I JUST WANT MY PANTS BACK

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A NOVEL

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CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE
DEDICATION
EPIGRAPH

CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18
CHAPTER 19

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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FOR RACHEL, DAMN IT.
All of man’s problems stem from his inability to sit in a quiet room alone.

—BLAISE PASCAL
I was a bored and hungry mammal. I lived in a small apartment on Perry Street that had a working fireplace, but only if you could find logs the size of cupcakes, as my hearth had the dimensions of an Easy-Bake Oven. I sat on my fire escape and watched happy couples come and go, finishing the rhyme in my head, “talking of Michelangelo.” But they were never really discussing Michelangelo. Marc Jacobs, who had opened a store on the corner, was a more likely subject. I wasn’t bitter. I didn’t want a girlfriend, not really, at least not right away. But I could have used a functional vagina. It had been a while since I’d had access to one of those, and my penis kept reminding me how accommodating they could be.

Sunday was winding down, and the streetlights flickered to life. It was early April and the day had held hope that spring had finally arrived, but as the sun set a cool breeze informed us we weren’t quite there yet. I zipped up my sweatshirt and wished once again that I smoked. It just seemed like something that might be nice to do, romantic. I stared at Hunan Pan across the street; soon I would call them as I always did, and they would bring me my supper. It was getting a little embarrassing, though.

“Hello, this Hunan Pan.”

“Hi, can I get an order for delivery?”

“You ninety-nine Perry, number Three-A?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Steamed vegetable dumplings and moo-shu chicken with extra pancake?”

“No, um, the dumplings and moo-shu beef.”

“You sure?”

Sigh. “Fine. Give me the chicken.”

“Okay. Fifteen minute, Mr. Snuka.”

They may have known my voice, but they’d never know my name. I wasn’t Mr. Snuka, aka Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka, the wrestler from the eighties. I was Jason Strider, a Jewish guy with sideburns. Ever since I moved to New York three years ago, I had used pseudonyms when ordering in. Raphael’s, my second most frequent takeout, knew me as Sir Peter O’Toole.

I slipped back through the window into my apartment and began weighing options for the evening. Common sense held that I should eat my dinner, watch *The Simpsons* like the rest of my demographic, and get a reasonable night of sleep before work the next day.

But my penis, my damn penis. He just wouldn’t shut up. And I had to admit, his argument wasn’t without merit, or logic. His basic premise: “Any girl out tonight might be just as desperate as you.” I offered that I had been out a lot this week; the last two nights hadn’t ended until way into the morning, and even now a slight hangover hummed behind my eyes. But Lil’ Petey, as I called him, was persuasive. The problem with being a boy is the constant struggle between listening to your brain and listening to your dick. The problem with being me was that somehow my dick had acquired the argumentative skills of a debate team captain. Or perhaps I was just weak.

I took a quick shower and had just barely gotten a towel around me as the buzzer rang, announcing the arrival of my supper. I opened the door a crack and handed a small Hispanic man a few crumpled bills in exchange for his one crumpled bag. I quickly pulled on jeans and, over a long-sleeved T-shirt, a short-sleeved one that read “Henry
Rollins Is No Fun.” Then I began to eat straight from the cardboard boxes. Yum, the taste of déjà vu. Once finished, I went back into the bathroom and fussed with my hair a bit; it was the same shortish, messyish style that I had sported in one iteration or another since the bad Steve Perry bi-level back in junior high. I looked at the circles under my eyes. Darker and deeper every day. They were the reason I had, about six months ago, forgone my contacts and started wearing glasses, thick black frames I might’ve stolen from Elvis Costello, if we had similar prescriptions. Plus, the first night I had gone out with my glasses on, I had made out with a ridiculously hot girl. Call me superstitious.

I fished through the papers on my coffee table and found the flyer that a random woman with a disturbing number of facial piercings had given me on the subway. The LiZee Band, Sunday at 8:30, at the Umbrella Room. The band was named for the girl herself. She had dyed black hair and wore an ill-fitting business suit; it was a look that said, “It’s because I have to, okay?” She’d approached me and every other young person on the F train, given us flyers, and invited us to see her band. The Umbrella Room was literally five blocks from my house. And eight-thirty was nice and early. It seemed worth the risk. Lil’ Petey 1, Jason 0.

It was almost eight, so I cannonballed the ass-end of a joint with the remaining third of a two-liter Diet Coke and let them race each other to see which could get to my brain first. For me, Diet Coke and marijuana went together like ice-cold milk and an Oreo cookie. Like Jacoby and Meyers. Like sha-nah-nah-nah yippity-dip-da-do. I hit the lights, locked my door, and let gravity take me down the stairs like a slightly bent Slinky. Once I was outside, the cool night air felt great against my skin. I searched my mind for an adjective better than “great.” I had been an English major, after all; I had been taught to avoid mundane adjectives. Refreshing, soothing, bracing…nope, “great” really did best describe the feeling.

I turned up Hudson and looked across the street at the people hanging out in front of the White Horse Tavern. The White Horse was where Dylan Thomas supposedly mumbled, “I’ve had eighteen straight whiskies, I think that’s the record…” before keeling over and dying a few days later. It’s an unproven story, but that didn’t stop busloads of tourists in matching sweat suits from rolling up every Thursday through Saturday. Tonight, however, it looked as if just a few folks from the neighborhood were hanging out by the door, enjoying the evening. One was Patty, the fiftysomething bohemian woman who lived across the hall from me. Gray-haired, a bit of a mutterer, she wore sandals all year round: rain, snow, locusts—sandalis. I never used to see her much, but lately we’d been bumping into each other in the building more often. I imagined her to be some sort of lesbian poet who chain-smoked cigarillos and once let Allen Ginsberg sleep in her bathtub because he was “tired and also filthy, just filthy.” The one thing I did know from peeking at her rent bill (our landlord taped them to our doors like your mother might tape a note to “clean your room”) was that she paid only $210 a month for the same apartment I paid a grand for. And a thousand bucks was considered a deal. So I kept an ear open every time she left her apartment, lest she fall down the stairs and I could inherit the New York dream. I was joking, but she had once given me a card with her “lawyer’s” number on it, just in case anything should happen to her. Then she gave me an orange she wasn’t going to eat.

“Hey, Patty!” I yelled across the street.

She waved. “Hi, neighbor.”

I waved back but quickened my step. I was stoned and easily distracted and didn’t want to fly off on a tangent. High, I often went too far for too little. No, I was on a mission. I was going to see this LiZee group. They might just become my new favorite band. Maybe I would buy a T-shirt and start a blog.

Going to a bar alone is no big deal for some people, but for me it was always a bit of an awkward experience. Somehow it always felt as if everyone were looking at me. “Did he come by himself?” “Did he get stood up by a girl?” “Poor guy might be suicidal, let’s step away in case he tries to off himself and we get hit with flesh shrapnel; this is a new shirt.” It wasn’t something I did often, but I liked the adventure of it, although I had to deal with the slight anxiety as well. The pot both helped and hurt. It motivated me out of the house and led me to believe I might be the funniest person ever to roam the planet, but once inside the bar it sometimes gave me the inner confidence of a man whose fly was stuck open.

This was a side effect of partying that my friends and I called “The Fear.” Mild paranoia was just a touch of The Fear, hardly worth bothering with; a full dose really came the morning after, a bottomless pit of regret and shame fueled by drugs, alcohol, lack of sleep, and the insidious feeling that you had somehow just fucked up
monumentally. I had learned to live with The Fear, but we were not very good roommates and I believed he was using my toothbrush.

Luckily, when I arrived at the Umbrella, the LiZee band was already onstage tuning up, so I felt like just another guy who had come to check them out. The Umbrella was a tiny bar with a tiny stage; it was pretty dingy, with an, um, umbrella motif. There was one black one nailed to the brick wall behind the bar. I made my way toward it and praised Vishnu that there was an open stool. I climbed aboard and ordered a Bud; it seemed like a Bud moment.

The band continued to sound-check. The guitarist, a balding, rotund dude whose tight T-shirt revealed a muffin-top of flab over the waist of his jeans, stood next to the bassist, a shockingly thin poster-boy for meth awareness. Together they looked like before and after, plus side effects. Their random plucking morphed into actual playing and suddenly LiZee started singing. She was no longer confined to her business suit; now she wore a white shirt and ripped pink tights. She was rubbing against the monitors provocatively, shrieking passionately, going for a sort of Karen O vibe. Even the most tone-deaf could hear she was missing. The only thing that kept me from leaving after song two was inertia. They had some damn comfortable bar stools at the Umbrella.

A girl squeezed between me and the guy on the next stool, who I was sure was related to someone in the band named Jimmy. Or else maybe he just liked to yell, “You rip, Jimmy!” The girl had plastic glasses similar to mine but tortoiseshell; her hair was in pigtails. She held her money up but was overlooked. Petey stirred.

“Want me to get the bartender?” I asked her over the music.

She smiled. “Thanks, could you ask her for a Jameson’s, please?” She handed me a ten.

I took her money. “Uh-huh, no problem.” Just a single drink, she was probably here alone. My crotch was gloating already. I made eye contact with the bartender, who shot back the “I see you but wait your fucking turn” look. An awkward moment passed. “She saw me, but I think she’s making a martini for someone first,” I said to the girl.

“That’s cool. So how do you know this band?” She had a smattering of freckles, and she did a sweet squinty thing when she pushed her glasses up her nose. She was so cute it hurt.

“I don’t, actually.” I told her the train story. “I was sitting home bored and I figured what the hell.” I was hoping I had good breath, as she was fairly close to me. I dug in my pocket for a mint. Nothing.

“I don’t know them either,” she said. “I was walking past and I saw them setting up so I came in to watch. What do you think?” She twirled her hair, just like girls do on TV.

“Um…what do you think?” I responded, just as the bartender leaned in. “Jameson’s please,” I said, smiling at her.

“Rocks?” She sneered. She could hardly tolerate me. I fucking hated bartenders like that. Why the anger? You’re at work and a band is playing, life is not so awful. I looked at my pigtailed friend.

“Neat please,” she said. The bartender fixed it and I paid, giving the change to Pigtails. “I’m Jane,” she said to me, holding up her drink.

“Jason.” I clinked her glass with the Bud, which was getting low. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” She sipped and smiled.

The band played for another half hour but the last thing we did was listen. Jane started telling me about a “gorgeous” Swiss Mountain Dog she had seen on her way to the bar that had made her really want a puppy, and I responded with a story about Daisy, my dog growing up, that didn’t really go anywhere except prove that when younger I’d given my dog a pretty queer name. Luckily, the pointless anecdote didn’t put her off. She flashed me a grin, perfect teeth wet with whiskey.

“So, what do you do, Jason?”
The smile hung there, full of promise. I decided not to disappoint it with the truth.

We left before the last E chord died, and walked down Hudson. “So no way, you’re really an orthodontist? I always thought of them as older,” said Jane, now wearing a cabbie hat and strolling alongside me. She lived in Brooklyn and we were walking sort of toward a subway. We were near my apartment, but I was feeling a little too chicken to close the deal.

“Well, I’m not like a regular one, like in the ’burbs,” I said, hands jammed in my pockets. “I’m a downtown, New York City orthodontist. My clientele are all artists and fashion people and their kids. Jeff Koons designed my office, know him?” She nodded. “Our dental chairs look like oversized red tongues, and all my dental hygienists wear big plushy costumes like Barney, but they’re not dinosaurs, it’s all dental-related—they’re like molars and toothbrushes and plaque and stuff. Once Sting came in for a retainer and had me record the whole procedure on a DAT.” I lowered my voice. “He’s got a receding gumline, you know.”

“Oh my God, Sting? That’s hilarious.” We walked on a bit more. “So what do you want to do now? Do you want to call it a night?”

“Um, I’m up for something. I could get another drink.”

“I’m kind of hungry, actually; I didn’t have dinner yet,” she said, adjusting her hat. We stopped and looked around. There were no restaurants on the block.

“Well, we could go to my apartment, back there on Perry, and order in. And if you want, I have some weed there.” I immediately regretted that choice of word, it sounded so AEΠ. But it didn’t matter.

“That sounds perfect.”

* * * * *

We sat on my small green couch. She finished off a slice while I twisted a joint. “Sandinista” by the Clash was in the stereo; not the sexiest choice, but it was what was already in there when I hit play and I went with it. She excused herself to go to the bathroom, and I flicked the lighter and inhaled some smoke. Instantly I felt it, a small tingling in my ears and a bit of nervous energy. The toilet flushed and my mind began racing with the fresh THC and adrenaline. This was just too easy. What was up with this girl? What if she rifled through my wallet in the middle of the night and stole my Discover card? What if she had a penis? I made a mental note to check for an Adam’s apple. I heard her gargling; she must've found my Duane Reade generic mint mouthwash. Christ, how embarrassing. I should’ve spent the extra forty cents for a name-brand variety.

The door opened and she sat down next to me. I handed her the joint and took a sip of her water. We started a halting conversation about God knows what, both of us waiting for the inevitable to happen. I put my hand on her leg and took the joint gently from her fingertips. Joe Strummer sang “Italian mobster shoots a lobster, seafood restaurant gets outta hand…” I started saying something about how the Clash were really influenced by Jamaican dub and then, I don’t know who started it, but after seconds of leaning closer and closer to each other, we started kissing deeply.

The first trading of tongues officially ended my months of rejection, and I resisted the urge to hop up and perform a victory dance—an Icky shuffle or some spirited clogging. After what felt like the right amount of time, I gently reached up her skirt and made with the artful rubbing of the naughty pieces. It was fun sometimes to go vagina before going boobs, kept ’em guessing. Not that I didn’t get to those, stat. One nipple was pierced with a hoop, but I didn’t let that throw me; a few years back I had learned the hard way that the most important thing with those was simply not to yank them.

Jane unbuckled my belt and released Petey, who stood at attention. The same thought ran through my mind that ran through my mind every single time I hooked up: “I can’t believe this girl is actually going to touch it!” Yes,
every single time, it was like David beating Goliath or the apparition of Mary on a tortilla chip. A bona fide miracle.

After some grappling and half-naked clumsiness, we started toward the bedroom but never made it. As she leaned against my wobbly refrigerator and I fucked her from behind, I could hear the meager contents—an almost empty jar of Welch’s grape jelly, some ancient rolls of film, and an economy-sized Heinz ketchup—fall and rattle around. She looked back at me mid-stroke and snarled, “I want you to fuck me in your fridge!” She ripped open the door and lay her chest across the wire shelf, her face wedged back near the light and a partially crushed box of baking soda that had been there since the dawn of man. “C’mon, do it!” she yelled, her voice muffled. “Fuck me!”

I thrusted and thrusted, pushing her deeper and deeper into my kitchen appliance. I was grinning like a lunatic. What a fantastic e-mail this was going to make tomorrow.
I awoke alone and surprisingly rested. Jane had taken off shortly after the sex; not only did she live in Brooklyn, but apparently she worked there too, so there was no sense really in her crashing at my house. I’d walked her outside and helped her to hail a cab. She gave me a peck good night, told me she had left her number upstairs, hopped in, and was off.

I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and allowed myself a celebratory smile, for lo, the long sexual drought was finally over. It had been four months. Tumbleweeds had begun blowing through my bedroom. A dry spell like that makes a man start to question his haircut, his clothes, if he has done anything to anger the gods. I had survived the slump the only way I knew how—positive thinking and excessive masturbation.

With girls, for me, it was always feast or famine. I was either 007 or the Elephant Man. Nothing nothing nothing, I’ll never touch a girl again, then kapow! I’m kissing one girl and I have a date with a different girl later in the week. The fact that one female was interested in me seemed proof enough to others that I was worthy of fondling. Unfortunately, and more frequently, the reverse held true. So to have any hope of attracting prey, I had to keep blood in the water, like a shark fisherman. It was the Chum Theory; I hoped it would apply again now.

It was getting late. I hopped up, threw on my jeans, brushed my teeth—did only the things one deems necessary when rushing to get to work. Corners cut included showering, putting on underwear, and eating anything—other than a swallow of mint-flavored toothpaste. As I slipped on my sneakers, I saw that there was no scrap of paper with Jane’s phone number in the most obvious place, on top of the coffee table. I looked around on the floor—nothing. Damn, she must’ve been doing the same thing as me: going out Sunday, simply looking for a little fun. How progressive. I pictured feminists everywhere slow-motion celebrating to “We Are the Champions.”

“I feel so used,” I joked aloud, smiling. Then the smile faded. Hey, what the fuck? How come that slut didn’t want to marry me? Then I saw it. Her name, number, and e-mail scrawled in the middle of a heart she had drawn on a ripped envelope, hanging on the fridge door. “PS: You need groceries!” Clever girl. Clever, and filthy as all fuck.

I snatched it and was out the door, onto the beautiful old West Village streets. Almost every building had a historic look, stately brownstones that were painstakingly attended to. Except my building, 99 Perry. It was “painted” a pale shade of yellow, the color resembling a dirty towel that had been long forgotten, and was now covered in soot. The front door’s lock was hit-or-miss, and the stairwells were creaky and peeling. It was one of the last rent-stabilized buildings in a wealthy neighborhood, and the landlord did as little as he could to keep it standing.

I hustled toward the subway. I was currently employed at a theatrical company, JB Casting. I answered the phone and manned the receptionist area. All of the actors were extra-polite to me, as if I might have pull and be able to help them get parts. It was a little sad, this job, and I had no real interest in it. As my parents might say, I was in the process of finding what I wanted to do with my life. And over the course of the last few months, I had had the epiphany that “casting director” and “receptionist” were two titles I could cross off my list.

I had graduated with honors from Cornell, but I was an English major who didn’t do all the required reading and owed his diploma to the friendly folks at CliffsNotes. I had even framed the New Testament CliffsNotes that had gotten me through my Literature of Religion class. I hung the piece on my off-campus apartment’s wall, titling it, “For Sinners Only.”

After a couple of road trips down from Ithaca to see bands, I was sold on moving to the city. I had been a DJ at WBVR at school, and I figured I’d be able to find some kind of job in the music industry here, though I didn’t know what. The career center had helped me get a few interviews at radio stations, but they were all in ad sales, which seemed a lot closer to telemarketing than Telecasters.Soon the rent and Hunan Pan bills were looming, so I just looked for any job to cover them until I figured out what I wanted. Truth was, I hadn’t gotten around to doing a full investigation of the music world yet. I was still settling in, and frankly there were a hell of a lot more fun things to
do here in the meantime. In the two and a half years since I’d arrived, I had worked three different jobs. Well, two, really; I had been a bartender at a bar that had changed names during my tenure, so I counted it as two different jobs. My friends from school mostly had found their niches by now. Even the ski bums were back from their year in Aspen serving muffins to Cher and had found entry-level jobs in PR, not that they’d even known what PR was. I traveled through Europe the summer after graduation. But when I came back, I didn’t see the point in shaving every day and working long hours at something I wasn’t sure I wanted to be doing.

The scary thing was that I was becoming aware that very few people were doing what they wanted to be doing; they just got caught up in whatever they were doing long enough that it became who they were. Or as my dad put it, they had “picked and sticked.” I had not. Which I’m sure ate at my folks, because they were textbook pickers and stickers. My parents still lived in the brick house where I grew up, just outside St. Louis, on a street full of brick houses. My mom had been a secretary for a local real estate attorney, Bob Hoefel, Esq., until political correctness came to town. She still worked for him, but now her title was “administrative assistant.” My dad was just as loyal to his job. He worked at the same hardware store he’d been at since he was a junior at St. Louis University. Although now he was the owner. Strider’s Hardware. The funny thing about that was, he wasn’t remotely handy. He knew the stock like the back of his hand, he could pontificate on the subtleties that separated Benjamin Moore white dove semi-gloss from Benjamin Moore white dove eggshell, but for the love of God you didn’t let the man climb a ladder to clean the gutters without a team of firemen holding out one of those “jumper” nets to catch him. His home-improvement mishaps had becoming a running joke between my mom and me.

It was pretty clear a career in home improvement wasn’t his dream. But I felt like maybe dream jobs were a more contemporary desire. It seemed like in his day, a “good job” was all one looked for. Then you put a picture of your wife on your desk in the back office, pumped out a kid, managed a Little League team or two, got chubby from drinking beer and rooting for the perennially lousy Cardinals, and went into minor debt sending your wise-ass son to an Ivy League school, when he could’ve gone to Mizzou for close to nothing. (I felt guilty about that one. But Mizzou had scared the crap out of me—it was filled with giant corn-fed heifers of human beings—and like any eighteen-year-old, I felt the urgent need to get the hell out of Dodge.)

For some reason, my parents thought I might become a lawyer. I was never sure why they envisioned me as a legal eagle, but I supposed they saw how well Mr. Hoefel was doing. “It’s a solid career,” they had told me during winter break of senior year, holding out an LSAT prep book they had borrowed from the Richters next door. Cornell was pretty hard, and the last thing I wanted was more school after school. Hell, I didn’t even know what lawyers did every day, except for what I had gathered watching reruns of Matlock while hung over. I kept picturing his desk covered with boring legal briefs and dandruff flakes.

Unfortunately New York was the kind of town where the first two questions out of people’s mouths were, “What do you do?” followed by “How much is your rent?” Answering the whole truth to either of those usually wasn’t the best way for me to go, if I was aiming to impress. So frequently I didn’t. And although New Yorkers stayed single or married without kids well into their forties, with cutting-edge European moisturizers or smuggled infant stem cells keeping them young- and fresh-looking, beneath that veneer, they were relentlessly responsible adults. In fact, if adults were some kind of exotic animal species, New York City was their African veldt. People competed for jobs, parking, clothes, apartments, taxis, picnic spots, preschools, brunch reservations, dermatologists, dog-walkers, frozen yogurt, treadmills, Hamptons houses, seats at the movies, you name it. It made me dream about the promise of communism, but I just as soon dismissed it; there were no perfectly taut communist honeys. All those years of sausage and socialism really wreaked hell on a girl.

Hence my job at JB’s, to which I was once again about to be tardy. I got to the Twelfth Street 1 train entrance and tumbled down the stairs, pulling out my iPod and headphones as I did. I put it on shuffle, clicked PLAY, and hoped for a good subway set.

I arrived at the office at Thirty-second and Sixth at about ten-fifteen, or in layman’s terms, an hour and fifteen minutes late. John Barry, the JB in JB Casting, was in his office with the door closed, so I figured I was fairly safe. It was a small office—just me, JB, another assistant like me named Melinda, and Sara, another agent. The space itself was a loft that consisted of a large reception area where actors would wait until they were called into a separate room, which contained a Polaroid camera and a video camera. There, one of us, usually Melinda, would film them doing whatever the small part required and then send a tape to the director, who would phone his choices in to John or Sara. It was pretty straightforward, and as far from glitzy Hollywood as one could get.
Melinda was on the phone at the reception desk when I walked in. I sat down beside her, went on the computer we shared, and opened up nytimes.com, my ritual; I figured it was worth seeing whether or not the world was coming to an end imminently before I started working.

Melinda hung up and pushed a few stray brown hairs behind her ear. She had a slightly round face that always sported a deadpan expression; she looked like a smart girl in Barnes & Noble, ready to say something sarcastic about your book choice.

“Good morning.” She raised an eyebrow. “Doctor’s appointment, right?”

Melinda had been at JB’s for two years; she was an aspiring playwright, and like me, was only there for the money. Her salary went toward supporting her craft, whereas mine went toward supporting me. She was pretty funny too—if she didn’t live with her girlfriend I might’ve thought about dating her. I had a feeling we’d probably stay friends after one or both of us eventually left JB’s. Although I had thought that same thing about folks at the bartending jobs, and they had vanished into the ether.

“Actually, I got laid last night.” I smiled at her and held up my hand, jokingly. “High five?”

“By a girl?”

“Yup.” The phone started ringing.

“Well done.” She motioned toward the phone. “Maybe that’s her now.”

Every day Melinda and I went to grab lunch, and every day I hoped and prayed and promised myself that I would find something to eat other than a turkey sandwich. Foiled again, I sat back down at the receptionist desk, opened up Instant Messenger, and took a bite. There was just nothing else to eat, it seemed. Well, at least today I had bought a different flavor of beverage than my normal Diet Coke—an old-school Dr. Brown’s Black Cherry. Like the White Horse’s patron saint, I was raging against the dying of the light.

On our walk, Melinda reminded me that that night was her last playwriting workshop. They were going to do a “table read” of her play, and then after, it was going to shape-shift into a party; “Jon” from her class had some sort of giant loft in the East Village, perfect for such an event. I was definitely going, I told her.

I logged into IM and wrote my friend Tina to see if she wanted to join, although odds were she already had plans. Tina was the sort of girl who epitomized the Reggie Jackson moniker, “the straw that stirs the drink.” Somehow she knew everything and everyone, a one-stop shop for social life. Even in college, where we had met, she was that way. She simply loved to party the same way most people loved to breathe—regularly, deeply.

Now she was a web designer at an Internet ad agency; she made a lot of banner ads for pharmaceutical products, but every once in a while she’d get to build a really cool site for an independent film or something. About two years ago when she started there, we all thought Tina was going to be rich. The firm couldn’t really afford to pay her much, so they gave her all these stock options that promised big money if they got bought out. But of course they didn’t, and there went that. Her firm went from seventy to forty people in about two months. How she kept her job she could only attribute to one thing. Her boobs. She was proud of them; hell, we all were.

However, I had certainly never touched them. Tina and I had kissed once, early freshman year, but it didn’t take. It wasn’t completely yucky, like Frenching a sibling or accidentally getting slipped the tongue by an overly friendly dog, but something was off, it felt wrong. It was unspoken, but mutual. We were just to be close friends. In fact, we were often each other’s wingman.
doodyball5: arf

tinadoll: flarfell

doodyball5: hlllerghf

tinadoll: liturgical. como estas?
doodyball5: muy bien, finally got laid last night!
tinadoll: you sure? u didn’t wake up with your dick in a glass of ice tea again, did you?
doodyball5: no, it was a real girl. she had tits and a vagina and everything
tinadoll: everything? that code for hermaphrodite?
doodyball5: shut up. it was pretty nuts, i fucked her “in” my fridge, seriously

tinadoll: that happened to me once but the sex was bad so i ate a half a pizza

doodyball5: geez hard to impress a slut like you. what happens later? melinda’s having a reading/party
tinadoll: i’m going to the movies at seven

doodyball5: want to meet after at the party? gonna get there late anyway, have to cover a session
tinadoll: nah. A girl needs a night in now and then

doodyball5: ug
tinadoll: gu

tinadoll: what are u casting for?
doodyball5: it’s called “skinflint.” whatev

tinadoll: oh, stacey has something to tell you later

doodyball5: yeah?
tinadoll: ?
doodyball5: ?
tinadoll: sorry…it’s a secret

doodyball5: secrets are for losers. give it up

tinadoll: my lips are sealed

tinadoll: don’t even say it, pervstein

doodyball5: give me a hint, c’mon. am i in trouble?
tinadoll: hmm, you might be. bye!
Stacey and her fiancé Eric were old friends of mine and Tina’s from school. It was cool that we all had ended up here; when I moved to the city I felt like I already had a built-in support system. In fact, Eric had helped me find the place at 99 Perry. A guy he knew from med school was moving out, and I attached myself to him like a barnacle to a ship. The guy recommended me to the landlord, who was a very religious Jew. I went to meet him in his basement office wearing a yarmulke, and when he asked if I had any questions, I queried him about the nearest shul. I’m probably going to burn in hell, but I got the apartment.

The afternoon crawled on at a glacial pace. Melinda left the office at five to help set up for her workshop. I was hoping the reading wouldn’t be over by the time I got there, as I was on video duty for the Skinflint session. I hadn’t even really read the specs yet; I was following a debate in the comments section on stereogum.com, a music blog, about the “greatest modern guitarists.” Someone named Shreds 81 was throwing a hissy fit about the “lack of respect for Slash, you fucking college weenies!” So I was pretty surprised when the first actor arrived and was only about three feet tall.

“My name is Leroy Hanson, I’m here for Skinflint,” he said, shaking my hand with his tiny, pudgy palm. I did my best not to flinch but couldn’t be sure that I didn’t show surprise.

“Right this way, I’m Jason,” I said, walking him back to the video room. I quickly read the specs.

For the LSD sequence, we need five little people who will wear fruit costumes (banana, strawberry, lime, lemon, pineapple) and dance in the background. We are looking for the littlest people possible, but it is IMPORTANT that they have long, skinny arms and legs, as these must stick out of holes in the costumes. SHORT, PUDGY, OR DISFIGURED LIMBS ARE NONSTARTERS. Please show CLOSE-UPS of limbs so we can make a judgment. Also, please have all actors dance. We will not see faces, so it does not matter if they are women or men.

I flicked on the lights and showed Leroy to a tape mark on the floor. I turned on the camera. “Okay, tell me your name, agent, whether or not you are in SAG, and um, your height, please.” Leroy was a pro, and rattled them off. “Okay, I don’t have any music, but can you show me some of your dance moves?”

Leroy looked straight into the camera. “What kind of dancing are you looking for? Disco? Waltz?”

“Good question.” I hit pause and re-read the specs, but it didn’t say. “Umm, it doesn’t say, but you’ll be playing a piece of fruit, so dance like a piece of fruit would dance, I guess.”

“How does a fucking piece of fruit dance?”

“Uh, I guess, well, just do a bunch of different stuff, that’s probably safest.” My God, Melinda was going to shit when she heard about this. She lived for awkward casting moments, and as I videotaped Leroy doing a surprisingly good “running man” with no sound but the whir of the camera, I couldn’t think of anything more awkward. Oh, wait, yes I could. “Okay Leroy, now I just need to shoot some close-ups of your limbs.”

* * * *
By the time I had finished the session it was eight-thirty. I had videotaped about twenty little people dancing and was completely fascinated and horrified. Who knew there were so many little people in the city? And who knew so many of them could dance? One woman did a flip.

Before I left, I quickly composed a short e-mail to Jane. It wasn’t every day you met a girl who invited you to fuck her in a kitchen appliance, and visions of my oven were dancing in my head. Besides, she had freed me from my celibate prison, so I wasn’t about to play coy and wait a couple days to write to her. It would have been hubris to go the aloof route.

I was starting to get it down to a science, this first written contact. In fact, I had saved a few older e-mails that I had written to other girls, and I pretty much just needed to cherry-pick lines from those to make a nice opening message. It was bordering on lame, sure, but I was really only plagiarizing myself. I liked to think of it as recycling. It was good for the Earth. But this time I decided to be original; I thought up a subject (always the hardest part), “Freezer Burn?” and dashed it off.

Hey Jane,

It’s Jason. Remember me? President and founding member of the LiZee fan club? Last eve was really fun. Shall we hang out again sometime soon? I know of many other average bands…Hope today was swell.

Hugs. Not drugs.

Jason

PS: I don’t often use the word “shall,” but I’m trying to impress you.

I scanned it, added my cell-phone number to the bottom, and changed the “freezer burn” to “hiya” and the “hugs not drugs” to “bye” so I didn’t seem too much like a spaz. You just knew any e-mail you sent to a girl was immediately forwarded to at least one of her friends or office pals and deconstructed like a Shakespearean sonnet in an Advanced Elizabethan Poetry class. Usually the line above the forwarded e-mail would simply say, “I don’t know, is he weird?”

I said good night to the computer, put it to sleep, and then escaped the office to the street. A souvlaki vendor was frying up mystery meat and onions right outside the building; it was the savory smell of freedom. The Post-it that Melinda had given me said the reading was at Ninth Street and Second Avenue, so I hurried off toward the 6 train. As I walked, I fired off a quick text to Stacey, “Hear u are looking for me!” Tina had made me quite curious.

I emerged from the subway at Astor Place, starving. I grabbed a slice and crammed it into my eat hole as I headed toward Second Avenue. I got to the building, walked up three flights, and stepped into the loft. It was enormous, a wide-open space with large windows and very little furniture. As the door loudly creaked shut, twenty or so people sitting on folding chairs set up to resemble audience seating turned and looked at me. I smiled sheepishly and tiptoed over to an empty chair. Facing us, seated on one side of a table, were Melinda and four of her classmates.

One man was reading intensely: “It’s easy for you to say! I can’t even remember our address—our fucking address, Ruth! Did you know I keep it written down on a slip of paper in my wallet? And I have another one in my shoe, in case I lose my wallet!”

Melinda read, dryly, “Oh my God, what if you lose your shoes, though? Then what?”

The man sighed. “Very funny, sweetheart. See, I already forgot how funny you are.”

From what I roughly knew, Melinda’s play was about a famous composer whose Alzheimer’s was rapidly becoming debilitating. As the disease progressed, the symphony he was working on became his saving grace—the musical notes were written down, so he didn’t forget or get confused when he worked on it, the way he did in other aspects of his life. But as I watched, I started to realize where Melinda was taking the play; he was now beginning to
I looked around the room. People were rapt, sitting on the edges of their seats. A few were audibly sniffling. Everybody was rooting for the play to be great, everybody was open, sincere. It was almost too good, the way movies depicted old artsy New York, this reading, this makeshift theater in someone’s loft. I watched Melinda; she was so focused, furiously scribbling notes as people read their lines. Her lines, which she was showing to the world outside her workshop for the first time. She was oblivious to us, though, lost in her own creation. It was amazing to see her in her element, away from our little office world. God, what a joke compared to this. We were just tap-dancing at work, who cared, what difference did our efforts make? We were killing time for money. This was something else.

About twenty minutes later, Melinda looked up. “Curtain.” Everyone began to applaud wildly and she smiled as she was hugged by the people who had read with her. I stood and whistled as loud as I could. I wanted to go over and congratulate her but it didn’t seem like my turn yet. Then, boom, the lights dimmed and someone hit the stereo. The Strokes blared; for some reason their music always made me feel like I was in Urban Outfitters about to try on an overpriced T-shirt.

I took a deep breath and waded into the outer ring of the crowd around Melinda. I saw George first, a white guy with dreads who I knew through her. It was tough to pull off, the white-guy-with-dreads look; very few could do it. Only thing worse in that genre were the white girls on spring break in the Bahamas who got their hair beaded and then tragically forgot to put sunscreen where the hair was pulled apart.

“Hey, man, that was great, huh?” I asked George, shaking his hand.

“That, I think, is going to get bought.” He held up a Pyrex pipe and changed the subject. “Can I interest you in getting high?”

And soon I was as stoned as a teen at the prom in 1978. I burned my throat a bit, so I left George and went to grab a beer out of the kitchen. It was crowded with folks smoking cigarettes and grabbing at some pita bread and cheese that was laid out on the stove. I reached into the fridge.

“Hey, can you hand me a Stella?”

I turned to see a girl with green eyes, a Joan-Jett-circa-“I Love Rock and Roll” haircut, and a polka-dot sweater. All curvy and shit. Like someone hand-packed her into her jeans. I passed her a beer. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” She smiled at me. “So, what’s your story? You friends with Jon?” She pulled a bottle opener/magnet off the fridge door, opened her beer, and then gave the opener to me. I fumbled with it a bit. I was higher than I wanted to be.

“No, I’m friends with the playwright, Melinda. Well, not friends exactly, we work together, I can’t lie. Well, of course, I could lie—I’m actually quite an accomplished liar.” I picked at the label on my beer as I rolled on. “But I made a list of New Year’s resolutions, and right after ‘Get buns and abs of steel’ is ‘Be more truthful.’ My name is Jason.” I stuck out my hand.

She shook it. “Carol.” Surprisingly firm grip. A little manly. “Nice opening monologue.”

“Thanks, I, uh, took drama in college.” I tried a sip of the beer. Lukewarm. “I don’t really know who Jon is, actually.” I gestured to the apartment. “His place is awesome, though.”

“He was the guy in the orange T-shirt who didn’t have too many lines. I used to work with him at this ad agency. But now I’m a VP web producer at match.com.” She smiled.

“Wow, congratulations.”

“Yeah. It’s a great place for me.” She blinked, and touched my arm. “So what do you do with Melinda?”

I brought my beer to my lips, buying a second, contemplating my answer. It would be easy for me to latch onto
Melinda’s life, say we’d worked together on a play in the Fringe Festival or something. I’d certainly strayed farther from the truth before. Last night, in fact. But for some reason I really didn’t feel like playing that game, the one wherein we made ourselves sound better than we actually were. And since I had just gotten laid as an orthodontist, I felt a certain desire to abstain from it. “Melinda and I work at a film casting place; I’m an assistant there.” I watched her for a reaction. “But there’s only four people, so I’m this close to being CEO.” I held up three fingers.

She took a prolonged swallow of beer. Fuck, they can never hide it. “A casting assistant, huh?” She glanced down, I think at my shoes, then back to my face. “So like, do you want to be a producer or something?”

She was already in Phase Two. My current credentials didn’t sound that hot, so now she was sizing me up for “future potential.” Like I was a young racehorse or a piece of real estate in a gentrifying neighborhood. This exact sequence had happened to me more times than I cared to recall. It started with “Oh, this guy looks sort of interesting,” then went to “Oh, his job is kinda lame, though, but wait…maybe he has a plan,” to, if it hadn’t already ended with me immediately being dropped like a dirty diaper, “Wait, this one I can mold like a lump of clay into Perfect Boyfriend.”

“Um, producer, I don’t know,” I shrugged, smiling. “Could be, I’m still sorting that out, to be honest. Or maybe an astronaut. I’m on the fence.”

“Mmm-hmm. Tough choice.” Carol took another taste of her beer. Her eyes darted around the room. “They’re really different jobs.”

I took her face in. Yeah, I didn’t have a shot in hell of ever kissing this girl. No “assistant” did. She was probably racing her friends to be first to both procreate and be made partner. “I make more money than you, AND my baby was born first—in your face!” It was all camouflaged under the stylish haircut. A friend of hers walked past and they started chatting; she was about to sail away. On cue, the wind blew.

“Okay, well, I’m going to get back to my friends,” she said, touching my shoulder, patronizingly. “It was nice to meet you.” I watched her curvaceous body move as she negotiated her way out of the crowded kitchen. I guess you could say she had an hourglass figure. But time was running out.

I consoled myself with a mouthful of beer. Maybe I was high but I felt like everyone in the kitchen was looking at me, so I shuffled back out into the main room and found a spot to sulk. VP, Jesus. It killed me, that crap. All of a sudden these people who two minutes ago were proud to rule the bong thought they were Gordon Gecko or something. What was I to her, a retarded busboy at Stuckey’s? I mean, I wasn’t some poet, some Utopian dreamer; it wasn’t like I wanted to live in 1967, abandon all material possessions, and give my children Native American names like Spirit Runner. I loved money and treasure as much as any pirate. These people who used their job titles just like maybe they had once used their major or their varsity letter or whatever to make themselves seem superior. Fuck ‘em, I wasn’t buying it. I leaned against the wall and drained my beer. I had made an excellent argument to myself, but there was no way around it. A girl turning you down, thinking that who you were wasn’t good enough, hurt. It hurt every fucking time.

Especially painful was the first time it happened, at Seth Strasser’s sixth-grade birthday party. We had just graduated from “Spin the Bottle” to “Run, Catch, and Kiss.” All adolescent kissing games cruelly seemed to have the rules built right into their names, rendering moot any “I don’t know how to play” excuses. The girls chased the boys under the June night sky, and Carol Kensington, a B-cupped beauty who was the inspiration behind many of my first locked-bathroom-door explorations, was closing in on me. I faked twisting an ankle, going down on the soft grass of Seth’s front yard, all the easier to be caught and kissed. But Carol passed me over. Literally. She hurdled me in desperate pursuit of James Lerner, the “hottest guy in school.” Well, until sophomore year, when it all went bad in an eruption of acne and an unfortunate attempt at a mustache. Carol’s running leap was followed rapid-fire by Lisa Beeman’s dainty hop and Mandy Tellman’s misjudging the jump entirely and landing on my hand. They dashed off as I sat there, examining the grass stains on my good 501s. What made the whole thing worse was that only a minute before, Seth, wide-eyed and out of breath, had grabbed me in front of the garage and announced like a pubescent Paul Revere, “The girls are Frenching, the girls are Frenching!”

Wilco wafted through the speakers and I turned to see Melinda by the stereo. Nursing my minor wound, I straightened up, forced a smile, and headed over. “Author, author!” I yelled, giving her a hug. “That was
phenomenal."

“Thank you so much for coming!” she said, hugging me back. “Oh, hey, sorry, I almost crushed you!” She bounced up and down on her toes. “Really, you liked it?”

I nodded. “Loved it. I’ve never been more impressed, Mel. I couldn’t imagine doing something like that.”

“Shut up, you could do it. You just make up stuff and type it.”

“Sounds hard. Besides, I’ve been busy at JB’s—you’ll never guess what happened after you left!” I said, like an excited kindergartner.

