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April 14, 2015

Pierce the Sky

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

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By S. T. Wright

A brilliant but deeply confused high school student receives a massive scholarship to an elite college far away from his tiny Southern town, but finds himself incapable of making a final decision. Desperate, he enlists the help of his best friend: his history teacher, Mr. Wylie, who attended the college and constantly sings its praises. Sympathetic to the protagonist's plot, Mr. Wylie convinces the protagonist to take a secret trip with him down to the college in order to get a better sense of its culture without being hindered by the eyes of the school's administration or the protagonist's parents. The protagonist agrees to the terms without hesitation.

At the college, the protagonist begins to second-guess Mr. Wylie's plan, but still forces himself to attend a variety of college events, culminating in a boisterous frat party. Overwhelmed by the circumstances, the protagonist suffers a massive anxiety attack on the dance floor and begins to wonder if the college is right for him. Shortly after this, the protagonist runs into an old friend in the form of Andrea, a freshman who, like him, dreams of being a successful author. As the protagonist enters Andrea's world, he begins to run into the boundaries of his own understanding, and finds his assumptions about the nature of his visit and the college around him begin to unravel. Fantasy and reality intermingle, until the protagonist is unsure what exactly Wylie, Andrea, or the college mean to him anymore.

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This manuscript is dedicated to David Spry, with love and squalor.

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“This is it. This is your story.” – Auron, Final Fantasy X

Pierce the Sky

by S.T. Wright

Part 1: Wylie

Look; nobody edited this. No scholarly eyes have scanned this page. No outside sources were consulted in its creation. There will be no “Acknowledgments” section following this, because there is no one to acknowledge. In the end, even I knew how little I had to work with. There are faded landscapes, snippets of conversation, a few frantic notebook entries, and maybe even a handful of clear moments, but they all drain through the same filter. At the bottom of it all, there’s me.

One of those clear moments: my favorite teacher and I, scrunched into his Volvo coupe, blazed down I-85 southbound in the dead of night, blasting hip-hop to disguise the vehicle’s moribund rattle. Even though our “plan” had just entered into its second stage, the combination of boom-bap drums and desolate roads made it seem like some sort of victory.

“I’m telling you man, you’re gonna love it!” Mr. Wylie yelled. He had one hand on the wheel and another on his phone, trying to rewind the song to the perfect moment. I don’t recall the song, but I was into it. I just wanted him to pay more attention to the road before we ended up in a smoking heap.

“What?” I said. I reached for the volume wheel, but he batted my hand away.

“The school, man. The- No, wait! This is it!” he said. Right on cue, his favorite verse started, and Mr. Wylie went right with it, pounding out the beat on the steering wheel while he recited every word in his thick Southern drawl. The sonic assault from his stereo made my head

throb heavily, and as I gripped the safety handle I could feel the very skeleton of the vehicle creak and moan under the stress. It was exhilarating.

I reached to grab for him, but he jerked away and kept on drumming. “It’s your turn!” he yelled. The next verse started, and I imitated his example. He repeated the end of every line along with me. Now it really did feel like a victory.

Finally, at the chorus, I reached for him. With clear reluctance, he brought the engine down from the red line. The vehicle still groaned from its mild shaking, but at least my brain no longer felt like it was stuck in a broken spin cycle.

“Good stuff. I’m just trying to get to a certain kind of place, man. You know?” Mr. Wylie said, turning back to the road. With his free hand, he fumbled around under the seat and produced a scratched tin adorned with Iron Maiden’s zombie mascot, ‘Eddie.’ Again and again he tried to open it, but the latch held fast. He grunted and tossed it to me. “You mind? Fucking thing’s jammed or something.”

I slipped my fingers under the familiar lid and flipped it open with ease. Inside was a scattered collection of pre-cut cigars with names like “El Diablo Grande” and “Diesel Special.” I grabbed one and handed it to him, and he lit it. He always insisted on doing that part himself. In the shuddering light, I recognized the Zippo’s case graphic: Eddie. Of course.

“Thank you. So, the college. The college, man,” he said, puffing away at the cigar. “Or, the university. As some call it.” His voice was almost a hiss; I had to stifle a laugh. “Whatever the hell you wanna call it, it’s a damn fine place. Had a lot of good times there. Man. Did I ever tell you about that one girl?” Smoke spewed from his lips. The car had the stink of toxic regret.

“Not sure,” I said. “Which one?” There was always a girl; to him, there wasn’t a story without one. At least one, that is.

“Well, I don’t wanna give away too much,” he said, taking another drag. “It ruins it, you know?”

“Okay,” I said. I waited for him to say something, but he just kept nursing his cigar. As always, he wanted to play twenty questions with his sexual history. Not that I minded much: I was more than a little curious, and nobody else would even come close to broaching that subject with me.

I adjusted in my seat and forced a sigh. “Fine, if you’re going to be like that. Was she blonde?”

He exhaled a cloud of mucous smoke. “Maybe? Not sure. Definitely not brunette.”

“Where was she from?”

“Uh, I don’t know. Atlanta, maybe?”

“What was her name?”

“Kathy? Katie? Something like that.” The red circle of his cigar crept up its length as he inhaled. He tipped the ash out the window.

“Not very clear so far,” I said, squeezing my armrest.

“Well, ask me about something that actually matters!” he said, laughing. Every laugh that issued from Mr. Wylie’s lips was a perverse spectacle somewhere between a cackle and a growl. For a few weeks after I had first met him, I had tried to imitate it whenever I had a spare moment to myself. I never could quite get it down, but then again I hadn’t had access to the world’s cheapest cigars. It was two years past that, but I still didn’t quite have it down.

“Like what?” I said. Those were the three things I had been taught to note first about the opposite sex. It seemed reasonable enough. Mr. Wylie, on the other hand, seemed to prioritize a different set.

“I don’t know! Ask me about her tits or something,” he said.

“Uh...” I started, unsure how to phrase it. “How were her tits, Mr. Wylie?”

“They were fan-tastic,” he said, pounding on the dash with each syllable. “The absolute best.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “The best ever?”

He snorted, and some acrid smoke followed. “Okay, maybe not the best ever. But at the time...let me tell you. Definitely top ten. Maybe even five.” He paused to take a long drag.

“What’re you waiting for? You gonna ask me another or what?”

I may have been inexperienced, but even I could see the pattern. So we burned through the next few miles like that; me, hands in my lap, tossing him the foulest questions I could come up with; and him, describing every last detail of his conquest, laughing all the while. Still, no matter how deep I tried to go, the descriptions would end at his own actions. It was all about her, the nameless phantasm that, as far as I was concerned, probably didn’t even exist.

“Little piece of advice,” he said. “Never take a girl up to a roof. It might seem like a good idea, but let me tell you. All you end up with is cold balls. Especially in winter.”

He gave me a glance, and I couldn’t tell if I was supposed to laugh or nod in agreement.

“So,” I said. “You took this girl up to the clock tower, you smoked weed, and she gave you oral sex. Is that it?”

He coughed. “Well, yeah, I suppose. If you really want to cut it down that much.”

I sighed. “Maybe when you’re giving me the tour, you should cut it down a little.”

He took a drag, longer this time. “I’ll try my best.”

For a while, nothing but the ceaseless rattle of the car filled the air. At some point during this I reached down into my bag for my journal. Even then, its red cover was faded and worn,

and the edges of the pages had started to curl. I flipped through the pages, past incomplete ideas, diagrams of characters never developed, and finally settled upon a blank space next to a half-finished poem. Mr. Wylie's aggressive driving and endless postulations about my future were making my nerves misfire. In situations like this, I had two options: play video games, or try to write something. I had forgotten the bag that had my handheld console in it, so the latter was my only choice.

I tried to put some of my swirling thoughts down, but they wouldn't come; the familiar boundary between my brain and the page had reared its ugly head. Mr. Wylie's non-stop acceleration didn't help.

"Could you cool it? I'm trying to do something here," I said, reaching back into my bag.

"Oh, really? Like what?" The death of his cigar was imminent; he coughed out its last gasps as its glowing ring receded even further.

"You know," I muttered. "Stuff." What was I supposed to say?

"Right, right. The same 'stuff' you used to scribble in that while I was trying to teach you about the Wilmot Proviso?"

A memory took hold: I'm writing frantically, trying to find the perfect metaphor; him standing over me with his laser pointer, preparing to snatch the notebook from my hand.

"No," I said. "Similar. But not the same."

"Oh, really?" he said, laughing. "What's the difference?"

"The difference?" At first, it seemed like a stupid question. A couple of years ago, I had written like *this*, and at this moment I wrote like *that*. Everything else is up to interpretation. But as the road unfurled before me, I began to wonder. I tried to wrestle it down, to restrain it, but it fought back with too much vigor. Finally, I resorted to the obvious.

“What’s the difference between poetry and prose?” I said.

A hum escaped from Mr. Wylie’s lips, but he just kept on staring at the road. He wasn’t the kind of guy who stays silent when asked a question, but I guess I had cast him out of his comfort zone. He probably just needed a little jolt. So, I hit him in the arm.

“Come on, this isn’t *Jeopardy*. I mean your opinion.”

“Well...” he exhaled. “The form, I guess. And the – whatdoyoucallit. The way it sounds.”

“Meter?” I offered.

“Yeah. That,” he said.

“Right, right. Makes sense,” I said, failing to suppress my chuckle. Apparently I wasn’t the only person falling back on the obvious. “Well, anyway. One of those important dead white guys once said that poetry is, and I quote, ‘the best words in the best order,’ and that prose is merely ‘words in the best order.’ Now, I think that’s secret code for most prose being complete shit. Like, the garbage pile.”

Outside, hazy silhouettes of trees swept by. The tires rumbled on the cracked asphalt.

“He was a poet, by the way,” I said.

Mr. Wylie shifted in his seat, like he did whenever I tried to adjust the stereo. “What’s your point?”

I sighed. “My point is this: a long time ago, I used to worry about putting the best words in the best order. A while after that, I tried to settle for just the best order. Now, I’m happy if I just get the words on the page at all. That’s the difference.”

“Okay.” He looked down at his phone and thumbed through some menus.

Finally free of distractions, I tried to complete the line on the page, but it just wouldn’t come. I had neglected to give it the bindings it deserved, so, like all my other good ideas, it had

vaporized. I groaned and put the whole ensemble back in my bag. When it wasn't coming, it wasn't coming. And it hadn't been coming for a while.

