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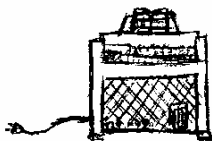
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For the Kids

THE INSIDE



I'm thinking back. I don't know why I'm thinking back, and I wish I could stop, but I can't, and it makes me want to kill someone. Maybe everyone. I'm too much of a coward for suicide, but if everyone else died, wouldn't it be the same thing? These are the kinds of thoughts that run through my head, even when I'm lying in a hammock on a July afternoon with my arm around someone I love. This is the hard thing. Even when the present is summer sun and lemonade, the past is still there, whispering snow and ice. It's always winter somewhere.

David Martin. He's the first thing I see when I look over my shoulder. Can I please blame everything on him? Our lives ran parallel. We matched each other step for drunken step. Can I use him as my stand-in? My stunt double? I just can't do it again by myself.

David and Julie in their cold, empty house. Watching them

lie there in bed, sleeping with their backs to each other as always, I really couldn't regret what I was doing. My conscience was a distant mosquito whine, and I slapped at it. I looked at the concrete wall on West Division Street—shadows became cars, their headlights became fiery explosions—and I looked away. I hated the future. I was fucking terrified of it. So of course I didn't make a strategy, oh no. No plan, no blueprint, not me. One thing just *led to another* until cars were crashing, steel twisting and skulls cracking, electric organs falling from the sky, vacuum tubes flashing and bursting like bombs, spraying that insane, quivering music that drives the world mad, tears it apart, makes it beautiful.

I'm thinking back. I'm telling myself a story. Sitting next to the little bed in my mind, reading to a squirmy brat who won't sit still, I begin with: *Listen. For once in your life, just shut up and listen.*

FALL

AGE 12

FEAR - MUTATIONS - SCHOOL BUS



I see the edge of a school parking lot, the concrete steps of the cafeteria back entrance. It's the furthest corner from the playground, half-hidden in shadows, almost an alleyway. I see a seventh-grade kid sitting there on the concrete steps, spinning a twig in his fingers, staring at the asphalt under his feet. It's a few minutes after noon, recess break. The air is soft and cool. Birdsong mixes with grumbling traffic noise. White jet trails slice the blue sky. A warm breeze brushes against his face, and he looks up, startled. Everything is suddenly quiet. The laughter and screams of the other kids fade into the distance, become muted and echoing. Something has changed.

There is a radio tower in the soccer field.

The seventh-grade kid stands up, hands dangling at his sides, and squints into the sunlight. There never used to be a radio tower in the soccer field. He walks toward it.

All around him is total silence. The playground is empty. There are no cars on the road. No planes in the sky. Not even birds. Just the ocean murmur of wind in his ears.

He walks out onto the soccer field, and stops. The brilliant green grass stretches off to the horizon on all sides, perfectly flat, beautifully manicured. In the exact center of this green expanse is the radio tower.

It looms over him, vast and grim. The red signal light at the top blinks at him, flashing in irregular patterns like syllables, like language. He stares up at it, craning his neck painfully. There is something *up there*. He can see it at the very top, something moving in the air. He takes a step closer and reaches for the—

“Ow!” A pop can bounces off the back of his head, and he turns around, rubbing his scalp. Two of his classmates are standing a few feet off, laughing. “Hey space case!” one of them says. “Break ended five minutes ago. Come on.”

The seventh-grade kid nods, waits for them to leave, then looks back at the soccer field. It’s empty. Just a hundred yards of dull, yellow grass.

He turns around and joins the stream of kids coming off the playground, hurrying back to class.

...

David Martin. Lost child. Tower climber. My unwitting and unwilling accomplice. When I think back, I see his memories as clear as mine. He could be my best friend, or my brother, or my son. He could be me.

A day in mid-October. Recess was over, and he had just seen a radio tower in the soccer field. He walked a little slower than the rest of the kids on their way back to class, pausing every few steps to look over his shoulder at the field. Empty.

David was the new kid at Christview Elementary, a small, cheap parochial school in the woodsy nowhere of northwest Washington. He had been here three weeks. Kids gave him uncertain glances as they ran by. Looking back in my mind, it’s slightly funny to think that exactly seven days later, most of those

kids would be bleeding in the hospital because of him. But I digress.

The tardy group slipped into the class and David managed to seat himself while the teacher was writing something on the blackboard. The teacher punctuated it with a hard rap of the chalk, then turned to face the class, revealing what he had written. David's chest tightened.

DANCE—FRIDAY, 6:00 PM

A murmur of excitement flooded the room. David glanced over at Shelley Kent, and found her already looking at him. She smiled. David quickly looked away, feeling a sour twisting in his guts. Every kid goes through this at some point, the first painful twitches of developing emotional organs, but David Martin was some kind of a mutant. These organs were not in the right places. I never knew what to do with this kid.

The room felt claustrophobic as Mr. Kenneth droned through a few more announcements, then finally dismissed the class. David burst out the door as if drowning and sucked in the cool afternoon air. He stood off to the side to avoid the stream of kids pouring out, hurrying off to other classes. Again he noticed Shelley Kent watching him.

"Hi David," she said, cradling her books in one arm.

"Hi," David mumbled, gave a polite smile, and walked away.

If he hadn't been so intent on getting out of the schoolyard and getting home, he might have noticed a skinny blonde kid watching him from behind, staring with brows creased in curious interest.

...

Violently and without warning, Friday arrived, and David found himself at the school dance. He was barely aware of how he had gotten here, and had no idea why he had come. He was in jeans and a white T-shirt, his hair unkempt, and he thought his

breath probably stank. He just stood there leaning against the gymnasium wall, arms crossed, watching the rest of his school cavort on the makeshift dance floor.

The inane music throbbed around him, the lights pulsed red and purple, glittering off the metallic streamers that hung from the rafters. He couldn't let his face relax. People always told him his default face looked depressed. He would be just sitting there thinking, and people would come up and ask, hey, what's wrong? So he had learned to keep that hint of a smile, keep his eyes dancing. It was the only way to avoid notice.

Maintaining this effort, he saw Shelley walking towards him, golden and resplendent, and he panicked. He had to hide somehow, but she had already seen him. For a moment he actually considered ducking behind a nearby bench.

"Hi David," she said, smiling.

"Hi." He took a sip from his plastic punch cup and made his eyes roam around the room, as if Shelley had just made a casual greeting while walking by. But she was still standing there, a little deflated, but maintaining her smile.

"How are you?" she persisted.

"Fine." Another casual scan of the room, another sip of punch.

Shelley just stood there for a moment, looking unsure, then made the attempt. "How come you're just standing around out here?" she asked with a little tilt of her head, her voice tentative. "Why aren't you... Why don't you come out and dance?" Her smile returned. David's chest flooded with sickly warmth.

"Uh, no thanks," he said like a knee reflex. "I'm just going to hang around." He gave her another polite but dismissive smile and took a sip of punch. It was like one of those dreams where you can't move or scream.

She mumbled something he couldn't hear over the music and walked away, back into the dancing crowd. He hated this. Everything was always such a mess.

He watched Shelley leave, and while watching her he noticed someone else watching her from across the room. A kid probably his age, tall, skinny, with a loose mop of blonde hair, dressed and groomed as carelessly as David. He was watching Shelley with an odd twist to his mouth, not quite a smile. After a moment, his eyes raised to look at David through the crowd, and he shrugged. David squinted at him. *What?*

The kid disappeared into the crowd. David resumed his punch-sipping and fake smiling. He was thinking about leaving, still unsure why he had come in the first place, when the kid appeared next to him and took a place leaning against the wall. “Do you think we know too much, or not enough?” he asked, in a tone like asking what’s your favorite color.

“What?” David said.

“Too much, or not enough?”

“About what?”

The kid shrugged and waved a hand around vaguely. “I don’t know. Just in general.”

David paused, looking at him cautiously. “How can you know too much?”

The kid shrugged again. “I don’t know. I’m just trying to figure out what’s wrong with us.”

David looked at him, frowning. “What? Who *are* you?”

The kid let out a short laugh. “Right, right, sorry. I’m Josh. Hi.”

“Um, hi.”

“You’re David, right? New kid?”

David eyed him sideways. “Yeah. You’re in my history class, right?”

“Yep.”

David nodded. His eyes roamed, and he caught sight of Shelley again. She was dancing with some other kid, but she looked up and caught his eyes before he could look away. He flinched.

Josh was watching him. “Hey, are you going on that field trip Thursday? Fort Casey?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I didn’t know if there’d be anyone I knew there, so I wasn’t sure if I was going to go.”

“Why, are you new here too?”

Josh smiled. “I’m kind of new everywhere.”

There was another pause. David shrugged. “Well, yeah, I’ll be there. I went there a couple times with my old school, and it’s a pretty cool place. They have these giant cannons that you can almost climb inside.”

“Cool. Sounds fun.”

Josh glanced around the room and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “All right, well I’m going home now. I guess I’ll see you at class Monday. Maybe we can eat together at lunch or something.”

“Sure.”

Josh gave a final nod and slipped out of the crowd. David watched him leave, feeling a vague unease.

...

The days flickered by like a zoetrope until it was Thursday, and David’s class shuffled single file onto the bus, filling the air with a buzz of excitement. The blonde kid, Josh, sat next to David and they greeted each other with elbows to the ribs. They had been hanging out together almost every day since the dance, and Josh had even come over to play Nintendo a few times. They were becoming friends at that wonderful speed only possible in childhood, before maturity fucks everything up and then kills you.

Now they were going to Fort Casey. The engine roared to life, the bus jolted beneath them, and they were on their way. David’s eyes wandered around the bus, and caught Shelley

Kent's. No coy smile this time. No inviting warmth. She just looked away. Well...of course she did.

"Forget it," Josh said quietly, behind his ear. "You had your chance."

David looked over at him, startled. "What?"

"You had as many chances as you could want, and you blew them all."

"What? With...?"

"Yeah."

David didn't know how to respond. "How would you know?" he said finally.

"I'm observant. Like, really observant. But it's obvious to anyone who looks."

"Uh, I've only been hanging out with you a few days, how would you..."

"Yeah, but I've been watching you for a while. Like since you got here." His unaltered tone suggested there was nothing odd about this. "You and her and a lot of people, actually."

David stared at him, eyebrows arched. "Uhhh..."

"I want to be a psychologist some day. So I study like, human behavior and stuff. There's a whole science to it, you know. It's really fascinating. But trust me, you blew it."

David looked at the back of Shelley's head, at her hair. It didn't seem like something so delicate and shimmering and angelic could grow out of little holes in a human scalp. Girls' hair...it was some kind of miracle. "What exactly did I blow, Josh? What am I missing out on? Being able to sit by her for fifteen minutes at lunch and call it a date? That's stupid. I mean...we're too young. It's just stupid."

Josh shook his head, but didn't reply.

It was a long way to the fort, and as the trip wore on, David's mind poked at what Josh had said. They crossed the Deception Pass bridge, suspended hundreds of feet over the waters of the vast Puget Sound. The water was set absolutely on fire by

the sun. "So what would you have done?" he demanded after a long silence. "Seriously."

Josh looked at Shelley and shook his head, letting out a slow breath. "I don't know, man. I think sometimes you've got to just...*do* shit. Like whether it makes any sense or not."

David looked out the window. His lips tightened together. "This is so dumb. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"You're the one who brought it up again."

"I know but I'm done. Can we just talk about something normal?"

Josh shrugged and looked out the window. There was another long silence, then he said, "I beat *Mega Man 2* last night."

"Cool."

"The last boss took me like an hour to beat."

"Dr. Wily in a big machine again?"

"At first, but after you beat his machine it gets really weird and you go to this cave where there's acid dripping everywhere, and the final boss is an alien you fight in outer space."

"What?"

"But it turns out it's just Dr. Wily using a hologram or something."

"Oh, ok."

"But it was really hard."

"Well the first game was way harder. I don't know anyone who's beat the first one."

"Yeah. Me either."

"The first one was like...ridiculous."

"Yeah."

...

Fort Casey. An old coastal military base, it had been sealed up and painted and turned into a tourist stop. David's old school had taken the trip twice in three years, but the place still intrigued him. There was an eerie ambiance about it, this tiny world frozen

in time. To most of the kids, trips like this existed to provide a more interesting stage for their games of farcical romance. David usually just wandered around.

To his surprise, Josh decided to take the low road and join the games. David occasionally saw him following Shelley at a distance, making awkward attempts to break into her conversations with her friends. Shelley was clearly not interested, and Josh seemed aware of this, but he pressed on anyway with embarrassing determination. When he saw David watching, he shot him a look that was equal parts frustration, resignation, and envy. David shook his head, and kept walking.

Viewed from the top of the coast-side wall, the fort's interior was ghostly. The inner walls were full of gaping black holes. Empty windows. Doorways left floating hundreds of feet above ground after the fort's guts had been removed. David wandered out to a gun turret overlooking the fort's interior. He could see a few of his classmates cavorting in and out of the black doorways. Everything was covered in moss and lichens, the concrete walls streaked with water stains, the metal rusted and crumbling under its gobbled coats of black paint. This place was disturbing somehow. The incongruity of modern ruins. Like wandering through a Peruvian jungle and stumbling upon the vine-covered remains of a Radio Shack. Standing there in the black doorway, looking at all the moldering electronics and wondering, *What happened? Where am I?*

Because this field trip was considered an "optional extra-curricular activity" by Christview's unique private-school rules, they hadn't left until early evening. Now it was getting late. The sun was well on its way down, and the dying light was curbing David's desire to wander alone. He stepped into the dark concrete labyrinth of the old bunkers, figuring this is where he'd find Josh.

It was amazing how quickly the light from outside was choked off. David walked briskly, running his left hand along the

wall to stay straight. He could hear the muffled warble of distant conversation, and he considered trying to scare some people, but he wasn't in a prankish mood. Wandering around alone for so long at dusk was starting to creep him out. Right now he just wanted to find Josh and hang out by the big cannon until they could leave.

A whisper in the ear, a breath on the neck, a fingernail down the spine. David stopped in midstep and felt his eyes stretching open, suddenly alert. All the concrete corridors were connected, so voices and footsteps echoed from all directions, but when someone was nearby, you could feel it. An imagined shadow in already total darkness, a slight shift in air pressure.

I was too close. I knew I was too close, but it was so hard to stay so cautious for so long.

He pivoted slowly around on one foot, craning his neck in a useless effort to see. "Hello?"

Gritting my teeth, I stepped back.

"Hello?" He turned again, and reached his hands out, tentatively feeling the air. "Josh?"

"Right here."

David relaxed, and tried to make his way toward the sound.

"That's David, right?"

"Yeah. Where's everyone else? You by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"What are you doing?"

