her and ignoring his
peas. His hands were folded again. “I said no thanks,” said Mom, “I said I only drink
lattes, but Maurice didn’t think it was funny. You know Maurice, she’s so serious about
this Tea Party thing. I stopped listening to her after the election. She used to say, Oh no,
If Obama gets elected”—Mom was animated, lowering her voice—“There will be race
riots all across the country, We’ll be overthrown in chaos, I heard it on the radio. Well.”
Mom’s voice returned to normal high pitch. “Well I just want to tell Maurice, I voted for
Obama, and where are the race riots, huh? That would get her all wound up, though.
Maurice and her dang radio.”

I caught Sam’s eye and imitated Mom, mouthing the words of the story I’d
already heard three times.

Sam smiled at me from the table. In the low light, she kind of looked like Mom,
but with a stretched-out face and minus thirty years, the less thick, always happy Mom of
old home videos. Always smiling. I hadn’t seen her in a while.

“Hey,” I said. Mom and Dad turned to look at me. I knew how I looked framed
in the window. Silly. “I put a little rock by the sink here earlier. Has anyone seen it?”
Mom held up her fingers, pinching a pretend rock. “The little gray thing?” Mom began to stand. “I put it in the junk drawer.”

Dad held out his arm, stopping Mom. “I was looking for a pen and I found some rock. It’s right below you,” he said. “In the trash can under the sink.”

Mom got up and left the room. Dad didn’t stop her. “What are you, collecting rocks?” said Dad.

Sam stepped in. “I think it has sentimental value.”

I looked down. “A friend gave it to me.” Of course Dad would throw it away. And of course I couldn’t expect him to understand why a simple white rock, one of gazillions of look-alikes, would mean more than a paperweight to me.

Dad confirmed my thoughts. “So what is it? A paperweight?”

I sighed and caught myself. I won’t let this dinner win, I thought. Dad was just being Dad. I tried humor, irony. In other words, being myself. I rambled what would have been natural in other moments, such as sharing a joint with Webster. “Who uses paperweights anymore? I mean, who uses paper anymore? I guess if you work for a paper company there’d be paper. Like Dunder Mifflin, right. But Dunder Mifflin isn’t all windy and stuff. It’s got to be windy for a paperweight to have any meaning. So I don’t know, who’d use a paperweight, maybe what, the Department of Farts. And Toilet Paper. There you go.” As soon as I said it I realized how dumb it all sounded. It was out of context in my parents’ kitchen. I was out of context. I had no idea how to communicate with my parents. All the techniques that worked with friends—sarcasm, cultural references, stoner humor—fell flat and limp in front of my family. My words were like stale pancakes. I was surrounded by stacks of pancakes.
It was nice of Sam to horse-snort for me. Dad snorted too. There was no levity in the noise. It was a rough huff, the kind a bull would snort through flared nostrils, his pierced ring gleaming, his legs stamping rodeo dust as he huffed again and charged. “I still use a paperweight,” he said.

“Proves my point.” I couldn’t help myself. I’d opened the stupid faucet, now it would pour. I spewed at him from the wall window. “Cause you know. Your office is full of farts.”

“The Horseshoe,” said Dad, ignoring me.

“The stadium,” said Sam.

I pictured a rusty luck horseshoe weighing down a stack of boring forms. But in the weird reality in and around Columbus, the Horseshoe referred to the Ohio State University stadium. This was a fair nickname. You could see the horseshoe shape pretty good on the Interwebs satellite maps. It was stupid huge—it seated a hundred thousand, one thing I’d learned in school—and it was a big deal for pretty much everyone around here except me. Dad actually smiled at Sam. “Yeah, the stadium,” he said, as if this fact validated the presence of a paperweight. He couldn’t stop there. Now that our alma mater was brought up, Dad had to out-dumb me. Maybe he was just trying to be natural, trying to goof around like I was, but what an unironic clash of humor and attitude. What a joke. Dad cheered, “O – H.”

You’re supposed to respond, “I – O.” It was this communal idiot call, especially around the campus area. O – H! I – O! If you never heard it, you’re not from Ohio. Game days you couldn’t avoid the call and respond chant—the Wendy’s drive-thru speaker, the natural foods store cashier, even the independent coffee house where you’d
think all the other haters would be hiding. It was a communal thing, I got it, whatever. It’s just that I was the bad guy for not jumping in and yelling back the code for the school that put me in debt a couple tens of thousands of dollars. It was like the whole city of C-Bus succumbed to this cultishly desperate need to connect. They couldn’t hide their yearning and loneliness deep inside like me. So I made my own way to deal with the chants. Webster thought it was hilarious. One drunken game night in C-Bus, I came up with my own response, and when Dad hooted the asshole mantra, I responded naturally. I gave the instant answer I always gave. It popped right out. Dad said “O – H” and I said “F - U.”

If it weren’t for the name, no one would have guessed my relation to James the Second.

Dad freaking grinned at me. I hadn’t been the only voice. Sam had given her natural response as well. She said “I – O” in time with my “F – U”—she literally cheered the letters with enthusiastic loudness—and saved the moment, and I was glad of it. There was no way Dad would get the irony, the purposeful outcast joke of it. Dad just didn’t get it. He must have heard my voice, low below Sam’s chant, and he must have heard what he wanted to hear. Dad looked happy. His children had heeded his call. Perhaps he saw it as everyone’s call. The framed image of proud Dad—this microsecond of imagined bond—filled me with guilty relief that he didn’t hear my snarky response. Scared me, too. I’d been a second off from pissing him off. However instinctual, my response had been meant to trigger the opposite of a smile of fatherly bliss. For the first time, I felt confused and wrong for my “F – U.” It had never been a bad thing before. Maybe I am an asshole, I thought.
I kneeled away from the grin and opened the cabinet under the sink. The trash can was trashed. It was overflowing. It was like the basement storage room of trash cans. Onion skins, crumpled leaf napkins, a vomit-looking pool of old chili. We needed a garbage disposal. I didn’t do a very thorough search. I returned to Autumn Fall and took a seat and sipped tap water. I gulped. “It’s gone,” I said.

“It’s better this way,” said the scarecrow.

I glared at the little jerk. Shut up, I told him, no one here loves you.

Mom appeared with pen in hand.

“I don’t need it now,” said Dad in low tone. He was again his stoic and unpredictable table presence, like one of those statue people in parks that suddenly step at you.

“What did you need the pen for?” said Mom.

“Bills.” Dad glared at the pen as if it were a syringe. “I need to sign the check for the student loan payment.” He said this a few volume clicks higher than average.

Mom again disappeared.

If I had a job, I would have paid my own shit, just like I did for one year after school in C-Bus: rent, loans, bongloads of weed. Get my own car if I really needed it. Car insurance. Maybe even some health insurance, which had ended with my job. Right then, though, with Dad grunting at the pen, I just wanted to throw something of his away. Take a sledgehammer to his useless aquariums, with Peter Gabriel whooping in my earphones. Paint his television screen pitch black, the Stones for that one. Leave the house forever. I didn’t know that soundtrack.
Mom reappeared with Mom timing. She held a platter of cupcakes frosted strawberry-pink. She got a little carried away with family dinners. I couldn’t complain. Only a real asshole could complain about cupcakes. That would be like saying The Beatles suck, which is a whole other argument that shouldn’t even be a debate.

Dad glanced at me more than his hands, or even the cupcakes Mom was placing by our plates. He was serious. “James,” he said. Student loan check aside, he seemed calmed. The presence of cupcakes must have placated him. I’m telling you, cupcakes are awesome. They have sweet powers. Dad’s eyes shone under loose eyebrows, his big face drooping and sedated, a chill and lazy Ferdinand the Bull from that kid’s book that was probably still in the basement somewhere. Dad opened his calm mouth and formed words that looked like, “I’m sorry about the rock,” but all I heard was Vivaldi.

My phone blew up with violins. It buzzed against my thigh and blared the song about fall. I had finally changed my ringtone. “I got to get this,” I said. “BRB.”

Mom’s mouth dropped over her tray of cakes.

“You’re going to miss cupcake time,” said Sam.

“Sorry guys.” I dashed to the living room like a crazy cat. There were a couple of cats hanging out on the couch. The smallish family TV stood dark and reflective in the corner. I answered the phone. “Hi, you’ve reached James Jameson.”

“Shit, I was shooting for the Great Pumpkin,” said Webster Mullet. He made mouth sounds like he was eating dinner too, far away in his Williamsburg studio, which was basically the size of my attic cell. “Don’t tell me how you’ve been. Just tell me one thing, James Jameson. Tell me you have the instruction manual for Ball Buster.”
I stared at the framed Kinkade on the wall. The useless manual I had found in the Card Table box was apparently not useless. I lowered my voice. “Oh Jesus. That old video game manual? I threw it out, no shit.” It was at the bottom of a brown paper trash bag, buried in leaves and dogpiled on the curb with all the other sacks I stuffed.

“Fuck.” Webster groaned like a bear. His voice was only slightly less goofy than the tablecloth scarecrow. “Bad news bears. You threw away a couple dime bags.” Webster compared everything to the price of pot. His rent, he claimed, was several ounces of dank a month.

“I’ve never even seen that stupid game.”

“I never owned it. I traded a VideoVision system just for the manual.” There were repeated clicks and bubbling static. “No good, James, no good,” he said with a muffled voice, then a forced exhale.

“Do I hear Meg?” She was our bong, beloved and striped with red and white. Webster had mailed her to New York, bubble-wrapped and marked as an “heirloom glass-blown vase.” “You bastard. I can’t even get away with cigarettes around here. Seriously, I need to get out of here.”

Webster bear-laughed. “I’m a bastard?” He clicked a lighter that sounded like it worked. “Last week you said you were doing alright, asshole.”

Mom’s voice spun stories in the dining room. I caught the name of Maurice. “Alright by Lockend standards means I’m not actively trying to kill myself. Fuckface. Look, I’m sorry about the manual, man. I’ll get you a Jackson next time I see you.”

“Just call it a twenty, alright?” Webster coughed and laughed at the same time. “Oh, Ohio.” He cleared his throat. “The VideoVision was busted anyway. I wouldn’t
have traded if the thing worked. Or maybe I would have. VideoVisions suck. Hey. I
didn’t call to talk about console war losers from the early eighties. Unless you want to.
You know I will.”

“What’s up?”

Webster was eating something again, or else chewing gum. Either way, he
sounded sloppy and chompy, like a bear with a honeycomb. He was a man of many
mouth noises. “Well now I just want to talk about Ball Buster. The title alone is worth
your Jackson, buddy.”

“What’re you eating, Webster?”

Webster gulped. “Did you call Alex yet?”

“Not really. I’ve been raking leaves.”

“What are you talking about leaves? Alex has something to tell you.”

“I figured you were exaggerating.”

“What the fuck, exaggerating? Call Alex. She has a tremendously important
issue to discuss. I want to tell you but I can’t. Alex said she’d saw off my balls with a
butter knife if I mentioned one word. We’ll be playing Ball Buster for real. It’s life or
death, James, and it’s your call, literally. Tonight is your last night to call. Or someone’s
losing balls. Exaggerating, fuck. Just call her.” Webster either sighed or exhaled a pot
cloud. “I called to say sorry.”

“That’s what you said last time. Right before you got on the subway.” I wanted
to ride on a subway. Except for the germ part.

I hadn’t ever expected an apology. Webster had shattered our agreement to move
together, and I figured the shards would remain sharp and unglued.
“I know,” I said. I know I know I know. “It’s alright. I would have done the same.”

“You almost did.”

“I never had the money, really.”

“Money?”

“To move.”

“Dude,” said Webster. “Don’t tell me. Don’t tell me you don’t know.”

“Jesus fuck, what?”

“I get to be the messenger. This’ll be fun as a fuck fest. I’ll just say it. Here it is. You didn’t get the job at Burn. You were burned by Burn. Someone had to say it. No really, I’m sorry, man. I was looking forward to hanging out. It sucks.”

“But—what—how would you know?” If Burn had contacted me, I’d missed it. I hadn’t checked my email since my afternoon lunch break.

“I know who got the job.”

“No fuck.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I kind of told them about the position when it was open. Look, I’m sorry. I was just telling her about how you interviewed and everything. I’m sure I was drunk. I mean, chances are. I didn’t know she was going to apply for it, let alone get the job. Crazy, really.”

“Is this what Alex wants to tell me? She stole my job?”

“What the fuck, Alex? God no. Burn wouldn’t want her. No, man, it was Sara.”

I looked at the Kinkade and saw nothing. Sara. Innocent Sara of the cutest couple ever, with her degree in Media Communications and her internship with the other
better Columbus alternative paper and her own cute indie blog of live shows, with flashy
pics and video clips. Of course Sara, with her resume of experience, her one-minute
charm, her more immediate need of a job in New York, her eight a.m. passion. She’d
always set her alarm brain-cloudingly early, even for mornings after parties. We’d bug
her and she’d say, “Got to keep my sleep schedule, guys, if I want to get shit done.” No
wonder she and Mikey had texted me during dinner. Sara felt guilty—I knew her very
well and she would very much feel guilty—and she needed to know that I didn’t hate her.
She needed to be sure we could still be friends, at least on the rare occasions we saw one
another. It all made stupid sense. I couldn’t believe it. “Sara?”

“Mikey’s girlfriend.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

“I wish I were fucking with you. In every sense of the word.”

“Shut up. You’re totally making this up. You’re playing.” Pulling a James the
Second, making shit up. “You would do that. I don’t know why, because it’s a total dick
move, but I know you and you would do that.”

Webster let out another exhale that was definitely a sigh. “Look, James the Third.
I’m trying really hard not to make a gay ass pun with your phrase ‘dick move.’ And I
won’t. Just to show you how serious I am. Remember Big Bed Rock?”

Too much. “The best day of my life.”

“Top ten, for sure. You remember what I said?”

“Um, you said a lot.”

“I said that after that experience, after opening up to you like I never opened to
anyone, I would never be able to lie to you. Exaggerate, sure, embellish a bit, whatevs,
but not straight out lie, man. I was an awful liar, you know. Being made fun of your whole childhood can mess you up, you do dumb shit like make up stories to sound cool. So you know it was the real shit, a real therapy like turning point, when I decided to stop and control what I was saying to you and to every goddamn person I ever talked to. Ecstasy opened my eyes. When they weren’t rolling around their sockets, anyway.”

“I remember, Webster.”

“I’m still holding true to that. No lies. You got burned, James.”

My mouth drooped stupidly open. Words like backstabber and bitch and cunt were bouncing around in there and very near to flying out. Though I felt bitched and backstabbed, Sara had never been a bitch, and she was much more than some cunt. It would be awful to call anyone a cunt. Sara had been a close friend that who listened to me whine my way through the breakup with Alex. She had been there for me for everything. I had been there for her candlelit dinner parties. I ate meat with delight, so I mean it when I say Sara cooked the best vegan food. She taught me the taste of braised tempeh and good wine. Before Sara and Mikey moved, she had always been cool for splitting a bowl. And Sara had kissed me on Big Bed Rock. Everyone had kissed. We were all on ecstasy, right. Mikey kissed Alex, Alex kissed Sara, Sara kissed Webster, and Webster said, “Everyone’s making out, so I think we have to,” and slobbered a big surprise kiss at my lips. Like vegan food, I rolled with it. Not my thing, but I knew it was Webster’s thing and I thought I got it. In druggy empathy, I gave his scratchy face a tease of tongue. He returned it with ecstatic, sloppy passion. I think he got more from it than me. I had to pull away. I ate vegan food, but I wasn’t going to go vegan, know what I mean? As soon as I leaned away from Webster, Sara was there, her cheek
touching mine. “My turn,” she said into my ear. Unlike Webster, Sara’s kiss was soft and deliberate. I could still feel it. It was a warm touch of understanding and friendship, one of those kisses that say this person really likes you and really likes what they’re doing. Sara sucked my bottom lip, pulling on the ring, which felt freaking amazing. She traced my lips with hers, sealed our open mouths together and gave me a flash of tongue that playfully lingered with mine for a long time, even by ecstasy standards. If we could express through touch our bowl hits and bad jokes—physically express the casual makings of our friendship—this kiss was it in the most intimate, sensual way. Rolls or no rolls, the whole thing was unavoidably hot, about as deep as you can go without crossing the “just friends” label. Sara pulled back to admire me with eyes flickering behind her eyelids. “You’re rolling,” I said. “Our friendship means a lot to me,” said Sara. “I know,” I said, “and you too, I mean, you know, damn man, this stuff is so good I can barely talk straight. You’re awesome, Sara. Your dinner parties like unite everyone.”

