Midnight in a perfect world

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MIDNIGHT IN A PERFECT WORLD

by

Jaron M. Serven

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ABSTRACT

What follows is a collection of short stories dealing with the experience of growing up in America during the Digital Age, written in a creative fictional method. The stories directly deal with the themes of coming to terms with the past, friendship, facing tough choices, maintaining love in an unloving world–overall, expressing the look and feel of what it is like to be young, to see through the eyes of a generation inheriting a world of questionable morals. The collection pulls from numerous resources in the genre of the contemporary American bildungsroman, but also from much literary criticism dealing with the cultural effects of the Digital Age, in an effort to ascertain what is unique about this young generation. The stories themselves do not deal directly with the internet, but reflect the social trends birthed by the presence of unlimited information and almost constant awareness of the global process which the internet provides. This collection, and its author, espouses the notion of extreme hope and determination for the future, as it rests with this generation, even in the face of ignorance, hatred and evil.
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Introduction

I’ve always loved stories. For a while I minded drawing and painting, but my heart always drew me back to the little capers going on behind my eyes. At times I would transfigure what I saw at the movies into my own imaginative scenarios; I was a little lion king, trying to save my people from an evil uncle (little did I know it, but my near-unparalleled love for *Hamlet* may very well have been seeded then). As I grew older, I found that books offered keener visions for my mind’s eye. I’ve never looked anywhere else since. Over the years, my views on storytelling may have changed, but my love for them, for their influence and their impact, has never waned. For my money, the best stories represent their respective investigations into an era with clarity, craftsmanship and, of course, imagination. So, simply, that’s what I set out to do—write a fictional representation of what it was like to come of age in America, in this time, using well-told, simply-put stories.

The coming-of-age part was an easy choice to make. I am a relatively young man as I stand right now, and I am still going through the growing pains of making it on my own in the world—or maybe I am just realizing for the first time what it really takes. Either way, I knew the inspiration for these stories had to come from this strife—the struggle to find out who you are and how you fit in with everything else—because it was what I, and many of my friends, are going through. This theme is, in fact, a time-honored
tradition in literature—the *bildungsroman*. Its formatting may have changed, but the basics of the genre have remained intact—a story following the evolution of the protagonist as he struggles to accept, and be accepted by, society.

Writing short stories influenced by this tradition was interesting, first and foremost, because so much about the genre is slow-moving, whereas short stories are finite. When considering the classics—Salinger’s, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Joyce’s, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Little Women*, Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*—we can see clearly the basic pattern for the genre in action: initial crises, social conflict, epiphany, acceptance/rejection of social paradigms and of the self. The *bildungsroman* is not usually associated with the short story because of the longevity of each tale’s arc; change is long, change does not come easily, and it requires novel-length musings about internal conflict. Yet I found the themes in the American *bildungsroman*—many of them wonderfully articulated in Kenneth Millard’s work *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*—to be very much in line with what I had in heart and mind: themes of father-son relationships, friendship, death, love and the quest for knowledge/truth. I had to take these themes, and this long-winded genre, and work them into the short story.

Reading other contemporary examples of the American *bildungsroman* goes a long way toward assuaging fears. It is evident that there is much creativity and play to be had in this field, from Louis Sachar’s *Holes*, with its dried lake bed filled with underage “campers” digging six-foot holes; to Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*, with its narrator’s sharp voice, like broken glass; Sapphire’s *Push*, with its clear rendition of America’s
urban cities; and Brady Udall’s *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint* and Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, for evoking a mood that could only be described as zany. Through reading these stories, one sees that the *bildungsroman* is more than just a simple, formulaic genre. The genre is to be found *within* the stories themselves, is dredged out of them by an overarching need for canonization in literature. I include Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club* more as an influence on my writing style, but also for the fact that it *is* a novel of education, of the the acceptance of self and of social reality. It still fits with the overall puzzle, even though at first we might think the piece should not be included in the box.

What is even more intriguing is the inclusion of memoir in the genre, specifically because of the autobiographical nature of such stories. I do not think that the *bildungsroman* should be limited to fiction; a story is a story. The specific reasons I choose memoirs such as *Prozac Nation*, *Fun Home*, and *The Adderall Diaries* for inclusion as influences is that they are well told, inspiring in their writing style, and their themes run in line with much of my own concerns: drug use, destructive father relationships, tense childhoods, and the search for meaning within it all. Further, we would be lying to ourselves if we said fiction did not contain elements of real life. My own terrifying childhood, complete with an abusive father, served as kernels of inspiration for much of my fiction.

Still, I wanted my stories to be unique as well, if only for the fact that we live in terrifying times. The age of the internet has brought our culture into extreme self-awareness, where change and growth happen radically and without pause. We are growing up in ways not even imaginable before, where it is becoming more and more
clear that there is no elemental subject of “the human being”, but that we each individually make a choice to be who we are everyday, that subjectivity is becoming the new objectivity. Walter Ong’s article “Writing is a Technology that Restuctures Thought” is wonderfully articulate in the way he attributes humanity’s ascent to the status as the most dominant species on the planet to writing. Writing is a tool that shapes our minds, our emotions, our culture–even our bodies. Its influence, in the simplest of forms, is so vast that it may be impossible to trace. The internet is the technology of writing taken to its zenith, and my generation–what people are so cheekily calling “the Facebook generation”–has not known a world without it. This was where our uniqueness lies.

The literature on the subject–of the influential nature of the internet on our individual and collective psyche–is extensive. First, I went into the fictional aspect of technology affecting our culture, reading a few seminal science-fiction books such as Philip K. Dick’s Ubik, William Gibson’s Neuromancer, and Pat Cadigan’s short story collection Patterns. Well-written, enjoyable stories, but homes to dark worlds, oblivious to humankind’s actions or divinations–worlds I did not want to reflect in my fiction. I see more than just mere darkness; I see the light as well, and I cannot omit that if I were to write the truth of the world as I see it. I thought literary criticism on the subject might work better. David Bell’s book, An Introduction to Cybercultures, provides one of the better overviews of the internet and the language/writing philosophy surrounding it, as well as leading us to questions of our own selves and our bodies.

This theme–how the internet, being a house of the mind, will affect our bodies as we become more and more dependent on technology–is in some ways the running mantra of many books within this philosophy, including the works of Donna Haraway, Aaron
Barlow, and, specifically, Gregory Ulmer. For Ulmer, in his book *Electronic Monuments*, the creation of a tele-technology has actually opened the door for a “true” democracy—an arena where the playing field is even, where every voice may be heard in a way that is without prejudice. Haraway’s commentary was interesting in the way she addresses language itself as another form of anti-feminism, that the metaphorical “cyborg” is a rejection of structure. The “body”, as it stands to influence our existence through appearance—race, age, etc.—is rendered moot through the technology of the internet. Under these readings, the internet does away with many of the social constraints that exist in the “physical” world—there is no sexism, racism, agism to be truly had. If you want your voice to be heard, you will be heard—in the same forum, the same place, even in the same font, as everyone else.

Of course, this is only a small portion of the issues at hand when it comes to the critics and the internet. In a way, many of these books and articles, and others of their type, read like deconstructionalist criticism, in that there is no real answer for anything, since *everything* is truly possible. And while Derrida and his contemporaries were laying their stake against structuralism, with this new Digital Age criticism we see rambling, disassociative musings on the meaning of it all, when nothing has truly happened one way or the other for anybody to make a clear conclusion on anything. That is not to say that there are no hints at a clear direction; what seems to be the main theme over much of the critical literature I’ve read on the Digital Age is that we are, as a culture, breaking down more social barriers at a rapid rate, and are moving toward a state of humanity that is more regulated, more involved with our own technology than with human interaction. The type of critical thinking in the field today can only produce a paradigm of thought,
that of humanity’s demise versus humanity’s salvation, which may or may not prove valuable when the time comes to take action. In a way, my feelings toward the criticism on this subject is the way I feel about all criticism: while being necessary—severely so—to the cycles of literary history, I look upon the whole of literary criticism and see a spiral of bylines working their way toward being totally, completely wrong. I know to gain any semblance of truth that it must be done, and I can stand back and appreciate it, but I cannot fully participate in it.

Coming out the other side of all of this, I realized that we are living in a time of great unknown, an age where the line between being grown up and being a child is becoming less and less pronounced; despite all of the research I’ve done, I still can’t ignore what is going on in the real world. I can’t ignore that people my age are still living with their parents, when years ago it would have been unthinkable. I can’t ignore the general unrest and distrust my friends and I feel toward the American government. I can’t ignore the fact that the internet does indeed give us access to a worldwide discourse, which only heightens my awareness for how precious life is, what with all the death, violence and hatred—and yes, all the love as well.

So, the art is what remains. The stories I wrote became fiction about the unknown. Its deals with kids still struggling to come of age in an unaccepting, unforgiving world. Not everyone is good (“Knives Out”), not everyone is bad (“The Ivory Tower”), and there are some poor fools in between (“Trivia Night”, “Echoes”). I wanted to capture the quiet moments of introspection—the moments of epiphanie if these were to be true bildungsromans—where the characters realize something elemental has shifted within them. I wanted to represent the world as it stood for us, a couple of kids
stuck in what felt like a fast, downward spiral—inherting a world that was used up and at the end of the rope. I want to capture the cold fear, the insidious evil, and, yes, the desperate love that such a place would imbibe a person with. If anything, I wanted to say: *We were here, we were alive, if only briefly.*
I remember how I would sometimes sneak into the garage to look at my father’s Italian switchblade. The damp yellow light, the dust and the cars. So large in my hands. The first time I took it out I couldn’t fold it back down. There was an odd mechanism, a slide of steel which needed to be pressed aside so the blade could find its place in the handle, and I couldn’t work it. I was afraid. After several minutes, standing there and almost crying, I went to my father for help.