"Just walking."

"Just *doing* shit, whether it makes sense or not?"

"Shut up, dickhead." There was bite to his words, but David realized there'd been bite to his too.

They followed the walls in darkness and silence for five minutes before they found an exit. Outside, the sun had fallen below the sea horizon, and the interior of the fort was smothered in thick shadow. David could hear Mr. Kenneth rounding up the class in the distance. The trip was over already, and it seemed like

all David had done was complete one walk across the wall-top. Where was the educational value in that? What was the point of this stupid field trip?

As they made their way up the hill toward the bus, he looked over at Josh, unable to filter all the bitterness from his voice. “So how did it go? Any luck with her?”


Josh didn’t take his eyes off the bus in the distance. They had turned the headlights on, it was time to go. A small smile bent his face, made tired and strange by the squint of his eyes. “You know you may have a point, David.” The gray twilight made his face dark and angular, made him look older.

David watched the grass beneath his feet for a moment. “So you think—”

“Here.” Josh grabbed something out of his back pocket and jabbed it into David’s hand. A crumpled-up piece of notebook paper. “Read that on the way back.”



David started to un-crumple it, but Josh shook his head. “On the way back I said.” He smiled again, with an odd twinkle in his eyes. “It’s funny.” He quickened his pace, pulling ahead of David, and climbed into the bus.

Josh didn’t sit by David for the trip home. He sat in the back of the bus, and David sat in the middle, sandwiched between Jason Weaver and some girl he didn’t know. He pulled out the paper Josh had given him.

tree tree tree telephone pole 
tree tree telephone pole tree

I was asleep a minute ago but
I woke up. The Chapel guy talked
about Exodus, all those people
escaping slavery, running out into
the desert because where else can
you go once you escape?

There shall be a pillar of cloud by
day and a pillar of fire by night.

 Awake  - Asleep

Were going on a field trip and then
we'll be going home. Tomorrow we'll
forget today and do something else.

This is it this is it **ETC.**

tree tree tree ~~it~~ puts me to sleep
I think I sleep for hours but it could be
years. No one would tell me. I wake
up in bed crying for mom.

Got a cold? Shoulda put your jacket on,
Warm up by the pillar of fire.

WE HAVE NOTHING FOR YOU HERE.

PLEASE LEAVE.

David held the piece of paper in front of him for about two minutes after he read it, squinting at it but not reading, as if studying the paper fiber. Poetic bullshit, right? Josh was crazy.

David read it all the way through again. "Please leave," he mumbled, and stuffed the paper into his pocket.

It was dark outside the bus. Black silhouettes, probably trees, maybe telephone poles, whisked by the windows. A rare oncoming vehicle blinded him with the flash of its headlights, leaving glowing green streaks across his vision. The bus was quiet except for the steady rumble of the engine. He was tired. Resting his head between his knees, trying not to bump the kids on both sides of him, he closed his eyes.

Snap.

...

He was sitting on a grassy hill, overlooking a freeway, and there was a full moon. The pale light rippled with the breeze in the grass, and shone softly on the town spread out beyond the freeway. This place was beautiful. He was going to sit right here forever.

There was a rustle of bushes, then the soft thump of footsteps, fast ones, coming his way. No surprise. No fear. Just curiosity, expectation. A silhouetted form rounded the bend in the hill, paused on seeing David, then scurried up and crouched beside him. It was too dark to make out any of this person's details, but he or she was breathing heavily and seemed frightened.

"Hey," she whispered breathlessly, and David felt his skin prickle. It was a girl's voice, soft and airy. "Is there somewhere here I could hide?"

David just peered at her, uncomprehending.

"Do you live down there?" she said, pointing to the town below.

David had absolutely no idea. "I..." he croaked, then

forced his mouth shut. The girl stood up and pulled him to his feet, though all she had to do was touch his shoulder and he shot up. “Listen, I need help,” she whispered. “Some uh...some guys are after me and I need—can you hide me?”

The sounds of distant shouts and footfalls suddenly reached David’s ears. What was this, he wondered? A gang of thugs? Enemy soldiers? Goblins? It didn’t really matter. He grabbed the girl’s hand and said, “Let’s go.” He didn’t know where he was or what he was doing, but her hand felt so *real*.

They ran down the hillside toward the freeway, and the girl’s fear seemed to melt away, if it had ever really been there. She let go of David’s hand and threw her arms in the air, releasing a stream of giddy laughter. Now in the more direct moonlight, David could make out her face, her brilliant smile, long, dark hair fluttering out behind her. When her eyes turned his way, they were a sharp blue that he could make out even in the darkness.

They didn’t even pause when they reached the freeway, they just ran. Flashing headlights blinded them and blaring horns screamed by on all sides, but David grabbed the girl’s arm and barreled through, trying his best to see the oncoming traffic and time their dashes. The girl seemed even less afraid than David. Her head darted about, eyes widening with excitement when a semi-truck hurtled by inches away, buffeting her hair and jacket. Within seconds they were over the median, across the northbound lane, and into the grass on the other side.

They climbed the manmade slope and collapsed at the top, panting for air through fits of laughter. “You think we lost them?” David wondered, raising himself on his elbows.

“Oh I’m sure we did,” the girl said with some kind of mischievous glint in her eyes. She looked down at the busy pipeline of streaking headlights, and laughed. “God, I can’t believe we did that. Are you crazy?”

He chuckled and looked down. “Sorry about that. Guess I

got caught up in the moment.” He glanced up and met her eyes.

“I guess so,” she said. Her eyes flickered away, then back.

David’s face felt warm, a flood slowly spreading through his chest. “What’s your name?” he asked.

Her eyes went back to his, and her smile widened. “It’s—”
“Knock it off you little shit!”

The world shriveled and melted like film over flame, and the inside of the school bus crashed in around him to replace it. He jolted awake with a soundless scream shaking in his throat, too constricted to release.

“Quit elbowing me or I’ll kick your ass.”

Jason Weaver. It was big, stupid, football player Jason with his blond bowl cut, scrunched down face and beady eyes. Still reeling, David unbuckled Jason’s seatbelt and shoved him violently out of the seat, then pounced on him on the floor and started hitting him. Too shocked to fight back, Jason ducked out of the way and David didn’t even see him go. He just kept swinging, his fists hitting the hard floor. A hand grabbed his shoulder and he leaped up, eyes red and watery, vision blurry.

“David!” Mr. Kenneth shrieked. “Stop it right now!”

“We have to go back,” David panted, his voice cracking beyond understanding. He dashed for the cab of the bus.

The driver turned around just as David was almost on top of him, and was too startled to react. David stomped his foot down on the driver’s foot, slamming the accelerator to the floor, and grabbed the wheel in both hands. *We have to go back. We have to go back and start over.*

He turned the wheel sharply to the left.

The bus was in total chaos, kids were screaming and getting out of their seats, the teacher was yelling and scrambling to get to David, but David wasn’t aware of any of it. He only knew that this place was dry and cold and meaningless, and he had to go back. He had to go back to Fort Casey, back to the drive home, back to falling asleep and opening his eyes somewhere else, back

to that hill, that freeway slope, back to where he was about to find out someone's name.

Moving fifty miles per hour down Highway 20, the school bus turned a sharp left. Two tires shrieked and burst, two wheel rims sent up showers of sparks, sixteen kids screamed. In David's realm, everything became steadily slower and more silent as the bus tilted and tipped over. He didn't feel the impact when the steel hulk hit the pavement like a whale slapping the ocean, kicking up sprays of glass and sparks. He didn't even feel the pain when he fell sideways and crashed into the dividing wall. He just watched the silent jumble around him fade to a soft white, waiting for the hill by the freeway to materialize around him. But there was nothing. Just a black void. Simple, empty sleep.

...

I saw a girl sitting on a bench under a flickering street lamp on an empty street. She looked at me, and smiled weakly. "Hi," she said, almost a whisper. She looked lost.

"Hi," I said. My voice trembled. I took a few steps closer. "Hey...are you ok?"

"I...think so." Her face was bemused, like she had just wandered out of a forest into a foreign land. She was beautiful.

"What's your name?" I asked.

Her eyes moved back to me, and she smiled again. Then she was gone.

WINTER
AGE 19
MEETINGS - MESSAGES - CLIFFS



David Martin, college student, medical delivery driver, dreamer of dangerous dreams, was taking a walk. It was one of those sharp, clean winter days where the icy gusts make a joke of the feeble sunshine. Wrapped tightly in coat, gloves, and hat, David was on his way to the abandoned Cascade Mall, to haunt it.

He could just make out the rooftops in the distance, hundreds of glass sheets like solar panels. The mall had been under a major remodel for several months now, and was so deconstructed it was no longer recognizable as a civilized structure. Roofs had been taken down, and half the walls had been removed. David crossed the eerily bare parking lot and stepped in through the main entrance. The construction happened in shifts, and today was an off day. The entire mall was empty, echoing and silent. The mall was a ruin. David was a ghost.

He found himself in the food court, where the entire roof had been torn off except a few remaining panes of glass around the edges. These refracted the sunlight and cast sparkling forms all over the broken concrete pillars. He climbed up onto the thick

concrete wall and sat down on a corner. The clouds were thinning now, just a silvery gauze over the sun, and the light warmed David's red cheeks. He sat there with his eyes closed, soaking up the warmth.

"David Martin! You're sitting in my spot!"

David peered down at the person standing on the floor below. Some young guy looking up at him. Vaguely familiar...was that...?

"*Josh?*"

"Been a while, hasn't it?"

David stared at him. Josh stood there with a big grin. David stared at him.

...

"David, can I ask you some questions about school?"

"Ok."

"How long did you attend Christview Elementary before you were expelled?"

"A few weeks."

"And before that, you attended several other schools in Washington, is that right?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you change schools so often, David?"

"My family moves around a lot."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know."

"What does your father do for work, David?"

"He's an HVAC technician."

"He does construction work?"

"Yeah. Heating and ductwork stuff."

"How many times have you moved since you were born, David?"

"Twelve times."

“When your family moves, does your father tell you why you’re moving?”

“Not really. I think he just gets sick of where we’re at.”

“Do *you* get sick of where you’re at? Or do you wish you could stay, when your family decides to move? David?”

“I thought you wanted to talk about school.”

“I apologize, I do want to talk about that. David, how many different schools have you attended?”

“Five.”

“Do you miss your old schools? When you leave, do you miss the friends you made there?”

“I guess. Maybe a little.”

“Just a little?”

“Yeah. Just a little.”

“Did you make many friends at Christview, David?”

“I was only there a few weeks.”

“So you didn’t make many friends?”

“I don’t know.”

“Now that you’re going to Clearwater Elementary, do you still talk to any of the kids from Christview?”

“No.”

“Because of what happened on the bus? David, would you mind if we talked about that for a moment? About what happened on the bus? ...David?”

...

“Yeah, Josh...it’s been a while. You could say that.”

Josh pulled himself onto a broken pillar stump and hopped onto the wall. The intervening years had made him almost unrecognizable. He was not skinny or awkward anymore. His movements were easy, he looked athletic. His blonde mop was fashionably swept. His blue eyes were confident, he didn’t break gaze

when he talked. David felt like he himself hadn't changed at all.

Josh walked over to the corner of the wall and sat down next to David, letting his legs hang off the edge. "Wow," he said in a deep release of breath. "Weird, isn't it?"

David nodded. "Yeah. What's it been, seven years?"

"Something like that." He looked down at the food court below, glanced over at David, then back at the court. "Kind of awkward?"

David smiled and shrugged. "Well, you know. Seven years."

Josh nodded. "Yeah. So what do you want to do here, man? The basic briefing type of thing? Long time no see, what have you been up to, see ya later? Or do you have some time?"

David thought about that a moment. He recalled the last few times he had run into old friends. Spotting them down the aisle in the grocery store or waiting in line at the theater. He recalled dodging around corners to avoid being seen, switching lines, sometimes actually leaving the store. David Martin was not one for catching up. He was not one for "thinking back". But Josh...this was different somehow, wasn't it? This was *Josh*, and Josh was...

"I guess I've got some time," David said.

"Great."

"So...what brings you to the empty mall today?"

"Well actually, I followed you here."

"You followed me?"

"Yeah. I saw you on the sidewalk, you looked familiar, so I started following you." He glanced around the mall. "But I've been coming in here a lot anyway since they started tearing it down. In fact I usually sit right here where we're sitting. It's a good place to read and whatever."

David nodded. "Do you live around here, then?"

"Yeah, I moved out to Sedro Wooley when I turned eighteen. Living in a cabin on my Grandpa's property right now, but

I'm hoping to find a place here in town eventually."

"You going to college at all, or...?"

"I did about a year's worth of Running Start credits in high school, then I kind of took a break, but I'm going back soon. For the last year though I've just been working, making plans, etcetera."

"Plans?"

Josh shook his head dismissively. "I don't know, just stuff. Anyway, how about you?"

David shrugged. "I don't know. Living in Mount Vernon, working, going to Skagit."

"Skagit, no kidding! I've been thinking about going there myself, either there or Western. Maybe you'll see me on campus pretty soon."

David nodded. "Yeah, and we should hang out sometime and catch up properly. Do you want to—"

"Tell you what," Josh cut him off. "Do you know Brandi Noel at all? She goes to Skagit."

"I've seen her around. Why?"

"She's having a big party Friday night, people from Skagit and a bunch of other people you'd probably know. You want to go?"

David groaned inside. "Party, huh," he grimaced.

"What, you don't like parties?"

"No, I...love college parties. I mean, *party*, bro. Woo..."

Josh gave him a huge grin. "Oh come on now, Martin. What's that sour face? Don't tell me you've gotten more cynical than you were in seventh grade."

David shrugged.

"I bet you need to be shaken up a little."

David attempted a pained smile. "Uh huh."

Josh looked at him a moment, then took a deep breath and stood up. "Anyway, I've got to get going, but it's at 8:00. It'd be great to see you."

“Yeah,” David grunted. “We’ll see I guess.”

“All right, David.” He reached out a hand for David to shake, and David shook it after a moment’s confusion. “It’s good, and a little surreal, to see you again, sir.”

“Yeah, uh, you too.”

Josh gave his hand a vigorous shake and released it. He climbed down from the wall and made his way toward the exit. “Hope to see you Friday!” he called up, and waved. David offered a noncommittal “maybe”, and then Josh was gone.

The spell that had brought David to the mall today was broken. The once magical ruin was now just a construction site again. He packed up his stuff and left. Walking at a quicker pace than normal, he found his head swimming with uninvited thoughts. Old thoughts. Buried. They thrust up through the dirt of his memory like zombie hands, clutching and clawing.

Josh Miller. Where the fuck had *he* come from?

...