Mr. Wylie eyed my bag with his usual disdain. "You know, I wonder why you waste your time with that shit."

"You're right," I said. "I do know. In fact, I'd say your opinion on that matter has been comprehensively documented."

"Oh, don't be a smart-ass. It's just...you've got a Lambo in that head of yours," he said, tapping on his own.

"So?" I said. I could see where he was going with this – anyone could – but that didn't make it any less annoying. We had gone through this hundreds of times. A green sign flickered by in the darkness: apparently, we were passing through Jackson County.

"So maybe you should apply it to something that's a little more – I don't know, real - than words on a damn page. Words that, as far as I can tell, don't really add up to anything. And maybe pursue something more..."

"Pedestrian?" I said.

"No, you asshole. Conventional. Something that pays the bills. Something that would make your mom and dad proud. You know. Like finance."

That just about killed me. I laughed up a storm as he just sat there, his sharp blue eyes staring forward. This was a familiar situation; a misplaced reference would fail to register, and as one of us enjoyed the punchline the other would chuckle along, in complete ignorance. But he didn't feign anything this time. The irony was so obvious, looming over all, that he couldn't see it.

My stomach had only started to unwind itself from my laughing fits when he finally spoke up.

“What’s so funny?” he said, with the tone of a reporter trying to glean gossip from tired waitstaff.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just funny that you bring them up now, of all times.”

He bristled in his seat. “Your parents?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Considering that, you know. You just lied to their faces and all.”

An accusatory finger floated inches from my own face – the Volvo shifted mildly in the process. “Hey, look. That was us. WE lied to their faces, not just me. Plus, that was your damn idea, not mine. I figured they would understand.”

“And let them know that I’m about to visit a college with you instead of them? Not likely.”

“Why not?” he said, in his best Devil’s Advocate voice.

“They’d flay me alive. We talked about this,” I said, trying to keep my tone flat.

“Yeah, yeah, I know all that. I just don’t understand the why, man.”

I gave him an once-over. “No offense, but I just don’t think they’d really ‘get it,’ if you know what I mean.”

Mr. Wylie stared ahead, eyes vacant. “I’m not sure I do.”

I swallowed, reaching wildly for the right words. “You’re young. You know, considering. They’d get the wrong idea.”

“That, what? I’m going to give you a handle and a girl and tell you to go to town?”

“Well,” I said, my throat dry. “Are you?”

Mr. Wylie’s face tightened.

I wanted to rib him a little more, but the tiny quaver in his voice hid something ugly, and I was afraid I might accidentally scare my favorite clown away. And, really, at that precise moment, that would have meant the golden ticket falling to ashes in my hand. A part of me, which pulsed in odd intervals, told me that the ticket was worth grasping. Another, which droned in the back of my mind like a broken television, suggested tearing it apart and letting the pieces fly to the winds. But in that moment, with the trees whipping past and the pulse tearing up my insides, I decided to be cautious. “Never mind,” I said.

He didn’t say anything. Instead, he rolled the windows down and let the wind rip through the vehicle. Reams of ScanTron sheets, student papers, and historical documents shivered from the assault; some even danced a slow waltz through the air. Mr. Wylie’s cropped hair blew back and forth upon the top of his head, and for a second I thought that he was trying to get us to go into hyper-drive. His face was an absolute portrait of ridiculousness, his eyes narrowed into slits, his mouth twisted into a half-grin he probably practiced in the bathroom three times a day. He looked like a man geared up to throw himself at a dusty problem that the rest of the world had solved ages ago. Someone quicker had gotten to it first, but that wasn’t going to stop him from dissecting the crumbs.

“What you need to realize,” he said, straining his voice above the howl of the interstate, “is that this is a real opportunity for you. For both of us.”

“Yeah, definitely,” I said, with all the enthusiasm of a mortician.

“There are infinite doors open to you right now. You know that, right?” He looked at me, half-grin cocked. “Like, think about it. You’ve come down a hallway, right? Now, to you, this hallway’s not that great. It’s kinda dingy-

“Really dingy,” I interrupted.

He frowned. “Yeah, whatever. It’s kinda dark-“

“Dark as night,” I quipped. I still can’t believe I said that one.

“Come on, man. I know you hate River City, blah blah blah. Let me finish. So, this hallway. No windows, no doors. Nobody really goes down this way, because there are better ways to get to where they wanna go. But you gotta go down the hallway, right? Because there ain’t any way out. You see what I’m saying?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“So what’s a kid in your position liable to do? First door you see, you take it. Right? That’s what I would do. Hell, that’s what anybody would do. But what you gotta realize is that not all these doors go to the same place. Some of them go down a floor – others, go up a couple. So, I’m pulling back the curtain. I’m giving you a taste of what’s to come, at least here. Now, I know the deadline’s not for a week, but, you’ve gotta decide. You have to go down one of those doors. And I’m trying to make sure that-“

“What about windows?” I said.

Mr. Wylie gaped at me. He was just sitting there, constructing this intricate metaphor, but of course I had to jump in with both feet and scuff up the upholstery. But it didn’t stop him.

“I’m trying to make sure you open the right door.”

“Right, but you said windows too. ‘The hallway doesn’t have doors or windows.’
Something like that.”

“No, I-“ He looked away. Another green sign: 63 miles to Queenspoint.

“Alright then,” I said. “The doors, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. “The doors.”

Blackness congealed on the horizon. We had a million miles to go, I was sure of it. The sign said otherwise, but I didn't buy it. In that state, in that car, with that person, the totality of the darkness seemed inevitable. As we grew closer to Queenspoint, the headlights would dim more and more, until they would finally give out. The university and its enormous verdancy, the grand, bulging clock tower, the rows upon rows of illuminated doorways and sprawled across its length; we would pass them all by, and keep driving, due south, perhaps until water interrupted our trek.

But that's not what happened. Instead, I said this: "Well, I think the windows are relevant too. First one I'd see, I'd just bust through it, because at least it gets me out of the damn cycle. I know where it goes."

Mr. Wylie laughed his spectacular laugh. "It's dark, it's dirty. Maybe it's a basement."

I sighed. "There wouldn't be windows then, right?"

"Maybe," he conceded, scratching his stubble. "Maybe."

We kept drifting across a sunless sea, with no destination in sight.

"Honestly, I just don't know what your problem is," Mr. Wylie said, calm and measured. It was rather unlike him.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"With River City. You treat it like it's a damn hell-pit. It's an okay place, alright? We've got RCU. We've got football. We've got co-eds."

"So?" My curtness rattled him.

"So, ain't that supposed to be what it's all about? You're 17. What else could you want?"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Something different, I guess."

"Like what?"

“I don’t know, okay? More than a couple thousand people would be a good start.”

“You might not be saying that when you’re sitting in traffic for hours a day.”

“I don’t care. I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, sure,” he said.

“Look, if River City’s so great, why are you even driving me out here? Why don’t I just go to RCU like everyone else in my damn family? Seems a lot easier.”

He bristled, gripping the steering wheel with both hands. “I’m not saying River City’s great. I’m just saying it’s better than you think it is. As for me, well, a job’s a job, and mine’s in River City. I ain’t got a lot of choice right now.”

“There’s always a damn choice,” I muttered.

“Not always. But right now, you’ve got one. Yeah, I want you to go to Queenspoint and have an amazing college experience, like I did. But I want you to do it for the right reasons. And hating your hometown isn’t the right reason.”

I looked down at my notebook. “Yeah, maybe not. But it can be one of them.”

“Look. At the end of the day, you decide the door or whatever, okay? Past all this metaphorical shit, either you take the scholarship or you don’t. We’re gonna have some fun this weekend, but that’s what it boils down to. I just want to make sure you have all the right information. I’m your friend here. Okay?”

The thick blackness bubbled through, threatening to burst through the windshield. Doors – Wylie’s, or perhaps some of my own creation – flapped on their hinges all around me. None of it felt very real, but it never does when you need it the most.

“Yeah,” I said, diffident. “I guess you’re right.”

“Okay. Glad we’re clear on that. Mind getting me another cigar?”

Out of the darkness I shot towards the sleeping city, where my uncertain future dwelled
beneath the trees.

It's funny, really, the way memory works. The voices still echo, the lips still dance, but the individual words are covered by fog.

Once, when I was much younger, I used to pretend to sleep, waiting until all the lights in the house were off. When all I could hear was the swaying of the oaks, I would creep downstairs and put in one of my dad's old boxing tapes. These weren't the grand bouts of athletic triumph and attrition that would later so impress me, but rather homemade compilations of devastating knockouts, husks of sheer brutality presented without justification. What started as a curiosity soon metastasized into a full-blown addiction; my five-minute viewings turned into ten, which turned to twenty, which turned to me falling asleep on the couch, looping the same video for the third time that week. The climactic blows themselves, once a source of rote catharsis, soon lessened into numb gestures, devoid of all impact. One man would posture at another, I would blink, and suddenly, the other would be on the floor, a pile of twitching limbs struggling to regain equilibrium. The referee would wave his hands, the bell would ring, and I would see the blow again as it careened through the air in its slow, fateful arc. Cut to a duo of fresh-faced fighters, in a different ring, in a different state, and repeat until unconscious.

Yet it was only at that point, when I could only sleeplessly rustle the sheets without resorting to the tapes, that things began to change. The knockout hits themselves became afterthoughts as the nuances came to light. I would rewind once, twice, thrice to understand the mistake – perhaps the victim's hand was too low, or he fell for a fatal feint, or it was just the result of a lucky flail. The appeal lay not in the hit itself, but in the slight movement of the hands, the shift of the eyes, the firing of the neurons a split second before it. The art had revealed itself

to me: the thing that no one saw that could explain the disaster that followed. And I had accidentally developed an eye for it.

Maybe that's not what art is. I'll admit that. But, still, to this day, that's what I always remember. That moment right before the impact. But never the impact itself.

Anyway, suffice it to say that I don't remember anything about the tour of the campus we took that next morning, after spending a fitful night in Mr. Wylie's condo. If I had to hazard a guess, I would say that it was probably pleasant but unremarkable. Vaguely, I recall standing beneath that colossal clock tower as it beat out the noontime hour, all metal clanging and solemn bell-tones. Maybe Mr. Wylie made a joke about his phantom blonde, and maybe I made a counter-joke. Presumably we sauntered through the immaculately manicured quadrangle, *oohing* and *ahhing* at every useless factoid offered by our tour guide, toward the ancient administration building, clad in pure white marble and marked by a hint of Masonic imagery. I recall standing before that monolith of pure whiteness, clean enough to see yourself in, and wondering about a video game.