We admired each other. Sara was even thinner than me, with long dark hair and bangs—the Jenny Lewis cut—and at that moment I saw her as the most beautiful woman in the world, asides from Alex, naturally, who was very pretty in a different way. Alex was soft and round all around, but in that moment Sara’s straight edges and trim form appeared like an angel perched on the cliff’s edge, modeling human beauty and love for the universe of hills. “You know your girlfriend is beautiful,” I told Mikey, “and she kisses real good.” “Thanks man,” said Mikey, “I know.” These are the things you do and think on ecstasy. You think your friend’s girlfriend is an unironic angel of compassion, and when she says, “You kissed pretty good, too, James,” you will always remember it. No
one can tell a lie on ecstasy. No one could ever lie or betray after something like that.

Not fair-weather friend forever, Beautiful Sara.

“That cunt,” I said.

“Nice. You should send her a congratulations card. To: a fucking cunt,” said Webster.

“Fail. I’m an epic fail. How the fuck did this happen?”

“You’ll win. No lie, keep trying, man. I wish you got the job, I really do. I wish you were here.”

“Me too, but I’m broke as my favorite band’s name.”

“Their new single’s alright.”

“It’s good. It doesn’t suck.”

Meg gurgled. Webster stopped talking and smoked. The world pretty much stopped too. I felt the grinding halt of the earth, of the spinning, breaking, slowing of time and space reaching codeine pace. An awareness of Webster’s freedom, and his drunken job-informing to Sara, seeped into my skull. The emo zombies stretched and yawned.

“I need a cigarette,” I said.

Webster was chomping some food again. “This baklava is so good. I got some real authentic stuff. Like the filo is all doughy like real bread and it’s like floating in a soup of honey. This is the real shit. Do I say that too much? ‘Real shit?’ I don’t know. I wish you were here, man. James, wait, seriously. I’m sorry about Burn. I’m sorry I told Sara. I’m sorry.”
Everything Webster said about Burn was true enough. In email, a very personal rejection from Burn described my online article as “unique and awesome”—yes—and then noted it wasn’t “the kind of material Burn is exploring at this time.” This meant Burn was “exploring” beautiful girls with Jenny Lewis hair and thick resumes. Hopefully Sara would bring good writing to Burn, because their message wasn’t clear to me, and even contained grammar errors. “You were one of the top candidate’s,” they said, “with an enthusiasm that will earn you the position you deserve.” If an enthusiasm wouldn’t earn me Burn, then what was the position I deserved? Forget the grammar. Forget them.

Dinner won. Dinner beat me, and it wasn’t over. Nothing is ever over. After I hung up, I stood in the living room and watched the Kinkade painting of pretty shit come into focus. It looked different. It was like I had never looked at it, and true, I’d never really studied the thing. I mean, it was a Kinkade—a product—not like an epic gallery piece or even Webster’s conceptual work, such as his fake store shelf covered with buckets of dirt and advertising “New!” That was art.

The phone call brought my surroundings into terrible focus. Everything buzzed with clarity and twisted potential. Like the painting. Strange. Kinkade didn’t look bad, and maybe this is why I kept looking at it. It was an unobjectionable little scene of a mossy cabin by a sparkling brook, with a stone bridge and pine trees, and there were people on the bridge that looked so happy. It was like they and the bridge were floating in light over the bright water. The colors were total cheese, gooey pastels, a kind of Easter Impressionism—that’s what I had always thought in passing glance—or maybe, I considered, what the moment would look like through crying eyes, a blurred and brightened landscape, a heightened landscape, because it’s all so damn beautiful you
can’t hold back the tears. Those smeary folks on the bridge, they were crying, weren’t they. I could hear their little sobs over the bubbling brook. They were ecstatic without ecstasy. Sometimes the world isn’t against you.

  Screw you, Kinkade. Sometimes it is.

Female laughter came from the dining room.

I slumped in there.

Sam grinned gums, Dad glare-stared, Mom looked wide-eyed. Their plates revealed discarded and crumpled cupcake wrappers. My phone buzzed. I stood and read a text from Webster: I’ll visit soon.

  Mom made a high-pitched sigh, not quite a squeal. “Would you please put that stupid effing thing away?” she said. “I’m sick of you looking at your phone. Please, James. Your family is right here.”

  “Don’t say ‘effing,’ Mom.” I put the phone in my pocket. “Texting is what young people do.”

  “Yeah,” said Sam. “They just stare at their phones all day now.”

  “I know how to text and I know when it’s effing rude,” said Mom. “Why can’t I say ‘effing’? What’s the deal, James? Just sit down already.”

  I remained standing. “I have news,” I said. The world sped forward to catch up with itself, like a record yanked under the needle. My family’s faces blurred like Kinkade beings, my voice scratched and echoed, I was floating in space, my feet were off the ground. “I have some things to tell you. I had an interview online. I didn’t mention it because it was for a job in New York. New York City. I want to move there.
Anyway, looks like I’m not moving anywhere. I didn’t get the job. So now I’ll find something around here. In Groveland or something. Start paying my student loans.”

My family was silent as the gone stone. Fourth frost quiet. Canal quiet.

My ears rang. Should I answer? What was I thinking?

“I really wanted the job,” I said. “It was for Burn, which is number four on the top visited music sites. Last summer, they hosted a free music benefit with some of the largest upcoming bands, names that will be winning Grammys in a few years. The Broke played there. Burn has money to burn, literally, and they’re growing bigger every day and hiring right now. I know all this because I read Burn, I love it, and I would love to work for them in New York City, where all of my friends live and where there are still some jobs for people with degrees like Creative Cultural Memes. If Burn hired me, I’d be paid well, a decent living, at least par with my friends’ standards. I’d pay my own bills. This was the opportunity I needed. And I didn’t get it. So. Now you know.”

Dad’s head stared like a statue. “New York. What is it about James?”

“What is it about Dad?” I was done with getting along. “Why does Dad always talk to me in third person? I’m right here, Dad.”

“We’re not talking about where you are right now,” he said. “We’re talking about where you want to be, which you just told us is far from here. Do you know how expensive it is in New York? Do you know how hard it is just to get by out there? James, why do you try so hard to be different?”

I blurted the truth. “I don’t want to be you,” I said. I swayed. “I don’t want to get another job in some office I don’t care about. It sucked. It would kill me. What else can I do? I can move. That’s the only thing I can do. There aren’t any other options for
people like me. I’m not trying to be different. I am different. I’ve always been different. And there are jobs for people like me in New York.”

“James is a member of his generation,” said Sam, cutting me off. She pulled her ponytail. “All of his friends moved to Brooklyn.”

“New York City,” said Mom, slow and deliberate, as if hearing the words for the first time. She talked to the cupcake next to my plate. “It’s so far. Why do you want to be so far away?”

“Not everyone gets to move,” said Dad. “And from what I understand, the recession started in New York.” He set his cupped fists on the table, as if that finalized some debate.

“Why do you even care? You don’t want me sticking around here.”

Mom grabbed my hand and squeezed tight, near painful. Light shone from her deep set eyes. “Why would you say something like that? Sit down.”

“I care because I don’t want you getting yourself hurt,” said Dad. “I don’t want to watch you screw up your life. You’re our son, James. Maybe you should think of this as an opportunity to get your feet on the ground. You can’t just get up and move. You have to establish yourself. You need to establish what’s in your head. What you think you want from what you really need. This,” Dad said, raising his hands, “living here with us, this is the opportunity to get your head straight.”

“When’s that going to happen for you?”

Dad shifted like he was going to stand up. His meaty cheeks flushed red. He took a deep breath and spoke clear and deliberate. “You’re proving my point. You wouldn’t say that if your head was together.”
“Dad,” said Sam. She turned to me. “Eat a frickin’ cupcake already. Jeez, James.”

So I did. I sat and peeled the wrapper while everyone watched. I took my goddamn time. I sniffed the sweet strawberry frosting and looked at Sam. She looked perturbed, spooked. I spoke. “You know, moving to New York is what I want to do.” I turned to Mom and Dad. They looked sadder, older. “Look guys, I’m fortunate to be here. I’m happy that I have parents that love me enough to let me live here. But I’m twenty-four years old. I can make my own decisions. If I get a job in New York I’m moving there. And yeah Mom, I would be home for Christmas.”

I bit the precious little cupcake. I can have my loser’s cake and eat it, too.

My tongue rolled in my cheeks with sugary joy. My nose and chin were frosted with pink. I looked up, certainly silly looking.

And what do you effing know. Everyone was smiling, an oval of jack-o-lantern grins.

“You’re ridiculous,” says Sam, and whinnied.

They thought I was cute or something. I was the family baby with the smash cake, mushing everything in front of me. This was a serious moment—I’d told them my Big Dream and its loss—and here they were, grinning at my frosted face. “Am I funny? Seriously. Can I eat my cupcake?”

Sam laughed. “I think someone needs a cigarette,” she said.

“Why would you say that?” I said, not very nice.

Sam covered her mouth with her hand. Her voice was muffled. Mom looked sad.

“Jeez. I forgot.”
Dad huffed and kept his smile. “You can’t smell it on him?” He did not remove his eyes from mine, a bullring staredown. “I know. I know you smoke.”

“Did you lie to me?” said Mom. Her eyes no longer looked sunken. They popped out big and bright, a cornered mouse. “You’re too old to lie to me anymore, James. Don’t lie. That’s so wrong.”

“I’m sorry,” said Sam. She looked sorry, a pony left in the cold rain. She could have been dying. “I forgot.”

Dad shook his head. “B t dubs, James, you need to quit smoking.”


Mom handed me a leaf napkin. “You can move if you have to, just please stop smoking, James. I know what it does to people. I see it everyday.”

I wiped my frosted face. The napkin leafprints were red oak, like the trees outside my bedroom window, like the leaves I raked all day.

Dad smacked the table and my glass of water made Jurassic Park rings. “New York is fine,” he said. “I was young once. After college, I thought I’d ride my motorcycle across the country.” We watched Dad like television. He never talked about his choppers, the motorcycles he modded and fixed back before Sam was born. Dad and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. The bikes were tall tales, old Polaroids, nothing more. Cat butts was a clear family memory compared to Dad’s motorcycles. We listened. “I thought I’d see all the states, or at least the ones worth seeing. You can blame it on that movie if you want, Easy Rider. Course, I didn’t want to get shot at the
end.” Dad smiled at his spoiler joke. “I thought I’d end my journey in San Francisco, check it out. Some of my buddies moved there.” He looked at me and tapped the table. “And now the young people move to New York. Anyway, I got a job right out of college. It was easy back then, at least for me.” Dad’s eyes flicked at Mom. “I started eating lunch at a deli downtown. The food wasn’t anything. I was there to talk to the girl that took my order.”

“They’ve heard this,” said Mom. We had, but not in a decade.

“She was paying her way through school.”

“It paid off. That’s what I used to say.”

“A nice fall day like today I asked her on a date.”

“To a deli,” said Mom, looking at Dad. “You thought you were so funny.”

“You thought I was funny. Next thing I knew, we were in love.”

Mom looked away from Dad. “We got married.”

“Sam happened and bam, I had a family to support. My job became my career. I’m still there, though it’s starting to look bleak these days. Look. I never rode farther than Indiana.”

“Illinois,” said Mom. “We went to Chicago on your bike. You remember, Jim.”

Dad nodded. His basement eyes shined something unknown at me. I couldn’t see beyond their shine. “The point is, I had no idea what I really wanted back then. Turns out I wanted to meet a girl and fall in love.” Dad pressed his hands on the table and began to stand. “You should stay here until you get yourself together.” The scarecrow spoke up. “Let them eat cake,” he said.
“I think I will,” I said. Dad grunted something. The scarecrow went silent. He was again a printed picture on a pattern on a tablecloth on an Autumn Fall table. The window rectangles had gone black behind Dad, who was standing and pushing in his chair. I caught my eye in the window reflection. I was not there, in the window or beyond. I was stuck in a different world. A world where ketchup is cat butts. Halloween is Christmas. Potatoes are rocks. Burn burns. Friends far, parents near. A weird world where fallout families began as real families, as people in love. Where Dad was the one who once had different ideas. I didn’t know how to get used to this. And I really didn’t know how to get myself together.

My parents half-smiled and glanced at one another. Dad reached his hand to Mom. She blinked at it before raising her hand to his. They grabbed and shook their hands together like an awkward business deal. It was the most affection they’d shown one another in years, and it was over in one second. It was weird. Dad stomped into the kitchen.

“That cupcake was awesome,” I said. Pink frosted my fingers and chin, crumbs coated my lips and lap. I was a mess. “Thanks,” I said.

“Thanks,” said Mom at the same time.

* * *

I wanted the day to end there. I wanted to scald-scold myself in the shower. I was tired and sore and couldn’t think clear. I was done with thinking. The meatloaf dinner was the most drama I’d seen in the Jameson household since I got my first tattoo—we were a
happy, repressive Midwest fallout family—and the crazy wasn’t over for me. Weirder crap had to happen before I could call it a long, terrible night and collapse into bed with a couple of codeines dissolving in my belly.

Like I said, the tablecloth scarecrow was all in my head. I made ’em up, yup. The little guy was on the table, sure, but his voice was an autumn imagining, a Halloween hallucination. That was clear as tap water. I restate this because what wasn’t clear is what happened next. It’s beyond elaboration. It’s unexplainable, but I can try.

I’ll start with after dinner. Sam was right. I really needed a cigarette.

The sun was set. It was damp and chilly as Sleepy Hollow outside. I shoegaze-shuffled past porch pumpkins and corn husks. I was done with Autumn Smiles. I blinked at downtown. More like downvillage, because as Moody Flakes researched and related in our Road Trippin’ paragraph, there weren’t enough citizens to legally define this place as a town. If I were a Moody Flake, I would have mentioned the traffic light, couldn’t miss that attraction, directing the corners of Hill and Lock. And I’d have added the three-story brick buildings with those funky second-story awnings, still holding their own from the canal days, and the inoperable opera house from when the canal flowed with gold, and there, the Canal Corner Convenience Store, which was always blaring the local rock station—that’s RAWK, big and loud—a rusty slot machine of Rush, Pink Floyd or Metallica, guess good and pull the lever-door-handle, here we go. Tom Sawyer? Money? Exit Light? I’d been there so many times it was all the same. That said, I’d take Floyd any day.

Bright inside. Canal Corner looked like the shining package of every interstate gas station interior, minus the charm of an interstate. Overpriced condoms, tacky candy
and teenagers. I was one of those teens once, paying too much for those condoms—the optimism of youth—and gnawing tacky candy with my wisdom teeth.

“The red lighter,” I said to Dean. I handed him my second credit card. It wasn’t maxed out yet. “And a pack of Camel Lights, or Blues, or whatever they are now.”

“James Junior,” said Dean, with his eternal gray-toothed grin. “You got to quit this smoking.” Everyone was on my case. Dean coughed. “You don’t quit, you might end up looking like me.” His voice was as froggy as his face. Dean had been manning the Corner since he graduated Groveland High—Lockend wasn’t big enough for its own high school—and Dean was a grandpa now. He thought he knew me well or something. That’s because Dean was always in my past, floating around birthday parties and bringing cookies on Christmas, a Santa hat on his head. He had been the number one fishing buddy with my grandpa, the original James Jameson, Rest in Peace.