First he tried to tell me how to do it, and I told him that I didn’t want to be accidentally cut.

“Oh come on,” he said. He had thick arms, such large hands. “There’s nothing to it,” he said. And he quickly slashed the knife across my forearm. I screamed.

He laughed, “It’s dull, son. The edges aren’t sharp.”

I looked down at my unmolested arm.

“See?” he said. “It’s fine. Now, here...” And he pointed to the the tip of the knife. “Here is what you have to watch out for...” And he gently pressed his forefinger against the point. His face didn’t change, but when he pulled his hand away he rubbed his finger and thumb together and smeared blood.

“This knife is meant for one thing only,” he said. Then he folded it up and told me to put it back where I got it.

“Go outside or something,” he said. I remember. “Don’t play with things that aren’t meant to be played with.”
He sat in his chair, turned the volume back up on the television and, as I watched, sucked his bloody finger dry, pulling it away from his lips with a small pop.
Knives Out

In winter of my last year of college I found out my best friend was mugging people around campus. Each time there was another “incident”, the school would e-mail everyone the most recent CrimeAlert, which would supply the details of the assailant. White male, five-foot-six to six-foot-whatever. Wearing a black hoodie. Basically, it could have been anyone we knew, but we never cared too much to look for the signs.

“Party this weekend,” Mark would tell me.

“Rad,” I would say.

We would hit up the super market and buy beer. When we went through the checkout, we would say we had ten cases even though we had an eleventh hidden in the undercarriage of one of the carts.

“Never buy,” Mark would say, “what they’ll just give you for free.”

This was when people were giving Mark their money because he was holding a knife to them. Life was always easy for him like that. There was the right decision, and the wrong decision—but there was never right and wrong.

This was during my Greek mythology phase. Sometimes I’ll pull up my left pant leg at parties, and reveal a tattoo of a jagged lightning bolt on my calf. “I’m Zeus’ son,” I’ll say. Sometimes people laugh, but most of the time when people laugh they’re just laughing at the silliness of it all.

What Mark used to mug people with was one of those small hunting knives, the kind with the serrated edge. I had seen him use it to scrape resin when a bowl got
clogged. Smoking resin wasn’t ideal, but it could get you high when you were in a fix, like having no money or, worse, having no weed.

Mark got into a big fix—that’s having no money and no weed—because someone stole all of his stuff. This is how he started mugging people, see—because he would sell weed out of his house. A lot of people did it. The first thing you needed was a Connect, someone you could get weed from. Mark got his from a guy he knew in the city. I didn’t have a Connect, and I was never around when Mark spoke to his, but here’s what I think most of their conversations were like:

“Yo bro, are you good?” Mark says.

“Yeah man, how much do you need?” the Connect says.

And Marks like, “Like, fuckin’, three O’s.” (That’s ounces)

And the Connect’s like, “Fuck yeah.”

The second thing you needed to sell weed was the right set of supplies. A standard starter kit was a couple packs of those clear plastic baggies (Mark liked to use ones stenciled with the Batman logo—it was his signature trademark), a portable scale, and a couple of airtight glass jars.

One day, Mark walked into his room and found all his supplies stolen. All his baggies, his scale, and, probably the most important, all of his weed. Plus over six hundred dollars he had stashed away from selling. There was a slit along the bottom of the screen in his window, where the thief had come in. “The fucking thief,” Mark said, over and over, pacing around. I remember beads of sweat gathering on his forehead. The Fucking Thief had known where to go—nothing else in the house, or Mark’s room for that
matter, had been touched. “That means that it’s someone I know.” Mark’s eyes narrowed as he said it: the Fucking Thief had been here before.

See, the third thing you needed to sell weed was both a gift and a curse: you needed buyers. If you only sold to your friends, you’d be poor. But you had to be careful with random people calling and asking for a hook-up. They could be the cops. Or worse, they could be looking to rob you. You couldn’t call the cops if someone just robbed your weed shit:

You: “Officer, someone stole all my drug-dealing supplies! Please arrest me!”

Cop: “...Okay...”

In any case, this wasn’t good. Mark owed a lot of money to different places, but mostly, he owed his Connect. I guess the Connect had fronted Mark some of the weed—they had known each other for a long time—and now the Connect was looking for his paycheck.

I wasn’t there, but here’s how I think the conversation went down:

Mark: “Dude, I don’t have your money. I got robbed.”

Connect: “Fuck you. Pay me.”

So Mark started to pull his knife and ask for wallets and purses. But none of us knew it was him. We were waking up, hungover most of the time, and there would be news on the e-mail about another mugging, but we never thought of Mark. We did think he recovered from the robbery pretty well though—he kept selling us weed and we kept buying.

This was later on in the semester, during my Buddhist phase. I would carry My Teachings everywhere, would try and apply it to discussions in class. Drove my
professors nuts, but at least algebra class got interesting. I wasn’t looking for *truth*,

exactly; just a better way to live. If people found comfort in ritual, than how come I

couldn’t?

Of course robbing random people on a small college campus at one in the

morning isn’t really profitable, and Mark must’ve been getting desperate. I guess some
deadline for his Connect was approaching, because before the end of fall semester that

year there were four separate robberies over the course of one night. He never robbed
anybody we knew, and was always careful to keep his face hidden—according to reports

cited on CrimeAlert, the “assailant” had taken to wearing a ski-mask. People were scared

shitless; no one walked alone around campus at night anymore, and the cops were
everywhere, all the time.

By now I was beginning to think something was wrong with Mark, and not just

because I was going through my big Divination phase—he just *seemed* different. He had

lost weight, he started smoking cigs. It was like he was using coke too much, but he said

he wasn’t. He was just nervous, all the time. He also kept talking about the Fucking

Thief, how he wished he new who it was.

The last time I spoke with him I came up to his house and he was standing in the

driveway. We were gonna smoke and get the house ready for another party, and I was

late getting there.

“Sorry bro,” I said, “Faith held me up awhile.”

“What, like church?”

“Oh no, faith.com. Lookin into a new religion. The freemasons. Not really a

religion, but then again what’s religion anyway?”
“You need to cut it with that religion shit,” he said. “It makes you look like a fuckin psycho.”

“Look who’s talkin,” I said, watching him fidget for a cig.

We stood in the driveway, shooting the shit, and we came back to the Fucking Thief, as we usually did. We always came back to it; it was as if he couldn’t get over it. I know he was hog-tied for money with his Connect, but at the time I was just annoyed. Sometimes I just wanted to scream into his face that it really was me, just so he would shut up about it. But it was too late, I had kept the secret too long. Now I had to keep it forever.

“There’s, like, a traitor in our midst, bro,” he would say. His hand would shake as he brought the cig to his lips.

“Are you all right?” I said.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

I had a Tarot deck at the time–I probably still have around here somewhere. At parties I would shuffle the cards and then just hold up the deck, showing people the face of the bottom, and that would be their card.

I only stole from him because everything came easy for him, and for once, just once, I wanted it to be easy for me too. But in retrospect, nothing is really easy after all, is it?

This whole searching-for-religion thing, I guess what I was really looking for was other people.
So Mark is sitting there, and he flicks his cigarette onto the driveway and immediately goes to his pocket to get another. And his hand is shaking. So I take out the Tarot deck—of course it was in my back pocket—and start to shuffle.

“It helps, to think that you know where you’re going,” I say to him, and show him the bottom of the deck.

He looks at it and blows smoke, “The fuck does it mean?”

I look at the card. It’s the Tower.

“You got an epiphany coming,” I said.

A week later it happened: a couple of kids off the baseball team, near blackout drunk, stumbled upon someone lying in the street. There was a pool of blood on the sidewalk; the kid had been stabbed three times. Turns out, the kid was a friend of ours—Montgomery. Montgomery was a linebacker on the football team who had smoked with us, and Mark had always suspected him of being the Fucking Thief. Did Mark track Montgomery down? Or did he randomly go to rob someone in the street and happened to be facing Montgomery, and just snapped?

I wasn’t there, but that must’ve been an interesting conversation:

Mark: “Give me your money.”

Montgomery: “No.”

Mark: “…Please give me your money?”

Montgomery: “Fuck you.”

Mark: “Fuck you!” (Stab. Stab. Stab)

Montgomery died in the hospital. It didn’t take long for the cops to finger Mark; he had thrown the knife into the bushes down the road, and his fingerprints were on the
handle. My best friend was not only a Fucking Thief, but a Murderer as well. So he went to jail; I never saw him again.

Sometimes I imagine him sitting in his cell, still thinking about the Fucking Thief. In my mind, he doesn’t say anything to anybody about it though. He just sits there and shuts up.

With Mark’s supplies I got my own business going. Even contacted his Connect and took over his spot as major supplier on campus. I even got myself a knife, a nice hunting blade that folds up and goes in my pocket... just in case. Sometimes though, this deep fear comes over me, because I think about the decision I made, the one and simple decision to steal from my friend, and how everything else in my life—my friends, my feelings, my decisions, my outlook—has changed because of it. But I keep on coming to the same realization: this must have been the way Mark thought and felt about his life. There are only the right decisions and the wrong decisions. There is no right or wrong.

I think I know there’s a lesson here somewhere, but really, I just can’t get over how funny it all is.
Monday morning. On my way to work a stone the size of a golf ball swings up from the utility truck in front of me on the highway. I see it in my peripheral vision, a sine curve in the morning blue, and focus on it squarely when it smacks into my windshield. It leaves a smooth crack dead center on the passenger side about an inch across, a black smile.