To be frank with you, I spend a lot of time wondering about games, trying to make aged pixels relevant to my life the way they were years ago. But at that precise moment, the world seemed to do the work for me. In the *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, between the castle and the nearby ranch, there is a precise spot where, if you do it just right, you can look up and just make out a thin seam that holds up the sky, almost like the spot where the author himself stitched the universe together. Deep within myself I felt a strong stirring, and a funny notion planted itself in my head. This tour was an artificial waste of time; a commercial, even. I felt that I could reach up into the sky above that tour, find that seam, and pluck it outright, bringing the sky and everything down upon us, perhaps revealing a camera crew drifting through the ether.

But that didn't happen. Nothing happened, in fact. Instead, we coasted on, through relentless sunlight and dusty nostalgia, until we were in the car in front of Mr. Wylie's old frat house, far enough from main campus to avoid the administration's piercing eye. It was a Saturday night, and we were already arguing.

"I'm just saying, I think it might be a little weird," I said, trying to discreetly pull on a plaid button-up in the front seat of the Volvo. Once, a girl did this in my front seat while I was trying to drive. It was, I'm sorry to say, one of the greater dilemmas of my sixteenth year.

"I think it'd be valuable for you. If you're along with a real brother, they're gonna like you more," Mr. Wylie said, playing with his lighter. "Plus, I brought this along. Like it?" He pulled out a flask emblazoned with the kind of flames you see on the side of a bad racecar.

"Uh, sure," I said, as I fumbled with the top button.

"Yep. Pretty sweet, if I say so myself. Don't get a lot of chances to use it nowadays." He unscrewed it and took a pull. Outside, the waning sun quietly sapped warmth from the earth.

He took another pull, deeper this time. "This is Scotch, by the way. Damn good stuff, too. You a Scotch man?"

I finally emerged through the shirt's neck crevice. "Uh, not really," I said, absentmindedly.

He gave a laugh that transitioned into a hacking cough. "Oh, really? Too much for you? I'm shocked."

His tack pricked me a bit, but I had a shirt to worry about. "Yeah, sure," I said. "Honestly, I don't have a ton of time to worry about what brand of poison I prefer."

He guffawed and turned outside, where the streetlamps blazed above. Ahead of us, the road curved gently, giving the impression of a secluded country drive. Only, instead of apple

trees, this boulevard was lined with bulbous houses that loudly advertised the Greek letters above their doorsteps. Indistinct electronic music blared from each of them, mingling into a bass tone that thumped away at my consciousness.

Mr. Wylie turned back towards me and gave me his half-smile. “It’s funny, that a guy like you attacks what you don’t understand. You know you do that, right?”

I cleared my throat. “It’s not that I don’t understand them, it’s that I don’t care about them. And it’s not an attack. You’re the one that does that.”

The half-smile broadened; he knew he had me. He sloshed the flask. “Fair enough, I did call you a wuss. But look. Let’s do a little test. This is sixteen-year Scotch. Can you tell me what that means?”

Gazing upon the houses in the growing dark, I realized just how absurd they were. They were almost like scale models of manor homes designed to be mounted on wheels and driven from one collegiate hellscape to another.

Mr. Wylie let out an obnoxious buzzer chirp. “I’ll take that as a no, then,” Mr. Wylie exhaled. “Literally, it means it’s been aged for sixteen years in the cask. Figuratively –“

“It means you paid way too much for it?” I said. “Though I guess that’s not really figurative.”

His eyes flashed. “No, idiot,” he said. “It means it’s really good. It’s like I always say. It isn’t old enough to fuck, but it’s old enough to drive. So drink some.” He tossed the flask at me; it stung as it hit my lap.

Looking back, it now occurs to me that this was only the second time in my life that someone had offered me alcohol, excluding sips of wine taken at insufferable family gatherings.

I probably should have taken it. But in that moment, all I could think of was the growing fire in my belly that flared at the thought of waltzing into the unknown recesses of that house.

So, I passed it back to him. “I’m good,” I said.

“Come on,” he said, trying to pass it back. “It’ll calm you down.”

“No. Really, man,” I said. “I don’t want it.”

“Okay, okay. Fine,” he said, placing the flask back in his pocket. He beat out a hurried rhythm on the dash. “This is exactly why you need me in there with you, though. You better know that.”

I idly buttoned and re-buttoned the top of my shirt. I couldn’t believe I had gone with the plaid one. “How do you figure?”

“Hold up,” he said. He folded back his shirt-sleeve with dramatic flair. Apparently, I had accidentally activated one of his impromptu performances, and I was going to have to sit through it. He shoved his wrist in my face, grazing my nose. “Go ahead. Tell me. What time is it?”

I sighed. I resisted the urge to make a snide comment. It would only make his shtick take longer.

“Uh, I guess about a quarter to 11. Probably time to be going in, I’d imagine.”

“That means they’re already drunk. You know that, right? Fifty drunk strangers in there.”

“Sounds great,” I managed, but a familiar fire began to smolder in my gut.

It’s a strange phenomenon, the fire; I can attend a dozen parties and never feel a thing, but then I’ll be bounding into a low-key affair and I’ll feel its acid flame begin to singe my insides, licking up and down my gullet. From something or nothing, it returns, just to remind you it can.

Years ago, I once tried to explain this concept to a girl I had met, breathlessly whispering my greatest secrets to her as she stared at her freshly-painted nails. Was she scared to meet my gaze, or was the monologue not compelling enough? Regardless, at the end of it, when my cavalcade of clichés finally petered out, the words unable to hold any of the feeling, she looked at me, and said some things. She tried to understand, she really did. It wasn't enough. But it was a lot closer than anybody else had ever come.

"I'm just saying, I think I need to be in there with you," Mr. Wylie said, facing the miniature manor. Quietly, he added: "I think it'd really help."

I wondered if Mr. Wylie hoped I would forge the same memories in that frat-house as he did. I fiddled with the top-button again. The notion made me sad, but the fire was growing close. I needed to get out of the car.

"Look, Mr. Wylie," I said – well, I really didn't say. My tongue flapped and the words came out, but 'said' implies a kind of sincerity. "I'm really glad you're worried about me," I conveyed, every syllable clanging like a loose nut in a whirring engine. "And I know you're...curious about what it looks like inside there today. But I need to do this alone. Really. It's important to me."

He shot me a heated glance. "You sure about this?"

The blaze sank further into me. "Yeah. I think so."

Mr. Wylie let out the mother of all groans; it was like the death cry of a broken bass drum. "Okay," he said. "Fine. Talk to the brothers. Try to see if you like them. But..." he said, tossing the flask back to me. "Take it. Maybe you'll change your mind."

Something nearly gave way in me. I wanted to explain to him that I had never even tasted a drop of liquor before, that I had about as much interest in his flask as I did in taking shots of

radioactive toilet water. But, looking at him as he sat there studying the house, no doubt tracing the experiences that had occurred so long ago, whatever had snapped it me managed to reknit itself. “Alright,” I said. “I’ll try to save some for you.” I stepped out of the Volvo onto the house’s mangled lawn. Apparently, they hadn’t yet spooked a pledge into pursuing landscaping as a major.

“Okay. Just call me when you’re done,” he said. He stared straight ahead, no doubt trying to ignore the fount of nostalgia that lay just behind me. Then, seconds later: “Are you sure? I’ve got plenty of favors in the back.”

I knew what kind of man Mr. Wylie was. If I gave him an inch, he would’ve taken the fucking ruler. “Yeah. I’m sure,” I said, decisively. “Don’t wait up.”

He sighed. “Okay. Well, don’t get too fucked up.” Seconds later, the engine turned over and he sped away, leaving me choking in a cloud of noxious vapor as the house before me bounced in ecstasy.

I took a deep breath to quiet my stomach and made my way across the battered lawn. Unlike the grass preceding the other houses, which were merely unkempt, this lawn bore battle scars, the lone proof of stories whispered in the ears of tipsy freshmen in the corners of dive bars. In some spots, foliage grew through the concrete; others were filled in with rocks or sand, perhaps the aftermath of a drunken brush with fireworks. It was a tapestry. And I was walking across it to partake in what it represented.

I approached the slanted front steps. Three students were standing on the patio, drinking beer and gossiping about random bullshit. As I grew closer to them, a dilemma struck me. Either I had developed facial blindness, or these guys had a cloning machine in the back. The three brothers looked like a copy-paste glitch from the most mediocre video game ever made. Their

names might as well have been Bland, Blander, and Blandest. And, at that moment, I had a creeping suspicion that they had gotten more action in the past month than I would get in my entire life.

I swallowed and crept up the steps to the brother nearest me - Bland. I offered him a hand; shockingly, I was able to keep it steady. "Hey. What's up?" I said. My dry throat, combined with my anxious demeanor, made me sound like a flamboyant serial killer. Blander and Blandest continued their repartee; whatever they were discussing, it was apparently important.

"Sup," he said, taking my hand in his anaconda grip. "Who're you?"

It was such a straightforward question it threw me for a loop. "Uh. Just a dude trying to get into this party, I guess."

Bland laughed. "I feel that. But, for real. Like, where's your group?"

I glanced at my surroundings. No cars were coming up the street; besides the thick basslines emanating through the air, the night was still. "Guess they're running late." I don't think even I would have bought that one.

"Uh huh. Really?" he said. "Be real with me, man."

Blander and Blandest made their way towards me, their business apparently concluded; the latter wobbled on jelly legs, latching onto objects for support. As he neared me, his grip faltered, and he nearly fell out onto the grass. So this was what a drunk person looked like.

"Who's this dude?" Blander said, the words melding together into one exotic entity.

"Some freshman," Bland said. "Apparently his friends're running late."

“Yeah, sure,” Blander said. “You’re bringing the girls, right? Whole mob of ‘em, I bet.” He grabbed a can of cheap beer – maybe Miller, maybe Bud – off the nearby table and drained it down his throat.

I didn’t respond. I had waded out into the deep water, and a movement in any direction spelled certain doom. So I just stayed still and hoped I could avoid the waves.