“Yeah.” I never knew what to say to Dean. Our background of family parties and lake fishing with Grandpa was founded on amusing me as a child. Now I felt like I had to amuse Dean. “Looking at you, right, I may have to reconsider smoking.”

“What?” he yelled. Since I last lived in Lockend, his hearing had gone down, exponentially with the radio volume going up.

Teenagers pooled behind me. These were different, not jocks or Goths but an in-between breed. Too unfit for sports, too uninspired to larp. Whatever they were, they were still teenagers. There were always teenagers. They joked about slut slushies and I didn’t get it and I didn’t care. They were wearing baggy shorts and tee-shirts on a cold October night, like Fuck you, Seasons, We’re not going to follow your rules. I hated them. I got out just as Rush fired up their gay elf synthesizer anthem.
“Watch yourself,” yelled Dean. This was his way of saying goodbye. I ignored the warning and cut into the woods behind the Corner. I should have listened.

I hit the short trail that led to the park. I was over any apprehension about Dead Lock. The sit with Sam cleansed the place like a ritual, transforming the lock into a personal historical marker. I could take the shortcut. Plus, I was Burned with worry and woe. I was a discarded plastic bag, floating around. The emo zombies didn’t care where I went. The lock was the lock was the shortcut.

I was halfway to the park before I awoke to the forest around me. The autumn woods were tinted every shade of dark. The path was a snake, witch cat black. Loads of leaves, red or gold, who knew. I stepped over every root of the path with intuitive memory. The forest and I went way back. It was like my oldest friend. The shuffling crunch of leaves, the tannic stink of leaves subdued the emo zombies. They shut up. I became aware that I was calm. The woods could do that.

The tree leaves breathed in the breeze, a susurrus, which I think is a word as lovely as the sound.

I noticed my armpits were wet. I was sweaty hot. Maybe those naïve teens were onto something. If this was like a hot flash, I felt sorry for my mom. I ripped off my hoodie and the breeze, how nice, it was cool as apple-bobbing water on my flushed face. I caught a whiff of smoke. More burning leaves.

The forest rustled with warm softness. There was no one behind me but leaves. There was nothing around me but leaves.

The path snaked around a large boulder before popping out at the park. The big boulder looked like a lurking, crouching bear in the dark. It charmed me. I admired its
density and mass, which were about all I could admire in the dark. I had climbed the rock as a kid, and here it was, waiting, because what else does a boulder do, until some lucid stoney moment when it awakes, once to find a boy climbing it, and now the same boy staring at it over a decade later. I wondered if I looked weathered. I hadn’t thought of this boulder since the climbing days, and I didn’t bother now to climb and sit on it, and I knew I wouldn’t take the time to look up what kind of rock, now that my eyes were adjusting to the dark, was layered with brain gray and gravestone gray and there, a ribbon of ghost white. What a boulder. It confirmed my presence. I belonged there. I would light up at the lock. I acknowledged the rock with a nod and circled around.

I strode across the park lawn, past the one-slide playground, slap-packing my cigarettes. Pulled one out, put it in my mouth. I was already enjoying the endorphin kick. I looked up at the lock, a few footsteps away, and the cigarette fell from my mouth. It rolled into the dirt where a person, a girl, a wonderful young woman I had known in the most intimate way and had not seen in some time, turned from her perch on the lock and flicked her hand at the cigarette, within her reach, as if playing with the idea of picking it up, and said in an AM radio voice, echoing and faraway but right there in my ringing ears—“I’ve been waiting forever, like really, forever. You got the light, Jimmy Three?”—which was the name Alex bothered me with when she wanted something, and only Alex.

“You’re not here,” I said. “You’re in New York.”

“What are you, trippin’?” She laughed. Her voice was husky, like she smoked too much. She did. The raspy laugh took me to the summer night we sat there. “I’m right here,” she said.
All I knew was that Alex was there and not there. I was also aware that I was completely unafraid. I blinked and she went invisible for the half-second after I opened my eyes. Alex reformed from the evening air, from every shade of darkness. Her radio voice buzzed like tinnitus inside my head, like the tablecloth scarecrow. Unlike the scarecrow, her words formed without my control or consent. I wasn’t making it up. Alex was just happening, sitting there like my memory and hazy like a ghost. She was a memory ghost. It’s as if summer night Alex somehow imprinted her image and sound, her entire momentary being through all of time and space. Alex wasn’t dead, and real ghosts required dead people, so a memory ghost was the only explanation. I felt too calm for her to be a real ghost. Besides, I didn’t believe in them.

I knew how surreal it was. It was like when I kissed Alex for the first time senior year and thought, “Holy shit, I’m kissing Alex.” As she looked at me from the lock, I thought, “Holy shit, this is weird.” Something new and strange was happening, and I felt overcome and subdued by it—perhaps too subdued—so much that I played along with it, like a shroom hallucination, as if I really were tripping. I accepted the image of Alex as in a dream. I felt no fear, only a deep and calm feeling that my acceptance was the right thing to do.

Alex patted the edge of the lock and smiled her dimples at me. It was one of those deep, genuine smiles that old friends give one another, one of those smiles that, upon seeing each other for the first time in too long, forgives the dramatic bullshit of history, resets the reasons they are awesome, and reaches for you. The dimples did all that. It was the kind of grin Webster or Mikey might give. “Sit. You want to talk to me. Come on, I know you want to smoke.”
My mouth formed the grin of a madman, I imagine. I sat on the lock, legs hanging, pretty much the same spot as I sat earlier with Sam. The sandstone felt strangely warm under my butt.

Alex looked like Alex. She was dressed for the summer in striped purple short sleeves. Her hair was dark as the night, with the long locks in front of her ears, what she called fake sideburns. She had her round nose with stud, her rosy cheeks and her sharp-cut let’s-fuck bangs. She was a remarkably accurate replica. Her voice was all Alex, too, the spacey throaty tone, the voice of an everyday joint smoker: “It’s been too long, James.” She brushed her fake sideburns and a cigarette appeared between her fingers. “Got the light?”

I wondered if there was anyone on the sidewalk, watching a lone figure on the lock who was cupping his hand and holding a lit lighter to the empty air next to him. I doubt anyone could see me. The sparse streetlights, a couple baseball diamonds away, lighted the sidewalk and not much else. The new moon fulfilled its shadowy promise. It was nowhere. Weak starlight pinpricked the sky stage. This was one dark park.

I felt Xanax calm and wanted to talk. “Why is everyone gone?” I said.

“It’s dark.”

“I mean Ohio. Everyone left.”

“I’m here.”

“You’re somewhere, right.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Leaving was my idea. I was going to go far away from the start. I was going to move.”

“B t dubs? Why is everyone saying that? It sounds like something a teen would say. It’s totally republican. Whatever. You look good, too.”

“When did you get those plugs?”

“I went up a gauge. I think I’ll keep stretching.” I was impressed with this memory ghost. I wasn’t consciously coming up with her questions and answers. They arrived as an instant voice in my head.

We smoked. The air was warm and thick for October, like a flannel blanket wrapped around me. I checked my cigarette pack. Dean had given me my regulars, but my cigarette tasted different. I gazed into the dark of the lock. It turned out I saw Alex better from the corner of my eye. She was more solid, more there, breathing smoke into the air. She spoke. “It’s been too long. I need to hear you say it.”

I answered with truth. “I don’t even know if I love myself.” Alex already knew this. She’d heard it all before.

I puffed my cigarette and got the flavor. It was cool mint menthol.

Alex smoked menthols.

This is the strangest thing I’ve ever known, I thought.

“Uh-huh,” said Alex. She took several small puffs, as if taste-testing the cig.

“Don’t fuck with love, James. If you love someone, please tell them.” Alex chain-puffed. “Maybe you can commit yourself to your big New York dream. Commit yourself to something.” Alex pointed her menthol into the lock as if there was something to see. “In some other life, one of those parallel worlds, I’m sure I’m in New York, I’m
sure there’s an Alex making a whole little life there, happy, eating cupcakes. She has to be eating cupcakes.” She lip-kissed the cigarette, little peck puffs. I had forgotten that was how she smoked. I guess my memory hadn’t. I’m not sure how it worked. “I’m right here, though. I have to work with this world. I can’t wait much longer.”

I leaned on my hand and felt with my finger a rock-shaped hole between us.

Alex reacted like I dropped my burning cig on her leg. She jerked, examined my hand, and decided to smile. “I think I know what to do,” she said, and slapped my knee.

This is what I saw. What I felt was the breeze turned to wind. It cut cold through the ripped knee in my jeans. “Listen,” she said, “Just listen.”

I expected a speech. I expected Alex to ramble. Instead, she was silent, gazing at the oaks across the lock. I listened to the susurrus of leaves and the snaps and pops of falling acorns. I didn’t feel like saying anything anymore anyway. We listened, the only movement the cigarettes to our mouths. I heard high ringing like a TV set was on somewhere. The wind blew cold again and my body shivered against it. I didn’t feel so hot now. The tinnitus and cold and gradually growing strangeness woke me from my subdued and calm acceptance. Some kind of Alex was sitting next to me and something about her began to feel wrong, like a trip turning bad. Puffing my cig, I debunked her as a half-baked recipe of stress, imagination, memory, and years of too many drugs. She was a perversion of perspective, I concluded, a trick of the tired mind. I had woken that day before noon, after all. I had raked hard and lived through a draining dinner. It was a long day of physical and psychic exhaustion, and Alex was a waking dream. She wasn’t really there. But my cigarette still tasted like menthol and Alex still watched the trees blow in the breeze. I looked into the lock for an answer. Black shapes emerged, less
brambles and trash than gnarly beasts and teeth. I tapped my cig. Gray ash floated into the void, was consumed by a log crocodile.

Alex tapped her menthol. I heard her rough voice in my head. “James Henry Jameson the Third,” she said. I had always thought her voice was kind of hot, like a smoke-exhaling vixen, but now it bothered me, as if this ghost were hiding the true Alex behind it. “I actually like the sound of katydids. Kate-ee-did, kate-ee-did. They’re like annoying and soothing at the same time.” Alex kept tapping though there was no ash to tap. “When I die, one thing I wouldn’t mind being is a katydid. That would be okay.” She stopped the tapping, cig suspended over the lock. “Maybe I was a katydid in a past life.” Breeze, leaves breathed. “Maybe I already am in another life.”

I heard it. Low and slow as a cold motor refusing to turn, the grinding start of a katydid singing its last: Kate. Kate-ee. Didn’t make it to Did. The final tree bug of the season, shaking its death rattle.

Alex stared at me. Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see hers, black and wide. They reflected no starlight glint or anything. She wanted something.

“I wish we were katydids,” she said. I noticed then her words were gasps, rustles in the breezy night that came together as a voice in my head. “If we were katydids, we’d be so green and we’d sing all night, sing our short little lives away. Sing sing sing together. Then we’d curl up and die right here in these leaves and rot in the lock.” The wind died. Alex’s black eyes were the darker than her hair, than the lock, darker than anything out there. “Let’s do it. Let’s be katydids, and we can live and die here.”
The owl tattoo on Alex’s strong upper arm stared at me as well. It peeked out from under the sleeve of her short-short sleeve shirt. I hadn’t seen the owl in a year. I glanced back and it blinked its big lazy eyes.

My armpits were downright drenched, and the cigarette shook in my fingers.

Alex pointed her menthol at the lock bottom again. “We can die down there with our little katydid legs in the air. We’ll be mud, leaves, frog shit. Then one day we’ll wake up like a millennium from now, no, like an *epoch*, that’s a lot more, right? But it won’t feel like any time at all has passed, you know what I mean. What I’m saying is we’ll wake up from the muck, we’ll open our eyes and we’ll be two people sitting on the edge of this lock again in the middle of a perfect summer. We’ll wake up right here. We’ll be in love.” I heard her say the last word before her lips moved. Her lips moved: “Forever.”

My mouth moaned as my ears flooded with pressure. Eyelids shuttered tight. My tongue dry as ash and I couldn’t swallow. If I let go, if I let myself go, I would have floated like a bright dead leaf to the bottom of Dead Lock. Dizzy dizzy. My bladder screamed for a sudden Titanic leak. I swallowed miracle spit. My ears expanded into my skull and exploded with high-pitched shrapnel. Ears popped twice in one day, a new record. Eye shutters flung open. All of my Camel was a stick of gray ash, as if I’d just let it burn without a puff or a tap. I tapped and the whole cig dropped from my hand and into the lock like a paperweight stone.

Alex flicked her menthol into the lock hole after my cig. The darkness consumed whatever orange spark may have been. “All you have to do is say it. I’ve been waiting like forever, Jimmy Three.” She whispered and the breeze blew leaves. “Repeat after
me,” she said. “Let’s practice,” she said. Alex leaned her memory face a breath from mine. I stupidly turned and gazed. Her small full lips did not open. She blinked, and the words came from the hollow mouths of her eyes. “I love you,” they said, she said.

In one great blasting breath I exhaled all the oxygen I have ever enjoyed, and her eyes inhaled it all. They sucked at my gasp.

From the trees: one solid screeching kate-ee-did.

The arm owl spread its wings, opened its beak and shrieked. The wind picked up, got cold and went well beyond autumn. It blasted the first icy gust of winter. My chest shook and spasmed. I was freezing. A blizzard of leaves whirled around us as I pulled on my hoodie.

I yelled against the howl of wind. “I already told you,” I said, which was true. “I said it at the end of last summer. It didn’t stop you from going without me. You broke your promise. You were going to break up with me anyway. You just thought I wouldn’t say it.” I stood and stumbled on the edge. My foot slipped, kicking moss and sand and quartz, and I fell. I landed hard on my ass on the edge of the stone, which was coming apart under me. I felt my weight going down like on a playground slide. A heavy gravity pulled at me from the black hole of the lock. Alex watched with ghostly patience. I screamed like a child and kicked at the darkness. My purple shoes pushed against a grasping thickness and pressure, as if I were stuck in mud. I slipped further and rolled onto my chest on the edge of the lock, my legs flailing in space. I hugged the stone for life, pulling with my arms and kicking with my legs. My feet found footing on the crumbling stones. I clambered over the edge and rolled into the safe, soft grass, and in
two steps was sprinting away. “Goodnight, Alex,” I said, though I can’t say why. I also
don’t know why I looked back.

Darkness in the shape of Alex held up an arm shape as if waving. If I hadn’t just
been totally freaked out, I would have seen only shadows around the lock, a play of light
and dark from the leaves and oaks. The blackness was nearly indistinguishable. Alex’s
voice scratched at my brain, and like an AM signal it was unclear and fading fast. In the
ringing static, I thought I heard “bye” or “why” or “die."

I ran like a chicken. The sky was falling in many ways. I bolted for the
continuing forest shortcut that would cut by my parents’ backyard. It was a dumb horror-
movie move—don’t go in the woods!—but the path was right there and the sidewalk
wasn’t. I sprinted in giraffe-size strides, skidding on stones and kicking up clumps of
ferns with each bound uphill. I was running away from Alex instead of to, which was the
last possible thing I could imagine, behind seeing a ghost. Physically, my biking paid
off—my legs bounded with ease—but I’d done nothing to prepare for impossible
thoughts. They haunted me. Every tree was a threat. Branches and briars clawed for my
flesh. Boulders shape-shifted into death demons and sprang into the path where no
boulders had been before. I tripped over what I told myself were rocks and roots. I
stumbled constantly. My intuitive muscle memory was bunk with panic, or else I wasn’t
on the path. I couldn’t see shit in the hillside night woods. A branch whipped my face.
Tiny hands ripped at my hoodie. Leaves rained against my face with the rising wind. I
thrashed forward with tale-tell pace. I got Halloween a week early. I was scared shitless.

From a tree above me, a screech owl whinnied cool and slow, like a horse that had
found a hidden place to die.
My brain said to my instinct: shut up. My instinct said to my brain: run faster, asshole.