“David, your parents gave me this. They said you had it on you the night you came back from Fort Casey.”

“So?”

“Can you tell me anything about this? Is it a poem?”

“I don’t know.”

“It sounds like you wrote this while you were on the bus. Can you tell me what some of this means to you?”

“I didn’t write it. Josh did.”

“Is Josh one of your friends?”

“I guess. He was, anyway. At Christview.”

“You aren’t friends with Josh anymore?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t really talked to him much since then.”

“So Josh wrote this poem?”

“I don’t think it was supposed to be a poem.”

“What do you think it was supposed to be?”

“I don’t know. Just like...*thought*.”

“How did you feel after you read it?”

“I don’t know. Kinda weird.”

“You felt ‘weird?’”

“Yeah.”

“What does it mean to you? This poem, this ‘thought’, did it mean something to you that day on the bus?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Can you tell me what it meant to you?”

“No.”

“Why do you think Josh gave this to you, David?”

“I have no idea.”

...

After meeting him at the mall, David ran into Josh again the very next day.

David was on his way to his Oceanography class, making his way down the tiled streets of Skagit Valley Community College. Skagit was a box fort, four connecting rows of classrooms surrounding a grassy square. It was a walled city, a temporary haven from the complexities of the real world. David couldn’t really say why he was there. His classes were a blur. He could see no connection between them and the future, but that wasn’t the point was it? Get out of high school and go to college. You’re on the right track. A glowing coal of purpose to fill that empty hollow in your chest. When someone asks you, “So are you going to school?” smile, and say, “Yes.”

Josh ran into David in the grassy center court. They both noticed each other at about the same time. “David!” Josh said. “We meet again!”

“Hey Josh,” David said, surprised and a little disoriented. “Uh, good to see you again. You still checking out the campus or

something?”

Josh grinned and hefted the books stuffed under his arm. “I’m a student, man. I completed my enrollment yesterday evening, and I start classes next week. I’m just picking up books now.”

“Oh, awesome,” David said, nodding lightly. “Pretty quick decision there. Yesterday evening?”

“Yeah, well, I’m not a procrastinator,” Josh said, and started to back up. “I’ve got to go. I’ll see you in class, ok?”

“Are we in any of the same classes?”

“Yeah, a few, actually.”

Had he checked the student list or...? Josh was now backed up to the point where conversation was cut and couldn’t be resumed without awkwardly walking back to hearing distance. David waved and started to turn away but Josh wasn’t quite done yet.

“Come to the party tonight, David! It’ll do us both good for you to be there, ok?”

David gave a nod, waved, and turned back toward the Oceanography room, muttering under his breath. He sat in the back of the class listening to a lecture about deep sea life. Things that lived in the dark.

...

On his way home from class, David kept his eyes straight ahead, never veering from his lane. He refused to look at oncoming cars. He knew if he let his eyes wander, it would hurt. He would catch a glimpse of someone through the windshield, they would lock eyes for a brief instant, and then *whoosh*, they would be gone again. A lovely young girl with an inviting half-smile, a well-dressed businessman in a Mercedes, a middle aged woman in a van with kids in the back, a college kid on a cell phone, head tipped back and laughing. It could be anyone. These people and their lives. Where were they going? They whooshed by, and

David was left sitting in his car alone with the emptiness, an angry, trembling death grip on the steering wheel.

Sometimes he hated them. All these people he would never meet. Who were they? Were they happy? They had to be.

He was driving home, and his overcranked speakers made the sound of a lawnmower pull-start over Elliot Smith's "I Didn't Understand". He sat in the car until the song finished, then shut it off and listened to the battered engine clank to a halt. A little worse every time. Another unchecked box on his list. How many pages long now?

The place where David slept was a rickety monstrosity of chipped paint and rotting wood. A perfectly stereotypical bachelor pad. Mismatched furniture, bare white walls, soul-sucking fluorescent lights—like in an office!—draining everything into a washed out, translucent gray. It was not a home, it was living quarters. David didn't mind. He used only his bedroom and the bathroom, and there were rooms upstairs that he had never been into.

He slipped inside and ducked into his bedroom. Gray carpet, white walls, bare as a warehouse. A bed, a dresser, and a desk. A trash can full of wrinkled up paper—poems, song lyrics, scraps of short stories. He never kept any of these. He was embarrassed that he even made the stuff. It always came out wrong, always such melodramatic bullshit. He wished he could write something grand and inspiring. Something that would uplift humanity and help millions of people. He would scribble it out on a piece of notebook paper and throw it in the trash, but a gust of wind would blow it out the window and onto the sidewalk, where someone important would find it, and read it, and show it to all their friends, and then...

He sat on the corner of his bed, looking at the white wall. Normally he would be at work right now. This was one of his rare days off. He didn't know what to do with himself.

On any given day, the average person spends 7 hours sleep-

ing, 8 hours working, 2 hours driving, 1.5 hours eating, 3 hours watching TV and movies, and 24 hours wishing they were doing something else.

David stood up, for no particular reason, and stepped into the living room. One of his room-mates was sprawled on the couch. David wasn't sure if the guy had been there when he'd come into the house. He may have been so motionless he was undetectable. Camouflaged with the couch. Like a sea slug.

"Aaron," David said, and flopped onto the other couch across from him.

"What's up," Aaron mumbled. His eyes stared blankly at the ceiling and his mouth moved slightly, as if mouthing lyrics. Huge mop of curly black hair, tall, skinny, infinitely tan. Tan even in the winter. He may have been Greek or something. In his late twenties, he was the oldest and most perpetually jobless resident of 1005 South 8th Street. He was also the only one David ever saw for more than ten seconds at a time.

"Doing anything tonight?" David asked, looking out the window at the homeless shelter across the street.

"Yep," Aaron said. "Party."

"You're going to a party?"

"You know I am." He sat up a little, and put on his glasses. Their thin silver frames looked almost scholarly, which struck David as humorous. "You should come."

"Nah."

"Dave. You've got to get out once in a while."

"Since when do *you* get out? You're on that couch every time I come in here."

"That's total coincidence. I get out all the time."

"No you don't."

"I get out like a banshee."

"That doesn't even make sense, banshees don't get out."

"Who says?"

"I really doubt banshees get out much, if at all."

“Just come to the party, Dave.”

“I’m tired. I don’t have any energy for a party.”

“Bullshit. I saw you go to bed at like 8:00 last night.”

David made a sound halfway between a sigh and a groan, and rolled over on the couch, reaching out for the TV remote and falling short. “I don’t want to go, ok?”

Aaron heaved himself off the couch and stretched his arms. “Sick of your shit, man. You’re coming.” He grabbed David’s shirt and tried to haul him to his feet. David shook him off and glared at him.

“What’s the big deal, Aaron? Where is this stupid thing happening?”

“It’s at Brandi Noel’s house.”

David recoiled. “What the fuck, you too? Is this thing a citywide function or something? Is it being advertised on TV?”

“Huh?”

“An old gradeschool friend I ran into has been at my throat about this party for two days.”

“Listen to him. Obey.”

“Look, all it’s going to be is a bunch of drunk assholes, shitty music, and ridiculously attractive girls that I’ll never talk to. It will suck.”

Aaron sighed. “Dude, you’re too much. What are you gonna do instead? Sit around the rest of the night writing stories and wrinkling them up?”

“I don’t want to go, Aaron.” A pleading tone had crept into his voice, and he didn’t like it.

Aaron dismissed his objections with a shake of his head. “Come on, Dave. Get dressed and let’s go.”

And to David’s dismay, he stood up, sighed, and headed for his room. Then he realized he was putting on his shoes.

In the corner of the living room, an old 1970’s electric organ sat covered in dust. David had bought it at Salvation Army a year ago for thirty dollars. He had wanted to learn how to play.

He knew only three chords, but he wanted more. Why didn't he ever play that thing? Why didn't he learn how?

Someone had turned it on. The furnace glow of the vacuum tubes inside glared at him as Aaron dragged him out the door. Its speaker crackled softly.

...

"David, I'm told that your family is moving again soon."

"Yeah. To Methow Valley."

"That's in far eastern Washington, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's a desert."

"But you're not going with them?"

"No. I'm getting my own place in Mount Vernon."

"Are your parents ok with that?"

"Of course. I'm almost seventeen."

"Of course. So, David, it's been a few months since our last session, and you know we may not have many more after this one. So I would like to ask you...how have you been feeling lately?"

"Fine."

"Have you been sleeping well?"

"Yeah."

"I know you don't like talking about this very much, but I have to ask...have you had any 'special' dreams lately? Like the one you had on the bus? David? I'm sorry, David, but it would be very helpful if you could tell me."

"No. I haven't."

"Have you been having any feelings like the feelings you had after that dream on the bus?"

"No."

"It's been over four years. You haven't experienced anything like that dream since then?"

"No."

"How does that make you feel?"

“It’s good. It was...scary, after that happened. I couldn’t stop thinking about it.”

“So you feel like that experience has been put behind you?”

“Yeah. I don’t think about it anymore. I had a girlfriend a few months ago, and that was pretty nice. I didn’t think about it hardly at all when I was with her.”

“David, this may seem like an odd question but...do you ever wish you could have another dream like that?”

“Well, I don’t want to freak out again. I don’t want to hurt people and fuck up my life again. I mean that was...crazy.”

“Of course you don’t want that to happen again. But David, do ever wish you could just have that *dream* again? The ‘special’ dream? Do you wish you could go back to that place?”

“Well...yeah.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. Every night.”

...

David watched Burlington, Washington pass by his window with a dull stare. A blur of glowing department store signs and street lamps, then rows of off-white houses in the residential district. The houses grew bigger and nicer as they approached Burlington Hill, a little splotch of upscale on the city’s drab background of working-class. David didn’t quite catch the name on the sign next to the wrought-iron community gate. Meadowlark Meadows, Sunnyvale Brookewoodfield. Something like that.

There were so many cars at Brandi’s house, they had to park two blocks down the street. David stepped onto the sidewalk feeling his stomach twisting as it always did when faced with human beings. How had he been dragged into this? He didn’t *go* to parties. He didn’t know how. He didn’t speak English.

Aaron was too jobless to own a car, so he had secured a ride with some guys David had never met. Aaron and his friends

pushed through the front door and immediately began greeting acquaintances. David paused in the entryway and looked around at the sea of people. Grinning faces repeating useless greetings, hey hi hey how are you. Heads bobbing to the beat of some soulless R&B megahit. Speakers blasting loud enough to completely drown attempts at conversation. Everyone reduced to the language of shouted words and hand signals, like basketball players, like commandos.

David had no choice but to plunge into the crowd. He probably knew a few people here from Skagit, but no one he could really talk to. Aaron was in his own world, laughing and shaking hands with countless friends. David needed to find Josh, fast.

The noise in the house was astounding. David struggled through the wall-to-wall crowd, bumping into people and making unheard apologies in the chaos. It was hard to imagine Josh Miller hanging out in a place like this, but he had probably changed a lot since seventh grade. Everyone changed, everyone moved on in life. David just moved around.

The density of the room felt familiar to him. All the jostling shoulder to shoulder made him think of seventh grade. Cafeteria lines. Long hallways, poorly lit. Being packed into a school bus, the breath of classmates hot on the back of his neck.

A memory. Josh in the hospital lobby, both of them on their way out, on their way home. A big bandage on David's head, a cast on Josh's arm. Josh looks at him, his brows lower, squinting, mouth slightly open, shaking his head. "David...what the hell?" he asks, and that's the last thing David hears from him for seven years.

The hospital is pale and lifeless, the air heavily machined and suffocating. A white glow from the windows and glass door, the exit. The air looks so fresh outside. David doesn't respond to Josh. He just shrugs. His parents take him home.

A memory. Walking to the wall-mounted phone to call Josh, to see if he wants to hang out. Imagining what he would say, the awkward greeting,

the uncomfortable silences.

Walking away.

A memory. A crumpled piece of paper.

“Warm up by the pillar of fire. There is nothing for you here.”

The noise flooded back into his head, pounding music, shouted conversation, smiles and winks. The air was heavy and wet, he could barely move, could barely breath. He pushed his way through a dense hallway and saw a clearing opening up to the left. He went for it, popping out of the crush like a watermelon seed between fingers, and collapsed into an overstuffed recliner. He had stumbled into one of the calmer regions of the vast house, and it was a little quieter here. He leaned into the recliner, closed his eyes, breathed slowly.

Aaron was right that he had gotten plenty of sleep the night before, but he was exhausted. It was that kind of tiredness that you feel in your face, a heavy numbness in the eyes and skin that makes you want to burrow your head into a couch cushion. In this hazy stupor it took him a moment to notice that there were other people in his little haven of quiet. There were a couple of guys and a girl on the couch against the wall, laughing and talking with plastic beer cups in hand, and one other girl lounging in the recliner opposite him. The chairs were fairly close, and they had just made eye contact, so a response was in order. “What’s up,” David said with a short nod. The girl just smiled and nodded. She was pretty, but David took no special notice. There were too many “hot girls” here to count, a smiling, giggling blur of bleached blond hair, tanned midriffs and tube tops. Beauty science had become so advanced, with all the form-fitting clothes, face-flattering haircuts, nuclear tanning beds and space-age makeup, it barely meant anything anymore. David was tired of it. He was just tired.

The girl gazed out into the churning crowd, not pursuing any conversation, and that was a relief. David closed his eyes and slumped deeper into the endless cushions, like a down-filled

beanbag. They seemed to get softer and deeper by the second, until he was completely enveloped in them, until the whole world was just soft, pillowy nothing. He sank. The noises of the party buzzed in some distant universe. They became garbled and reversed, stretched out and strange, then disappeared. He sank.

Snap.

...

He was standing in a wide open plain of sand dunes. Endless blades of stiff grass rustling in the breeze. A beach. He could smell the salt in the air, could hear the distant roar of the surf. He began walking toward that sound.

The sky was a light, featureless gray, but it was warm, despite the breeze. On the horizon, just before the grass gave way to sandy beach, he could see several of those red-and-white-striped poles, usually set up to mark trails on ocean camp grounds, to prevent campers from getting lost on the beach. But there were no paths to be marked as far as David could see, no trace of a campground or any kind of civilization within at least five miles. Only one thing broke up the endless expanse of beach grass. A dark shape in the distance. Some kind of building. He ignored it, and kept walking toward the noise with mounting anticipation. Finally he broke free from the grassy dunes, and the shore opened up in front of him. He grinned like a two year-old.

The ocean. It had been years since he had seen it, even though he lived right on the coast. The pummeling roar, the immensity of the waves, the infinity leading up to the horizon. Even in the bland, overcast light, it was awe-inspiring. He walked out onto the beach and stopped at the edge of the tide, watching the water advance and retreat. Then he raised his eyes, and noticed a silhouette standing out in the water, just before the waves spread out into sliding sheets of glass.