For a moment I’m angry, but it passes; there’s nothing I can do. Instead my mind turns to past misdeeds: *I’ve done something to own this*, I think. The time I pulled into a parking spot too fast and hit the car parked in front of me, visibly cracking its bumper. My car (a different one than I have now) looked untouched. I entered the store and walked around for a couple of minutes, browsing the shelves but not seeing anything. I was twenty-years old, on my parents’ insurance. I barely had enough money to buy beer on the weekends when I went partying with my friends. After ten minutes in the store I walked out without buying a thing and nothing had changed. No one standing there, looking angry. No police car sitting behind mine with the lights flashing. So I drove away.

I haven’t told many people that story.

Years pass, and I consider this, possibly, to be the worst thing I’d ever done. If that’s true, then I guess I can safely say that I, at best, have inflicted minimal damage to the world, or, at worst, I’m another average stupid kid.
In my mind’s eye, the stranger whose car I hit is angry, frustrated. He could have insurance, he could not. His face is unclear, seen through a fudged lens. Unknown. There’s comfort in that on top of the guilt: for all I know, the guy could’ve called his insurance company, filed a claim, and came away fine.

Now I work in a daycare, going to grad school at night. The city I work in is one of those small urban areas, where there is crime and poverty, but nothing truly frightening. As one friend described it once: it’s like New York City but without the fun.

I get to work and go to the break room with my insurance information. Stand against the window with the phone to my ear. My diaphragm pulls up to my heart in a slight panic; I can’t remember if I waived the glass coverage to get a cheaper monthly payment. Twenty-two years old, my first insurance policy, my first car, my first apartment, my first job with benefits. So many other times when the sharp snap of a rock off the windshield brings you to look at the glass in wild bewilderment to find nothing there and nothing there—and now another first. The real world throws curveballs at you.

But the panic lifts when the operator assures me that I won’t even have to pay the deductible, the glass repairman will come tomorrow and fix the windshield while I work. The window I stand by looks out into the back-alley streets of, really, any poor urban city in America. I like it here; it reminds me of my childhood, because I lived here for a time then, back when life was simple. Not easy. Simple. I remember running along the sidewalks, which were cracked and uneven and with sprouts of weeds dotting them. The sour stink of the river, the smell you only noticed on your way back in. The old abandoned garages in my neighborhood, their windows busted out with stones. I came back here after undergrad because it was cheap living, but there’s always something else
going on beneath the surface. One day I’ll leave this place for good and I will never look back, but for now I need to remind myself why I shouldn’t live here, why I can’t live here. I need to remind myself of what it is I came from. The turns that I’ve made. I need to teach myself the humility I had lost.

The window in the break room is criss-crossed with diamond wiring to keep out thieves, pedophiles, drunks, gang members... but I can still see the man standing next to the abandoned derelict across the street, not twenty feet away, as he starts to unbuckle his pants.

The operator from the insurance company asks me to verify my birthday, and I do.

The man across the street pauses, looks around. He’s dressed in a heavy brown coat, almost the same color as his skin. We lock eyes for a second, and it is I who looks down, who turns away, ashamed, as he crouches over the bare sidewalk to shit. Another first for me.

When he looked at me, I saw something that, later, I realized would be the last thing you’d expect. He looked at me, not with disrespect, not with hatred, not with defensiveness (*the fuck you lookin at*?), not even cunning (*check this shit out...*) . No; when I saw his eyes, I saw nothing. It was like he didn’t see me at all, though I was plainly obvious in the window, so close, and we looked into each other’s eyes, if only for a second.

Me, walking through the store, or searching the windshield glass. It’s all the same. I’m bewildered, seeing nothing. Every now and then you catch a glimpse of the darkened curve, the illusion of the glass, but most of the time you can look at the things
that happen in this world, stare them directly in the eyes, and see nothing. The man, squatting over the concrete, looks at me, but doesn’t see me there. Fudged through the diamond wire. Incomprehensible. Unknown. And while I came here to live and learn tough, there will always be some disconnect, a glass wall, that keeps me from truly being a part of it. And I’ll be sure to maintain it.

When I finish my call I look up again, but the man is gone.

I go downstairs, back to my classroom. One of the infants, fourteen months old, has been having difficulty walking. He’s behind developmentally. I’ve been trying to expedite the process, leading him by the hands on walks around the room. Today, as I crouch and hold my hands out to him, he takes one, wobbly step toward me on his own—his first. I cry my jubilation so suddenly and loud that, startled, he falls on his bum, bewildered.

So I pick him up and lead him by the hands again, around and around the room. Always in a circle. To build his confidence.

To help him remember:

*You came around this bend before.*

*It’s all right to let go.*
Here, the bare trees pout up from the earth in rows. Beside them the sidewalks, maybe glassed with pooled ice, and property lots of homes beyond, are locked in peculiar beauty; pine trees, fences, the stark streets, the quieted noise of traffic and bustle somewhere unseen. The cool air of night oncoming. Lamps in twilight. These were the suburbs. If you traveled a couple of miles in any direction you’d find the city. The chain link fences. The parking lots with their long stretches of pavement and the cars in them shiny and cool in the night. The neon lights in the windows of bars, the low masonry of it all slowly progressing into daring skyscrapers, gritty movement of cars and the mill of people in bright streets.

She could see it all, even from where they lay beneath the arch of the abandoned church. A matrix of blurred shadows behind window shades, moving car headlamps and the somehow laconic and silent bleating of red pinpoints at the tops of towers, her face apprehended in that glow like the aged stone around them. Like the newly dead.

“Rene,” he said in her ear.

“Yes?”

He could see her figure in the sheen of sweat still coating her, evaporating in little wisps of steam. The church above them was a low tower, hollow and without a roof and built of oblong, crude cut stones.

“How many people do you think live there?”
He nodded at the city below them. She brushed her dark hair from her eyes, and he could see the lights from the valley in them as she peered over his torso, both hands on his stomach and flat under her chin.

“I dunno,” she said. She suddenly rolled over, her crown on his bare navel, and looked at the ceiling of stars above them, a mirroring of the man-made grid below.

“I heard once,” she said, “that there are as many stars in the universe as there are grains of sand on every beach on earth.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

She laughed a little, “I just made it up. It seemed like a nice, even number.”

She was pretty, with her brown hair fanned out around his taught stomach, her thin body naked in the grass and marked with goosebumps for the chill. She turned onto her side and stared up at him. Looking into her eyes was like happening upon two teardrops spilled on the pavement.

“I think that there are as many stars as people in the world,” he said. He searched the sky above, smiling as if he knew what he said to be true. His head lay on the pile of their clothes, his naked body smooth and without any marks. “That each and every person has a star of their own up there.”

“That’s nice,” she said.

Gabriel raised his brow, “You don’t believe that?”

She shrugged, reaching into the clothes beneath his head, giving his cranium a good shake and pulling out a pack of cigarettes with a lighter slid inside the plastic wrapping.
“I think we all should be able to think what we want,” she said. She lit up, orange-yellow spotlighting her face for a moment. “No matter how ridiculous the thought may be.”

“Man,” he said. “Just smack me in the nuts next time.” His voice seemed to boom with echo through the tower around them. She didn’t say anything, just smiled, the orange ember of her cigarette glowing in the darkness.

“Some people would say we’re ridiculous,” he said.

“That’s because we are.”

He cupped his hands beneath his head and stared at the stars.

“I like being ridiculous,” he said. “People are such...”

“Bummers.”

“Yeah.”

“I know baby, I know.” She twirled her forefinger around his bellybutton.

He sat up suddenly, and she moved to accommodate him. “I wrote you something,” he said. He was rifling through the pile of clothes. “I was gonna show you before, but then...well...” And he waved his arm over their bare bodies before returning to the clothes. She giggled. He was pulling a piece of paper from his jeans. He had tiny dimples in his cheeks that folded in when he smiled, and every time they appeared it felt like she was falling in love with him all over again.

“This might be the best thing I’ve ever done,” he said. “Okay, here goes...”

He cleared his throat, she settled back, and he began:
“A Poem for Rene. I love you in the morning, I love you at night, I love you more than anything, in any kind of light. I love you on the whole, and each of your different parts, and if I may be so bold...”

Pause. “...I even love the smell of your farts.”

They both collapsed into laughter, Rene waving her hands slowly in front of her.

“Wait,” he said, laughing. “Let me finish...”

He leaned forward, looking at the paper, and said, “…sometimes...”

They laughed, their voices echoing through the hollow tower. Rene said, “That is the best thing you’ve ever done.”

He folded the paper back up, found her jeans in the pile of clothes, and slipped it into the pocket. She held the cigarette pack out to him, and he took it.

“What’s the best thing you’ve ever done?” he said, putting a cigarette to his lips.

She sighed, looking off into the grass, “Wow. That’s a good question...”

She took a final pull on her cigarette and tossed the butt into the tower, “There was this kid in high school. Kinda cute, kinda funny. Skinny, glasses, and really, really sensitive. So naturally he was screwed; high school is no place for a kid like that. And all he wanted was to fit in. He even used to sit at the cool kids table, even though none of them would talk to him. They didn’t even make fun of him to his face, they did it all behind his back. It was like he wasn’t even worth their time. And I know, I just know, he would go home, and nobody would call him, no one would hang out with him outside of school. I knew that kid, though, and I would always be nice to him. Because I kind of knew what he was going through. And I knew every time I said hello to him, every time
I asked him how he was doing, that I was doing something good. Through and through.

You know?"

She sighed, and looked down, picking at a hangnail on her thumb.

“What happened to him?” Gabriel said.