“I’m just kidding, man,” Blander said, putting the can down. “I get it. It’s Saturday night. You hear about something going on off-campus. You take the time to walk over here, ‘cause you wanna take a girl back and get your dick sucked before exams start. That’s cool. I’ve been there.” He wrapped his arms around his two cohorts; Blandest stumbled towards him, his feet splaying in every direction, trying to find balance. “Trust me. We’re all been there. Except...” He pushed his two friends away and reached for another beer. “We can’t help you, man. First off, we’re a frat, not a charity. If we let every guy like you in here, we’d ruin the ratio. Ratio’s important.”

“Ya,” Blandest grunted. “Very important.” He belched so loudly that the air seemed to distort around him.

“Second, tonight’s a special event. White Night. Happens once a year. So, kind of an exclusive list. And as of right now, I don’t have a ton of reasons to let you in. Sorry.”

As these three titanic intellects argued their case to me, I couldn’t help but chuckle a little. My mind couldn’t bear to uncoil their twisted threads of half-logic, but it would hardly have been the first time. I had encountered every degree of Bland there was back in the rolling foothills of South Carolina, where the necks grow redder with each passing generation. I had expected a kind of new breed to fester down here in Queenspoint, a type raised on sailboats and skis rather than four-wheelers and pro wrestling, one that would gently push you away rather

than shoving you in a locker. But, now, I realized that my forecast had been rather misguided. I was running into all the same fences that people had erected around me back in River City. Sure, they had all the latest bells and whistles to curb the legion of climbers – like me, who spent so many hours building gizmos and trebuchets to try to catch a glimpse of the other side – but they were fences just the same. And I had to scramble up this one, too.

They gaped at me. Blandest had started to chuckle a bit, too, before realizing there was nothing to laugh about. Finally, I spoke. “Well, you’ve sure got me pegged.”

“Damn right,” Blander said, reaching for another beer in a nearby cooler. “Honestly, you’re one of the half-a-dozen we’ve turned away so far tonight. And there’s plenty more to come.”

“Yeah?” I said, as I tried to ignore the heat creeping up my esophagus. “Well, you’re wrong. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Really?” he said. He cracked the beer in his hand and took a long gulp. He was half-a-head taller than me, but he didn’t have a lot to him. I imagined he had an hour to go before him and Blandest passed out in beds that was not their own. “Because you’ve got twenty more seconds before we kick you back to your fat-ass roommate at Ike or whatever.”

“What’s-“ I began, intending to inquire about that last proper noun. But I caught myself; freshmen are supposed to know stuff about the university. “I know a guy. Ex-brother. Said you guys were cool.”

“Oh, alright,” said Blander, placing his beer on the banister of the steps. “I can respect that. What’s his name?”

“Uh...” I wracked my brain for Mr. Wylie’s first name, and it came forth lined in gold. “Rob Wylie.”

“You think?” Blander said, letting out the kind of belly laugh that would have made the subject of our conversation proud. “Look, bro. I appreciate the effort. Makes our job a lot more interesting. But there isn’t any brother named ‘Rob Wylie’ who came out of here. Not anybody who graduated, anyway.”

Even with anxiety creeping through every fiber of my being, I knew bullshit when I saw it. “How could you possibly know that?” I said.

“Dude, come on,” he said, taking a sip of his beer. “Ever heard of ‘Hell Week’?”

I flinched. I might have been from a town where there were more churches than people, but even I had heard the phrase before. Some of my older acquaintances who went to River City University – home of the fighting Rainbow Trout – had complained about the recruitment process of the half-dozen or so organizations that resided in the stretch of double-wides that RCU called “fraternity row.” Once, a guy I barely knew showed me the ligature marks where they had hog-tied him and left him outside for the entire night. It was at that point, staring at the oozing red, that I had decided that RCU was most definitely not for me. Still, I had to say something. “Of course,” I spat out.

“Oh, cool. Well, I had to memorize every damn name on the registry for that, A-through-Z, from 1950 til now. So unless your ‘guy’ is shitting himself in a retirement home right now, his name isn’t Rob Wylie. But honestly, I’d be surprised if he exists at all.”

He looked down at me, taking another swig. I guess he expected me to admit my mistake, to bow down in defeat. Maybe I was supposed to run up to him and beg for his forgiveness, to offer to get him another beer, to try and negotiate a spot as his footstool for a week in exchange for entry. Or maybe he expected me to give him the punch he so clearly deserved.

Whatever the case, it didn't matter. My mind wasn't there. After all, I didn't know Blander, nor would I ever. To me, he was just the person standing between point A and point B. His name was probably a one-syllable grunt. He probably came from a city so alien to me that I wouldn't last a minute in its crowd-choked streets. But, underneath his contempt, I could hear the soft ring of truth. Either he was mistaken, or Mr. Wylie wasn't a brother. Maybe this entire thing was based on a false premise. But this wasn't the time to consider it.

And that's when I remembered the hideous, flame-streaked flask rattling around in my shirt pocket.

"Look man, Rob exists," I said. "We've just had a little misunderstanding, okay? Let me make it up to you guys." I pulled out the flask. "How do you guys feel about boilermakers?"

Blander and Bland looked at one another, searching for an answer. Blandest belched again. "What's a boilermaker?" Blander said.

I sighed. "It's a drink that Mr.- I mean, Rob, likes. Whiskey plus that beer in your hand there."

"Oh," Blander said. "Uh, I dunno."

"What if I told you that this was sixteen-year Scotch?"

Blander shrugged. "I'd ask you what the hell that means."

I laughed. "It means it's good. It also means it's yours. Rob wants you to have it." I tossed it to Bland; it sliced, but he got a hand on it. It bounced and flipped on the porch like a fumbled pigskin. A second passed; and then, of course, the trio all sprung for it at once, descending into a mess of splayed limbs and spilled beer. So, before they could protest the terms of the deal, I slipped past the melee and through the door, into the unknown depths of my first and only frat party.

In my memory, the party is outlined in darkness and haze; not your everyday variety, but the kind that lurks behind the worst of human endeavor. Looking at it now, I know this is ridiculous; after all, it was just a frat party, the kind that happens every weekend at colleges everywhere. Yet something colors it, giving it a dark tint that doesn't ever seem to lift. Perhaps it was the shock of seeing what I was expected to like; or maybe it was just everything that followed. Regardless, I know only one thing: as that door closed, I was tapped into a certain will, all forces aligning to bring me the true "college experience" that Mr. Wylie always talked about. I wanted it. I would ask him: what is that, exactly? And he would beat on his desk and give me one of his looks, and say: it's like pornography. You only know it when you see it.

It's strange how the choices that define us so often boil down to just one notch above nothing. In this case, it felt like less than that. What got me there that night was not some grand scheme painstakingly crafted, but the result of a conversation with a particularly desperate individual.

"I got it in the mail today," I had said, offering the envelope to Mr. Wylie. It was late autumn, and the sunlight flowed into his classroom, trickling through leaves ready and willing to fall back to earth. Grudgingly, Mr. Wylie rose from his cluttered desk and snatched the paper from my grasp. He readied his hands to rip through the package when he recognized the seal on the back; at that point, it was as though it was correspondence from God Almighty. With a hungry expression, he carefully unfolded the document and scanned across its four or five lines. His eyes bulged.

"So...yeah," I said. I hadn't shown it to anyone else yet, and his reaction was making me a bit uncomfortable.

“That’s a lot of zeroes,” he said. “They’re offering you THAT much?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess they liked my essay.” (That piece, a hateful, three-thousand word screed documenting my charges against River City High School, probably did no more than wake the college’s reader from their slumber.)

“They must have REALLY liked it,” Mr. Wylie said. “This is so good! You’re gonna take it, right? You have to take it.”

Something pulled taut within me. “That’s why I came to see you. I’m not so sure,” I said.

Mr. Wylie threw down the letter onto the table in what was probably an attempt at dramatics; it fluttered down, slow and lazy, onto the beige tiles. He took his glasses off and glared up into me, eyes shining like fool’s gold. “How can you not be sure?” he bellowed, slamming his fist onto a stack of printer paper. “This is unprecedented. You know that, right? Nobody from RCHS has even so much as gotten in. Far as I know, at least. But you’re thinking about turning down what is basically a full ride? For what? Just to say you did?”

I took a step back. I knew he would resist, but I didn’t expect this violent of a reaction. Sure, he had encouraged me to apply early decision, helped me with ideas for my essay, and composed a letter of recommendation. But this was a level of aggression that I had thought he reserved exclusively for discussions of Ayn Rand and college football.

“Calm down, Mr. Wylie,” I said, picking the letter back up. I tried to throw some softballs, to help him calm down. “I’m just...conflicted right now. Atlanta is a big change from here, and based on a lot of what you’ve told me, I’m not sure I’m ready to go to a university like Queenspoint just because they have a high rank. I’m just not sure I’ll fit in. You know...” I struggled for the right word. “Culturally.”

His glare softened slightly, and he brought his hand to his forehead. “What do you mean, ‘culturally’? Like, this isn’t a damn commune. It’s college.”

I sighed. “I just wonder if a guy like me is going to have problems making friends there. Like... I don’t know. I’m not the most social.”

He slapped me on the back. “I don’t know what you mean. Seems like you do just fine to me.”

My stomach dropped. Of course he thought that. Why would he have any idea what happened outside of his classroom? Or, to be more precise, what didn’t happen. All the conversations that never occurred, the truths never spoken, and the bonds never crafted. He never saw the hours I spent in front of a dim monitor, shooting strangers in the head along with friends I would never meet, or composing half-formed thoughts into impotent indictments against the place I had been born into. How could I expect him to?

“I don’t know, Mr. Wylie. I’m not sure I really do,” I said. “Like, I understand how you might think I...’get by.’ But, honestly, it’s been a struggle.” Through his window I could see a group of students gathering under the flagpole to smoke; the sun glinted off of it, glaring back at me. “For example,” I said. “You see those kids out there?”

Begrudgingly, he glanced in their direction. “Yeah, I know them.”

“What’s my relationship to them?” I blurted out.

“You kidding me? They’re your classmates. Your friends. You see most of them every day in my class.”

A coarse laugh emanated from deep within my chest.

“What?” he said.

“Oh, nothing. I just think it’s funny how our sentence construction reveals the way we think.”

He straightened, bewildered. “What’re you getting at?”

“It implies a kind of equivalence. ‘Classmate’ and ‘friend.’”