Over a few drinks I proceeded to tell her the story of the dancing little people, which somehow devolved into us calling them tiny dancers, which somehow devolved into our combing through Jon’s CD collection until we found Elton John’s Greatest Hits Volume II, cranking up the stereo, and singing along to “Tiny Dancer” at the top of our lungs. It was kind of like that scene in Almost Famous, except they were rock gods on a tour bus and we were drunk idiots in an apartment. If I was someone else at the party, I would have hated us. But I was me. And I loved us. Hell, I was ready for an encore. Levon likes his money.

I didn’t hang out much later after the sing-along. Melinda was the star and she had a lot of people to attend to. I was tired and a bit fucked up, and I didn’t really know many people there. I saw the VP girl flirting with some tall dude in khakis and figured it was a sign to call it a night.

I headed home, stopping off on the way at my local bodega, Andy’s Deli. It was funny that it was “Andy’s,” as every person who worked there was of some kind of Indian or Bangladeshi descent. I said hello to the night guy, a twentysomething Indian immigrant who went by the name “Bobby” and had pretty much only seen me when I was drunk. Once again, I did not disappoint.

“Bobby, good evening to you!” I said, reeling through the door and making my way toward the glass fridges in the back. He was behind the counter, looking through a magazine whose masthead read INTERNATIONAL ASS PARTY. He slapped it shut and slid it under the counter.

“Hi, Boss! Why no girl tonight, where is your girlfriend?” Bobby had this great wide smile; he was always happy, even though he had to work such crap hours. I didn’t really know him and he didn’t really know me, but I was pretty sure we were best friends forever. I probably wasn’t the only late-night partier who thought that, though.

I grabbed a Canada Dry ginger ale out of the fridge and a Whatchamacallit from the counter. I didn’t even know they were still making Whatchamacallits, but you had to admit: It may not have been a very good candy bar, but it had one hell of a name. And I decided to vote for it with my dollars.

“Just this, my friend?” asked Bobby, ringing me up.

“Yup. You know, I was just thinking. It’s funny. I’ve only ever seen you here at work. You’d think we would have bumped into each other on the street by now.” I handed him a fiver.

“Someday, someday! You are drunk, yes?”

“No. Never touch the stuff.” A smile snuck out of my nose, swiveled into place, and gave me away.

He pointed at me and laughed. “Yes, yes you are! Most people who come in here after midnight are drunk. You are always nice, though. Some people are very bad. They smoke in store, they yell.” He gave me back a couple of bucks.

“I’m sorry. People suck,” I said, shrugging as if I had just imparted some grand piece of wisdom. I backed out of the deli. “Have a good night, Bobby, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Boss.” Bobby smiled at me. “Do not vomit I hope!”
I made my way up my three flights. I wondered how Melinda knew she wanted to be a playwright; it seemed like it must have been all she ever wanted to do. I wondered if the VP had found someone worthy—perhaps even scored an SVP—and was now contemplating a merger. I unlocked my door, washed my face, brushed my teeth, took three Advil, got into bed with my ginger ale and candy bar, and turned off the lights to be alone with my shame.

I had just crumpled up the candy wrapper and thrown it onto the floor when I heard a text message come in. I was still sort of awake, so I shuffled over to the coffee table where I left the phone and checked it.

u up? janey

I scratched my head and smiled. The clock on the microwave read 12:47. Sure, I could be up.
Twenty minutes later I found myself in the women’s bathroom of Tom’s, some bar in Nolita, sharing a joint with Jane. She had been out for a while and had the slur to prove it. The second I walked in she dragged me by my hand to the ladies’ room, whispering, “C’mon handsome, let’s get high.” I was a bit taken aback at first—she was quite aggressive. She still wore the glasses but her hair was out from the pigtails and she looked pretty damn sexy in a short bright-blue skirt and a white wife-beater tank top. Her nipples, like the built-in thermometers in Perdue Oven Stuffer Roasters, were declaring, “Chicken’s ready!”

Jane handed me the joint after taking a long pull, and before I could put it to my lips she put her mouth next to mine and blew the smoke in. It was a sexy move and Petey instantly improved his posture.

“What’s your name again?” she, I hoped, joked.

“Jason.” I sucked on the joint. “Some call me Adonis.”

She giggled. “So who are you really, Jason? C’mon, you’re obviously not an orthodontist. What do you do in our city?”

“I kiss girls in bathrooms.”

We started to make out for a second, then she pulled away and squinted at me. “No, really, what do you do?” We stood a few feet from each other, in front of the sink. Someone pounded at the door, and we ignored it.

“I work in casting, you know, for films and commercials and stuff.”

“So, are you like a casting director?”

“Kinda.” I scratched my nose. “Well, you know, I assist the director. And what about you? What exactly do you do?” I realized I had no idea.

“I’m a buyer for a toy company. I source stuff from China and the Far East that we think we could sell here.” The knocking began again.

“Oh, that sounds fun.”

“Kinda.” She stubbed out the joint in the sink. “Well, now that that’s resolved…” She moved in and kissed me sloppily. Her hand trailed down my stomach and grabbed Petey through my pants. Instantly I was as hard as a left turn in Midtown. I slipped my hand up her skirt. No underwear. Or pubic hair, for that matter. What a difference a day made.

“Not here,” she said suddenly, straightening her skirt. “Too cheesy.” Then she took my wet finger that had just been inside her and licked it sensuously. We opened the bathroom door and stepped out past a girl who glared at us.

Miss Manners and I hopped into a cab and pointed it west toward my apartment. She had my jeans unbuttoned and her tongue in my mouth. A radio sports reporter jabbered at us through the lone rear speaker—the Knicks had lost again. Jane suddenly jerked away. “Hang on, what time is it?” she asked, looking up through the partition to the radio. “Shit, it’s almost two! I can’t go to your place. I’m sorry, I have to get up early tomorrow for a really big presentation I’m giving.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be fast,” I said, leaning in to continue the kissing. “You won’t even remember it.”

She avoided my lips. “No, I can’t. I’m sorry, I totally spaced. I have to be on the ball, it’s a huge meeting! You
know how those are."

Oh yeah, I hated those. The driver switched the station to some percussive Tito Puente number I couldn’t put my finger on. “C’mon, we’re almost there. You’ll sleep over, there’ll be pancakes and a full continental breakfast.”

“I can’t sleep over! I have no clothes.” She thought for a moment. “Okay, what if I, uh, ‘take care of you’ before we get to your place? Then I can drop you and take this cab straight home.”

Good sport that I was…

The mambo music pulsed as she went down on me with a fury. What a motivated little worker she was. I looked out the window at the bleary lights while she did her voodoo. I watched people in suits trudging home from late nights at the office, others I could see in all-night restaurant windows eating, laughing. A girl smoked a cigarette lazily, leaning against a parking meter. An old man with too-short pants lumbered along while his tiny dog pranced near his white-socked ankles. Something was happening in every nook and cranny of the city. Even the two of us in this cab, we were part of it. I looked down at Jane, her head pumping up and down, one hand up her skirt, fiddling about. I was quite enjoying my particular nook and cranny, I wouldn’t trade it. I opened the window and let in the breeze, the sound of the streets overtaking Tito. We weren’t that far from my apartment, only about two avenues and five blocks. I leaned back and closed my eyes against the wind.

Stopped at a light only a block from my house, I came. She skillfully milked every last drop from me: a mess-free operation. Clearly she had done this before. The driver pulled over as I quickly buttoned my jeans. I caught a glance of his tired eyes in the mirror and looked away.

“That was fucking hot.” She smiled, and we hugged good night. I slid across the seat and out of the cab.

“Hey!” she said out the window. “I think you better at least split this ride with me, don’t you think?” I laughed, and pulled out my wallet. I had two dollars.

I held them up to her. “Shit,” I frowned. “Sorry.”

Jane grabbed them and fumbled through her bag. “Fuck, I only have five myself.” She handed all of our cash to the driver and got out of the car, grinning. “Looks like you got yourself a slumber party.”

* * * * *

A

fter a stop at the cash machine we quickly got ready for bed. Jane made me set the alarm for six, which I was fairly unenthused about, because she had to go home first thing and put on her “meeting outfit.” We rubbed each other all over but neither of us was up for round two. I wasn’t a real fan of round two; if you did it right, in my opinion, once was more than enough. We put our eyeglasses next to each other on the nightstand and spooned for warmth. Jane made a joke about me “owing her one” and gently tangled her leg between mine. I could hardly keep my eyes open. We lay still, and I started drifting off.

“Do you think I’m a slut because I texted you for sex?” Jane whispered in my ear.

I turned over so we were nose to nose. “Only in the best, most positive way.”

She smiled. Her teeth were like Chiclets. I sort of wanted to touch them. She propped herself up on her arm. “So, there’s good sluts and bad sluts?”

“Sluts are people too, sweetie. There’s all kinds.” I yawned, and covered my mouth. “Ooh—sorry.”

Jane yawned back, and then lay down against me. “I’m glad you checked your phone, cowboy,” she said, taking my hand.
“Me too,” I said. “I was happy to hear from you.”

She kissed me softly on the mouth. We whispered good night and I sank into the pillow.

The next thing I knew the clock radio was blaring. Apparently, it was raining men. I slapped the thing silly until it stopped. Jane was up like a shot and into the bathroom. I heard tinkling and the balling of toilet paper followed by a flush and the slurping of water from the tap. She reemerged.

“Hey,” she whispered. “Can I borrow these pants?” I rolled over to see her wearing my favorite pair of Dickies, ones I’d had forever, made supersoft by thousands of washings. Despite the small white paint splotch I had gotten on the hem of the left leg (from sloppily painting the apartment—like father, like son), they were a key player in the very limited trouser rotation of new jeans, old jeans, old Dickies that I relied on. “Just to get home,” Jane explained. “I don’t want to wear my skirt right now, it feels too cold.” She turned around and wiggled her ass at me.

“Sure,” I croaked. I closed my eyes again. I heard some more getting-ready noises, and then warm lips pressed against my forehead and I opened one eye wide enough to see Jane and my pants quietly make their exit.
The week flew by, and to paraphrase Ray Davies, “I wished I was a different guy—different friends and a new set of clothes.” Well, that wasn’t really true; I had spent a good amount of time breaking in both and was quite content with them.

It was now Saturday morning. I lay with the pillow over my head, trying to block the sun out for at least another hour. I had just awoken from my recurring Godfather dream, wherein I made love to two hairless Sicilian girls who, after I finished pleasing them, plied me with decadent desserts. “Tiramisu, signore?” they’d giggle. “Profiterole?”

The ringing of my home phone shattered my sleep plans. Jesus, who called my home number anymore? Four agonizing rings later I got the answer as the machine picked up. BEEP. “Jason. It’s Stacey. Are you there? Are you sleeping? Is someone sleeping with you? Yeah, didn’t think so. Just kidding! I’m getting sick of the phone tag, so when you get up, call me. I really need to talk to you, call my cell.”

It was closing in on eleven, so I got out of bed and let the poison drain out of my system. Then I curled up on the couch with the phone, dialed, and caught Stacey on her way to the gym. We decided to meet for brunch at twelve-thirty so I could hear the giant secret that had apparently taken Manhattan by storm.

Since she was exercising, I decided to do some myself. Hell, I was hoping to be seen naked again soon—Jane wasn’t exactly a prude. Although I was thinking maybe we should grab dinner the next time we hung out, you know, something somewhat normal before the next sexplosion. I pulled off my shirt and did three sets of push-ups, three sets of sit-ups, and three sets of curls with the dumbbells I kept in my one itty-bitty closet. I had calculated my square footage at about three hundred, so I guess the closet wasn’t as much tiny as it was proportional. I managed to work up a bit of a sweat lifting, so I showered, bringing a cold glass of water in with me for hydrating purposes.

At a quarter to noon I exited my apartment and ran into Patty, my neighbor from across the hall, who was coming back from the grocery store, her numerous white plastic bags a dead giveaway. She had a red bandanna tied around her head Aunt Jemima–style, and a weird-looking cigar/twig in her mouth. Or maybe it was some sort of sugarcane. Hard to tell. I helped her get her stuff inside her apartment.

This was a groundbreaking moment. I’d never seen the inside of her place; by her low rent I figured she must’ve lived there thirty years, and I was dying to see what it looked like. I stepped inside carrying two bags. Her door opened right into the kitchen. Disappointingly, the kitchen didn’t reveal much—it was pretty much identical to mine, just flipped, and cleaner. She had a bunch of magnets on her fridge; one big one in the middle was an illustration of a cowboy on a bronco with the words WYOMING IS BUCKING AWESOME!

“Nice magnet,” I said, putting the bags on the counter. “Have you been to Wyoming?”

“Been there?” She started to empty one of them. “I escaped from there. Don’t get me wrong, it’s great if you like cattle, or beef jerky or Republicans. But if you don’t, just fly over and see it out the window.” She put some bottles of tonic water on top of the fridge. “Anywho, so how’s life, neighbor?”

“All’s pretty good, I guess,” I said, putting the last bag on the counter. “Just working, playing. You?”

“Oh me, who cares? I’m old and boring.” She gathered up the empty bags and stuffed them in the cabinet under the sink. “But I expect more from you. Details, stories! These are the years you get all that stuff, don’t you know that? Then you spend the rest of your life looking back at the so-called good ol’ days.”

“That’s um, a little depressing, Patty,” I said with an “I’m just kidding” smile. I could tell her some stories, all right, but they weren’t the PG-13 kind you shared with your older neighbor. Maybe they’d bore her anyway, if she really lived the bon vivant life I pictured.
“Oh, you didn’t know that about me?” she laughed. “I’m a huge buzzkill. I fear it might become my defining
characteristic.” She reached into the fridge. “Want some OJ? It’s fresh, I just got it at the farmers’ market.”

I saw by the clock on her microwave that I was going to be late, and Stacey was punctual as hell. I edged toward
the door. “I’m actually meeting a friend for lunch who has some big secret to tell me. I should probably get going.”

Patty finished pouring herself some juice and took a sip. “Big secret, huh? I hope it’s something good!” She
started coughing. She put the glass on the counter and leaned against it as she hacked, doubling over with the
strength of it. I could hear large wet things flying around inside her, like mattresses in a hurricane.

“Whoa, hey, you okay there?” I asked.

Her eyes were watery. “Oh yeah, phew.” She smiled thinly, caught her breath, and turned away from me. “Wrong
pipe.”

I met Stacey at a diner that was sort of halfway between our homes. She and Eric lived in Murray Hill, a
neighborhood that was bland by NYC standards. I didn’t like Murray Hill much. First off, bad name. Also, and
maybe this was the bigger issue, people from Murray Hill—or people who seemed like they could be from Murray
Hill (it had become a symbol to me more than an actual place)—tended to come down to my neighborhood en masse
and take all the seats at the good restaurants. Thursday to Sunday, there was literally nowhere I could afford to eat
that didn’t have at least an hour’s wait. These Murray Hillers and their ilk had subscriptions to *Time Out*
and they
were good at calling ahead and making plans. They could not be stopped.

We grabbed a table by the window, made fast work with the menus, and got our orders in; we were both starving.
Only once our respective Diet Cokes arrived, and with them the assurance that the system worked, were we able to
relax and begin talking.

Stacey had her brown hair pulled back in a post-workout ponytail, a few stray wisps hanging above her eyes. She
unwrapped the scarf that hung loosely around her neck, revealing an NYU Law sweatshirt; she was in her third year
there. Eric was a resident at Cornell Med, which was located in the city, uptown. They were on the cusp of being a
power couple. Soon they could help me with any legal troubles I might have, and with any social diseases I might
stumble upon. They were going to be Number One on the speed dial.

“You’re so proud of your law school,” I said teasingly, pointing to her sweatshirt.

“Yeah, that’s why I wear it to the gym and sweat on it,” she laughed. She brought her straw to her lips and took a
long sip of her Diet Coke. “So do you want to talk about things and stuff, or do you want to get right to it?”

“I guess right to it,” I said, glancing hopefully toward the kitchen. “With a five-minute break when the food
arrives when there shall be no talking, only eating and digesting. Nothing is that new with me anyway, although
thank God, the slump is over.”

“Yay! So who is she, do you like her?”

“Her name is Jane. Sure, I like her fine, I guess, but it’s a little early for all that, Stace. We’ve only”—I made air
quotes—“‘gone out’ twice. And actually, I wrote her Tuesday to see how this big meeting of hers went, and I
haven’t heard back yet.”

Stacey wrinkled her brow. “Tuesday? Eh, I wouldn’t worry about it, I’m sure she’ll call soon. Anyway, I’m glad
at least you have a ‘good possibility.’” She knocked wood. “Oh hey, whatever happened with Scott?”

Scott Langford, fuck. He was a guy from Cornell who I was never really friends with, but we knew each other. He
went to Columbia Journalism straight from college and was now an editor at *Fader* magazine. Stacey had run into
him at some gallery and had thought he’d be a good person for me to contact. She even got his e-mail for me.

“I uh, I haven’t gotten in touch with him yet, actually.” I mock-cringed and held my hands in front of my face. “Don’t hit me!”

“Jason! C’mon, that was like a month ago. You need to write him.”

“I know, I know. I will.”

She gave me her stern Stacey look. “Just do it today, when you get home.”

“I will. For sure.” I played with the white paper wrapper from my straw, twisting it around my finger. “But that’s not why you called me here today, I take it.”

“No.” She leaned across the table, serious. “Okay, how long have we been friends, Jason—like seven years now, right?”

I nodded. We had met the first day of freshman year, which was sadly that long ago. I wondered what I’d been wearing. It’s funny, it was probably a huge deal, my first-day-of-college outfit choice, and yet I couldn’t even remember it.

“It’s crazy, right? I’ve known you longer than I’ve known Eric even. And he considers you as good a friend as I do, which I hope you know.”

“That’s nice. I feel the same way.”

“Yeah, but if it came down to it, you’re my friend first, right?” She smiled and winked. She was a big winker.

“Sure. I mean, by a couple of days.” Behind Stacey’s head I saw our waiter walking toward us with two plates of food. But then he continued past, damn it. The digestive juices in my stomach were bubbling like a witch’s cauldron.

“Those days count,” Stacey said, winking again. “Anyway, Eric really wanted to come today but he had a rotation. We both love you, you are so important to us, and um, we wanted to ask a big favor of you, for the wedding.”

“Am I going to be the best man?” I asked. “That’d be pretty cool. I get to make the embarrassing toast! Yes!” Eric and I weren’t crazy close, but I knew he didn’t have a ton of guy friends.

“No, actually, Eric’s brother Jeff and my brother are going to be co–best men.”

“That’s nice.” I wrinkled my forehead, confused. “So, what can I do for you guys then? I can usher. I’m pretty good at ushering.”

She took another sip of soda. “Okay, here goes. You introduced us. You get all the credit for that.”

True, although it wasn’t like I was a matchmaker or anything. Stacey had lived in my dorm, and Eric was in my geology class. It was supposed to be “rocks for jocks” but was one of the most difficult classes I had taken in college; in retrospect I’m sure the professor was fuming to himself, “Gut course, eh? I’ll show you!” I’d sat next to Eric a few times and we’d become friendly. He was a junior when we were freshmen, but it was never an issue. He came over to my dorm one night to study for the midterm and Stacey popped in to say hi. He thought she was “intriguing,” so the next time there was a party I made sure they were both there. Cut to fireworks and cherubs and lush string music.

“You brought us together, and we were thinking it would be really nice if you could bring us together again, officially. What I’m trying to say is, we’d be honored if you, Jason, would officiate at our wedding.”

The waiter clanked our dishes on the table. “The spinach omelet is for the lady, and the bacon cheeseburger is for ___”
“The rabbi,” Stacey said.

After a few silent bites, Stacey explained that since neither of them was really religious, they didn’t care if they had a real rabbi marry them. It wasn’t like they knew any, and they didn’t want to just hire some stranger. Apparently, it was fairly easy for someone like me to get the necessary paperwork to be able to perform the ceremony. The fact was that once they got the wedding license from the state they were legally married; the ceremony was just, well, ceremonial. Stacey, ever thorough, slid across the table a very thick packet of printouts she had culled from various sources. Some were testimonials from other amateur ministers who had had a “joyous” experience, others were essays from wedding sites that explained what made for a good wedding ceremony and what did not. Most important were the ones that explained exactly what I would need to do, which basically entailed going to an Internet site, filling out forms, and becoming something called a “Universal Life Minister.” This title legally allowed me to sign the civil license and send it in to the state for official processing. And although it wasn’t required, Stacey and Eric also wanted me to take a two-session class (that they’d pay for) at a temple where I’d learn how to structure a ceremony and incorporate some Jewish traditions within it.

As I leafed through the documents and she went on and on and on about how she saw the whole event playing out, I began to feel a little overwhelmed. I knew this was an honor and all, but like in the army, honor usually required great sacrifice, and I started to feel a little concerned about what I was getting myself into.

But of course I nodded along in all the right places and smiled and hugged her and quickly agreed to it. How couldn’t I? I mean, was there some way I couldn’t?

From the look on Stacey’s face, not really.

** * * * *

It was Saturday night. It was on.

I stood with Tina in the corner of a bar on Avenue B and Seventh Street, cleverly called 7B. We each had a belly full of whiskey and a brain full of THC. Plus, to stay awake, we had been snorting Ritalin; I don’t think it was curing our adult attention deficit disorder, though, as our conversational skills were now based on tangents, non sequiturs, and epithets. We were shattered and threatening to leave but had full drinks and were firmly planted with a good view of the bar. It was full of twentysomething downtowners in assorted stylish smocks. It was a little like looking into a mirror, but somehow we believed we were far more genuine than the others. You couldn’t trust the others. They looked like us and they talked like us, but at night, they went home and slept in pods. You could just tell. Not us. We had beds.

Tina had been calling me Rebbe Goodgirl all night, after I told her the secret was out. I had been calling her a filthy whore, but it was falling flat. I was still feeling a bit weirded out by Stacey’s request, and it was buzzing around the back of my brain like a fly trapped in a car. Stacey and I had been really tight at school, and I still counted her as one of my closest friends. Yet over the last few years, and even more so recently, we had begun to drift apart. Things were changing. Maybe it was because Eric was older, but Stacey was really into acting grown-up and hosting the kind of dinner parties where the cutlery matched and you sipped (never swigged) wine and played Pictionary and people were couples and the conversation veered to serious but boring topics like accountants and buying an apartment versus renting one. After a while everyone started to sound like Charlie Brown’s teacher to me. I just felt like Stacey and Eric, and some of their new friends, were rushing to leave youth behind and become adults. They could not wait to take on the next phase of responsibility. “Give it to us!” they yelled. “We have broad shoulders!” It was just so goddamn dull. So the truth was, we didn’t get together nearly as much as we used to. But I did love them, I really did. They just scared me sometimes.

Before the onslaught of toxins on the brain rendered me speechless, I voiced my doubts to Tina about the rabbi thing. She was quite supportive. She put her hand on my shoulder and said, sincerely, “You, sir, are fucked.” Then she laughed, “I’m joking, but it’s a huge responsibility, no question. It’s her wedding, you have to be prepared and go into it knowing it’s the most important day in her life. You cannot be the one to fuck it up. I’m so happy for
them, but...the hell if I’d want to do it! I mean, you know Stacey, she’s going to have like over three hundred people there, her grandparents are coming from Germany, she has like twelve bridesmaids, blah blah blah. And she’s very, what’s the word...particular.”

“Oh, I’m feeling way less anxious about it now, thanks,” I said. I scratched my head. “Why do you think she wanted me to do it?”

“Because of what she told you, you introduced them and all. It sounds silly, but girls are really queer like that, trust me. And you’re funny, and you’ll make the ceremony fun, and she wants it to be really special, not just some other wedding. You’ll be great. By the way, I have to listen to her talk about this all the fucking time, you’re only just getting sucked in now. I’ve already heard her treatise on ‘band versus DJ.’”

I groaned.

Finding out you were to stand as a rabbi in front of three hundred people, some from Europe, and fuse two friends together for life required somewhere around thirteen drinks—a true bar mitzvah–style drunk—and Tina and I had been doing our best to reach that magic number. The good people at 7B were obliging. It was your classic East Village joint, the kind of non-theme bar that was getting harder to find—local acts like the Bouncing Souls and the Liars on the jukebox, a couple of slimy pinball machines, tattooed bartenders whose bands were playing somewhere sometime soon—and if those reasons weren’t enough to buy a pint, 7B was also the bar in Crocodile Dundee, the film in which Paul Hogan mouthed the famous words that defined a generation: “That’s not a knife. THAT’s a knife.”

Tina was single too, although she had met some guy a week or two before who she had “a feeling” about. But as with Jane and me, she hadn’t hung out with him sober and during daylight hours yet, and basically until that happened it could really go either way. The right drugs helped you tolerate the not-so-tolerable, and Tina always had the right drugs. Stacey once told us that one of the best parts of being in a relationship was that you could go home before you were too wasted or too exhausted. There was nothing to stay out late for, to have that one regrettable drink for. That was my favorite one, though, the uh-oh one, the crossover. The one that made you teeter between being fucking brilliant and dangerously out of line. Stacey’s pro-relationship comment was meant to sound nice and comforting, but it lacked the whole reason bars existed. Possibilities.

I told Tina all about my second encounter with shy, reserved Jane. She told me I could expect a cold sore in four to six days. She started texting someone about something and so I made my way to the men’s room, bumping into more people than I should have. I was shivering with intoxicants. 7B’s bathroom was a little cozy for more than one person, but as there was a line, people were crowding in two at a time, sometimes three, with the odd man out taking the sink. Classless. I eventually took my turn at the overflowing urinal with the “My unicorn could kick your unicorn’s ass” graffiti written on the yellowing porcelain. Next to me was the filthiest toilet I had ever seen, one I could only describe as an absolute pit of despair. Someone had some serious digestive issues.

I got back to Tina and took my place next to her.

“Where were you, you fat piece of shit?” she asked, smiling dangerously.

“Spike Jonze is back there. He said he liked my sneakers but he hated my shirt. I think he wanted to kiss me, maybe. It was weird. I felt ‘a vibe.’”

“And you let him get away with that? Where is he?”

“No, it’s cool—I broke a mug across his jaw. He’s fucked forever. He left bloody and crying.”

She pulled the lemon from her drink and tossed it onto the floor. “That reminds me, I just figured out a new band name for myself, if I ever have a band.” We both continued absentmindedly sipping our drinks and staring out at the people. I felt like they couldn’t see us, like it was TV and it only worked one way.

“What is it?”

“Daddy’s Stabbing Mommy.”
“I don’t get it.”

“You know, like when a little kid walks in on his parents having sex and yells, ‘Daddy’s stabbing Mommy!’”

“You’re retarded,” I said, grinning.

She pointed at a stain on my shirt. “And you’re a sad little rabbi with a dirty tallith.” She turned her head and yawned loudly. “I think I need to go home. I’m going to have a massive bout of The Fear in the morning, I’m a fucking mess.” She was. She looked like a smeared version of herself. Or maybe that was because I couldn’t see straight. “Plus, Brett just texted me that he’s downtown. I just might let him take me upstairs and give me a foot massage.”

“We need to give that guy a nickname. Brett, that’s just sort of…not descriptive.”

“Okay, ‘Jason.’ He has a big dick, maybe you can come up with something from that,” she said, laughing. “He does, though—seriously.” She reached out and put her glass on the edge of someone’s table. Then she put her hand up to them and waved. “Enjoy the veal, good night.” She turned back to me. “Want to walk out with me?”

“Um, I think I’m gonna finish my drink. But it was fun, right? It was the best night ever?”

“Totally awesome, I can’t wait to go home and write about it in my dream journal.” Tina straightened herself out and threw on her jacket. “Don’t stay out too late, Rabbi,” she said, wagging a finger, then turned and began parting bodies on her way toward the door.

It only took four more swallows and a burning feeling in my eyes for me to realize it was high time to away to my bed. I checked my phone but there was nothing, zip. I fingered the buttons, considered texting Jane, but caught myself. I stumbled outside, gave some paper from my pocket to an exotic-smelling man with a yellow car, and soon I was home and asleep.
After the debacle at Seth Strasser’s sixth-grade birthday party, it looked like it was going to be one long tongue-less summer for me. My hopes weren’t high when I attended a pool party at Carol’s house in mid-July. It was a classic hot summer day, and while other kids flirted awkwardly on the grass, I horsed around in the water, playing some game that was a combination of water polo and kill-the-guy-with-the-ball. Misty Blank swam over to me. Misty had an identical twin sister, Christy, but they went to private school so we didn’t see them very often. That only made them all the more attractive to the boys; in our eyes the two blond sisters were both miniature Pam Andersons. I couldn’t really tell them apart; I only knew it was Misty from the “MB” monogrammed on her one-piece.

“Hi, Jason.”

“Hi.”

She scratched her nose. “My sister likes you if you like her first.”

“Really?”

“Yuh-huh. So?”

I shrugged. “I like her first, I guess.”

She swam away. Ten minutes later I was out of the pool, picking through some salty Ruffles and Lipton onion-soup dip when Christy, in a “CB”-initialed suit, flip-flopped over.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Do you want to go for a walk in the woods?”

Barefoot, I followed her into the suburban-grade forest that marked the edge of Carol’s lawn, the twigs biting into my tender feet. Despite the pain, I had enough of a grasp of manhood to know you didn’t scream “Ow!” when you were oh-so-close. We were both still wet from the pool, and Christy’s blond hair was dripping water down her back. We stopped by a tree. Christy leaned against it.

“Ever kiss anyone?” she asked me. She took a piece of gum out of her mouth and chucked it clumsily, the weird mechanics of a girl throw. It went six feet and hit the dirt.

“Uh-huh, sure.”

It was cold there in the shade and I was shivering a bit. She put her closed lips up to mine. We stood stone still, lips stiff, hands hanging dumbly at our sides, like Siamese twins attached at the mouth. I opened my eyes and saw that hers were open too, so I quickly clamped mine shut again. I felt something on my lips. It was her tiny pink tongue, and it pried my mouth open and then it was inside. It was all warm and minty and it was official, I was French-kissing. More than anything sexual, I remember feeling relief. I had finally reached first base.

Back then, the girls really took the lead. But things seemed to have changed over the years. The girls just didn’t seem to chase the boys all that much anymore. Or at least my girl Jane wasn’t chasing me. It was now a week and a half since she had slept over, and I hadn’t heard a peep from her. I had even texted her late Wednesday night after another bout of debauchery with Tina, “My turn—u up?” No response. I tried to rationalize that maybe she had gone to China or something for work, but in my head that annoying “Nah nah nah nah, hey, hey, hey—good-bye” song was playing. Repeatedly. It was just plain weird that she hadn’t gotten back to me; I mean, I didn’t remember
completely blowing it. In fact, I thought it had gone sort of well.

It was nearing eleven on Friday and I was sitting at the receptionist’s desk at JB’s. The office was slow and so was the news online. I checked my e-mail every eighteen seconds, looking for something interesting, spam, anything. I watched the clock tick and tick. Melinda was running errands all morning, so I was stuck there all alone for the next couple of hours. I thought about my options. I could maybe start in on a rubber band ball; JB had one on his desk that was fairly impressive. Perhaps I could top it. Or I could make a paper-clip chain of ludicrous length—a paper-clip jump rope, even. God, I was bored. Maybe I could slip out and get high and eat a wheel of cheese. I just wished something would happen, anything. The worst feelings in the world were boredom and nausea. But at least when you were nauseated, you didn’t have the feeling you were wasting your time.

I had nothing else to do, so I figured what the fuck and shot Jane another e-mail. She was on my brain, and my brain controlled the fingers that started jabbing at the keyboard. Hell, one more e-mail couldn’t really make matters any worse at this point. And if I went zero for three, then I’d at least know it was officially kaput.

Hey Jane,

Woke up this morning and went to put on my Dickies and then I remembered—hey…you have them! Give me a shout and let’s catch up, make a plan. I have other clothing items that will fit you fantastically…

Mr. Giggles

I hit SEND and then began composing an e-mail to my folks. We were pretty bad at staying in touch; even in college I’d go weeks at a time without speaking to them. My mom liked to think of it as a genetic flaw in the family: We were all self-sufficient to the point of negligence. I caught them up on the news I thought they’d be most interested in: my imminent role as rabbi. They had actually met Stacey and Eric on a visit out to Cornell. “Your son is finally a rabbi, Mom, just like you always dreamed!” I joked. We weren’t a very religious family, to say the least. Judaism was, for us, more Woody Allen, less Abraham and Esther. I had been bar mitzvahed and all that, but at the time it was really just about getting heaps of gifts and playing “Coke and Pepsi.” We never, ever went to services; to me temple seemed like a building where men went to show off their new cars and women their new dresses and jewelry. Our cantor had even had an affair with a woman from the congregation. Now he owned a Mercury dealership on the way to the airport.

I shot off a few more e-mails to friends; maybe I could have lunch with someone or at least make plans for the weekend. It wasn’t like I was changing the world at JB’s—just the toner. Nights held a lot more interest.

I yawned and looked over at the office clock again. It had hardly moved. I forced myself to try to do something productive. I scrolled back in time until I spotted Stacey’s e-mail with Scott Langford’s info in it, and took a crack.

Scott—

Hi, it’s Jason Strider from Cornell. Hope all is well with you.

I heard through the Cornell grapevine that you landed at Fader—major congrats on that! Don’t worry, I’m not writing for a free subscription. (Although, if you can give them out easily…) But, I was wondering if you had any inkling how one could apply to be a music reviewer there?

I doubt you’d remember, but I DJ’d up at school. It was an eclectic show called “The Mostly Phenomenal and Fully Enjoyable Jason Strider Power Hour.” I played everything from the obscure experimental, like Moondog, to the ironic, Menudo. Mostly though, I focused on all things Indie. Each week I’d review several new releases, in detail, on the air.

Anyway, I’d appreciate any guidance you can offer on the reviewer thing. Thanks so much, Scott.

Go Big Red!
I looked it over and did a spell-check. It seemed to make sense. I mumbled “Fuck it,” and quickly clicked send. For a moment I had the sense of fulfillment one gets after completing a chore they’ve left undone for far too long, like doing the dishes or burying a body.

The moment passed. I leaned back in my chair and looked around. What else could I be doing right now? What would I be doing six months from now? I tried to see what my life would be like five or ten years down the road, but invariably it was impossible to see anything clearly. How did people do that? I had trouble picturing what I was going to eat for dinner.

I just didn’t want to spend the bulk of my waking hours on this planet yawning and sighing and waiting for five o’clock, all for the little bits of green paper that eventually blew out of my life and into the hands of cabdrivers, bartenders, drug dealers, and bodega cashiers. But I hadn’t found a reasonable alternative yet. And it wasn’t working at some “real” but equally uninspiring job until ten every night so I could afford more expensive jeans and double desserts. Although lately I’d thought I heard Tina mumble when picking restaurants that a certain place might be too expensive. Too expensive for me, is what she meant. There just had to be some way I could beat the system.

The computer made the duck-quack sound informing me I had a new e-mail. Jane? Langford? Nope, it was Eric. Not only was he around for lunch, he wanted to buy me lunch. He hadn’t yet seen me since I had been anointed his rabbi, and he wanted to thank me. Was I available?

Fuck yes, I was.

* * * * *

Eric and I finished up our lunch specials at the sushi place around the corner from my office and made our way back out to the street. The sun was beaming down and we basked in its warmth like sated lions; the soup, salad, and raw fish had filled us to the bursting point. Eric was really tall, I remembered now that we were standing. I always forgot his height, almost six foot five. He looked a little worn-out. He had spent lunch telling me some of the more disturbing tales of being a resident, which besides long hours and only one day off included having to touch horrible people on horrible parts of their bodies. “It’s a bit like joining a fraternity and being hazed,” he had explained. The things the ER doctors didn’t want to do, the residents got. Which, in New York, according to Eric, often involved men who took too much Viagra and needed to have the blood siphoned from their unwaveringly erect penises with a hypodermic needle. Yeah, I just didn’t like people enough to ever help them out with stuff like that. It went without saying that Eric was a far better person than I. He came from a family of surgeons—his mom, dad, and older brother. He would be one soon too; he just had to get through this penis-draining phase and on to the real work. He would; he was irritatingly patient.

Eric and I didn’t hang out one-on-one all that often, but I was always pleasantly surprised by how enjoyable it was when we did. He wasn’t caught up in a lot of the pop-culture bullshit I was, and we tended to have conversations about real things, often politics or health topics I had read about in the Times. He also wasn’t afraid to cry. I mean, he should’ve been more afraid, he was kind of a bawler. I had seen him tear up at least a half dozen times, most recently after he, Stacey, and I watched the old film Heaven Can Wait on cable. Over lunch I’d done my best Al Roker and predicted that his wedding day was going to be partly cloudy, with a passing shower of man tears.

As we stood there, faces pointed at the sun, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned my head to see a petite blond girl in a black sweater.

“Hey, Jason, how are you?” the blonde said, beaming. I knew that smile. Intimately.

“Holy shit—Annie!” We hugged. “I didn’t know you were in New York.”
“Yeah, I moved here about a year ago, I got a job at People magazine as a photo editor. I live up on the Upper West Side.” She flipped her hair. She was dressed way more stylishly than the last time I had seen her. She actually did look like a photo editor. The trendy tight sweater, fancy jeans, some kind of stylish boots. “And you? What’s your story?”

“I live in the West Village.” She made a face, as if she were impressed. “Yeah, I was really lucky, and got this great place.” I realized Eric was standing there awkwardly. “This is actually the guy who found me the place, Eric. He went to Cornell too, but he was a couple years ahead of us.”

Eric reached out his hand and shook Annie’s. “Hi, I’m old Eric.”

“Hi, nice to meet you.” Annie turned back to me. “I love the West Village, good for you,” she said, grabbing my arm. “So what else? What are you doing for work?”

“Nothing too exciting, really. Right now I just work at this casting place around the corner.” I shrugged.

“You don’t sound that into it,” she said, seeming genuinely surprised.

“Oh, you know, it’s fine.”

She fingered an earring, smiling. “When we broke up, I always had nightmares that the next time I saw you, you’d have models on your arm, a famous record producer or something,” she said.

“Oh, well, I am hugely famous in Croatia. People have posters of me there.” I laughed.

Eric excused himself and popped into a deli on the corner. Annie and I talked and caught up for five minutes and gave the brief versions of our deals, until he came back.

Annie looked at her watch. “Shoot, I better get going.” We hugged again and said our good-byes. Then Eric and I continued around the corner.

“So what was up with that girl?” he asked. “You used to date her?”

“Yeah, it was after you graduated, spring of senior year. She’s a year younger. I was working crazy hours at the fucking Sam Goody because I was saving up to go traveling, and she had a pretty easy semester. I’d close the store at ten, get home exhausted, and she’d force me to motivate. All I did that spring was re-stock CDs, smoke pot, and have sex.”

Eric opened a pack of a gum and offered me a piece. “That doesn’t suck. Annie, hmm. I feel like Stacey has mentioned her.”

I took the stick and popped it into my mouth. “That was really weird seeing her again. She was like the only ‘girlfriend’ I ever had—even if it was just a few months. What kind of gum is this?”

“It’s called bubble mint, it’s some hybrid of bubble gum and mint gum.”

“Hybrid, eh?” I grinned. “Okay, Doctor.”

“Shut up.” He blew a small bubble, pulled it back in his mouth, and cracked it. “Maybe you should have gotten her number.”

“Nah. I mean, she was a crazymaker.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It just means we drove each other crazy all the time, in good ways and in bad. It’s a chemical thing, I think. We had a lot, a lot, of screaming white-trash-type fights. We got thrown out of a bowling alley once because we were fighting over the right way to score spares, Jesus!” I laughed. “She also had a pretty bad eating disorder, which I
didn’t realize until later. She only ate baked potatoes and frozen yogurt. At the time I thought she was just ‘quirky.’”

I spat the gum into a trash can on the corner. “I’m not into it,” I said, wiping my lip.

We began walking slowly in the general direction of my office. A river of people rushed around us like we were a rock in a stream, splitting and then re-gelling on the other side. It was sunny out, but the buildings were so tall in this part of town that we were always in shadow, no matter what side of the street we walked on.

“I still say you should’ve gotten her number. Just think, you could show her how much better in bed you’ve gotten.” He slapped me on the shoulder with one of his big man-paws, and we hustled to beat the light and cross Sixth Avenue.