“He killed himself,” she said. She was still looking at her hands. “Took a math test, walked out of school, went home, took his father’s gun and shot himself.”

They sat in silence for awhile.

She sniffed and spoke through the rising sob in her throat, “It’s just like...he took it all away, you know? Like he didn’t realize that people liked him...and if he had just said something—”

She shut her eyes, tears sparking into the darkness. “Anyway, that’s the best thing I ever did. And it doesn’t mean a thing, because he killed himself.” She angrily swiped the tears from her face. “It’s so stupid.”

There was silence. Gabriel smoked his cigarette away, then looked into the valley again. “Look at them,” he said. “All those tiny little lights, each one for a tiny little person. And everybody is so involved in what they’re doing, and how they’re doing it. But from up here, everything they do just seems so...”

“Petty.” She was trying to dry her face with her hands.

“Yeah. But, I mean, we still have to live, right?” He shrugged, the light from the valley illuminating his face. Rene leaned toward him and hugged him, and he hugged her back, and after a while they fell back onto the grass.

“Can we be this way forever, baby?” Rene whispered.

“Be what way?”
“Be stupid and silly. Meaningless. I mean, it’s all meaningless, right? But being meaningless with somebody else, somehow... somehow it means *something*.”

He smiled, “Oh, you mean being in love?”

She laughed, “Yeah. Being in love.”

He sighed, closing his eyes, and promised, “I won’t stop trying if you won’t.”

Another tear slowly crossed her cheek. “Okay,” she said. It seemed to be the smallest noise she had ever heard, her own promise echoing through the empty chamber. Soon they would have to return to the valley, she knew, and the lives that needed to be led there. But maybe all she needed to do was to keep the memory of this place within her, to know that at one time there was a perfect night like this, the two of them in the tower; and then they would always stay perched there like lonesome angels, watching over man below, and love one another, untouched by the mouldering hands of time.
Echoes

Wheeler, as he was called, was a curious young man—in both the sense that he was an uncanny individual and that he had an inquisitive nature. When he wasn’t spiking his hair in what was known in his day as the “blowout” fashion, or drinking, he was generally causing terrible social faux pas at the expense of other people by asking personal, and often invasive, questions. More than that, he found himself privy—when invited in, of course—to search through his friends’ belongings. Of course, one cannot keep many friends long while engaging in such activities, and more often than not he found himself drinking alone in the dormitories on weekend nights, when everyone else was going out. But poor Wheeler never meant any harm to the people he met and loved; the nature of his inquiries should be here attributed to a keen sense of human nature—even a high intelligence—as opposed to mere rudeness.

The thing about Wheeler—his cross to bear, so to speak—was that he was compelled to talk with people, and he did not rather like these nights alone, making music mixes, drinking straight vodka and wondering what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

On nights that were particularly hard—for example, if he had failed a test earlier in the week, or if a girl had been exceptionally nasty to him the night before—he would call up his one consistent friend, Alec. Alec was a friend to Wheeler in the sense that he could put up with Wheeler’s invasiveness, mostly because he was open to answering Wheeler’s questions, and had nothing that he considered truly precious or secretive in his
possession (or so he thought). But as it so happens, people tend to forget what they want to forget, and Alec was no exception to the rule, even if he did prefer to abscond from a more sociable lifestyle.

Nevertheless, when Wheeler called on a rainy and blustery April Fool’s night, Alec accepted his request for company, and invited him over. Alec lived in one of those dilapidated loaners every young person in college has the privilege of living in at one point or another, which was located on the main street of town, where most of the fraternity and sorority houses barely stood for all they had gone through—emblazoned with their Greek symbols across the front porches and with almost constant trash strewn about the lawns. As Wheeler approached Alec’s place, the streets, which lay in gray rain-soaked twilight, were an affront to decent ears and eyes: young people screaming on the sidewalks, wearing terribly bright and ridiculous outfits. Alec couldn’t seem to get Wheeler into the foyer quick enough.

“What’s up man?” Wheeler said, rubbing his wet shoes on the carpet. He had a brown paper bag under one arm, darkly pecked with rainwater. “How ya been? What new with your life?”

Alec raised his pint glass of beer, half empty, in response. As opposed to Wheeler, who was skinny and somewhat aggressive with his body language—always moving his hands through the air, as if trying to dig for more information—Alec was pudgy—some would say fat—and more subdued in his movements, with his hair short, any sense of style there forsaken in the face of premature male-pattern baldness. What he lacked on his head he made up for on his chin—a black wiry beard fell to the collar of his shirt.
Wheeler smiled at him, “I hear that my man.” He removed a case of twelve bottles from the bag under his arm. “Let’s get started!”

And, as usual, when Wheeler placed his fourth empty bottle amongst the others on the bedroom table in Alec’s room, his eyes, as if by their own volition, began to roam across the edifice. They quickly floated over the intermittent piles of clothing—clothes laying on the floor always, somehow, appear soiled, as if after touching an article one will pull back greasy fingers— and seemed to try and peek into the dresser drawers themselves—if all the clothes are on the floor, then what's in the drawers? The rest of Alec’s room seemed to pre-empt any question of enigma; the ceiling was fourteen feet high instead of the usual nine or ten, and gave the space a more open look. There was a bed, a desk, a closet, the usual juvenile posters on the walls—nothing else to truly satiate Wheeler’s interest in his friend.

Still, Wheeler would not be deterred. Until this point they had been discussing the eloquence of contemporary comedic actors, particularly of what they referred to as the “Apatow troupe”–a conversation that for the most part consisted of them blurting their favorite quotations and laughing with nostalgic retrospect. Now Wheeler was looking around the room, and he popped the top of his fifth beer in just such a way, as if to indicate the conversation was now going to begin.

Alec sighed–more inwardly, so Wheeler wouldn’t really perceive it. It was as if he weren’t expecting this strange twist in his friend’s demeanor, as if he had held some hope that tonight might hold the possibility in being of the non-invasive persuasion. He should have known better. Still, while Alec knew he had not lived much life, he had
learned that it was the little things that counted toward happiness, and Wheeler, to Alec, was a simplified aspect of the good humanity could produce, in that odd, invasive way.

“So,” Wheeler said taking a sip of his newly sprung beer, “what’s new?”

“You’re lookin at it,” Alec said. But Wheeler was already on his feet, beer in hand, eyes searching. He didn’t acknowledge Alec’s comment, but instead sifted the pile of clothes over with his damp-sneakered foot, before looking up at the light in the ceiling, which hung dotted with the shadows of fly corpses. Alec watched him with a mix of exasperation and amusement, while trying to keep both of those particular emotions from coming to light in the features of his face.

“I mean,” Wheeler finally said, moving over to the dresser, “what’s new with life? I mean... you’ve gotta be doin something right?”

“Besides goin to school and drinking every weekend?” Alec said. “I tool around on the internet. Just like everyone else.”

Wheeler was regarding the trinkets on top of the dresser with bored disinterest—he’d examined them before. “Oh come on–no girls, nothing goin on with the family... Nothin?”

“Come on, Wheeler. I’m twenty-two. Wait a couple of years and then come see me...” Alec put a cigarette between his lips and patted himself for his zippo. Wheeler grabbed it off the top of the dresser and tossed it over.

“What about you, Wheeler?” Alec said, puffing smoke. “What’s been going on in your life?”
“Oh, you know, same old same old. Searching for the meaning of it all...”

Wheeler opened the door to the closet, which was filled with even more piles of clothes and stank of moist darkness.

Alec smiled, “How’s that going?”

Wheeler shut the door, “Surprisingly unfruitful.”

“Is it that shocking to you... to find things ‘unfruitful?’”

Wheeler sipped his beer and shrugged, “Not anymore. It been that way for years, I guess.” He drank the rest of his beer, went to put the bottle with the others. But the bottle slipped off the edge and fell, bouncing on the carpeted floor and rolling underneath the bed.

“Shit,” Wheeler muttered, “I got it...” And getting on his hands and knees, he went under the bed to grab the bottle.

And that’s when he found them. The two drum sticks were stuck in between the mattress and the support beam, and Wheeler just caught sight of them as he put his hands on the bottle. He lifted the comforter from his face to gain a better look and yes–there were drum sticks underneath the mattress. Wheeler almost swooned with elation–he had found something. And now that he had, he sat frozen in sudden shock, unable to conceive of what to do next.

Alec’s brow, smoothed with the mixed look of amusement and interest, furrowed. He had truly forgotten about the drum sticks, and he didn’t know what Wheeler had seen. “What?” he said.

Wheeler sat there for a moment. Always confined to asking questions and never finding the answers to satisfy, he knew he needed to tread lightly, that he was on the edge
of something and that if he wasn’t too careful, someone—even himself—might get hurt. And his thoughts continued even further—for the first time, he realized that he was not dealing with the curiosity of human nature that he was possessed with, but with real human emotions. The immensity of a human life sat before him in those thin, fragile drumsticks. But Alec was sitting behind him, wondering what was going on, and he couldn’t stay under the bed forever.

So he reached under the bed and pulled the drumsticks out. Alec looked at them—they were Pro Mark 5B’s. “The Natural”, printed on the sides. Wheeler just held them in his hand, looking up at Alec, waiting for a response. The look on his face was meek, almost apologetic.

“Oh,” Alec said, “yeah. Those.”

He leaned over and put his beer on the desk, took the stick from Wheeler, who sat on the bed. Alec smiled at him, and began his story, stroking his beard every now and then but mostly keeping his eyes on the drum sticks that he traced his fingers over, Wheeler silent and unmoving:

“I won’t make you ask. I’ll just tell you... I’d almost forgotten about these to be honest. You see how they’re still smooth? I’ve never played with them. But I’ve had them ever since high school.