He sighed, fed up with my endless hair-splitting. “I was just speaking generally. Wasn’t trying to imply anything about my...thinking process, or whatever.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” I said, laughing again. “I know you didn’t mean it.”

“Whatever you say,” he said. He stuck his hands in his pockets and studied the floor.

The figures outside began to converse; I watched their soundless interaction, studying their movements and gestures. The lack of audio didn’t bother me. Why would it? They always had the same conversations, as far as I could tell. Who won last night. Where to meet tonight. Who was fucking who. Who was trying to fuck who. Who was going to fuck who. Repeat ad-fucking-nauseam until some tycoon buys up all the surrounding farmland and steamrolls River City into a parking lot. From this distance, it almost seemed more humorous than depressing, like an incompetent puppet show run by interns drunk on prop wine. Only I couldn’t leave the theatre when it was over.

“So,” Mr. Wylie barked, pulling me out of my daydream. “Does this have a point?”

“Does what?” I said. Outside, the figures swapped cigarettes. A few held hands. I tried not to notice the latter.

“You told me to look outside.”

“Oh, right,” I said, laughing. “Yeah. I barely know any of them.”

“So what?” Wylie said, shifting.

“Like, her,” I said, pointing to one of them – I don’t remember which. “I don’t know her name.”

“What?” Mr. Wylie said. His eyebrows furrowed, as if attempting to meld into one.

“How is that even possible?”

“It’s pretty easy, actually.” I said. I honestly don’t know what had come over me; it was like I had tried to keep the stereotypical angst within me for so long that any attempt to relieve the pressure would just spew out raw emotion. “I’m passionate about literature, and politics, and video games, and...a bunch of other stuff. They’re passionate about...I don’t know what. Drinking. Maybe football. So, we have a deal. I don’t really talk to them, and they don’t really talk to me. It’s better that way. But it’s hard. It’s isolating. I don’t know how much longer I can do it.”

“Oh,” he said. “But...you talk in class. I see you chatting with your neighbors all the time. You sure you aren’t overreacting?”

His words hit me hard. Perhaps I was overreacting a bit. But there was a part of me, boiling with unbridled vigor, that told me that this was it. This was the one thing that I was absolutely certain about. And that one little part filled me with so much vigor that I knew I just couldn’t let it go.

“No,” I said. “I’m not. There’s a gulf, Wylie. Between me and them. Between what you see in the classroom and what actually matters. And I feel it every day. I can’t figure it out.”

I walked over to the window; Mr. Wylie just stood there, dumbfounded. I torqued the window’s string and let the blinds fall, cutting the sunbeams into tiny slits of light. Suddenly, the vigor had evaporated. There was no reserve of inner strength, no truth hiding behind my words. There was only me, and my history teacher, and my immature rant that had no chance of

changing anything outside of these four walls. I could sense that fight had been lost long before my time.

“Honestly...I’m not even sure I want to.”

And then I sat down at a desk, put my head into my hands, and didn’t say anything for a long time.

“Well,” Mr. Wylie said, finally deflating the silence. “It seems like...you want to make sure you’re going to a place that will accept you for who you are.”

I gave a weak nod.

“And, I’m not gonna say I really understand, because that’s probably what everyone tells you. ‘Everyone goes through stuff like this.’ ‘You’ll get over it.’ You probably hear a lot of stuff like that, don’t you?”

I nodded again, a bit stronger this time.

“Yeah. So, what you need right now isn’t for me to recite some boring platitudes about high-school. What you need is a solution. A real solution. An innovative solution. And I think I’ve got it.”

I looked up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You ever actually been to Queenspoint? To Atlanta?”

I flipped back through my memory, to the handful of times I had seen buildings that were taller than me. Forget New York; the only time I had ever escaped the Southeast was an impromptu field trip to Washington, D.C. in the fourth grade. “Probably? But it was a long time ago.”

“Well, why don’t we take a little trip down there? I hear there’s a big trivia tournament down there in a couple of weeks. Should be fun.” Then he gave me the worst attempt at an

obnoxious wink I had ever seen. It was like his whole face was conspiring to scream his intent at me.

I stared forward blankly. In those days, understanding even Mr. Wylie's brand of subtlety was a reach for me. "But we don't have a trivia team. Not anymore, at least."

"So we'll bring it back together for just one more go. Our last rodeo. You and me. It'll be fun." His face twisted out another monstrous twitch of the eye. I got it that time.

"Oh...right," I said.

"And, if we have some extra time, maybe we could take a look at the university. It'll give you a little head start on that 'college experience,' huh? You know. Getting to know people. Hitting the row." His voice was rising in a slow crescendo; as always, his own machinations drew out a passion in him that seldom entered the classroom. His next words were an excited whisper. "Maybe even pounding back brews."

"'Hitting the row'?" I inquired.

He sighed. "Going to frat row. Parties."

My core tensed. "Oh. Right."

"Yeah. When I was a student there, that was my favorite part. You'll love it."

I counted the floor tiles underneath my feet; I had never noticed, but they were exactly fifteen by fifteen, a perfect square. Surely I would have noticed that during one of Mr. Wylie's sermons on the virtue of the free market.

"Hey. You okay?"

It snapped me out of my calculations.

"Uh, sure," I said. "Usually, parties aren't really my thing, but...if you think it's important."

He laughed. “It’s like the glue that holds the whole experience together. It’s what makes it worth it.”

“Sure,” I muttered. This sounded preposterous, but what did I know? The last time I had actually bothered to attend a party I had heard about, I had managed to stay until only about ten people showed up; then I made my way out the back door and wandered back home, through the dark woods, trying to ignore the intense pounding that reverberated through me. Going to a frat party seemed like a bad idea. But perhaps Mr. Wylie had felt this way at some point. Perhaps he had once trembled in the wings, waiting for his cue. If so, he had clearly overcome it. It gave me pause.

“So, yeah. You ready? It’s gonna be quite the experience. Maybe two weeks from now?”

“Sure,” I said, the word almost catching in my throat. “You always say that, you know. The ‘experience.’ What does that even mean?”

He laughed and pounded on the desk. “Trust me. It’s like pornography. You’ll know it when you see it.”

So, that night in Queenspoint, I was doing just that. I was out there putting all those people under my microscope, trying to see what he was talking about. Clearly, some sort of invisible line drew out before me, dividing us into two separate groups; me on one side, and an unknown confederacy on the other. Now was the time to mark that barrier and conquer it. I didn’t know if I actually could, but I knew it was worth an attempt.

To be honest, I don’t know what I really expected to find at the party. A pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? A slight clue that what I was doing was right? A way to unlock Wylie’s rows of doors, flapping in my mind’s eye? Whatever it was, I knew I had to have it. I had to find

“the experience.” So I crossed the threshold. But I didn’t get the pot of gold, the key, or even the clue.

What I got was this: a mass of bodies writhing to a thumping backbeat; a jumble of lights, glaring down in all the garish colors of the rainbow, flashing like a cathode ray tube sighing its last; the unfamiliar stink of beer and cigarettes, rising from the depths of a rumbling basement; groups of beautiful women flitting by, their eyes everywhere but on me, emblazed by their surroundings; and, of course, frat boys, six-foot-something loads of taut muscle interrupted only by a rip of a jaw and uncaring eyes. The backbeat slowly faded into something more aggressive; the mass began to shuffle faster and faster, slamming into each other in great waves. The pulses came closer, threatening to engulf me; I turned and slipped away, back into the smoky foyer. Beside me, a couple colonized each other’s mouths with their tongues.

I could feel the flames rise in my throat, but I pushed them back down. Was this really what Mr. Wylie was talking about? Was this the thing that made people flock to this school? Of course not – this was everywhere. This was inescapable.

The bodies upon bodies swallowed up the main room; I couldn’t quite tell what its intended use was. Between the strobes I could make out a pyramid of beer cans adorning the mantle. Above that, a neon sign proudly displayed the fraternity’s three letters, which, given my inexperience, were literally Greek to me. The three characters blazed red in time to the music, giving the impression of an unfinished mathematical statement begging for a solution.

My stomach burned. Mr. Wylie had suggested a maximum of sixty people, yet I could easily count three times that in the main room alone. I had come here to get a feel for the house, to see if I fit into the experience of the school. But now, that experience was being hoisted upon me, flooding in from all directions, and I was without a paddle.

I breathed deeply, in and out, in and out, trying to slow it down. What would Mr. Wylie say if he were here? He'd probably tell me I was overreacting. And I was, certainly. This was hardly my first brush with large crowds. River City was no excuse here. Hell, during the two weeks they actually let me attend art school, I even went to a ball, and that was no problem. There were no roaring flames to quench then. Why not? I had stood there, in that golden room, wearing my rumpled suit, draining soda as fast as they could pour it, as couple after couple passed by me. Why had the flames not come then? Because she was there, of course, right beside me, making fun of their ostentatious gowns and tuxedos, reciting quotes from awful B-movies to puncture the silences. In the moment, I had merely laughed along, enjoying her company, unaware of how the memory would linger in my brain. Between us, we both knew that there could be nothing there. Or at least, she did. I had some ideas, of course. But every sixteen year old does.

Clearly this sort of gathering offered nothing to me but the anxiety creeping deep within me. So then, I decided, it was merely a matter of finding something among the chaos. Surely not all of the brothers were engulfed in the mob. There was someone in that house for me to talk to, to give me a taste of what was to come. Only then would I be able to make an informed choice.

So, ignoring the unease festering within me, I stepped into the darkness, using my phone for a light, passing by gaggles of drunken partygoers that staggered away from my bearing. Occasionally, one would glance towards me, but for the most part I blended into the background. The brutal architecture of the house shocked me, given its outward gentility. Its labyrinthine layout, however, combined with the near darkness, continued to disorient me. Stairs seemed to extend one floor too far in both directions, ending in locked doors or shackled windows. Winding hallways took me around in tight, impossible circles, terminating as abruptly as they

began. As I descended another staircase, I began to wonder if this was some elaborate prank that Mr. Wylie and his former frat buddies had devised for me. Perhaps now they were sitting in a bar, smoking his cheap cigars, laughing at my misery.

Just as this thought occurred to me, an air conditioner roared to life behind me, and I jumped in alarm. I lost my footing and rolled down the stairs head-over-heels, finally coming to rest at the bottom landing. As I tried to gather myself, a series of soft clangs echoed through the narrow corridor. I searched my pockets; my notebook was gone, dropped in the commotion.