It was a woman looking out into the horizon, a pale yellow

sunset. She stood up to her ankles in the water, her jogging sweatpants pulled to her knees, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, pulling her black hoodie close against her body. Her dark hair flailed in the wind like a tattered flag.

She cocked her head slightly as if hearing something, and then turned halfway around. Her face was veiled by the strands of hair wind-plastered across it, but David felt a tingle of recognition. A feeling rising in him, a vibration, like a boulder grinding over its restraints, about to start rolling. Their eyes locked, his brown to her burning blue.

Her mouth opened slightly. "Oh my God," she whispered.
Snap.

...

A deep, soft recliner. The jet-prop buzz of a hundred people talking and laughing. Emptiness, fanned to glowing heat. He could feel it physically, a sinking weight in the middle of his chest.

He kept his eyes closed, squeezing them shut, straining to not wake up. *Go back. Go back. Go back.* But the door had shut. Nothing was happening, he was just sitting in a chair with his eyes closed in a room full of drunk teenagers. He let out a stifled groan, and let the harsh lights of the waking world flood his retinas again.

He knew right away that he had to get out of here. The memories of the dream's details were already becoming blurry, but he could still feel the sense of warmth there, the...*rightness*. It made this place feel like a nightmare.

"You ok?"

David looked up, squinting in the dim light. He must not have been asleep very long, because that same girl was still sitting across from him, now watching him with what looked like real concern.

"What?" David said.

“Are you ok?” she asked again. “You looked like you were about to throw up for a second.”

He rubbed his hands over his face and stretched his arms, trying to compose himself. “Yeah I’m fine. Just...a weird dream.” He laughed out the words, dismissing them.

The girl smiled slightly. “Yeah, you don’t look like the drink-till-you-hurl type.” Suddenly David noticed her. She really was beautiful, and not in the painted and varnished kind of way. Loose curls of natural blonde hair past her shoulders, big, warm brown eyes, a wide smile that was all lips. He just looked at her, caught off guard.

I had no plan at that point, no detailed strategy. I didn’t even know the next step. All I had were feelings, and both feet on the road. I had to act.

I came from behind, leaned in close, and whispered in his ear. A voice lost in the noise of the crowd, in the quickening whirlwind of his thoughts, yet on some level, understood. It was only a suggestion, a hint. All I did was nudge him, but it was enough, and it started the boulder rolling.

David smiled. “What would give you that idea? Isn’t that why I’m here? To drink and hurl?”

“Is it?”

“No.”

“Good.” She nodded. “So why *are* you here?”

“Can I say I just...ended up here?”

The girl shrugged. “Sure, whatever. Then I don’t have to explain either.”

“Well there you go.” He leaned forward and put out his hand with a calm smile. “I’m David.”

She shook his hand, looking a little surprised. If she had been here long she was probably more used to guys introducing themselves by grabbing her ass. “Julie.”

“Julie...it’s really good to meet you.” It came out slow and curious, like a revelation to himself.

She cocked her head. “Likewise.”

David’s mind had begun to hum with some new, startling excitement, but it was mixing strangely with the crushing weight left over from his dream, like chocolate with vinegar. “Julie,” he said, then hesitated, glancing around. “I’m not feeling so well and I need to get out of here, and I know we’ve barely said three words but, um...could I call you sometime?”

She stared at him for a long moment. Then she said, “Sure.” She smiled. “848-3625*.”

She handed him a pen out of her purse and he scrawled the number on his palm. He felt so strangely alert right now, so focused, like a conversational ninja jumping from sentence to sentence over chasms and alligator pits. It suddenly dawned on him what was happening here, that he was actually at a party getting the Digits, and he almost fainted.

“Uh...thanks,” he said. “See you around.” Julie nodded, smiling. He got up and left the room, trying not to run.

He may have been sleeping longer than he thought, because the party was dying down as he made his way to the door. The music was still overwhelming and there were still a lot of drunks flailing and shouting and groping on the couches, but the overall energy level had subsided. Other people were heading for the exits too, in small groups and one by one. David walked out the front door and moved off to the side of the deck. He found a lawn chair at a distance where he could safely watch the exit stream without being noticed, and sat down to wait.

He and Josh saw each other at the same time. “David!” Josh said, grinning, and pushed toward him through the crowd.

“Hey Josh.”

“I’m so surprised to see you here, man.”

“Well,” David shrugged. “Don’t know what to say...I’m here.” There were no other seats, so David just stood up, and leaned against the wall with his hands in his pockets. “I’ve had the weirdest night...” He trailed off, mentally wincing. Why had

he brought it up? But somehow, Josh didn't ask him to elaborate. He just nodded.

David looked out past the deck, into the darkness of the neighborhood, punctured here and there by the yellow glitter of fancy crystal porch lights exactly like Brandi Noel's. He let out a slow breath, and pushed himself up from the wall. "I don't know. I just need to go home. My friends are still at it in there, could I get a ride?"

"Oh sure," Josh said, already turning to go. "You're practically on the way. Come on."

From Burlington Hill to the freeway, they rode mostly in silence. It wasn't cold silence, it was just an absence of things to say, and neither of them were the type to just open their mouths and make noise to fill the air. After about ten minutes of this, they pulled up next to the rotten wood box that was David's home. David got out of the car and leaned down to wave.

"Hey, sorry if the party sucked for you," Josh said, bunching his lips together in a facial shrug, *what can ya do?*

David brushed it off. "It wasn't that bad, don't worry about it. So I guess I'll see you on campus Monday, huh?"

"Yep. See you there."

David walked up onto the porch, pulled out his key, reached for the doorknob, and stopped. He stood there, looking at his reflection in the window, and listening. Josh's car grinding into gear, driving away. A muffled conversation from somewhere off in the distance, voices raised, angry. A dog barking across the street. Crickets. He was at least two miles from any open field, but he could have sworn he heard crickets. He remembered a place that felt warm and secure, full and solid. *Real.*

He put the key in the lock, then stopped again. Through the window he could see the standard Friday night scene, his roommates and company sprawled around the living room, cans of Coors stacked in a pyramid on the coffee table next to the congealed pizza, the pale light of the TV flickering over every-

thing. No. Not tonight. He'd had plenty of this tonight. He felt hollow like a vacuum, depressurized, and going into the house would be the tack that burst him, that made him implode. No. Flee the scene. Run for it.

He got into his car, turned it on, and pushed down the gas, just moving forward, just *going*.

...

The night had changed in the few hours since he had driven through it to Brandi Noel's house. It had intensified. The sky was clear and bright, and the perfect full moon made everything into a sharp, high-contrast black and white. The outlines of objects seemed to vibrate.

David was driving exactly the speed limit, with the radio off and the windows down. The air was crisp, blowing through the car and through his hair. He drove constantly straight, turning only when there was no other choice. He forgot that he was driving, forgot everything, and floated. His muscle memory took the wheel, driving on instinct in random patterns throughout downtown Mount Vernon and the surrounding area. When his mind finally snapped back into place, he was parked somewhere he didn't recognize. Street lamps spread sepia circles of light on the asphalt, revealing nothing of the further surroundings. *Sleepwalking*, he thought with a bemused smile. *Is this what it's like?*

He left the car running and got out. A wooden boardwalk ran along the edge of the asphalt, railed with wood and chicken-wire. Below it, beyond it, was absolute darkness, pierced by glittering yellow reflections of street lamps in the water. The Skagit River made a distant gurgle as it flowed west and far, far out of David's world.

He wasn't sure what time it was now. 10:30? Maybe closer to midnight? The air got colder as he stood there, staring blankly down into the water. Another street lamp buzzed and flickered on. A few more people drove in, parked, didn't get out. Maybe

doing the same thing he was. Maybe floating.

It was way too cold out. He slipped back into the warm car, leaned the seat back, and began to drift. The gentle purr of the engine surrounded him, like he was wearing headphones. The street lamps refracted through his eyelashes, pulsating yellow dragonfly wings, just before he let his eyes fall shut. And he was gone. He was *elsewhere*.

...

He was in the beach grass. The stuff was like a bed of knives under his feet, which were bare for some reason. He took light, careful steps until he reached the beach itself, and then buried his feet. He wriggled his toes into the soft, cool sand, then just collapsed. He curled into a ball and smiled.

He felt a pinprick of cold on the back of his neck, then three more. He could see dark spots spreading across the sand as the rain increased. Eyes level with the ground, he saw just one continuous line, sand becoming surf becoming pale white horizon. A storm of questions in his head, unable to phrase them to himself.

The rain advanced quickly, into a kind of heavy spray that came from all directions with the swirling sea breeze. It was *cold*. All the rapturous feelings flooding him didn't change the fact that the rain was very, very cold. He rose to his feet, brushed himself off, and there she was. Somehow, he had expected her.

The wind flew her denim skirt out behind her close-pressed knees, and she clutched a knit shawl tight around her shoulders, looking at him through windblown feathers of dark brown hair. The look on her face was a kind of pained, apologetic smile, as if to say *All right, I'm here, but it's really, really cold, can we go?* She didn't say that, though. She just brushed some hair back from her face and said:

“Hi.”

Her smile warmed briefly.

“Hi,” David said, almost a question. The distance between them was awkward. The wind and ocean noise was annoying, making them raise their voices to an unnatural volume.

She cocked her head slightly and smiled. “It was...David, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah. And...?”

She took a step toward him, but seemed reluctant. “We almost got to this a long time ago, didn’t we?” She reached out a small hand for him to take. “I’m Laura.”

David took her hand and half squeezed, half shook it. *Her name is Laura. I’m here on the beach, talking to Laura.*

He saw again the red-and-white marker poles, marking no trails for no visible campground. He saw the building shape, closer now. A cabin.

“Is that yours?” he asked, pointing to it.

She opened her mouth as if to answer, then paused, and exhaled. She took a few steps closer, out of the blade grass, close enough to talk without raised voices. “Look, David,” she said, and locked eyes with him. “I wish this wasn’t useless, but it is. I’ve tried this before, and it’s just...it’s useless. So I’m going to leave.”

Everything felt like it was in slow-motion. He thought “*What?*” but didn’t say it. He just stared at her in stupid bewilderment.

“Maybe we’ll see each other again someday, but...I kind of hope we don’t.” She took two steps back, and smiled a small, sad smile. “So...goodbye.” And then under her breath, like something she hadn’t meant to say aloud, she whispered, “But don’t forget me.”

Then she turned around, and walked away.

Snap.

Musty air. A sun-stained plastic ceiling. A perpetually damp canvas bucket seat. Grinding, gnawing emptiness.

She's there, his blurry thoughts muttered in that place just before consciousness. *She's there on the beach, somewhere, balanced on the tip of a needle. One specific pebble in the whole of the Rockies, a stray signal on your cell phone, flickering in then gone forever—out there, anywhere, and gone.*

He pulled the lever on his seat and it catapulted him upright, into a view of noonday sun on the Skagit River. “Shit,” he muttered, shaking his head. He braced his arms against the steering wheel and shut his eyes, gritted his teeth. “Shiiiiit!”

Goodbye, she had said. As simple as that. He was hours late for work, and his car was dead and out of gas after running all night, but he barely even thought about those things. Just a word, smothered in reverb, echoing, fading. *Goodbye... Goodbye... Goodbye...*

“What the *hell!*” he shouted, and smacked the steering wheel. It was *her*. He knew it now, he *recognized* her. It was the girl he had dreamed on the bus seven years ago. But she was...older. *Grown up*. A hundred voices started barking questions in his head, but he shut them out. He had to think, had to get—

“Hey!”

He looked out his driver’s side window, saw a familiar face, and something in him shifted. The hollowness in his chest redirected. “Julie?”

...

Leaning down to his window, her lazy smile opened, revealing just the tops of her teeth. “You don’t have to stalk me, David, I gave you my phone number.”

David glanced out the window at the vehicle she had come out of, and realized it was one of the ones that had been parked there last night. He looked up at her. “You were here last night too?”

She nodded. “Yeah. It was an...odd night for me.”

“Yeah. Me too.” There was a pause, and he could feel the “well, see you around” coming. He groped for something to say. “I...ha...I left my car running all night. It’s dead.” He smiled stupidly, like he had made a joke.

“Gas?” Julie asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

She gave him a considering look. In another second she would have offered, but he had to blurt it out first. “Hey, I’m late for work already and kinda stuck here...do you think you could give me a ride to a gas station?”

He was such an ass, such a—

“Sure,” she said, smiling, cocking her head. “Hop in.”

So he hopped in. And they drove off. It made me fucking sick. Having to just sit back and watch it all go down. I guess it had to happen, but God I hated it.

...

“So...did you sleep in your car too?” David asked casually. The nearest gas station was only a few minutes away, but they were going pretty slow.

“Uh, yeah I did.” She giggled and held it back.

“Mind if I ask why?”

“Oh, it was just some stupid...” She sighed and fidgeted her hands on the steering wheel. “I don’t know. It was nothing. Just a mood.”

David realized that the natural progression of this conversation would be him trying to explain why *he* had slept there. That was no good. “So where do you work?” he asked, and the conversation blurred.

They got a gas can at Shell, and Julie drove him back to his car. As she pulled up next to it, the talk died down, and David breathed a silent sigh of relief. He had made it through alive, without saying anything disastrous. He unbuckled his seatbelt and

held in a deep breath, looking over at Julie. She smiled back at him.

“That was nice, talking to you,” she said.

“Yeah,” David replied, totally unsure of himself but firmly holding her gaze. “Maybe I’ll...um...” A pause.

“Call—?”

“Call you, yeah. Maybe I’ll call you sometime.” He had the urge to laugh suddenly, but squelched it.

“Sure.” She smiled and nodded. “Well, you’d better get to work, right?”

“Right, right.” He opened the door and stepped out. “Thanks for the ride, Julie.”

“No problem. Be seeing you.”

He slammed the door, and tried to keep his face neutral as she drove away. Inside he was a kaleidoscope, and the only feeling he could identify in that rainbow was not a pleasant one. Not excitement. Not eager, rosy-hued anticipation. Just longing. Simple, unfocused need. It felt a little like terror.

Don’t forget me...

He stared at his right hand. Julie’s number stared back at him, black smudges in the sweaty crevices of his palm.

I let out a deep, nauseated sigh, and retreated.



848-3625...

Ring...

Hi Julie, it's me, David. Hey, I was wondering if...

David loaded his van full of oxygen tanks and nasal canulas. He sprayed down a mattress pad with disinfectant and loaded it up. He grabbed a bariatric wheelchair for someone who was too fat to walk. He checked his paperwork to make sure he had everything, then closed up the warehouse and drove off.