Eric dropped me off at the office and thanked me again for agreeing to shoulder the rabbinical duties. I took one last breath of spring air and then went upstairs, my posture immediately beginning to slouch as I passed through the entrance. It was still totally quiet. Melinda wasn’t in yet and I had no new e-mails, certainly no reply from Jane. Damn it. I checked out nytimes.com, but there was nothing interesting; apparently it was the dullest day in American history. I leaned back in my chair and cleaned my glasses on my undershirt. Maybe Eric was right. Maybe I should’ve gotten Annie’s number; even though she drove me nuts, I sort of thought I was really in love with her for a moment there. But it wasn’t love. It was some kind of unscratchable itch. It was crying three a.m. phone calls and screaming in an un-air-conditioned car at stoplights over directions and generally expending vast amounts of energy and passion playing devil’s advocate on points I really didn’t care about but couldn’t leave alone. But maybe that was love, someone who could drive you crazy, someone you couldn’t ignore even when you wanted to, who got under your skin. I mean I sure as hell wasn’t sure as hell about what “love” was. Anyway, had I gotten Annie’s number, I knew where it would eventually lead.

Beer. Intercourse. Tears.

* * * * *

Melinda never came back to the office, which meant I had to run the late-afternoon casting session. Toddlers for a Charmin commercial. After only about ten minutes I wanted to Krazy Glue the tip of my penis shut so that I’d never, ever impregnate anyone.

Kids were running around like they were on fire, crying, pulling each other’s hair, spazzing out. Each one was trailed by a mother suckling another younger child, or perhaps, in their eyes, another “gold mine.” These mothers were the worst, just the absolute worst. Their voices were so shrill they could pierce steel, the government should have considered employing them to sonically shoot down enemy missiles from the sky.

“What did I tell you, Charlemagne? Do you want to watch *Toy Story* later or not?”

“Brooklyn! Stop touching that girl!”

“Magellan, you do as that man says or I’m telling Daddy!”

All of the kids had ridiculous names like that, soap-opera-character names. There were Dakota and Blaze and Kash and Sodapop (“We both really loved *The Outsiders!*”) and D’Artagnan and Chyna and Pacifica and Charisma. Charisma—what the fuck, why not just name your kid Personality Plus? And, of course, all of the moms wanted me to know they were more than mere moms, they were also actresses. As they each approached me, their shrill commanding voices instantly softened, their thin frowns were replaced by flirty smiles and batting eyelashes. “Chyna shines when we are in scenes together. It really saves the directors a lot of time.” A sudden blast of authority. “Chyna! Quiet! Mommy’s talking!” Then back to flirty. “So”(hair-flip, stomach-in, boobs-out) “can I give you my head shot?”

The place smelled of forty kinds of fecal matter. There was a puddle in the corner and I was pretty sure it didn’t come from a juice box. A rotund ten-year-old with bushy hair sat against the far wall, away from the action. He was
chain-eating mini Snickers bars from a Halloween-sized bag, waiting for his mom and younger sibling. I got the sick feeling his folks kept him obese; he was a shoo-in for any “fat kid” role.

The only thing the toddlers had to do was smile to the camera and say “soft.” Maybe one had actually done that, the rest just started babbling or playing with the only toy we had at JB’s for sessions like these, a Fisher-Price xylophone. Cling clang clang! Cling clang clang! I was ready to shoot heroin directly into my eyes.

* * * * *

The day and the week finally came to a close, and I headed home. I stood among the zombies on a rumbling subway car that smelled of human rot. I looked around and saw the cause. A sleeping homeless man, filthy, sprawled in a seat, an open Styrofoam container filled with lo mein on his lap. The stench was awful, as if he were decomposing in front of us. He might have been, too. But no one complained. Or, for that matter, attempted to see if he needed help. We held our breath and waited for our stops, the homeless man finally snorting and coughing in his slumber, proving he was alive, probably spewing an invisible plague onto us all.

I emerged from the Germ Express and power-walked toward home. I got to my apartment, turned on an old Hank Williams album, and plopped down on my shitty green couch. Hank sang, “Yeah, my bucket’s got a hole in it. My bucket’s got a hole in it.” It was the kind of music you could make love to, or curl up in the fetal position alone and cry to. I had a lot of records like that. Ones that made you feel like you were in a movie somehow when you listened to them, like every move you made had meaning.

Back in St. Louis, my house had been a short bike ride away from the local hip used-record store/head shop, Vintage Vinyl. It became the place where I spent the majority of my allowance and where I learned all about “rock and fucking roll, dude.” It was intimidating to go in there; the music was blasting, it smelled like clove cigarettes, and there were a lot of Iron Maiden–type posters up replete with skulls and axes, all of which were frightening to a thirteen-year-old.

The first time I went in, after about ten minutes of wandering around not knowing what to look for, I placed Styx’s *Cornerstone* on the counter. I knew nothing about the band—or any band for that matter. I picked it solely based on the NICE PRICE sticker, the cool Styx logo, and the simple fact that I had been in the S section, seeing if there were any “Striders.” The cashier, wearing a skinny tie and a handful of pins on his shirt, snickered as he bagged it. I went back a week later, and as I walked past the register the same guy looked at me and sang, “Babe, I love you, ooooollllllll ooh baby.” He clapped his hands together. “You didn’t like that piece of shit, did you?” I shook my head. He asked me my name and I told him. “Okay, Jason,” he came out from around the counter. “I’m Mike. Allow me to assist you.” He led me over to rock/pop, humming something to himself. “Today’s letter is the letter ‘B.’ No reason, I’m just feeling it. Let’s see,” he said, click-clacking through the discs. “The Buzzcocks’ *Singles Going Steady,* and”—click-clack—“Bob Dylan’s *Highway 61 Revisited.*” I don’t know why they kept Bob Dylan under B, but that was their system. Whether Mike turned me on to bands or I found them on my own, I discovered all kinds of great shit in that store. It was where I first bought albums by They Might Be Giants, Built to Spill, and the Dead Milkmen just because I liked their names, only to discover when I got home that I had scored, big time. Every so often you’d see members of local bands like Uncle Tupelo and Enormous Richard (despite Tina’s efforts, Enormous Richard remained the best band name ever) in there, browsing. One time Mike was talking to this chunky guy who wore a cowboy hat and a neckerchief. It turned out to be Big Sandy, of Big Sandy and his Fly-Rite Boys. He was a Western-swing legend from California. We all got high, right in the store, back by the discount rack. On the bike ride home I swallowed about six bugs because I couldn’t get the goofy, open-mouthed grin off my face.

* * * * *

I sat there for a few minutes, decompressing, listening to Hank, thinking of nothing. I studied the ceiling. I tried to focus on only the white of it without my peripheral vision letting anything else in. It was really hard to do. I tried but
I couldn’t hold it, so I gave in and let my eyes slowly wander around my apartment. It was dusty. The late-afternoon sun streamed through the window and lit swirling particles floating in the air. Something about it made me feel like I lived inside a giant nostril. There were clusters of stuff everywhere—black-and-white photographs on the mantel, piles of CDs on the floor, take-out menus on the countertop. One cabinet was open, and I could see an old package of green tea beckoning me in the back. Tea, why not? Antioxidants might come in handy.

I boiled the water and washed a mug. I had no sugar so I poured a few drops of lemon-lime Gatorade in, the theory being that lemon and tea went together. I took a sip. The theory was proven correct. I opened my window and climbed out to the fire escape, then sat blowing on the tea as I watched people on their way home from work. It was the end of another nice spring day, it seemed a shame we’d all wasted it.

“Hi, neighbor!”

I looked to my right and there was Patty, leaning out her window. “Good evening,” I said nodding.

“Enjoying a beverage on your veranda I see,” she said. “You’re not going to jump, are you?”

“No, I love life,” I said, taking a sip of tea.

“Good, because you wouldn’t die from this height anyway. Just break your legs and embarrass yourself. But have you ever been up to the roof? A fall from there would probably be fatal.”

“That’s, uh, good to know. Just in case.”

She took a deep breath and exhaled. “Ah, it’s just beautiful out, huh?”

We stayed like that, me on the fire escape, her stretched out the window, for a few nice, peaceful moments. Then those passed, and we stayed for a few more quiet, awkward ones. She pushed her hair off her forehead and thought for a second. “Oh, hey, you totally piqued my curiosity the other day. So what was”—she deepened her voice dramatically—“‘the big secret’?”

“Oh, basically my friends want me to preside over their wedding ceremony. As like, a Universal Minister.”

She clapped her hands together and chuckled. “Oh my God, that’s funny. I mean, it’s an honor, no?”

“It is, it is. And a big responsibility.” I took another sip of my tea.

“Sure, it’s their big day.” Patty began to pull her head back inside. “Well, I’ll leave you up here to contemplate the mysteries of life, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Oh, by the way, do you know Robert Green, he lives in 2B?”

I thought for a second. “Oh, is he the guy who wears a cowboy hat sometimes?”

“Yeah. He’s a drug dealer, you know.”

“Really, that’s weird. I mean, here in the West Village?”

“There are drug dealers everywhere, silly! Don’t get excited, though; it’s nothing we’d want. He used to sell pot and give us all a bit for free, to keep us quiet I suppose. He cleaned himself up for a while, probably as long as you’ve lived here. But now…he’s selling crack. That’s the worst, those guys get bloody desperate. That’s the only reason I’m telling you, it’s not like I’m a big gossip or anything. See those guys hanging out across the street? They’re waiting for him to come home.”

There were two scraggly-looking white dudes sitting on the steps of the brownstone across the street, smoking. I guess they did look like crack addicts, it was kind of hard to tell. Still, I found it hard to believe I had a crack dealer in my building.

“It’s nothing to worry about, they won’t do anything here, they don’t want Robert busted. But you should know, just so you keep your eyes open.” She coughed her smoker’s cough. Again, you could hear the mattresses in her.
“Ahem, sorry. Hey, speaking of drugs, you wouldn’t happen to have any pot, would you?”

“Why, Patty, what ever gave you that idea?” I laughed at the unabashed question. “Has the hallway been reeking?”

“No! I mean, I’ve smelled it, but only a little. I just thought you might. If you could spare any, may I borrow a joint?” she asked, quite seriously.

“Of course, anytime. Oh, do you mean, right now?”

“No, no big rush. Now I have things to do, people to see. Boring things. But maybe I could stop over when I get back, or if you’re going out, maybe you could slide a joint under my door? I’d really owe you one.” She took a deep breath, like she was trying to eat the air, digest it. “God, these first warm days, they just sneak up on me. All of a sudden I walk outside wearing my winter coat and…it’s spring.” And with another swallow of air and a bony-armed wave, she slipped into the darkness of her apartment.

I carefully pulled my mug from where I had set it on a stair. I was done with this tea. I wasn’t much of a hot-beverage guy, to be honest. I was the only person I knew who didn’t drink coffee. Whenever I’d tell someone I didn’t drink coffee I’d get a look like I’d just said, “Mmm, puppies, delicious!” in a PETA meeting. Glancing down to make sure I wasn’t about to scald anyone fifteenth-century style, I slowly dumped the rest of the tea to the sidewalk. The pause while it fell, followed by the slap slap slap slap slap as it hit the pavement, was surprisingly fulfilling. I thought of David Letterman and his watermelons. Probably even funnier in person. I considered dropping the mug but thought better of it.

I stayed sitting there for a bit. The crack addicts gave up on Robert and walked off toward the river. I stared at the clouds hanging above the buildings across the street, looking for animal shapes. There was nothing I wanted to do but I felt like I ought to be doing something. I yawned and covered my mouth. So Jane had completely blown me off, huh? Fuck. Maybe I just wasn’t sexually experimental enough for her, maybe she was looking for a guy with an extra ball or who liked to role-play “school-bus driver/little retarded girl.” I was digging the idea of her, fine, I could admit that. I tried to think about where it might’ve gone wrong. I mean, she still had my pants; why would she have borrowed them if she knew she wasn’t ever going to call me again? It didn’t make sense.

Christ, what a whiner I was. I reminded myself that I was one lucky son-of-a-bitch living a pretty fucking cool life, and my complaints, compared to most people’s in the world, were so minimal and stupid and small it was incredible I even bothered with them. I watched as a bird landed on the tip of a lamppost across the street. It fluttered its wings, teetered, fluttered again, and finally found its balance. “That’s me,” I told myself. “I’m just like that bird.”

Then something deep inside me asserted itself. “What in the fuck are you talking about?” I muttered, then half-laughed aloud. Geez Louise. Maybe I had my period.

My phone buzzed in my pants pocket and I stood up.

“Hello?” I asked; the number was blocked. The sun was low in the sky now. I felt a little regal answering my phone outside, standing above the world, stretching. It was truly gorgeous out, what the hell was I griping about?

“Jason? It’s Tina!” She was yelling and enunciating. “What are you doing?” I could hear loud music and laughter in the background.

She was calling from a pay phone, her cell was dead. Apparently some new restaurant had opened by her apartment on the Lower East Side and was giving out free drinks and free food for the next few hours. They had a big backyard and a rockabilly band was playing. Was I or was I not man enough to haul ass over there and get in on the good times?

I crawled inside, twisted two joints, and drained a Diet Coke for strength. I swallowed three Advil with a palmful of toothpaste water. I checked myself in the mirror, stepped into the hall, locked the door, and braced myself for the night. The good times were killing me.

I slipped one of the joints under Patty’s door and was on the street in a flash. It was just as bucolic on the
pavement as it had been above it. Trees were blooming and birds were chirping and the sun began to set. It felt like this was it, the official beginning of the good weather. Patty was right, it was like spring snuck up behind me and slapped me on the back of the neck saying, “I’m here!”

I walked toward the West Fourth Street subway and inevitable inebriation. I pulled out my iPod, earphoned up, and clicked PLAY. The Vaselines’ “Son of a Gun” came on and I was happy to hear it. It was thick with distortion to start, angry as a Japanese monster, but then a catchy tune cut through and eviscerated the opening fuzz. I turned it up loud enough to drown out the rest of the Western world, loud enough to inspire tsk-tsking PSAs on tinnitus. My steps began unconsciously landing on the downbeat, my hands were slapping at my sides like they were a percussive instrument. As I crossed Seventh Avenue a sombrero perched atop a fire hydrant at the corner caught my eye. A dry cleaner pulled down the shiny new metal gate in front of his store; someone had already written “neckmeat” in black spray paint on it. There were male and female vocal parts to the song, and the Scottish girl singer had this bittersweet, nostalgic voice that made me smile and gave me a stomachache at the same time. I floated toward the train, safe in a musical bubble that none of the other New Yorkers screaming into their cell phones or setting off their car alarms could penetrate, not even a delivery guy riding his bike on the sidewalk who seemed determined to cripple me. The drums marched along at the perfect clip, and as I moved down Sixth I considered swinging from a lamppost like Gene fucking Kelly. I reached the subway entrance, fished out my MetroCard, and descended on beat into the underworld.
I got out of the subway at First and Houston and hoofed it down to Ludlow and Rivington. The Lower East Side had changed a lot just in the few years I had lived here. It went from being a slightly scary neighborhood whose only real nighttime draw was the odd rock-'n'-roll dive, to fancy new bars and cafés blooming on almost every street. And according to the alcohol-soaked rants of late-night bar prognosticators, this was only the beginning. The vintage clothing stores that gave way to the funky boutiques with new clothes would give way, eventually, to a Banana Republic. It was inevitable. The whole city would one day be a giant mall. Like everyone, I was against this sort of mallification, although I secretly looked forward to the escalators and free air-conditioning.

The restaurant Tina was at was called Old Devil. A couple made out in the entrance; I squeezed past them and into the fray that was the bar. I bumped into some guy in a cowboy hat and a T-shirt that read “Thou shalt not BlackBerry on the toilet.” He leaned in close to me, his breath flammable, and imparted, “Life ain’t nothing but bitches and money.” He had something there.

I took a look around, scanning for Tina. It was a retro, rockabilly dream inside. Someone who must’ve owned very stiff dark-blue Levi’s and a lot of pomade had dropped a big fat pile of cash to make the place look authentic—not in some Bennigan’s version of the fifties, but in a real The Wild Bunch way. Stainless-steel walls, pies under glass, red-vinyl booths, even a gas-powered Wurlitzer jukebox pumping out Jerry Lee. I dug it. I was ready to scream “Go, daddy, go!”

Tina was nowhere in sight inside. Past the bar and through a small dining room, I saw a screen door to the backyard. I stepped through it. The sun had set, and the whole yard was lit up by Christmas lights strung on the surrounding buildings that walled it in. For New York, the yard was just enormous; it had a full-on oak tree in the middle, complete with a tire swing. On one side, a couple of guys were working a large Texas-style half-barrel smoker grill; burgers and dogs were sizzling atop its flame. Across from them a three-piece rockabilly band, with even the hard-to-fit-in-a-cab stand-up bass, were ripping it up, tearing through what I was pretty sure was “Chicken Flop,” an old Hasil Adkins gem. The name of the band was on the drum, “Thee Hellcats.” They must have been Olde-English-type honkytonkers, I reckoned.

I walked past some drunken swing dancers and found Tina leaning against a brick wall, a Pabst in one hand and a paper plate with half a burger in the other. A tiny bit of ketchup dotted the corner of her mouth.

“I know what you’re thinking, Rebbe,” she said, air-kissing me near the cheek. “I usually mock the ironic popularity of shitty Pabst with the hipsters, but it’s free, and thus, I am drinking it.” She took a long pull from the metal can.

“Actually, I was thinking, ‘Wow, she’s eating the bun of her burger’ I mean, that’s a lot of carbs for a girl like you,” I said. Tina was thin; she knew it.

“Comments like that are why I vomit myself to sleep,” she said, straightening up. “Follow me to las cervezas.” As we serpentinized through the people, she asked over her shoulder, “So, what ever happened with freezerface?”

“Nothing.” I said. “Haven’t heard from her in like two weeks. And she still has my pants, my good Dickies, she borrowed them the night she slept over. Any advice on getting those back?”

“Give up. Those are on eBay by now, Papi.”

I grimaced. “But why? We’re adults, she should return them. I mean, wouldn’t you?”

“Many of my dishrags are the clothes of former lovers.”
“Great.”

Tina was drunk, and she was a dangerous drunk, like a boxer on rubbery legs who still somehow managed to counter-punch with ferocity. I followed her swagger over to a tub filled with ice and Pabst cans. I grabbed one, cracked it open, and spilled the cold liquid down my throat. I had some catching up to do.

Tina smacked her can into mine. “A toast,” she said, “to your old Dickies. I wish them well.”

“I might get them still. I was thinking of maybe giving her a call.”

“Who, the girl you fucked in your freezer, who blew you in a cab the next night, who you haven’t heard from since? Give me a break.” She let out a small burp. “Those pants have twenty different kinds of DNA on them by now.”

“Ugh,” I said. I put the beer can to my lips and drank until my teeth were numb.

Three beers and a burger later, I felt whole again. The melancholy of the day was fully flushed out of my system. The Vicodin Tina gave me probably didn’t hurt either. I mean it definitely didn’t hurt, you know, being a painkiller and all. There were things to look at, and so I did. Girls had obviously tried on every shirt and skirt in their collections before deciding what to wear for this lovely evening, and bras thankfully seemed to be forgotten on the bed. Tina needed the bathroom and I was almost there myself, so we made our way inside. Along the way I fell in love with several girls, who—through a combination of my smudged glasses, the neon lights of the bar, and a magical mix of intoxicants—seemed to glow. Goddamn New York City girls. They had sass.

The line to the restrooms was somewhat long, as it tends to be in a bar passing out free Pabst. “Tell you what,” I said to Tina. “Drinks are only free until ten, right? So you go first and I’ll head to the bar, and then I’ll go after.”

“That’s the most ingenious idea you’ve had since I met you,” she said, and leaned against the wall at the back of the line.

I burrowed my way toward the bar, which was three deep with people. Miraculously, a sliver of daylight appeared, and I was in. I smiled at the beauty of it and began the game wherein I tried to catch the bartender’s attention.

On my left, perched on stools, were two slinky little minxes, one blond, one brunette, both in jeans and those deconstructed T-shirts girls either buy or cut up themselves, the ones that show off soft shoulders and bra straps (or no bra straps) and fit just right. Girls really knew what they were doing. The little sassters were facing forward, I soon realized, trying to avoid the guy pressed behind them, a very drunk man with an un-ironic mustache in one of those button-up dress shirts that have no collar. He resembled Jeff Foxworthy. I felt like saying to him, “If two girls are ignoring you for this long and you’re still harassing them, you might be a redneck. Or, possibly…an asshole.”

I stood there, somewhat entertained, somewhat horrified, plenty drunk, possibly swaying, but for a full five minutes unable to get the bartender to acknowledge my existence.

“So come on, what’s up with you two?” Foxworthy asked. “What, do you like girls?”

The girls shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah, that’s it,” one said.

“No? Well, do you like guys?” He leaned on the blonde’s shoulder. She tried to shrug him off. “Tell me. Do you like girls, do you like guys…?”

“Do you like robots?” I turned and said to them. Popped out before I could stop it. The grapes that go ripe in the sun loosen the screws at the back of the tongue. The Clash. *London Calling*, side three. “Get the vinyl,” Mike had told me, “the lyrics are on the sleeve.”

The girls’ eyes lit up and they nodded and laughed. “Yes. We are in love with our robots, so leave us alone,” said the girl with the brown hair, turning on her stool and giving me a smile with a “thank you” built into it. If I was ever to make a movie entitled, *Cute Postgraduate Girls Who Love Indie Rock and Are Certified to Teach Pilates*, she
might star.

Foxworthy looked at me. “How ’bout you go fuck yourself?”

I should’ve had about a million witty retorts to that, it was so lame. But as this guy had, in the way that men have done throughout the centuries, instantly turned his spurned advances into hatred for another male, and stepped directly up into my piece, about all I could muster up was, “Sure. I’ll go off and do that. I’ll fuck myself real nice-like.”

“You’re a fucking wiseass,” he breathed into my face. His eyes were glazed like a bad piece of pottery. That’s when I knew it. I was going to get into a fight. I hadn’t been in one since I was sixteen. Noah Lewis, in the smoking section behind the high school. He was bigger than me, a bit of a bully, but somehow I had knocked him down, and so remained undefeated to this day. That record was in jeopardy, as this guy looked a scootch more challenging. And my glasses were not a plus. I reached in my pocket for my keys, and balled them in my fist, like I had seen in some movie.

“How about backing the fuck up?” I said, as tough as I could. I wanted to sound like a hard bastard, like they did in those British gangster movies. Like I just might glass the cunt. But I was an average lanky doofus, so it wasn’t very believable. To be a badass, I needed some sort of a twitch or scar or at least a tattoo, something.

“Make me,” he said, inching in closer. Goddamnit. I was feeling a lot more sober. I had the sudden idea that I should just step in and blast him in the face first, with my fist weighted with keys, before he could take a smack at me. Just cold-cock him before he could make a fucking move. I tightened my fist.

“Hey, asshole!” Tina had arrived out of nowhere, and was yelling at the top of her lungs at Foxworthy. So loud people started to look. He turned to face her. “Yeah, how about the next time you go to the bathroom, you don’t pee all over the fucking seat! What the fuck is wrong with you, dickhead?”

“I wasn’t even in the bathroom,” he said, holding up his hands in innocence.

“Yeah you were, fuckwad!” Tina kept aggressively screaming. “I was right behind you on line and there was fucking man-piss everywhere. Ugh! You’re a goddamn pig!” People gathered around us, curious. The tide had turned. I wasn’t going to get in a fight after all.

“You got the wrong guy. Fuck you.” He walked off, as onlookers pointed and chuckled.

Tina put her arm around my shoulders. “Who’s got your back, Papi?” she smiled.

“I was so about to kick that guy’s ass.” I grinned with relief, relaxing my arms.

“I’m sure. I didn’t want you to get arrested, though.” She yawned. “Where’re them drinks?”

Two shots of tequila, offered to us by the blonde and the brunette (I wasn’t finished with them just yet; I didn’t know what chivalry was worth these days, but I hoped with inflation it was at least up to heavy petting), were followed by several Pabst, which we were now buying with American currency. Tina’s new guy Brett arrived and we all went back outside with our drinks. Tina climbed into the tire swing and Brett gave her a gentle push. He was sporting a white belt and a complicated haircut. He was just Tina’s type—sort of good-looking, kinda rock-’n’-roll, with a pocketful of pills. I took some Percoset and slipped them in my own pocket for a rainy day.

It was really a funny scene there, outside. Who were all these people in their hip clothes, where did they all come from? It was a perfect mix of hyper-cool whites and blacks and Latinos and Asians. I felt like I was in the middle of a Benetton ad or a bad Lenny Kravitz video. My God, the effort these people were making to be super-stylish, it seemed exhausting. Sometimes I loved that everyone knew what was going on minute to minute on the pop-culture countdown, and other times I was like, enough with all this presto-chango shit, find a style and go with it. I went with the lazy/myopic look. Jeans, Converse, old shrunken Izod, glasses. Occasionally a “Kiss me, I’m Irish!” pin. Consistent and sloppy. With a wink.

Tina had fallen off the swing; now she and Brett were sprawled out on the dirt below it, cackling. She was toying
with Brett’s hair, about two minutes away from either puking or making out with him. They were like Sid and Nancy, but with 401k’s and pants from Barney’s. I wiped my forehead with the cold of the Pabst can. Suddenly I was at this party alone. I looked at my cell. Nothing.

I made my way inside, figuring I could hang out with the minxes. Perhaps I might even collect my bounty from one. I allowed myself the momentary erotic daydream of them both paying up. I had never had a threesome, but it sounded like something for the memoir. Although it was probably a little nerve-racking. There were a lot of holes and things that a guy needed to tend to in a situation like that, a lot of sexual multitasking. You had to bring your A-game.

I moved into the light of the bar—well, the light compared with the dark of the backyard anyway—and my God, was I drunk. Fuck you I was. I confirmed this by knocking over a stool, but luckily no one really seemed to notice. The key was confidence. I screwed a smile onto my face, straightened my posture, and stepped forward, trying to seem cool, unflappable, like Bogart. I wasn’t sure of Bogie’s gait, though; all I could remember was the omnipresent fedora and the hill of beans and “the Germans wore gray, you wore blue.” Man I was silly with it all. I saw the girls still in their same spots. I was probably too fucked up to be trying to touch anybody, including myself. But I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand to degrease it, and closed in.

“Ladies, may I join you?” I said like a proper prince, and pulled up a stool.

“Hi,” said the blonde. She had a name, but who could remember it? It wasn’t a sexist thing, I was just terrible with names, men or women. Dogs I did okay with. I was always preparing myself to say my own name and I forgot all about remembering theirs. I was going to order one of those late-night memory tapes someday soon. Then I’d have a system and would be pretty much unstoppable.

“Thanks again for before.” She tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

“I’m almost, I’m sort of like a hero, right?” I said, smiling. “You guys need another a drink?”

I got us another round of fucking shitty Pabst, I have no idea why I hadn’t switched off of it. I had no business having another drink anyway. No business. The brunette, whose name I’d also forgotten, excused herself to the bathroom. I debated whether or not this was a move to let me and the blonde get chummier.

“Thanks for helping me and Sue before,” she said.

Sue. One name regained. “Ah, it was nothing.”

“So…?” she said.

“So…” I said. “You don’t really like robots, do you?”

“Yeah, I do,” she laughed. “Robots are cool.”

“Sure, until they become self-aware and start replicating. Then we’re in big trouble.”

“Well, we can always just unplug them, right?”

“Oh, if only it were that easy.” I took a long pull on the Pabst. “The coming robot war, it’s going to be hell.” I grinned. She grinned back. I decided to go for it. I winked at her, charmingly goofy. “So, anyway, are you a little infatuated with me now? I mean, it’s to be expected, I am a hero.”

The blonde gave me a sad little look. “You are a hero,” she said. “But…I have a boyfriend.”

“Oh, uh, me too,” I said, leaning back on my stool, trying to recover. “But I’m not all throwing him in your face.”

Sue came back from the bathroom, interrupting at just the right moment, and pointed a finger at me. “You know what,” she said grinning wildly, obviously a little a drunk herself. “I think it was you!” Her voice started to rise. “I think it was you who peed all over the bathroom, that’s what I think!”
“That’s bullshit,” I said back, just as loud. I hopped off my stool. “I am deadly accurate, Missy. I’m like a laser.”

About a half-hour later, after the three of us had swallowed even more poison, the blonde went home to Mr. Wrong. I chatted up Sue for a few more minutes. She was all taut and pretty and wasted, her lipstick smeared in the sexiest of ways. I wanted to challenge her to a WWE-style no-holds-barred wrestling match. I wanted to plant a flag on her pubis and proclaim to the four winds, “All this territory, including the hills to the north, belongs to me.” But it wasn’t going to happen. It turned out she had a boyfriend too, a boyfriend who showed up and bought us a round. He seemed like a good guy, the bastard.

I stepped outside, defeated. I raised my hand and felt my way into a yellow vehicle. The driver deciphered my slurred speech and headed toward my apartment. Out the window, a couple held hands at a bus stop. I checked my phone, my eyes struggling to focus. No voice mail, no late-night text from Jane, nothing. I snapped it shut and jammed the piece of shit into my pocket. What the fuck, Jane? Return a fucking message. Or at least give me my goddamned pants back. My poor Dickies, they were probably balled up on the floor of her apartment right now, surrounded by stray Prozacs and the cell-phone numbers to eight other dudes like me. And maybe a severed thumb. Shit, for all I knew she was a sexual predator with a thumb fetish. I really thought she was into me too, Jesus. Was I just blinded by vagina? I traced my upper lip with my tongue. Maybe I was going to get some kind of cold sore after all.

We slowed to a stop and the cab deposited me in front of Andy’s Deli.

“Hey, Boss!” said Bobby as I came in. “How you been?”

“I feel like a hundred dollars.” I burped and stumbled and grabbed a Gatorade from the fridge. “Can I get some Advil?” I asked. Did I have any left or didn’t I? Better safe than sorry. It sure was bright in there. My retinas were en fuego.

“Oh, rough night for you, Jason, huh? How many you want—big bottle?” He held up a large size, and I nodded. “Okay. So no girl again tonight, man?”

“Why you always got to rub that in?” I slurred, fumbling through my wallet, eyes just slits. “I’m joking, Bobby, I’m a joker.”

“Oh, okay. Good night, Boss. I pray for you!”

I climbed the stairs and unlocked the door. I stumbled over to my computer and after mistyping my password twice, opened my e-mail. Booze had convinced me my mission was just.

Jane,

Well hell, I’m getting that feeling that I’m probably not gonna hear from you. That’s cool, I get it, no worries. I just want my pants back. I’d love to go out again, have a drink and get them, but if not, I still want them. You can mail them or messenger or send via carrier pigeon, whichever:

Jason Strider
99 Perry Street #3A
NY NY 10014

I hit send with the middle finger and then flopped onto my bed as fast as I could. I lay there with my jeans and shoes on and closed my eyes for a moment. Shit. I had the bad feeling. The bed began making slow rotations, so I tried the trick where you put one foot on the floor and one hand on the wall to steady yourself. It didn’t help. I was the tiny black ball and the bed was the roulette wheel. I felt a wave of hot unpleasantness wash over me. I hopped up, careened into the bathroom, dropped to my knees, and leaned on the toilet. I stared at the bottom of the bowl, where some weird yellowish film surrounded the hole, pieces of the film peeling off and floating. I gagged and considered my toothbrush resting on the sink. It was my expediter in situations like this. I wasn’t the kind of guy who wrestled with the dry heaves; if I was going to get sick, I got it over with Karen Carpenter–style. I took a deep
breath and made the call.

Fuck it. I was going to fight.

I yanked my shirt off and lay down on the cool, but filthy, tile floor. I had this theory based on stuff Eric had told me that sometimes worked, and I was hoping it would work now. The mind becomes analytical in times of crisis. The vestigial nerves run the length of the body. They cause nausea, vertigo, et cetera. The coolness of the floor and the cold sweats combined to lower body temperature, and for me, sometimes, it got rid of the nausea. I lay there while sweat poured down my face in unfathomable amounts. It stank like beer a little bit. I wiped my brow, my hair was soaked. I tried to think happy thoughts. I even thought about baby kittens I had seen romping in a pet-store window, but soon the vision turned ugly and they were scooped up in a pillowcase by a dirty little boy and tossed into a creek. Where did that come from?

After a few minutes the sweats slowed, and I began to feel better. It was amazing how once the almost-moment of vomiting passed, you suddenly felt okay again. I sat up, bits of crap embedded in my back, pulled off my shoes and pants, and then got back into bed. I had dodged the bullet. Jesus shit, I hoped I wouldn’t be a mess in the morning. Before I closed my eyes I looked at the clock; it was only two. I was going to be okay. I was. It was going to be all lollipops and rainbows from here on out. Now I just had to sleep, and maybe dream. That was it for my “to do” list. I needed to stop thinking. I put the pillow over my head and waited.
I awoke the next morning with more than a touch of The Fear. Besides some lingering queasiness, I had a pain in my head that turned the light from the window into a knitting needle to the eye. Had I almost gotten in a fight? And that e-mail, Jesus, nothing brighter than sending a late-night drunken message, moron. It couldn’t be helped: The morning was going to be filled with feelings of longing and regret. Which is why if I was a real drinker, I would’ve gone right out for some kind of mimosa pick-me-up brunch. But instead I had the Gatorade and Advil I’d left on top of the toilet, still in the brown bag from the deli.

It was a gray Saturday morning, and I was glad to see it. I didn’t need any glorious weather peer-pressuring me to get outside and enjoy the day. I wanted an egg-and-cheese on a roll and I wanted it now. I looked at the clock: ten-thirty. I wasn’t the type who could fall back to sleep. That was a gift that some people had; they could go back to sleep after waking up, or they could fall asleep in the middle seat on a packed airplane or next to a native transporting live chickens on a bus racing along a cliff in the Andes.

I got dressed and went out to the diner around the corner, the Galaxy. The theme inside was just that. On the stained wooden walls were amateurish paintings of space scenes that looked a lot like a stoned sophomore’s art-class watercolor of Dark Side of the Moon. I especially liked one over a booth in the back that showed an astronaut on what looked like an asteroid, sharing fries with an alien creature. It was painted directly on the wall, a fresco.

I went up to the counter to get my grease sandwich to go, but after I ordered I saw that I only had three dollars left in my wallet. That didn’t help those feelings of shame subside. I promised the guy I’d be back and walked down the block toward a cash machine. How much fucking money could I have dropped last night? The drinks were mostly free, dinner was free, what happened? I tried to remember how much I had started with but had no fucking idea.

There was no line at the ATM, so I stepped right up and slipped my card into the slot. The nasty fingerprint-smeared screen told me I only had $145 left in my account. And payday wasn’t until next Friday. Do-able, but not altogether comfortable. I guessed I wasn’t getting that beach house with the stable of extremely flexible swimsuit models just yet. I got $40 and slunk out; I had to be among the bank’s least valuable customers. I pictured the tellers sitting around watching the security tapes of me, laughing their asses off.

I got my sandwich and walked toward home. A shredded plastic bag blew past me and caught itself in a tree. The city was so disgustingly dirty sometimes. On a windy day like today I could feel bits of shit hitting me head-on; when I washed my face later the water would come off brown. I imagined my pores being packed with filth the way footprints on the beach were filled with blowing sand. And every few blocks, especially as the weather got warmer, the stink of urine would waft up. Human urine, dog urine, rat urine. I doubted there was a piece of pavement in Manhattan that had yet to be pissed on.

I got to my building and saw Patty on her way out the front door. She was wearing an Army jacket and had on an old hunter’s cap with the earflaps down. And of course, on her feet, her signature sandals. The outfit was part Ted Nugent bow-hunter, part Deadhead magic-burrito maker.

“Hi, neighbor,” she smiled. “The weather reverted on us, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s a good day for TV I think,” I said.

“Oh hey, thanks for the joint. I haven’t tried it yet but it smelled very nice.”

“No problem.” I held up my bag. “Hey, I don’t mean to rush off, but my egg sandwich is calling out to me.”

“Go, go,” she said, waving her arm. “Listen, are you going to be around later?”
“I think. I have no plans. Do you need a hand with something?”

“I might. We’ll see.” She turned to go. “I may knock on your door; if you don’t want to see me, just pretend you’re out.” A gust of wind blew and she held on to her hat. “Oh, I can’t stand this breeze. Do you know that in certain parts of southern Spain, the wind is so constant that it’s been proven responsible for people becoming schizophrenic?” I shook my head. “It’s true. The wind has powerful psychiatric qualities.” She pulled sunglasses out of her pocket and put them on. Blueblocker specs with yellow lenses. She gestured toward the door. “Go eat before it gets cold. See ya.”

I climbed the stairs, a bit weak and run-down. My tongue felt like it needed dredging and my sinuses were sort of achy. Could’ve been allergies, but I went into my apartment and, with the remaining Gatorade, swallowed a Vitamin C and beckoned my white blood cells to start fucking shit up.

I found my ass groove on the couch and fit myself into it like I was a Lego. Then I ate my egg sandwich, feeling somewhat anemic. The food wasn’t filling me. I felt like calling someone but I wasn’t sure who. Tina was probably on her couch, Brett providing comfort via a cold compress and an Atavan; Stacey and Eric were probably doing something that would make me feel worse, something productive like helping build affordable housing for the poor or learning how to salsa-dance.

I wished I had bought some chocolate, like a big ol’ Cadbury Fruit and Nut or something. I had nothing sweet in the house but I didn’t want to go back out. There was nothing for me out there, not today. I got up, woke up my computer, and checked my e-mail. There were two new ones. The first was from my credit-card company. They had a free gift for me. Right, and I had full payment for them. DELETE. The next one was from Langford at Fader.

Jason,

Hve no idea if we r looking. U can send me over 5 of your best published clips, or if u don’t have since yours were broadcast, any unpublished reviews you’ve written that I can show my boss.

Scott

Sent from my BlackBerry Wireless Device

I re-read it and then went back to the couch. I lay down and put a pillow behind my head. I didn’t have any published clips. I didn’t have any unpublished ones either. Christ, I was fucking naïve. I turned on the tube and flipped around, looking for anything half-decent. I could write up some reviews, I supposed, just pick a few new albums and critique them. I mean not today, today would be a success if I simply didn’t slip into a coma. It didn’t seem like there was any rush anyway, he didn’t really make it sound that hopeful. Odds were he probably only wrote me back because he felt he had to or something. I clicked again and again and then thank god, there it was, the thing that was going to eat up my Saturday: Superman II. I lay back on the cushions, eyelids heavy, as Terence Stamp began his reign of terror on Planet Houston. I waited patiently for my favorite line: “Come to me, Superman. Come. Kneel before Zod.”

* * * * *

A knock on the door woke me up. “Who is it?” I yawned, rubbing my eyes. I had no idea what time it was, but Superman II was over, transformed into some kind of women’s golf tournament.

“It’s your neighbor,” said my neighbor. Patty. I sat up, ambled over to the door, and opened it.

“Hi, oh, did I wake you up?” she asked.

“No, not really, I just sort of dozed off watching TV,” I said. We stood in the doorway. I wasn’t sure whether or
not to invite her in.

“You’ve got sleep lines on your face. Did you fall asleep on corduroy?”

I felt my cheek. It did feel a bit corrugated. “Oh.” I managed a chuckle. “It must be the texture of my couch, I guess. Hey, do you want to come in?”

“Great, thanks.” She pushed by me and went into my small main room. “I like your place,” she said, looking around. She sat on the couch, fished around in her pockets, and pulled out a cigarette. “Is it okay if I smoke?”

“Yeah yeah, no problem.” I went into the fridge and pulled out a two-liter Diet Coke. “Want some?” I asked.

She shook her head and lit up. I poured myself a glass, grabbed a mug to act as an ashtray, and sat down on the other end of the couch. It was the only place to sit. I sipped the soda and started to shake off the sleepiness. “Sorry, I’m sort of out of it. So, what have you been up to? I’ve just been here all day. I mean right here, on this couch. I had a late one last night.”

“Oh, yeah?” She blew a perfect smoke ring. I’m talking perfect. It hung above her head and rotated, slowly dissipating and softening until it disappeared into the ceiling. She ashed into the mug and looked around my apartment.

Patty smiled, and I smiled back. This was nice, something my parents might have done, had a neighbor over for a chitchat. Not that much different from the way it might happen in most suburbs of America, for better or worse. Well, actually, for better. I didn’t get the suburbs. Working all day was bad enough, but braving a bus or train and then the subway and the streets and the overcrowded elevator just for the privilege? Two hours a day wasted. No, I’d never understand that.

Patty adjusted a pillow behind her back. “I was up very late myself. Almost until five. I’m trying to reorganize, you see. I’ve been going through all my possessions to just assess what I have, where I’ve been for the past year, where I’m going. It’s the season of rebirth, you know.” She exhaled another perfect smoke ring.

“How do you do that?” I said, pointing to it. “I always wanted to be able to blow those.” I felt like a teenager outside the high school, talking to the bad kid.

“You don’t smoke, though, do you, Jason?”

I shook my head. “Just the pot.”