I burst into my parents’ backyard, lungs burning like a rip from a gravity bong. I leaped from the forest and flew five feet over the leafy lawn. I’d made the finish line, the safe zone. Instant airborne relief. The instant was only as long as the flying leap. My foot landed in the grass and a dark something jumped from nowhere and flashed for a nanosecond in front of my face. I had no time to recognize it. It punched me, freaking thwacked me on the nose like a stooge. The hard handle of the damn rake I left out earlier. My vision flashed rainbows. I kicked and tripped over the rake. Flailing, falling. Airborne again. Going down. Autumn fall.

The fall was short and soft. I fell face-first into a huge leaf pile. Oak leaves dramatically poofed up and showered down. It was like falling into a feather bed. My panic satiated in the pile. There was no more flight. There was nothing to fight. Just leaves, just leafy relief. I was safe there and in no need to run. I rolled onto my back and breathed heavy, calming the fuck down. The pile buried me in crunching papery softness. I sunk and watched rake-handle rainbows flash behind my eyelids. My breaths slowed with comfort. The rare wonderful stink of leaves warmed me like an old quilt. The last time I’d laid in a pile of leaves was in my childhood. I’d forgotten the special, sacred quality I’d granted leaf piles as a kid. Living in Lockend, I thought, is trippy in many ways. This was my only thought. I laid there until the colors disappeared from behind my eyes. My heartbeat halved. Shaking ceased. The only sound the buzzing in my head. I laid in leaves and comfort for a long non-moment. My thoughts were falling leaves, leaves, leaves. And this is how you get a tick behind your balls.
I sat up in the cold leaf pile. Perhaps the taint tick had brought me back with a slight bite, but I didn’t notice it then. All I knew was that the leaves were no longer comfortable and I was shivering. Leaf prints textured my face. Twigs clung to my hair. I shook them off like a dog. I’d been curled like a nesting animal for so long that I couldn’t tell if I had fallen asleep or not.

I now felt primitive and full of needy urges. I needed caveman rejuvenation, like a drink and a fuck. I would have settled for a fucking drink. I considered scooting my sorry skinny ass down to the Canawler’s Bar. No more rum, thanks. Get me a jigger of whiskey. That was how the canal diggers were paid, Sam had said, with booze. But going down to the bar would involve spending money, and worse, seeing people. I’d seen enough.

After I pulled myself from the tick-leaf pile—rising like an autumn zombie scarecrow—and carefully stepped over the lurking shape of the leaf blower—I didn’t put it away—and stumbled into my parents’ house, I was thankful to be home. I didn’t want to call it that, but the house was warm and inviting. It smelled like cinnamon and nutmeg and cats. It felt like home.

I took a piss so long and relieving it was ecstasy. My eyes even rolled back a little bit. I skulked upstairs, quickly, quietly, to the lifetime comfort of my third floor attic cell, and take a deep breath of dark silence. I clicked the desk lamp.

On the desk, an inch from my hand and glowing like bone, was the stone.

My bladder squirted from nowhere a drop of panic piss. My heartbeat again went hardcore fast. My body tried to faint, but wait. The stone paperweighted a yellow Post-It. I flicked the stone like a jellybean and it wobbled aside like an oblong golf ball.
The note read: Found the rock! Might want to keep it somewhere safe in this house. And sorry about the smoking thing, btw. Sam.

After her name, Sam had drawn a cutesy smiley face.

So. Sister Sam wants to be Friend, too. Thank fucking Jesus. I’d had enough for one night. All I wanted was to curl like a fetus and sleep deep. I hoped I could this early. I clicked off the light and collapsed into my little bed.

The twin mattress was too short by senior year of Groveland High, and I’d put on a few inches. If I lay straight, my feet stuck out from the sheets a good foot from the bed. I more or less had to curl like a fetus. I saw some kind of Alex.

I jolted up. Anxious, desperate, alone, I pressed the call button and turned the phone to my ear.

Shot straight to unfunny voice mail. “You’ve reached [Alex’s phone number]. Leave a message and I will return your call as soon as I can.” Beep. The message gave Alex a professional distance, a calm cool. This was false. Alex was a scatter head. I listened to the second of static, realized it was me exhaling heavy, hung up.

And my phone exploded with a ringtone I hadn’t heard in a year. Indie guitar, desperate singing, The Broke—the ringtone I had set a long time ago for Alex.

“I just called you,” I said. I just saw you.

“You just woke me up,” said Alex. Her voice was scratchy and raw, the real smoky vixen. Alex yawned. “I was just like taking a nap before I go out. We’re going to a mead bar. It’s like honey wine.”

“I know what mead is. We read Beowulf.” We had read the old story together in Ancient English. We screwed around that day before class. While Air spun on her
turntable, I lapped her mead, she stroked my Grendel. We sat next to each other in class. We reeked of love. I tried to take notes while Alex passed giggly glances. Fucking schoolgirls. “So what’s going on?”

“Oh my God James, I have to tell you before I forget. I was just dreaming about you when you called. This is so weird.”

“Yeah it is.”

“It was windy. You were trying to tell me something, like you were yelling but I couldn’t hear you. And then you called and woke me up. You must have picked up my wavelengths.”

“Where were we?”

“I remember trees. I don’t know. It’s gone.”

So Alex had been thinking of me, too, at least on a subconscious level. I didn’t mention Dead Lock. It was all too strange and personal and I was too lame and insecure. My goal as an ex on the phone was to avoid sounding like a creeper, and telling Alex I saw her ghost seemed pleading, made up, creeperish. “Webster told me to call.”

“Webster’s on my train like all the time. Like a stalker. He would make a terrible stalker. He sticks out even here.” Alex yawned again. “It’s weird that we’re talking. Sorry. Now it’s really going to feel weird. I’m glad Webster told you to call. I have something to tell you.”

“Here I am.” I was right there. Right there, waiting. Here I was. There I am. Tell me, Alex.

“You’re not here here,” she said. She didn’t say anything more. Nothing at all. Nope, nothing.
“What are you talking about?” I said. What was she talking about? Why was I thinking this?

“I’m getting married, James.”

I sat up in bed. “What the shit, Alex?”

“I know. Trent and I are engaged. You would like the ring. It’s wood.”

Trent, the man I never met. “Well then.” No white quartz stone for Alex, she’d go with the woody. She sure got hitched quick. If anyone, I figured Sara and Mikey would have been first. No, Alex had to be first at everything. Music, moving, marrying.

I listened to the phone static and heard noise. The static of city noise, of pipes and roads and people, flowed through the receiver and poured garbage and cement into my heart. I stuck my finger in the thickening concrete, wrote these hard words: “Happy fucking congratulations.”

“What?”

“Congratulations, Alex.” That’s what you were supposed to tell people who made big important decisions that would ruin their lives. Congrats.

“Thank you, James.” Alex paused and made little smacking sounds. She was puffing a cigarette. “So. Should I invite you to the wedding?”

“Wait now. I need to understand.” I clicked the lamp on the desk, which was pressed next to my bed. My room looked closet small in the yellow light. “You wanted me to call you—so you could ask me—if you should invite me—to your wedding.” Alex wasn’t usually this passive. She dumped me, after all. “Why didn’t you just call me?”

Alex sighed smoke. “No offense, but I’m scared to call you. I feel like you won’t answer. Or if you did, you’d be mad. We have a history.”
“We have a history, right.” I sat at my desk and traced my carved initials with my finger. The desk had a history. “You unfriended me.”

“Oh my God, James. I didn’t unfriend anyone. I quit all the online stuff, deleted my profiles. I took an Internet detox and you know what, it’s really cleared my head. I recommend it. I think it could help you.”

“An Internet detox would help me feel more isolated. What are you talking about? You have an account online. I sent you a new friend request.”

“Oh God. Trent set up an account for me. He thinks I need one for work, but I don’t use it at all. I still check email. You can email me.” Alex lip-smacked the cigarette and blew a big vixen sigh of smoke. “Look, James Henry Jameson the Third. I’m sorry about us. We can’t erase our history or anything. It’ll always be there hanging in the past, but I’ve been thinking that we have the future, too. I want to invite you to the wedding. I guess I’m afraid you won’t want to come. Which is fine. It’s just, it’s been over a year, you know? We’ve got our own lives now. Like, I’ve been dating Trent for a year. I know you guys would get along. He loves The Broke. Plus the wedding is in our territory, in Columbus. In spring, this May. I invited everyone. It feels wrong to forget you, I mean, it wouldn’t be like C-Bus without you. I want you to come. Will you come to my wedding, Jimmy Three?”

I laughed against my will. “I can’t believe you just called me that.” I tapped the desk. “You’re right, the future. I agree. Leave the past where it sits.” Very easy to say. “Tell me, who’s all going?”

“Oh, everyone. Webster. Sara and Mikey.” Alex went on, giving the Peripheral Friends their names. “And Stella, she’s flying in from Portland with Barry. Rheta’s
coming, she asked if you were. Drew and Tanner, for better or worse. They’re still crazy.”

“Everyone.” I clicked off the lamp and sat in the dark. “The most important question. Is the reception open bar?”

Alex snorted and half-laughed. “Of course, James. Now will you come?”

I could see nothing in the dark room. “I can’t believe you want me to be there.”

“We were really good friends for all those years.”

“You broke up with me.” I implied her broken ultimatum. “You moved.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I guess this is my way of saying sorry.”

“It kind of sucked, Alex.”

Alex made smoke puffs. Her vixen voice went up an octave. “Well we kind of sucked. Seriously, no offense, but our relationship was a total fail. I mean, it’s like the cliché, we wanted different things. It’s unfortunate, but we had to be in a relationship to learn that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I wanted to get married. After college I wanted something real. The drugs and parties weren’t doing it for me anymore. I realized I really did want the future with kids and a house and all that crap. Oh my God, I sound like a Jane Austen character, but it’s the truth. You wouldn’t even tell me you loved me.”

“I did.”

“God, James. I grew up. You know I moved to New York because of my career, not to party. I moved here because I got a better job than I could get in Ohio. And now I’m getting married because that’s the next best move for me. I know we really had
something, James, but you know it wasn’t going to work. Sooner or later, I’m going to have kids. You hate kids. I mean, you hate everything. Sorry, I don’t mean that in a bad way. God. This is why I didn’t want to call. I knew all this old crap would get brought up.”

I didn’t know what to say. “I don’t hate everything,” I said. “I love pot.”

Alex blew into the receiver. “You haven’t changed.” It sounded like she was smiling. “Look, I want to reset our friendship. I want you to come to my wedding. It’s my day, James, and I don’t have to invite you. You’re not allowed to ruin my day. I only want you to come if we put all our bad vibes behind us. I mean I can do that, can you? It’s been over a year. We have different priorities and it really sucked to learn that but I mean come on. It’s been over a year.” Alex was really rambling now. She used to say more words in an hour than I said in a day. “You know I still look back on our Columbus years as the best time of my life. I mean it. Like it’s pretty great out here, for sure, but in a different way. God. We were all so close back then, like we were all part of a big family. I never felt so close to anyone as I did to you and Sara and Mikey and Webster, you know? We were family. That’s what I always wanted, that feeling like I belonged and people loved me. My parent’s divorce totally had something to do with it. And probably why I have this deep inner need to have a family of my own. I’m sure you remember all that from my huge rant up on Big Bed Rock. In fact, that was the first time I admitted to myself that I wanted kids. And that was like the first time I realized we weren’t going to work out. Pretty bittersweet.” Alex snorted at some thought. “Oh my God, James, I still dream about that place sometimes. I have this reoccurring dream. I never used to have reoccurring dreams, and now I have this one like every few months.
I’m always trying to hike up to a beautiful overlook that is totally Big Bed Rock, even if it doesn’t look like it, you know how dreams are. The thing is I never make it. Even though I can see it. Weird. Look. Let’s be friends again.”

I was floored. Really, by then I was laying on the floor, the phone pressed hot on my ear. Alex was fulfilling her promise of friendship. Stranger things had happened. An hour or so before, for instance. Plus, both Alex and Webster referenced Big Bed Rock in the same night. Maybe it hadn’t been a lie. Maybe the moment still meant something for everyone. “You’re right,” I said. “Having a family is definitely not a priority for me. It was never going to work.” My brevity was a counterbalance to Alex’s wordiness. “And I know what you mean. I felt close to everyone in college, too. And I still think about Big Bed Rock sometimes.” Incredible understatements. “Don’t dream it, though.” From the floor, I could see the top pie pieces of the circular attic window. Wet black branches waved in the wind. Most of the leaves had fallen from the twin oaks. “If you want me to be there, I’ll be there, Alex. I mean, I want to go. You know what I mean. I’ll be there. And I’ll be good, don’t worry. I won’t ruin your day. Let’s leave our history behind us. The bad parts.” If Alex’s invitation was her apology, I accepted. I needed my friends, needed the idea that we could all be friends again. Friends were the new family. There was no one else.

“Great.” There was relief and surprise in her rough voice. “We can all hang in Columbus. It’ll be like a little reunion. I’m thinking of my wedding as a celebration of the past and future. Everyone from my past will come to welcome the future. I guess that’s what all weddings are, huh.”
I liked that. I like a lot of things. I hated more. “I like that. Let’s look to the future.”

“To the future,” said Alex.

“To the future,” I said. We breathed in silence for an awkward moment. “Not the same without booze,” I said.

“Speaking of booze, I better go. Mead awaits.”

“I thought you didn’t move to New York to party.”

“It’s Friday.”

“Good song.”

“Not as good as the new Broke.”

We half-laughed for one another. We could be friends again. “Tell everyone I said hi,” I said. “And that I hate them.”

Alex snorted. “Sure, Jimmy Three. Goodnight.” After Alex hung up, I listened to the dial tone until I realized there was no dial tone on my cell phone, which had turned itself off. The noise was the ringing in my ears, a lower tone than usual.

I floated in the ear-ringing dark. Everything Alex said was true. We wouldn’t have worked out as long-time lovers. We had conflicting ideas of how our lives should be. Specifically, she had an idea and I didn’t.

The whole engagement to Trent thing threw me off. The tiny room spun with emotional vertigo, a queasy sulking. Alex had hooked up with Bushwick Trent while I was still in Ohio pining for my lost love, and that had hurt. It sucked so bad I still had the bitter flavor in my mouth. Yet another part of me, the part separated by time and distance, the part that had gotten over the whole thing and reached closure, and the part
that yearned for a better time, for friendship and Big Bed Rock and renewed promises, accepted and even congratulated the marriage. I liked Alex, and Alex was happy. This was good. Never leaving myself out of the situation, I equated that I could be happy, too. The dizzy spell subsided.

The idea of a reunion seeped into my attic cell like a draft. A reunion seemed exciting, scary, overwhelming, uncertain and strange. It was exactly what I wanted—a party of friends—but I wasn’t prepared for it. I was a loser. If I was still living with my parents in the spring, I couldn’t suffer the sight of all my successful, fabulous friends. I needed to drop fifty pounds of self-pity and dead-end isolation. I needed a job. In the dark, I made a promise to myself: “I need to get my shit together by May.”

That said, I needed sleep. Leaves and parents, a ghost and a wedding—I chose not to think about any of it. I slid out my drug box from under the bed. There weren’t many drugs left in the drug box. It was the shoe box my purple Velcros came in. The shoes looked cooler than you think. A packet of pink pills rattled as I rooted. They were antihistamines, allergy pills that make your throat dry and your head drowsy. I swallowed some and a couple fat codeines. I could do this without water.

The bed was clay that molded to my body. My body was wax that melted into the mold. I melted and floated at the same time. It was almost as good as the leaf pile, in an absent kind of way.

Goodnight, nobody. Goodnight, everybody. Goodnight. There was nobody against me when there was no world.
CHAPTER VIII
DOWN AND OUT

The apocalypse happened overnight. I slept through it because the codeine coma kept me good and knocked out until the next afternoon. I cracked open my crusty eyes and stretched my sore limbs. A minute or two passed before I realized where and who I was, and that I was surrounded by apocalypse emo zombies. Your world is over, they said, it ended last night.