I was just wondering if you wanted to...

He delivered an armful of portable O2 tanks to Mrs. Crown in Burlington. He checked her O2 concentrator machine, changed its filters, and gave Mrs. Crown a nervous smile. She sat on the couch and watched him, wheezing softly.

...because I had fun talking to you the other night and was just wondering if...

He answered a call from the intake girls at the office, and wrote down an order. Mr. Ogden had died last night. He drove to Mr. Ogden's house and disassembled his electric bed. He sprayed the smell of death off the mattress, and tossed it in his van. He crossed Mr. Ogden out of the route book, the book of life, and

clocked out.

I was just wondering...

He paced in his bedroom, repeating what he was going to say over and over, trying out different tones and inflections. He drank a glass of water. He set a glass next to the phone. He formulated a conversation flowchart in his head like a telemarketer. He mapped out every likely direction the exchange might take from greeting to closing, and came up with smooth responses for each possible scenario. He drank the water next to the phone, and had to refill it again. He started chewing some gum.

He picked up the phone, dialed 848-362...paused, hung up, flopped down on the bed, breathed deep, rehearsed.

Hello?

Hey Julie, this is David.

Oh bi David!

How's it going?

Pretty good. What are you up to?

Nothing much, I wanted to say thanks again for the ride the other day.

Oh no problem, it was my pleasure.

So I was just thinking we should hang out again soon, pick up where we left off.

Sure. I'd like that.

And so on. Everything was ready. He had it all down. Another ten minutes passed with his fingers trembling over the phone keys, then he did it.

*848-362...5.

“Hello?”

So far so good.

“Hey Julie—this is Julie, right?”

“Yep.”

“Hey Julie, this is David, hi.”

“Hey David, how are you?”

“Nothing mu—I'm good, how's it going?”

A pause. *Shit.*

“Oh, pretty good.”

“Cool—well hey, cool, so I just wanted to say thanks again for the ride the other day, and just for the conversation, too, that was...cool. It was...it was fun.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Her voice was cheerful. Maybe she was laughing. She was probably laughing. *Shit.*

“So...I was just thinking it would be cool if we could—we should just hang out again sometime so we could pick up where we left off last time. Like I mean like go somewhere and hang out.”

A pause. *David, you fucking—*

“Yeah...I’d like that.”

David stopped breathing. His voice wanted to rise two octaves but he held it down. “All right, great! Do you want to stop by uh, Starbucks tomorrow and chat for a bit?”

“Sure.” He could hear a smile.

“All right, how about 6:00?”

“Sounds good.”

“All right, so I’ll see you then, then.”

“See you tomorrow. Goodnight David.”

“Goodnight.”

He slammed down the phone and dropped backward onto his bed, letting out a huge breath. “Oh my God...” he murmured.

He had done it. He was going on a date with this girl. And he could already feel the emotional stew building. The thick, black anxiety bubbling through his elation like crude oil. Was this normal? He couldn’t remember.

Sleep came to him grudgingly that night, but when it finally did it was deep and dark, a vast, black sea. It was empty, and nothing happened. He was alone in it.

Don’t forget me... her voice whispered into that blackness, and he started running. He shuddered, stifled a scream, and ran.

Blindly.

...

I feel weird...

That thought sprang loudly into his head at the same time he lurched out of sleep. His eyes opened clear and alert. It was still dark. He glanced at the clock. 2:00 AM. Why had he woken up? He thought maybe he had to piss. Usually his subconscious would throw some terrible nightmare at him to wake him for bladder relief, but maybe tonight it was feeling benevolent.

He slid out of bed and started for the door. His foot sank into something cold, soft, and wet.

He let out a muffled “What th—” and hobbled sideways, trying to keep that foot up. Some of the stuff was still clinging to it. He flipped on the lightswitch and squinted his eyes shut as the sudden brightness hammered his retinas. When they finally adjusted, his face was still for a moment, then his brows slowly creased while his lips mouthed “*what?*”

There in the middle of his bedroom carpet was a small pile of mud. Not brown, earthy mud, but the kind of slimy, grayish goop you find at the bottom of rivers and lakes. It was just *there*, by itself in the middle of the room, splattered out slightly like it had been dropped from a few feet up.

David stood there staring at it blankly for several minutes. A pile of mud on the floor. And on his foot. “Okay...” he mumbled, and got back in bed, with one muddy foot sticking out the side of his sheets.

...

Morning sun rays passed over his eyes, bringing him awake, then made their way across the floor and over the mud pile. He swung his legs out of bed and sat there looking at it. Now that he was fully conscious, it seemed a little less bizarre. In this house,

there were at least five possible causes, one for each juvenile roommate.

He threw on his bathrobe and stepped out into the front room of the house. He spotted Aaron spread out on the couch.

“Hey Aaron,” David said.

“Hey.” He didn’t take his eyes off the movie he was watching.

“Hey you wouldn’t know anything about the pile of mud in my room would you?”

“Nope.”

David kept looking at him. “Really?”

“Wait, what’d you ask me?” He looked up from the TV.

“Do you know anything about the pile of mud in my room.”

“There’s a pile of mud in your room?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. Weird.” Back to the movie.

David kept looking at him, expecting more. After a moment Aaron looked up and shrugged. “Hey, sorry to hear it, man. You want me to help you clean it up or something?”

“Forget it. Is anyone else home?”

“Don’t think so.”

David gave up. He took a shower. He felt vaguely off balance throughout the rest of the day. He was dizzily tired though he’d gotten plenty of sleep, and he found it hard to concentrate on anything at work. He forgot deliveries and took the wrong streets. He left out signatures on paperwork, and took extra long bathroom breaks, sitting on the toilet and staring at the wall. And then he found himself driving to Starbucks for his big date, and he wasn’t scared or excited or even aware. He was just *there*, driving, sleepwalking in a car.

The view through his windshield faded in and out of focus as he drove, hands hanging limply on the wheel, eyes half shut. Blurry visions of the future bloomed in his head like time-lapse

flowers. He and Julie would marry and embark upon an epic honeymoon that would span the globe. Their love would be an inspiration to all the native cultures they encountered. Wars would end. Ancient territorial disputes would be resolved in tearful handshakes. They would buy a big house in Hawaii and have a vast family of grinning kids. More wars would end. Evil dictators would hand over their countries to benevolent democratic governments, who would then proceed to end world hunger. All viruses would be stricken with remorse, and would leave their hosts and dissolve in the atmosphere, ending disease forever.

Their love would save the world.

He walked across the parking lot with a dreamy smile smeared across his face. Where was he again? A coffee shop? What was he doing here? Meeting Julie. Right.

He had tried to arrive early to get the psychological upperhand, but when he walked in the door she was already seated with a drink. She smiled and waved when she saw him, and he made his way over to her table.

“Hey, how are you?” he said, but didn’t sit down yet.

“I’m great, it’s good to see you again.”

“Yeah, you too.” This all took place with that certain timbre, that surprised, almost puzzled tone of *interest*. Small smiles. Excessive eye contact.

“I’m going to get a drink,” David said with head cocked, eyes boring into hers like probes. “I’ll be right back, ok?”

“Ok.”

He got himself a big drink with some goofy made-up Starbucks name ending in “-ccino”, and sat opposite Julie. He just smiled at her for a minute, then scooted his chair closer and leaned in, getting ready to speak. “So,” he said, laying his palms out.

Julie grinned.

Ok. What now? He needed to find a track to get on. “Uh, where were we?”

Julie smiled, shrugged. "I don't remember."

"I'm sure it was something really interesting."

"Oh definitely."

"Yeah."

There was a pause.

"Yeah."

They both grabbed for their drinks. David took a very slow sip, hiding his face in the cup, scanning his brain for a starting point. "So who invited you to Brandi's party the other night?" he blurted finally. "Did you hear about it at Skagit?"

"Yeah, one of my friends from my Chemistry class wanted me to go. I ended up knowing practically everyone, though. It was like a Skagit reunion party in the middle of the year."

"Yeah, I...had some friends there too. So how long have you been going to Skagit? I don't think I've ever seen you there."

"Oh I've been there a few quarters. I try to spend as little time hanging out there as possible, though. I'm pretty busy between classes and full time work."

"Where do you work?"

"Safeway, for about two months now."

It was at that point that David realized they had entered the Information Phase, and the rest of this conversation would continue on autopilot. Job, school, home, hobbies, likes, dislikes... They could have the same conversation by exchanging printed info cards. David barely paid attention. He just looked at her, distracted by the feeling spreading through his chest as he listened to her talk. It wasn't exactly warmth, it wasn't exactly elation or desire. It was a thrill strangely hollow. Like a balloon inflating inside him. Filling empty space with more empty space.

"Sure, I guess I..."

"...is my favorite movie of all time..."

"Well, I do a lot of..."

"I don't know, I guess I mostly just listen to..."

"...sometimes I..."

“I usually just...”

“I haven’t in a while, but...”

“Well, I...”

Eventually the flow dried up, and the auto-pilot began to fail. During an awkward pause, David took a deep breath and leaned onto the table. “Well Julie it’s been great talking to you.”

She nodded and reached for her jacket. “Yeah, this was fun.”

“Let’s do it again, ok? Like *soon*.”

“Sure. You mean come here again...?”

“No no, let’s...” David’s mind raced through options like camping on the beach, taking her to a restaurant blindfolded, having a picnic in a moving boxcar...

“How about a movie?” Julie offered.

“Uh, ok. Sure. That’d be fun. Like...which one?”

“How about that new Dane Cook one? That looks pretty funny.”

“Ok...sure. Why not. I’ll call you when I’ve got the show-times. How does next Fri—” (too long) “—Tuesday sound?”

“Sounds great.”

Smiling, they both stood up and put on their jackets.

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

They paused outside the door of Julie’s nondescript white coupe. David noticed that there was a romantic sunset ablaze in the sky.

“Well, goodnight, David.”

He reached out to squeeze her hand, and their palms met pointing upward, almost like a high-five. Julie giggled uncomfortably. “All right,” she said. “Go team.”

“Um, goodnight,” David said. Julie got in her car, and he turned and power-walked out of view.

...

Aaron was on the couch when he got home. He had a frozen pizza on the coffee table and was watching a movie.

“Hey Aaron,” David said.

“Hey.”

David tossed his coat on a chair. “I just went on a date.”

“Nice.”

David looked at the movie for a moment. “Is this *The Notebook*?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re watching *The Notebook*?”

“This girl I was hanging with last night rented it, but we didn’t end up watching it.”

“Gotcha.”

“If you know what I mean.”

“Right. So...now you’re watching it by yourself?”

“Yep.”

David stood by the couch for a few minutes, eyes on the screen. “That’s kinda gay isn’t it?”

Aaron shrugged, and turned up the volume.

David stood there with his arms crossed for a few more minutes, then slumped onto the couch.

“So how’d it go?” Aaron said during one of the old-people scenes.

David didn’t answer for a while. “Good question.”

“You make out or anything?”

“It was our first date. We met at Starbucks.”

“Weak.”

They fell silent again until the next scene with James Garner and CG birds on a lake. “So any sparks flying?” Aaron said.

David didn’t answer. They sat there on the couch, and watched the rest of the movie. When the credits rolled, David said, “I don’t know what’s flying. It doesn’t exactly feel like sparks.”

Aaron stretched his arms and collapsed into the couch

cushions, closing his eyes. "Well good luck with that. Night, Dave."

"You do have a bed you know."

"Night, Dave."

David got off the couch, but didn't leave. He stood in front of the living-room window and watched the homeless shelter across the street. There were always at least three or four bedraggled men sitting on the porch over there, sharing stories and watching the street traffic go by. David wondered what the average age was in that place. They all looked old, with their filthy beards and beef jerky faces, but life had the power to quick-age anyone. He looked at Aaron, already snoring on the couch. He looked at himself, at the faint traces of Julie's number smeared on his palm. He wondered how many teenagers were over there, in that shelter, just a few yards across the street.

One of the men saw him staring, and flipped him the bird. David waved, and retreated to his bedroom.

...

Kids are splashing in a blow-up swimming pool, their skin darkening in the relentless sunlight. It's a muggy summer evening, it's the Fourth of July. Patriotic streamers hang from every doorpost. In every yard, a sumptuous picnic is laid out on red and white checkered blankets, each identical, each with a wicker basket and a half-eaten watermelon. Oscillating fans turn slowly on the window sill of every house, but the houses are all empty. The picnics have all been abandoned, and now the swimming pools are motionless too. Small fireworks go off on the suburb skyline.

"...waving and welcoming all who've gathered, turning away none."

Snatches of a television broadcast drift through the humid air, along with the sounds of a murmuring crowd.

"...and it is my pleasure to bring you this uplifting vi-

sion...”

Down on the main street, the sidewalks are packed with people. Everyone in town has gathered to watch the parade and cheer the candidate on.

“...we have eliminated any danger. We are entering easy times, friends. A bumper crop is to be harvested...”

The car moves slowly, festooned with inverted rainbows of pleated patriotic cloth, hands are waving everywhere, grins straining to widen. The crowd goes wild!

Children throw themselves in front of the wheels of the car, and it rolls over them, but they are laughing, and get up yelling that they're completely fine. The candidate waves, and patriotic confetti suddenly clouds the air, a blizzard of red white and blue.

“Citizens of every town are giving their heartfelt testimonies!”

“What a beautiful day! What perfect weather for a firework show!”

“I just bought a brand new boat!”

Fireworks are bursting all over the sky in brilliant shades of red, white, and blue.

“We will preserve the sanctity of our great nation for our children and our children's children...”

“This is a time for safe celebration and evenings free of tragedy.”

There are more children than adults now, swarming the streets, throwing themselves in front of the car en masse. Everyone is screaming and laughing. The fireworks are bursting in the rooftops, lighting fires in the shingles.

“It's a miracle! It's a Fourth of July miracle!”

David hears music as the scene fades and deep sleep finally takes him. It sounds like an ice cream truck. Warbling music box in minor scales.

...

I would like to think I had nothing to do with anything. I would like to think it was all his fault. That it was the natural course. I would feel better, thinking back, if I could believe this.

What do you want from me, David? What do you want me to do?



The week leading up to David's next date with Julie felt seven months long. The rattling of the oxygen tanks in his delivery van frayed his nerves. His nostrils cringed from the smell of the dying, laid out motionless on their beds, their air mattresses pumping up and down to prevent bed sores. The wheezing of kids waiting for nebulizer treatments. The bleak faces of the parents and husbands and middle-aged grandchildren. He had been working for Option Care home medical services for over a year, but it still got to him sometimes. He collected his eleven-dollar-an-hour paychecks, paid his bills, and went to school. He considered calling Julie a few times, but didn't. He didn't know what he would talk about.