“Filthy habit,” she said, consciously exhaling smoke away from me, out the side of her crooked mouth. “My clothes, my sheets, everything stinks. I used to have a dog, before you lived here. A little terrier mix, Jolly. Even she reeked of smoke. Believe me, you don’t want to start. However…” She stubbed out her smoke, leaned back, and reached into her jeans pocket, pulling out the spliff I had slipped under her door yesterday. Was that yesterday? Christ, it felt like weeks ago. “I could try to show you with this little fellow.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I probably shouldn’t,” I protested, waving a hand. Getting high now wasn’t a great idea, after only a few hours ago being on bended knee in the bathroom, pleading “No mas!” I looked at the microwave: 6:30. Hmm. But…if I got high now, I’d be exhausted early, and I’d definitely stay in tonight and not end up going out to some bar. It was some twisted kind of drug logic, but I was nodding along to it. Yes, it made perfect sense. Getting high was the healthy thing to do. “I probably shouldn’t,” I said again, grinning. “But fuck it.”

“Good boy.” She took the spliff between her fingers and straightened and tightened it. Then she flicked her lighter to the joint’s end and inhaled, eyes slit, until it glowed. She took it away from her mouth and held the smoke in, finally opening her eyes wide, and blowing a wall of white. This was obviously not her first or four hundredth try at this. “Tasty,” she said, examining the joint, then extending it to me.

I reached out and took it from her. “Now remember, I’m only doing this for educational purposes. So show me how to do the smoke ring.” I took a toke, held it, and looked at Patty, expectantly.
She explained rapidly, “Okay, now, while you hold the smoke in your lungs, make an ‘O’ with your lips. Then let the smoke slowly pool in your mouth—but don’t exhale—you have to open your epiglottis thing and just let it go there. Okay, when it’s in your mouth, with one quick puff, blow all the smoke out through the ‘O.’” She made the movement with her lips.

I tried to follow what she was saying but the smoke dribbled out, shapeless. “I have no idea what you are talking about,” I half-laughed, half-coughed. I passed the joint back her way.

“You have to keep trying. You really have to will it.” She took a deep drag and then blew a smoke hula-hoop. “Ooh, that’s a good one,” she said, watching it slowly expand, rotate, break apart. “It’s one of those things where you have to picture yourself doing it successfully, mentally prepare yourself, and then one time, boom, it just all comes together.” She shook her head. “Whoa, I’m feeling this already. Pot is so much stronger now than it used to be. When I first started getting high you’d smoke three or four joints on your own, can you believe it?” Like a game of Pong, the joint was volleyed back to me.

“Totally,” I said, taking a pull. I tried the ring thing again. Bupkis. I waved my hand through the white cloud. “Even in the last few years I feel like it’s gotten crazy strong. You have to be careful or next thing you know you think you’re a pelican or something.” Ping, back to Patty.

“Ha! Let me ask you this, neighbor,” she said, putting the joint to her lips. It was about halfway gone. She took a short strong toke, blowing the smoke back out her nose, Continental style. “What kind of provisions do you have? Because I think we will soon be a bit hungry, don’t you?” Pong.

“Not much. But we can call Hunan Pan.” I gestured out the window toward the restaurant, then took a deep hit. I was going to be very fucking high. But it was mellow, a relaxing buzz. Patty was cool. The only thing that was weird was how normal it was, me and someone older, getting high. I gave up on the ring thing, leaned back on the couch, and blew the smoke toward the ceiling, like I was some kind of volcano. The headache I had had that morning was long gone. I ashed into the mug and gave the joint back to Patty. There were still a good few hits left.

“No, that’s crazy. I have food. I’ll cook,” she said, and took another hit. “I think that’s it for me,” she exhaled. “I’m really stoned. Thank you, neighbor!” She handed me the joint, stood up, and did some kind of yoga stretch, her arms moving out in a circle and meeting over her head, and then she bent down to touch her toes.

I was really stoned as well. I took one last long toke and stubbed out the roach in the mug, figuring I’d retrieve it later for a possible bedtime hit. I watched Patty stretch, stoned to the tits. Ooh, I did not want to think about her tits, not cool. Man, was I high. My synapses were just firing at will. Thought, thought, thought, lots of sentences that never gelled into paragraphs, a non-sequitur freakout. I watched Patty and her yoga moves and I wanted to make a joke about “warrior three,” and then I gawked at her bright flannel as if I were a hippie in a sixties cult movie saying, “The colors! The colors!” I giggled out loud. I was a good audience for myself when I was high. I was Dom DeLuise to my own Burt Reynolds. I took a sip of my Diet Coke and stood up. “What are you doing?” I asked Patty, who was still holding some yoga pose.

“Sometimes when you’re high it feels amazing to stretch,” she said, arms held straight over her head.

“Really?” I put the Diet Coke down and bent over to stretch my hammies. I wasn’t very flexible, I couldn’t even touch my toes. I hung over my feet, breathing slowly. I heard her laugh and I looked up.

“I just made that up,” she said, giggling. “Sorry.” She walked over to my stereo. “Music! How do I work this?”

I grabbed the remote off the coffee table and turned it on. The Ramones’ *Rocket to Russia* began to play.

“Lobotomy! Lobotomy!”

“Too aggressive?” I asked, turning it down a bit.

“Oh no, I like the Ramones,” she said, bouncing on her toes a little. “I used to know Joey a bit, you know.”

“No shit, really?”
“Yeah. Well, I used to have a good friend, Shelly, who bartended at CB’s.” Patty moved back over to the couch and sat down. “I’d try to go there on Tuesdays and hang out with her, because the other nights she’d be too busy to spend any time with me. Tuesdays were the slowest nights, and that place could get rowdy. It was all kids in there; you have to remember, the drinking age was only eighteen back then, so there’d be a lot of drunk high school kids, and I was too old for that shit.” She reached into her pants pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and held it between her teeth as she jammed both hands back into her pockets searching for a lighter. “The Ramones used to play on Tuesdays a lot before they got popular, I mean, nobody was really there except Shelly and me, and whatever other bands were waiting to play. Their whole shtick was really funny, you couldn’t understand a word they were saying because they were so damn loud, but you could just tell they had something. When they were done playing sometimes they used to hang out; Shelly would slip them some free beers.” She spotted the lighter on the table, lit the cigarette, and took a puff. She exhaled. “Joey was always very polite, very nice. Even after they became stars I’d still see him around town and he’d wave and say hi. It was a shame he died so young.” She gestured at me with her cigarette. “Hey, how old were you then? This was seventy-five I think.”

“I was zero,” I said. I paced over to the window and looked outside. It was dark now. Another day gone. I looked back at Patty, who was playing with her fingers, cig dangling from her mouth. “You okay, Patty?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s just…sometimes, I don’t know how I got so old.” She looked up at me and smiled. “Time flies, right?”

I felt bad. “Totally, it totally flies,” I babbled. “Like this whole week flew by, I can’t even remember what I did. I went to work Monday morning and the next thing I knew it was Friday night, and I was at some bar drinking and saying, ‘Hey man, I’m so glad it’s Friday,’ to a bunch of strangers. It’s like I went to sleep one night and I woke up and the week was over.”

Patty puffed on her cigarette. “I got news for you. You know how your week flew past? Well, when you get to be my age, that’s how the years go. You wake up one morning and it’s the next year.” She inhaled, held, and then blew a smoke ring. It floated out at me on an angle. “I told you, I can be a bit of a buzzkill,” she laughed. Her laugh turned into a cough, the same kind I had heard the other day. A bronchitis cough. I felt like a wet stuffed animal was going to come flying out.

“Do you need the Heimlich?” I joked.

“No, no it’s okay, allergies is all.” She wheezed. “Spring is hard for me.” She caught her breath, stubbed out her cigarette, and smoothed her hair. “Could you be a dear and get me a glass of water?”

I washed out a glass, filled it, and gave it to her. “Sheena Is a Punk Rocker” came on, my favorite Ramones song. So I said, “Hey, this is my favorite Ramones song. Did you ever see them play it?”

She finished a sip of the water. “Oh, yes, I must’ve. I might not have been paying attention, but probably. I don’t really remember. Another great part of getting older, Jason, is you forget stuff.”

“But just think, you forget all the really bad stuff too, so maybe it’s a benefit,” I said.

“That’s true. But here’s the thing. When you get older, one day you’ll catch yourself looking in the mirror wondering, ‘What have I been doing again?’ I mean, maybe you’re just trying to remember something, like right now I’m trying to remember the Ramones, or maybe you’re being deep, thinking back across the years, but it’ll hit you. The game is for keeps. That’s why you see a lot of gray-haired guys in Porsches, they had a moment and were like ‘Hey, I don’t want to miss out on this, I’m doing it now!’ If you live in America and you’re not some religious nut and you believe in free will and all, you have no one to blame or congratulate on how you lived except yourself. It’s sort of a tough day, to be truthful. It was for me. I think even if you’re president or really successful or whatever, it’s still a tough one.” She stared into the corner, where my computer was sitting on my tiny desk. “That for work?”

“Nah, it’s left over from college, just for e-mailing and playing around online,” I said.

“Oh. Wait, what is it you do for work again?”

I scratched at an itch on my neck. “I have this bullshit job at a casting company. It’s very small, just four of us. We cast for like TV shows and commercials and stuff. I’m like the general assistant, you know, whatever they need,
I basically do. It’s temporary.”

She laughed. “That sounds fun! Meet any stars?”

“Nah, it’s not like that at all. It’s really just for bit parts and extras. Like if a sci-fi movie needs a hundred female warriors, and they all need to be blond and over six feet tall, they’d call us. It’s goofy.”

“So, are you going to be a director or screenwriter or something?”

I poured the last of the Diet Coke into my glass and put the bottle in the sink. “To tell you the truth, Patty, I have no idea. I found the job through this temp agency. It’s, you know, fine. I don’t need to shave or dress up, and it pays the bills. Eventually, I’d like to do something music-related.” I thought about the e-mail I had just received from Langford. “I mean, I think.”

Patty took off her flannel; a gray long-sleeve T-shirt was underneath. “That sounds like a good gig for now, then. No hassles, enough money to live and get your footing. It’s just a job. You’ll have oodles of them.”

I was somewhat shocked by the positive response. If I had said anything like that to one of my peers, nine out of ten would’ve just smiled and said, “Great,” while inside they were thinking, “Loser.” At least that’s what their expressions would look like, as if they were trying to put on a brave face as I told them my cat had died. “Yeah, it’s okay, I suppose. A little boring, but whatever.”

Patty stood up. “I’m starving. Do you want to come over? I have all these vegetables from the farmers’ market, and I have some rice, we could make a stir-fry.”

“Sure, okay.” I felt in my pocket for my keys and grabbed my wallet off the coffee table. “Should I run out and get some beers or something?”

Patty put her flannel back on. “First you can help me chop the veggies, then while I cook you can run out for some. Let’s be efficient!”

We headed for the door. “Oh, the stereo,” I remembered, and walked back across the room to turn it off. As I turned I saw Patty skipping out of my apartment and into the hall like a hyper five-year-old on too much soda. I hustled out behind her to get to chopping.

Patty arranged quite a cornucopia of vegetables on her countertop. There were some normal ones—carrots, snow peas, and such—and then there were some scary-looking root vegetables that I could not have named if I was on a game show and the prize for doing so was a car. Patty was using a cleaver to chop and was whistling some unknown tune. I washed the odd vegetables and peeled them over the sink, using a paper towel as a low-rent drain screen. I was getting into it; the repetitive motion and the revealing of bright, wet flesh underneath dirty peel was incredibly satisfying to my stoned self. It was a little quiet, so I asked, “Patty, can we put on a little cooking music?”

She held the cleaver in mid-chop and said, “Absolutely. Go in the living room, you’ll see the stereo, just put on whatever. But something upbeat.”

Oh my God oh my God and then it happened, I was out of the kitchen and in the living room, the never-before-seen inner sanctum, and I was both alone and high. Yes. It was the mirror image of my apartment in shape, but it was far more cluttered. There was a lifetime of “maybe I should hold on to this” in there. She had an old cracked brown leather sofa; on it were two throw pillows with crocheted images of dogs. Her coffee table was a steamer trunk with a giant ashtray on top, a stack of mail and a fan of books next to it. The walls, as much as I could see of them, were a pale yellow. They were covered with framed and unframed paintings, photographs, and illustrations. A giant one, it must have been five feet diagonally, was of the Jackson Pollock school and took up almost the whole wall above her fireplace. In front of it, on her mantel, was a garish gold trophy. On the third and top tier of this was a
male statuette with his hands held above his head. Carefully balanced on his hands was a still-packaged Twinkie. It was the sight of this that assured me my generation did not invent irony, as much as we may have thought so. I checked out some of the photographs crowded onto the narrow floor-to-ceiling strip of wall in between her windows. There were shots of Patty with friends or maybe family from a while back. In one black-and-white shot, she was holding a cigarette and leaning against a brick wall in what looked like Chinatown. Her other hand, by her side, was giving the photographer the finger. She must’ve been my age, maybe a little younger. She was pretty; she reminded me of what some of the girls looked like when you saw photographs of Lou Reed in Max’s Kansas City in old magazines. Her bangs hung in her eyes, a small smile was screwed on lopsided. In this shot at least, she had it, that look of cool and youth that never went out of style: She just didn’t give a fuck.

I started to feel like maybe I was snooping a bit too long, so I moved to the stereo, which was like the one I had growing up, an all-in-one Fisher with a record player on top. Next to the stereo, on a tall bookcase, were stacks and stacks of vinyl, hundreds of old LPs. I was giddy just staring at it. I thumbed through a few on top and found a rare one in a simple all-white sleeve, maybe even a bootleg, a live recording of Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash. I put it on the turntable and lowered the needle. It crackled to life. A song called “Mountain Dew” started up. Dylan sang in his nasal, country voice, “My Uncle Mort, he’s sawed off and short, he measure about four foot two…” When the chorus came, Johnny and Bob harmonized in an odd but beautiful way. “They call it that good ol’ mountain dew, and those who refuse it are few.” With the warmth of the analog sound and the needle pops I felt like maybe I had flicked a switch and sent myself back in time. I was considering turning on Patty’s TV to see if the Vietnam War was still under way; the set definitely looked like it dated from that time period, and I was thinking maybe it was so old it could only tune in the seventies. Anchormen would smoke Lucky Strikes and Johnny Carson would make jokes about hippies while sporting an Indian headdress.

“Good choice,” Patty yelled from the kitchen. “Dylan is my absolute favorite!” I hurried back toward the kitchen but something stopped me. I saw words in small writing low on the wall, just above the molding. I got on my knee and saw it was a tiny diagram with arrows. The one pointing toward my apartment said “Jason.” One pointing down said “Robert,” and another pointing up said “Rachel.”

Patty had finished the chopping, so I headed out to grab some beers while she “seasoned” the wok. I went into the deli; Bobby wasn’t there yet. I was disappointed for a moment because I was excited to see him when I was sober. But then I realized that even if I hadn’t had a drink, technically being high as shit didn’t really qualify as sober to most people. The guy working the register was absolutely blasting Madonna, which was just about the funniest thing I had ever seen, an empty bodega, lit bright by fluorescents, tended by a balding, middle-aged Indian humming along to “Holiday.” I moved to the beat over to the beers, smiling, and tried to decide on one. I wanted to go with our Asian theme. The closest they had was Pacifico, and since the Pacific was on the way to Asia, that was that. I also grabbed a pint of Ben and Jerry’s Phish Food. I could take or leave that band’s jammy music, but they sure inspired a damn good ice cream. I brought the items to the counter, paid, and left the man and his Madonna in peace, hoping that maybe later, he might vogue.

When I got back to Patty’s she was cooking with a fury. It smelled pretty good too. I snuck the ice cream into the freezer and cracked open a couple of beers for us. “So Patty,” I said, watching her work the overfilled wok, “those are some great pictures of you in the other room. The one in Chinatown is awesome.”

“You think?” she said without looking up, focused on moving the sizzling vegetables around. “Thanks. That was a while ago. I don’t give people the finger nearly as much now,” she laughed. “Hey, are you hungry? Because I think we might’ve been too high when estimating how much we needed.”

“I’m still high…”

“Me too!” she slipped in.

“…so I’m pretty hungry. Don’t worry. Better to have too much than too little.”

“That’s my philosophy on food too.” She stopped working the wooden spoon and looked up at me. “My arm is killing me. Time for you to take over. It’s almost done.”

I took the spoon and made with the stirring. The veggies crackled and smoked in the oil. “Hey, can I ask you
something? Like, back when that picture was taken, what were you doing in life?”

Patty was pulling plates from her cupboard. “Then I was working at this store that made custom leather pants for rock people and folk singers. They were all the rage. People wore them every day, and once they started to stretch they’d come back and we’d readjust them. It was on Sixth Avenue, above a bagel place a couple of blocks from Washington Square. It was fun. The store was by appointment only so we didn’t really work that much. It was cheaper in New York then, you didn’t have to kill yourself.”

I kept the vegetables moving. Some of the onions were starting to burn but the squash-looking bits still looked raw. I wanted to know more about Patty but I didn’t want to be pushy. “So, how long did you do that for?”

“Oh God, just a couple years,” she said, taking out cutlery. “Watch that—is something burning?” She stepped over and took a look into the wok. “Okay, just one more minute and that is done.”

I turned down the heat and moved the wok off the burner. I dumped the contents into a bowl Patty had left on the side, sneaking a bite of broccoli. Not bad. “And like, what other jobs did you do after that?” I asked, sheepishly.

“My goodness, Jason, are you interviewing me for a position in your firm?” she asked. I was mortified until she laughed. “C’mon, let’s eat and I’ll give you the short version.”

She cleaned off the steamer trunk and we sat down to eat. Stoned, we had completely forgotten to make the rice. So we ate the tasty vegetables and drank beer, and she briefly gave me her work history. After the leather-pants store, Patty had bartended for a few years at the White Horse, which explained why I saw her outside there every once in a while. After that she was a dog walker. “I controlled all of the NYU area. Me and this guy Paco, we had a little dog-walking service together—Hip Pups. We were like the dog mafia. It was the world’s greatest job any season but winter. We made a lot of tips at Christmas, though; no one wanted to be cheap to the person taking care of their dog. Guilt money.” Paco had died twelve years ago from what sounded like AIDS without her actually saying it, and she had sold “the territory” to some corporate dog-walking company. “They don’t even screen who they hire. But they offered me a lot of cash, and it made me sad to do it without Paco.” Since then, she still walked a few dogs in the neighborhood, “my babies,” and bartended one Saturday a month at the White Horse.

We carried the dishes back into the kitchen. “So, Jason,” Patty asked, putting her plate in the sink, “any serious girls in your life?”

“Nah,” I said, handing her mine. “I did go out with this one girl a couple of times recently, but I haven’t heard from her in a while.”

“Bummer. How long has it been?”

“Two weeks.”

“Ooh.”

“Yeah, and the thing is, I know this is silly, but she has this pair of my pants I sort of really want back.”

“That’s awkward. It might be best to just remember them fondly.”

“I know, I know. But what’s she going to do with them, it’s not like she’s going to wear them. She could put them in the mail, or whatever.”

“Yeah, but sometimes, Jason,” said Patty turning on the tap, “you just have to go out and buy yourself a new pair of pants.”

After she washed the dishes, I busted out the ice cream and we polished off the pint. Patty lit up a cigarette and had another one of those coughing fits. It was pretty nasty, and I didn’t say anything at the time. But a half-hour later as we bid each other good night, both our eyes heavy with sleep, I couldn’t help myself.

“Hey, um, my friend who’s getting married is a resident at Cornell Med, and he could probably recommend
someone who could check out those allergies, cheap, if you wanted.” We stood in her doorway.

“Thanks, neighbor. I have a doctor, though. Don’t worry.” She gave me a hug. “Sweet dreams.”

I went into my apartment. It was midnight. I washed and brushed and got under the covers feeling sated. I rolled over, got comfortable, and finally let my lids shut.

I was a little worried, though.
And then it was Monday. I sat at the reception desk and made a sesame bagel with butter last as long as it could. There wasn’t much to look forward to after that. Melinda was in the back running a casting session for nuns for some movie, so there were actresses trying to look nunly sitting on the benches in the waiting area. Unfortunately the specs must have been for older nuns, real ruler-slappers; there were none I wanted to tempt toward the sins of the flesh.

I hopped on Instant Messenger to see what was happening with the kids. I hadn’t caught up yet with Tina to see how her night with Brett had ended up, and I hadn’t talked with Stacey in ages. Both were on my to-do list.

doodyball5: so…was it

tinadoll: yes princess?

doodyball5: proposed to over brunch?

tinadoll: nope…but it has a crush

tinadoll: just made out. im no slut

doodyball5: yes u r

tinadoll: that’s true! he is sooo cute!

doodyball5: you guys can share gel and talk about jeans

tinadoll: did u soil either of those two girls?

doodyball5: nope

tinadoll: pants?

doodyball5: not yet

tinadoll: im picturing a nice oven mitt

doodyball5: i did do something tho…

tinadoll: oh christ…you called the pants police?

doodyball5: i drank and emailed

tinadoll: have i taught u nothing!?

tinadoll: how bad was it? did u tell her u love her?

doodyball5: i just asked her to give me the damn pants back
tinadoll: response?
doodyball5: radio silence
tinadoll: you should’ve went all-out crazy, threatened to kill yourself or something
tinadoll: kidding. don’t sweat it. if it makes u feel better, ive done far worse
doodyball5: like the time you gave the entire east village crabs?
tinadoll: you cant prove that
doodyball5: heh. hey have you talked to stacey lately?
tinadoll: no. let’s start a chatroom. stacey and eric hold…

stace has entered the room.

tinadoll: stacey!!!
doodyball5: stace?
stace: hi
doodyball5: hello hello. what’re you doing tonight?
stace: i have my women’s legal group and then i’m going to a party with ali’s friend mallory
doodyball5: where? we’re coming!
stace: a bar on 13 and A. some dorky internet party of some kind
doodyball5: well, wouldn’t you like to hang out with me?
tinadoll: speaking of internet dorks…
doodyball5: will your party allow guests?
tinadoll: i’m not drinking tonight
doodyball5: lie
tinadoll: i have alcoholism
tinadoll: bad

e-diddy has entered the room.

tinadoll: yes!!!!
e-diddy: how’s my doodyball? stacey? sweetie?
doodyball5: stacey is too busy for your love
tinadoll: speaking of…i just fell in love
e-diddy: w/?
tinadoll: a boy
e-diddy: yup, tell more
tinadoll: shit. i gotta go rock the house. see you all in hell
e-diddy: me too bye

e-diddy has left the room.
tinadoll has left the room.

doodyball5: whoa—is this party over?
stace: hi
doodyball5: oh hi miss bizzy
stace: that plus i cant type fast enough. all good?
doodyball5: status quo. u? been a while…
stace: I know! gonna have to catch up soon
doodyball5: over ketchup
doodyball5: btw…I wrote scott
stace: woohoo! and…?
doodyball5: didn’t sound too promising, but he said to send some writing samples
stace: that’s something
doodyball5: yeah, now i just need writing samples
stace: you could do that fast, jason. send them soon and then keep checking in with him
doodyball5: that’s the plan
stace: you have to be persistent
doodyball5: no doubt
stace: so…you know what happens this week, rt? your first rabbi class
doodyball5: i will pick out a good outfit
stace: i emailed you the info. wed 7 to 10
doodynball5: I am ready to rabbi
stace: k gotta go. next weekend dinner or drink or something?
doodynball5: yep
stace: call and tell me how class goes. bye
doodynball5: wait, don’t go yet. im bored as bloody hell

stace has left the room.

doodynball5: balls

doodyball5 has left the room.

Melinda emerged from the back and pulled up a chair next to me at the desk.

“So, were the nuns fun?” I asked.

“So fun. They were all trying to act very serious and pious. Not one smile on that casting tape, that’s for sure.”

“Is it almost time for lunch? I’m getting the shakes,” I said.

Melinda glanced at the schedule. “Yeah, I think we’re cool. Let me just tell Sara that we’re going out together so she’ll answer the phone.”

“You know, I’ve never actually talked to Sara.”

“No!”

“Yeah, it’s weird. I say hi, but I’ve never been caught in the elevator with her or chitchatted. Not once. I barely talk to JB either.”

“Well, JB is totally antisocial, but Sara is nice. Someday you’ll meet by the watercooler, if it’s your destiny.” Melinda put on some lip gloss and went over to Sara’s office.

On the walk to lunch we caught up. It had been a while since we’d had a talk other than just mocking work. It turned out that Melinda’s play had gotten some interest from a well-known off-Broadway producer.

“Why the fuck didn’t you immediately tell me? That’s sick!” I shouted.

“Because nothing’s certain yet. These things take a long time and they are really flaky,” she said as we crossed the avenue.

She hid it well, but she had to be bursting on the inside. To have someone legitimize her work must have been amazing. The producer had been at the reading/party a few weeks ago and apparently was really into the play.

“But if you sell it, I’ll be all alone and I’ll have no one to go buy lunch with. I’ll be one of the lonely lunchers,
feeding half my sandwich to pigeons from a bench. You should factor my mental health into your decision.” We entered what we affectionately called “Stress Deli.” It was a fine deli—a big one, really—but it got tremendously crowded during lunch. If you didn’t know exactly what kind of sandwich you wanted as you got to the front of the counter, people would actually heckle you to hurry up. Worse, the women who worked the cash registers were little balls of Korean fury who would somehow divine what denomination of bill you were going to pull out of your wallet and would shove the change in your face before you could even get your hand into your pocket. At least once a week I’d end up with a massive bruise on my leg from some asshole with one of those twenty-five-pound briefcases who was in such a rush to grab some Dentyne Ice he’d ram me on his way through the store. But it was sorta the best place nearby, so we braved it.

All conversation was put on hold until we emerged with our sandwiches.

“That was like Iwo Jima,” I said, shifting the bag from my right to my left hand.

“It sucks in there. But it’s fast,” said Melinda.

“Well, when you’re famous and you come back to the office to visit we can always go there and remember the times we’ve had,” I said, as we started walking. “Do you really think you might be leaving?”

“I don’t know. I hope. We’ll see. Anyway, business has been so bad at JB’s, odds are I’ll be laid off before I sell a play,” she said.

I stopped for a second, leaned down, and tied my shoe. Looking up I said, “Really, are we doing bad? I had no idea.”

“You had no idea? What do you do all day? Basically nothing, right? Which means we aren’t overrun with business.”

“How am I supposed to know?” I said, standing back up. “I feel like it’s always been mellow there.”

“That’s sort of the problem, I think,” she said as we continued walking. “It’s not just a lull, it’s kind of permanently slow. But we’ll see. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

We cruised back to the office, and I told Melinda about the Jane situation. I was curious as to her opinion.

“Yeah, I don’t think you’ll be seeing those pants again,” said Melinda as we reentered the office. “That’s just the way it works. You took that risk when you lent them to her.”

“Sheesh. I expected at least you’d be on my side. I figured lesbians would be a little more evolved in these matters.”

“Oh, no, we’re far worse. I still wear my ex’s stuff, she was my size.”

“Fuck, well, I guess they’re gone.”

Melinda stared at me. “Is it the pants, or do you really just want to see this girl again?”

“The pants. Honestly.”

She shrugged, looking unconvinced. “Those must be some fucking pants.”

I sat back down at the receptionist desk and commandeered the computer while Melinda leafed through an old Us Weekly. E-mail was opened and I saw that Jane hadn’t responded to my tirade. I sighed. She wasn’t ever going to. Okay, that was it. I was done. “No mas,” I said to myself. I wasn’t going to become a stalker. No, I was going to take the high road. Back to basic cable and beating off.

I closed e-mail and surfed onto Pitchfork, a hip music site I frequented, to read up on the latest and greatest. I figured I should take a good look at how they wrote their record reviews. I clicked on one after another, and each
was longer and more in-depth than the last. They were filled with obscure details like bands’ favorite BPMs, and highfalutin hypotheses like, “Of all the cyclical inclinations in the post-Vietnam rock-'n'-roll oeuvre, mod revivalism stands tall as the most oxymoronic.” Jesus. As I read on, I unwrapped the butcher paper around my turkey sandwich and took a bite.

Goddamn motherfuckers forgot to put the cheese on.
The day ended and there I was, back at home, on the toilet. I had been sitting there quite a while.

I started thinking about the sixteen-hour drive I used to make twice a year during college, from Missouri to Ithaca and vice versa, alone in my bad little beige 1986 Honda Civic. After graduation, I made the epic drive one last time. The highway near Indiana seemed so straight and flat I probably could’ve fallen asleep and safely made it across the state. As I cracked open my fifteenth Diet Coke, an old Ford Mustang pulled up next to me. The driver shouted, “Buy American, asshole!” He sped past, his kids giving me the finger out the rear window.

The Honda had no disc player and the tape deck was busted. For a long stretch after the Mustang, all I could pick up was static. I was beat; I was like eleven hours in and starting to see visions. Desperate, I tried switching over to AM. And crackling through the speakers came a miracle, “You Are My Sunshine.” I was instantly reenergized; I rolled down my window and sang along to the chorus at the top of my lungs, drumming my hand against the car door, delirious. “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine / you make me happyyyyyy, when skies are gray.” It was such a goofy, positive song. But then, speeding along, listening to all the verses for probably the first time, I realized that it really wasn’t a love song at all. It was fucking dark. “You told me once, dear, you really loved me / no one else could come between / but now you’ve left me, and love another / you have shattered all my dreams.” All sung to this smiley sing-along tune, which was disguising it. “Please don’t take my sunshine away.”

In the other room I heard the TV come back from commercial. I had left it on CNN. They were reporting that a coyote had been found and captured in Central Park. How the hell did a coyote get into Central Park? That sounded like a setup line for a cheap joke. “He took the 6 train.” When you live alone, you can go to the bathroom with the door open. That way you don’t miss the big coyote stories on TV.

I finished my business, went back toward the couch, and saw there was a message on the machine. It could’ve been there for days, I never checked it anymore. I hit PLAY.

“Hey Jason, it’s Mom.”

“And Dad!” I could hear him yell from somewhere in the back of the room.

“How’s everything? We got your e-mail. A rabbi—that’s very funny. We didn’t realize a regular person could just marry people, but we’ll take your word. Everything here is the same, it’s finally starting to get warm. Work is slow, your dad and I have been going to see a lot of movies, no big news. Oh—the next time you come home we really want you to clean out some of the old stuff you have in your room; Dad is thinking of starting a project and making it into a home office. I’ve already alerted the paramedics, don’t worry. We’ll keep all your stuff in the closet and replace the bed with a pull-out couch for when you come visit. Which is going to be when, honey? Let’s pick a date already. Okay, I don’t want to use up your whole machine. Call us or write us. Love you!”

I had heard the threat of my room being turned into a “home office” for years now, and was pretty sure it was safe from renovation for several more to come. I made a mental note to call my folks this week and then picked up my phone and called the people who had taken on the responsibility of feeding me in lieu of my parents, Hunan Pan.

* * * * *

And then there I was, in a bar again. Moo-shu chicken followed by vodka, yep, my nights were damn predictable. After partial digestion, I had met Tina for a civilized drink. Just a quick one. She had to run to catch a band with Brett; I assumed I was invited but it turned out I wasn’t. I don’t know, she was a little weird about it.
“So,” she said, smoothing down her hair, “what’s happening with Mr. Fantastic?”

“You know, just being that guy. What about you? I mean, other than going to see bands without me, what’s new?” I poked the lemon in my vodka soda with my straw.

“Oh my God, you are such a girl!”

“I’m a man, just look how hairy my arms are.” I held one up to her face. It wasn’t that hairy, actually.

Tina shoved it away. “Sheesh, I don’t care, you can come. Brett has just been crazy busy, and I wanted some alone time with him.” She stirred her drink. “You know, I’m still figuring out what I think. So far so good, though.”

“I’m just messing with you. What’s he so busy with?” I wasn’t quite sure what Brett did every day. All I knew was that he was a couple years older than us and had finished up NYU film school around January.

“It’s really exciting. It looks like he’s going to direct this film. A real film, not like some student one. He’s got funding and everything.”

“Wow, impressive. How’d he manage that?” I was a little jealous.

“Honestly? Chutzpah. This guy who lives on his block, Donnie Sherman, had a novel come out last year called Chase Me. Ever hear of it?”

I shook my head.

“Supposedly it got good reviews. Brett liked it a lot, anyway. So around five or six months ago, he saw the guy at a café, walked over and introduced himself. Then he just put his dick on the table.”

“The old dick-on-the-table, eh?”

“Works every time, from what I hear. He said, ‘I’m a director. I’m sure you’re talking to other people, but I loved your book and I really want to make a film of it. Can I buy you a drink?’ Anyway, they hit it off. They wrote the screenplay together. Donnie knew a producer and he got them money somehow, and then Brett found a few other investors. Pretty nuts, huh?” She glanced around the bar, which was starting to fill up. “I haven’t read the script yet; I’m scared if I don’t like it I’ll have to break up with him. But I think it might be a really good movie. They have a couple of great theater actors lined up, that girl from Rent is the lead. And Chris Makepeace is also going to be in it, you ever hear of him?”

I laughed. “Isn’t that Rudy, Rudy the rabbit, from Meatballs? He was in My Bodyguard, too.”

“He plays an aging former porn star who’s just moved to Park Slope. Who knows, maybe it will be his Pulp Fiction.” She polished off her drink. “Anyway, they’re just really getting started casting and figuring shit out, and he’s pretty obsessed with it, which makes sense. But that’s why I wanted to see him alone tonight.”

“Well, it sounds pretty fucking exciting. Seriously, it’s huge. Tell him I say congrats.”

Tina bought us a second round, two more vodka sodas. I brought mine to my lips and took a deep swig. “Ugh,” I spat, “yuck, tonic!” I put the drink down and took a step back, stumbling right into a smoky little girl wearing a jean jacket and a scarf. “Oh, sorry!” I said, pulling it back together and offering a half bow.

“Qua, it was my fault,” she said with a French accent and a crooked smile.

I smiled in return and turned back toward Tina. Then my half-pickled brain caught up. French, huh? Tina raised her eyebrows and smiled. She put her hand up to my ear and whispered, “Body odor. I guarantee it.”

Tina downed her drink, it was time for her to go. She went to the ladies’ room to make sure she looked pretty for her man. I finished off my drink, despite the tonic, and looked around. It was early yet. It seemed like the French girl was checking me out, and she was only a few bodies away. I was just drunk and confident enough to make an
It was certainly worth me buying one more drink, in the interest of foreign relations. I reeled toward her.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Jason.”

“Hello, I am Isabelle.”

And soon I found myself ordering us two more drinks, a Bass for her and another vodka soda, this time with soda, please, for me. I was pretty buzzed; the last thing I needed was more alcohol, but unfortunately it was also the first thing I needed.

Suddenly we both had arms draped over our shoulders. “Hi!” said Tina, freshly made up and grinning ear to ear. “So, I’m off.” She turned her head to Isabelle. “Hi. Bye.” She turned to me, and glanced down at my Levi’s. “And you, keep an eye on those slacks, ‘kay, sport?” She pinched my cheek and moved on.

“What she say?” Isabelle asked, furrowing her brow.

I shrugged.

Isabelle and I talked for a bit and I learned that (1) yes, she was from France, here on vacation with her younger sister Esther who was back at the hotel, (2) her English was slightly less than so-so, and (3) she was sassy as all hell. A variation on a pageboy haircut, flirtatious eyes, the crooked smile, and that damn accent all arranged perfectly around a body a drunken Brit might call “fuckin’ fit, mate.” The clock struck two; where all the time went, who knew? We left the bar behind us and lit out into the early-morning chill. We walked and talked, where oh where could we possibly be going…oh, surprise! We were outside my building. Apparently, there was just enough chum left in the water.

The rest is exactly as I wrote it on my computer early the following morning, thinking it needed to be preserved for future generations, as Isabelle still slept in my bed:

ME: So, do you want to come upstairs?

FRENCH GIRL: Yes. Why not I think.

ME: Très bien. (I raise eyebrows, “Aren’t I clever? That’s French.”)

INTERIOR, APT.

ME: Want a drink?

FG: You have beer?

ME: Yes. (I open fridge and hand her a Stella.) Here you go.

FG: Can I put on music? I love this Radiohead.

ME: Rock out

FG: What?

ME: Oh, nothing. Turn it on, it’s that button…no, the other…you got it. (Music begins to play loudly.)

FG: I love this music. “Carmel Police…mmm mmm mmm…” You want dance?

ME: Not just yet. (I open another beer for myself.)
FG: You have mariwahnah?

ME: Yeah—you want to get high?

FG: What?

ME: Smoke?

FG: Sure, why not. *(She dances and smiles, as tempting as Easter chocolate.)*

*(We get high and begin to dirty dance. We continue to talk while dancing.)*

ME: Sometimes when I get high I talk a lot, you might notice.

FG: What you say? *(She starts speaking rapidly in French.*) I think I cannot talk English right now. *(She kisses me.)*

ME: Mmm. Do you French people take classes for this when you’re little, because I think, it’s really a good idea. Fuck math.

*(Cut to bedroom. We are naked and things are happening.)*

ME: *(breathing hard)* I just want to say you are a good ambassador of your country.

FG: Ohh good. Mmmmph!

ME: Magnifique! Right?

FG: Mm! Mm!

*(We continue having sex, briefly pausing to switch positions with acrobatic grace.)*

FG: *(quite loud)* Oui! Oui! Oui!

ME: You mean “Yes, yes!”

FG: Qui lenipomonique! *(something French and unintelligible)*

ME: *(close to orgasm and punctuating each thrust with a shout)* U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!

FG: Vive la France!

*(We lie side by side, satisfied.)*

FG: Mmmm, that nice, Jason.
ME: I guess you haven’t learned the word “stupendous” yet.

FG: What that mean, “stuuup…”?

ME: It means like…it means “Welcome to America.”

(She lights a cigarette.)

FG: You funny.
Somewhere back around New Year’s I had promised myself I would try to write a sentence or two every day in a journal, which was really just a Word document on my dusty computer cleverly named journal.doc. I was big on it when I was traveling, and it was something I was trying to bring back, but so far it hadn’t been brung. After having typed in my French connection yesterday, it seemed like now was the perfect opportunity to get the party started again.

It was after work on Wednesday. I was killing a little time at home before I had to head to the rabbi class, and I had been staring, frozen, at the journal document. The cursor blinked and blinked, but I couldn’t think how to start. I was stumped. I knew it. It knew it. I punted and flicked the computer off.

There were few times lately when I felt I had to get something that happened written down, lest I forget it. My days had become routine, somewhat indistinguishable from one another. Lots of small funny things happened, sure, but nothing major. In school you had semesters and finals and spring breaks to delineate time; out here in “the real world,” every day was sort of like the one before. I guess that’s why people freaked out about birthdays: Those at least put a stake in the ground, somehow ended one chapter and opened a next. The last big chapters for me were quitting bartending and taking the JB’s job, mostly because I went from working nights to working days; before that was graduating from college and coming to New York. These events were worthy of lines on paper, of contemplation over an afternoon beer alone or of reinterpreting song lyrics as specific advice written just for me, just for my life-altering moments.

I wrote constantly while I was traveling; I was one of those super-clichéd scruffy twenty-two-year-olds scribbling furiously on the train, one eye guarding my “rucksack.” I was always seeing new things or waking up in new cities. Sometimes I’d get lost and caught in the rain and end up in an absolutely shady hostel listening to mice scamper and sleeping with my passport in my underwear. Other days would reveal secret parts of the Spanish countryside. One time an Italian schoolteacher in Prague kissed me in the back of a beer hall while her colleagues were sitting outside at a table, all because a guy I was traveling with had lied and told her my father had written _Twin Peaks_. Apparently, back in the day it was a huge hit in Rome. A graph line of my life then would have shown a lot of modulation. If I wrote every day now, all entries would be something like, “Woke up, went to work, drank soda, e-mailed, went out for drinks with X, and did/didn’t have my bathing-suit area touched.” The graph line had become far flatter. There were fewer highs and lows, and less need for written commentary. Just a lot of dittos.

Even during what were supposed to be the most fun times, in a bar, drink in hand, life was starting to feel repetitive. If every day was a rerun of the day before, then the nights were one long uninterrupted blur. And The Fear the following mornings seemed to be getting worse.