I shined my phone's flashlight down the staircase. There it was, in all of its faded glory, sitting at the bottom. I stood up to retrieve it, but the world swam around me; I had to sit back down. I could feel the slow pounding of my arteries as I composed myself.

I laughed. Footsteps pattered nearby, growing closer. I wondered what she would think if she could see me now, sprawled at the bottom of a staircase in some frat house. Hell, I wondered where she was at this very moment. Of course, I knew a little bit; more than I wanted to admit to myself. I knew she was here, at Queenspoint. Or, that she had enrolled, at least. I didn't want to dwell on that fact; what did we even have to say to each other anymore? She was probably polishing off that novel she was always working on deep in the library right now, smiling at every sentence. She was only a year older than me, but that tiny difference seemed an impassable gulf when she started to apply for college that last year. She was in the process of escaping her own hellhole; I still had quite a bit of time to continue pushing my boulder up the endless hill. So we drifted apart; or, rather, I pushed us apart. But then again, our relationship was based entirely on a two-week summer program that happened years ago. Should I have expected more?

I laughed again. I had to admit it. I was jealous of her. Bitterly, unceasingly jealous. The kind that churns in your gut and poisons your words. I felt sure that she had found her place,

wherever it was. And here I was, in some frat house, following the advice of a teacher who was somehow also my friend, deceiving my parents, all for what? By sheer probability, this was likely not the place for me. The only place I had ever known was two to three hours north, sitting in a dark room with my video games, finishing *Braid* for the hundredth time, or writing angry screeds about my joke of a town. Or voraciously reading every gold-leafed tome I could get my hands on. Or...

Or on a picturesque campus in the middle of the closest thing to a bustling metropolis I had ever known, where the ivy grows up the immaculate stonework towards the first streaks of sunset. And I would look to my side, and see the play of the light on her hair...

I had been wrong before, and I could be wrong again. Now was not the time to capitulate. Those two weeks had been what I needed, but if I had approached the Academy like this, I would have brought myself to hate it before I had even breathed its air. If I wanted something like that back, I had to at least try to give it a real shot. That's what she would have said, that's what Wylie would have said. So I did it.

I tried again to stand up. Now the world merely rippled where it had once rocked. The footsteps drew closer. As I started to descend the stairs, step by deliberate step, the lights shot on. When I opened my eyes, a large student wearing Greek letters was picking up my notebook in front of me. He looked like the kind of guy that TV dinners were designed for.

"Hey man. You drop this?" he said, offering me the notebook in his considerable paw.

"Y-Yeah," I said, grabbing it. "Thanks."

He shrugged. "No big deal." He started up the stairs, then hesitated for a moment. He turned around. "What do you think is the best feeling in the world?"

It caught me off-guard, to say the least. “Excuse me?”

He smiled. “I know it’s weird. Just answer it.”

“Uh...” I stammered, too overwhelmed to construct an elaborate fiction. So I went with the embarrassing truth. “Well, I tried for years to beat a specific video game and kept getting stuck on different parts. So when I finally beat it when I was like, thirteen, I think that’s probably the most accomplished I’ve ever felt.”

A light came on behind his eyes. “Ooh, that’s a good one. I’m writing that one down.” He produced a pen from his pocket and scribbled something on his forearm.

“Why do you ask?” I said. I wriggled my fingers, trying to shake out some of my anxiety.

“Oh, it’s just a question I’ve been wondering about lately. I get a lot of the same ones though, especially from the brothers. They all seem to really like the sexual ones.”

I cleared my throat.

He faced me. “What’re you doing down here anyway? Party’s up there.”

I suppose it was an obvious question, but my first instinct was to lie. “Was looking for a girl. Thought she went down this way.”

He laughed. “Yeah dude, been there. This way’s the basement, though. Ain’t nothing down there but empty kegs. I was on duty down there. Sucks, but, hey.”

I turned the notebook over and over in my hand. This guy didn’t exactly seem like a Rhodes Scholar, but he seemed interesting enough.

“So...” I said, my voice overflowing the stairwell. “What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?” he said. He readjusted his tank-top; it looked like he had spilled beer and paint on different parts of it.

“Being in a frat,” I said. “Going here. Being here. What do you think of it?”

Silence lingered. He scratched his head.

“Um...I guess it’s okay? I mean, I’m technically a pledge, so, I have to do a lot of shit I don’t want to do. But we get nights like tonight, where shit gets crazy, and it makes it all worth it. Some of the girls here are unbelievable, dude. I get why the brothers play it up during rush. You should see the one my friend got to come here. She’s like an eleven. Out of five.” He laughed sheepishly. “Course, I’m not the guy to talk to about that. Never have been. I’m working on it, though.”

I didn’t push on the latter point. “What is so special about tonight, anyway? My friend who told me about it didn’t say it’d be like this.”

“Like what?” Something in his expression worried me; it was like his once-gentle eyes were trying to drill into my skull.

“Uh... this...crowded, I suppose?” My words sunk into silence.

“Do you live on campus, dude?” he said. Was that a note of suspicion in his voice?

“Yeah, of course,” I said, too quickly.

“Where at?”

I reached blindly for a name. “Uh...Ike, I think?”

He laughed. “Oh, yeah. Dude, that sucks. Anyway, you must be living under a rock or something. This is White Night. You know? Themed party. Big event.”

My mind blew back through the gallery of outfits I had passed that night. None seemed suited to any particular theme; in fact, their clothes had bordered on the generic, the kind I would have imagined based on the party-centric media I had consumed from a young age. Perhaps that was the point.

So I simply blathered. “Yeah. Definitely big.”

“Yeah. You thinking about rushing? I’m Chris, by the way.”

“Oh, uh, hi Chris. Eh, I’m thinking about it, I guess. Mostly I’m just trying to get a feel for the organization,” I said. It was the closest thing I had said to the truth since I had arrived in Queenspoint. But somehow it still felt completely wrong.

“Cool, cool. I can respect that. Honestly, you should know that most of this stuff is just to get girls here. We’re not really about all that shit you might have heard about us.” He paused.

“At least, I’m not.”

“Oh, really?” I said, my curiosity piqued. “Like what?”

“Like,” he said. “That ‘freshman fight club’ we supposedly had? Literally two guys. And they were assholes, too. But no, they had to fucking kick us off campus because of it. Whatever, though. We’re back now, and the bangers are bigger than ever.”

Though the idea of two idiotic Palahniuk fans slapping each other silly appealed to me rather thoroughly, I thought maybe it went farther than that. “Oh, yeah?” I said, mockingly.

“That’s not what I heard.”

“Really? What’d you hear?” he said, his face a degree closer than before.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Some stuff.”

He looked to the left, then to the right. Then, in a hoarse whisper: “Drug stuff?”

I had to suppress a chuckle. “Yeah. Drug stuff.”

“Yeah man,” he said. “I know what you mean. Some of the brothers go a little crazy, you know? Makes me uncomfortable.”

I coughed, trying to hide my shock. “Makes sense,” I muttered. And then, without thinking: “I kinda know what you mean.”

“Yeah?” he said, tensing his shoulders slightly as he leaned against the nearby wall. “How so?” His tone wasn’t quite biting, but I got the feeling that maybe he felt he revealed too much. But I didn’t back off; I had seen a chink in the armor, and the misericord was already in my hand.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Just...there’s a lot of people here tonight, and I don’t really know a lot of them. I don’t do so well with crowds anyway, so...it can be a little overwhelming.”

He relaxed against the wall. “Yeah, I can totally relate, dude,” he said. He took a swig from the beer in his other hand. “When I was a freshman, I was terrified of girls, man. Well, not just girls. People in general.” He continued to recline further; now his lean came to resemble a slump. “I mean, let’s just be real. I wasn’t the most popular guy in high school. You weren’t either, right?” He gave me a quick once-over, almost like he was scoping me out as competition.

“...Yeah,” I sputtered, afraid to say anything more. I wanted to reward his openness, show that I appreciated it. But I had already screwed up once tonight; keeping it vague was probably my best option.

“But, hell, you probably did better than me. I think I only went on like...two dates? Maybe three. Never even got to second base. But that’s kinda how it goes, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, swallowing hard. “Something like that.”

It wasn’t anything like that.

“Yeah. I know the feeling, man,” he said, taking another swig. “But...what you’ve gotta realize is that most of the people here are like that.”

“Like what?” I said.

“Like...outsiders. The lamest of the cool, if that makes sense. Greek life here is like that. Most of the brothers I know are too busy studying to even think about going out every night. Or, honestly...even every weekend. This is sort of our big thing for the semester.”

“If that’s the case,” I said, scratching my head, “why are there brothers involved with ‘drug stuff,’ as you put it?”

He didn’t reply. Something inside me shifted, like a broken machine running a routine diagnostic.

“Just seems kinda contradictory to me,” I added, quickly.

He rested his head on his palm, with his elbow tucked into the wall, looking as though he was trying to catch all his whirling thoughts with a tiny butterfly net. “So...how do I put this. I think you have the wrong idea. They don’t really do it for ‘fun.’ They do it because of the pressure. Make sense?”

I stifled my laughter. The immense pressure of what? Doing exactly what they came to college to do? But I couldn’t say that. “Seems unhealthy.”

Chris sighed, and took another swig. “Yeah, it’s definitely not. But here, man. You said you were interested in rushing, right? Let me introduce you to some of the brothers. Maybe that’ll help you with your nerves. It helped me.”

“Yeah, sure!” I said, pocketing my notebook. Finally, here was some progress. Though I could feel my own pulse begin to quicken, I knew that this time, it would at least have some purpose behind it.

“Alright,” he said. He offered me the beer can. “You want some?”

“Nah,” I said, “I’m good.”

“Cool,” he said. “Did you pre-game?”

I had no idea what this meant, so I simply nodded. “Yeah. A ton.”

He gave me a cock-eyed stare and laughed. “Sure. Alright, follow me.” And then he went rumbling up the stairs, two or three at a time.

I tried my best to follow him through the twisting halls, but he was a lot faster than his bulk suggested. We arrived back in the foyer; the couple was now gone, no doubt boldly exploring other mysteries of their anatomy. Chris stood in the doorway to the party room, bright lights shining on his face and chest, making him look like an extra in a bad sci-fi movie. I walked over to him, and he pointed at the vacant blackness above the writhing mass. “Look,” he said. So I did. For a while, there was nothing; but then a flash of light revealed a rimmed container lying suspended over their heads, rocking idly to the time of the music. With another flash, I saw its mechanism, a complicated system of pulleys and wires. It looked like it could turn over at a moment’s notice.