The pseudo-adult world of college had taken on an oddly schoolyard feel for David. Josh had reappeared. Now instead of walking into this place alone with his concerns, sitting in the corner, taking notes, and ducking out the door unhindered, David found himself stopping in the halls to chat. He and Josh were catching up, and the seven years between them were beginning to melt. They talked about their lives during those years, but they

pointedly did not talk about what had caused that gap. The word “bus” was omitted from their vocabularies.

It was towards the end of the week, during a Biology class, when David decided to tell Josh about Julie. There wasn't much time between classes, so they had many of their most pressing conversations during the actual lectures. They passed notes like seventh-graders.

He tore out a piece of his notebook as quietly as he could, and scribbled on it.

I met a girl.

He crumpled it up and tossed it at Josh's back, two seats ahead. Josh picked it up, read it, wrote a response on the backside, and tossed it back.

What! Where? How? Tell all.

David tore out another piece, wrote on it, and tossed it. This exchange happened between the professor's major points, when he turned his back to write on the dry-erase board.

At that party, believe it or not! I fell asleep in a chair next to her and when I woke-up we just started chatting. We had a date a few days ago.

That's a pretty big deal for you isn't it? You don't date much, right?

You could say that, yeah.
I guess it's a pretty big deal.
I mean we're only one coffee date into it but we'll see how it goes.

He tossed the note and watched Josh read it. Josh turned his attention back to the professor, and David assumed the conversation was over. Then Josh tossed back one more.

Remember Shelley Kent?

David hesitated, then wrote a reply.

You seemed to have a pretty severe philosophy on romance back then. "No point in it all, it's stupid, it's a waste of time, we're too young" and all that. Are we that much older now?

Well we're not kids anymore.
It's totally different. I mean
we can drive, we have homes,
we can go on dates, it makes
sense now.

There was another long wait.

Does it really? Is that how
you'd describe life now, at 19?
As something that makes sense?

David set the scrap on his desk and looked at it for a while. He balled it up and stuffed it in his pocket. He didn't reply. About ten minutes later, near the end of the lecture, Josh tossed one more note.

What's her name?

David stuffed this one away too. The lecture ended, and he left class with a small nod to Josh.

...

Finally, it came. Date Day.

He found himself in the car, exceeding the speed limit toward Safeway, gripping the steering wheel hard. They met at the video rental desk, and awkwardly side-hugged.

“Hi,” Julie said. “How are you?”

“I’m awesome,” David said. “Are you ready to go?”

“Sure am. Are we still going to that movie? What time is it playing?”

He opened his mouth to tell her the showtimes, but the words jammed in his brain before they made it to his larynx. Here he was talking to this gorgeous girl who he could converse with, drink coffee with, who he could make eye contact with for longer than five seconds, and instead of meeting her to talk to her and look at her and just absorb her presence, he was meeting her to watch Dane Cook? With his spiky hair, his relentlessly boot-cut jeans?

“Hey Julie?”

“Yeah?”

“What if we skipped the movie tonight. What if we drove up Little Mountain instead and slept in the woods, watched the sunrise.”

She paused. “What?”

“It’s beautiful up there. It’s amazing. Wouldn’t you rather go somewhere beautiful and just talk than sit in some sweaty theater?” He cleared his throat, and waited.

Julie looked at him. During this five second pause, David felt a sensation of reaching, straining. He had tossed a grappling hook, hoping for purchase on some distant cliff, but during this five second pause, he felt the hook miss. He felt the rope fall limply into the ocean.

“Sure,” Julie said, smiling a little. “That sounds fun too, let’s do that inst—”

“Ahh, you know what, nevermind,” David said, waving his hands in front of him. “It’s too cold out for that, let’s just go see

the movie.”

Julie frowned. “Are you sure? I don’t mind doing that instead, it’s totally fine.”

“No, no, it was a dumb idea, let’s go see the movie.”

Julie seemed distressed now. “I have a tent and sleeping bags, we could get some food ready and go up there for a while—”

“Julie, just forget it, forget I said anything.”

There was another pause. David took a deep breath. He smiled big, and gave her shoulder a squeeze. “The movie’s at 8:00. Let’s go.”

“Well, ok,” Julie said. And they went.

They bought their tickets, they sat down in the dark. After an amusing clip of a loud moviegoer being launched out of his chair and through the roof, the screen commanded, “SHH! NO TALKING DURING THE MOVIE!” They obeyed. The movie played. David laughed occasionally. Then it was over.

As they made their way out of the theater toward the parking lot, toward his car, where he would drive her back to Safeway and part ways, David had trouble listening to what she was saying. His mind was racing for a way to stall, to hold off the ending. The parking lot was empty and his Civic gleamed silver in the lunar light of the fluorescent lamps. He knew that if he got in that car it would be over. The moment he sat down everything would go into fast-motion, they would hurtle uncontrollably to Safeway and it would all be over. But it hadn’t even started. They had just stared at each other blankly, and sat in front of a movie screen. She was beautiful and seemed smart, the chemicals were there, but they were inert. He thought maybe if he could drag things out long enough...something would happen. Something inside him would move.

He stopped about ten feet from the car. “Wait. It’s pretty early still...” It was close to midnight. “Can we go somewhere and talk for a while? I mean...I’d at least like...to talk for a while,

somewhere...”

Julie looked at him with arms folded, and cocked her head slightly. “Ok.”

Think quick. “Like...Starbucks, maybe...?”

“Sure.”

So they went to Starbucks. Again. He felt like such an idiot, such a desperate fucking idiot, and of course, he was. And of course, Starbucks was closed, so they sat at one of the outdoor tables, in the dark. At least that was a little different, right? A little odd and spontaneous?

The ensuing conversation was excruciating. David could think of little to talk about other than the usual information-gathering, but they were running out of questions about their day-to-day lives. What do you say when you already know where your date works and what she’s doing in school? And they had no drink cups to hide in during awkward lulls. Julie didn’t offer much either, but David felt like it was his fault as his mind raced for things to say. It was painful.

When it was over, they stood up, and he pasted on a smile. “I really enjoyed all this tonight.”

She locked eyes with him. “Me too, David.” She took a step toward him, penetrating well inside his bubble, and looked up. A feeling rushed through him like being dared to eat worms, but he closed his eyes, plunged forward, and kissed her. It started light and perfunctory, but when he started to pull away she pushed in, and parted her lips. Her tongue slipped into his mouth, and he felt a shiver rush down his spine and through his groin. His tongue pushed back.

He could see it all from here. The future was an open book of skin on skin, feeble conversation, brief bursts of happiness, and inexplicable emptiness. He slammed it shut. He didn’t want to look past right now, because *right now* felt good. Felt...*ok*.

“Do you want to come over?” she murmured, not meeting his eyes.

He looked at the stars, lightyears distant and dead. "Ok."

...

He left Julie's house while it was still dark. He slipped quietly out of bed and went to the bathroom. He took a towel and washed himself off, the stickiness and primordial smells. He put on his clothes. Josh's note bulged in the pocket of his jeans.

What's her name? it demanded.

He pulled it out, and wrote on the other side.

Had to go get ready for work,
Tonight was awesome.
Talk to you soon,
-David

He set it on his pillow, and left.

Moving slowly down East Division Street, his eyes caught the concrete wall of a book store facing the river bridge. As cars crossed the bridge, their headlights filtered through railings and around other cars, projecting vivid shadows onto the concrete wall. As the cars moved, the shadows warped and shifted, forming a twisting collage of lines and bars and strange shapes. It enveloped his field of vision, and began to change.

Constantly moving bridge framework becomes towering buildings of gray brick, a stone fountain, distant streets. Warping, stretching vehicles become human forms, pale silhouettes of women. Mermaids. Yellow carlight becomes soft, gray, wooly fog, enshrouding the mermaids like wraiths.

Poor, sad boy, they murmur as he sits alone in the gray streets. *Poor, sad boy. Come with us.*

And he does. He drifts toward them, and they wrap him up in their arms, carrying him down into an endless black ocean. *You will love*, they whisper. *You will be loved*. They lead him through coral towers and vast underwater halls. *You will grow and learn, and become a man, and you will die here, swaddled in our flowing hair. You will grow old, and die, and you will be loved.*

His face is against the steering wheel. His hands grip the sides of it, squeezing hard. His teeth are clenched. His breathing is heavy.

...

When he got home, he realized it was only 5:00 AM. He collapsed onto his bed, but slept fitfully. He tossed and turned, glancing blearily at his bedside clock. He had brief, truncated dreams that ended in the middle of their climaxes. Dreams of dystopian futures where love was an illegal narcotic, an “emotional hallucinogenic”, or where all the world’s beauty had been reduced to mathematical equations, or had been outlawed, or removed entirely via some incomprehensible technology, and David and some girl, maybe Julie, said, “Let’s go up Little Mountain and watch the sunset!” and they drove up Little Mountain, paid ten dollars, parked their car in a huge parking lot, and watched grainy footage of a sunset projected onto a tattered drive-in movie screen. Behind the screen, an empty sky of thick, inky blackness.

He didn’t know exactly what time it was when he got out of bed, but it was a winter morning, and still mostly dark. Before showering, before eating breakfast or even putting socks on, he stepped out onto the front porch in boxers and a t-shirt, and slowly looked around. Everything was still. Muted. Like being underwater.

He shuffled slowly forward, down the porch steps, across the street, toward his car. All around him the silence heaved and

hissed gently, just that soft, swirling hush of open spaces. He got in his car, and found himself driving some winding road through the woods. He was floating again. He let the inertia take him where it wanted, eyes open and glazed, hypnotized.

It took him to the top of Little Mountain. Just a five minute drive from home. He had been here before. Nature's majesty encased in a trim, efficient city park with a roofed viewpoint, picnic tables, and a concrete outhouse. He stood there inside the viewpoint in his boxers, staring out at the scattered quilt-patches of farm fields, and beyond that, the Puget Sound, an endless stretch of silver spotted with evergreen islands. It was all dark down there.

"Why are you here?" David asked himself out loud. The sharp sound of his voice was jarring in all the pillowy silence. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He maybe had a girlfriend now. She was beautiful. Where was the traditional lovestruck euphoria? Why couldn't he be a team player and just fall in love quietly like everyone else? Why did he have to make such a scene?

It was getting brighter. The sky gradually took on a golden glow, and David stood there on the rough planks of the viewpoint, his bare feet muddy and wet with dew. He wished he could see the sunrise. The sun ascending gloriously in the east did nothing here but cast long shadows through the choke of cedars. He could feel the light building against his back. He could see it catching on the silvery frame of the park's radio tower, a looming monolith of steel bars and girders, antennas and dishes, purpose unknown. It had always intrigued him, that tower. Huge, imposing, such a stark contrast to its surroundings. It was beautiful in a strange way. Somehow mysterious. He watched the sun move down its length, lighting up one steel bar after another. *I could climb that*, he thought. *That's the eastern viewpoint. I could hop the fence and climb that tower, and enjoy the most fantastic view in a hundred miles.*

And yet...why?

It was worthless. These urges, this whimsy, this digging around for beauty...it was worthless. It had to be shared, or it was empty. He didn't need to climb the tower. What was the point? He was alone, and it was like playing single-player charades. Who was watching, who was guessing? What a fucking waste of time.

The last man on earth writes no plays, he thought, and imagined that as a proverb, an old adage cross-stitched and framed and hung in Grandma's living room next to "Home Is Where The Heart Is".

He let out a tired breath, and headed back to the car. He was barefoot and shivering. The radio tower loomed overhead, its red light glaring down at him, blinking in irregular patterns, like syllables.

Don't for—



Despite the muck churning in his head, David was somehow able to keep up with his classes. I know I never saw him study, but he was still passing tests. The campus had become an alien place to him, though. All of Julie's classes were in the evening and all of his were afternoon, so the school was just a buzzing hive of empty faces and nameless bodies. Walking across the green hills in the center square, he hunched his shoulders in as if to protect himself from the simmering chaos around him. What he needed was a good night's sleep. Every night lately his mind spun like the wheels of a gyroscope, keeping him stiffly upright when all he wanted was to fall over.

And then there was Josh, standing in the hall just outside the Biology classroom, waving.

"Hey man," David said.

"Mr. Martin."

"How was Psych?"

"Oh just totally awesome. Aced another test."

They exchanged a fist-knock high-five.

"I might be needing that expertise pretty soon," David said as they shuffled into the classroom and took seats toward the

back. Joshed raised his eyebrows, but didn't say anything. The professor started to drone. After a few minutes, Josh tossed a note.

Lady troubles ?

I don't know what's going on with Josh. There's nothing wrong with her, she's not stupid, we get along, we have a lot in common, she's totally hot, but I just don't feel what I've always assumed I should feel. It's like, the engine is there, the transmission is there, all the components are there, but there's no gas.

David that's pretty standard, man.
Love isn't a formula, you can't just
put the ingredients together and
expect the chemistry to happen
like science. There's a little magic
involved, a little science fiction.

David read this, and frowned at his desk for a while. Was it as simple as that? Just a basic lack of chemistry? It felt different.

It feels different. I'm not disinterested in her, I'm not bored with her. ~~That's~~ I feel like I need her, like she's keeping me afloat somehow. But it doesn't feel right. It's like...you know that feeling you get when some asshole with a time machine goes back and alters the past? And suddenly your whole life is changed and you don't know that it's been changed, but you just have that vague feeling that something is wrong? That things were supposed to be different somehow? It just feels off. Something feels off.

Once the note was delivered the professor returned to his lecture, and David had to sit there pretending to listen. Something about oxygen. Brain damage. Eventually, the lesson called for diagrams again, and Josh tossed his reply.

You never did tell
me her name.

David read it, and suddenly wondered if Julie had seen the backside of his pillow note, that simple, insistent question. David balled up his reply and chucked it at the back of Josh's head.

Who cares dude?
Her name is Julie.

Another brief pause, then Josh started writing. The prof suddenly finished his diagram and started to turn around so Josh just tossed it, incomplete.

Longish blonde hair, brown eyes?
Kind of a lazy smile? Wow, if
that's the same Julie, I think I
met her at the party too.
She seemed really cool, David, I'd

He'd what? Stick it out? Give it a chance? David held the note for a while, then sighed and wrinkled it up. What was he expecting? He knew he wasn't going to get any answers. He paid vague attention to the rest of the lecture, and as it was winding toward its conclusion, he wrote one more note and tossed it. It said:

So the brain can only go about 3 minutes without oxygen before it starts shutting down, right? After that you get brain damage, maybe coma? Tell you what I'm gonna do after class. Go home, curl up in bed, put the pillow over my face for 3 minutes, and take a nice, long, relaxing nap. I'll just forget all this shit. What do you think?