That lack of modulation weighed on my mind when I blew off work to go to brunch with Isabelle, the morning after our Franco-American summit. We ate some eggs at the Galaxy and then strolled around Chelsea, popping into the occasional gallery, before she went to meet up with her sister somewhere in Midtown. It was refreshing to move through the familiar streets with someone from out of town, someone seeing the city for the first time, wide-eyed, like I was during my own travels. She was amazed at the little things. A woman picking up her dog’s poop in a bright pink bag, the man who sang opera as he sold small illustrations on the corner of Twenty-sixth Street. We kissed good-bye outside the entrance to the E train. First on the mouth, then both cheeks. She was flying out later that night. She gave me her e-mail and invited me to visit her in France sometime. As I walked away, I considered if that might ever happen, or more likely, if this was the last time I’d ever see this particular human being. Real good-byes eluded me; it was hard to grasp the finality, hard to escape whatever else I felt at the moment, the heat of the sun on my neck, my lips dry and chapped. I looked back and caught a glimpse of her head as she disappeared down the stairs. I thought about calling after her, I didn’t know if she knew the right train. Instead, I took a breath and mentally wished her good luck and a good life. Then I slumped off toward work, thinking “dentist’s appointment” would be the appropriate excuse for my tardiness.
Now it was time to away to the rabbi class. Temple Beth El, where it was being held, was on the Upper East Side, a bit of a trip from the West Village. I grabbed my iPod, took a swig from the two-liter Diet Coke in the fridge, and headed out of the apartment.

I hit PLAY, shut out the city, and walked toward the L train. After only three blocks, though, the damn battery died and I was back in cacophonous reality. I sighed, took off the headphones, and pocketed the player. I grabbed a free Village Voice from a red plastic dispenser and made my way to the train.

Twenty-five minutes later I resurfaced on the Upper East Side. I walked past a steady stream of chain stores—Baby Gap, Old Navy, Victoria’s Secret, Baby Gap, Toys “?” Us, Baby Gap. I looked down Lexington: This was fro-gurt country, there were frozen-yogurt outlets as far as the eye could see. Expensive knobby-tired baby carriages boxed me in as I moved along. It felt like a PG-13 version of the city. I checked my phone out of habit; I had a text message. Stacey, reminding me about tonight. Was she neurotic or was I that untrustworthy? I was pretty sure it was her personality flaw and not mine, so I texted her back. “Totally forgot! Drunk downtown. Shit!”

I arrived at the temple on Seventy-ninth Street, on time. I was a little nervous as I opened the door and walked down a long narrow hall in search of the rabbi’s study, where the e-mail said we’d be meeting. The hall was decorated on both sides with framed paintings of various biblical scenes, along with black-and-white shots of Masada and the Wailing Wall. I sort of wished it was more like a Jewish Hall of Fame, or like an athletic stadium tunnel leading to the field of battle, and that there were framed 8x10’s of Sandy Koufax, Sammy Davis, Jr., David Ben-Gurion, all our biggest stars, lining the walls. I could see a rabbi and a cantor walking down a hall like that, getting pumped to go out on the dais and give it their all. Someday, if they pushed themselves, their photos would be wedged onto that wall, perhaps in the coveted spot between David Copper-field and Leonard Nimoy. (Indeed, Mr. Spock was a Jew.)

The rabbi’s study door was ajar, so I poked my head in. Two women and a guy about my age sat in folding chairs around a wooden table. Suddenly I wondered if I should have been dressed nicer than my jeans, faded Yoo-Hoo T-shirt, and hoodie. Or if I should have maybe brought a pen and a pad.

“Hi, is this the, uh, class for, um…” I wasn’t sure what it was even called. “Learning how to preside over a wedding ceremony?”

“Yep,” responded the guy. He had silver metal glasses and wavy blond hair, and he was wearing a light-blue shirt with a loosened maroon tie. “That’s why we’re all here. The rabbi hasn’t arrived yet, though.” He extended his hand. “I’m Mark.”

“Hi, I’m Jason.” We shook. “Jason,” I said extending my hand toward the first woman, who looked to be around forty, with short gray hair and a belly that tested the buttons of her beige blazer.

“Nora,” she replied. “Hi.”

I leaned toward the other woman, who looked to be about my age. “Hi, I’m Jennifer,” she said, smiling. She had blue eyes and thick curly dark hair, rabbi’s-daughter’s hair. And, I was embarrassed to notice in shul of all places, simply fantastic tits under her tight black V-neck sweater. Light, fluffy, perky, kissable. Mazel tov, my dear.

I took a seat and unzipped my sweatshirt. A man entered the room wearing a green sweater-vest over a white shirt and sporting a beard and a yarmulke. “Hi, everybody, I’m Rabbi Stan. Glad you all could make it.”

We went around the table and introduced ourselves to Rabbi Stan. Every rabbi I had ever met, which wasn’t a whole hell of a lot, went by his last name. Rabbi Pearlman. Rabbi Feldstein. Rabbi Bassen. Rabbi Stan, who looked to be in his late thirties, must have been some kind of New Age rabbi, the kind that let you call them by their first names and knew how to juggle.

“So, Jason, tell me what brings you to this class,” Rabbi Stan said.

“Um, well, two good friends of mine are getting married, Stacey and Eric, and they asked me to preside at their wedding.” Why else did he think I was here?
“To marry your friends, that will be wonderful. Do you know what type of ceremony you’ll perform?”

“No, I’m pretty much a novice,” I said, grinning. “I was hoping that I’d learn all about that here.”

Rabbi Stan scratched his chin. It seemed like he might still be getting used to the beard; it was a bit patchy. “You will hopefully learn a lot here, but the ceremony design will be yours. Rabbinical teaching that is not.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what he was getting at, but that might’ve been because I was fixated on how he sometimes spoke backward, like a Jewish Yoda. Maybe he was trying to sound than his years older. “I’m sorry, what do you mean?” I asked.

“You’ll decide how the ceremony will flow, you’ll provide the words of love and guidance. You are not here to become a rabbi, you are only here to learn some of the Jewish tradition. After all, you will be a Universal Life Minister. You know the Internet site to go to, right?” We all nodded. “Our work here is only to offer guidance and advice for how you can structure your personalized ceremony. For you, not a rabbi like myself, were chosen by your friends to bring them together. But if you are here in my class, they want a bit of tradition, yes? Yes. You know, a great rabbi was once asked by a man to teach him the entire meaning of the Torah while he stood on one foot. The rabbi told him, “Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you. The rest is commentary.” He smiled at us. “Piece of cake, don’t worry!”

He asked the others why they were there. Mark was going to perform a small second marriage for his friend. Nora was going to be the rabbi for her sister’s wedding. Jennifer of the teacup tits was, like me, going to be a rabbi for her friends from college.

Now that he knew our stories, Rabbi Stan rolled up his sleeves. “Today we are going to talk about Jewish law a tiny bit. But we will talk more about love. Love is a word we use a lot in society today. We use it too much, I think, it’s lost the meat of its meaning. You love your dog. You love the Yankees, and ice cream, and vacations to the Poconos. I heard a girl in shul today say she loved her new sandals. Just loved them! But these aren’t really loves, these are very strong likes. Things adored. Things perhaps treasured. But loved? Not in the old sense of the word.”

As Rabbi Stan gestlicated I could see half moons of sweat forming under his arms. My eyelids were getting heavy, so I bit my tongue to help stay awake. It was the same trick I had used throughout high school and college. A little pain kept the eyes open.

Rabbi Stan continued. “‘Would you dive in front of a bullet to protect those sandals?’ I asked the girl in shul. ‘No, of course not,’ the girl told me. ‘Then you are not in love with them,’ I said. Now, I’m joking of course, but to marry two people you must have a grasp of the meaning of love. It seems at the very least that would be something you ought to know if you are to say, ‘By the power invested in me I pronounce you man and wife.’ Can I teach you love? No, it can’t be taught. But I can tell you a few things about it.

“True love is more than anything a responsibility. It is the greatest responsibility, for lovers are the caretakers of each other’s hearts, and lives. And to fulfill this responsibility requires great compromise and sacrifice. That is why the mother cleans the child’s behind, even though it is quite unpleasant. You laugh, Jennifer, but have you changed a newborn?” Jennifer shook her head. “I’m kidding, but truly, you can’t underestimate the importance of sacrifice. Willingness to do the things you don’t want to do for the sake of someone else. It may not sound as exciting as lust and sex and God forbid getting a tattoo with a heart, but sacrifice and compromise are the Krazy Glue of love. It is what keeps a marriage together.”

I began playing with a loose thread at the bottom hem of my shirt. Was a rabbi really the right person to be defining love? I mean, spiritual matters or morals maybe, but love? I would have liked to see his résumé. Not that I doubted him, or could think of a better person off the top of my head; I just wasn’t sure this guy in the outfit from Sy Syms’s had the “Love Ph.D.” He was wearing a wedding ring, but was it his first marriage? How did he know she was the one, did he have an epiphany, was it a lightning bolt at first sight? Did that shit even exist? It felt like maybe Hollywood and Hallmark conspired to invent it. These were things I wanted to understand; sacrifice I had heard about. I kept pulling at the thread. I wondered whether, if I kept unraveling it, I’d eventually be sitting there topless. Or maybe just the torso part would disappear, and I’d still be wearing sleeves. It would be an interesting experiment. The rabbi cleared his throat and I was back in the classroom.
“Now, the other side of sacrifice and compromise is passion. Because in a marriage, you are willing to sacrifice and compromise on things that, in the end, aren’t as important, so as to improve the ones you are most passionate about. For example, a man might take a lesser job so as to have more time with his family, et cetera.” He held up his hands. “Or a woman, I do not mean to be sexist. Responsibility, sacrifice, compromise, and passion. The four horsemen of love, all perfect topics for a wedding ceremony. Okay, now, have any of you thought about your ceremonies?”

Nora had. “My sister and her fiancé are both English professors, so I was going to start with a reading of a poem, either a Shelley or a Donne, their favorites. Then I was going to tell the story of how they met, and then get into the vows, which I’m going to help them write.” She crinkled her forehead. “How does that sound?”

Rabbi Stan took off his glasses and cleaned them with a small piece of cloth he pulled from his pocket. “Well, Nora,” he said, “I think the poetry is a nice personalized touch. But you must also think about how you will bring your friends and family into this emotional setting. Please do not think this cynical, but you must understand that a wedding is not a private ceremony. No, this is a stage show for two people to tell the world they love each other, to declare it to the four winds, and you shall be the master of ceremonies.” Again he cleared his throat. “Think of this as the Super Bowl of their life. Never will they have more people gather to see them, rooting for not only a win, but also for a good game. So as they say, you will need some sizzle to help sell this steak. Because you can make it beautiful for the bride and groom, but if the rest of the congregation does not feel included, there will be coughing and talking and the worst thing you could have, which is grandparents audibly complaining. If you hear, ‘What is she talking about?’ from a senior, the ceremony is in trouble. It is the Jewish equivalent of a tomato thrown at a comedian. Trust me. I have been heckled by many of our elderly congregants when they don’t like a sermon.” He smiled.

“Has anyone else thought about their ceremonies?” We looked at one another. I sure as shit hadn’t. I shifted awkwardly in my seat.

“That’s fine,” he said. “Let’s take fifteen minutes and each of you brainstorm a bit what you think you might want to talk about. Then we will have a starting place for each of you.” He passed out some paper, and I bummed a pen from Nora, who fished out a spare from the bottom of her bag. Rabbi Stan turned his back to us and went to the computer on his desk.

Everyone leaned forward and began scratching out wedding ideas. I wanted to think about Stacey and Eric, but sitting there, the rabbi’s back to me, I had what alcoholics call a moment of clarity. In the not-too-distant future I was going to be standing on a stage in front of three hundred people wearing a suit. A suit I probably needed to buy, because I hadn’t worn the one I owned—the “interview suit” my parents had bought me after college—in years, and it probably didn’t fit. The word “oy” struck me as appropriate.

I attempted to think about what made Stacey and Eric special. They were incredibly dependable, rock-solid, the perfect candidates to hold your spare set of keys. Yeah, that sounded really romantic. What was I going to say? I hadn’t given the whole thing too much meditation, but in the back of my head I had been thinking I might try to do a fun, sort of comic ceremony. But I could see now from the rabbi’s whole love spiel that this was pretty serious. Still, it was hard to be sincere without also being dull. I tried to think of wedding scenes from books or movies, but all that was really coming to me was The Graduate. “Hello darkness, my old friend…” Great, now “The Sounds of Silence” was going to be stuck in my head. I began to doodle just so I wasn’t sitting there with my pen in the air.

The fifteen minutes were up, and Rabbi Stan had each of us talk about the people we were going to marry, and then go through our first thoughts for the ceremony. When my turn came I talked about the only thing I scribbled that was even close, that most friends of Stacey and Eric’s had only ever known them as a couple, since they had been dating so long. I thought it might have potential. After we each took our turn, the group gave pointers to and critiques of each person’s idea. The comments I received were mostly, “You need to dig a little deeper,” which, yeah, I knew. The class came to a close, and Rabbi Stan told us that we were to continue to work on our “ceremony starts.” Next week he would spend some one-on-one time with each of us, helping us get to a place where we were comfortable enough to go the rest of the way on our own. I already felt like I needed a tutor. I wondered if there was a place you could buy wedding ceremonies like you could buy term papers.

We shuffled out of the temple and said our good-byes. Nora lived in Jersey and asked if any of us needed a ride to
the Upper West Side. Mark lived there, so he hopped into her Lexus SUV and off they rode. Jennifer and I walked up Lexington; I toward the subway, she toward her apartment on Ninety-eighth Street. That worked out quite nicely for me. She was cute, American, and didn’t strike me as a trouser thief. I was curious.

“So, what did you think of the class?” I asked.

“It was different from what I expected.” She smiled. “I mean it was really casual. ‘Rabbi Stan’? I’m Orthodox, so anything in temple for me is a lot more formal.”

Orthodox? I looked at her. She was fairly stylish, I would have never guessed. Well, she was rocking that signature long jean skirt, but it wasn’t ankle-length or anything. “Yeah, I’ve never met any first-name rabbis either,” I said. We waited at the corner as the light was just changing in our favor. “So, I guess your friends aren’t Orthodox, right?”

She laughed and pushed her curls out of her face. “Oh, no way. They are total hippies. The wedding is going to be in Rhinebeck on a horse farm, and they’re roasting a pig! You know, a big one on a spit with an apple in its mouth? It’s not going to be Jewish at all. I know that stuff anyway.”

We walked some more and I decided to keep going past the first subway entrance at Eighty-sixth Street to the one at Ninety-sixth. We traded stories, bitched about the city a little. I told her about Stacey and Eric, and found out that Jennifer was in med school as well, not a resident yet but on her way. She asked me what I did, and I sort of panicked and told her I was an assistant producer. It wasn’t a huge lie, just a one-word lie. I was an assistant, after all.

Jennifer also happened to have a great can, which I hadn’t noticed in the temple. Yep, overall the whole thing she had there was a tight little package. I considered asking her if she wanted to get a drink as we were walking past bar after bar, but the Orthodox thing threw me. So when we hit the next subway, I gave her a pat on the shoulder and said my good-bye.

“Hey, next week after our class, there’s a med school party if you want to check it out. You can bring whoever you want, if you want to come,” she said, the breeze blowing her sweater tight against her body. She was confident, I liked that. She wasn’t posturing.

“Definitely. That sounds fun,” I said, halfway down the stairs. “I’ll bring Rabbi Stan.”

She laughed, turned, and continued on her way. I cruised into the subway and through the turnstiles. I could hear the train arriving, so I raced down the pockmarked concrete stairs two at a time and slipped into the car just as the doors closed. Huffing, I flopped into an empty seat. The train hiccupped and then shuddered down the tracks, and I wondered if religious girls were good kissers.
It was almost midnight by the time I got downtown. I walked west on Eleventh Street, away from the hubbub of Union Square, where the train dropped me. I whistled “God Save the Queen” as I crossed Seventh Avenue. It was always amazing to me how once you crossed Seventh, the din of the city died down and, just like that, you were alone on a peaceful street lined with beautiful old townhouses. Uma Thurman lived somewhere on this block, and I looked into the oversized windows as I walked past, hoping for a glimpse of her or any other wealthy, naked woman who might care to put on a show for the have-lesses. Nothing doing, though. Empty rooms and fancy chandeliers were all that was on display. I kept moving through the light and shadows, looking this way and that, soaking it in. I was in no rush. I turned the corner and sidestepped two men kissing against a mailbox, taking up a good chunk of sidewalk. The air felt delicious and nutritious, even though I was a bit anxious about this wedding thing. I’d put some work into that soon, I told myself. Maybe this weekend.

I opened the door to that good old eyesore, 99 Perry, and went in. I walked over to the mailboxes; I hadn’t checked mine earlier. They were located underneath and behind the staircase in a little area I liked to call the “Rats’ Nest.” I opened mine up, just coupons, a postcard for some band I didn’t remember hearing, and a cell-phone bill. Suddenly I felt something on my back and I spun around.

“Oh, did I scare you?” asked a skinny, scraggly-ass white guy. He was wearing a blue T-shirt and ripped jeans, his short brown hair a mess. You could play connect-the-dots with his acne and probably draw The Last Supper. “Sorry, sir.” He realized he was looming over me and backed up a step.

“Who are you?” I asked, trying to seem casual. It was cramped back there. Something felt weird and I didn’t like it.

“I’m a friend of Robert’s,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for him, but it was cold out so I just came in. The front door wasn’t locked.”

It was true, the lock on the door sucked. I edged past him toward the stairs. This was definitely one of those guys I had seen out my apartment window that day with Patty. “Yeah, well if he’s not here, you should probably wait outside, know what I mean? Robert doesn’t like people waiting inside the building.” I was bluffing but figured Robert would be with me on that.

“No, I said firmly. “He’s not home, I’m telling you, man.”

He took a small step toward me. His voice was pleading and getting louder. “Please, sir. Just knock on his door. Two-A. Pleaseee! I really need to see him!”

“No, it’s late, man. Go wait outside or I’m calling the cops. Come on, don’t make me be an asshole.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket. The guy looked more than a little jittery. I had seen Trainspotting ten million times on cable; I wasn’t taking any chances that this guy was Francis fucking Begbie.

His voice rose. He spit his words at me. “Why would you call the cops? I’m his friend, sir.” He stared me dead in the eyes. I could feel a bit of perspiration beading up on my forehead. Why did everyone want to fight me lately?

I fingered the “9” button on my phone, then gestured with the phone toward the door. “He’s not home, I’m telling you, man.”
“Bullshit, man!” he erupted. “I know he’s there, I can see in his window from outside. I saw him!”

The front door opened and in walked Patty. She looked up at me and then at the ragged crackhead. “Walter, what are you doing in here?” she said, staring at him.

“Nothing. I was cold and…”

“I told you never to come in here.” Her voice was like a drill sergeant’s. “Get out before I get the cops, and if the cops come…Robert. Will. Kill. You. Let’s go. Out out out.” She grabbed his arm and showed him to the door. “Wait outside, we don’t care. In here, we care. Good-bye.” And away he shuffled, like a teenager dressed down by a tough mom.

“You,” I said, smiling as she turned back to face me, “are no joke. He wasn’t going to listen to me, but you took care of him like that.”

“Well, he knows I know Robert. But it’s all in the tone of voice. It’s the same with dogs. You have to talk to them like you’re their master, that’s the key. You don’t ask them to sit—you tell them.” She leaned against the banister. “What are you up to? Going in or out?”

“I was just on my way in,” I said, still shaking off the scene. “How about you, calling it a night?”

“I was,” said Patty. “But if you’re up for it, I’d pop across the road for a quick one at the White Horse,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

I was kind of wide-awake now. “Okay. But you have to escort me home after so Walter doesn’t beat me up.”

“Oh, hush,” she said, walking to the door and holding it open for me.

* * * * *

The White Horse was pretty crowded, so we grabbed two pints and found some space to stand in the corner near the jukebox. Patty held up her glass. “To the successful completion of our mission and the defeat of our enemies.” I wasn’t sure what that meant but I clinked her glass all the same and let the cold Harp numb my tongue. I flipped through the jukebox’s offerings. Van Morrison was playing, furthering my belief that the White Horse did not have one of the more up-to-date jukeboxes in the city. Evidence: Huey Lewis was still present. I tried to picture the human who might put on “I Want a New Drug” without irony. It could only be one of the News.

Patty excused herself to go to the bathroom and I chipped away at my beer. I wondered if people might think I was out boozing with my mom. I kicked myself in the ass for the thought the second it zipped through my consciousness; I hated when I became a cynical bastard like that. There were a million of those in this city, it was a pretty unoriginal style. Not many people here could say a positive thing without adding a “but.” They’d seen it all before, and even if they hadn’t, they’d pretend they had. A spaceship could land and people would be like, “Oh, you’re from Mars? That’s so expected. I was hoping for Saturn.” Any sincere thoughts were immediately roughed up and taken advantage of, like rubes stepping off the all-night bus from Iowa. People laughed out loud a little less here, they were guarded. They didn’t want to show they’d been surprised or something.

I looked around the bar. It seemed there was some kind of office softball team that must’ve come by after their game, as well as the usual mix of law students and neighborhood types. No one to wake Lil’ Petey up. I did some small circles with my shoulders and rolled my neck around; I had a touch of a headache and the beer wasn’t really helping matters yet.

I saw Patty squeezing her way back toward me through the crowd. She was carefully holding four shots in front of her as if they were hydrogen bombs she didn’t dare drop lest civilization endeth.

“I didn’t know it was going to be that kind of night,” I said, genuinely surprised at the offering. I wasn’t really
thinking about getting shitfaced.

Patty smiled. “No one ever does until it happens.” She balanced the shots on top of the jukebox. “This is sort of a sampler. I didn’t know what you drank. I’m embarrassed, I should know what kind of poison my neighbor prefers. There’s Jack, Bushmill’s, Southern Comfort, and tequila. Your choice.”

I picked up one of the brown ones I thought was the Jack, shaking off a twinge of foreboding. “You had to get four shots, huh?” I said, grinning.

“Tequila for me,” she said, holding the glass up. “Please make the toast, neighbor.”

I raised mine. “Okay, well, here’s to you then, Patty. When you hear me retching later, please be kind and don’t yell at me to shut up.”

Mouths opened, hands tilted, and liquid was swallowed. I could feel the trail of fire go from the back of my tongue down through my pipes until it hit bottom and spread wildly in the dry grass of my stomach. I chased it with the bottom of my beer. “Blech,” I said, eyes tearing.

Patty was already holding up her next shot. I lived next to the female Bukowski, it seemed. She handed me the SoCo. “C’mon, take your medicine,” she laughed. “The faster you do it the less it hurts.” She tipped her head back and sucked the shot from the glass like the cowboys in the Westerns do when they’ve rolled into a saloon after a long day on the trail.

I downed mine as well, although my form was closer to that of a freshman girl at a sorority mixer, eyes screwed closed and a look of disgust on my face. I wasn’t an amateur when it came to shots, but sometimes when you haven’t properly girded yourself, they can be a quite a shock to the system. Like jumping into a really cold pond.

I went to the bar with watery eyes and fetched us two more beers, wondering how long it was going to be until the two doses of evil got into my bloodstream and reached my brain. Any moment now, any moment now.

We drank those beers and then started on two more that a waitress friend of Patty’s brought by on the house. Above the clamor of the bar, Patty was going on about what it had been like to live around here years ago, during the riots at the Stonewall. “Let me tell you something,” she said, leaning toward me, “the gay guys weren’t all muscled out like they are today. They were more effeminate back then. But they were still stylish as hell. And the cops, the cops were all these fat, out-of-shape guys in their polyester uniforms. Everyone down here was rooting for the gays. Less firepower but so much more panache.” She poked me on the shoulder. “How you feeling, soldier? Am I losing you?”

“No, I was listening,” I said, momentarily a bit unsteady. “Just getting my sea legs.”

“Hey, do you want to go somewhere else?” She held her almost-full beer up to mine. “I mean, after these?”

“Sure. I mean, maybe.” What time was it?

“Think about it. I know a fun spot. But first, the ladies’ room.” Patty strode off.

I was fading a little but game. Why not? All I had to do tomorrow was man the phones a bit, and remember to breathe. I could kill a lot of brain cells and still perform adequately, what a joke. Patty must’ve had an easy day in store as well. I had seen grown-ups drink before, but generally it was at weddings and things and they were wearing suits or pearls. Patty was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt with STUYVESANT written in all caps on the front, with jeans and the sandals. If those sandals could talk. I guessed they’d probably say something like “Look out for that dog shit!” or something. Yeah, sandals didn’t seem like they’d have much of a personality. Those high boots girls wore, now those you’d want to sit next to at a party. They knew the secrets of the back of the knee.

Patty returned and then I went to the bathroom. I carefully used my foot to lift the toilet seat. I did my thing and then used my foot again to flush. I was like Daniel Day-Lewis when it came to using public toilets without touching them with my hands. If only I could manipulate my foot to turn restroom doorknobs, I could live without any fear of bathroom germs. Maybe someday.
I found Patty in our spot near the jukebox. The crowd had thinned somewhat since we’d arrived. I still wondered what time it was, but then I thought maybe I’d better not find out. Grabbing my beer and bravely taking a big gulp, I asked Patty, “So, what were you thinking about next?”

“Well, neighbor, I’m thinking we should leave here, and go to this private bar I know on Sixth Avenue near Twentieth Street. I think you’ll like it.”

“What’s its name?” I asked.

“I don’t know, actually. I don’t think it has a name. It’s in an apartment.” She proceeded to tell me it was an after-hours joint, a place that was open after the legal limit of four a.m. I had actually never been to one, but I knew Tina had had some fuckedup nights where she ended up at places like that. Patty explained that a lot of bartenders and waiters who worked the late-night shifts only got off at four, when no legal places were still open. These bars filled that need.

We drained our beers and walked outside. Patty immediately lit up a cigarette. I could almost see our apartment building from where we stood, and I was thinking of calling an audible. She took a long drag and let out a smoke ring. I watched as it curled up toward the streetlight and hung there, slowly dispersing and becoming part of the sky. It sucked that you could never see stars in the city, too much light leak. Patty yelled “Taxi!” and a cab pulled up beside us. She stamped on the butt and opened the door, and in we slid. She gave the driver an address and our heads snapped back with the G-force of acceleration.

I was feeling a bit like Jell-O as the cabdriver managed to hit every single pothole on his way up Hudson. Riding in the backs of cabs drunk sometimes made me a bit nauseated; all the grease and license stickers on the Plexiglas partition made it nearly impossible to look out the front windshield to see where you were going. I stared out the side window and watched stores and pavement and graffiti pass.

Patty let out a mighty cough as we crossed Fifteenth Street. One hand covered her mouth, the other braced against the partition, fingers flexed, white on the tips from the pressure. Her eyes were shut tight and a vein on the side of her forehead stuck out like a major thoroughfare on a map. She rolled down the window and spat. “Uggh,” she grunted.

“You okay?” I asked, as the car rolled to a stop at a light.

“Yes. No big thing.” Patty smoothed her hair. Her breathing returned to normal.

The cabdriver leaned his head back. He was a very dark-skinned black man, I guessed probably from Ghana—there were a lot of drivers from there, who knew why? He gave us the once-over, eyeballing us nastily; he was worried about having someone yak in the back of his cab. He shook his head and then punched the gas. He was a classic two-foot driver, one on the gas, one on the brake. I was sure that style had led to at least one vomit scene for him before, you’d think he would’ve figured it out.

We turned on Nineteenth and traversed the two avenues in silence. Patty stared out the window and I started to get tired again. But suddenly the taxi screeched to the curb and we were there. She pulled five dollars out from somewhere and we were standing on the empty avenue.

“You know,” she said, looking around, “some cabdrivers are very nice. The others just hate humans, they deal with them all day and are sick of them. Those guys are just dogs eating garbage, in my book.” She put her arm around me. “This way, neighbor.”

We walked up to the buzzer of a low-rise building and Patty punched the third-floor button. After a pause, the door buzzed open and in we went to the fluorescent-lit lobby. Patty pushed the button for the elevator. Immediately the door opened. Inside was a big-in-every-way man wearing an oversized T-shirt and sunglasses and holding a walkie-talkie.

Patty smiled at him. “Hi, I’m a friend of Gus’s. We’re just going up to his place.”

Gigantor didn’t miss a beat. “Five each.” I gave him a ten and the doors closed, the gears whirred, gravity was
defied, and twenty seconds later we reached our destination. The Stones’ “Country Honk” was playing as we stepped from the bright elevator directly into a dark room. It did look much like it was someone’s apartment. We passed a few old sofas bordering a coffee table where some silhouettes sat laughing. It didn’t seem very crowded; there were maybe thirty people in a room that could have easily held a hundred. Patty led me into the kitchen, where a bald man in a white T-shirt in his early fifties was filling the fridge with Bud bottles from a cardboard case. I guessed this was the bar.

Patty got a Bud and I got a Jack and Coke, hoping the Coke would wake me up a bit. At this point in a late, late night, trying to wake up was among the stupidest things I could choose to do. Also, a quarter-glass of cola was not going to undo any sort of damage. That would take drugs. And I could probably get drugs here. I shook the evil thought from my head, took a sip, waded through a few people, and sank into an easy chair against the wall. Patty pulled up a stool next to me and we drank, surveying the scene. People were generally older than I would’ve expected; only a few folks looked like they were in their twenties, the rest spanning that hard-to-pinpoint age of above thirty and under forty-five.

“A lot of the people here work at St. Vincent’s Hospital; they get off their shifts and need a place to go. A lot of city workers on the eight-to-five shift as well,” Patty said. “Sometimes there’ll be sanitation workers; you’ll smell those, and also a lot of the guys who deliver flowers to the flower district. It’s early for most of them, though.”

I straightened up and reached into my pocket, wondering exactly what time it was. My cell phone read 4:27. Pow, right in the liver. There was no turning back now. I took a big swig of my drink. I was on the moving walkway to Shametown. I promised myself that, before I shut my eyes later, I would drink an entire Gatorade. A friend had once told me that the best hangover prevention was Pedialyte, the medicine designed to keep infants from becoming dehydrated. I made a mental note to buy a case. Then I smelled something. Something warm and familiar. It wasn’t fresh-baked bread.

Patty was exhaling a cloud of pot smoke from a Rasta-style cone-shaped joint. “I finally got some of my own,” she smiled, passing it to me. “Do you want a little, or have you had enough?”

“I don’t know,” said Patty, taking the joint and putting it to her lips. “Apocalypse Now?”

“I said Arthur,” I said. It was one of my favorites. Dudley Moore played a drunk amazingly well. My second-favorite movie with a drunk in it was My Favorite Year, starring my pseudonym, O’Toole.

Patty passed the joint back to me. “Dudley Moore, it was so sad what happened to him. Watching him degenerate like that, it made me cry. You know he was a fabulous piano player, but after he got sick he couldn’t even do that. I saw him on Sixty Minutes before he passed, poor thing.” She coughed and I heard the sea inside her shift.

I took a small pull on the bone and gave it back to Patty. “I’m done, thanks.” My mind started speeding along and I found myself humming the sappy Christopher Cross tune from Arthur, “When you get stuck between the moon and New York Ci…ty…” I was thinking about Dudley, maybe he brought it on himself, maybe he flew too close to the sun by marrying Susan Anton, she was like a six-foot-two internationally credentialed piece of ass and he was like five-nothing and jowly. Then I felt bad. You shouldn’t joke about others’ misfortune. But others’ misfortune was often the best thing to joke about. Some comedians made entire careers out of it. Cartoons too. Look at Tom and Jerry. I fucking hated that Jerry. Asshole mouse. The best way to kill him, I thought, would be to feed him a fistful of Alka-Seltzers and a quart of tomato juice, then duct-tape closed all his orifices and wait for the big bang. Or was it his orifi? I took a sip of the Jack and Coke and breathed. My synapses were at DEFCON 5.

Patty was staring off over her shoulder, giggling. I figured she must have been as big a mess as me. I was a huge mess. I was a toilet. I was at the bottom of the landfill where all the toilets went, soiled and shivering but dancing gamely like a Rockette. “What are you giggling about, huh?”

Patty turned and pushed her hair behind her ears. “Oh, nothing. I just had déjà vu. I was thinking for a second that we were the same age. Because that’s how I feel, especially when I’m tipsy, and when I look at you and see your
little line-free face, I forget that I’m a lot older. This could be any night for me from twenty or thirty years ago, you know?” She smiled. “Anyway, I was thinking about this one guy I used to run with, Douglas, and how we used to always smoke pot in bars, kinda like this. Back then, I’d get so nervous and paranoid when I was high. I always thought some stranger on their way to the bathroom was going to narc on us. I was really silly about a lot of things, you know? Well, you don’t know, but you will. But then again you kind of won’t I guess, because I kind of don’t. I’m still silly about so many things. Maybe it’s because I never settled down or had kids, but I think my brain is in arrested development or something like that. Or maybe I’m just drunk.” She laughed, took a long swallow of her Bud, and sank back into her seat. “But I’m happy with it all, you know? I did pretty good,” she said quietly.

People had been arriving at the apartment, and little by little, it had filled up. I reached into my glass, took out an ice cube, and sucked on it, finally crunching it up between my molars. The time had come. “What do you think, Patty? Should we split before the sun rises?”

Patty stood up and stretched. “Yeah, let’s go.”

We got into the elevator with the big fellow and went back down to the lobby. It was that time when it’s almost light but it’s not but it is. We walked to the curb to hail a cab as a jogger bounded past. We looked at each other and cracked up.

It happened in the cab as we were speeding toward home. A bad wave of exhaustion and nausea. “Suddenly feeling grim,” I said through tight teeth as I rolled down the window. Stupid fucking child-safety window only went down partway. Great, I was going to have to thread the needle. With vomit. But fuck them all, I didn’t care if I puked in my shirt and had to wear it all day in the hot sun at a beach volleyball tournament.

“Keep it together, Jason,” Patty said, rubbing my neck. “We are so close.”

I bit my lip and focused out the window on the blur of the awakening city. The wind blew through my hair but I still felt like shit. We finally pulled up at the corner and I jumped out of the cab and started racewalking toward our building. Heel toe heel toe. Patty caught up with me a second later. “Let’s get you upstairs, partner.”

I never noticed it before, but the sun rose really quickly once it got itself started. Everything was turning yellow and the fucking birds were squawking. Patty opened the door and we hurried inside. Bad sweat drenched my brow. I took the stairs two at a time, keys already in hand. I wasn’t going to make it. I reached our landing and made a desperate attempt at the lock, but it was too late. Krakatoa erupted deep within me and I covered the bottom of my door with what Jesse Jackson might’ve called a multicolored mosaic. Sucking for air, I tried to remember what I had eaten, my face inches above the mess. The smell hit me and I retched again. This was the worst, the fucking worst. I was on my knees waiting for the next wave. I wiped my mouth with my forearm, tears in my eyes, nose running. “I’m going to fucking die,” I groaned. I let fly again. Less colors, more liquid.

Patty kneeled beside me and put her hand on my back. “No, you’re not,” she said.

I retched again, inverting my stomach like a reversible raincoat, but nothing came out. “Ugh, Christ! How do you know?” I cried, and spat into the puddle.

“Because it takes one to know one.”

I looked over at her, a string of saliva hanging from my mouth.

“Lung cancer,” she said.

I contemplated the tight little smile and the eyes that didn’t wink to say, “Just kidding.”

“I’ve got lung cancer,” she repeated, her voice steady, her expression stone.

I turned back to the dirty floor. The taste of bile rolled over my tongue. Gravity took it from there.
After twenty-four hours of whispering “I promise I will never drink again,” I was back at work Friday morning, on time. I felt mostly better but Wednesday night had been like a punch to the throat. I manned the receptionist desk, uncrumpled my brown bag, pulled out a bagel and OJ, and went online to see if any interesting e-mails had arrived during my sick day. Stacey had written, inviting me to dinner with her and Eric that night. I felt I could handle it, and so I replied in the affirmative. Besides, I had a few things I really should be asking them if I was to actually accomplish anything before my next rabbi class.

Tina had written letting me know there was an eighties-themed party that night as well. The thought of alcohol and girls dressed up like Olivia Newton-John circa *Xanadu* gave me the sweats, but I knew enough to know you never knew. That was the thing about promises; you could always say, “I made you, and I can break you.” I hopped on IM.

doodball5: howdy
tinadoll: super f-ing busy. sup?
doodball5: stop being such a power player. just responding to your e-mail. maybe a drink before your party?
tinadoll: k
doodball5: because i cant pull off a late one. bad ugliness after rabbi class
tinadoll: k
doodball5: jesus, you rot. call me when you have time for more than one letter
tinadoll: k
tinadoll: french girl?
doodball5: qui!
tinadoll: b.o.?
doodball5: nothing I couldn’t overcome
tinadoll: my little soldier

Melinda wasn’t in yet, the phone wasn’t ringing, nothing was happening. I clicked from the *Times* over to *Pitchfork*, excited to mock her tardiness for a change. The site loaded and the record review section stared me in the face. “Ah yes, record reviews,” I thought. Maybe now was the perfect time to finally write one myself.

I quickly opened up a Word document and saved it as “jason.reviews.” I settled back in my chair and fingered the keys for a few moments, unsure of where to start. I didn’t even know which record I wanted to critique. Sara walked
out of her office and started to make photocopies in the far corner. I wasn’t going to be able to focus on this at work.

I quit out of Word and started Google Image–searching things like “grandma thong” to see if anything spectacular came up. Things did come up. Apparently, those who fancied old women liked their old women to also be “hairy.” Now I knew. I was learning and growing.

Time passed, slowly but surely. JB came out of his office and holy crapola right up to me at the desk. It was an occurrence as rare as Halley’s Comet.

“Hi, Jason. Have you seen Melinda today?” he asked, fingerling the knot of his tie. JB wore jeans and a shirt and tie every day, without fail.

“Um, no, she hasn’t come in yet, actually,” I said. We had absolutely no rapport. “Maybe she’s sick, usually she calls if she’s going to be late.” I paused, then decided to throw in for good measure, “There’s a stomach virus going around, it really knocked me out of commission yesterday.”

“Oh? Well, I hope she’s okay. Let me know if you hear from her. Thanks, Jay.” He crinkled his forehead. “Do you prefer Jason or Jay?” he asked. It was a question that would’ve been polite six months ago, when he had first hired me.

“Oh, um, either is fine.” I cringed.

“Very good,” said JB, and he walked back to his office.

I returned to the Internet, wondering if JB thought I was an oddball. It was getting near time for lunch, and I considered calling Melinda’s cell phone. But I didn’t have to; she walked through the door a moment later, taking her sunglasses off mid-step.

“Oh, hello,” I said smugly, and opened my arms wide. “Don’t worry, because I have it all under control.”

She cracked a grin. “That’s good. Because I just sold my fucking play!”

“What?! Awesome!”

“I know! I just came from my lawyer’s. Can you believe I have a lawyer? I have a cramp from all the papers I had to sign.” She was beaming.

“Wait a second. Like two days ago you were all like, ‘I don’t know, probably never happen, it’s all preliminary’ and shit,” I said.

Melinda pulled a chair over and sat down. “I know, it was close then, but I was feeling superstitious and I didn’t want to jinx it. I haven’t even told my parents or anything. Actually I’m going to call them and some other people, and then let’s grab lunch and talk, ’kay?”

“Sure. Oh, hey, JB just came by looking for you, if you even give a shit anymore, Madam Playwright.”

“Oh, I was supposed to help him on this thing. Oh, well.” She got up and went back to the empty casting room to make her calls in peace.

I was happy for her but a little stunned. Wow, Melinda was out of here. Did you get rich when you sold a play? Nah, that couldn’t be. But still, I was thinking it must be pretty good money; it had been bought by a well-known producer, not some after-school theater. Hell, if it succeeded, it might even go to Broadway. I could say I knew her when. “We were both receptionists at this casting place. I mean, well, I still am.”

Melinda emerged and we went out to a diner around the corner. In between bites she told me the whole story. I chewed and listened and listened and chewed. She told me about her deal and how it worked, and the rewrites of certain scenes she had to do. She really liked all of the producer’s suggestions, so she was excited to get started—which she needed to, stat.
“I better be invited to all the fabulous parties with all the fabulous people,” I said, sipping my Diet Coke through the straw, focusing on getting the last drops hiding between the ice cubes.

“Of course!”

Melinda couldn’t stop smiling and even picked up the bill. We headed back upstairs. She went into JB’s office and closed the door. I went back to my seat at the desk. I sighed and checked my e-mail. Nothing. No one was on IM, either.

A few minutes later she emerged. She didn’t even give two weeks’ notice. She couldn’t. Those rewrites had to start immediately. So she put the one or two things she had at the office in a box, kissed me on the cheek, and left. We each promised to make plans and soon. Then she was gone. That was it.

* * * * *

I ended up being stuck there until seven. I had to work the camera for a casting session for outlaw-biker types. I stood around for an hour videotaping hairy, fat guys, most of whom showed up in leather pants and/or leather vests. Each guy had one line to deliver, and almost all opted to deliver it shirtless: “Yeah, fuckin’-A right I fucked him.” I was wondering if the role was for a gay porn film or a gangster flick. I couldn’t tell from the film title, Happy Father’s Day. That could have really gone in either direction. The place reeked of bad breath and musk by the time I left. People had so many different smells. And my job allowed me to experience them all. How magnificent.