Go away, I mumbled. They scoffed. They held protest signs: Occupy James’ Brain. The End is Now. Burned by Burn, Isn’t that Ironic?

That’s not ironic, I said. “Burned” was only slang, “Burn” only a name. What was irony? Making the uncool cool? I figured only the computer knew the true definition of irony, and I wasn’t going to get out of bed to find out.

I couldn’t define true irony. No wonder I got burned. I was a fool with lame experience and half-ass bullshitting skills. Curled under my covers, the interview haunted me.

Burn (thin black guy, girl with outdated trendy glasses, mid thirties): So what’s the deal with your college degree? Can you explain this?

J.H.J. III: A Bachelor’s in Creative Cultural Memes. It means—(be honest)—it means I really have no idea what it means. In college I thought I was some smart badass
that could observe and interpret the world for a living. I took loads of classes that looked interesting, Art History and Postmodern Theory and New Media courses. After four years they handed me a degree. I thought I could integrate myself in a creative way into our society. But all Creative Cultural Memes means is that I can read something and write about it. I can do it online and with whatever computer program I need to use, just like every other kid my age. (Sell yourself.) And I can listen to music and write about it. Music is awesome.

Burn (glancing at each other): What do you listen to, then?

J.H.J. III: Whatever Burn tells me to listen to. (Ha.) I mean that in a good way. Don’t get me wrong, but Burn is pretty harsh, so when you guys give something a good grade I trust that it’s good. It usually is.

Burn: Like what?

J.H.J. III: People trade music like money, right. When I meet someone at a party, the first thing I ask is, “What do you listen to?” It’s our common ground, our link to one another. Our small talk. We can all talk about indie noise, chillwave, Katy freaking Perry. Music is the new weather. There’s a creative cultural meme for you.

That said, The Broke.

Burn (double nods, of course, of course): Why do you want to live in New York City? What is it about New York City that draws you to it? Why do you care about this city built on power? Why do you give a crap? What are doing even thinking that you belong here?

J.H.J. III (What could I say? What could I do? How the hell was I supposed to answer that?): Ohio sucks.
Burn (completely bemused): Okay. Well, thanks James. That’s all for today.

That’s all.

J.H.J. III: It’s weird that we can’t shake hands through the screen. (That would have made the end of the interview professional and official.) What’s the screen version?

Burn: We’ll get back to you.

And they did. Looking back, I heard what they heard. My words had been there all along, stinking behind a pile of clever bullshit. Turns out I was a bad smartass.

Of course everyone that applied was into the Broke, art rock, indie crap, noisecore, backpack rap, solo songwriters, non-dance electronic. Everyone already knew everything about these genres because of the Interwebs. It’s the other music that would win attention. The stuff Sara liked. Her record collection was truly eclectic. Stacks of one-hit doo wop wonders, rockabilly gems, authentic Country Western (whatever that meant), old black blues and forties crooners. Sara had records by legends like Etta James and Sonny James, and I only noted these because they had my name on the cover. The James music I knew was the dance night track by, naturally, James, the song where every line was a standout. Sara had that on vinyl, too. She had everything. Her records were Rock and Roll Hall of Fame exhibits, the stuff any lifetime fan of modern music should know. And I didn’t. I couldn’t just write bullshit Burn columns on the fashion of The White Stripes and get a paycheck. I needed to know all of the musical influences from the last century, the last five centuries, from all of musical history.

Creative Cultural Memes meant Bullshit Consumer of Trends. This was all I had learned.
Sure, I could say things like, “Death Cab’s new single is a generic mash-up: the best rhythmic transitions from the Photo Album with the worst of Gibbard’s metaphorical ambiguities.” No wonder I liked the song. I could say “Fucked Up set either a very high or pathetically low bar with their name.” I never listened past their name. I could say, “Having mastered the indie arena anthem, Arcade Fire decided to take on the complete anthemic album, winning a Grammy and proving that albums as a listening format are still relevant.” I could say all this stuff, but it didn’t mean a damn thing. This was the kind of small talk that everyone I knew could make up. I didn’t even know what rhythm meant. I was another asshole with nothing to offer Burn but cliché comment board comments.

So I woke up with a sad. Emo zombies all around.

Getting up sucked, but I had to piss sometime. Shuffling downstairs was like waking up in hell. It Burned. My parents were out Saturday shopping or something, thank Jesus, but I was still stuck in their house. I was locked in Lockend. Alex was getting married, and despite my kind thoughts the night before, her certainty that she was living her life as intended confirmed that I wasn’t. And she had haunted me. I told myself that her ghost was some kind of memory mindfuck, but it still freaked me out that my brain was capable of being insane. I preferred not to think about it. I preferred not to think.

I showered for a long time, trying to rinse the pity away, and that’s when I found the tick behind my balls. It was a strange sign, like a fortune cookie with an ambiguously translated fortune. I felt fucked in the bad way.
I tried to start the day, but the whole physical world was against me. Started with the tick and went wrong from there. Pouring coffee, the pot top popped off and all the scalding shit splashed over my mug-holding hand and my scissor tattoo, literally burning myself and wasting the coffee. I wiped up steaming towel-loads of coffee, indignant and pissy, my arm stinging. I had to make more. Angry, I went out for a cigarette while the new coffee brewed. Of course I forgot my lighter. I stomped back in, failing to take off my purple Velcros, and tracked mud across the kitchen floor. I wasted angry minutes wiping it up. The lighter I’d just bought was nowhere in my room and I was feeling ready to scream. I found some matches from the kitchen, where I also found I hadn’t put new grounds into the coffeemaker, so the stuff brewing was water weak. Fuck it.

Outside, every time I lit a match, the autumn wind blew it out, and I grew in steady increments more and more ready to kill someone. My fight or flight mode kicked in, with nowhere to run and no one to fight but emo zombies. As I smoked my cigarette—it’d lit by the fifth match—my rage peaked. The nicotine should have calmed me. I wanted to kill.

An insane belief entered my smoky brain. I was trapped in hell forever. My degree was worthless and I was an epic fail. I imagined that my Dad would say something—anything he said, really—and set me off like a bomb waiting to explode. I would have a loud, physical fight—I’d punch his bull head—and get kicked out, literally, his boots bruising my ribby frame. I’d end up squatting in a Groveland meth trailer with a ragtag gang of burnouts and fuckwits. Some of them would spit out homophobic and racist slurs like tobacco juice. I wouldn’t object, because they’d given me a place to crash. I’d grow a goatee, dumpster moldy bread, spit tobacco. Methed up for days, I’d
break and rob outdoor pop machines and cash the quarters to support my habit. It’d be
my trade, the only trade I’d ever learned. I’d droll at the clickety-clank of Coinstar. If I
passed the drug test, I’d get a third shift job answering phones in a customer call center.
But more likely, if my life really reached an eternal point of hope-and-lovelessness, I
believed I’d find some way to end it. I would kill someone. And there was only one
person to kill.

Screw coffee. I crawled upstairs and hid in bed, hoping to escape my contorted
thoughts. My heartbeat pounded in my skull, louder than the ringing.

This wasn’t the first time in my life I’d suffered this way.

When I was a teenager I was into cutting. Every non-self-respecting teen was into
it. I was a member of my generation, after all, a generation known for such great things
as binge drinking and online bullying and cutting. The wrist tattoo had its time and place.
There were still some slash scars on my arm, a different kind of body art. At twenty-four,
I knew better. Cutting was so republican. Instead of hurting myself, I lashed out at the
world.

I screamed and punched at the invisible emo zombies. My fist hit the ceiling,
slanted low over my bed, again and again. It didn’t hurt. After several feral and insane
punches, my hand shot right through the drywall. I stared into the jagged hole above my
face, at the peek of wooden roof beams and pink fiberglass insulation beyond. A draft of
stale air seeped out, smelling like what mummies must smell like. Moldering, cobwebby,
cursed. I didn’t want cursed. I imagined spiders pouring out of the hole onto my face.
My knuckles bled red. I had cut myself, after all. Now it hurt.
When I was done crying—really baby sobbing—I found a poster folded in an old music magazine and taped it over the hole. Now Moby’s bald head grinned down at me like a clown. His dopey face made me reconsider my chances with the mummy hole. Moby won. I couldn’t argue with his smile, so non-offensive it was nearly impotent. A lot like his music. Not that I had the background, I believed, to comment on his post-rave, pseudo-ambient gospel-house music. Even Moby made me hate myself.

I pulled a Brian Wilson. I spent too many days in my little bed. The little TV stood on a milk crate across from me, and I didn’t turn it on once. I hid in bed. I crunched the rest of the codeines like bitter candy. Then I moved down to the antihistamines and aspirin. I got up only to piss and smoke cigarettes and eat food, and I ate a lot. Depression makes some people lose their appetite, but I ate like a lonely stoner in a combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell. Full of food, I went back to bed and pulled the pillow over my head and digested. I napped. The days slid by in half-conscious oblivion.

My parents let me float through their house like a ghost. My mom was always cleaning or cooking or both at the same time, believe it. At the end of the day she watched laugh-track gut-busters on the smallish living room TV. My favorite comedies didn’t use laugh tracks, so I was surprised any shows still did. The laughing sounded so sad and desperate when you weren’t part of it. As for Dad, sometimes he went in the garage and pulled the tarp off his Ford Mustang. He’d got the relic for a fair price because it needed some major servicing. It was an unfortunately rusty project car that had its day in the late sixties and would likely never have its day again if my Dad continued to work on it. He opened it up and poked around, a manly leftover hobby from
the motorcycle days, and got mad. To cool off, he retreated to the huge screen basement TV. He probably paid more for that than the 'Stang. When our paths crossed, I kept to simple greetings and grunts. The whole dinner confrontation went unmentioned and our silent, separate lives continued. The dinner had been an anomaly to our usual Jameson uncommunication. I was relieved that we were back to normal repression and avoidance.

Cats came to visit my little bed. Reagan pawed and purred at my blanketed form. Clinton dozed on my pillow, on my head, for an uncomfortably long time. I let him. I felt the presence of Nader—a light bounce on the bed—but when I looked up, he was gone. Though I didn’t pet them, the cats brought an awareness of my attic hell. There are other things in the world, they said. You will be okay.

I didn’t feel okay. Under the pillow, my ears rang louder, as if I’d been to a rock show the night before. I hadn’t seen a band since I lived in Columbus. I ran out of antihistamines and glugged cough syrup. I didn’t like it. It doesn’t get you high so much as totally messed up, like seriously dissociated from all reality, a drug for dumb teens. I didn’t like it, but I needed it. It spaced me out enough to forget I existed. Another few slugs of syrup, and the pillow over my head became an enclosed and hidden place. With a better drug, it may have felt warm and womb-like. On cough syrup it was an empty cave. There was no one else there but me. I became a stalagmite in the darkness.

Cave-hours dripped by and Mom called my name for dinner. Sobered up and at the table, I kept my eyes on the comics and pretended I was okay and gorged on second and third servings. I wasn’t hungry, but I was never satiated. I told my parents blatant lies about job applications—what else was I doing up in my room all day?—and felt even worse.
I needed to get my shit together. I’d said the resolution, but the world was cold and the bed was warm. And physically I felt like shit. When I wasn’t gorging on junk food or stepping outside for a cigarette, I felt sleepy weak and always tired. Naps came easy.

Mentally, I believed I was trapped. By society—get a job. By parents—I relied on them, and in turn felt a guilty pressure to prove myself. As for friends, they had found love and success and freedom and I couldn’t get out of bed. No finances, no control. The world was against me.

One night my Mom sat under her Kinkade painting, watching the Peanuts special with the Great Pumpkin. The noodling piano music filled all of downstairs. “Remember this?” she said. “Watch it with me.”

I stood in the kitchen doorway. “I don’t get nostalgic for this. I think that’s you guys. I get nostalgic for the Garfield special.”

I grabbed what I had come for, five fun-size candy bars, and crawled upstairs. I had real fun shoving the bars into my mouth. This was my Happy Halloween.

I got a picture text from Webster. There he was, Wario for Halloween, you know, Mario’s evil twin from the nerd universe of Nintendo. Webster crossed his eyes over a fake zig-zag mustache. He was totally wasted. It was really pretty accurate.

I couldn’t think of anything I wanted to be.

Days wept by. My neck and back muscles stiffened and sored. I shuffled slow and bent like an old man. Some afternoon I tripped on nothing and fell down half my narrow attic stairs. The next day I was nasty sore, with bruises like yellow birthmarks in unique places—my shoulder, my right butt cheek. My body was losing control, too.
During lucid moments I listened to Elliot Smith’s saddest songs and Beck’s *Sea Change* and this really slow piano track by Arvo Pärt, a song Sara owned on record. I played it over and over until it meant nothing. With my parents at work, I sobbed and screamed phrases that would scare most people. If the cats were around, they bolted from my room. My voice went hoarse like I’d been out drinking all night in loud bars. I didn’t punch anything anymore.

I knew the next logical step was a job, but non-existence loomed above it all as an ultimate fantasy. If I didn’t exist, I didn’t need money or friends or cigarettes. I wouldn’t have to do anything. I wouldn’t be a burden on anyone and the emo zombies would claim their victim, eat my brains and shuffle away forever. I wasn’t sure I wanted to die—I wasn’t sure about anything—but it was the only way to not exist. I had no more drugs. I made up a note in my sick head. It was short: “I love you. I’m sorry.”

I sat at my desk with pen and paper. I wondered if notebook paper was good enough for a suicide note, and wondered why I cared about this detail and nothing else. The circle window showed me a too-nice November evening. November already. I slashed the paper with my pen, ripping it in half and marking the desk.

In the reign of childhood, what felt like a century ago, I’d carved my initials into my desk with a red pocketknife. I traced the initials with my fingertip: J H J III. As a child carving them, I had felt what I thought an adult would feel like. Accomplished, in control, claiming my title on the world.

I dug for the red knife. It had waited a silent lifetime like a loyal dog in the back of the pencil drawer. Though the blade was dull and wobbly, the presence of the knife
came back to me. In my hand it hummed with dark force and control. It was the opposite of Moby’s smile.

Out the window, the twin trees’ bark glowed orange in the slanted sun.

There was no future. Tomorrow is gone.

Just my little bed, just the desk. This was the only world.

And a ceiling slanted over me like a cement tent.

And the circular attic eye window. Gold sunlight stare-glared in, warmed my arm, spotlighted the scissor tattoo like a sign.

Here was another autumn sunset, the kind of gold haze I could float in forever, as if I would feel this way for the rest of my life.

I would feel this way for the rest of my life.

The awful thought made me crave any and all drugs. They were the next best thing to dying. They allowed you to die and stay alive at the same time. I’d never touched the trashy trinity of meth, crack and heroin, but I would have then. There were no drugs.

I traced my wrist with the pocketknife, pressing the dotted line just hard enough to know that I’d have to use something a lot sharper.

I found myself swaying in the kitchen and staring at the steak knives, with no memory of going down there. I stood alone. My parents had gone to Groveland to eat on a weeknight. They used to only go out on the weekends. Whatever. I pulled a knife from its wooden block and gripped it, trying to feel its presence, feel anything.
I stood this way for several spacey minutes. The sharp knife shined in the kitchen light. I stared at it, waiting for the next move. The blade seemed to be pointing at something. I followed its aim to the spice cabinet. There were some drugs, after all.

An ancient bottle of nutmeg hid behind the spice jars. It was like mummy nutmeg, all oddly preserved. The font on the label, in seventies yellow and brown, looked like a winning thrift find. It was from my parents’ wedding spice rack, their marriage nutmeg, unused and waiting and good as any knife. The bottle sighed in my hand, a light promise. I opened and huffed. Like the font, the powder’s color had dulled, but it still smelled strong as spice. It would do.

I poured the entire thing into a tall glass of milk and stirred it into a sludgy brown drink. It looked and smelled like a festive latte from Starbucks. It passed the sniff test.

It failed the taste test. I held my nose and gagged between gulps.