Josh read the note, and paused. He craned his neck around and gave David an odd look. Then he turned back to the professor. He didn't send any more notes. When the class was over, they nodded to each other, and went their separate ways without another word.

...

When the last class of the day finally ground to a halt David headed home, with a huge pile of papers and books on his passenger seat. Was he even going to look at half of them? Did

he *ever* look at these piles? He figured he must, since he was doing well in his classes, but he sure couldn't remember doing it. School, his job...they were part of another dimension, a parallel universe. There was a David Martin who lived in that world, who held a job and paid the rent and did his homework every day, but David didn't know him, and didn't want to.

When he got home, Aaron was sitting on the couch, watching a movie. David suspected that Aaron's parallel-universe self was not much more motivated than this one.

"Dude," Aaron greeted him. He was lounging with a couple teenage girls, watching an old Twin Peaks tape. "Girls this is my roommate David," he said, making a quick hand gesture from the girls to David. "He's a gangster."

David mumbled a quick "How's it going," and turned for his room.

"Hey Dave," Aaron caught him.

"Yeah?"

"I'm trying to get some people together to go up to the Oyster Dome on Friday. You want to come?"

"Up to the what?"

"Oyster Dome. It's a spot on Chukanut Mountain. I know it's winter or whatever but it's supposed to be really warm this weekend. It'd be rad to camp up there."

"Nah—" David's reflexes started to say, then he paused, cocked his head. "Well, actually...sure. Sounds fun."

Aaron snapped his fingers into a thumbs-up and grinned. "Invite anyone else you want to, all right?"

"Sure," David said. "I can think of...a few people."

He started to go into his room again, but then thought of something, and turned toward the kitchen. They had a huge dry-erase board hung on the kitchen wall, covered in phone numbers, bill due dates, "Your mom called" messages, and random little notes like "razors and lazors" and "join a gang and be happy for life". Today there was one that just said "Poop", next to a draw-

ing of some. It was that kind of house.

David erased the poop and the rickets to clear some space, and wrote his own note.

Dearhouse,

A few days ago I woke up
to find a pile of river mud
on my floor. What the
hell.



He doubted he would get a confession, and really it wasn't that big of deal. The mud had cleaned up fairly easily. It was just so...weird. Plopping a pile of mud in someone's room...if it was a joke, where was the punch line? The "Poop" message on the board made more comic sense than that.

As he was finishing the note, he heard the front door open, followed by muffled conversation. In a house with six guys, there were people coming in and out all the time. Most of them were people David didn't know, friends of his roommates (whom he didn't know), so he let other people answer the door and usually tried to avoid being seen. Since the door to his bedroom was right next to the front door, he had developed a knack for waltzing through with just a quick, polite nod, and slipping into his room barely noticed.

He tried it now, establishing a good, purposeful pace so

when he entered the living room he would appear to be passing through on important business. But the visitor was Josh. He was standing in the entryway, talking to Aaron. David was caught off guard. Josh never came over here. They rarely saw each other outside class except for going to see a movie every once in a while or grabbing lunch together between classes.

“Hey,” Josh said cheerfully, and David wondered what he was doing here, but didn’t ask.

“Hey Josh. What’s up?”

Josh shrugged. “I was just on my way through town...thought I’d stop by and say hi. So I hear you guys are heading up to the Oyster Dome.”

“He’s coming too,” Aaron offered from the couch..

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Josh said. “I hiked up there a couple years ago and it was amazing. I’m excited.” David nodded, smiling. There was a brief silence, then Josh said, “So are you bringing her?” He didn’t say it slyly or with a wink, he just asked.

“Um...yeah, I suppose I am. I’m going to ask her at least.”

Josh smiled one of those pursed-lipped, upside-down smiles accompanied by a nod. “Cool.”

There was another silence.

“Well,” Josh said, checking his watch, “I’m going to head out. I was just stopping by on my way to do some errands.”

David started toward his room as Josh started toward the door. “All right man, see you tomorrow.”

“See ya.”

Josh went out the front door, David went into his room, and both doors slapped shut at the same time.

...

Next Friday arrived, and David went to pick Julie up for the hike. She lived by herself in a big, modern apartment com-

plex, the kind with a workout room and plumbing that doesn't shudder. He rang her on the intercom and she buzzed him in. He took the elevator to the fourth floor, which had no visible vomit stains, and knocked on her door. She answered it instantly.

"Hi!" she said, and lunged into his arms. He squeezed her, and she gave him a peck on the lips. "Give me just a minute, I'm almost ready."

He stood in the middle of the living room while she threw excessive amounts of preparations into her backpack. The place was flawlessly decorated and lit softly with brushed steel lamps on dimmers. He recognized a leather couch and an Audrey Hepburn print from IKEA. Julie was two years older than him, but she worked at Safeway, and clearly had generous parents. The floors were blonde hardwood. No smell of ancient cigarettes from long dead former tenants. No mottled brown carpets designed to camouflage dirt by already looking like dirt.

"Two more seconds," she said, stuffing clothes into the pack. David shook his head slowly, watching her. Two pairs of jeans? Three changes of underwear?

"Julie," he said.

"What?" She rushed into the kitchen and filled a third water bottle.

"Um...nothing."

David looked through the doorway to the bedroom. He looked at the bed, neatly tucked in at the moment, and he reminisced. He looked at the couch, and reminisced. He looked at the dining table, and reminisced.

"Ok, let's go!" Julie said, hefting her straining backpack onto her shoulders. Her eyes bulged for a moment when she felt the weight but she bore up and soldiered out the door. David wondered if anyone made rolling luggage cases with off-road tires.

It was perfect hiking weather. The horizon was an infinite expanse of uninterrupted blue, with just a few wisps of cirrus

clouds like brushstrokes at the very top of the sky. After about twenty minutes of sickeningly twisty roads through the Chukanut area, then a steep drive up the mountain's access road, they arrived at the trailhead parking lot. Aaron was unloading a nice-looking red Pathfinder (not his, of course) with three equally nice-looking girls, all gathered around him smiling and laughing. "Hey guys!" he called to David and Julie as they approached. He offered two devil-hand signs.

"Hey Aaron."

He turned to the three girls. "Ladies, this is my roommate David, and uh..."

"Julie," she offered, and smiled politely.

"David, Julie," Aaron said, "this is..." The girls' names went into David's head and directly out the back, leaving only blank dashes. David, meet _ _ _ , _ _ _ _ , and _ _ _ _ _ .

He glanced around for Josh and saw him through the Pathfinder's rear window, leaning his back against the hood with arms crossed, looking out over the breathtaking view of Puget Sound and the islands.

"Hey Josh!" David called, and Josh turned around for the first time.

"Hey," he said.

"Feeling good?"

"Yeah." He turned back to the view.

"We all ready to go?" Aaron asked the group. They all nodded. "Then let's go."

As with most hikes he'd been on, David started out strong and confident. He kept a fast pace, talking slightly more than usual for the semi-conscious purpose of showing everyone that he wasn't breathing hard. He surprised himself with his unexpected endurance. And then, as usual, the hike seemed to drag on much longer and steeper than expected. His urge to chatter quickly subsided as the gentle switchbacks became steady upward slopes. Despite the early-Winter chill, he dripped with sweat.

“You doing ok?” he asked Julie at every break.

“Yeah,” she gasped, leaning over against her knees.

“You want to switch packs?”

“No, I’m fine.” Her pack dwarfed her. It bulged like the Burden of *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Josh stayed in the back of the line. Whenever they stopped for a breather and the order got mixed up, he still ended up at the back every time. He chuckled every once in a while at an overheard joke from farther up the line, but said very little. He was breathing pretty hard, David thought. Maybe he just didn’t have the spare breath for conversation.

After another fifteen or twenty minutes of intense mountaineering, the evergreens opened into a huge field of immense, jagged boulders and razor sharp rocks straight out of a fantasy novel.

“Well, this is the Oyster Dome,” Aaron said, standing on a boulder and stretching his arms. “Watch your step, obviously.”

Once they were on the rocks, David rushed ahead of the group. Traversing this alien landscape of angles, pits, and towers stirred something in him. There was something about the feeling of hopping from rock to rock with a well-tractioned pair of shoes. He felt like Hermes flying down Mount Olympus, his feet had wings, and it seemed like he should fall, but he never did. It felt like freedom. Like a lucid flight dream.

“All right guys,” Aaron addressed the group when they were all gathered on the same boulder. “See that cliff?” He pointed toward the towering rock face that had spawned all these shattered chunks below. “That’s the top, that’s the end of our hike. The trail we were on keeps going all the way up so if you want, you can just hike it the rest of the way, but I brought enough gear for a few of us to climb the rock, so...” He dropped his backpack and started opening it up. “...if anyone wants to, it’s a lot of fun.”

David looked at the cliff. He had absolutely no guess how

high it was except *damn* high. It was at best a ninety degree angle, at worst it leaned *out*.

Aaron pulled out a roll of rope, a couple harnesses, a few carabineers and some other gear David didn't recognize. "We'll need someone to hike up there first to hook the rope in. Has anyone here been climbing before?"

"I can hook it in," Josh offered with a shrug. "I've never actually climbed but I've 'been climbing' with people so I know how you hook in."

"Sure you don't want to climb this time?"

Josh shrugged again. "Nah."

"Sweet, well here you go." He handed Josh the rope, then turned to the rest of the group with a big grin. "So, who's up for it?"

The group began to split. Two of Aaron's groupies started looking the gear over, while everyone else fidgeted in the general direction of the trail, smiling, shaking their heads, and mumbling excuses. David was the last to move. He hesitated, but Julie was joining the trail party, so he followed. When Aaron saw him going he waved his hands out and shook his head decisively. "Woah woah woah. David. Come on, man. Get back here. You know you're climbing. You too, Julie."

"No way," Julie said with a raised-eyebrow smile that said she meant it. "I'd like to live long enough to finish the hike, if you don't mind. David, you're not are you?"

He hesitated.

"Come on, Dave," Aaron said like a warning. "Don't give me that, don't pretend like you're thinking. You know you're gonna do it. Let's go."

David had done a small amount of very low-elevation climbing before, and he'd been to an indoor climbing wall in Seattle, but this was different. Much higher, much scarier. But it felt...*necessary* somehow.

You need to be shaken up a little, Josh had said.

Maybe this would shake him up. Shake loose the cobwebs, crack the rust.

“Which harness do I use?”

Aaron nodded approvingly. “Right here buddy.”

David heard Julie sigh behind him. “All right. I’ll see you at the top.”

David gave her a winning grin. “Maybe I’ll beat you there!” He was relieved to see her return his smile.

“Just...God...be careful.”

When the climbers arrived at the very base of the cliff, Aaron informed them that it would be a good ten minutes before Josh got to the top to hook the rope in, so they had plenty of time to make sure their gear was set up right. The climbing harnesses were like little short-shorts made out of heavy nylon rope, with straps around the waist and upper thighs/groin. Any man who has put on this gear knows the not-talked-about awkwardness that occurs when these straps are pulled tight, and all that stuff has nowhere to go but *out*. David chuckled to himself as he cinched everything up. *Hi. I’m David Martin, and these are my genitals.*

Now that he was this close, he realized that it really wasn’t that hard of a climb. There were hand and footholds everywhere, and there were paths that were never steeper than ninety degrees, often less. It would take a while to get to the top, but it would be fairly straightforward. Still, it was a little disconcerting when Josh, a tiny speck high up on the peak, let the rope fall, and fall, and fall.

One of Aaron’s girls went first. David watched her climb for a few minutes, then turned around, trying to find something to look at besides her ass, framed in the harness like a piece of fine art. He could see the Puget Sound over the treeline, the islands, the horizon, all soft and blurry in the distance. He stood there feeling the beauty all around him, and wondered if he had remembered to pay the gas bill.

“So who’s next?” Aaron asked, looking from David to — — — with a big grin. — — — was looking a little woozy as she craned her neck to see her friend waving at her from the top. “Umm...he can go next,” she said, flicking her eyes to David. Aaron shrugged and transferred the belaying device from the girl’s harness to David’s. “Ready?” he said, giving the harness a couple jerks to make sure it was secure.

“Sure.”

“All right. Saddle up.”

David went at it like Spiderman. He scaled the first half of the cliff like a ladder, while Aaron held onto the rope and fed him more slack as he ascended. David surprised himself. This felt *good*.

Aaron would occasionally pause his conversation with his groupie to yell something like, “Doing great!” or “Almost there, man!”

When David reached the final third of the climb, he began to slow down. The rock was getting more vertical, and holds were getting scarcer. Within a few minutes, he was stuck. He had a good hold where he was, but when he groped around above him, all his hand touched was smooth rock.

“I’m kinda stuck,” he yelled. No response from below. “Any suggestions, Aaron?” Still no response, but he could hear the distant murmur of conversation. “Aaron!”

“Right here, what’s up?”

“You see any good holds? I’m kinda stuck.”

“Uhh...don’t know, hard to tell from here. Keep looking.”

David stalled, pressing his body close to the rock to take some weight off his arms. As much as it was possible, he rested, trying to think of a plan. A mild breeze whipped up and brushed against his face, ran through his hair. He heard the earthy crackle of tiny rocks falling somewhere, the rustle of wind and animals in the underbrush. He heard that subtle, fuzzy hiss of silence. He took a deep breath and held it, closed his eyes, then opened them. He could see those transparent dots that float in your vision

when you look up at the sky, always drifting slowly downward. He was aware of everything. He could feel the whole world, and he was suddenly happy. Free. Ecstatic just to be alive in a bright, beautiful world where every single object had its own sound and smell and meaning. And in this flowery cloud of euphoria, a small, hard, shiny black *thing* poked out of the middle, and asked,

Wait...did I remember to pay the gas bill...?

The cloud collapsed in on itself. The warm flow choked off.

You have to work in a couple days, the black thing reminded him.

Check your account balance before you write that check.

Don't forget to pay that speeding ticket by September 8th

What about Julie?

What are you going to do about Julie?

Everything was so loud, like the deafening whine of a mosquito stuck in his ear canal. Every time he started to feel free, his conscience dutifully reminded him how many things he needed to be worrying about. It told him to feel guilty for his underserved bliss, for thinking he could afford to relax. What a fucking mess. The world was a hangman's noose, tied so tight there was no need to kick the bucket, it would kill by strangling.

What would it be like to let go of everything? To feel nothing but the breeze, see nothing but the sky?

David smiled, and let go of the rock.

He shouldn't have fallen far, the rope should have been taut, but it wasn't, and he did. He had expected to, though. In that long moment, he had forgotten the rope existed. The air was totally still around him. All he could see was the sky, an empty blue void above him. He was weightless. The whole world was nothing but air, and he was free.