After the last Hells Angel or Leatherman, I made my way over to meet Stacey and Eric for dinner at this Middle Eastern spot on Tenth Street that had great hummus and pitzas, aka pita pizzas. They already had a table when I arrived, and were sipping some wine and nibbling on olives.

“Hey, buddy,” said Eric, shaking my hand.

“Look who’s working late,” said Stacey, giving me a hug.

I got myself a beer and, lickety-split, my whole temperance movement was kaput. We figured out our order and got it in to the waiter. Eric began telling us a story about how he had observed brain surgery earlier in the day.

“The amazing thing is that when you cut through the skull, it’s not unlike being a carpenter. You really have to use your body. You could see the surgeon straining his muscles, flexing down on the saw. Even though it’s mechanical, it still requires putting your shoulder to it.” Eric brought his glass to his lips. “It was really intense.”

“I’ll bet,” said Stacey. “I guess that’s why it’s considered the hardest thing you could do, hence the phrase, ‘It’s not brain surgery.’”

“Ha-ha,” said Eric. He kissed his fiancée, then turned to me. “So how’ve you been, Jason, what’s new in your life?”

“Not that much. Work kinda sucks, but that’s not new.”

“Hey, anything happening on the Langford front?” asked Stacey.

“Status quo.” I popped an olive into my mouth and used my teeth to separate the meat from the stone. I was thinking about that surgeon. “Let me ask you this, Er,” I said, taking the pit from my mouth and putting it into the designated pit dish in the center of the table. “What do you know about lung cancer?”

“Um, well, I know a little. What do you want to know?”

“Just an overview is all. Is it treatable?”
“Lung cancer is pretty aggressive, but like all cancer it depends on when it’s caught, and different people respond differently to treatment.” He scratched his eyebrow. “Why? What’s up?”

“My neighbor Patty, I’ve probably mentioned her before, the eccentric older woman who lives next door to me…”

“The one you smoked pot with that time,” said Stacey. Then she frowned. “Oh, gosh, no.”

“Yeah, she told me she had lung cancer. She said she was dying. But this was after a really late night of drinking, I mean, she doesn’t seem weak or sick.” I took a pull on my beer. “But she does have this awful, disgusting cough.”

“Well, it’s impossible for me to tell, obviously,” said Eric. “But what makes cancer patients weak more than anything is the chemo,” said Eric. “Do you know if she’s started that yet?”

“Wait,” interrupted Stacey. “What do you mean she told you after a late night of drinking?”

I gave them the executive summary. Eric couldn’t offer much more, but thought she at least sounded strong if she was pounding drinks. Stacey sort of tsk-tsked me on going out ‘til dawn with my neighbor, then missing work hung over, but I let it go. I wasn’t looking for a lecture, and defending myself would’ve brought one on. I was a little sorry I’d brought the whole thing up.

The food arrived and we all started shoving it in. Mouth half full of pitza, I changed the subject. “Let’s talk wedding, shall we?”

“Let’s,” said Stacey.

“Okay,” I said, “well, I’ve been hard at work on your ceremony, and before I tell you my preliminary thoughts, which, let me just say, won’t be until after the rabbi helps me next week, I just wanted to ask you some really basic questions. Like, do you guys want to write your own vows, for starters?”

“I think the traditional ones are fine, don’t you honey?” said Eric, taking another slice.

“I mean, yeah, they’re ‘fine,’ but don’t you think we should personalize them a little?” Stacey turned to me. “We haven’t discussed it yet, obviously.” Then back to Eric. “I don’t think I want to repeat the same vows everyone else does, it just seems so impersonal.” She took a sip of her wine. “What do you think?”

He looked back at her for a moment before speaking. “Okay, that’s cool. So we’ll write something up I guess.”

“Oh, very good, now, let me ask you this,” I said, reaching for more pitza.

“But,” interrupted Eric, “I think it’s nice to say the same vows as everyone else. And by everyone else, I mean the same vows our parents said, and our grandparents, you know? Tradition.”

“Honey,” said Stacey, wiping her mouth with her napkin. “I totally hear you, but I don’t necessarily agree with the traditional vows. Take the part that says that I, as the bride, will ‘honor and obey’ you. That seems a little outdated to me, and I don’t really want to say it.”

“Jesus, it’s not like you have to take them so literally,” said Eric, jamming a piece of crust into his mouth. “It’s so pretentious. ‘Oh vee are so much more een love than anyone else has evair been. Vee have written zeese sacred words to describe our love to ze whole world.’”

“You’re thinking of your cousins! That’s just because they wrote those saccharine, lovey-dovey ones. Ours don’t have to be like that. And the whole point of a wedding is to show your love to the world, anyway.”
“That’s a whole other story,” Eric said, rolling his eyes at me. “Besides, when are we going to find the time to sit down and write vows? You know how crazy we’ve both been.”

Stacey stared at him. “I think we can find the time to write our wedding vows.”

Eric broke. He reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “Okay, okay, we’ll write the stupid—” He smiled. “I mean sacred vows. ’Kay?”

Stacey pulled her hand away. “What the fuck did you mean by”—she deepened her voice to impersonate him—“’that’s a whole other story’?”

I got up from the table. “I’m going to leave you two love-birds for a minute to visit the restroom.”

I walked away briskly. Marriage looked awesome. I couldn’t wait.

Inside the bathroom I splashed some water on my face and then texted Tina. I wasn’t dying for a big night, but I hadn’t seen her in a bit and I thought I should try to at least grab a drink. She had an actual relationship simmering and it was high time I got some more details. Or I could just bag it and go home and knock on Patty’s door. But Tina texted back instantaneously that she could meet me around the corner for a tipple. I wrote her that I’d call when the meal was over.

Back at the table the tension seemed to have subsided. Now they began to play the “What’s our single friend up to?” game. I wanted to get back to the ceremony but I didn’t want to re-ignite any arguments—maybe this was a thing best done over e-mail first, so they could discuss it privately before we got together. As we finished off the food, I answered their inquiries about “some girl who stole your pants?” and I told them about the French connection.

“So no one who’s girlfriend material,” said Stacey. She sounded dejected.

“I’m pretty single. But there’s this cute girl in my rabbi class who invited me to a party. She’s Orthodox, Stacey.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” asked Stacey.

“I don’t know, I just thought you might find it impressive,” I said, shrugging.

“You know, having a girlfriend wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, Jason,” she said. “It’s fun, that’s why most guys do it.”

“Even Hitler had a girlfriend,” I said, suppressing a burp.

Stacey frowned. “God, always such a wiseass.”

“It’s a song. The Mr. T Experience,” I said with a wave of the hand.

Stacey brightened. “Ooh, I know. There’s this girl in Eric’s rotation. She’s really cute.”

“She’s hot, bro,” said Eric.

“’Bro’?” I asked, grinning.

“No good?” asked Eric. I shook my head. “Whatever. Her name is Liza and she’s pretty hot—a hot doctor. Just broke up with her long-distance boyfriend.”

“I’m not much for the setups,” I said, shrugging. It was true. I had been on a few. Desperately awkward. Even if the person was cool, you had the feeling like, here we are, two people so pathetically alone that friends have conspired to put us together. Plus, setups never put out; too many people in the know. “Maybe we’ll end up at the same party sometime, and you can introduce me.”

“She’s not going to be single long, Jay,” Stacey said, taking the bill from the waiter.
“I don’t know, she probably won’t jump into another relationship right away,” said Eric, taking out his wallet. “I’m sure she’ll date for a bit.”

“You guys are like real estate agents—she’s gonna be gone soon! No money down! Sheesh, just bring her out one night. And by the way, the Orthodox girl is in med school too—at Columbia.”

“Now I’m impressed,” said Stacey, smiling. “Listen, dinner’s on us, for helping with the ceremony and all.”

I feigned protest and thanked them and we went outside. They weren’t up for meeting Tina, so we said our goodbyes and shuffled off in opposite directions. Why did it feel like I had just had dinner with my parents?

* * * *

Tina was sitting on a stool at a nasty little dive bar called Lucy’s on Avenue A. Lucy was the owner, a Russian or Romanian woman, probably in her seventies; she still tended the bar.

I said hello and Tina said hello and we got two vodka sodas with lemon. She was wearing a gingham dress over cropped jeans, like a picnic blanket laid over a denim field. She reached over and tousled my hair.

“Time for a haircut, Tex,” she said, grinning.

“Really? I was going to grow it long and then cut it asymmetrical, so it would look like I was always standing on a steep hill,” I shot back, patting my hair back down. “Your boy have any product I can bum?”

“Don’t make me kick you in the kidneys. Actually, he’s looking a bit haggard himself. Making a movie is a shitload of work; I never really realized it until I saw all the crap that needs to get done.”

“Duh. Don’t you ever watch DVD behind-the-scenes stuff?”

“No, nerdlinger. Anyway, he’s working like ten hours a day on the script and locations alone, and then he spends half the night trying to find the crew he needs. They’ve got some A-list people even though they have like a, I don’t know, C-list budget. I guess people like the story. But they start shooting in September, and they’re still looking for a stunt coordinator and a second camera crew. And he needs to begin locking in all the post-production people, the editor, the effects guys…”

“Hold up. There’s special effects?” I was surprised, I didn’t realize it was that big a film.

“It’s not Lord of the Rings, but he said there’s a couple things, yeah. And he still needs a music supervisor, you know, the person who finds the right songs. They’re going to be a big part of the overall feel of the thing; Brett wants it to be like a Harold and Maude or Rushmore.”

“Harold and Maude was all Cat Stevens, I’m pretty sure. I love that movie.” I sang the main track, “If you want to sing out, sing out…”

Tina cut me off. “Don’t sing out.”

“Anyway, he’s Yusef something now. And the guy from Devo picked all the songs in Rushmore, Mark Mothersbaugh.” I took an ice cube into my mouth and rolled it around, considering it. “I have that soundtrack if Brett wants it,” I said, crunching down on the ice.

“Me too. I think everyone our age has it, they basically handed it out freshman year. I doubt he’s got Devo money, but I’ll mention it.” She held up her glass. “Anyway, enough about that. Good to see you, sir. What’s new, what’s exciting, what don’t I know?”

“Cheers,” I said, clinking her tumbler with mine. “Um, well, you’re up to date on most stuff. You know about
Isabelle, the French girl.”

“Did you Chunnel her?” She giggled.

“Probably not. What’s that?”

“You know, the Chunnel? It’s when you go in England and come out in France.” She let out a full cackle.

I detailed my vomitous night with Patty, leaving out the cancer part.

“Now your next-door neighbor knows how soft you are.” She stabbed the lemon in her drink with the tiny red straw. “Anything less disgusting to report?”

“Well, as you well know,” I sighed, “I’m now profoundly single, once again. My only possibility is this religious Jewish girl.” I told her all about my Orthodox classmate.

“I don’t think those kosher girls are too good about trimming it up, FYI,” Tina said, slurping her drink. “I remember from gym in high school. Tikva Rubenstein—huge bush.”

I relayed how Melinda had sold her play. “So now it’s just me as the only somewhat normal person in the office. You’ll probably be seeing a lot more of Doodyball on IM.”

“That’s so cool for her. So, are you going to get promoted to her position?”

I chuckled. “No. I don’t think either of us exactly has a title, Tina. It’s grunt work. I’ll probably take some of her responsibilities, but I don’t even know if they’ll hire anyone else. I could probably do it all, it’s just horseshit really.”

“You should bust out of there too, then.” Tina swiveled her stool to face me better. “I don’t want to sound like your guidance counselor, but if you’re not into that job—which, c’mon, you’re not—then you should go find something you like. It’s not like you’re supporting a couple of kids.”

This from a girl I had once seen pick a dime bag filled with white powder up off of dirty Houston Street and snort it without knowing what the fuck it was—and then call me a pussy for not joining her.

“Easier said than done, Oprah,” I said, sticking out my tongue at her, then acquiescing. “I know, I know, I need a game plan. I’m working on it. Actually, Stacey hooked me up with Scott Langford.”

“I heard about that. He works at Fader, right?”

“Yeah. I need to send over some album reviews for him to be able to do anything, though.” I held the cold glass up to my forehead for a second, I had the slightest of headaches. It was really too soon for drinking again.

“Written any?”

“Not yet.” I shrugged and smiled despite myself, and then pointed to Tina’s empty glass. “Another one?”

“Nah, I want to get going to this party.” Brett was meeting her there. “Did you want to come? I kind of want your opinion already. I really like him, I think. Is that weird?”

“So weird. Shut up, that’s great. I’d definitely like to get to know him better, but I don’t think tonight is going to be the night. I’m still a wee bit shaky. And I don’t want to cramp your style.”

“You won’t cramp my style. Not any more than usual, anyway. You sure?”

I was. I didn’t have the knees for a big one. But I wanted to know more about this Brett. I mean, the guy was making a feature film. Was he a genius? Was he hilarious? Did he have any cute female friends who liked to wiggle it, just a little bit?
“He’s funny. He’s not funny like we’re funny, of course. But he makes me laugh. He’s a real go-getter, but not in an annoying way. I don’t know, it’s fun, it’s comfortable, it hasn’t been boring yet. He, like, makes me feel good about myself.” She blushed. “Ugh, I sound like a Lifetime movie!”

“Nah, you sound like a girl with a crush is all,” I said. I gritted my teeth and put away my quiver of sarcastic arrows. The truth was she looked happy. So I said it.

“I am, I guess,” she said, tossing an ice cube at me. “How’s this—you latch on to your little Golda Meir, and then we can double-date. Sound like a plan?”

“Sure, we’ll get blintzes,” I said.

“C’mon, seriously. It would be fun. We could have chicken fights, we could all move to Brooklyn together, split a brownstone. It’d be America’s favorite new sitcom.”

I scratched my neck. “Brooklyn, huh? First let me see if we get past date number one, then we’ll talk real estate, ’kay?”

“Of course, of course, first things first, naturally.”

We hung out for another ten minutes and then went our separate ways, her down and east, me, straight and west. As I got into a cab, I felt a twinge of remorse that maybe I should’ve made the effort to go meet Brett. But it was too late now, and besides, my pillow awaited. A good night’s sleep had become pretty much the only productive thing I was doing with my time. I went home and fell into my bed like it was a warm pool. A Nestea plunge into slumber.
I woke up the following Wednesday thinking it had been exactly a week now since I had last seen Patty. I even knocked on her door Sunday and Monday, but she wasn’t there. I told myself not to be a nervous Nellie. But it was eating at me.

It was early and I was still lying in bed. I began contemplating the bizarre dream I had just had. I was on the dais marrying Eric not to Stacey but to that crackhead, Walter. I kept looking at Eric for a clue, wondering what was going on. He slipped me a bit of paper that said, “If you don’t marry us, his friend will kill Stacey.” I glanced at Walter, who actually looked quite majestic in the wedding gown. Then all of a sudden an Apache helicopter landed and out came Bill Cosby and Jerry Berger, this fat kid I knew from sleep-away camp when I was thirteen. Jerry was still thirteen, and still had his two broken arms. We used to tease him because it was physically impossible for him to wipe his own ass. They approached the dais, and Cosby put his arm around Jerry. “I think you owe this young man an apology, Jason.” Then Walter pulled out a knife and gutted Cosby, shrieking, “You are ruining my special day!”

My jaw ached. I must’ve been grinding my teeth. I got up and brushed them, still feeling a bit anxious. Then I dug into a pile of clothing on the floor of my closet, hoping to mine some buried piece of wardrobe gold. Stymied, I pulled out the same pair of jeans I had been wearing all week and threw them on my bed. The thighs were becoming somewhat charcoal-colored, but the only other pair I had, my “old jeans,” were even filthier. Meanwhile, somewhere out in Brooklyn my perfectly good Dickies were probably on standby should Jane run out of paper towels.

I finished getting dressed, found my fully charged iPod, hit the street, and set off toward the office. The fresh air felt healthy so I snorted a noseful. I clicked PLAY; “Range Life” by Pavement came on and I began to match my stride to the loping rhythm. It was sort of a wistful, jangly number, I didn’t really know what Malkmus was trying to say but I liked the way he said it, you felt it in your chest. The sun dappled the sidewalk through the trees; you could tell it was going to be hot later, but right now it was just right. I turned off Perry and started up Seventh. The music was well timed, the light changed and I crossed Eleventh Street without slowing a step. A dog walker with three dogs passed me, the back of his shirt read POOP INSPECTOR, STAY 200 FEET BACK. I neared the subway and Malkmus sang, “Don’t worry, we’re in no hurry.” I took his advice and kept going past the entrance. It was definitely a walk-to-work day.

Malkmus gave way to Motörhead. It was way too nice out for Lemmy’s heaviness, unless I was to happen upon a mid-morning knife fight. I rejected him with a click, and then switched off the shuffle mode, feeling very much like Luke Sky-walker when he turned off his onboard computer and listened to Obi-Wan’s entreaty to use The Force. I stood in a small crowd on the corner of Sixteenth Street, waiting for the light. To my right was a teenage girl wearing black-and-white-striped tights and carrying a purse that very well might’ve been a hollowed-out Tickle Me Elmo. She blew her nose in a tissue, her eyes were swollen. I searched for the right song, finally landing on “I’ve Just Destroyed the World.” The longing, done-her-wrong Willie Nelson track played into my ears as I watched the girl sniffle. The light changed and she stomped away into the commuter swarm.

I kept moving north. I tried an instrumental, Django’s “Japanese Sandman,” but it was too up, too festive, it made me think of Christmas and escaping from the cold into a diner for a hot chocolate. No. I scrolled past some stuff I had been hearing a lot of lately, LCD Soundsystem and the Whites Stripes and Modest Mouse, until I found an old favorite by Will Oldham. His voice lilted and broke over a two-fisted piano refrain and my eyes moved with it, panning and synching with the song. I followed a couple of unhappy men in red jumpsuits as they pushed a wheeled trash can in the gutter. I looked left and saw a gaggle of middle-aged women in skirts and white sneakers scratch lottery tickets and sneak smokes outside an office building while passersby crisscrossed, off on their own missions. Meanwhile Will warbled, searchingly.

I turned east on Thirty-second toward my office. It was an awful garment-center block, always overcrowded, trucks double-parked everywhere, unloading. You had to fight your way down the narrow sidewalks. I scrolled past
some mellow Belle and Sebastian, looking for the right piece of aggressiveness until I got to Q, clicked the Queers, and selected “Stupid Fucking Vegan.” The track bounced and ripped and I basically redrovered my way through a couple insistent on holding hands and slowing everyone down. I turned sideways and expertly squeezed between a wheeled clothing rack and a dude eating a hot pretzel with mustard for breakfast, managing not to touch either one. I was weaving through people like a damn Heisman winner. The song three-chorded toward the finish and so did I, I wanted to get to the office building before it was over. I raced along, stepping out into the street, avoiding pedestrian grid-lock. The last sloppy bass notes dribbled out and the song came to an end just as I revolved through the revolving door and stepped into the empty elevator. I turned off the player and removed the headphones, grinning. Nailed it.

The doors shut and it was suddenly quiet. The elevator idled, awaiting my command. I was a bit winded. I took a breath and then punched 12, the floor of my discontent.

A combination of e-mailing and a king-sized Raisinets got me through the day. I was finishing up now and getting ready for my rabbi class, which hopefully would be followed by a night of flirting and maybe even stroking a Jewish girl on her bathing suit places. Hope sprung eternal.

JB’s hadn’t really changed much in the few days since Melinda left. I led a casting session on Monday that she might have covered, for a “businessman.” Every gung-ho actor who came in had greeted me with unflinching eye contact and a painful kung fu grip of a handshake. But other than that, I had been doing mostly the same old shit, answering the phone and making sure FedEx went out. A big yawn. I sent Melinda an e-mail to see how she was doing; in it I described in exhaustive detail what my lunches had been. It took me like an hour to compose. But like the lame Genesis song, there had been no reply at all. No reply at all.

The subway platform was as hot and humid as I imagined the Amazon to be during rainy season. The air was thick and still and it sucked the patience out of even the most reasonable human. I put on my headphones and flipped through a discarded Post I grabbed off a bench while I waited for the train uptown. The ink blackened my moist hands and I wished I had a wet nap or something. This was the perfect place to contract a nasty little disease; with these warm temperatures the whole of the subway system was like a giant Petri dish.

I was wearing a green button-up work shirt with the name “Danny Boy” stitched on the front. It was polyester and the miracle fabric wasn’t breathing or absorbing sweat, so droplets ran down my sides. The firemen of my body had uncapped the hydrants of my glands and soon my belly button was a swimming pool, around which microscopic flagellates and escherichia coli lounged like they were starlets in Monte Carlo. Finally the train arrived in all its air-conditioned glory and I was even able to get a seat. Breathing in the man-made cool, I headed north, temple-bound. I reached into my messenger bag and pulled out my spiral notebook with the PAPAYA KING sticker on the cover. I turned to the first page, which had the wedding outline on it. I looked it over. About the best thing on the page was the “AC/DC” logo I had scrawled in the margin. Fuck, why did I have nothing? It wasn’t like my days were jam-packed. My life was pretty simple, I had a bad job and two pairs of jeans. I found a pen and tried to think.

I got to class a few minutes late. The rabbi was already in mid-spiel, fanning himself with his fedora. I grabbed a seat at the small table and smiled at everyone, lingering on Jennifer, who smiled back. That felt nice. And she’d even brought her two perky friends with her, I was happy to note. ’Allo, chaps!

“Jason, welcome,” said the rabbi, placing a hand on my shoulder. He was wearing another sweater-vest; this one was burgundy. “We were just discussing how today will work. Well, to be honest, it was not a discussion. I was saying that I’d like to meet with each of you privately for fifteen minutes, and then I’d like to spend the remainder of our time having each of you practice your ceremony in front of the class, who shall play the role of the congregation.”

“Will that be enough time?” asked Nora, scratching her head with the back of her pen. “I mean, that only gives us like fifteen minutes each to practice what we’ll say.”

“Aah,” said Rabbi Stan, clasping his hands. “Fifteen minutes is plenty! You are not speaking in front of the UN, you are speaking to an audience of friends and family who are wondering whether there will be hot hors d’oeuvres or not. They will be hungry and thirsty, they will want to get photographs of the bride and groom kissing—and that is it! On with the show, to the hora, to the toasts, that’s what they look forward to. The whole ceremony will last
more than fifteen minutes, but that includes vows and prayers. Remember, this is not your show—it’s their show.” He paused and ran his hand through his beard, sniffing his fingers as they passed his nose on the second stroke. It gave me the willies. “You open, you lead the congregation in a few prayers, you talk about love and what it means in terms of this couple, you marry them, you ask people to let the families leave before they step into the aisle, you go get a drink and a bite of something. That’s a wedding.” He held his hands out to the sides. “Now who wants to go first?”

I saw that everyone, except me of course, had several pages in front of them. Typewritten pages. “I’ll, uh, go last,” I said, smiling sheepishly.

“I’ll go first, if no one minds,” said Jennifer, looking around the table. She already had a red pen out, which contrasted nicely with her dark curls. She was prepared. I wondered what kind of underwear she had selected for this evening, and if she had spent a lot of time in the selection process. She was a nice contrast to the typical girls I slept with. Hmm, Orthodox Jennifer as my girlfriend, I guess it wasn’t the craziest idea Tina ever had. Pretty close, though. The rabbi pulled up a chair beside her. I hoped she remembered we were to go out later.

Okay, I needed to concentrate. Less sex, more marriage. I looked at the outline once again. There wasn’t much. And what I had added on the train sounded corny. Christ, I was a lazy bastard. I started to scrawl out some more thoughts, but I was having trouble coming up with any sort of thread that could lead to a grand finale. Endings, they were always such bitches. Beginnings weren’t a picnic either.

Rabbi Stan made his way around the table. After Jennifer, he went to Mark, and then Nora. Nora was getting a little upset, I could tell, as the rabbi urged her to cut huge swaths of text. Every time I looked up I saw her, eyebrows knit, running Jennifer’s red pen through another sentence or paragraph.

“Stop fucking off and focus,” I told myself, instead of focusing. I was more than a little behind everyone else and I wanted to catch up. I pushed my pen around the page, hoping for a miracle. By the time the rabbi got to me, I had, well, something.

“Okay, let me see what you are thinking, Jason,” he said, pulling up a chair and leaning over my notebook. He squinted at it. “I can’t really read your handwriting, how about you talk me through it?” It was true, I had the penmanship of a chicken with Parkinson’s.

I began to read what I had aloud. It was a story of how on their first date, Eric had taken Stacey to an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet. I thought it was a funny story, and that it showed how Eric always knew Stacey wanted “everything she could get out of life,” and planned on helping her to get it. The rabbi quickly stopped me. “Jason, this is very cute. Too cute, I believe. It feels maybe like a wedding on a sitcom, you know what I am saying? Who doesn’t want everything out of life? If you want to use this anecdote, okay, but not just for the anecdote’s sake. There must be some more revealing truth about your friends.” He looked at his watch, then gestured to the page. “Take the next ten minutes and see what you can do.”

I did what I could and then we all began to share our plans. Mark went first and kept his remarks really short, because, as he said, “This is a second marriage. I know they don’t want me to make a huge deal out of it, just make it fun.”

Nora went next. She started reciting a poem by Shelley:

The fountains mingle with the river,
And the rivers with the ocean;
The winds of heaven mix forever
With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single;
All things by a law divine

In another’s being mingle—

Why not I with thine?

See, the mountains…?

“Jennifer, does this touch you or bore you?” interrupted Rabbi Stan. “Be honest.”

She squirmed in her seat. “Well, I don’t know much about poetry.”

“You are very polite,” said the rabbi. “Allow me to translate.” He put his head down and made a snoring noise.

“I think it’s nice,” said Nora defensively. “You have to imagine me outside reading this, on a sunny day.”

The rabbi sighed. “Nora, you don’t have to listen to me, I will not be offended. But consider a couplet instead of the whole poem. You will thank me, I promise.”

Jennifer went next. She had her remarks on index cards. She was definitely the kind of person whose notes I used to photocopy in college. Her friends were getting married on September twenty-third, the first day of fall, on a farm. And her remarks were related, all about how farmers planted in the fall, and how this was really the perfect time for the bride and groom to begin a life together. To lay down roots. It wasn’t bad. As she spoke, she didn’t seem to know what to do with her hands. They were at her sides, and then she’d suddenly become aware they were at her sides and she’d gesticulate broadly. Then back they went again to her sides. Something about her presentation was deadly cute; she was confident and bashful all at the same time. A little dorky, sure. But it was disarming.

Rabbi Stan gave a quick clap when she was through. “Yes, very good!”

Then it was my turn. Perfect, right after the valedictorian. I tap-danced my way through, with a lot of hemming and hawing. I was a little kid giving a book report on a book he hadn’t read. At one point I apologized for not being completely prepared, as “work had been just overwhelming last week.” Nothing like lying in temple. I stumbled and bumbled through. It was painful.

Class wound down, and everyone began to pack up. Jennifer sidled up beside me.

“Hey. Your stuff sounded really good,” I said, touching her on her shoulder.

“Thanks! Yours is, um, coming along,” she said, biting her lip.

“I know, I know,” I frowned. “I’m going to crank on it this weekend. Or hey, maybe I’ll just steal your idea. Except my friends are getting married this summer, so that won’t work, shoot.” I gestured down the hall. “Hey, are we still going to the party? I could use a drink after that flop.”

“Absolutely,” she said. “Let’s get our stuff and head on over.” She pulled her hair behind her head with both hands, and I struggled to keep eye contact as her shirt pulled taut. Her stomach was so flat it reminded me of Kansas.

As we left, I walked over to the rabbi and thanked him. He gave me a stern, disapproving look. Comically stern, but still. “Don’t worry, I’m going to get it there, I promise,” I told him.

“I know you will, Jason. Because you must. But just in case, take this.” He handed me his business card, onto which he had written his cell-phone number. So even rabbis had cards. With raised ink and rounded corners too. I slipped it into my wallet.

“Call me if you need more help, or if you have questions about the ceremony, or anything at all. Do not hesitate,” he said, locking eyes with me. “I mean that.” He shook my hand. “Just be sincere. The rest will follow.” He pulled his hand back and finally broke into a smile. “Now, I won’t see you after your ceremony, so this is pre-emptive:
I sucked down a big gulp of beer and looked around the room. Jennifer was off in the bathroom somewhere. I checked out the party space, a cafeteria at Columbia that had been transformed via balloons, streamers, two kegs, and several stray bottles of liquor. It was pretty crowded, and a few people were dancing in the middle of the room to something off what I thought was Eminem’s first album. I didn’t really know that much about hip-hop, somewhere around Tupac and Biggie I gave up on ever figuring it all out. Maybe it was that I didn’t look good in baggy pants, who knows? The rhymes never seemed to touch me the way rock or country or folk did.

It had been like ten minutes and Jennifer was still nowhere in sight. I was starting to feel a little bored, and also a little dissed. I jammed my hands in my pockets and felt around. Ah, there it was, left front pocket, nuzzled up next to an ageless wonder of a Chapstick: a squished but functional joint. If I had learned anything in Cub Scouts, it was to always be prepared.

I slipped out to a bodega on the corner and bought a lighter. I chose the one featuring a photo of an Hispanic woman in a bikini eating a hot dog. It exuded class, and I was most certainly a gentleman. Quickly, I lit the joint and kept walking. It was never good to stand on a corner or in an alleyway with a joint, that was suspicious. No, you had to keep moving like you were just smoking a regular cigarette, a regular man about town simply enjoying his nicotine fix. I walked around the corner, sucking in furiously, moving as inconspicuously as I could toward an altered state.

On the way to the party, I had gotten to know Jennifer a bit more. She was from New Jersey originally and had gone to Wisconsin undergrad. She tried to go to shul regularly. She liked my glasses, and so obviously had good taste. When I had asked if there would be any drugs at this party, referring to the fact that it was a med student affair, she had looked more than a little taken aback. “You know, penicillin and stuff?” I said, making the joke clear, and putting the smile back on her face. I doubted she had a bong, let’s leave it at that.

I licked my finger, extinguished the joint, pocketed it, and headed back to the party. Fuck, I thought, I should’ve bought mints at the deli. I wondered if I had smoked not enough, too much, or just right. Time would soon tell. I rooted for the Baby Bear outcome.

I looked around the room at the drunken physicians-to-be. They were like anyone else, I supposed, laughing and flirting. And yet someday I’d count on one of them to keep me alive. Odd. It wasn’t like they were born to heal. Somewhere around sophomore year these folks were thinking, “I don’t know, maybe I should go pre-med, but organic chemistry is supposed to be such a bitch.” But they made the decision and powered through. To think that a job where you held someone’s life in your hands came down to something as trite as a discussion over a cheeseburger at “The Rat” about what major to choose.

And then, over the sound of Wham! blasting through the cafeteria speakers, I heard the voice of Mick Jagger in my head. “Oh here it comes...here it co-omes!” And just like that, the High, as if behind me on a hike, suddenly sprinted, caught up, clapped its arm around my shoulder, and shouted, “Howdy, old friend!” For some reason in the movie that my mind was currently screening, the High was played by a fresh-faced Randy Quaid in a cowboy hat and with a stick of straw in his teeth. I greeted him in return.

“I’m feeling really high,” I said.

“Well, shucks. You smoked a lot mighty fast.” Quaid wiped some sweat off his brow with the sleeve of his brown suede coat.

Suddenly I was starving. I shook Quaid out of my head and made my way over to a table that had some plastic
bowls on it. Chex Mix. I dug in, hoping the med students had washed their hands. Crunching away, I wandered around and scanned for Jennifer.

I finally spied her way off in the corner talking to a tall, skinny guy with a Long Island look. Baseball hat, goatee, very light blue jeans, Timberlands. It seemed like they were having a bit of an argument; Jennifer was doing a lot of gesticulating. If I didn’t know better I would have thought she was signing. Or throwing gang signs.

I was feeling pretty stoned, my eyes were having trouble focusing. It was crowded in there, I didn’t know anyone, and I was on the verge of going to the ugly anxious place, so I heel-toed it back over to the booze table and quickly fixed myself a vodka soda. I took a sip, hoping it would take the edge off, then looked back to see that Jennifer was still flapping her arms at the guy. I kept looking at them jabbering away. I wasn’t sure how to handle it. I finally decided to casually swing past them on my way to the little doctor’s room and see what happened.

I slowly walked over by them and hovered for a second. Jennifer didn’t even look at me, she just kept talking. I moved past them and went straight into the bathroom, feeling a little like a jackass, like an unwanted pursuer. My face was flushed. I was suddenly the teenage dork at the high school dance. The bathroom smelled like bad urinal mint. I sucked down a big mouthful of vodka and put the drink on the counter. I didn’t really have to pee even, but I went over to the urinal and squeezed out a few drops, lest I be a guy in a bathroom with a drink, not peeing.

Washing my hands, I finally started to feel the vodka, and it felt good, calming. It took me down a notch. It was the voice of reason. Suddenly my posture was improving. I wasn’t a jackass, no, not yet anyway. Yes, I definitely preferred vodka to regular potatoes, that was for certain. I smiled at myself in the mirror. I was okay by me. Then I winked. It was a pretty queer move.

Feeling stronger, I walked tall back out toward Jennifer and Long Island, determined only to use my peripheral vision as I passed. I figured if she didn’t stop me, I was just going to keep walking straight to the train and head back downtown. Fuck it, the whole thing. I had my sea legs now. As I stepped past, though, Jennifer reached out and grabbed my hand.

“Hey, there you are. Let’s go dance,” she said, looking at Long Island, then tugging me toward the area where people were dancing. She kept pulling me right through it and back over to the alcohol. She filled up a red plastic cup with keg beer.

“So, um,” I said, “what’s the drama?”

“What are you talking about?” She took a long sip of beer.

“Oh, c’mon.” I gestured back there, and grinned. “You’ve been gone for like a half hour. You can tell me.”

She took the cup from her mouth. “Okay, okay, I went on like one date with that guy, and he was hassling me because I showed up to this party with you.” She took another sip. “It’s no big deal, really."

“Only one date, huh? He seems a little bent out of shape for that.” I stretched out my arms. “Hey, I’m just a friend of yours from class, right?”

She blushed. “Right. I mean that’s what I told him. Whatever.” She took another big swallow from her cup. Lipstick showed from the rim, a slightly darker shade of red than the cup.

“Cheers,” I said. “To Rabbi Stan.”

“Cheers,” she said. She took a sip and smiled at me, her blue eyes shining. She was really quite pretty.

It was then that I made my decision. I was going to get completely shitfaced. And I was going to get Jennifer completely shitfaced. “Can you handle two of us, Quaid?” I shouted, internally. No answer. “Quaaaaaaid!” I yelled.

A pregnant moment of silence.

“Is a bullfrog waterproof?” Quaid boomed, somewhere off-screen.
I wasn’t sure. But I turned to Jennifer and pointed to the vodka bottle on the table. “How about a shot of this?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, waving her hand.

“All the cool kids are doing it,” I said.

“I was never really a cool kid.”

“Here’s your chance at the big time, then.”

“I can’t pass that up, I guess.”

“L’chaim,” I said.

We both grimaced as the room-temperature vodka went from the bottoms of two plastic cups to the backs of our throats. The second shot wasn’t any easier.

And then we were both dancing. I was not a good dancer, it wasn’t one of my strengths, but I could do it in a pinch. Luckily the dancing took place during a block of the Jackson 5, and even a man as white as I, whose lineage seemed to go back to a land called Caucasia, could find the beat in that. Jennifer told me between songs that she hadn’t gotten drunk in months; med school was just too overwhelming. The girl needed to blow off some steam. I did what I could to help. I got us both another beer. Every sip made the world a better place. For her. For me. For America.

I noticed that Long Island guy sort of lurking about. I was getting drunker and he must’ve been as well. Alcohol plus cuckolding begets violence. So I put my arm around Jennifer and suggested we go someplace else. And bang, we were on the street, in a cab, flying downtown with everything blurry and wonderful.

I don’t know how I did it exactly. But soon we were on my front stoop sharing an oilcan of Fosters. We had gone into the deli, and while Jennifer was in the back looking at the beer choices, Bobby threw me a high-five. “All right, Boss, all right for you!” he whispered. Normally I don’t allow the high-five, but this seemed like the reason it was invented. Jennifer emerged from the back with two oilcans, and I bought them without discussion. We sat down on the stoop, and she leaned in close to me, smelling like beer and something sweet. She kissed me softly on the lips.

“Hi, you,” she whispered. Thus began what one could call “a make-out session.” She was a really good kisser. And I liked to think I was holding my own.

Every so often I tried to softly convince Jennifer to come upstairs, but she was holding out pretty good. I started thinking maybe I should play it cool, maybe I should save that for our next date. Wasn’t that how relationships normally began, slowly building up to sex over a few dates, instead of starting with a one-night stand? I mean Tina had probably been sandwiched between Brett and a hairless Tahitian boy on their first date, but they were the exception that proved the rule. It was kind of too late for such wise thoughts, though; Jennifer was going to come upstairs. I already had an ace up my sleeve, an ace I knew would be played shortly. And then it happened.

“I need to use a bathroom,” she said, pulling back from a kiss.

“No problem,” I said, standing up awkwardly due to Petey’s half-salute. I pulled my ace out, the keys that led to the bathroom in my apartment, jingled them at her, and opened the door. Always fucking bet on the bladder. It cannot be denied.

We climbed the stairs. I glanced at Patty’s door as I hunched to put the key in mine. I straightened up for a minute. How the fuck didn’t I know what was going on with her? I felt a wave of nerves.

I turned the key and we entered my place. As Jennifer excused herself to the bathroom, I hustled. I went to throw on the first CD my fingers touched, but it ended up being The Velvet Underground and Nico and that was just not going to work unless we planned to tie off and shoot up first. So I shoved it aside and put in the second album my fingers touched, The Flaming Lips’ Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots, and then I uncapped two Stellas that had been resting in the crisper in my fridge. I saw some dirty clothes on the couch and tossed them into the cabinet beneath
the kitchen sink. I looked the room over. It was acceptable, I supposed. I sat down on the couch and glanced at the clock. Three.

Jennifer reemerged. She walked over to the couch, sat on my lap, and started kissing me. The taste of mouthwash was strong. Damn it, I had to get name-brand mouthwash, this was getting ridiculous. We began making out again, like teenagers.

Once we started there was no stopping. I slowly made my way up her back, and went to unhook her bra. I tried with one hand but was unsuccessful. Damn my pathetic fingers, damn them! I brought in the left and with two hands the job was soon accomplished. She backed away from me for a moment, then pulled the bra out of the bottom of her shirt. We started kissing again and then, yes, I touched them! One I named Mt. Sinai. The other I promised to name later, after I had researched the name of another famous Jewish mountain or large hill. They were all I had hoped for. I would gladly fight to defend them for my people. I kissed them as if they were the Holy Land.

We went into the bedroom, our shirts off now. Jennifer whispered in my ear, “You are really cute.” She slipped her hands into my pants. “You know, I wanted to kiss you from the first minute I saw you in the shul.” As she spoke the word “shul” her fingers lightly ran down my cock. We could recruit thousands to our religion with this technique, I thought.

I tugged off her pants. Her underwear was a black, lacy little number, hardly IDF standard issue. I awkwardly pulled my own jeans and boxers off, then quickly began kissing her again. Things were going quite well, I did not want any break in momentum. She was moaning. It was a good sign.

I slowly slipped her underwear over her hips and down her legs. Aah, Tina was wrong, the field was quite well manicured, my fears of kibbutz-level grooming unwarranted. This girl was fucking sexy, I could prove it in a court of law. I wanted to play Moses to her Red Sea. I wanted to be the afikoman to her hiding place. I wanted her to speak Farsi and I would be in the Mossad…

Suddenly she stopped and looked up. “Wait. I don’t believe in sex before marriage,” she breathed.

“Really?”

“No, really,” she said, sitting up. “But don’t worry.”

She put me on my back and began doing things with her mouth that you wouldn’t think an Orthodox girl would have been so expert at. But it kind of made sense, given that she wasn’t having sex and all. The girl was fucking thorough—I mean, she was like a cat cleaning its young.

“Will you do me a favor?” she said, pausing for a moment. She slid her body around so her backside was near my head. “Put your finger in my ass.”

“I’ll do it,” I coughed, “my pleasure.” I gently slipped the tip of my index finger into the naughty place.

She began once more with the tongue work, then abruptly stopped and looked back at me. “Try your thumb.”

I put my thumb in, and as she pressed back hard, it was soon deep inside the quivering cave. You just never really know how the day is going to end, do you? I looked away, suppressing a giggle. There stood Quaid, biting his fist. “You have your thumb in another human being’s asshole.” He tipped his hat. “Fine work.”