“Damn,” I yelled, trying to throw my voice over the music. “That’s quite the thing you’ve got there.”

“Yeah,” he responded. “One of our pledges is a physics major, does some engineering on the side. So we made him make this.”

The room shook with frantic energy. I tried to resist it.

“Here,” he said. “Most of the brothers are over there.” He pointed off into the darkness.

“Where?” I said.

“Over there,” he repeated. “Don’t you see them? By the table.”

I kept staring into the black. But all I could see was the shake of the figures before us, and the nothing rising above them, to whatever lay beyond. It was an illusion; surely it was. But telling myself that didn't seem to help.

“Just follow me,” he said. “It'll work out.”

So I shadowed him, close behind, as he snaked through the maze of gyrating strangers, stepping over sprawled partygoers and amorous couples, until we finally stopped in the middle. A slow beat echoed through the hall. For a brief moment, stillness seemed to reign. The lights played on the dancing figures. The movement of the forms seemed to grow slower, almost graceful. The air swirled around me, drawing an eclipsed spiral in its wake.

Chris turned and said something to me, but I couldn't hear him. He pointed to his side, where a dark-skinned figure wearing his same letters stood. I took his hand and shook it; he tried to say something to me, but I still couldn't hear him over the deafening tones. I tried to yell back, but it barely carried. The beat intensified. The throngs around us began to draw in and draw out, faster and faster. The figure spoke again, and I shook my head. Then he grabbed my head, stuck his face right beside it and shouted:

“Look up!”

And Chris followed: “Check it out!”

So I did. And that's when I saw it.

All I really remember are the lights and the screams. A red flash; the wires twitched, groaning from the strain. A green flash; the mechanism shuddered and flipped, flowing away swiftly into the nothing. A yellow flash; the bucket turned over, and in that instant a flurry of white powder descended upon us, in great clods, cloudy and thick, blinding and arresting. The white world began to vibrate, and the waltz turned into a riot as the forms began to shudder,

faster and faster, until the motion grew imperceptible. The assault was never-ending, from every direction, a violence not of fury but of celebration. It overwhelmed me, and from the uneven layers upon the forms I could tell that my world was spinning. Fire grew from below; everything aflame. As I looked up to see the bucket give up its last drops of whiteness, I realized that I was on the floor, in the middle of a place where I should not have been, a place that was no place, a house that seemed not a house at all but a kind of metaphor, a parody, a poor facsimile of what I had imagined. It began to overtake me. It was what I thought it was. It was not what I thought it was. It was a waveform oscillating between the two. And it had all just collapsed into itself - right on top of me.

At the edge of my consciousness, familiar voices began to stir.

“You think he’s okay?” It was high. Anxious. Not my first choice for a rescuer, but any port in a storm, I guess.

“Yeah, he’s fine. I think he just got overwhelmed. You really stuffed that thing. It came down in bunches.” Husky. Probably a bigger guy. Maybe...Chris?

“We should do something, right? I don’t know.” High again. Must belong to the other guy. He sounded like he was in the same room as a corpse. He should relax. Hadn’t he ever felt anxiety before?

“Just wait. He’ll probably come around soon. Then we’ll ask him what happened and see what we can do about it.”

A silence.

“I told you that fucking bucket was a bad idea.” Husky again. “We’re taking the whole ‘white’ theme a little too far. This guy’s a freshman. He thinks we have a drug problem, apparently.”

“Well, we don’t, do we? ‘Cause if we did, you’d tell me, right?”

“Right. I would.”

“Okay. So, we don’t then. Why should we be addled about it? Who cares, anyway?” High might have learned his English from bad British fiction. It was hard to tell.

“Dude. All we have is our reputation. The last thing we need right now is the entire freshman class thinking that we’re a bunch of damn drug dealers, or addicts, or...whatever. Like those guys at Triple Ep. I’m gonna bring it up to Doug.”

A silence. It occurred to me that I should probably be moving by now.

High chimed in, nervous, twitchy. “He’s not waking up, man. He’s not waking up. We need to do something.”

Husky sighed. “Like what?”

“Like check his pockets. Find out his name, his dorm.”

Something tickled my thigh. It grabbed for my keys, my phone. Then I felt my notebook shift, and my eyes shot open. A gangly, dark-skinned frat boy was feeling up my entire leg; I kicked him off, and he let out a tiny scream.

“What the hell, man?” I said.

“Sorry,” he squeaked, and scurried away from me.

“See? I told you he’d come around,” the husky voice said. It was Chris. “Sorry about that. He gets a little antsy.”

“I was just trying to ensure your safety,” the other guy said. “Standard procedure.”

Chris chuckled. “Not really.” He adjusted in his seat. I blinked. We were all sitting in a dusty, derelict attic that someone had once tried to restore before buckling under the weight of the task. A smattering of coarse graffiti and unraveling plaster marred the slanted back wall; splintering floorboards laid below our feet. Near the lone door, thick paint of a disgusting yellow hue adorned both walls, ending halfway along their perimeter. A collection of beer bottles, cigarette butts, and men’s clothes had accumulated in every corner, save for the one nearest me, which featured a colossal pile of chip bags and other rubbish.

“This is Raj, by the way,” Chris said, pointing to his friend, who was attempting to light some kind of smoking apparatus that looked like it had been designed by Ridley Scott. “Say hi.”

“Oh, sorry. Hi. I’m Raj,” he said. He didn’t even look up.

“So, yeah,” Chris said. “What happened, man? You good?”

“Yeah,” I replied. This was my automatic response, of course; there’s nothing worse than having to explain the concept of anxiety to someone who only has a vague idea of it. But was I? It was true that the bubbling deep within my gut had stopped, at least for the moment. But it could return at any point – the crowd had twisted something inside of me, and it needed time to straighten back out.

Still, I had to say something. So I tried to put it in terms they would understand. “It’s just...a thing that happens to me sometimes. Randomly. Like whether or not it rains or snows, or somebody winning the lottery. Nobody can really predict it. At all. The best you can get is an educated guess, and that costs a lot of money.”

Chris stroked his patchy beard, trying his best to look wistful. “Hm. Interesting analogy. Maybe it’s more like a lightning strike. You know it’ll hit at some point, but you don’t know where.”

“Yeah,” I said. He wasn’t exactly right, but I appreciated his effort.

Chris shrugged. “But, anyway, take whatever you need, man. We’ve got beer in the back. Plus I’ve got a little of this...” He trailed off as he reached under his chair, pulling out a mess of purple glass pipes melded together. “It can help sometimes.”

Clearly, it was a device for smoking something; any idiot could gather that. But I couldn’t tell what he meant by “it.” So I just nodded and said, “Yeah.”

“Want a hit?” he said.

“Nah,” I said, keenly aware of my quickening pulse. “Doesn’t really work like that for me.” As I would learn later in life, I was unknowingly speaking the truth.

He nodded. “Makes sense.” He pulled out a lighter, flicked it to life, and lit a small part of the device. The water in its base shivered as he inhaled from its largest orifice, and he blew

out pungent smoke-rings as he put the ensemble down. “Ain’t nothing like it,” he said, almost in a reverie. “What’s your major, by the way?”

“Uh...still thinking but creative writing, probably.” I said.

“Oh, cool. I’ve been meaning to take a class in that.”

To my right, Raj was still trying to master his futuristic smoke-toy. He pushed another button on it; it sputtered out a tiny trickle of smoke from its side. Surprised, he stuck his lips to the crevice and pressed the button a dozen more times, desperately hyperventilating. Chris chuckled at his antics, and I nervously followed his lead.

“I don’t think that’s how you use that,” I said. “Then again, I’m not the guy to ask.”

“To be fair, none of us are,” Chris said. “He bought that thing off of some shady website for almost three hundred bucks. Unfortunately, the instructions are in Mandarin. It’s programmable, too. He’s just trying to get his money’s worth.”

I laughed again. “Where the heck are we, anyway?” I said. “Like, we’re still in the house, right?”

“Yeah,” Raj said. “This is the attic, or as I like to call it, the Chill Zone.”

“Nobody calls it that,” Chris said. “But yeah. It’s the attic, two floors above.” He stopped to take another hit.

In the dead space between their words, I could just make out the hard kick of an 808 in the background, and the static of a crowd above it. It was like the echo of a dream mostly forgotten.

Smoke still bellowing from his mouth, Chris continued. “We bring people up here that have gone a little too hard, if you know what I mean. Though, for you, I guess that’s not really

the case. We just chill out. Me and Raj are the risk managers on duty tonight, so...this is where we're at."

I laughed aloud at the mention of the title; both Chris and Raj gave me puzzled looks. I cleared my throat. "Kind of a funny name, huh? It's like you've gone corporate or something."

Chris stroked his stubble again. "Yeah, I guess so, if you think about it that way. But it's nothing fancy. We just stay sober and babysit anybody who needs it."

"Sober?" I said, pointing to the pipes.

He shrugged. "Sober-ish."

"You're the first person we've brought up here, though. But you're not even drunk," Raj said. "Funny."

I examined my fingernails; they were dagger-like, as always. I'm not sure, but I think Chris gave Raj a glare, or an elbow, or something, because then he said: "But yeah, man. Don't worry about it. Let us know if there's anything you need."

There was a part of me that was ecstatic for this turn of events; here were two frat boys that I could interrogate about their school until the break of dawn. But yet I found a deeper part of me half-disappointed. This was almost too easy. Sure, I had suffered a really unfortunate anxiety attack, but it seemed to pass as quickly as it came. That almost never happened. Perhaps Mr. Wylie was right; this new location was helping me. Maybe I was on the verge of a breakthrough.

So, invigorated by my surroundings, I shot every question that came to my mind to the duo: living situations within the frat, how easy it was to get girls, how the life generally was. I tried to limit the questions specifically to Greek life, trying not to draw attention to my lack of familiarity with the university, but I still got my share of strange looks from the two. Though

they answered my questions with a kind of enthusiasm, I could still feel a kind of barrier between us, cultural or otherwise. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I felt that they were just humoring me. Was it because they viewed me as a victim? It was hard to say. Regardless, I was having a much better time than I ever anticipated. Eventually, I ran out of frat-specific questions, so I fell back on the generic.