He had just enough time to emit a short, strangled laugh, and then he hit the rocks.

Aaron hadn't been paying attention to David's ascent and

hadn't been pulling the rope in taut, so David scraped down the side of the ledge then freefell a long stretch before the rope caught him and swung him back against the cliff like a piñata. He hit hard once, taking most of the impact against his knees and right arm, then bounced lightly a couple times before coming to a rest.

"Ahhhhhhhhh..." he moaned slowly through a grin, and started laughing as he swung gently back and forth. *Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen! Behold!*

Aaron's voice drifted up to him. "David!"

"Yeah," David called back wearily. "I'm ok. Just a few cuts."

Optimism.

"What the fuck, Dave! You just threw yourself off!"

"I fell off."

"Dude I saw you jump out."

"I fell off, and thanks for belaying me so well, buddy."

That ended Aaron's offensive. He scratched his head uneasily. "Uhh...shit...yeah, sorry about that, man."

"Yeah."

"Sure you're ok?"

No. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just keep a closer eye on me, ok? I'm going up again."

"All right, go for it." He sounded relieved to have been let off the hook so easily.

David hurt all over, but he didn't want to inspect the damage just yet. He climbed harder and faster than he had before, taking a route that avoided the place he got stuck last time. If he had looked closely at the rock, would there have been blood or peels of skin there? Would there have been peels of sanity?

The rest of the climb went smoothly, and in less than ten minutes he crawled up over the edge and stood up. He had hoped someone, maybe Julie, would have been there waiting for him, and would have cheered as he rose triumphantly onto the

peak and struck a statuesque pose. No one even noticed him for about two minutes.

The top of the Oyster Dome was the kind of sheer, flat-topped cliff that you usually only see in Road Runner cartoons, with a fantastical view that seemed to encompass the entire Pacific Northwest. Aaron's groupies (except for the one probably climbing by now) were working on setting up their tent, while Josh and Julie worked on the other one a little ways off. David stood on the edge of the cliff for a bit, breathing heavily and trying to force life into his numb, hanging limbs. He could hear snatches of Julie and Josh's conversation, pierced here and there by Julie's sparkling laugh. He started making his way over to them, hobbling on his battered legs. He still didn't want to give himself a damage report.

Julie and Josh were absorbed in what they were doing, and didn't notice David until he was fairly close. Julie saw him first, started to smile, then saw his injuries, and her face paled.

"Oh my God! What happened?"

The intensity of her reaction forced David to have a look for himself. It was pretty bad. His knees and elbows looked like moist, fresh-ground hamburger. "It's uh...not as bad as it looks?"

"What *happened*, David?"

"I fell."

"Goddamnit, David!" she said miserably. "I told you to be careful! You could have—"

"I jumped off."

Silence.

"What?"

"Yep." David smiled like a kid who's just taken off his training wheels. "Threw myself right off the rock."

Julie just stared at him with her mouth open in a silent "uh!". Josh's eyebrows raised, and he let out an amazed chuckle. He sounded almost...what? Impressed?

What the hell kind of reaction is that? David wondered. What

was Josh thinking? Did he think he actually knew why David had jumped? How was that possible? How could he know why a guy might suddenly throw himself off a cliff for no apparent reason, just on a whim? How did Josh always seem to...*get it*? It made David want to have him around forever, to be eighty years old on the porch in rocking chairs, sipping beer and just looking out at the world with knowing smiles. It also made him want to run in terror.

“You jumped off?” Julie repeated. “On purpose?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because...I...just...” David stumbled through his mind looking for an explanation. He guessed she deserved one, but he came up empty handed. “It was just one of those moods.” A silent pause. “You know?”

“What moods?”

David searched a little more, still found nothing.

“What moods, David? Suicide moods?”

“No—God!—No, ok? That wasn’t it at all, it was just...forget it. It was just a weird moment, just a few scratches, I’m ok, don’t worry about it. Let’s go set up camp, ok?” He gave Julie a questioning smile as he walked by her. *Everything’s fine, let’s drop it, ok?* Her expression didn’t answer the request his face made.

Eventually Aaron and _ _ _ came puffing up the trail that Josh and Julie had taken. Apparently _ _ _ had changed her mind about braving the cliff and taken the easy way, dragging Aaron along with her. They joined the other two girls still working on their tent. Josh and Julie had finished setting up theirs and now they and David were busy unloading their packs and getting set up. Most of the work was done in silence. David thought Julie had probably let his little aerial excursion go, but it had put a damper on conversation.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly as they both knelt inside the

tent laying out their sleeping bags.

“Sorry?”

“For scaring you. Jumping off the cliff. Sorry I can’t explain it well enough, it was just...weird. Sometimes you just get these feelings, you know? Like you start thinking about something and it just snowballs until it’s overwhelming, and you have to just...*do* something. You know, something crazy, something...”

She looked at him, studying him, frowning. David looked at her, and saw the incomprehension.

“I thought the rope would catch me.”

Her face melted into relief.

“I was just trying to get better footing. I thought the rope would catch me.”

Julie smiled. “Ok, well just as long as you’re ok up here.” She jabbed a finger at his forehead. “And don’t do it again, ok? No matter what urges you get. Please?”

“I pr—I won’t.”

“Good. Thank you.”

A few hours later, he found himself sitting next to the edge of the cliff, watching the sun go down on the horizon, waiting for its explosive crash-landing in the ocean. He wondered if it was wrong to think that the World Trade Center collapse was an awesome sight. That destruction could be breathtakingly beautiful. Nuclear fireballs put nature’s best displays to shame, and no one likes to hear stories about people being happy.

Eventually Julie wandered over and stood behind him. He patted the ground next to him, and she smiled and sat down with her arms wrapped around her knees, both prickling with goose bumps. His instincts told him to help her, but he had already given her his sweatshirt, and it would probably be awkward if he offered her his pants. All he could do was put his arm around her and hold her tight against him. For a moment, he considered doing so.

They sat there quietly for a while, her shivering, him thinking and wishing. Wishing he could put his arm around a girl without seeing a vision of life's complexities exploding outward in a web of tangled events and choices. And...there was something else. A tiny burr in the back of his mind, a fuzzy uncertainty that made his brows crease now and then, that made him abruptly say to himself, *Wait, wait...* for no apparent reason. An old memory. A pair of eyes. A whisper.

"This is incredible," Julie said, waving her hand out at the sunset. "It doesn't even look real, you know? It's like a painting, or a computer effect background in a movie or something."

"Yeah," David agreed, thinking about something else. Trying not to, but failing. "It's funny, isn't it? How we think like that? We're so *used* to everything, you know, the whole drab, everyday 'real world', that when we see something like this, something truly beautiful, it looks *fake*."

Just a dream, David...just a dream...

While David sat there absorbed in thought, the fire of the sunset became the fire of the campfire, and he didn't really notice the transition. The shimmering coal of the sun became actual coals, and David sat in much the same position, staring into the heart of the blaze in much the same way. Julie was sitting next to him. She was too close to look at without craning his neck, but he could feel her presence there. It was like an invisible force-field extending out from her, a warm, gentle pressure against his side. For a moment he felt frantic. Disoriented. What *was* she?

His head suddenly seemed to open up. His mind became a stationary point in a vast expanse of clear sky, suspended between the earth and the stratosphere. *Is this it?* he wondered, his thoughts echoing in this infinite, empty space. *Is this what all the fuss is about? All the poems and songs and books and movies? Is this really it?*

...

The flames of the sun's crash finally fizzled out in the ocean, and their campfire became the only light in the world. For a bunch of college kids on a Friday night campout, the group was pretty somber. Everyone just stared at the fire, mesmerized. Minutes went by without a word spoken.

"I love fires," Josh said finally. "Look at those coals. How they ripple like that? Doesn't even look real."

Because it's too strange to be real? Too good to be true? Too beautiful to not be a dream? Because reality is ugly, right?

"Anyone want a beer?" Aaron said, his first contribution to the conversation, and David was glad for it. It was a sandbag on a runaway hot-air balloon.

"I'll take one," he said quickly. He didn't even mind that it was Schmidt. He didn't mind that the second one was Schmidt either, or the third, or the fourth. Or the fifth. He began to feel tired. His eyes tracked slower. His posture became unsteady. The storm of thoughts in his head increased, but became blurry, like pages submerged in rippling water. He could see them, but couldn't read them, couldn't translate them.

"Josh," he said abruptly, in the middle of the silence, in a slightly puzzled tone, "you matter."

Josh raised an eyebrow. "What?"

But David didn't elaborate. He looked over at Julie with the same puzzled look on his face, then glanced at Aaron. "You guys all...matter." He rubbed his eyes and sighed. He was drunk on Animal Beer. How embarrassing. "I'm going to bed," he said blearily, and stumbled into his tent. His skin prickled in the cold air as he undressed (he thought of Julie out there, and felt regret) but the sleeping bag was a warm cocoon. Everything in the world was an analogy, a metaphor, a simile, and David was the last page in a book. The one at the very end that's completely blank, and no one knows why it's there.

...

He woke in the middle of the night to the sound of Julie's rhythmic breathing. He could see her wrapped up in her sleeping bag on his left. Josh lay on his right, in the far corner of the tent, breathing soundlessly. Julie looked hunched. She mumbled something, but it was unintelligible to him. She was shaking slightly. Was she laughing? Or crying? Hard to tell in the dark.

Everything was quiet except for her breathing, and the distant forest noises. David rolled onto his back and stared up at the tent ceiling, an empty blackness. Julie let out a small whimpering sound. David could feel the future opening up, a deep, creaking groan. He could see a thin slit of light widening in the darkness of the tent, revealing something. An image, an unfolding scene, events and series of events, his future—he shut his eyes. The disrupted blackness above his head was replaced by the smooth emptiness behind his eyelids.

He exhaled. When he finished the breath, he was asleep again. And he was on a beach.

He gasped and whirled around to take in his surroundings. Wide, sandy beach, endless dunes of bladegrass... He had found it! The needle in the haystack! Somehow, he had found his way back!

“Hi, David.”

There she was! Beautiful, smiling, standing right next to him! “Laura,” he said slowly, as if testing the word to see if he could really speak it.

“Let's spend the rest of our lives together!” Laura said.

David's astonished smile faltered.

“We'll be together always!”

“Laura—?”

“I love you!” Her face was a grinning, plastic mask. “I love you!” Her voice was the lifeless drone of Teddy Ruxpin.

This wasn't real.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and the beach scene deflated, contracted inward, wrapped around him, became the inside of his sleeping bag. There was turmoil and momentum in him. He couldn't lay still. He wriggled out of his bag and stepped over Julie's sleeping form to get out of the tent, out into the cold night air. Standing barefoot just outside the doorway, he stared with hollow eyes into the darkness. It was just a dream. Wasn't really her. Just a pathetic fabrication presented to him by his sadistic subconscious. *Did you think I'd enjoy that? Did you think that would make me happy you son of a bitch?*

And then he stopped, and almost laughed. It "wasn't really Laura"? It was a "fabrication" of Laura? Laura *was* a fabrication! She was a *dream!*

"Oh God..." he groaned, and stumbled out toward the edge of the cliff, feeling too weak to walk. The vast horizon was dark except for the slight halo of dawn around the very edge. This was feeble and gray, more like dying light than the approach of morning, like the halo of the most shit-poor angel in heaven. And Earth was a terrible, ugly place. Everyone in the world was unhappy. All the handsome, smiling faces on TV were suicidal and addicted to drugs. Songs about heartbreak outnumbered songs about happiness ten to one. The neighborhood ice cream man was slowly going insane from the music in his truck, that warbling music box in minor scales. Billionaires hated their lives. The President hated America. Romeo hated Juliet. Mothers hated giving birth. Babies hated being born. The miracle of new life was blood-smeared and grotesque. Life was a tasteless joke. Life was dying. Life was a deleted scene. Brief, unnecessary, and without music.

David lay down on his side, and curled into a ball. *Everything will look better in the morning*, he said in his head. He fell asleep there, shivering, and laughing quietly to himself.

He woke up still curled into a ball, stiffened into a ball, frozen there. He slowly straightened himself out, forcing wooden

muscles to stretch, forcing blood into frozen fingers, then he opened his eyes to a frostbitten world. It was pre-dawn, everything was dark and gray and cold, glittering with ice. The pine trees were heavy with icicles. Below the cliff, the jagged chunks of fallen rock had become giant ice cubes the size of houses, with woolly mammoths visible deep in their centers. On the horizon, towering glaciers rushed in from the east and the west, pushing aside hills and mountains, reshaping the Earth, converging on the place where David sat. He watched this spectacle in sad resignation, watched the Age of Man come to an end. He watched it all close in on him, alone, and just wished it would hurry up.

Gradually, he became aware of Julie sitting next to him. The sound of breathing, then a movement, a slow release of breath. He looked over at her, and she smiled. Warmly. "You're a strange guy, you know that?" she whispered. "What are you doing?"

David was so cold. So stiff, hollow, brittle, and cold. He trembled as he gave her a pitiful smile. She was so warm. She was so pretty, and so warm. And she was *close*. She was *right there*, sitting right next to him. He could reach out and touch her.

The sky in front of them was ablaze from the sunrise behind them. A glorious crimson and gold spread across the whole world, as if this morning, the sun didn't care that it was supposed to rise in the East. As if it had said fuck everything, and just done what it wanted to.

The pit in David's stomach was consuming him. It was unbearable.

"Julie...?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to get married?"

She looked at him for a moment, her face unreadable. Then she smiled. "Ok."

...

I saw her on a park bench one bright, muggy day in July. I was jogging my golden retriever, hoping the fresh air would raise my spirits, and I saw her there. I stopped hard and yanked on Buster's leash. I stood there, breathing heavily. Things had turned out well so far. Things had clicked, things were ready. But I wasn't. I never am. I stayed back, watching her from a distance. She was reading. Whatever it was, she was immersed in it, it showed in her gleaming eyes. She was so beautiful.

My insides surged in my chest, but as I've said, I am a fucking coward. I covered my face with the black hood of my sweat-shirt and walked by at a brisk pace, tugging the leash. "Morning," I said as I passed.

She looked up, and I could feel her eyes on the back of my head, squinted in partial recognition. "Morning," she said faintly, almost a question. She stared after me a little longer. Then she returned to her book. The wedding band hung on her finger like a scrap of dirty brass. Hush little darling don't say a word. I'm gonna buy you a messenger bird. And if that messenger bird don't sing, I'm gonna buy you a diamond ring. And if that diamond ring don't shine, I'm gonna buy you a bottle of wine. And if that wine puts you to sleep, I'm gonna find you in the ocean deep...

I'm sorry, Julie. I'm so sorry.

WINTER

AGE 23

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