Jennifer began to grind against my thumb, hard. It was really squeezed in there, and for a second, with her weight on it, I was scared it could break. She was moaning and yelping loudly, like…like a girl who enjoyed a thumb up the ass, profoundly. And then she suddenly pulled free of it and in one quick move was on top of me. I was inside her, it was happening.

“Hey,” I breathed, surprising, “I thought…”

“No thinking,” she whispered, eyes screwed shut, tentatively moving up and back. She slowly began to grind harder, then harder, then full-on, leaning forward and putting her fingers around my throat. She gripped it tightly,
almost choking me. I felt my eyes bulging Marty Feldman–style. Then—flip-flop—she clumsily rolled over and pulled me on top of her. She wrapped her legs around me and began thrusting so spastically I understood what it must be like to fuck an epileptic. I remembered health class and considered looking for a stick to put in her mouth. I watched her writhing below me, all earnest and animal and just plain pretty, and I was back in the moment. I closed my eyes as we fell into a nice rhythm, and after several guttural noises we each reached fruition. I peeled off her and fell at her side, winded.

After a few seconds, Jennifer got up and went to the bathroom. I lay there for a moment, still feeling a twinge of pain in my thumb. I had the strange urge to smell it, which I repressed, but it was harder to repress than it should have been. She came out and tumbled back into bed. “I am so drunk,” she said, curling into the pillow. “Oh my God, I can’t believe we just did that.”

“lt was fun,” I said, kissing her head. I took my turn in the bathroom, feeling fucking drunk as shit myself. I washed my thumb with soap and water. It looked a little pruney, like I had stayed in the pool too long. I stumbled into the main room, turned off the stereo, and stumbled back into bed.

We lay quietly for a few moments. Then I said, “Hey, you okay over there?”

“Yeah. I just…I just really shouldn’t have done that.”

“I’m sorry, I…”

“It’s okay, Jason, it’s fine. It’s my issue. We really don’t need to talk about it.” She kissed my neck softly and closed the subject. As we both passed out, I gave in and smelled the thumb. Ivory soap.

* * * * *

A
nd then, something felt wrong. Something woke me. Jennifer was sitting up in the bed. I pretended to sleep but I watched her out of a half-open eye. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she mouthed. Her head dipped with each “fuck.”

Then like that she was up and getting dressed. She followed the trail of clothes into the other room. My brain was fuzzy and so was my vision without glasses. The clock looked like it read 5:21. The sound went from the patter of bare feet on the wood floor to the clomp of heels. She walked past me in the bed, straight to the door, and fumbled with the bolt. She was just going to slip out. Not even say good-bye. I couldn’t just let her leave. I had to say something.

“Hey,” I whispered, pretending to wake up. “Are you going?”

Startled, she held the door open a crack, the light streaming in from the stairwell. She whispered without turning. “I have to go to an early study group.” She was halfway out the door. “Bye,” she whispered.

“Wait, um…” I whispered back. But it was too late. She was gone down the stairs. It sounded like she was running.

I lay there, puzzled, too much unwanted adrenaline now dripping into my too-tired bloodstream. My body chemistry was at the exact point where the balance was tipping from “still drunk” to “hello, hangover.” Go to sleep, I told myself. Think about this later. Repress and deny, repress and deny. Eventually my thoughts slowed and my heart slowed and the vein throbbing in my forehead slackened. I was determined to get as much sleep as I could before I had to leave for work. I found a comfortable position and consciousness began to fade. I realized I didn’t know Jennifer’s number, her e-mail, anything. And she didn’t know mine. The best I could do was call Rabbi Stan’s cell phone. His polyphonic Hava Nagilah ringtone began to play in my skull. Christ, I was still a little high, wasn’t I?

“Yessiree,” said Quaid, tucking me in. He waved bye-bye and off I drifted.
I woke up and the clock read 10:45. Shit shit shit I was fucking late. I pulled on the boxers and dirty jeans that were strewn on the floor by the coffee table. I grabbed a shirt off the floor of the closet. I felt wobbly. I burped and tasted the bad taste. Oh my God. Oh my vengeful God.

I shook myself out of it, grabbed my wallet, flung the door open, and took the stairs two at a time, the subway my destination. I pictured Jennifer going down these same steps hours ago, and The Fear ratcheted up a notch. I sprinted out of the building and almost smacked into Patty on the sidewalk.

“What’s the rush, stranger?” she said, a twinkle in her eye.

I was out of breath. “Hey. Wow, how are you? Good to see you.” I was babbling. My head itched and I scratched it. She looked good, I thought, the same as ever, thank God. “So, oh yeah, I’m just running to work. I’m really late,” I gestured to my watchless wrist.

“And I’m just on my way back from chemo. Fun stuff.” She brushed a blowing hair from her eyes, smiled, and waved me on. “Go, go. Come by later tonight and we’ll catch up.”

“I will. Tonight. Definitely. So good to see you!” I yelled over my shoulder and double-timed it to the subway.
I got to JB’s by 11:25, which frankly was a fucking miracle given the circumstances. I sat down at the front desk and tore into a chocolate doughnut with colored sprinkles that I had bought from a street vendor. To say I felt like dogshit would be an insult to dogshit.

I opened my IM and got Tina.

dooodyball5: the fear is here

tinadoll: what?

dooodyball5: worst hangover ever

tinadoll: how was yentl?

dooodyball5: that’s why i’m writing

tinadoll: please don’t bore me

dooodyball5: she came back to my place

tinadoll: she was drunk too, eh?

dooodyball5: yes, wasted. wiseass

tinadoll: go on

dooodyball5: while we were fooling around…

tinadoll: she puked all over you

dooodyball5: no.

tinadoll: stop the suspense stephen fucking king

dooodyball5: she said she didn’t believe in premarital sex

tinadoll: that’s a “con”

dooodyball5: but 2 mins later…she slipped it in

tinadoll: !

tinadoll: wait—she did or you did?

dooodyball5: she! i am a gentleman
tinadoll: naturally

doodyball5: but then at 5am, she snuck out—she left!
tinadoll: yikes. really?
doodyball5: yeah, it was weird. she totally bolted
tinadoll: um…
tinadoll: u didn’t deflower her by any chance, did u spaz?
doodyball5: no!
tinadoll: u positive?
doodyball5: she didn’t say she was a virgin or anything
tinadoll: no one ever does, dude
doodyball5: stop trying to freak me out. she wasn’t a virgin
tinadoll: sure, maybe she just needed to run off to prepare shabbat dinner
doodyball5: you’re making me feel worse. this isn’t why i wrote u
tinadoll: you did nothing wrong. virgins are just super emotional
doodyball5: stop it, fucker! i feel bad enough. i sort of liked her

tinadoll: and now she is going to burn in hell for all eternity

JB walked over and I quickly quit out of IM. He was wearing a gray-striped shirt and, shocker—black pants instead of jeans. He paused at the front of the desk and looked sort of past me. “Hey, Jason, are you busy right now?” he asked, in a nasal monotone.

“No, not too bad,” I said. “Just tidying up some files. Need a hand with something?”

“Yes, um, come on into my office for a second.” He turned and started toward it, so I got up and followed him. I had never noticed how high an ass JB had. He could probably reach over his shoulder and take his wallet out of his back pocket. He waited for me to enter and then gestured to a chair, which I took. Then he closed the door.

* * * * *

On my first day at JB’s, Melinda told me I could decorate the right side of our shared computer monitor; she had already plastered the left with Sleater-Kinney stickers. I hung up a newspaper clipping I had saved from the last few days of my European travel, which I had spent on my own, in Turkey. Everyone else had headed to Ios to get shitfaced, but I desperately wanted to go someplace off the beaten path, impressive, scary-sounding. I made a mistake when I got off the train alone in Istanbul, and I ended up bunking in hooker central. And the next day when I went into the vast spice market, I got stuck in a maze of bodies and cumin from which it literally took me hours to escape. It was just what I had wanted.
On my way to dinner one night, I picked up a copy of the English-language newspaper, the *Ankara Times*. I had learned by then that dining without reading material forced me to examine the food a little too closely; not an appetizing move when eating at the cheapest places. The big story of the day was about a diminutive world-champion Turkish weight lifter who, amazingly, stood only four foot eleven. The tiny folk hero had just been knocked out of a tournament and had subsequently announced his retirement to the nation, simply saying, “Goodbye, it’s over.”

I was already standing on the street outside JB’s when I realized I had left the article upstairs. I held a Duane Reade bag filled with the only other possessions I kept at the office: A Duncan yo-yo, a calendar/address book, and a just-in-case deodorant. I couldn’t believe I had just been fired. Or laid off. Or as JB had put it, “We’re not really laying you off, we’re just so slow right now there’s no need for you. But as soon as work picks up, you’ll hear from us.” He was actually very nice about the whole thing, and I think, maybe, close to tears. My stomach was making weird noises the entire time, which both of us overlooked given the gravity of the situation. He promised to write me a letter of recommendation if I needed it and to let me know if he heard of any temp jobs or anything. Then he shook my hand and gave me my last check. Before I left my desk for the last time, I quickly sent Tina an e-mail telling her I really needed to see her for a drink tonight. I told her to meet me at eight at the Lakeside Lounge, and then I got the fuck out of there, unintentionally leaving the article’s headline behind as my epitaph. BROKEN DREAMS FOR POCKET HERCULES.

I still felt hung over. But I looked both ways, crossed the street, and walked the thirty blocks home. I had to start saving money for more important endeavors.

* * * * *

I leaned back in my stool at the Lakeside and took a sip of the five-dollar Negra Modelo. I couldn’t believe I was drinking again, after last night’s debacle. But it was the traditional thing to do after getting canned, I rationalized. I had stopped by Patty’s around seven but she wasn’t in, so I left a note saying I’d swing back later and headed directly to the caring arms of the bar. Where else was I going to go? I poured more cold beer down my throat. I was doing the best I could to squash the “What now?” thoughts that were bubbling out of the nervous part of my central nervous system. That was best left for tomorrow. Tonight, I just wanted to be like a country song and drink to forget.

I looked at my cell phone. Eight-thirty. I hadn’t heard from Tina after my e-mail, but then again, I had sent it from my work e-mail and I couldn’t check that ever again. I banged out a text, asking if she was coming. She might just be on her way. I poured more cold beer down my throat. I was doing the best I could to squash the “What now?” thoughts that were bubbling out of the nervous part of my central nervous system. That was best left for tomorrow. Tonight, I just wanted to be like a country song and drink to forget.

I called Tina—no answer again—so I left a message. The bar had filled up and I had just spent almost two hours drinking by myself. I walked outside and looked up and down the street, like maybe she’d just be pulling up.

At nine I called Tina’s cell. No answer. I ordered and chugged my third beer. Eighteen dollars. I started getting the feeling she wasn’t coming. I also got the feeling of being buzzed again. I ate a stale peanut out of a bowl. I eyed the muted ESPN highlights on the bar TV. I tried not to feel pathetic.

I called Tina—no answer again—so I left a message. The bar had filled up and I had just spent almost two hours drinking by myself. I walked outside and looked up and down the street, like maybe she’d just be pulling up.

I started walking toward the L train when I heard a huge crack of thunder. A beat later giant raindrops began pelting all the poor suckers like me on the street. Everyone scattered, ducking into doorways and delis. I ran all the way to the subway; by the time I got there I was completely soaked. My sneakers squished and my glasses fogged up. I jumped onto the train and plopped into a seat, shivering in the air-conditioning. The man across from me wore aviator sunglasses and was listening to an old Walkman, zipping and unzipping his fly to the beat, it seemed. He peered over the top of his glasses at me and smiled. Great.
I looked away and caught my reflection in the window as we sped through the dark tunnel. Awesome day. Fanfuckingtastic. Water was dripping down my face. I was really getting my ass kicked.

Finally we reached my stop. The rain continued outside and I gave in to it. I couldn’t possibly get any wetter. I trudged the few blocks home. At every light I leaned my head back, opened my mouth, and tried to at least get a free drink.

* * * * *

I stepped inside my apartment, stripped down, and toweled myself off. The towel smelled like mold; I really needed to do a wash. I guessed I could do one the next day, seeing as I wouldn’t be going to work. There was a bobby pin on the floor in the bathroom, it must’ve been Jennifer’s. I picked it up and rolled it around in my fingers, wondering how she had spent her day. Probably scrubbing off the shame I had brought upon her.

Miraculously my wet cell phone was working and I saw I had a text from Tina. She and Brett had just gotten out of a movie; could we catch up tomorrow? I was fucking annoyed, although I had no right to be, since she didn’t know why I wanted to go out, after all. But still, she should have been available, somehow she should have known. It wasn’t fair, but fair could suck it.

I put on some dry clothes, a gray T-shirt and the only dry, non-suitish pants I had left, the super-dirty jeans. It wasn’t like Mr. Laid-Off could go on a shopping spree to the Pants Emporium either. Goddamn that Jane, I hoped her vagina was being plagued by a yeast infection or locusts, something itchy and hard as fuck to kill. I flicked a bit of what seemed to be chocolate off my left thigh. I put my tongue to my finger. Yep, chocolate. I was like a hobo.

I went over to Patty’s, hoping she was in. I tried to buck up and appear cheerful as I knocked the old “shave and a haircut” on her door.

A moment later it opened. “Well hi, neighbor, come on in,” she said, giving way. Patty was in her pajamas, really pajama bottoms and an oversized three-quarter-sleeve baseball shirt. She looked like she might have been asleep, although I could hear the TV on. I shuffled inside and we went into her living room.

“So, how have you been?” I asked her, sitting on the far end of her sofa.

“I’ve been better,” she smiled. She clicked off the TV with the remote and sat down. “Soooooo. I guess I sort of dropped a bomb on you last week. But you know, you already seemed to be feeling pretty rotten so I thought what the hell, why not give you the bad news then? Better than ruining a happy time, right?” She stood back up. “Hey, you want something to drink?”

We went into the kitchen to make some tea. She filled a kettle under the tap. “I’m feeling pretty tired these days, as you can imagine. What with the poison I’m ingesting to kill the other poison before it kills me. All this killing really knocks a girl out,” she said, putting the kettle on the burner.

I pulled some mugs out of her cupboard and located the honey in the same one. We didn’t have all that many cupboards in our tiny identical kitchens. I placed the stuff on the counter and sort of asked the big one. “So, like, how’s that all working, the chemo?”

“Well, remember how I told you I was dying?” Patty said, wiping her hands on her PJ bottoms.

“Yeah.”

“I am. But just in the way that all human beings are slowly aging and dying. In terms of the lung cancer, well, I might have overstated the case.” She smiled. “My doctor thinks I should be able to lick this, no problem. They caught it late, but luckily it’s not too aggressive. Sorry about the scare, but what can I say?” She twirled around rather nimbly and did a variation on jazz hands. “I do have a flair for the dramatic!”
I exhaled with relief. “Well, thank God you’re okay. I was definitely nervous last week, especially because we didn’t run into each other. But then, you know, the thought did cross my mind about knocking down the wall between our places so I could expand in. I was trying to be a glass-half-full kind of guy.” I smiled, to make sure she didn’t miss the joke.

The kettle whistled and Patty took it off the stove. “Now you sound like a real New Yorker, Jason.” She poured the hot water into our mugs and dropped in the tea bags. I doctored mine with honey; she took hers straight. “But listen, little lamb, I’m not totally okay. I have to go through all this damn chemo and stuff. And it’s going to make me really weak some days. So, if I need a hand getting groceries or something, do you think maybe you can help me out?”

“Oh, of course,” I said, blowing on my tea to cool it. “I’ll give you my cell number and you can call me any time you need me. Seriously, any time.” I meant it.

“Thanks,” she said, touching my arm. “And I promise not to abuse it and call you if I’m just feeling lazy or hung over!” She took a sip of her tea and then wiped a drop of it off the counter with her thumb. “Getting old, Jason. It isn’t for sissies.”

We moved back into the living room and sat down in our respective seats. “Anyway, I’ll definitely be around if you need me. I got laid off this morning.” I tried to smile. It took a fair bit of effort.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Patty said.

“Yeah. It was kind of a surprise.”

“Well,” she said, shifting in her seat, “on the bright side, it’s not like you loved that job, right?”

“No, but the money was helpful.” I stood up. “I mean shit, I’m kinda screwed a little now, you know?”

“I know,” said Patty softly.

“Sorry, sorry.” I sat back down and blew my nose in the paper towel the teacup had been resting on. I was getting a little misty, for fuck’s sake. “It’ll all be okay. I’m just having a world-class-crappy twenty-four hours. Last night this girl I sort of liked slept over, and then at five in the morning she snuck out as if she suddenly realized I was Satan.” I folded the paper towel in my hand. “Well, okay, okay, it’s come to my attention that she may have been a virgin.” I shook my head. “No, she wasn’t, she wasn’t, but somehow I traumatized her. And then this morning, bam, I got canned. Jesus fucking Christ.”

Patty slid over next to me and gently rested her hand on my shoulder. “Maybe if you didn’t blaspheme so much,” she said, cracking a grin.

I blew my nose again and chuckled. “Sorry,” I said, looking up to the sky.

“You should have just stayed home today.” She raised her mug to her mouth, then put it back down in her lap without taking a sip. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them. “Oh, I just got a wave of exhaustion.”

She shook her head, like a dog trying to get its bearings. “I was saying, you should have stayed home. You have to learn to read the signs, Jason. Things tend to come in streaks, you ever notice that? It just takes one solidly good or bad thing to get one rolling, and it keeps on going until, well, until it’s done. That’s where the whole ‘find a penny, pick it up, all day long you’ll have good luck’ thing came from. Of course, there’s good streaks and bad streaks, and they start with a good or bad sign.” She patted my head. “And my dear, a virgin running from you is historically not a good sign.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And she was an Orthodox Jew, which probably makes it an even worse sign.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re fucked.” She waved her hands. “I’m joking, I’m joking. Your streak might already be over, enough bad stuff has happened. Maybe it was a twenty-four-hour streak. Like a little virus.”
I put the paper-towel tissue in my pocket. I suddenly felt like an idiot looking to Patty for compassion. “Yeah, I hope so. It’s just a job, who cares, right?” She had cancer, for chrissakes, and look at me, whining. I made Narcissus look selfless.

“Right. Positive thinking. You know what also might help?” Her lips curled into a grin. “Medical marijuana.”

“No shit! You have a prescription?”

“Nah, not really, but I do have some pot. Oh, wait, you had some of this the other night, actually. It’s good, right?” She walked over to a dark wooden end table and pulled a bag out of the drawer. “Just a little, and then we’ll both go get some sleep.”

She rolled a nice fat joint and we smoked a bit of it. Just half. I was a little afraid I would have a massive bout of The Fear; the joblessness thing was just starting to seep into my consciousness. We said good night and I shuffled back across the hall. I was really glad Patty was okay. Beyond that it had been a shit-eating day and I just wanted to brush my fucking teeth. I worked the bathroom, hit the lights, and crawled under the covers. Maybe I’d find a kick-ass job now. Maybe Jennifer would somehow get my number and call tomorrow. Lying there, I definitely felt buzzed. Maybe I could just stay plastered and ride out the whole bad streak. Maybe soon I’d find a penny on Perry Street.
A month and a half later I lay in bed, and I still had the fucking bad-luck virus. Turned out it wasn’t a twenty-four-hour bug, but more like an Epstein-Barr kind of thing. I willed myself to sit up. I had grown to hate mornings; when you had nothing to do all day there wasn’t any reason to hop up and get started. It wasn’t all “Good day, sunshine!” and shit.

I was living on dollar slices and free Happy Hour food. I understood why the poor were fat. I was one of them, and soon I too would have a gut. Not that it would matter, really, as once again my bedroom had become a ghost town. I had never heard from Jennifer, and I was in no position to track her down now. That double-dating idea of Tina’s was long gone. Hell, I couldn’t remember the last time I so much as talked to a girl. It was as if we were two like magnets, girls and I; as I got closer they were repelled. They could smell the stink of failure on me.

I hadn’t worked since that last day at JB’s. It was pretty hard to believe. I was all over Craigslist and the Times employment listings, but I was having trouble even knowing what to look for. I’d take any sort of job at this point, but I was still hoping there might be something at least semi-interesting. I had found one exciting possibility, an opening for an assistant at a record label, Erasable Records. Hell, it was perfect for me—I knew a lot about music, and about being an assistant. I had a bitchin’ phone manner, everyone said so. So I was pretty psyched when I scored an interview. I shaved, put on a skinny tie and a blazer, and tried to look very first-day-of-work, Ric Ocasek for them. But when I got to their loft with the poured-concrete floors and the framed gold albums, I found out that I had to take a typing test, which I subsequently failed. I typed with two fingers, I always had. I was slow but accurate, I tried to explain. No dice. Typing tests at a fucking record label? Not too rock-’n’-roll. I went home and sulked and illegally downloaded some music to spite them.

The first week out of work, honestly, was almost fun. I reveled in being flung from the workforce. I listened to a bunch of old albums and drank beer in the middle of the afternoon and occasionally hopped on IM to bug Tina.

doodyball5: anybody home?
tinadoll: just me, heather furburger
doodyball5: hows the working world?
tinadoll: exactly how you left it. stupid. any news, interviews?
doodyball5: nope. just saw an army commercial tho, seemed intriguing
tinadoll: you’d so be the squad “bitch”
doodyball5: don’t ask don’t tell
tinadoll: have to go, have a meeting with a moron about an idiot
doodyball5: see if either needs anyone like me. preferably the idiot
tinadoll: seriously! you never know
doodyball5: sure, ill get us both canned
But pretty soon I was sick of my couch and being inside my tiny apartment. I didn’t worry about the ceremony, I didn’t work on writing any record reviews. I just didn’t. Sitting there, atrophying, I was feeling like the dullest man in town. And one of the sweatiest. It had been ninety degrees and humid as hell and I didn’t own an AC. Anarchy, motherfucker.

I was also pretty damn close to broke. I’d been living paycheck-to-paycheck, and then I stopped getting paychecks. The day I found out I didn’t qualify for unemployment wasn’t a banner one, either. I was going to have to figure out something quick, though, because I wanted to attempt to pay the rent—and by “attempt,” I meant send in some kind of minimum payment.

That’s when I did it. I had no choice, really. I sent the SOS e-mail out to the Midwest to ask my folks for a check. Fucking shameful. I didn’t tell them that their son was unemployed. Instead, I just wrote that I needed a new bed, that mine was “like lying on a chain-link fence,” and I didn’t have enough cash to cover it. Two days later a FedEx envelope arrived with a check for seven hundred dollars and a note from my dad:

Hey kiddo,

Hopefully this is enough for a fancy New York City bed. Your mom and I miss you, hope everything is fine and dandy. What do you think about spending Labor Day with us in St. Louis? It will be horribly hot and sticky but I checked the airfares and they’re dirt-cheap. Probably because it will be horribly hot and sticky! Let us know and we’ll get the ticket, our treat.

Love you,
Dad

I was pretty emotional at the time; AT&T commercials were making me teary. So as I read my dad’s note and fingered the check, I was sniveling like a nine-year-old girl who just saw Bambi’s mom eat it. They were such fucking rocks, my parents.

But seven hundred dollars wasn’t even close to what I needed. I had sent a few hundred to the landlord the first month and a few hundred the next month, and now I was operating on fumes. I was finding it surprisingly rough without money. I mean, I thought I lived quite simply; I wasn’t any kind of shopaholic or gourmand. But the truth was, the city was almost impossible to move through without hemorrhaging cash. Gum. A bottle of water. Beer. A subway ride. Fuck. I was never more than ten paces from someone who wanted the few bits of green paper I had left. And I was doing a lot of walking. Manhattan was such a terribly boring place to be broke, too. It wasn’t like you could chill and enjoy nature for free. Movies were fucking $10. Most places wouldn’t even let you use a bathroom unless you bought something.

I was so desperate I had even begun looking for bartender jobs, but everything seemed to be filled up by NYU grad students who stayed in town during the summer break. Patty tried to get me in at the White Horse, but they had no need. She and I had been hanging out a lot lately. Like me, she had pretty much all day free. She was doing okay for someone with lung cancer, which she said was in remission. “Like my bank balance,” I’d joke. She did have some bad days when she was frighteningly weak, though. Days when she would call me and, in a small voice, ask if I could just pick up some toilet paper or orange juice, some little thing. Even then, she’d still tell me she was getting better every day in every way. My “How are you feeling?” inquiries had become a running joke, always met by the
“Like a rhinestone cowboy,” she’d sing, smiling.

I stopped by daily. Popping in to Patty’s had become part of my new little routine. Wake up around ten. Drink some deliciously free tap water for breakfast. Go online, see if the world was still intact. If yes, check the job listings. E-mail the one or two of them that seemed like decent possibilities. Go buy a $1.50 slice from Joe’s for almuerzo. Swing by Patty’s, bullshit bullshit bullshit, go for a walk together or play backgammon or listen to records or just hang out. Go back home before the day was over, call a temp agency. Masturbate on the couch to the cutest girl I’d seen that day. Nap. It wasn’t like I was sitting around feeling sorry for myself, watching TV all day. I couldn’t. I had put a hold on my cable service.

However, I had been smoking a lot of Patty’s “medical marijuana.” More than I should have. I told myself I was only allowed to get high at night, but on days with no new job leads, I had been slipping. It was something to do, and it was free. On the occasions when Patty didn’t want to play, I’d break out the iPod and go for long stoned walks in neighborhoods I didn’t know that well, like Chinatown and even Wall Street. It was amazing down there, I’d just find a place in the shade to sit or lean and I’d flip through songs, watching the well-dressed world scurry by, thousands and thousands of people. There were plenty of janitors and bike messengers and even tourists, but the vast majority was a whirlwind of gray suits and side parts and buttoned collars, and what stamina, I mean no one was wilting or ruffled, even in the heat. I started to tire of my music collection and walked into a CD store and spent money I didn’t have on a couple of random discs. I used to do shit like that all the time, go into a store, gamble on a few things that looked promising, go home hopeful that I had found a gem and would soon be e-mailing friends with the subject line, “just found your favorite new band.” I wondered why I had stopped doing that. I walked out of the store and into the heat. Maybe I liked the guy I used to be more than the one I was becoming.

But mostly Patty did want to hang out. One afternoon, stoned to the gills, she tried to get me to shave my head in solidarity with her. But I didn’t think it would help with any potential interviews, or ladies. Plus, she had lost very little, if any, hair. She was just fucking with me, it seemed to be a new hobby for her. I didn’t mind playing the sidekick one bit. Sometimes we’d walk around the neighborhood together; she’d need to go to the dry cleaners, drop off some mail, whatever. All the shopkeepers knew her. She introduced me to them as “Jason, my assistant.” It was about the only reference she ever made to my employment situation and I appreciated it.

The truth was, Patty was pretty much the only one around for me to hang out with. Stacey, Eric, and Tina were always busy. Stacey and Eric were focused on the upcoming wedding, and Tina was living in Love Country. She and Brett were officially a couple and they spent all of their time together in what I imagined was a never-ending hug on the couch. Of course, I did see them occasionally. But whenever I did, it was inevitably all about fixing me. Two nights ago I had gone with Tina for burgers at Great Jones.

“Okay, now seriously, Jason, just hear me out. Maybe you should go back to school.”

“I really don’t want to get into this again, Tina. Don’t make me throw my drink at you.”

“I would kill you in a heartbeat,” she said.

“C’mon. Let’s talk about journalism school for two secs.”

“Let’s not and say we did.” I took a bite of my burger. It had American cheese on it, which was such a better choice than cheddar, because cheap American cheese melted neatly over a burger, like a tightly pulled sheet on an army private’s cot. “Otherwise I am going to have to avoid you. Not that I see you much these days anyway,” I added under my breath.

“I’m not trying to be a bummer, I just was thinking j-school could be a cool option,” she persisted. “Look at Scott Langford.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense,” I said, unable to hide my annoyance any longer. “First off, I’m broke. Second off, I’d be applying for next year—one year from now, so it solves nothing.” I threw back some of my Bass.
“Well, how about just writing some of those reviews, then, and sending them to him?”

“I’m working on it.”

Tina looked me over. “You, my friend, are so not working on it.”

“I’m working on working on it. Fuck.” I finished off the Bass. “Maybe I don’t want to be a music writer.”

“How would you even know that, if you haven’t…” She saw the look on my face and stopped. She held up her hands. “Okay, okay, sorry.”

“No, don’t be.” I forced a smile. “You’re only trying to help the less fortunate.”

“Shut up,” she said, leaning in and stealing a couple of my fries. Well, not stealing, since she was going to pay for them. “What did you mean, by the way, you don’t see me much?”

“I meant I miss being normal and not always talking about my job bullshit,” I said, avoiding eye contact. “I’m glad you and Brett are hitting it off, and I know when people start dating they hang out by themselves a lot. But I still want to go out and have fun and debate whether the people around us are jerks or dorks.”

“I miss that too,” Tina said. “But friends talk about what’s going on in each other’s lives, and you being unemployed is bigger—just by a hair—than playing jerk-or-dork.” She took another fry and chewed on it. “I didn’t think I was sooooo unavailable. I guess right now Brett’s so busy being young Marty Scorsese that when we finally do get to hang out, we want to just chill and be together. You know, less drinking and pills, more DVDs. It’s kinda nice. You’ll see, as soon as you decide to get a girlfriend.”

She excused herself to the bathroom. I sat there and chewed on a cold fry. “Decide to get a girlfriend.” Oh, I just had to decide, how easy. The old Tina might have punched the new Tina right in the ovary for saying shit like that.

And then there was Stacey and Eric. A week ago they had bought me another in our series of dinners, ostensibly to go over wedding stuff. The wedding was coming up shortly, and I had the distinct feeling that they were starting to have second thoughts about the whole thing. The whole thing of Jason as rabbi, that is. I had been avoiding telling them exactly what I was going to say, since I hadn’t even started writing it yet.

And obviously, I had no excuse. All I had was free time, but I just wasn’t feeling the muse. As if I needed a muse—I just needed to sit my ass down and write it. It wasn’t like I didn’t want to do a good job, or even just get this thing off my back and done already, but for some reason I just couldn’t get it up to get it finished. I had sat down and opened up my notebook a number of times—well, definitely twice—but before I could accomplish anything, I’d always find something to distract me. A stray M&M. A shiny piece of metal. Nothing ever got done.

Even though she could have no idea that her ceremony remained unwritten, Stacey was treating me differently. It had been simmering for a while, but now it seemed the soup was ready. The length of time I had been unemployed, and her notion that I was doing absolutely nothing to change that status, were unfathomable to her. Exhibit A: Langford. Plus, I hadn’t been shaving a whole lot, only when I had the rare interview, and I looked a bit of a mess. Frankly, that’s how I felt, so why hide it? The night of our most recent dinner together, she fed me snide remarks about my level of dishevel and I just kept claiming, “Hey, I’m growing peyes for you two.” She kept eyeing me with a genuine expression of worry, like a shopkeeper eyes a group of rowdy teens, and it was pissing me off. I just knew that, when I excused myself to the bathroom, Stacey and Eric were discussing me, like, “I know, you’re right. He’ll ruin our wedding. But if we take this away from him, what will he have left?” She sent me text messages all the time with fortune-cookie-like aphorisms in them, such as “You make your own luck.”

That night I was supposed to see Stacey again—Thai on Second Avenue—under the auspices of going over the wedding stuff again. It was only a few weeks away now. There was nothing really left to go over. I needed to stop being a pussy and write the damn thing, was all. She was using the get-together to practice being a Jewish mom, with me playing the role of guilt-absorbing child. I hoped we’d have fun. I didn’t like being unhappy with my friends. I was trying to stay positive, but I was feeling such negative vibes. It was as if no one had anything else to gossip about.
Like sands through the hourglass, so were the days of my life. I was doing a lot of sitting around the house alone, thinking. I had started writing again in the computerized journal, my current entry entitled “Unemployed, Broke, and Horny.” It was cathartic to bitch in long, unedited bursts. My apartment should have been spotless given that I wasn’t doing anything, but since there were no girls in sight, and with visits with Patty always happening at Patty’s, the ennui and inertia were winning. I was perfectly content to let the plastic cups and paper plates pile up near the dirty laundry and assorted detritus.

I finally motivated out of bed and moved over to the couch, where I disregarded the wedding notebook on the coffee table, open to a page that screamed DO THIS, ASSHOLE! in large black ballpoint scrawl, and leafed through a copy of The Stranger I’d had since college. I always loved the opening paragraph. “Maman died today. Or maybe it was yesterday.” That fucking Mersault had learned to float through the pleasure and the pain with none of it touching him. I could see that in a positive light from my current position. I got distracted, reached over to the coffee table, and checked my cell. I had a new text from Stacey, trying to confirm tonight. I responded in the affirmative. Just after I sent the text, the phone rang. Weirdly, I saw on the caller ID that it was the main number from JB’s.

“Hello,” I answered.

“Hello, is Jason in?”

“This is Jason,” I said.


It took me a second to realize that John was JB. “Oh, hi,” I said, sitting up.

“Jason, how have you been? Are you working?” JB, Mr. Tact.

“I’ve been doing a few things, mostly trying to finish my novella.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Well, if you are free today, we had a last-minute casting call that needs dozens of roles filled. You’d be perfect, and it pays five hundred for the day. I thought maybe you might be interested.”

Was I! “Sure. Five hundred for the day, huh? What is the, uh, role?” I imagined he must need people to fill an audience for a scene with a band or something; I wasn’t sure what else I was good for. Background person at the library?

JB explained that Discover Card was doing a massive NYC promotion, and they needed lots of “young, friendly NYC folks” to help them pull it off. He gave the address of a place on Park and Thirty-third that I had to be at by eleven, and hung up. Five hundred bucks! I could kiss JB on the penis.

* * * * *

Three hours later I stood on the back of a crowded bus, dressed as a giant, three-dimensional slice of chocolate layer cake with vanilla icing. I was a diabetic’s nightmare. All the other “young, friendly NYC folks” wore similar huge, puffy foam outfits. We were all standing; you couldn’t sit in bus seats in these ridiculous costumes. Every type of food was represented: a lobster, a big hot dog, a ham sandwich, a cookie, and in the largest costume of all, a thin black guy dressed as an entire roast chicken. Had it been fried, I think he could’ve sued for racism.

The Discover Card Company was sponsoring a special restaurant week in NYC. The bus was dropping us off on different corners in Midtown to hand out information on the special discounts available if you paid with the glorious Discover Card. They must have been grouping people as full meals, because the main-course chicken, a piece of broccoli played by a slightly plump Goth girl, and I, the dessert, were dropped off together on the northwest corner of Bryant Park and told to spread out a bit. I looked at Broccoli. You had to be seriously committed to be Goth in summer. Today it was supposed to hit the high eighties. Her thick black eye-makeup would soon be running down
her stalk, that was for sure.

The sun was really intense. I found a spot in a bit of shade and held out my stupid flyers. My cake costume went from neck to knee, with white stockings for my legs. Thigh-highs. And, this was the worst, on my head I wore a chocolate beanie with a foot-tall pink-and-white plastic candle sticking out of it. The whole getup was not made of any sort of natural fiber or anything that remotely breathed, and even in the shade, I was cooking on the inside. If I were a wrestling coach, I would recommend this cake suit to my team so they could make weight.

There I stood. A moron. I was trying to be Zen, trying to picture the five hundred beans in my mind, but it wasn’t working. Not with every business-casual asshole in Midtown walking past and mocking me. They were all just so funny in this part of town. Maybe after they finished making spreadsheets they hit the comedy clubs, because I was hearing all sorts of brilliant cracks like “Hey, got milk?” and a tsk-tsking “I told you to get your MBA.” And then there were the secretaries in shiny white Reeboks, giggling at me and saying in grating Queens accents, “Oooh, now that makes me want to diet!” Oh, ha-ha. I had angry little daydreams of the many different ways I might torture them; the most vile involved wrapping a sweet potato in barbed wire and shoving it right up their asses. I was one surly slice of cake. I wiped the sweat from my brow on my hand, and I wiped my hand on my gauzy vanilla frosting. My face was so slick with oily perspiration that my glasses kept sliding down the bridge of my nose. I waited for more abuse and adjusted my candle cap; the elastic on it was tight and really kept in the heat.

I was getting delirious. I needed to talk to someone simpatico, so I crossed the street to see the roast chicken, who was standing on the far corner. As I waddled through the intersection, a car honked at me, and a sanitation worker hanging off the back of a garbage truck gave a wolf whistle as if I were a sexy girl. Maybe the stockings flattered my calves.

Roast Chicken was grinning, trying to engage passersby. He looked like he was having fun. That did not seem scientifically possible. “Hey, man,” I said, touching his wing, “how’s it going? You sweating to death?”

He smiled. “Nah, I’m cool. Couple more hours and it’s payday.”

I noticed he was also wearing stockings, golden-brown ones. “Can I ask you a question? How is it that you aren’t miserable right now? I’m dying.” I wiped some more perspiration on my frosting.

“I’m just rolling with it, is all,” he said. He looked around, then down at me. “And also, I’m really stoned,” he said, grinning again. “Smoked chicken, heh. Beth got me high.”

“Beth?”

He flapped toward Broccoli. “Yeah, Beth. We got high before we changed into these costumes. She has a little one-hitter.”

Broccoli Beth, you crafty little vegetable. Hell, I didn’t even know Goths liked pot. I thought they were only into…shit, I had no idea what kind of drugs they did. But they were the polar opposite of life-affirming hippies who had sort of claimed pot, so I would never have guessed she would’ve been packing. But I was glad I wasn’t high. I needed something to dull the sense of reality, not enhance it. Now, a Vicodin, or an old-fashioned Valium, that might have helped. I cakewalked back to my spot, thinking I was really glad I had a diploma from an Ivy League institution. What a laugh.

The next two hours passed like a kidney stone. A mustached Hispanic man in a tank top walked right up to me and whispered that he would very much like to eat me. A little kid poked my frosting, made a farting sound, and laughed. A fat man’s dog barked and nipped at me. A very cute girl in a wife-beater stopped, lowered her sunglasses, and looked me over. She was stunning, a tight little body and blond funky hair, kind of rock-'n'-roll but not so much that it seemed like you could only meet her if you were in a band. She looked familiar.

Then I realized who it was. “Annie?” I said. I took a step toward her. She looked fucking fantastic. “Hey, it’s Jason.”

“Jason?” she said, as if trying to place me. She pointed at my costume. “What’s going on?”
“Oh, you know, same old.”

She squinted, then smiled awkwardly. We stood there in the heat like any young couple flirting on a summer day, she the stylish girl, me the slice of cake.

“So, uh, how’ve you been?” I asked.

“What costume? This is Gaultier.” I shrugged as if to say, “Hey, it’s funny.” She gave me back a look that was… it was pity. Pure pity. Like she was looking at a homeless child in a gutter in Peru.

“Is this your job?” she asked, furrowing her brow.

“No, it’s, well…it’s obviously a long story,” I said, exasperated. “Hey, let’s make a plan and I’ll tell you all about it. We should have exchanged numbers the last time we saw each other, that was dumb of us. Do you have, uh, a card?”

“Do you have a pocket?”

I looked down at my cake suit. “Good point.”

She slid the sunglasses back up her nose. “You look ridiculous.”

“Yeah, I know it. It’s just a temp job.”

“Normally, you’re a hamburger, right?” She grinned. “Just kidding, just kidding.” She patted my cake shoulder. “Listen, I actually have to run to this meeting. I’ll see you around, Jason. Try not to melt out here.”

Then she was gone. I was the shit she had wisely stepped over. I bet she’d be on IM in ten minutes with someone from school: “You are not going to believe who I just saw 😒.” I turned to watch her go and adjusted my itchy candle cap. A stream of perspiration escaped the elastic and drooled down my forehead, stinging my eyes.

By the love of all that is holy, the bus returned on time. I pulled off the nasty hat and leaned on one of the seats as we went to pick up other assorted dinner items scattered about Midtown. This piece of cake needed an Indian Ocean–sized drink of anything but milk.

* * * * *

A

fter changing back into my civvies at the loft, I was now in some dark bar called Fiddlesticks, buying a round of drinks for Goth Beth, Derek (formerly known as Roast Chicken), and a nameless girl who had been a pickle. The Midtown Irish pub was conveniently located near a check-cashing place that turned my day of shame into $303.36, after taxes and check-cashing fees. Following the capitalist food chain, the bartender was turning that money into the universal problem-solver, my friend and yours, alcohol.