“I was in the band. Drum line. Despite what a lot of people say about it, you know, the cliche of being awkward and made fun of, I had a good time. I played sports too. I played football. So I guess that helped me out, in terms of not being made fun of. Plus I was a big guy, even back then. But I really had such a good time because I just loved to play the drums. I mean I knew the drums, inside and out. I had the rudiments
down. I could drum without looking down once... I was good. And it was the best feeling in the world, when I played the drums. It’s like, when you’re playing them, it’s like everything, all the bad shit, the frustration, everything you love, all of the intensity you feel in your life—it’s all coming through your hands. And the drum is there and it meets it and pushes it all back with the same force that you’re giving. I never wanted it to stop. I remember, while other kids were getting into trouble for partying—Facebook had just started up, and everyone was posting pictures of themselves drunk and shit—I was getting yelled at because I was still using my practice pad at one in the morning.

“There’s not a lot of careers you can get with drumming, but I had to do something with it. My guidance counselor brought up Drummer’s Collective, which is like one of the top schools. Like, they don’t take just anyone. But I thought I had the grades, and I thought I was good enough.

“Now my music teacher at the time was kinda like a mentor for me. He’s the one who taught me how to read sheet music, the different styles and genres, how to pick up on cue. He helped lay the groundwork under my passion for it. So I thought he was definitely going to write me a letter of recommendation. I ask him and he tells me he’ll do it. A couple of weeks go by and I mention it to him and he says he’s working on it. And the deadline is approaching to get the application into Drummer’s Collective. I keep waiting and waiting for this guy. And there’s really nobody else I can go to on this, you know? I mean, the guy is the head music teacher for my school. It would be a great letter for me.

“So it gets to the last day before the application is due, and I still haven’t got the letter from this guy. I haven’t really applied to anywhere else, by the way. So I’m
freaking out, my parents are freaking out. Everybody’s freaking out. I find this guy after school, in his office, and he... he sits me down. And tells me that he hasn’t written the letter, that he’s not going to write the letter.”

Alec stared at the sticks in his hands, his voice very quiet. Wheeler stared at him, and after a brief pause said, whispered, “Why?”

Alec continued, “Because he said he knew I wouldn’t devote myself to the music fully. Because I had ‘other obligations’. The way he said it... I knew. It was because I played sports. In that moment, I knew... I could see what he had gone through. Because a lot of people in my high school band were picked on by the jocks. Hell, by everyone. The jocks are just always the worst. And this guy still hurt from it. I could see it. He hurt so bad that he wasn’t about to let someone who associated with their type go farther than he could. Because he was stuck there, with the same jocks who all made fun of him—just behind his back now—and disrespected his classes. These kids—I—had no real respect for music. We didn’t have the passion for it the way he did.

“So he punished me for it. And I just...”

He put the drum sticks on the bed next to Wheeler.

“...I stopped drumming after that. I snuck into the band room on the night before graduation and stole these sticks, but I’ve never used them. And I swore to myself that I would never play music again in my life.”

Alec fell into quiet, and didn’t speak again. Wheeler looked at his face, and saw one of the most pure forms of anger and sadness he had ever seen. The curiosity fled from him, and he realized that there were parts of life that should not be known, trials that should not be lived. To see such loathing at the world manifest itself in such a
detrimental way... Wheeler felt as if he could finally understand evil, and he realized that he didn’t want to. And even though he’d had only five beers—he was slightly drunk—he was suddenly feeling very sick. So, after a long silence the likes of which neither man had gone through before, Wheeler took up the rest of his beer in his damp brown bag and excused himself. And as he left, he realized something elemental had shifted in him, that he would never talk to Alec again, and that it seemed as if Alec knew this as well.

Alec did not really mind. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that Wheeler was the polar opposite of himself, and that any friendship between them was doomed. Because while he admired Wheeler’s innocent–probably naive–interest in human beings, Alec had no interest in humanity; it had done little good for him–and the world in general–as far as he was concerned.

So Alec went back to his room and spent the rest of his night running through different avenues of advertising venture online. He was studying business, and looked to go on to graduate school for administration. With any luck he would be pulling in six figures in a few short years. The night waned on, cold and with ceaseless rain, and as Alec shut his lights, crawled into bed and stared sleepless at the high ceiling, the never-ending pitter-patter of the rainfall seemed to echo in his ears.
Gathering

The room where most of the family gathered was warm and lit by the white sun coming through a large bay window. In the center the twins lay in their tiny matching recliners on the floor, arms and legs waving and kicking wildly in beginnings of their itches to crawl. The one on the left, Haley, had a light tuft of blond hair, while the one on the right, Kirsten, had dark brown, almost black. Kirsten would smile more and did not seem to fuss as much as her sister, who cried for the bottle or bed most of the time she was awake. Sitting cross-legged next to them, Uncle Roy, a man in his mid-thirties with receding hair, cropped very close to the skull, and a large hooked nose that resembled a beak. He had a small Tupperware tray with red mush in one section and green mush in another. Across from Uncle Roy, sitting on a large couch, was Aunt May, also in her mid-thirties, with a dirty blond gown of hair that descended to her shoulder blades, her thin face slightly puffy from lack of sleep. Next to the couch there was a small coffee table where there sat a bottle-warmer and as Uncle Roy stirred the peas and sweet potatoes with a tiny spoon that changed colors if the food was too hot, Aunt May took the bottle from the warmer and poured some of the milk on her wrist. She wiped it off with a pink baby towel and put the bottle back in the warmer. Everyone’s movements slow. Across the room, backlit by the window, sat a young man, lanky, brown hair askew and a light complexion, not unlike his aunt’s and uncle’s. A small smile came to his face as Uncle Roy began his initial attempt to feed his daughters.
“Okay now,” Uncle Roy said, serious. “Daddy needs you to eat this time.
Yes…yes…” he nodded at Haley, who was staring at him solemnly, “…I know you don’t
like it but we have seventeen-and-a-half years to go…yes we do…”

He took up some peas with the spoon and slowly, firmly, pushed it to Haley’s
mouth. She promptly spit most of it out onto her chin with an obnoxious squirting sound.
Her face remained passive, as if nothing were wrong, and she kicked a leg out.

“Now, now,” Uncle Roy said using the spoon to scrape the peas up Haley’s chin,
over her lips and back into her mouth. “Let’s be a team player…how are you going to
grow up to be a basketball player if you don’t eat your peas?” He smiled as she took
everything he had on the second spoonful. He looked at his wife, who took the bottle
from the warmer again and then shot him a look. He turned back to his daughter,
“Daddy’s just kidding…you can be whatever you want to be when you grow up…”

Aunt May smiled, stood and walked through the large archway that led to the
kitchen.

Uncle Roy leaned toward Haley, “It’s okay…Mommy doesn’t have to know
about the hoop that Daddy’s going to put up over the garage…”

As the young man on the couch chuckled, another woman entered from the
kitchen. She wore a distinguished outfit, khaki slacks and gold necklace, with the
exception of the slippers on her feet, which made light, cool sounds as she slid over the
linoleum floor of the kitchen. Her back was bowed slightly forward and her hands held
each other in front of her chest as she walked. Her hair was short and an unnatural
strawberry blond, her face like that of the infants before her. An anomaly at her age: the
eyes vibrant and aware, the nose flat and smooth, the overall visage a reflection of
innocence and kindness, simple and true. When she entered, the young man sat up quickly.

“What’s up, Mum, you need anything?” he said.

“No no, sweetheart, I’m just checking on the babies,” she said. Her voice was like air. “Why, do you need anything?”

She knelt upon the carpet in front of Kirsten and began to coo, and the child immediately intensified her kicks and a wide, toothless smile of animated joy summoned to her face from that deep unknowing.

The young man chuckled, shaking his head slightly, “No, thanks, Mum. I’ll go ask Pup if he needs me…”

As he rose Mum raised her hands and, still cooing, brought them to the child’s midsection, giving a quick tickle. The child moved her head from side to side. Uncle Roy finished with the peas and moved on to the sweet potatoes. Haley seemed to take this new flavor with a mix of disgust and begrudging acceptance, regarding the extremely large image of her father every now and then but for the most part keeping her eyes fixed on the ceiling fan that looped lazily round and round above her.

The young man walked to the kitchen. Everything was white, clean. Pup stood tall and thin, although the extra skin that was gathered under his chin and around his arms attested that he once had muscle to match his height. He stood at the sink washing the dishes, deliberate, methodical. The remains of his hair were combed back over the cusp of his skull like a white veil. Aunt May stood over the counter in the corner making another bottle for her children. In the other corner a coffee maker percolated.
“You need anything, Pup?” the young man said, walking up next to his grandfather and leaning his elbow on the counter.

The old man shook his head and turned the corners of his mouth downward as if the very idea were despicable. “No, I’m fine.”

“Okay.”

Aunt May smiled and took the other bottle with her into the family room.

On the small wooden dining table next to the refrigerator there were two dishes covered over with aluminum foil. The young man walked over to the table. He breathed in. The dry and bland smell of flour and the sharp tang of apples. The presence of cinnamon, strong, but throwaway, like an afterthought. Apple pie.

The young man turned to his left and moved out of the kitchen through another archway in the wall. This room was of moderate size with a television in the corner displaying coverage of a hockey game. Glass patio doors that gave full view to the lawn and the trees and the sun and beyond. The young man lay himself out on the large couch. On the other side of him there were two armchairs and sitting in the one closest to the kitchen was a man. He was in his mid-forties, and his hair was black. Graying at the temples. He had a large and bushy mustache and square glasses. It gave him a hard militarized look, but you could see the signs of youth in his eyes, and you would notice how those signs were starting to loosen and slip away, not unlike the man standing in the kitchen cleaning dishes.