Webster had gotten high off of nutmeg. He’d personally researched every kind of high, free or pricey, legal or not. According to him, nutmeg was a common prison drug, and old-time sailors sometimes ate the spice they were transporting. “I got so stupid,” he said, “but I’d never do it again.”

Bottoms up.

The entire evening I waited like a loyal knife, like wedding spice. Other than some nasty nutmeg burps, my moment never came. I figured the old stuff bunk and drifted into a heavy gray sleep.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of sizzling. For a groggy half-conscious moment I believed my mom was home and frying bacon in my room. I yawned. There was no rich nostalgic bacon smell. My mom wouldn’t cook in my room. The sizzling
was all in my head. It was my brain, no lie, literally frying in my skull, snap crackle pop, louder and less ignorable than tinnitus.

I sat up and gagged with dizziness. I felt like I’d smoked a bowl of devil resin, a big bong hit of flu virus. This was not a fun high. It was a dumb, numb high, the kind a desperate prisoner or sailor might want. It’s like I had skipped the high and went straight to hangover. If I hadn’t taken nutmeg, I would have thought I was sick.

The room was freezing. Moby did a pretty poor job of keeping out the mummy air. A constant cold draft blew down on me. I hid under the warm covers and pulled the pillow over my head, but the sizzling and queasiness didn’t go away. I was totally eggnogged, spice-stoned, so stupid like Webster. I felt sad about it and I got sad that I was sad. Fucking ridiculous. My ears rang. “Hello?” I answered, as if the ringing would stop.

It was the emo zombies. They had cell phones like anyone, probably smart phones. I knew it was them because they didn’t answer, just breathed creeper heavy like a mob of zombies.

The sizzling had to be their doing. They’d finally made it into the heart of my head. They were frying my brains and preparing to eat them. They’d brought new cookbooks and secret family recipes. It was their turn to gorge, and they were going to do it right.

Lockend wasn’t big enough for the all of us. Someone had to die.

“Death to emo zombies,” I said.

Too late. At my words, the emo zombies devoured my fried brains and shit in my empty skull. These were magically fast zombies. My mind reeked of their waste: emo
loss, stupid self-pity, stinking resentment, a fungus of doubt-grout, confused hopelessness, rotten pumpkin hollowness, and every memory I despised. Bad memories always surfaced when I was depressed. Most of all, regret. I regretted my feelings. Like double sadness, I felt bad for feeling bad. I had lost control of my thoughts and as the bad memories crawled into my bed, I knew that I’d lost control a long time ago.

The zombies pulled out the old film and played the memories. I got to watch Dad scrubbing my first tattoo, and I hated him. I heard my college advisor asking, “How is this degree practical in our working world?” and I hated him and myself. And there was me in the dusty office after college, keying numbing numbers, and the admin dropping papers on my desk and scrunching her nose at my farty cubicle, and I hated the system and myself.

Post-feast, the zombies lived it up, watched the best of the worst. There I was, sweating in front of a college class, attempting to do a presentation on Huckleberry Finn, saying what was supposed to be an ironic joke but what sounded racist, and having a full-frontal panic attack, running from the room, hyperventilating, tears on my cheeks. I never returned to the class, never dropped it, either, and so earned my first F. The real world doesn’t allow for mental mistakes, for crazy anxious sad people. Also, I should have dropped the class. In the Office of Dust again, I watched myself approaching my boss’s door and stopped by the sound of his voice: “He’s a weird one. One of those hipster punks. Yeah. Full of themselves.”

The zombies saved my friends for last. Rolling on the edge of Big Bed Rock—what should have been an ecstatic memory—and Alex saying, “If you can’t say it on ecstasy, I don’t think you’ll ever say it.” Next scene, the tangled sheets of her hot bed:
“The best sex of your life and you still won’t say you love me. Really, James. Get help.”

Me telling Alex the three words, at the end of our summer, and her response: “It’s too late. We can’t do this. It won’t work. You know that.” Webster stashing his drug baggie in his pocket: “No offense, but you need to lay off the pills, man. I’m not the only one who thinks so.” Sara behind the coffee bar: “You want to move, get your ass off the futon, Jamey boy. Get a weekend job and save some money. That’s why I’m working here. It only sucks a little.” Mikey bursting into my room at two in the afternoon, waking me: “Holy shit, James Henry. You look like shit. Want to wake and bake?”

I wanted the memories out of my head. Under my pillow, I pressed my aching temples and groaned. I was sick off of self-hatred and spice.

I’d always been some kind of insecure, some degree of depressed. My brain had been bad for as many years as my adult memories.

I considered life without my on-again, off-again sad. If I had controlled it, if I had killed the emo zombies from the start, I would have told Alex I loved her before it was too late. And with a clear brain I might have considered her desire for a family. A mentally balanced person had the power to do anything, especially when they were energized with love. I’d at least have handled the breakup better. If I’d killed my sadness, I would have followed Sara’s advice rather than succumbing to guilt and insecurity. I would have applied at her café—she said they were hiring—and maybe I would have saved money to move. Instead, I blew my weekends and cash on painkillers and bong rips, as if drugs could kill emo zombies.

I rolled in my bed of nutmeg and regret. I tossed and turned and believed with crazy faith that my friends had given up on me. The emo zombies convinced me that
Alex’s invitation was selfish, our phone call irrelevant to the truth. Alex wanted me to witness her awesome life. My imperfect presence would make her life more perfect. I was a useless youth, a lonely lost cause. My friends had tried and now they had moved and moved on. My problem wasn’t their problem anymore. They were just living their lives, right.

Near insane, overcome with shitty feelings and a shittier drug, I still couldn’t avoid the burn of truth. I couldn’t blame the world anymore.

My problem was not society’s fault, no matter how much I hated the republican poop pile, the capitalist gang-rape of life. Get a crappy job and work until you die, blah blah blah. It sucked, many people agreed, but it didn’t ruin their willpower to fight it. They fought to create their own lives within it. The forever looping pursuit of happiness.

My world was not Lockend’s fault, either. Lockend was a relic of history, a smeary Kinkade painting, a misogynist song on rock radio. I preferred a different culture, for sure, but this was no reason to blame Lockend for my lonely castaway pity.

My parents could not be blamed. They’d done what good they could and made the same mistakes every generation makes. They needed to learn to freaking communicate—which I had partially blamed on my inability to tell Alex I loved her—but my parents had never meant any harm. However unspoken, they loved me. I had been loved.

It came down to what I already knew, what I had told Alex. I didn’t love myself. My problems were the fault of my depression, of my failure to do anything about it. I knew I could only blame myself. The world wasn’t against me. It sucked because I allowed it to suck.
I was against the world. “I’m totally republican,” I said. I tried to get of bed and thumped onto the floor. The thin carpet hadn’t been swept in years. A piece of toenail poked my cheek. Dark curly hairs stuck to my clammy skin. I rubbed myself into the gritty, dirty floor. It felt good in the wrong way. I was nutmeg sick. Seriously—I turned my dizzy, sizzling head and retched burning slime on my shoulder. It tasted like pumpkin spice, which made me puke again. I didn’t move for a long while, for fear of being sick and out of some sick satisfaction of lying in my own puke.

The MGMT song looped in my head. I hadn’t heard it in awhile, but there it was, soundtracked to nutmeg electro-sizzle. It was annoying.

My taint tingled. It may have been tingling for days, but I didn’t notice until then. I wormed my fingers into my underwear and touched the hairy spot behind my balls. I cringed and squeaked like a rat. The spot was sensitive sore.

My taint got me up.

I stumbled like a drunk down the narrow stairs. In the bathroom, I dropped my pants and fumbled a pink hand mirror. I dropped the thing and held my breath. The pink casing cracked with a smack, but the mirror didn’t break. Guess I was lucky. I propped the mirror under my naked crotch. It was hard to see through all the curly hair, and the nutmeg was doing something weird with my depth perception, but what I saw in the mirror’s reflection looked like a small red ring, a tingling taint target.

The first symptoms of Lyme disease are weakness, sore muscles, and extreme fatigue.

After I wiped my pukey face, I pulled on my clothes, grabbed my hoodie—I was freezing balls—and stumbled outside with a cigarette in my mouth.
Again, someone would have to die. “It’s not going to be me,” I said, and lit the cig. I would somehow see a doctor. I wished I hadn’t ditched my dad’s health plan when I got the office job. It had been an adult move, I believed, a step into the real world to have my own insurance. I’d cut the cord to my parents, and my insurance cut the cord when my job did. I was too proud and dumb to tell my dad I had failed and beg to be back on his insurance plan. Obama had changed the age to twenty-six. I was twenty-four. I didn’t want to talk to my dad. I didn’t know what to do. I smoked.

The trees spread their leafless branches like skeletons in the gray sky. The air was the gray color of dead brains, but glowed bright compared to my dim room. I blinked and adjusted. My breath made massive smoky clouds in the freezing air. It wasn’t just me and my room that was cold. The season had shifted and gone moody cold. The crickets were well beyond fourth-frost, a frozen silence. Lockend was dead quiet.

Something speckled in my peripheral vision. The gray air glittered snow. If the flakes were any smaller they would have been invisible. I smoked. The snow quickened and thickened. I puffed. The gray air blurred to a flurry of white.

I drifted in the first snow of winter, thin and wet.

Fall was over already. That’s how time moved in Lockend.
I lie on Big Bed Rock. I think I am calm as a Zen monk, so I’m probably not. I can’t trust my feelings or thoughts. I try to trust the cold night. The Milky Way streaks the black sky. The memory of Alex’s underwear, streaked with period blood, flashes in my head. I can’t control the images up there.

The stars buzz and vibrate above. The hills sleep in the shape of hunched dogs. The breeze rustles the new spring leaves. Not so far away, a screech owl whinnies cool and slow like a horse that has found a hidden place to die. I’ve heard the call before, and can’t think of an eerier sound or way to say it.

The hunched hills release a canine howl. It’s half-coyote, half-human, a near scream. In the night air it plays like music, echoing in the emptiness long after it’s gone. It’s eerier than a screech owl.

No coyote responds.

My taint burns hot. I am warm on the inside.

I feel like I feel everything.

I lie on my Bed Rock and wait for the feeling to pass.

If it does, I roll forward.
We were misunderstood.

Guess what, we weren’t jaded. We were seriously ironic, sure, and often sarcastic, but we were not jaded. Generation X had done that for us. They had claimed cynicism like a religion. Their freedom was tainted with a postmodern knowledge of how messed up we all were, like how insane it was to work at the store to get things at the store. People were dying overseas and we were buying stuff like a disease. This was it, huh? We watched their X-rated view, blasted it on the radio, acknowledged its hopeless truths, and saw through it to the stars and streaks above and below. Yes, X, the world was sick and dying, we had all caught stupidity, and weren’t we all entertained? Everything was wrong and it was fun.

How ironic, we thought.

Irony was an empathetic response to an insanely spinning world. We loved it all, every nauseous churn. The flashing packages begged our hard love. We bought the new pop flavors, no matter how unsurprising, and watched the new cartoons, no matter how nice it was outside. We were nurtured on the new, and when we graduated from high school and weekly allowances, we still needed it. We believed in it.
Yet we shunned the commonplace. Pop music was a fun addiction, but under its shiny, shallow gloss hid the same dull sound we’d heard forever before. The clothes we’d been forced to wear, the box store jeans and labels, were too baggy, too cloying. Fast food burger wars, television fall lineups, hyped movie releases—not really new, we knew. Like young idealists, we sought our own truth.

If newness was truth, we found it in the overlooked and underappreciated: obscure albums on independent labels, ethnic restaurants with traditional seating, no-budget films at one-screen theaters. We found truth in the vintage, retro past: faded thrift sweaters, punk and mod records, Atari and Nintendo cartridge collections. We were nerdy, because the uncool—paintings of unicorns, black-framed glasses, studio portraits with friends—was imbued with the power of irony and made cool. For one gold awesome moment this shit was new. We were still consumers, still playing the only system we knew, but we were first. We were right.

In skinny jeans and vintage tees, we were elite.

Being elite assholes was our sane and sympathetic response. We may have looked smug and snarky, but we were not jaded. We were just jerks consumed with our own miniature consumer worlds. This was our way of saying we cared. This was how we’d be part of the crazy society.

Then the new became not new, as it must do. The Interwebs opened our secret hordes of truth, revealed the obscure bands we’d tattooed onto our souls. Hollywood bought the indie movies for a couple dimes and dubbed the foreign films with chirpy celebrity voices. Television commercials played our music to our parents. Skinny jeans, our most expensive extravagance, cheapened themselves on big box shelves.
The kids too immersed in the nostalgic trip—that guy with tattoos of Link and Zelda—and too faithful of the new—that girl with her unlistenable noise bands—and too ironic—his mustache, her shoulder pads—we started calling hipsters. The younger kids who liked “Float On” on pop radio and bought fake faded tees—we called them hipsters, too. Everyone but us, though everyone else started calling us hipsters.

A hipster was someone who wouldn’t admit they were a hipster.

We had been sold out, and there was only one road away—the highway to Brooklyn, Portland, anywhere but here. To be somewhere else was to be anywhere other than where we came from.

And here I was smoking behind my parents’ house, in the first snow of the year. Not the kind of new I expected from my life.

I was depressed, ruined and sizzling on nutmeg, but I wasn’t jaded. I wasn’t another goddamn Cather in the Rye boy. I gave a shit. Maybe I gave too much of a shit, because it took me weeks of moping and deliberation to do anything. Weeks had passed. It was time for direct action. It’s always time for direct action, but I didn’t know that until I had to. Lyme disease wasn’t something I could cry about for a couple weeks. I had to get that shit checked out, now.

I googled and called and came up with a plan. The Groveland free clinic said they would take me. I printed forms and got out of the house. I pulled on one of my Dad’s oversized and insulated red flannel coats and giant gloves. I velcroed a bright orange safety vest over the coat. Cars would clearly see me. Though I had wanted to die, I didn’t want to die anymore, not by gory car strike from what would likely be a republican driver. No republican would be the death of me. Besides, I preferred peaceful
and quiet suicide fantasies, the kind where death falls over you like sleep or a first snow or romance. What evs. To my outfit I added a red shell helmet, a purple headband for my ears and Alex’s handknit scarf for my face. Finally, I pulled an old pair of baggy green corduroy over my skinny jeans. I looked like a Vice Don’t. Vice—the mega-critical hipster zine, what else?—would have been like, hey, we didn’t know the obese clown bike race was today. Flannel and corduroy? Helmet and Velcro shoes? Orange safety vest? Vice would have been like, look, it’s the loser crossing guard who sold you shitty pot in sixth grade. Old creeper Dickhead who played you at Pokémon and lost, even though he had the rare cards that cost like a hundred bucks. Good old Dickhead, faking his seizures—that’s why he wore that stupid helmet, looked like a fucking dick shaking on the ground—so you’d feel sorry for the fuckface and share your other Twix. Whatever, Dickhead, your gay ass shoes are unvelcroed. Made you look, fucktard. Hey man, while Dicky’s humping the floor you can totally swipe his rare cards and he won’t ever say nothing. Let’s get out of here before he smokes some oregano and tries to molest us again. Let ’em shake to his fucking grave. We need somewhere new to piss. Fucking Dickhead.

Harsh, I know, but I looked like that guy, like a Vice Don’t. And they probably would have been meaner and in fewer words.

Really, I looked like any other Lockender or Grovelander. These citizens had other and harder things to worry about than the practical and mismatched clothes that kept them warm and dry. They had bigger effing issues than looking presentable, like finding employment and feeding kids and getting addicted to meth. And it’s not like they lived in a city. Not like a real city. Not the kind where people care how you look.
So I would blend in. I couldn’t care about the way I looked. I had to go. I slammed an old, cold cup of asswater coffee that had been stagnating in the pot all day. For the first time in weeks, I was serious about something other than not existing. Thank the taint.

I dragged out Space Invader, feeling weak as a puppet, and clicked on the blinking red taillight, so in the flurrying snow the bike looked like a backwards Rudolf.