I was already drunk. I was rehydrating by dehydrating. We had been there since about six, and it was nine-thirty. Derek had been trying to kiss Pickle for well over an hour, and slowly but surely his persistence was wearing away at her resolve. As I predicted to Beth that Pickle would be smooched before midnight, my pocket vibrated. I pulled out the cell; I had a few new messages. It was too loud in the bar to hear, so I checked my missed calls. Five from Stacey. Oh, fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck! Dinner with Stacey. That was supposed to be at eight. Damn it. She was going to be perturbed, to put it mildly. I contemplated how to handle it. I did have a job today, okay, that was a positive. And now you could say I was networking. But I decided that calling her drunk and saying any of that would not be the best way for me to acquire forgiveness. I’d deal with it tomorrow, sober, with a protective shield of lies. Yes, that was the smart play.
I congratulated myself on the choice by taking a giant slurp of Beth’s cranberry and vodka by mistake. “Eww,” I spat. “Healthy juice mixed in with my alcohol!” Beth smiled. Hmmm, without all the Goth makeup and with booze coursing through my arteries, she looked downright acceptable.

As I picked up my own drink, a vodka soda, my phone buzzed again. It was Stacey, again. I took two quick long swallows, walked out to the street, sighed, and answered. She let me have it right from the get-go.

“Where the fuck are you, Jason?”

“Hi, Stacey,” I said. “I’m so sorry. I had a job today, it came up at the last minute and it was just horrible, and I completely forgot about dinner. You won’t believe what I had to do.”

“That’s bullshit. How could you forget? We confirmed it this morning. You couldn’t call me?! Eric swapped rounds with one of his friends so he could have the night off and join us. We’re sitting at a table for three.”

The street was empty. I sat down on the curb and put my fingers to the bridge of my nose. “I’m really, really sorry, Stacey. I didn’t mean to forget. I really did have a job today, and it…I’ll tell you about it later but it was shitty and I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care, Jason. What’s with you lately? I mean, how can I trust you to do the wedding when you can’t even remember dinner?”

I stood up. “Because dinner is just dinner, it’s not a wedding, people eat it every night. C’mon, I mean, sheesh, I’m sorry. I mean maybe I’m a little drunk right now and I fucked up, but I’ll remember your wedding.”

“Whoa-whoa-whoa. You’re drunk? Are you at a bar right now? Jesus, Jason…”

“Slow down. I got drunk after the shitty—”

“It’s just the way you’ve been lately, Jason. You do everything half-assed, and the wedding—I’m sure you mock it with Tina and all—but it is obviously very important to Eric and me. You can’t marry us in front of our families half-assed. And you know, the last time we saw you… I don’t mean to be rude, but you need to hear this. You looked like crap, like you don’t give a crap, you’re just sooo bohemian or something. And that’s not exactly how we thought you were going to take this responsibility. Maybe it was a bad idea.”

Now I was pacing back and forth in front of the bar. “I am taking it seriously, okay? I just got laid off…”

“Six weeks ago.”

“Hey, I’m unemployed, I’m allowed to look like shit and be in a shitty mood. I went to those classes, I’m not blowing off anything—how many times have we talked about it, how many dinners, how many phone calls? You don’t trust me? That is so insulting, Stacey, I don’t even know what to say. What am I going to do, show up wearing a swastika?! I was yelling, and I was shaking.

“That’s just how I feel right now, Jason,” she said quietly, doing the calm thing now that I was mad. Oh, how I hated that! “I don’t know what to say. You just seem a little out of it, or in a bad place or something, I don’t know. You don’t seem to want to talk about it, and maybe it’s not the best time to do something like this, something for people other than yourself. I’m going to talk to Eric and we’ll figure out what we’re going to do.”

“Oh, give me a break. What am I, some drugged-out high school kid on an after-school special? Don’t sound so sorry for me, ugh!” I was squeezing the phone with all my might. Completely flummoxed, I blurted out, “You know, my fucking GPA was higher than yours.”

Her voice was quaking a little. “I’m sorry you had a shitty day,” she said. “Bye.” She hung up.

“Fuck!” I yelled to the empty street. I snapped my phone shut and then reopened it. Then I shut it again and thought better of it and opened it again. Then I dialed Eric’s cell-phone number as fast as I could.
“Oh, hi there, Jason,” he said.

“Are you standing right there with Stacey?” I asked, heart pounding.

“No, no. She just ran into the bathroom crying.” He put on a mock-happy tone. “So, how are you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, Eric, she just was nagging me and I had a really shitty day—a really shitty couple months too, and I’m drunk.” I took a breath, and kept pacing. “Tell her I’m sorry. I’ll call her tomorrow and apologize.”

“I will. And you will.”

“Are you pissed at me too?” I asked.

“Yeah, I mean, my fiancée’s crying and you blew me off for dinner,” he said. I thought I could hear him take a sip of something, I was imagining wine. Wine they bought to calm themselves because they were mad at me. “I’m not exactly thrilled with you right now, you could say.”

I stopped pacing and stared down the street. A homeless guy was directing someone in an Audi wagon as they parallel-parked. “C’mon, Er. It was only dinner. Give me a chance. I will not screw up your wedding. I’m not a loser.” The wagon hit the minivan behind it, setting off the car alarm. The homeless guy cackled. I put my finger in my ear.

“Well, you’re acting a little bit like a loser right now, dude.” He paused. “But you are doing the wedding. It’s way too late to find a real rabbi now, those guys get booked like six months to a year in advance.” He took another sip of whatever it was. “Just, do me a favor. Call Stacey tomorrow and apologize.”

“Done. I will.”

“And, just slow down a bit. Okay? Stacey’s worried about you, and, well, so am I.”

I told him I would. I didn’t think I had been speeding off anywhere, though; frankly, it felt like I was going in reverse. But I played nice and said good-bye. Then I walked right back into the bar.
Yes, leaving would’ve been the right thing to do. The mature thing. The thought burped up after I did the shot Derek handed me. But I didn’t feel like it, how about that? My hair was crunchy from sweating all day. I was chafing at the crotch. I didn’t want to go home and think. I didn’t want to lie on my couch again and be sad, brush my teeth and feel sad, and get in bed and jerk off sad. Christ, it was all so dull and pathetic and tiresome. So I got another drink after the shot and I bullshit with Beth. I gladly accepted a hit of Ecstasy from that pickle chick. She had a shitload in an Altoids tin. I swallowed it knowing full well it was an eight-hour ticket to God knows where.

I looked around at the laughing faces. Everyone was having fun, I must’ve been having fun. For like a half-hour I felt good, like I could lift five hundred pounds right up over my head. It was all gonna work out. It always did.

Then just like that, I felt the nausea. I hurried to the bathroom and locked the door. My tongue felt swollen. I was leaning over the toilet, retching, puking up pure liquid. I wondered how much money in alcohol I was spitting into the shitter. I coughed a final time, then balled up some toilet paper and wiped my mouth. I felt a little better. I washed my face with cold water and looked in the mirror. Jesus, my pupils! They took up my whole eyeballs—I couldn’t even remember what color my irises were as I looked at the black saucers that had replaced them. I was like a fucking Japanese anime character. Oh boy, I thought. Oh boy, oh boy.

I went back out to the bar. The E was really starting to kick in. Who were these people? Everyone’s sneakers were sparkling like they had special Christmas lights in them. Some shitty Chieftains song was playing and the fiddle in it was like a paper cut on my eye. I squeezed past a guy so close I could smell his breath, I could see his nostril hairs growing, they were getting longer and longer and they looked sharp like bayonets and I felt relieved when I finally got past him and found my way back to the table and sat my ass down. I gripped the sides of the chair with both hands.

Beth turned to me. “Where did you go?” she asked. Her face was like a puddle someone had thrown a pebble in, rippling gently.

“So tell me,” I said, back to her, “what is it about death you Goths love so much?”

“What?” she said. “We don’t love death.”

“Yeah you do! You loooooove death. You want to marry it. Rock-'n'-roll is supposed to be about sex and drugs, but you Goths can’t wait to die and be buried and rot. It’s all misery and spiderwebs and blackness. Explain it to me.” I crossed my legs. “I want to learn the ways of your kind.”

“What? You’re wasted!”

I took a sip of a drink, it might have been my drink, it was wet like I recalled my drink being. “And yet, I am speaking the true word. Verily, I might add.”

“Give me a break, we like drugs and sex just as much as classic-rock people like you,” she said, poking me in the chest.

I grabbed her finger, hard. “How dare you?! How dare you call me classic rock! Do I look like Sammy Hagar?”

She laughed, “No. Tom Petty.”

I held her finger still. It was warm, I could feel the blood in it, circulating, doing its thing. I pulled her in and tried to kiss her.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said, pushing me back.
“C’mon, I have like every Cure album,” I said, sliding away from her, giving up, taking another sip of whatever it was in front of me. I hummed into the glass, “The Lovecats…da da da da da da da da da da da…”

“Hey, Cakeboy, you want this shot of SoCo? I bought it for you,” said Derek, clapping me on the back.

“I fucking hate SoCo,” I said, and downed it. It tasted like cough syrup and dirt.

I don’t know how much later it was, but all of a sudden that same Derek was manhandling me out of the bar and tossing me toward the gutter like I was a wet sack of trash. I was airborne and then I landed right on my coccyx, right on the corner of the curb. I let out a yelp and I saw stars and they were twinkling and then I wished I saw little birds like in cartoons and I might have just for a sec. I had walked up to that pickle chick and kissed her right on the mouth. Her tongue was cold and hard and wet, like a snail shell. Then Derek ripped me off her and here I was, Raggedy Andy.

I rolled over and looked up and Derek was standing almost on top of me. His ratty Converse were by my hair, the hem of his pants hung inches above my nose. The hem on one leg was flecked with white. White paint. Fuck a fucking farmer!

“My goddamn Dickies!” I yelled. I grabbed the cuff and inspected it. Paint splotches all around, they were definitely mine! Crackling through my head came fractured images of how they arrived here, how they got on the legs of the dude who just trashed me. I saw Jane fucking Derek, doing all kinds of filthy things to him and his big black dick. Yes, goddamnit—it was black, black as a chess piece. And big, the stereotype was true and everyone fucking knew it. I shared a high school gym locker with my friend Nate, he was black and I’d see his junk dangling, an elephant trunk searching for peanuts, making my Jew cock, my Lil’ Petey, my next-door-neighbor-that’ll-give-you-a-ride-to-the-airport-in-his-unexceptional-but-reliable-Camry-average-sized dick look like an itty-bitty jalapeño pepper. I saw it all, first Jane worshipping Derek’s monolith, and then her swaddling it gently in my Dickies.

I squinted up at Derek. “Where’d you get ’em?”

“What?” He looked down at me. He was smirking, the fucker.

“These pants.” I yanked on the cuff. “These fucking pants. Where? They’re mine.”

“Yeah, okay. Fuck you.” He put his foot on my chest and let a goober drop from his mouth. It splattered right on my neck.

“You fucking horrible piece of shit!” I let go of the Dickies and desperately wiped at the loogie with my hand. It was a snotty one, it felt like warm jelly, it was fucking miserable. Derek turned away and started back into the bar.

“Those are my fucking pants!” I yelled after him. “You cunting fuck!” I tried to get up, and an excruciating pain immediately shot through my coccyx. I lay back down to ease it and slapped my hand on the curb. “You have to be fucking kidding me!”

I heard people laughing and then the bar door closed and it was all muted. I rested my head on the concrete, my ass bone was just aching. I hoped I didn’t break it. Not my sweet ass, not my pride and joy.

I don’t know how long I lay there, resting, afraid I might need some kind of truss. Some assholes walked past and said something I was pretty sure wasn’t complimentary. All I could see was their shoes, and they had that sparkle too. I decided that gray was a really good color for cement, it suited it. Cement sounded gray. Fucking Jane, fucking slut, fucking whore, fucking thief, fucking chicken fucker. Shit, maybe Derek didn’t even get the pants from her, maybe she’d had a lesbian affair and that girl stole them from her and then Derek slept with the new girl and got the pants. Or maybe Derek and Jane were married and she cheated on him with me, maybe I cuckolded him, maybe I fucking won, it could’ve been. The pants permutations were astronomical. Neon mathematical equations flashed across the concrete.

I turned my head the other way, toward the street. In front of my face were a bunch of butts scattered in the gutter. I stretched out and scraped up a few of the bigger ones. I put one that had lipstick on the filter in my mouth and imagined who had been sucking on it, what she looked like, how it tasted on her lips. Then after a little while, I
slowly stood up. It hurt but I could do it. I patted my pockets until I found my lighter. I had a long walk home. I was going to finally learn to smoke.

* * * * *

The stairs at 99 Perry were extra-steep, and tonight they seemed steeper than ever. My coccyx flared on every one of them. I vowed to call the landlord the next day and lobby for an elevator, an escalator, a ski lift, a rope tow, or a Sherpa-like person to provide piggyback rides. I held on to the railing with one hand and held a bag with two black-and-white cookies and a Gatorade in the other, courtesy of Bobby. The red neon Bud sign he had installed in the window was the most beautiful thing I ever saw, I kept telling him. I really, really wanted to lick it. I knew it would be delicious if only he’d let me try. He gave me the cookies for free, the first time he had ever given me something for free. I was pretty sure I kissed him on the cheek afterward, the handsome devil. He kept telling me to keep my voice down.

I knocked on Patty’s door, the shave-and-a-haircut. She opened up after the second rendition.

“Want a black-and-white cookie?” I said, reaching into the bag and fanning out the two cookies in front of her face.

“I don’t think so,” she said, standing in a flannel nightgown, frowning. “It’s a little late for dessert.”

“It’s never too late for cookies, Patty! Santa has milk and cookies in the middle of the night,” I said, leaning against the doornamb.

“Shh,” she said. “Come in here, it’s the middle of the night.” I shuffled inside and she closed the door. She looked me over. “What are you on? You stink of booze, and something,” she said.

“Cake,” I said, mouth already full with a bite of cookie. We went and sat in her main room. Between bites of cookie and swallows of Gatorade, I explained my sweaty working day.

Patty rubbed her eyes. Her voice was raspy. “You’re lucky that was so awful because you woke me up, and I was feeling a little bit of anger toward you for that. If someone doesn’t answer after one knock, don’t keep knocking for ten minutes.”

“I knocked twice,” I protested.

“Nuh-uh,” she said. “Trust me.” She stretched her arms behind her head, yawning. “You look like a homeless person. What’s up with your hair?”

“I was a piece of cake all day. It’s a demanding job!” I eyed the second cookie. “You want to share?” I said, holding it up.

“All yours,” she yawned. “And stop yelling.”

I ripped it open. “Sucker,” I said. I took two big bites, one of white, one of black, for maximum flavorfulness. “It’s good to get a taste of the yin and the yang at the same time,” I said, crumbs falling from my mouth.

Patty eyed me, arms crossed. “So what’s up?”

“What do you mean?” I responded, before taking a slug of Gatorade.

“I mean, you didn’t pop in to chitchat, did you?” She gestured to the clock behind me. It was after four. She adjusted herself, leaning heavily on a throw pillow. She looked tired. Her face seemed to sway and the skin was sagging off the bone. But everything was moving around on me, really.
“Kinda,” I said. “I thought you’d be up and we could hang. Or maybe go get a drink at that Gus’s place?” I pulled out some moist, balled-up bills from my pocket and smoothed one. “My treat!”

“Jesus, Jason,” she said, “you sure you don’t want to talk about something? I mean, please tell me you want to. Because it’s late and as you are well aware, I do tend to get a bit tired these days for obvious reasons.” She pushed some hair off her face and tucked it behind her ear. “And although I like to think I’m a pretty laid-back person, I think you know that no one is quite this laid-back. So spill it, or let me get back to bed.”

I sat there for a second. “Seriously? I don’t think I can be serious right now.” I looked both ways, and stage-whispered, “I’m on drugs.”

“Okay, hit the road then, Jack. I’m exhausted.”

“Wait.” I wiped the crumbs off my shirt. I swallowed and tried to pull it together. “No, um, I don’t know. I’m having a tough time, I guess. The job thing, some other stuff. You know it all, Patty. It’s been hitting me hard lately. My friends think I’m a bit of a fuck-up. But whatever, everything is fine, I think.”

Patty leaned over and broke a piece off the cookie. White. She considered it, and then put it on the coffee table. “Well, Jason, I haven’t known you all that long, but maybe you should listen to your friends. Maybe you’ve become something of a fuck-up.”

I smiled at her but then realized she wasn’t joking. Or done.

She continued. “I mean, I, for one, did not choose a life that was defined by what I did for a living, so I would never lecture you on that. But this is the cold hard facts of life, neighbor. You spend the bulk of your day doing something for money. Welcome to America. So start looking for what it’s going to be. Who cares what it is? Find something that makes you happy, it’s not a vision quest. And by that I mean, look harder than you are.” She propped herself up on her elbow. Her skin looked translucent, like a jellyfish. I could see the muscles working in her jaw as she spoke. And I could see the sound waves emanating from her mouth, spreading in ever-larger concentric circles until they washed over me.

“And let me ask you this, I’m just going to say it. Why don’t you ever date a girl? It’s none of my business, but I don’t think you have ever told me about one girl you’ve dated, like, a few times. Think about that. It’s not normal. I’m not someone who’s for normality necessarily, mind you, but still. It’s something you might think about next time you’re doing some self-examining—which should be soon, Jason.”

“You’re really harshing my mellow, Patty,” I said, blinking, trying to grin.

She yawned, and scratched her pale cheek. “Humor is an excellent defense mechanism, neighbor. I know, I use it all the time. Especially these days.” She picked up the broken piece of cookie she had left on the table and popped it into her mouth. “Ugh, it’s stale.” She swallowed and cleared her throat. “Look, we never got real deep about this, and shoot, I can’t even tell if you’re really hearing me right now anyway, but when you’re in my ‘situation,’ you tend to look back across your life, and you get a good sense of where you got it right and where it could’ve gone righter. Maybe that’s why I’m so worked up. I think the world of you, Jason. You know that. You could be a star. You could also end up a cynical New York asshole—you know, you see them on the train, a really intelligent, really bitter nothing who’s forgotten how to smile.” She shrugged. “I’m just saying. Maybe your friends have a point. I don’t know, maybe they don’t.” She dropped her head down to her chest. “Maybe we’re all full of shit.” She stopped, and put both hands to the side of her head and rubbed her temples. “I’m exhausted. I have to get back in bed. Could you help me, please?”

I took her arm and helped her up and we walked, her leaning against me, over to her bed. She sat down slowly and then carefully lay back onto the pillow. I helped her swing her feet up onto the mattress. “It’s so warm these nights that I never even use a blanket,” she said, grunting. She reached for another pillow, I grabbed it and put it behind her head. “You know what it is, Jason? You’re neither here nor there right now, you’re just floating between ports. And it probably feels sorta nice to be between, right? Because you only have to think about yourself.” She looked me in the eye. “Yes, neighbor, so you’re a little lost. So what? You should be, you’re young. Believe me, you’ll miss it when you’re found. Knowing the answers, or more of them anyway, is boring.” She adjusted herself a
little to get comfortable. “Hit the lights, okay?” she said softly, eyes closing.

“I’m sorry, Patty,” I said. “I didn’t…”

“Shh,” she whispered, eyes still closed. “Save it for tomorrow. I love to wake up to flowers, you know.”

The room was starting to tilt and spin on me. I backed up, hit the lights, and started out. “And, Jason,” she called out to me, “forget being a fuck-up. Not everyone can wear it like Serge Gainsbourg.”
I unlocked my door, stepped inside my shitty little apartment, and sat down on the couch. I wasn’t tired. My heart was racing, it was thumping in my chest like an oversize subwoofer in a Toyota Tercel. Maybe it was the E. My eyes flicked around the room. I stood. I felt panicky. This was not the place for me. I rummaged through my silverware drawer. I knew I knew I knew I had some dope in there. I found a sizeable roach and a lighter and like that I was the fuck out the door and on the empty street and I was smoking and I was alive. That was something, wasn’t it? It was still pitch-black out and I walked west to make the night last as long as it could.

It was too late for bars and too early for coffee shops. I walked a few blocks, smoking the joint, getting to know the concrete, until I was more or less smoking my thumb and forefinger. I didn’t feel much from it, but my brain might have already been at full capacity. There was no traffic, so I strayed from the sidewalk into the street. I could see all the way to the river from there and I aimed my body toward it.

I was utterly alone. I didn’t think there had ever been another time that I had seen absolutely no life in the city—no cars, no one sleeping under a stairwell, nothing. It was impossible to be alone here, you got used to doing private things in public. You had no choice. We all got to see everyone else’s business and everyone got to see ours, so we were all even. Nobody had anything on anyone, at least not for long.

But now it was just me. The rest of the city was home dreaming about this or that or up worrying about something or taking a Xanax or a Tums or having a half-asleep pee or getting the shit fucked out of them or wishing they were getting the shit fucked out of them or whatever it was people did in apartments other than mine late at night or early in the morning. What a bunch of shit was flowing through my head. I crossed the highway and then the jogging path on the side of the Hudson and then walked all the way out to the end of the pier that jutted a hundred yards into the river. It was as far as I could go.

I leaned on the rail, looking across the water to Jersey. There was a strong breeze. The wind came off the water and I was the first person on the island of Manhattan it hit. It had traveled great distances to suddenly encounter me, the immovable object, which it flowed over and around and possibly through and then re-gelled on the other side off to somewhere else. What the significance of that was, I had no idea. I ran my hands through my crackly hair. I desperately wanted to think deep thoughts but they weren’t coming. I wanted a fucking moment of clarity, an epiphany, something, I needed something. I screamed as loud as I could. I considered jumping into the water but that seemed stupid and dangerous. I didn’t know what to do. It wasn’t coming. Ordinary people don’t turn on a dime. All I felt was sick and detached. I tried again, I tried to focus on Patty’s words, on me, but everything was fuzzy. Even the water looked fuzzy. I took off my glasses, they were filthy. It was like I was practicing for cataracts. I spat on the lenses and cleaned them with my shirt the best I could.

And then I got tired. My jaw ached and the only real thought I had was that I had to pee. I let my water join the river’s and then I lay down, carefully, on the concrete pier. My ass bone was still tender as fuck. Maybe something would come to me in a dream.

* * * * *

I woke up, the sun in my eyes, and I had it, I had my deep thought: Sleeping outside was a fucking retarded thing to do. My back was stiff, my head was throbbing, and my ass was a lump of pure pain. I got up and hobbled toward my house.

I stopped in some deli and saw that it was eight-thirty. I wondered how long I had slept out there. I bought a five-dollar bunch of tulips, bad ones dyed blue, the only ones they had, and a bottle of water. I was glad to see that I still
had my wallet. The deli dude gave me my change and a look, so I gave him a look in return. I got back to 99 Perry and climbed the stairs. I looked at my door and I looked at Patty’s and then I went over to hers. I shave-and-haircutted it.

No answer. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice so I started to shuffle over toward my place when I heard something. I went back to her door.

“Patty? You up?” I asked, ear to the door.

“Come here,” she said.

I tried the door. It was locked. “The door’s locked, Patty.”

“Jason.” A pause. “I need help.”

Everything happened in a blur from there. I ran down to the first floor and banged on the super’s door for what seemed like a century and he went upstairs in his robe and tried fifteen different keys until he got Patty’s door open. I went in and she was in bed, pale and crying, and I called an ambulance and they took her and they wouldn’t let me in the back.
I sat on a plastic chair and breathed in the hospital smell and read a *Marie Claire* someone had left behind. Every once in a while a middle-aged nurse would walk by and ignore me. I thought nurses were supposed to be super-sexy; I mean, a nurse outfit was always the slutty Halloween costume choice for girls who wanted to get laid. Looking at the opaque-hosed, orthopedic-shoe-wearing nurses here, I wasn’t sure how that outfit ever became known as erotic.

I had been waiting about three hours to get in and see Patty. I kept being told “in just a little while.” One of the nurses had asked me if I was family, and it struck me that I had no idea if Patty even had family. I should have lied and said yes, I probably could have been in there by now. All they had told me was what I already knew, she was weak from cancer. I couldn’t get anything more in-depth than that. So I waited in the plastic chair, trying in vain to find a comfortable position, wondering if I should get my bottom X-rayed. My phone still had one bar on the battery, so I squeezed out a few texts. First to Tina:

> in hospital with patty. ick.

Then to Eric:

> in st. vincent, patty very ill. advice?

Finally I was directed down a hall into an elevator, up three floors, and then down another hall to Patty’s room. It was tiny and there was another bed in there, but it wasn’t occupied. She was lying under the covers with some tubes up her nose. The TV was on and I took that for good news. I figured they didn’t let you watch *The Bold and the Beautiful* if things were too serious. But maybe it was the opposite, maybe they let you do what you wanted because you were too far gone. “You want bacon and ice cream and an opium suppository and some unfiltered Camels and a German Shiza DVD—sure, what more harm could they do?”

Patty’s eyes opened as I pulled up a chair and sat next to her. “Hi, neighbor,” I said, smiling. “How’re you feeling?”

“You look like hell,” she said in a scratchy voice just above a whisper. She blinked a few times, slowly.

“Yeah, and I think I smell too. You should be glad you have that oxygen supply—I still haven’t showered.”

She laughed weakly. “So. I owe you an apology, Jason.”

“What? I owe you one. I did have flowers for you by the way, but I left them in your apartment.” I hung my head. “Sorry about last night, and all.”

“That’s itty-bitty. I owe you a big apology. See, I told you a lie.” She stopped to take a breath. “A whopper.”

“About what?”

“Getting better. I’m not. I have lung cancer for chrissakes, Jason.” She smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling. Her skin looked like old, delicate parchment. “You know, you are terribly gullible.” She adjusted herself ever so slightly, then reached out her hand. I took it. “Sorry about that, neighbor, I just wanted us to have some laughs. I didn’t want to be remembered for being a buzzkill. I’ve been working on that, you see.”

I swallowed even though my mouth was pretty dry. “So wait. I mean, like, what’s the prognosis?”
“Death. Relatively soon.” She coughed lightly. “Don’t be upset. I’ve known for a long time. It’s not going to be like tomorrow, don’t freak out yet.” She stopped and took another breath. “Do you still have that card I gave you, the lawyer?”

“Yeah.”

“Call him. I gave him a list of everyone to contact. He knows what to do.”

Her hair was all caught up in one of the tubes that went to her nose. I leaned in and gently untangled it, smoothing it back. “What can I do?” I asked. I hadn’t the first clue.

“Want to stay with me for a little while? I may nap, but it’ll be nice to see a friendly face when I wake up.”

“Sure.” I gestured to the soap opera on the TV, and tried to smile. “Only if we change the channel, though.”

“Ugh, just turn it off.”

I found the remote and took care of it. I grabbed another chair to rest my legs on, maybe I could get some sleep myself. I was so tired. It didn’t make any sense. Patty had just told me she was going to die; she was going to die relatively soon. And all I could think was how much I wanted to shut my eyes. I didn’t want to cry or scream or run down the hall, I just wanted to lie down, just for a little. All I really felt were crushing waves of exhaustion. I curled up on the chairs. It was so quiet in there.

“Jason.”

“Yeah?”

“Is there anything you want me to tell God for you?”

I giggled. “Shut up.”

“You sure? You don’t want three wishes or something?”

“This is so weird, Patty. I feel like we’re just hanging out. I can’t get my head around it,” I said.

“Hanging out is the best part.” She coughed. We were both quiet for a bit. Patty’s eyes closed, and then so did mine. I floated just above sleep.

“Want to hear something funny, neighbor?” Patty whispered.

“Yeah.” I opened my eyes and looked over at her. Her eyes were still closed. She looked tiny under the covers. I watched her mouth move.

“My cemetery plot is in New Jersey. Can you believe that? I haven’t been to Jersey in twenty years.” She leaned her head to the side and yawned. Her hair fell across her face, obscuring it. “So long, New York,” she whispered. “Howdy, East Orange.”

We both fell asleep. A little later a nurse woke me up and kicked me out. Visiting hours were over. I’d have to come back tomorrow after nine.

Three days later I fought my way through Port Authority commuters and got on a Red and Tan bus. My suit jacket was folded on my lap. I put my headphones on and stared out the window. We made it through the tunnel and rolled into New Jersey.
My suit felt a little itchy and my heart was pounding. The setting sun grew warm against my back; I could feel myself sweating and wished I could just loosen my damn tie. I took a breath and tried to swallow the lump in my throat. Then I leaned into the microphone, and began. “Hello, my name is Jason Strider, and I’ve been a close friend of Stacey’s and Eric’s for many years.”

I stood on a small dais built on the sand of the bay in Westhampton, facing the seated congregation of wedding guests. They were smiling and fanning themselves. Tiki torches lined the area. “For those of you who know Stacey and Eric well, you know that they’ve always done things their own way. So tonight, instead of a traditional rabbi, they asked me to officiate over their marriage. I do so now with great honor, and…with a certificate I received over the Internet.” A reassuring group chuckle wafted toward me. I continued, “Let us open with the blessing over the wine.”

I said the prayer and handed the silver chalice to Stacey, who sipped from it, and then passed it to Eric, who did the same. It was so quiet you could hear the bay lapping up against the pilings, and the occasional seagull caw. I began the ceremony proper and I started to feel more and more confident. I knew it by heart. I had rehearsed like a hundred times in front of my bathroom mirror. The only thing I hadn’t practiced was actually holding the microphone. It was pretty hard to act casual with it; I imagined I looked a bit like a thirteen-year-old holding a cigarette awkwardly, pretending he knew how to smoke. I instantly had a newfound respect for Wink Martindale.

As I spoke, my eyes flitted between the bride and groom, and the audience behind them. Well, as much of the audience as I could see through the happy couple, their parents on either side, and the best men and bridesmaids who surrounded them. Some of the bridesmaids, mostly Stacey’s family members, were pretty attractive, actually. They all wore fairly sheer “champagne” satin dresses held up by spaghetti straps, and almost all wore them quite well. Stacey had some good genetics, it turned out. I tried to avoid looking at them so as not to be distracted, especially since Tina was also a bridesmaid and I just knew if we locked eyes I’d be done, I’d fall straight into nervous hysterics.

I started by saying that even though I was so honored when Stacey and Eric first asked me to preside over their wedding, I was also incredibly intimidated. The truth was I was no expert on love, yet in a short time I was expected to stand in front of all of their friends and family and pontificate about the subject. “Time passed, the wedding was getting closer, and I was getting worried. What I was going to say? Finally, just two weeks ago, while the three of us had dinner together, it hit me. Now, as a side note, this was the one dinner I actually bought them, instead of the other way around. So, it was already a magical night.” Eric flashed me a grin, his eyes already starting to well up. “But I digress.”

I began to tell the story of how Stacey and Eric had gotten into a fight, about appetizers of all things. “Eric really wanted to have those mini–hot dogs at the wedding, the pigs in blankets. But Stacey didn’t think those were really classy enough for such an important night. And as I sat there, picking at my french fries, I watched them work it out. It was like they were in their own little world. They went back and forth, really listening to each other’s feelings. When one got loud the other would calm that one, and soon they were laughing about the silliness of the whole thing. It was a trivial little fight, a tiny blip in their lives. And yet for me, it was telling.” A breeze started up; I patted the top of my head to make sure my yarmulke was secure.

“A very close friend of mine once told me that the most important things in life happen when you’re just hanging out. What I think she meant was, well, you can have a good time with just about anyone on a roller coaster, or at the Super Bowl, or in Vegas. But it’s really how you feel in the little moments that count. If you find someone who makes you laugh while you’re standing on line at the DMV, or when you’re sick with the flu, or who you can still have fun with while, say, having a heated debate about the pros and cons of wedding appetizers, well,” I paused, “that’s something.”
It wasn’t Shakespeare, what I had ended up with, but then again, this wasn’t a play. It was the real thing and it was okay to be a little corny, a little clichéd. The most important part was that I meant what I said. I had learned that at Patty’s funeral. It had been windy and gray that morning, traditional funeral weather. I could feel every little pebble on the concrete path scratching at the bottom of my rarely worn, hard-soled suit shoes as I walked in silence toward the grave site. The priest was a complete hack, but each of his oversentimental sentences about “this special life” set me trembling. They were nothing original. Hell, love wasn’t anything original either. But eventually it stung each of us, nonetheless.

I thought of Rabbi Stan and quickly eyed the crowd to see if they were with me. They were. Stacey kept turning to Eric, suppressing nervous giggles. She looked pretty, she wasn’t overly made-up, everything about her was simple, natural. She couldn’t stop smiling. I could see every one of her teeth almost to the molars. Eric looked sharp too. His tux was all black, no silly sea-foam cummerbund or anything like that. A six-foot-five guy in a tux could come off a little goofy, but he was making it work.

I touched Stacey on the shoulder, and I looked back and forth at each of them. “And in a few short moments, after our two friends are officially wed and we begin the reception outside on the deck, let us all enjoy our own little moment hanging out with them…while eating some mini–hot dogs.” A few people applauded and catcalled and Eric pumped a fist in the air.

It was time for the vows and the exchange of rings, so I handed it off to the bride and groom. Stacey began, and I stepped back and caught my breath. I started to think about Patty. I had seen Robert at her funeral; he stood across from me at the grave site. He tipped his cowboy hat in recognition as the priest spoke—well, shouted, so he could be heard above the rushing hum of the nearby turnpike. Robert was pretty upset that Patty’s grave was so poorly positioned, so close to the busy highway. I tried to see the bright side: It was the road back to the city.

It took almost no time for Patty’s apartment to be cleared out. Apparently she had some family in the Bay Area, and one of them, Aaron, a nice middle-aged hippie with John Lennon glasses and a graying ponytail, flew in, separated the wheat from the chaff, boxed up what he wanted, and left the rest. He asked me about Patty, as he didn’t really know her. She was his second cousin; the lawyer had tracked him down. He let me have the Chinatown photo and a few Dylan albums. I didn’t have a turntable but I wanted them all the same.

The landlord took over from there and sent in the Salvation Army, who bagged and tagged what was left behind, some for charity, some for trash. Then came the construction guys, who loudly clomped around and ripped out the kitchen and the bathroom and replaced them with cheap new appliances and fixtures and then slapped the whole place over with flat white paint. “Upgrades” like those somehow made it legal for the landlord to raise the rent. They left the door unlocked and I snuck in late one night and looked around the barren space; my footsteps made small echoes in the empty room. You would have never known a woman named Patty lived there. Every trace was gone, it was just some old patched-up piece-of-shit apartment. I slowly paced back and forth in the place. I figured Patty was the kind of person who might show me a sign, it didn’t seem that silly to me then. But I didn’t sense anything, just the overwhelming smell of fresh paint. The New York real estate market was a pretty goddamn good lesson in the fleeting and brutal nature of life. A couple of days later some girl moved in. I hadn’t met her yet. She played the flute. I could hear it in the hall sometimes.

A breeze blew across the beach. I watched as Stacey slipped the ring onto Eric’s finger. Past them I could see Tina, craning her neck, caught up in the moment, her camera dangling on a strap from her wrist.

I couldn’t sleep much those first few days after Patty was gone. I don’t know if I felt grief exactly, but I felt something, a nervous energy. I found myself staying in a lot. I started cooking dinner; I made an entire tray of lasagna one night that probably could have served twelve. In the early-morning hours, I finally hit the bullet, opened up a blank Word document, and focused on Stacey and Eric, banging away until I had done it, I had written the ceremony. Then I sent an e-mail to Tina for Brett’s number, called him, and met him for a drink. He said “Hey” and I said “Hey” and then I figured well fuck, the faster you do it the less it hurts. I told him I wanted to be his music supervisor. I certainly wasn’t A-list and I’d never done it before, but I knew music. I had DJ’d, I had helped “discover talent” at JB’s, I’d work my ass off if he gave me a shot. I rambled on too long like that, it sort of poured out, until I eventually landed on my best selling point: I’d work dirt-cheap.

He nodded. “Jason, first off, I’m really sorry we haven’t had the chance to hang out much, this movie is killing
me.” He said that Tina always talked about how funny I was, how much I knew about music, and how she was sure we’d get along great. But the thing was, he’d already hired someone. He told me it was a woman who used to be high up in A&R at Sony. She was new to it but had just finished several films that were in Sundance. Landing her was a coup. “However,” he said, taking a long sip of beer and leaving me hanging for five hundred years on the hopeful adverb, until he swallowed and continued, “I also happen to know that she’s looking for an assistant.” He promised to put in a very good word. “I mean, I’m the director, right?” He grinned goofily, “I’m still getting used to saying that.” We hung out a bit longer and then he had to run. I got in touch with the woman the next morning; we had a nice chat on the phone and were having breakfast on Tuesday. Tina said her fingers were crossed. Stacey said she’d give me a wake-up call from St. Barth, where they’d be honeymoong.

The sun was melting in the water now. Eric was facing Stacey, half-blubbering, half-speaking his vows. Their parents stood on either side of them, smiling nervously, tissues held in clenched hands. Next to them were the best men and the bridesmaids. They were all beaming, rapt.

Then I saw something.

The second bridesmaid in. Her gown had slipped, the thin strap was off the tan shoulder, leaving one whole breast exposed. The nipple was staring right at me, lit up, laser-locked. I was hypnotized. I was the only one in the whole place who could see it. Petey yawned in my pants, and began to wake up. Great, fucking great, I was going to be the rabbi with a boner.

Eric finished his vows and placed the wedding band on Stacey’s finger. Boom, I was back on. I took the microphone from him, turned away from the tit and toward the bride and groom. It was almost magic time; in the audience people fumbled and readied their cameras. I cleared my throat and, goddamnit, persevered. “You have spoken vows of love, vows you each took the time to write yourselves. You have exchanged rings. You have consecrated yourselves to each other in front of family and friends. So now…” I started grinning and couldn’t stop, “it is my duty, honor, and privilege, by the power invested in me by the holy World Wide Web, to pronounce you two…man and wife! You may kiss the bride!”

Eric lifted Stacey’s veil and, without hesitation, kissed her passionately. The audience erupted in applause and cheers and flashes popped and I got the chills. Goosebumps. The whole deal. Eric’s and Stacey’s parents exchanged hugs. Bridesmaid Number Two must’ve shifted or something because when I looked back that way the breast had retreated behind the curtain. I caught Tina’s eye and she grinned at me. One of the best men leaned in and put the cloth-wrapped glass on the ground near Eric’s shiny shoes. Eric looked at Stacey, and then he stomped on it.

“Mazel tov!” we all roared.

It was official. They were married. They kissed again and laughed and then stepped forward and hugged me simultaneously.

“Thank you, I love you!” yelled Stacey in my ear, sniffling.

“Great job, man!” said Eric, mussing my hair, knocking off my yarmulke.

Then they turned and bounded off the dais, holding hands. I just stood there and watched them go. I was smiling from ear to ear. The crowd fell in behind them, everyone happy, everyone headed toward the bar.

I stayed behind, alone on the dais. It grew quiet. Attendants came out and started to extinguish the torches and fold the chairs. I started to amble in, then stopped for a second, and gave thanks. Nice restraint, Petey.

* * * * *

And so, yes, hell yes, I was soon intoxicated. Guilty as charged, Your Honor. I hadn’t really drunk much since my night in the gutter and now I was feeling strong as an ox and swift as a puma. All night everybody wanted to run to the bar and get the good rabbi a drink, and it would have been rude of me to refuse. I was nothing if not gifted in the
ways of etiquette.

It was after dinner. We had eaten, we had Hora-ed, and now the people, as they will do at that point in a wedding reception, were dancing. From the relative safety of the carpet, I watched as a crowd of shoeless girls surrounded Stacey on the dance floor, chanting, “Go, Sta-cey, go, Sta-cey,” while the DJ blasted Herbie Hancock’s “Rockit.” It was quite the spectacle. Eric was pushed out onto the floor and the two of them danced in the middle of the fray like cute, overstimulated toddlers. Stacey tried to get me to join her by lassoing me with an invisible rope and pulling me, hand over hand, toward the dance floor. I quickly held up two fingers, mimed a pair of scissors, and cut the rope, laughing.

Tina and Brett were out there too, away from the fray, drunkenly slow-dancing. Tina was a wreck, a fantastic, sparkling, slit-eyed mess, swaying with the beat, hanging onto Brett for balance. She felt me staring at her, looked up, and smiled. Then with her eyes locked on mine, she slowly raised her hand off his back, smirked, and gave me the finger.

I wandered away, grabbed a Corona from the bar, and weaved through a sea of formalwear until I made it to the deck. Then I kept going, out onto the sand, down toward the water. The music began to fade behind me. I wished I knew a sea chantey, I felt like belting one out. As I stumbled along, I reached inside my jacket pocket and whipped out a perfect little joint. From my pants, I pulled a lighter. I brought the two together. I had a feeling they’d become fast friends.

I found a spot, lay back on the sand, and stared up at the sky, thick with stars. The moon hung low and bright, not quite full but in the ballpark. I put the joint to my lips, took a huge hit and held it, held it, held it, slowly letting the smoke pool in my mouth. Then I made an “O” with my lips, mentally prepared myself for success, and exhaled.
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I JUST WANT MY PANTS BACK

DAVID J. ROSEN