The young man yawned. “Man, I’m full”

His father nodded. “Good meal.”

“Yeah, it was.”
They stared into the television. From the kitchen there was a small clink as Pup put the dried dishes back into the cabinets. After a few moments he spoke into the living room, “So when are you going back to school, buddy?”

“I’ve got to drive up tonight after dessert.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah I’ve got a test tomorrow that I can’t miss. Well…that I don’t want to miss…”

“The grades good?”

“Oh yeah. I just got my midterms back the other day. Ninety-six on one of them.”

“Great. That’s great. You keep that up.”

“Don’t worry I will.”

“Keep that right up…”

Silence again. The young man’s father spoke up, “What’s going on with that internship by the way?”

“The tutoring?”

“Yeah they said they were going to look you up again this semester.”

“Oh yeah. They did. I’ve got to send them an updated transcript but other than that the rest of the application is still valid. I’ve just got to do the interview again.”

Pause.

“The only reason they didn’t take me last time was because they had only four positions available and there were just more people that were more qualified than me. It’s not like they didn’t think I couldn’t do the job, you know?”
His father nodded, eyes on the television.

From the kitchen came the sharp sliding sounds of Mum’s slippers as she entered.

“What about friends, honey?” she said.

“What’s that?”

“You have a lot of friends? You go out and have fun?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Good. You need that too. You don’t need to spend all this time here you know.”

“What do you mean? I like it here.”

“I know, sweetheart, I’m just saying I get worried about ya. I don’t understand these kids who coup themselves up and avoid contact with others, sitting around the computers all day long, or hanging out with old farts like your grandfather over here…”

The four of them chuckled.

“Now,” Mum said. “You want some pie and coffee?”

The young man and his father both moved to get out of their chairs at the same time, their arms shooting forward in unison. They approached the archway at the same time and the young man gave his father a slight push, and went through first.

His father entered the kitchen and glared at him. “Boy, I will knock you out.”

“Like to see you try.”

“Anytime, Son. Anytime you’re ready.”

“You better watch it, buster,” Mum said to her grandson as she took the aluminum foil from the first pie. “You’re going to get a beating.”

“Someone is,” the young man smiled.

“You want whipped cream?”
“I can get it…”

But somehow she was already at the refrigerator and grabbing it for him. When they both got pie Pup and Mum returned to the twins. The young man and his father went back to the television.

“You’re still working, right?” father said to son.

“Oh yeah.” The young man licked whipped cream from his lips.

“Got enough cash?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah, Pop. I’m good.”

His father shrugged and sipped his coffee, “Got it pretty much figured out don’t you?”

The young man smiled, “ Seems like it, doesn’t it?”

They looked at each other for a couple of seconds and then resumed watching television. There was something on the news about a school shooting—the shooter was running from the police, and the news had a helicopter over the chase, making sure that the story was covered. The young man’s father changed the channel, stopping for a few seconds on different stations before stopping on a basketball game. They sat in silence, watching for a long time, and before long, from the family room behind them, one of the twins started to cry.
Annabelle and I

When I walked into the gym and saw that Annabelle standing there, I just knew I was pregnant.

It was my day off and I didn’t want to bring the box back to my house, where Momma would for sure find it; she would have a cat and then spit it out. So I brought the box with me to work, hoping to put it in my locker. But I come into the entrance and standing at the front counter, typin on the computer, is Annabelle.

“Mary?” she say. She had one of the gym uniforms on, purple shorts and a grey shirt with the logo of some greek god. She looked sorta shocked to see me there. Like she didn’t know I worked at the gym, like her gettin a job there was some sorta similarity in our life paths.

I was for sure more shocked to see her there, I’ll tell ya. “Annabelle,” I say, “what the hell you doin here?”

“I’m workin, that’s what I’m doin!” she say.

“Yeah, but when? When did you start working here?”

“Yesterday,” she says. She was all sunny bright, all pleased with herself. Let me tell ya, she’s this pudgy little girl, her tubby tummy pushin all up against that shirt. In gym at school, in the showers, I can see those zits across her shoulders, how she never shaves her pubes. How her tits sagged like they were all loose, and how her hair was always hangin down her face like wet spaghetti. She’s gross.
Now me, I’ve always worked hard on myself. That’s why I got that job at the gym: free membership. And there’s these tanning beds in the back that I get to use, only up to three times a month, though, but still if you space them out just right you get to keep yourself a nice base all year round. I had mine all reserved for the next year. Momma always said to be sensible, to try and learn somethin, but that there’s no reason to look bad doin it. I knew that’s why Annabelle was always jealous of me, on account of I worked hard on myself. And because of Ricky.

Now Ricky was one of the runners on the football team. He could catch a ball like I ain’t never seen. So I caught him, if you see the phrase I’m turnin. He was my first. Not like we were an item or anything, but at the ends of those Saturday football parties, we would usually end up together. But three weeks ago we’d gotten into fightin bout how he accidentally came all in me. Guys get kinda weird when stuff like that happens. We haven’t spoken since, I haven’t even gone over to the table at lunch time. And now I’m two weeks overdue, but I ain’t too worried about it, cause condoms’ve broke on me before, I’ve been late before, and ever’ thing’s turned the right way round those times.

But I come walkin into work and there’s Annabelle, and it’s like I didn’t even need to take the test no more, because that’s the way God would do it. You see, Annabelle’s got this special kinship with God. It’s the main reason she’s so gross, why nobody likes her. She’s always wearing that silver cross, even in the shower, round her zitty neck. And that chastity ring. I hated it. I hated her. I hated the way she looked, the way she toted God around like an excuse for her bein ugly. I especially hated how she locked herself up from anything fun, like that made her better than me and my
friends; she wasn’t no better than nobody. And I never hated her more than that moment, when I saw her at my gym.

So I say to her, “You think you cool?”

Disappointment just slides onto her face, that excitement goin away real quick. And it made me feel good.

“What?” she say.

“I said, do you think you cool or somethin? Just cause you got the same job as me?”

“No,” she said, real quiet.

“Good,” I say. “Cause you ain’t. You ain’t never been cool, you ain’t never will be cool. You fat, you ugly... you’re nothin.”

She’s standing there, starting to cry. There are other people in the gym—it’s daytime so there’s not that many—but they’ve heard me yellin, and they stop and stare at Annabelle and me. I just turn away from the counter and walk to the lady showers. It doesn’t take too long, and of course it’s positive. And even though I knew what it was goin to be, this feelin still comes over me, somethin I never felt before. It’s like, I start to question ever’ thing I do. First I don’t know if I should put the strip down, or toss it in the garbage. Then I think about if I just wanna walk outta there, or take a shower, but then I get stuck a little taking my clothes off cause I still got that damn test strip in my hand.

I don’t even think about Ricky till I’m finally in the shower. And I just start laughin, cause it just seems so funny to me. The thing about Ricky is that his ding-a-ling wasn’t too big, and it really didn’t feel too good, you know, screwin him and all. But I
always figured we’d get better at it; it’s just like cosmetics, ya’ll just need to practice at it
till you get ever thing just perfect. And as soon as that thought comes cross my eyes I
stop laughin real quick, cause I realize I’m gonna get it taken care of. If I had a kid, I
wouldn’t be able to keep myself in shape. I would have to quit my job at the gym, lose
my membership, my tannin bed. Ricky would have to get a job. He wouldn’t be able to
run on the football field no more. And Momma, oh Momma...

And now I just start cryin, because it’s so unfair, all of it, and I’m just wishin that I
could take it all back, ever’ thing, just press a restart button or somethin and take this
life test all over again.

I guess I must be slobberin pretty hard, cause all the sudden there’s a bangin on
the blurry glass of the shower door, and there’s this voice sayin, “Is ever’ thing all right
in there?” It’s Annabelle.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“You sure?” I can see her shadow, through the blurry glass, just standin there.

“There ain’t nothin wrong, I’m fine.” I’m tryin and keep myself from cryin more.

“Then what you cryin for?” she says, and her voice is risin. “You ain’t got nothin
to cry for. Look at all you’ve got. You skinny and blond. You so pretty I can’t even
stand it. Cheerleadin, datin football players...You said it yourself. I’m the one who’s
nothin. Right? So what you cryin for then?”

And now she’s cryin, again, and I’m cryin, still. So I open the shower door just a

crack, so I can see her, the shower still runnin.
“I’m... I’m sorry, Annabelle,” I say. “Bout what I said before. I’m sorry, and I didn’t mean it. Just... just please leave me alone–”

“Don’t you like me?” she says.

“Whatcha mean?”

She’s lookin at me in a weird way, like she can’t believe the words comin out of her own mouth.

“I seen the way you look at me,” she says. “At school, in the showers. Starin at me, is more like it. I just thought... I thought if I started workin here, things would be easier for us...”

And then she opens the door wide, and steps into the shower with me, clothes and all, and she starts to press her mouth against mine. She’s kissin me, real heavy, her tongue all in my mouth, and it’s just like before, when I was lookin at that test strip: I don’t have no clue what to do. She kinda pushin me against the wall, her hands goin down my body, kissin me, and I’m just standin there kinda shocked, but after awhile, I realize that I’m kissin her back. And I realized that her hands on my body... they feel good. Better than anything Ricky ever did. I started gettin... excited. Her hands were on her own body now, at the gym shorts, slipping them down to the floor, still kissin me, and I’m followin her mouth with mine. She stands straight, takes my hand with hers and makes me touch her. I can feel her shake a little, and she moans, and even over the noise of the shower I hear her say, “Oh baby...”