It’d been too long since I’d been out. On the road I was slow and mechanical, pushing pedal by rusty pedal. As I pumped free of Lockend, my sore muscles stretched and began to work. One mile out, my weakness grew to a warm strength. Two miles out, and my tired mind awoke to a giddy exhilaration. The coffee had cured the bad aspects of nutmeg flu. The numbness and nausea were gone. Pumping the pedals, I became a prisoner escaping, a sailor blasting through white waves of snow. I felt naturally high. I wasn’t going to die.

The road was crunchy, not creamy. My taint stung at every tiny bump and jump. The pain was oddly exhilarating, and the thought of having a real hardcore disease was exciting in a self-pitying sort of way. It was emolicious. I pumped the pedals. I was pumped.

The heron stood in the dark pond, a witness to my manic snowy cycling. It waited like an icon of patience.

“What are you doing here?” I yelled. It didn’t move.

Country roads: lung-straining uphills, fast freefall downhills, half-collapsed barns, fields of mud and manure, staring cows with clouds of breath, and a lone goat perched on a pile of rocks. Some farmer had erected a life-size crucifix on his hill. Real country.
The heavy jacket and hard exercise kept me closer to hot than cold, though the 
freezing air cut through my scarf. My cheeks went from cold to numb. I squinted against 
the snow and wished I’d added some goofy goggles to my outfit. At times the wind 
pushed into me so I pedaled twice as hard, like really worked my leg muscles, like I was 
on a gym elliptical. I shifted gears as constantly and naturally as breathing. I was 
thankful the wet snow wasn’t sticking to the road. It melted on contact. Despite the cold, 
the darker, smellier areas of my body grew wet with sweat.

The ride was longer than usual. I had to turn right where I usually turned back, to 
join the fast traffic on the main road down to Groveland. There would be a constant blast 
of cars coming from Columbus and wherever. There was no quiet way in.

The snow blurred to freezing sleet as soon as I hit the main road. The traffic 
turned deadly. The cars whizzed killer fast in a forty-five zone. I was thankful for my 
blinking red light and orange vest, and hoped they would be enough to keep my life. For 
the traffic and me, this stretch of road was a race of focus and speed, no joy ride. I stayed 
to the right side of the side line—the thin foot of street—bouncing on grates and skidding 
on gravel, clenching my teeth at my burning taint. The passing cars sprayed me with a 
continual mist of freezing water. My corduroys grew wet and heavy. The traffic wasn’t 
conditioned to bikes on this road, and cars lined behind me and sped madly around me. 

A red truck, jacked up on huge tires and sporting an American flag sticker, honked and 
yelled something totally republican out the window. I caught “faggot.” Sometimes it’s 
impossible not to hate people. At least *Vice* is creative with their insults.

The traffic was endless, dystopian. I became part of its flow, stopping at lights— 
we were in Groverburbia now—and standing on my bike pedals behind cars. I’d mastered
the wobbly technique in C-Bus, and could balance on the Space Invader, waiting for the light to change, without putting a foot on the ground. It was like telling the asshole cars to suck it. Look what I can do, bitches.

I knew I was almost there when McDonald’s glowing yellow arches appeared. They’d never looked more glorious.

The sign “Welcome to Groveland” flashed by. A picture of a mallard duck was painted under its text, and as I heaved by in the sleet, I wasn’t sure I’d seen it right. I’d either forgotten or never noticed the sign. Maybe Groveland had a pond—at least one grove, you’d think—with its flock of green-headed mallards, but I’d never seen it. They should have had a picture of a line of cars creeping past plazas of cheap chain restaurants. Welcome to Groveland.

I didn’t feel like I felt when I rode my bike in Columbus. I didn’t feel like I was part of something bigger. Every car that passed me and every fast food place I passed—like the combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell—was its own solipsistic world of intent. We were all here, all going somewhere around here, but we only existed to our own damn selves.

Though I felt at odds with the world around, I began to feel as if I had some control over my life. I was doing something that needed to be done.

I found the free clinic on a store strip with a gun shop and check cashing. No thrift store, unfortunately. I could have used some dry pants, and whatever other treasures I found. Thrift therapy, right.

My face felt red as my jacket. I locked up Space Invader to a dead sapling. No bike rack. No one bikes in Groveland.
I pushed the dark glass doors marked GROVELAND LIFE PRACTICE. Some of the white letters were partially peeled off. The waiting room was warm and dry, more welcoming than it looked from the outside.

Though it was a free clinic, it wasn’t totally free. They had a sliding scale chart that was an incomprehensible gridlock of numbers and colors. Staring at the chart, my head didn’t feel as sober as it had out in the cold air. The secretary, who spoke with the same tame voice I’d talked with on the phone before I biked over, said I owed them ten dollars, which was totally fair and awesome, but I still cringed when she swiped my nearly-maxed credit card. I would have to puppy-eye my parents for cash soon.

The orange plastic seat in the waiting room felt secure and comfortable. No wonder, after an hour straddling a bike seat.

I filled out forms like an adult. Weird, I know. The papers started formal enough with age, sex, location. Another form required proof of poorness. I pulled the printouts out of my jacket pocket and unfolded the clammy, cold papers. I paperclipped my bank account balance and final temp paystub, which I’d printed before I left the house at the tame-voiced secretary’s request. Then the forms got weird. One was a very particular questionnaire about mental health. Yes or No: “I like to imagine the faces of relatives and friends at my funeral.” “I think someone is watching me sleep.” “I have gotten high from cough syrup in the last three weeks.” I’d been happy to get into the clinic, but now the forms made me uncomfortable and uncertain. The chair wasn’t so secure anymore. Other waiting patients kept glancing at me. My cheeks flushed. And after the wintry exercise, my body temp shot to hot flash in the warm room. I shed my big ugly jacket, but I felt too self-conscious to remove my wet corduroys. I didn’t want to be the guy
taking off his pants, even with another pair under them. I didn’t want any attention. I was dripping sweat and sleet water and the waiting area began to spin slightly in my vision, as if I was dumb-drunk, and I pressed my thumbs into my eyes until the dizzy spell passed. It could have been the nutmeg mixed with the hard bike ride. Whatever it was, it left me empty-headed, spacey. The last form was a white sheet of paper with only an empty line. Before the line was the phrase “If you consent, sign here.” I read it twenty times and signed. Maybe they forgot to give me something, like a page of fine print I wouldn’t have read anyway. I didn’t ask.

I read a *Newsweek* with a headline article titled: “Where in the world is Osama bin Laden?” The journalist speculated based on a list of fair and articulate facts. The article concluded that Bin Laden could be found in geological features like mountains and caves and deserts. They were so close. The answer was the ocean.

I wondered why the clinic had chosen *Newsweek* over *Time*, and if there was a difference.

There were some seriously sick-looking people in the room. I tried to ignore them like responsibility. They got called one by one, maybe not as fast as I imagined a free clinic would call people. It took longer than a long while. I was getting pretty hungry, and the glass doors showed it was getting dark outside. No *Time* to kill the time. This patient’s patience was waning. Is that why we’re called patients? The longer I sat, the more depressing the warm room became. A woman younger than me said “fucking child support” and “fucking Walmart” and fucking everything, more swearing than an issue of *Vice*, for at least forty-five minutes on her cell phone until her phone battery died. “Fucking piece of shit,” she said, and looked around as if ready to carry on the
complaints with anyone that would listen. I looked down. A shirtless toddler huddled under his seat, hoarding an entire bag of Tootsie Rolls and flicking the wrappers at my feet. I couldn’t imagine enjoying one Tootsie Roll, and felt sorry that the kid didn’t have better candy for his dinner. I looked away. An older woman about as wide as I was tall was coughing herself to death. She’d stop and gasp “My, my” and then, as if triggered by her statement, start hacking again. Maybe these were what real life emo zombies looked like. Maybe my life, apparently easier and less stressful than the lives of the people around me, would be easier to get together. Maybe I could be happy and figure out what to do with myself. I didn’t have financial and housing and nutritional and physical issues, no “fucking food stamps” or “fucking worthless bastard” to worry over, so what the fuck was wrong with me? Ask the emo zombies eating my brain, they’d giggle like nitrous suckers and keep on chowing down. It didn’t matter that my life didn’t outwardly suck in a hard and gritty way. My friends moved, sure, and I grieved for my dream to move with them. I couldn’t blame my world. I was secure and comfortable. All the suckiness was on the inside, regardless of passive parent fights and taint tick bites, yearning and Burning. I was the worthless bastard in my life. I had said to Alex that I didn’t even know if I loved myself. I now knew if I loved myself. The answer was no, but trying.

I flipped through a stack of limp, germy Newsweeks before I heard my name.

“James Henry Jameson?” called the woman with the tame voice. “…The Third?”

After height check—six four and a half, I must have been standing straight—and more sitting—this time alone on crinkly paper, with a surprisingly informative copy of O—the doctor knocked, entered the room and said, “So we’ve got a bite, huh.” She
looked like a short clone of Hillary Clinton. I’m not into older women, not like an active
cougar hunter or anything, but I’d always seen something attractive about the former first
lady. It was probably the power thing. My interest was vague at best, a harmless
celebrity crush, but in lonelier moments I could see Hillary taking off the power suit and
taking on the horny clarity of desperate fantasy. When I was down and alone, Hillary
became beyond attractive. She was seductive, hot. And in the Groveland doctor’s office,
I felt desperately lonely. I wanted Hillary, or someone who looked close enough. At the
time I blamed the nutmeg.

The doctor locked eyes. Hers were bright and inviting. She held the gaze a
second too long. “Let’s take a look at this sore, James.” She seemed to say it a bit too
slow and soft.

I explained to the doctor that the sore was behind my scrotum. I almost said balls.

“I know,” said Hillary. As far as I cared, this was her name. She gave a half-
smile. “You can take off your pants and lie on the table.”

Totally the power thing that got me.

I’d never shown my balls to anyone other than Alex and a couple lame hookups.
I told myself this was strictly medical, an unsexy procedure. It was, right.

I dropped my pants. I dropped my other pants. Hillary sat eye-level to my crotch
and shined a freaking flashlight on the dark side of my sack. I concentrated on not
getting excited. This was hard. Thinking of not getting horny makes you think of the
very thing you’re trying not to think of. Don’t get a boner. Boner. Damn, this is hard.
Hard. Damn it!
Hillary lightly pushed my legs apart, spread-eagled. I stared at the gray paneled ceiling. Unattractive, plain, nonhuman gray paneled ceiling.

Hillary cupped and lifted my balls. “Is it here?”

“It’s under there.” I wished she wouldn’t squeeze.

“I see. How does this feel?” said Hillary, slowly tracing a latexed finger over my taint.

“Sore.” I couldn’t hold out much longer. I felt a faint stirring down there, a minor pressure of blood pumping, filling, wanting to expand.

“And how does this feel?” she said, circling her finger around my taint bullseye in a deliberate and troubling way.

“More sore.” I counted ceiling panels.

“And this?” she said, pressing the spot.

“Ow.” More pain than pleasure.

She wheeled away from me. “You can put on your pants now.”

I was relieved and disappointed at the same time.

As I sat up, I caught a whiff of the undeniable caveman smell of my sweaty junk. It was a musky bicycle-seat stink. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d showered. When I’d found the tick, probably. I smelled like balls. This was embarrassing in a deeper way than an uncontrollable boner, and that hadn’t happened, thank freaking Jesus. I yanked up my boxer-briefs and pants and pants.

Hillary flicked her latex gloves into the biohazard trash. She focused on her clipboard, all professional and impersonal. “Well, James, I’ve seen Lyme disease and I’ve seen infected bites. Lyme disease is a distinct ring. Your wound is red and inflamed
around the bite, like an infection. We’ll draw some blood to make sure you don’t have
anything, but I think you’re in the clear. When did you get bit, again?”

“Um.” Time was blurry. The weeks had bled together and now there was snow
outside. “A couple weeks ago, I think.”

Hillary shook her head. “I have to wonder if this is a ladybug bite. A lot of
ladybugs get inside this time of year. They have a nasty bite. Is your bed near a
window?”

Ladybug, what? The taint bloodsucker had not been a lucky ladybug. I didn’t say
anything. I buckled my belt, clicking and clacking. “But I’m weak,” I said. “I’m tired
and my muscles are sore. I sleep all the time. Those are symptoms of Lyme disease.”

Hillary locked eyes again. “Those are symptoms of depression.”

“Sore muscles?”

“Anxiety can do that.” Hillary flipped forms on her clipboard. “Let’s look at
your mental health questionnaire. James, under the question, ‘I think about my ending
my life,’ you responded ‘much of the time.’ Do you think you may hurt yourself or
others?”

“I would never intentionally hurt anyone.”

“Yourself?”

I was no longer naked, but I felt just as awkward, just as exposed. I shifted on the
papery table and moved my gaze to the mirror behind Hillary. In the mirror my long face
appeared in a sickly, scraggly beard. When did that get there? It wasn’t like a hipster
beard. It was like a homeless beard. My bangs stuck flat to my forehead and shined with
grease, a very dirty blond. I was surprised Hillary had gotten as close to me as she had.

She was a pro. I shook my head.

Hillary read from my form. “You say you have no reason to get up in the morning. You don’t believe your life will improve. You drink cough syrup to get high.”

“Look,” I said, “I know I’m depressed. But I can’t do anything about it. I was on anti-depressants for years.” In high school. “I hated them. They made me feel insane, like a zombie.” Like an emotionless zombie, which was as bad as an emo zombie, but in a different way. “I tried another pill. It was like taking a laxative everyday.”

Hillary gave a half-smile and stared at me. I stared at the back of her head in the mirror, at her clean blond hair. I hadn’t expected such attentive service from a free clinic.

“I see,” said Hillary, “that you were taking SSRIs.” She pointed at my medical history form. “There are other pills that work in different ways.”

I met her staring eyes and saw that they were lucid and calm. She was attractive again, half-smiling under the florescent bulbs, but not a silly fantasy. She was a real human that seemed to care. She was with me. I wanted her. I wanted anything that could make me feel better.

“What do you got?” I said.

* * *

On the way home, I stopped at a Groveland pharmacy and picked up the pills. The free clinic covered most of the prescription. I paid the remaining twenty bucks, and wondered when my credit card would stop working. In celebration and hunger, I swung by one of
the cheap Chinese takeout places. My credit card worked. I ate the best General Tso’s of my life with throwaway chopsticks on a greasy table. Using chopsticks. That was something I learned in college. Each bite was as good as the first, sweet and slightly spicy. As I ate alone, Groveland citizens moped in and picked up their takeout orders. They looked mostly like shit, all rundown and overworked, not attractive like the doctor. They wore sports jackets and loose faded jeans. Everyone appeared as stiff and sour as I had felt earlier. They’ve all got the nutmeg flu, I thought. I felt sorry for the Grovelanders and at the same time hated myself for thinking anything was wrong with them. I licked the orange-red sauce from my splintery chopsticks. My fortune cookie told me “Bed year are over, how you must fun.” I agreed. With the last gulp of pop, I swallowed a yellow antidepressant pill. Then I smoked a really good cig, turned on my bright headlight, flicked on the red taillight and got the hell out of Groveland.

I cycled double-fast in the sleet-shitting dark. The ride was colder and wetter and deadlier. I spaced out, thinking of nothing but the white sideline. Space Invader and I rode that sideline hard, pumping all the way to home base. The tube of pills rattled in my pocket with each pedal. I survived.

* * *

When I got home I was rosy-cheeked and exhausted. My parents weren’t around, a blessing. I left a note on the kitchen table: “taking a nap.” This translated to “don’t bother me about dinner.” The empty, quiet house lulled me upstairs and tucked me into my tiny bed. I did like the note said and passed out. When I woke up, it was past
midnight and my parents were in bed. Another blessing. A note on the kitchen table told me that General Tso’s takeout—Mom spelled it “Gen. Zoe’s”—was in the fridge. How ironic, right.