Baby.
That word, it’s like Momma’s alarm bell; it’s suddenly like I’m comin back to my senses. And I realize what I’m doin: I’m makin out with gross Annabelle in the shower of the gym.

I’m so disgusted I can’t stand it. I break the kiss and shove her away from me. She goes through the shower door, which swings wide, and she falls half naked and wet as a hog on the locker-room floor. She must’ve busted her face too, cause when she looks up at me her bottom lip is bleedin.

“Get away from me!” I says, and I’m really yellin now. Screamin. Standin in the doorway of the shower and pointin down at her while she lies there curled in a ball.

“What you think I am?” I’m screamin. “You think I’m a lesbian? I ain’t no lesbian! I like boys! I like Ricky! And me and him are gonna be together! He’s gonna play football, and I’m gonna open up my make-up shop, and we gonna get married and live rich and fine forever. And ain’t nothin gonna keep me from it!”

I figure out while I’m screamin that I’m cryin at the same time, cryin harder than I was before. Meanwhile Annabelle’s tryin to get up, and she’s slippin on the wet floor, and I’m screamin over her, screamin still as she finally gets her fat ass up and runs out of the locker room, bottomless and all.

The shower is still runnin, the water risin higher cause Annabelle’s gym shorts are cloggin the drain. I pick them up, and somethin clinks on the floor. I look closer and see it’s her chastity ring; it must have slipped off while we were makin out. I all the sudden feel like throwin up—I feel cold in the warm shower, and my stomach hurts—but I hold it in, and soon the feeling in me goes away. I just stare at that chastity ring on the shower
floor, and I figure that I still hate Annabelle, now more than ever, cause she was better than me.

She really was.
The Homeless Old Man and His Empty Tomato-Paste Cans

I’ve always been a simple man. Never spectacular, always just squeaking by on tests in school. Of course when I got older, I realized I should’ve tried harder, because of the way the economy was at the time...things were hard, we’ll just leave it at that.

I remember, when I was in college, when I was young and struggling against everything, even myself, running into a friend on campus. He had been the artsy type, hemp clothes and long hair, and he was looking up at the clouds and talking to his girlfriend about them.

“See the way that one just...swishes into that big one?” he said. “And the way the light sets against them just right?”

I interrupted him to say hello, and he pointed them out to me: how the clouds left traces of themselves behind as they drifted over us, explaining how at any given moment when you looked up at the sky, it would never be quite the same, each and every time.

“Do you know how precious that is?” he said, smiling.

And I told him yes, that I did, but I had to go. I had somewhere to be, some class.

His smile was broad, and I could have sworn there were tears in his eyes. He said, “It’s all around you, man.” And he went back to standing there, kids filing past him and his girlfriend as they stood looking and pointing straight up into the zenith like two crazy people. Then again, people who appreciate the good things in life always seem a little crazy, but it’s not necessarily their fault.
I was coming out of the drive-thru when I saw him. A homeless old man trailing a string of tomato-paste cans behind him. He was standing by the exit to the burger joint and, as I watched, a car pulled up in front of him on its way out. A hand holding some money appeared from the slowly lowering window. The old man took it, nodding and saying something, and the car pulled away. The old man put the bill in his pocket, and resumed holding up the piece of cardboard he was carrying.

I was kind of amused; I had seen homeless people in the city before, and usually you get this feeling in your gut, a mix of shame and subconscious terror, imagining the horrors that would have to occur to put you in that place. But I guess the tomato-paste cans he trailed behind him reminded me of how newlyweds will attach tin cans to the back bumpers of their honeymoon vehicles. It seemed like an innocent enough gesture, playful, as if he were trying to put-on mental illness. Very tongue-in-cheek.

As I steered my car toward the exit I came around and saw his face. He was missing his left eye and the lid was sealed shut in a puckered abscess. The smile beneath his grey beard seemed good-natured enough.

But what really made me stop was the sign. There were words written in on the piece of cardboard he held: “Kindness Helps.”

I think it could’ve been the cans, maybe it was just the way he stood there smiling—or probably both—but there was something ironic in the words he held. Sardonic, even. As if the facts on that sign were apparent only to him. His single blue eye, the whites cracked with red fatigue, traced itself over the curve of the roof of my car.

The first thing he said was, “Bit young, huh?”
I couldn’t help but laugh, “Am I?” I remember shaking my head, “I sure don’t feel like it.”

“Imagine how I feel,” he said. The tops of his cheeks crinkled like twisted paper as he smiled. He shifted his feet and the rusted cans, tied around his ankles with browned string, tinkled as they lolled on the sidewalk. But my eye kept wandering back to his empty socket in almost macabre wonder.

“Well, how old are you?” I said.

He shrugged, “Don’t know. My mother left me at a shelter when I was a baby. Don’t know her, don’t know my age. Homeless is my life.” And still, his good humor never seemed to leave him; it was the kind of happiness that made you wonder about the warning signs of incipient madness. As I kept looking toward his eye I noticed there was a scar at the edge of the sealed eyelid which furcated into the smile lines along his temple.

“Beard’s gray,” he continued on. “So I must be gettin up there.”

I smiled at him, “Must be a bummer, huh?”

“No, oh no,” he shook his head. “No. If you don’t like livin than you ain’t worth the spit you swallowin.”

I smiled at him, my eyes going back over his face. That missing eye.

“‘Nam,” he said, but I didn’t realize what he meant until he pointed to empty socket with a chapped hand what he was talking about.

“Really,” I said. I looked away, quelled; I had been staring and hadn’t realized it. I was reaching into my pocket, trying to gather all the change I had.
“Shot in the face,” he said. “Whole thing broke up. But life ain’t like the movies. In the movies you get shot in the face, you die. Out here you gotta keep on livin’.”

His voice was odd, like his tongue was too big for his mouth, and too wet. I was fishing for the last coin in my pocket, looking at the road passing by the burger joint, the cars passing, the tall buildings of the city packed close and extending beyond. It seemed like they just kept going on. A car was coming up behind me from the drive-thru. I needed to go.

“You hear?” the old man said. He leaned down toward me, “Life ain’t like to movies. You still have to live out here.”

I remember being terribly uncomfortable, thinking now I had a crazy person leaning into my car, and that I needed to get out of there. A coin slipped through my fingers, fell into the seat and I reached under my butt to get it.

“You know how you do that?” the old man said.

“How?” I said. My fingers closed upon the coin in the seat, and I pulled it out. It was a quarter.

“Love, of course,” he said.

I stopped and I looked up at him, the coin face up in the palm of my hand. He smiled again, and I realized that when he smiled it seemed like his eye wasn’t missing at all. The scars at the corner of his socket disappeared into the crinkles of his face. His right eye closed almost all the way, a mere twinkle of blue flashing into the bright day, and I realized he was beautiful. He was a beautiful old man.

“It’s that easy,” he said. He was nodding, and he might as well have been talking to himself, “And it’s that hard.”
I held up the money. It was a dollar and ninety-three cents. He took it, put the coins in his pocket. He still held the dollar in his hand. He was looking past my shoulder, through my passenger window, at something.

“I have to ask,” I said, and his eye turned back to me. I nodded to his feet, “What’s with the cans?”

The car behind me beeped the horn. Neither of us paid any attention.

The old man shrugged, sighing, “Oh, you know...” He stopped. I followed his gaze. Next to the burger joint there was a cluster of concrete ramps connected to the highway, stacked stories high and hanging twisted on thick columns of stone. There was a short section of grass extended beneath it, and I could see white bits of trash dotting the green landscape.

“Everybody’s gotta have somethin’,” he said. He patted the roof of my car, then lifted one foot, and the cans clunked hollow on the sidewalk behind him. “This is all I got.”

I laughed slightly, “You’re crazy, man. You are crazy.”

He smiled wide, “Am I?” He gave a single loud, phlegmy laugh, and shook his head, “I sure don’t feel like it.”

And we smiled at each other. The last thing he said to me was, “Sorry. Gotta go spread the word.”

He tapped the cardboard sign with his fingertips, and he walked around the front of my car, the cans at his feet scraping and clanking as he went along. The car behind me beeped again, more urgently, and I pulled forward, moving past the sidewalk before stopping again, waiting for traffic to pass. As I sat there I looked back, and I saw that the
old man hadn’t been looking at the trash-strewn lawn at all, but at the sidewalk running parallel with it. There was a mother walking along with two small children, boys, on either side. I hadn’t even seen them. The old man walked up to them and in a swift motion handed one boy a dollar, my dollar. And he reached into his pocket, taking the dollar he had received earlier, and gave it to the other boy.

The car behind me beeped a third time. The road ahead of me was clear; I had to go. So I pulled away.

I went back to that burger joint many times, to see if I could catch a glimpse of that old man again. I wanted to talk with him about what he did that day. I wanted to talk with him about what he did on a lot of days. But I never saw him again.

Now I go to a different place, and instead of getting burgers I get a salad (on most days). And I take my salad and sit on the bench outside, on the nice days, and I think weird thoughts. I think about how a car is nothing more than a shiny can that will soon turn into a rusted one. About how each eye is like insurance on the other. Sometimes I’ll laugh to myself, and I would bet that people look at me funny, a young man sitting on a public bench, laughing, half-chewed salad falling out of his mouth.

And as I’m sitting there, I always make sure I look up at the sky. Sometimes it’s overcast, the clouds fat and heavy. Other times there will be traces of clouds, little trails left behind by passing jets, or maybe singular puffy and amorphous behemoths. And then there are days where there isn’t a single cloud, when the sky is bright and deep blue all around, and you feel like you could fall into it. Now, I don’t know which one I like best, which one is the most beautiful for me, and I can’t make any meaning out of anything in
this life, really, but I’ll say this: I’ve never seen the same sky twice. And that seems to be a good a reason as any to live.
Trivia Night

The host turned the volume down, everyone one in the bar becoming quiet with it, and began to speak into the microphone. The bar itself stood nearly empty; the few patrons sat in groups around tables in the darkened dining area.

“Yes, boys and girls, the final question of the night, for ten points,” the host said. He had a short, brown beard and his big belly orbed out the bottom of his button-down shirt. Behind the microphone you could see his mouth, grinning.

“What two states,” he said, his voice hushed in feigned intensity, “lay directly above the state of Utah?” And he said it again, “What two states... lay directly... above the state of Utah? You have one minute.”

I turned to confer with the rest of the table. The host turned the music volume back up, and the voices in the bar rose with it. Wendy immediately began singing along with the music; having not made a single contribution toward the questions all night, I could only assume that she didn’t know any of the answers, and had now resorted to singing to desperately try and avoid the issue.

Makaila put her hand on my leg and her temple on my shoulder. She was on her fifth beer of the night and she had ordered shots for the rest of the group a few minutes earlier. Rumpleminze.

“There are more states above Utah? God, this country sucks,” she said. Her big dark eyes drooped closed.

“I guess,” I said, leaning my nose and mouth into her long, dark hair.
“One of them’s gotta be Idaho,” Stephen said, more to himself than anyone else. He had his head inclined, hand to chin, Rodin’s *Thinker* but with gnarled tattoos peeping out from under his sleeves, and a beard.

“Montana?” Tracy said. I felt bad for her immediately, and not just because she was wrong; she had one of those naturally ugly faces that would be ugly forever. There were certain people who would grow into beauty. But Tracy’s face would never be pretty—it was too thin at the front, with her fat jowls hanging down and two crooked buck teeth poking through her lips—and what’s more, she seemed to *know* it. It was as if she was ashamed of herself all the time, and for some reason it was *that*—her insidious self-dislike—that was the ugliest thing about her.

“No, it’s not Montana,” Stephen said with a wave of his hand. He didn’t even look at Tracy—who could blame him? He grabbed a handful of nuts from the bowl in the center of the table by the liquid candles and began to eat them from his palm.

Wendy kept bawling that song over everything. Tracy looked down at her napkin, pulled a pen from her purse and started to draw an impromptu map of the Northwestern United States. Russell, sitting at the head of the table, seemed to be trying to cultivate beer inside his near empty glass through telekinesis—he had been at Noah’s since two, having given up the job search today after a good fifteen minutes. No one was talking to him; his dark skin seemed to burn with aged, brooding anger.

I put my hand on Makaila’s leg. It was solid—she was a swimmer, and her body was made of smooth muscle and supple curves in all the right places. Interesting—it’s as if the water cuts and smoothes our bodies over time, just as it does stone.
Makaila and I had known each other for a couple of years, having met in college, and while I had always done my best to be a good person, she was the only human being in the world whom I had never lied to, and that was something special in this day and age. Everybody lies about something. But I never felt that urge with her—and what was more, I never got the sense she felt the need to lie to me, either.

However, as soon as my fingers touched the denim over her thigh, she sat up and took her hand off my leg, fixing her hair, and something opened up in my chest—and it felt like all of me could fall into myself at any moment.

The music volume was turned down, and for a moment it was only Wendy’s voice singing the song until she realized she was singing in silence and stopped. I smiled inwardly. The host’s voice rang in our ears again, “Thirty seconds.” The music came back up. Wendy’s smile widened, and she started singing again.

“Well, we gotta put something!” Stephen said, dropping the rest of his nuts across the table. He grabbed at the submission slips and began to write. “Idaho and what else guys?”

“Wyoming,” Russell muttered, still staring at his glass. A waitress, peering over her large bust at Russell, came by.

“Same?” she said, cupping her hand over the glass.

“Why not?” he said, blatantly staring at her tits.

“Anyone?” Stephen said. The waitress, giving Russell an adoring look–it was kind of ridiculous, a bar maid giving one of her random patrons a look of adoration–took his glass and left, holding a food tray upright with her other hand.
“Put Wyoming,” I said, my frustration having multiple points of origin. “No one else knows...”

“Wyoming sounds good,” Makaila said, drinking off the rest of her beer. “I was gonna say Colorado...”

“I would’ve said Wisconsin, but then I thought about it again and I realized that was just stupid,” I said. I looked over at Makaila, to see if she laughed. Stephen scribbled something down on the submission slip, and then jumped up to hand it to the host, who took it from him with that smile still on his face. The song on the speaker system ended and a new one started up. Wendy’s smile disappeared.

“I don’t like this song,” she said. Wendy was a natural brunette but had dyed her hair blond, and she liked tanning a lot. Stephen came back to the table, grabbed his glass, drank the rest and went up to the bar to get more. Wendy looked to the host, “Hey, Randall!”

He looked over at her, sunglasses on his face, and came running over. “What’s goin on baby? We’re about to announce the answer.”

“Could you change the music, hon?” Wendy said, twirling her hair in between her fingers. She was chewing gum and smiling.

Randall shrugged, “Sorry, baby, no can do.” Without the microphone his voice was sapped of its intensity, and you could distinctly hear how nasally it was. “I don’t pick the music–the owner does that. I just turn the volume up and down.”

“Aw,” she said, and–I swear to god–she leaned forward and pressed her breasts together with her arms to accentuate her cleavage. “Randaaall–”
“Sorry, hon,” he said, slapping the small stack of submission slips against the palm of his hand. “You look good tonight, though.”

“Thanks,” Wendy said, and she popped her gum and rolled her eyes in the other direction.

Makaila pulled a thick strand of her hair together in front of her face, meticulously. I watched her; this was one of her favorite things, one of those tics people do over and over again which are unique to them as individuals. Me, I trace an angular hour-glass shape across the tips of my fingers with my thumb when I’m in deep thought—or nervous.

Makaila took the strand of hair she held and put it underneath her nose. She then raised her upper lip—she had beautiful, full lips—to hold the strand of hair in place beneath her nostrils. She would keep it there for a minute or two, sometimes forgetting it was even there when she was really drunk.

“Makaila?” I said.

She looked to me and let the hair drop from her face, “Yeah, sweetheart?”

“Why are you so pretty?”

She smiled, “Why are you so sweet?”

“Because I was born that way.”

“Ditto.” She laughed.

“Hey,” I said, turning in my chair to face her fully, “I have another trivia question for you.” (She rolled her eyes at this, in on the joke) “What’s the most joyful experience you’ve ever had? Besides meeting me, obviously.”

“Obviously,” she said. “Well, I think I would have to say... graduation night.”
“Really,” I said. “Why?”

“Because,” she said, tracing her hair, “it was a great night. I mean the ceremony itself was fine—but I can’t even remember who the speaker was, and really it’s the night that I remember—and forget to remember, you know?” She laughed. “It was Rachel, Cleary and me, and we just were out all night drinking and hanging at The Glass. We were singing and laughing and, by the end of the night, we were all crying... I remember when they played ‘Piano Man’... and then walking home we were all in a group, singing ‘Hey Jude’ at the top of our lungs... We were never going to be like that again—that young, that in love, that hopeful and that hopeless, all at the same time—and we all knew it... the night was just—”

“Perfect,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said.

Stephen came back to the table and sat down. The host turned the music down again, speaking like an auctioneer, “All right boys and girls, here we go. The question: What two states lay directly above the state of Utah?”

Stephen sat forward in his seat, listening intently. The waitress with the large bust brought another beer for Russell, and I swear I saw her trail her fingertips across his shoulders as she turned away again. He didn’t give any indication that he felt anything. Makaila put her hand back on my leg and squeezed slightly, whether in anticipation of the coming answer or at seeing the waitress’s coy flirt, I couldn’t tell. Tracy, who had continued on to map out the rest of the United States to the best of her ability, looked around at the table. Even Wendy was quelled.

“Idaho... and... Wyoming!”
“Yes!” Stephen shouted over the silent bar, raising his arms over his head.

We left a few hours later, all of us at least half in the bag and most of us deeper in than we thought. I was never sure, but I think I caught a glance of Russell making out with the busty bar maid by the back dumpsters as we walked to the parking lot. We had completely lost track of Tracy’s whereabouts.

“I’ll drive,” Wendy said, rummaging around in her purse for her keys.

I already had mine in my hand, the rest of the group walking away, toward Wendy’s car. “I’ll see you guys,” I said.

“Wait!” Makaila said, running back to me. She really was a spectacular beauty.

“I never asked you,” she said, giving me a goodbye hug, “what was the most joyful experience of your life?”

I looked at her. She was quite drunk, and if she had been sober, I would’ve kept what I said next to myself.

“When I met you, obviously.”

She pulled away from me and smiled, her eyes half-closed, nearly whispering, “Obviously.”

I didn’t kiss her. There would be time for that. Or maybe not—as I got into my car I was overcome by that despair that occurs when you’re half-drunk and alone. I lived on my own, a tough thing to do in those days, and renting outside the city was cheaper. I drove past all that concrete, all of those lights, leaving it all behind, and I felt the immensity of it all—the immensity and the emptiness. How it all meant nothing and everything at the same time. How everybody thought the world was going to end soon, and how that added some sort of quiet desperation to everyone’s actions. Not that we
really believed the world was going to end—you never really wanted to. It was really too horrible to consider. Still, I’ll never forget the oddness of that time, and how it stood so perfectly exemplified by that one trivia game in a bar on a cold October night.

And I thought to myself, as I drove: what a terrible, wonderful thing, to live here, and now.