I needed to refresh and revive my nasty ass. I was reeking and stinking. My back ached, my legs knotted. My mind was nap-numbed, all fuzzy static. It could have been some kind of nutmeg hangover to the hangover-like nutmeg. A shower would make me feel better all over.

There were still surprises in my parents’ house. I turned on the shower and discovered the bathtub. It gleamed like a monument to clean sensual pleasure. I pulled the stopper.

I hadn’t taken a bath since the nineties. How retro.

I turned the faucet to scald. It had to be hot. I found a stash of unopened bath salts under the sink. The clear plastic bags, tied with red ribbon, looked like generic Christmas gifts. I dumped some in and breathed the ginger-lavender steam, hot and sweet. The bath was ready. I folded my frame like an accordion and immersed myself.

The water was so hot I thought about nothing but heat and water. It was like drugs without drugs. I understood the whole of bath culture, I got it. The silky robes, the scented candles, the beads and gels. Join the bath scene, man. Showers are for people who think they have stuff to do. Baths are for everyone else, which are only two kinds of people. One, old people that somehow never learned how to take a shower, people like my mom. And two, people that get the experience, people like Alex—she’d been a bather, with Mirah on the stereo—and now me. Taking a bath, I understood, is like bathroom meditation, a baptism for non-believers, an inner as well as outer cleansing.
I plopped a hot washcloth over my eyes and listened to the bathroom. The faucet dripped and the light bulb ticked and my ears turned up the volume on their forever ringing radio. From faraway came a background noise, like a TV laugh-track or a dog barking. It could have been in my head.

The bath rocked. My muscles went soft as the water. My brain melted in drip-drops down my spine. For one watery moment I was calm enough to go back to bed. But as I bobbed, a new feeling in buzzed my head, an electricity rising in ringing waves. Though I was immersed in liquid calm, I began to wake up, like a cup of coffee was kicking in. The bath became uncomfortable. The water cooled, the tub hardened and I didn’t feel calm anymore. I felt energized, excited even, too much to lie in a tub of hot water. I wanted action, like, I don’t know, to shave my beard. And I needed a cigarette. I flung the cold washcloth from my face. I was awake and alert and strangely speedy.

I could say that the bath had revived me, and maybe it had, but I was pretty certain that the edgy feeling—my teeth clenching, my brain blaring “Dawn to Dawn” on repeat—was the new antidepressant pill, pumping its delicious crazy drug into my blood. I sang along. It was better than nutmeg.
CHAPTER XI
CANAL CORNER

Bed year are over. Weirdness flourished. Like, I made another decision the next day. I was on a roll, not the drug kind. The manic kind where you keep going and doing. How you must fun. This decision wasn’t as easy as riding my bike. The idea had been simmering in my crockpot skull for a while. It was now fully stewed, and there were no other ideas on the table. I was going to call Webster or Sara to talk it over, or even my sister Sam, because I didn’t know what to do. Decisions sucked. I wanted someone to make the calls for me, literally and figuratively. But I put off calling or emailing or texting for too long. Other people had other things to worry about. I didn’t want them to think I needed their approval and advice, that I was needy. And I didn’t need to ask my parents to know what they would think.

Over-rested, speeding on my new antidepressant, and watching the still-raining sleet slide down the window, I made the decision. I took direct action to change my life. I double-stepped to downtown Lockend, my head hoodied against the icy rain.

I stepped into Canal Corner and removed my wet hood. The dry air and bright plastic packages were a welcome contrast to outside. Despite the speakers overhead—they farted another classic rock flusher—I felt I’d made the right decision. I felt placebo confident. Blame the new pill. There was only one other person in the small store.
“What do you think you want?” said Dean in a deep voice. He looked like a smaller, older, toadier version of Bill Murray. He sat inside the store dawn to dusk, so his skin should have been pale and patchy. Instead, his face appeared dim and dark behind the counter, like he was always cast in shadow. He made a sound that may have been a real fart. He smiled. Dean was all gags and gas. “What do you want, kid?”

“A job.” I set my damp résumé on the counter.

Dean laughed his bullfrog laugh. “You noticed my sign.”

“Yeah.”

Dean picked up my résumé. “Well look at this.”

I felt like people were always telling me to “look at this.”


“No luck,” I said, “and I’m not doing squat.”

Dean fanned his huge hands. “So ride easy awhile. Live on Jim’s couch until you find something. That’s what all the college grads are doing these days, I hear.”

“The couch smells like cats. Plus, you know, Dad’s sick of paying my bills.”

Dean frog-guffawed. “How old are you, anyway?”

I wasn’t sure if this was a legal interview question. Then again, I wasn’t sure this was an interview. “Um.”
“You’re twenty-something, right? Good, good.” Dean nodded his wobble head. “I don’t hire teens anymore. Nothing wrong with them, other than the fact that they’re teenagers.” He crossed his arms and leaned on the counter. “They shove a candy bar down their throat soon as I turn my back. Cigarettes, lotto tickets, they’ll steal it like I won’t notice. I do. Sell beer to each other behind my back, too, they could get me in all kinds of trouble. Not that I wasn’t the same way, but there’s something different about these kids.”

“Every generation says that.” As soon as I said it, I regretted it. Not because I was arguing—I wasn’t—but because I knew I was pandering to Dean, giving him fuel to keep going.

He kept going. “True enough. The kids these days.” Dean snorted. “The old folks always say it. Now I’m old, I can say it. The kids these days. They all act like they’re all entitled to whatever they want. Staring at their phones all day. Not a nickel of sense in their skulls. They don’t care about work, hell, they don’t even know what it is. They expect their free little lives to be paid for, everything they want to be handed over. They work a day, they think they deserve a week off. But they’ll learn. They can flip burgers in Groveland. They can learn something over there. I’m not trying to teach them anymore. I’m too old for that.” Dean unfolded his hairy arms. “But you, you’re not a teenager. You went through the college gauntlet. And look, says here on your fancy fact sheet you worked in data entry for a year. You know how to work, huh.”

Sure. Sure I could work. That didn’t mean I liked it or thought it was the right option for humanity. Certainly we were smart enough to come up with something other than “working,” but probably not in my lifetime. A sense of dread crept into the store. I
felt less and less capable of cashiering for Dean, as if I had a lot to hide. I wasn’t a teen, but the way Dean put it—the whole thing about entitlement and aversion to work—sounded a notch too close to the way I felt.

Dean leaned towards me like he expected me to say something. Time to show Dean how I’d earned my degree. Time to bullshit. “Yeah, teens think they’re entitled,” I said. They were raised that way, same as me. “I mean, there’s something about that age where you do things without thinking of other people. It wasn’t that long ago for me. I remember. At that age, it’s like you only care about what you can get. Teens don’t care about consequences, like you said, like stealing a candy bar or whatever. They just see the candy bar, not getting fired. No guilt, either.” I knew I was generalizing an entire age group of people, but so was Dean. I went with it. “That’s all part of being a teenager. Then they grow up.” I was still working on this part myself.

“Some of them,” said Dean, and laughed a deep froggy laugh. “Forget about it. Come over here. Take a look at this register.”

I leaned over the tiny counter.

“Over here, Jimmy.”

I walked around the counter in two steps. I noticed for the first time that it wasn’t shielded with a swinging gate or anything. I looked up and noticed a lot more. Behind the counter, the store took on the look of a true storeroom of goods, an oasis, an important trading place for tired travelers. I had a clear shotgun view down every aisle, all three of them, one fat with junk food, another stacked with dusty cans and another cluttered with overpriced toiletries. Against the far wall, behind the tight aisles, a couple of coolers glowed with milk and pop and beer. Canal Corner looked vitally convenient.
It was a necessity for our very small town community. It also seemed less bright behind the counter. It was. There was no florescent bulb back there. Dean really was cast in shadow.

“This is a good register. It’s probably been ringing folks since before you were born.”

The register could be called vintage. A clumsy keyboard of big plastic buttons gleamed like a robot from the eighties. A single green LCD screen, the kind you’d see on an old alarm clock, waved from a tubular plastic arm. Under the robot register was an unassuming drawer with a keyhole in the middle.

“Actually,” Dean said, “I think you’re about the same age as this register. I remember you being a baby when I was breaking it in. Isn’t that something.”

“It is something.” The register and me were about the same age, from the same generation. We were born to be retro together. It seemed an unexpected yet obvious fate. Fate or karma or whatever you want to call it. Whatever it was, it registered. It clicked. It rang and ran.

“No scanner. Never needed one,” Dean said. “This works just fine. In fact, it’s the only working register in all of Lockend.”

“What about Canawler’s Lounge?”

Dean’s laugh was so loud and deep I had to smile. “Canawler’s Lounge don’t count. Really, they don’t count their dollars.” He tapped the big square buttons with his fat fingers. “Key price, hit inventory button, then total, you got it.” He grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the wall behind us and walked around the counter. “Stay there. Ring me up. This is your interview.”

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It seemed I was getting hired as quickly as I applied. It was too easy, shameful luck. Other people must have applied, people who needed a job more than me, people like the Groveland clinic patients. The applicants couldn’t have all been teenagers. I didn’t want to believe that Dean was hiring me because of his old fishing friendship with my grandpa, the number one James Jameson. It was favoritism and that’s wrong, right? I was like a celebrity getting royal treatment. James the Third gets whatever he wants. The world was with me in weird ways.

“A pack of Camels?” I said.

“You didn’t say my name. Didn’t say hi or hello. Everyone comes in here knows one another, you know that.”

Shit. I didn’t know that knowing people was a job requirement. I wanted to be the ambivalent cashier, the disinterested and smarmy cashier that flicked through magazines and smoked inside. Like Dean’s teens, I wanted to do the least amount of work possible. Unlike Dean’s teens, I wouldn’t steal anything, which I thought more than qualified me for the job. But Dean wanted engagement, a cashier as live and active as his chatty self, and I was too deep in the Canal to back paddle now. I was Cornered. I’d have to “fake it ’till you make it.” That’s what people said. Is that what people really did? Could it work? “Hi Dean,” I said, forcing a twisted smirk. It was unnatural, Romenyesque. “How you doing?”

Dean hooted, coughed. “Well, a carp can’t cry in a canal to Columbus, know what I’m saying?”
Nope. “Sure do. Just the cigarettes?” I said, and felt dog dumb. I didn’t know what to say or do. Tell me what to do. “Um.” I turned to the cigarette shelf behind me to get the untaxed price. “Five twenty-two?”

Dean’s big face went flat as pizza. “Jimmy,” he said. “You didn’t ask for my ID.”

“Oh.” I picked up the Camels, dropped them. “Can I see your ID?”

Dean slapped the counter and let out laughs like a swamp full of bullfrogs. Then his face went flat again. “Anyone looks anywhere near underage, we’re supposed to ask for ID. Call it as you see it. These secret agents get sent around, you know, and check to make sure we’re following law. Of course we are. Same with the alcohol. You’ll know an agent cause you’ve never seen them before. Everyone else, you’ll know pretty soon whether they can buy the stuff.”

“Ohay.”

“Five twenty-two.”

I keyed the numbers slower than Dean, even with all my data entry experience.

“Now hit the tobacco button,” said Dean. “For inventory.”

I tapped the key marked “TOB.” “And total. That adds tax. Unless it’s food. Hence the inventory buttons.”

I said the price of the cigs I knew by heart and lung. In fact, I was wondering if I had the measly credit to buy a pack. My card was dying, especially after the Groveland journey, and I was too lame to check my account online. I was scared. I didn’t want to know the date my money died.
Dean reached behind his overalls and pulled out an overloaded and faded leather wallet. It was thick as a bar of soap. He cracked it open, slow and casual, and paused. “Look here,” he said, and set it on the counter. There was a picture of an older woman smiling. She held up a hanging fish with visible effort. “Check out that bass,” said Dean, grinning. “My wife’s alright, too, I suppose.” He flipped the photos. “Here’s my grandkid. She thought this catfish was the cat’s meow.” A young girl with pigtails held up a fish half her size, also with visible effort. Dean kept flipping. “You know this one,” he said.

I did. It was Dean and my grandpa from years ago, Dean still old but not yet ancient, Grandpa still alive, each hip-deep in water and hugging a monster sturgeon in their arms. They strained under the weight as if the fish were a massive log. It was log-long, at least six feet, and lined with weird bony plates like a dinosaur fish. I had no idea where they were, but I knew the photo from Grammy and Grandpa’s house. I’d forgotten it. I hadn’t seen it in a decade, since before Grandpa died and before Grammy moved into Pinewood Ridge. It was kind of like seeing a ghost. A memory ghost. The photo details came back vivid clear when Dean held it over the counter, and with it I caught a smell like Grandpa’s house, musky like bog mud and spice-sweet like cloves, and with the smell I sensed a feeling of comfort, like I was in the right place. I sniffed again and the smell was gone. It was weird how the photo brought back these little things I’d forgotten. I’d known it all along, but was only beginning to accept that Lockend hadn’t been such a bad place to grow up. Really, it had been downright nice and all-American. I had been blessed with mediocrity, with middle-class family and security and certainty. Childhood glowed.
Now nothing was certain. My family wasn’t secure anymore. Grammy was senile. My parents didn’t know how to talk to one another, had somehow un-learned whatever communication had brought them together. I didn’t know how to talk to them. Lockend’s cricket-quiet streets, once a source of calm and comfort, couldn’t debate with—couldn’t even open their mouths against—the howling freedom and thumping bass of young city life.

Dean closed his wallet. “James was a good guy,” he said.

“No joke,” I said.

The store radio blared Floyd, “Wish You Were Here”. The irony of the moment dripped from the ceiling speakers, and with it a sense of true loss. The song’s yearning sounded loud and clear. I heard a bit of the meaning I’d passed off the hundreds of hearings before. The song had its time and place, and there was a sense of loss for that, too. Maybe some of the crappy classic rock wasn’t so crappy, just overplayed to the grave and out of context. Maybe the Lockend soundtrack, the AC / ZZ Tops and the Boston Foreigners, the Led Halens and Van Zeppelins and Lynyrd Segers and Motley Purples and all that hard guitar radio fuzz—it was all one big loud blob of RAWK to me—maybe it all came from a time when the grooves and growls represented an alive and breathing culture of Rock and Roll. The music had meant something before I was born. Everything had. Sure, it could still mean something to some people, an indignant expression of workaday lives and why-not nihilism and whatever. But classic rock, at least the same tired timestamps the radio looped over and over, literally sounded played out. The moment was dead. If the new butt-rock that rotated between the classics was today’s representation, than rock and roll culture had rotted into a methy misogyny.
Classic rock seemed like the only music that Lockenders and Grovelanders cared about. It blared out of car windows. It was what I was supposed to like in high school. What was sad was that my townspeople, from teens to retirees, clung to the dead music as if it defined their lives. I hoped the same thing wouldn’t happen to me with my indie rock and art rock and etcetera rock. I hoped I wouldn’t desperately cling to a lost time. I was screwed. A lot of my music was about desperately clinging to lost times.

This is what I thought of classic rock. No wonder Burn said No thanks.

Dean pulled out a Jackson. “Type twenty, don’t forget the decimal point and the zeroes. Always need the decimal point. Hit cash.”

I did and the drawer jumped at me with a robot clank.

“The change is right there on the screen.”

By screen, Dean meant the tiny green strip with LCD numbers mounted on the register’s tube arm. I counted change with embarrassing slowness.

“Have a good one,” I said.

“What?” Dean said. His seventy-something face creased as he smiled. I could not imagine him ever retiring. He was classic rock. He’d always be around. “Oh. You too, Jimmy. Here.” He lifted the Camels to me. “Take them. It’s your pay for today. Now stop your smoking or you’ll end up looking like me. Can you be here tomorrow at nine?”

Nine was scary early to me. I nodded. Fake it. Make it.

On my way out the door, Dean told me to grab the “Help Wanted” sign. I snatched it from the window like a cartoon character.
“Hey Jimmy,” said Dean, taking the sign, “watch yourself.” Not sure if I earned it, but I got the position I deserved.