“So, what do you guys like to do for fun?” I said.

Chris, putting the device down for the umpteenth time, spoke: “Well, we drink.” He and Raj laughed, but it rang a bit hollow. “But yeah, I don’t know. I like to golf. Raj is on the intramural Ultimate team.”

“Yeah,” Raj echoed, trying to unlock the filter on his hideous apparatus. “I’m not great at it, but it’s a good way to stay in shape. Some guys around here take it really seriously, though.”

“Ultimate?” I inquired.

“Yeah, Ultimate,” Raj said, absentmindedly.

“No, I mean, the ultimate what? What do you mean?”

Raj’s expression resembled the one that Mr. Wylie had given me when I told him I hadn’t read the Bible. “Dude. You’re kidding, right? Ultimate. Ultimate Frisbee. You know. Frisbee with touchdowns.”

A shock ran up my spine. “Uh, no. We don’t really have that where I’m from.”

“Wow, really? Didn’t you say you live in Ike? You should have seen us playing, man. You’re right across from the field.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, my brain reeling. “Must have just had my head in the books or something, I don’t know.”

“We’re out there three times a week. You must study a ton.” He took a hit.

“Guilty as charged,” I said, trying to sound detached.

“Oh, give him a break, Raj,” Chris said. “Not everybody loves sports. Where’re you from, anyway?”

“It’s not that I don’t like sports,” I lied. “I’m just more of a football guy. I’m from South Carolina. Rural South Carolina.”

Chris laughed. “Oh, that makes sense. What part? I drive through there to get back to D.C. all the time.”

My instinct told me to lie again, but really, there was no reason to. “Northwest corner, near Greenville, if you know where that is. Tiny college town called ‘River City.’ Population’s around 7,000 during the summer, maybe 15,000 when school’s in session.”

Chris whistled. “Wow. That is pretty small.”

“Yeah,” I said. “There’s nothing to do there. There isn’t a city. Hell, there isn’t even a damn river. It’s a lake. The people who discovered it didn’t even bother to check.”

“For real?” Raj said, spurring out thin vapor directly into my face. It tasted of peppermint.

I coughed. “Yeah. For real.”

“That’s crazy, man,” Chris said. “What school did you go to down there?”

Something in my brain blipped. “What’d you say?”

“What school did you go to down there? Like, me and Raj are both from D.C., but we went to different academies. Hell, my buddy went to Catholic school, and he’s the president of the secular society.”

“Oh,” I said. “The only one. River City High.”

Chris cocked his head. “Wait, what?”

“There’s only one high school in my town,” I said.

“Whoa,” he said. “That’s crazy.”

I sighed. Maybe this was what I had felt earlier. “Eh, not really,” I said. “We only have like a thousand kids. Makes sense to only have one school.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Chris said. “But still. That seems kinda nuts.”

“I can see that,” I said.

But I couldn’t. I couldn’t step outside of that tiny town. I couldn’t imagine the multitude of private schoolhouses growing out of the asphalt like so many weeds. I couldn’t form the enormous bridges, strung up by cranes taller than any building I’d ever seen, that carried them from place to place. I couldn’t fathom them sauntering through all their malls, surrounded on all sides by legions of teenagers who watched the same movies, played the same games, drank the same shitty beer, and made the same stupid fucking mistakes. And now they lived in this house, fifty versions of the same person, and somebody was always laughing. Everybody was Somebody. And Somebody was a dick.

Was Mr. Wylie Somebody? Perhaps. Looking around that dingy room, I could imagine him inhabiting that space, loading water balloons with fake urine, trying to convince a drunk girl that he was some celebrity’s cousin. I could see him high-fiving Raj and Chris, maybe throwing them a couple of beers. Mr. Wylie was more than that, of course; much more. So were Raj and Chris. But they were also Somebodies. And while I could see Mr. Wylie acting the part from the curtain’s rise until the final bow, I knew that it wasn’t my role to play. I would forget my lines and trip over the scenery. Sure, I could try, if I really wanted to. With enough effort, I might even be able to get by. But I knew it wasn’t the hill that I was ready to die on.

“So, are you thinking about rushing?” Raj said.

My dark reverie collapsed. He was sitting right in front of me, blowing broken ovals out from his device.

“Uh, what?” I said. My head was spinning; moments from my past kept flashing into my mind. The music at a ball, seguing from Canon in D to R. Kelly’s remix to Ignition. A woman’s hand, draped over a napkin, as she watched brave souls begin to lure others to the dance floor. And me, listless, wondering if I should grab for it.

“You know,” Raj said. “Rush. Are you trying to join a frat?”

“Yeah,” Chris said. “I was wondering about that. You said you were undecided, right?”

I cleared my throat. Something was caught in it. “Yeah. Right. I’m still trying to decide. For next semester, I mean.”

“Cool. Well, you should definitely consider us. We like to say we’re the choice that makes the most sense, after all.”

“Sure,” I said, still trying to clear my throat. “I respect that. But, to be honest, I don’t know.”

Chris nearly did a spit-take. “What do you mean? Haven’t you had a good time? Besides the whole anxiety thing, I guess.”

I hesitated; did I really want to rock the boat this much? I wasn’t coming back, that was for sure. Why not just tell the truth?

“Oh, it’s been fine,” I said. “I just got stopped coming in, is all. Big guys didn’t really like my attitude, or something.”

“That’s odd,” Raj said.

“Yeah,” Chris said. “I’m surprised. You came with a group though, right?”

My shoulders fell slightly, involuntarily. “Well, no,” I said.

“Well, that explains it, man,” Chris said, snapping his fingers. “You gotta come with a group. That’s just how it works. Do you get me?”

“Not really,” I said. “Like, what if my friends don’t like frat parties? I don’t have a lot of options.”

“Well, you’re not giving us a lot of options either. Feel me? Like, we gotta keep the ratio, you know?”

“Yeah, right.” I said. “The ratio.” I felt suddenly exhausted. I had gone around this same cyclical path one too many times. I checked my watch; it was almost midnight.

“Do you?” Chris said, eyeing me sideways. “I’m not sure you do. See, I’ve been watching you. You remind me of myself, you know? You seem like a pretty smart guy, but, just like me, you’ve got a lot to learn. Let me explain it to you.”

I sat silent in my chair. Could I even leave? I nodded, and he went on with his pitch.

“Okay, cool. It’s like this, see? I’m a business major. I’m a big believer in the market, you know?” He reached in the cooler for a beer, cracked it, and savored a long gulp. “And brands, I believe in those, too. Look, it’s like this.”

Before I could respond, he began to roll his chair around the room, picking up empty cans of beer, cartons, cigarette butts, and any other garbage he could find. He put the collection on top of the table in the middle of the room and began to arrange it. First, he put the beer cans around the table’s perimeter, approximating a winding path; then, he placed the cigarette butts and packages along the edges of it, leading toward the middle. He rubbed his hands together, like a chess master itching to sacrifice his pawns. Raj just sipped his beer.

“So, from a certain perspective, we’re a player in a market, right?” he said, taking another gulp. “Okay. Look at this. These beer cans represent the frat houses, right? And these butts

represent the idiot freshmen, or underclassmen, or whoever trying to get in. Now, if you look at it this way, you see that it's a crowded market. 'Saturated,' you might say. Everybody wants the girls to come to their party. The problem is, there's no differentiation here. Every frat house here is Miller Lite. But..." He pulled away one of the Miller Lite cans and replaced it with the PBR. "All it takes is a little bit of brand management. And, of course, a little bit of alcohol." He poured a tiny bit of his beer into the PBR can, sloshed it around, and took a sip of it. "Same old shit as before. But they'll never know it. Get me?"

I studied the door's oak frame, battered from encounters with generation after generation of drunk idiots. "Yeah. I get you." I felt cheated. Clearly, this was not the person I had confided with in the hallway.

"Cool. But, the thing is, we're not PBR," he said, knocking the can to the floor. "Hell, we're not even Miller Light. We're almost like...I don't know. Old English, or King Cobra. We're like the dark underbelly, or something. The one you love to hate but always end up coming back to, you know? So...given that brand, it's only natural that the people who're trying to get in are here for two things: alcohol and pussy. Or alcohol and dick if they're a girl, I guess. But we don't begrudge them that." He laughed. "So, when they come here alone, that's a signal. It's a signal that says 'I'm looking to get hammered and blown, preferably in that order. Please let me in so I can begin shoving cheap beer down my throat.' In that way, they're predictable. So around here, we're St. Peter. We gotta judge people. So they judged you. Sorry, but it's how it works." He leaned back in his chair and cracked another PBR.

I continued to study the door. I wondered how much force it would take for me to knock it off its hinges.

He took a long drink. “That’s just the way it is. And honestly, I don’t see what the problem is. You got in, didn’t you? That’s really all that matters. Right?”

That was enough. I stood up, ready to tell him how full of shit he was. His raw blue eyes measured me. Struggling for words, I grabbed his PBR can, crushed it in my hand, and stomped it flat. Beer splattered onto my shoes.

“What the hell, man?” Chris said.

We glared at each other, or perhaps just I at him. A silent moment passed. And then the oak door swung open, smashing into the trash pile and scattering beer cans and plastic containers everywhere. A flame-streaked flask dangled from the hand that now rested on the doorframe. And in swaggered Blander, even drunker than before. We all stood up.

“What the *fuck* are you pledges doing up here? Last time I checked, bitches were downstairs getting drunk off of our beer.”

“Sorry,” Chris said. Raj just stood silently, shame filling his eyes.

“Sorry? Are you kidding me? You’re supposed to be the ones making sure they don’t fucking kill themselves with our shit. Instead, you’re up here talking to this asshole.” He pointed at me. “I’m down there turning away old dudes pretending to be brothers and you’re entertaining the guys I’m trying to throw out! This dude wasn’t on the guest list. He snuck into our party. Now you’re having a conversation with him? Don’t tell me you gave him any of our fucking shit.”

Chris and Raj shook their heads so hard I thought they might get whiplash.

“Good. Now get the fuck downstairs before I kick both your asses.”

Before I could even blink, Chris and Raj had both left the room, bounding down the staircase towards the distant drumbeats.

Blander eyed me like I was a piece of expired deli meat, the rough skin on his hand turning burgundy as he squeezed the flask. “That was a funny trick you pulled back there.”

“Yeah,” I said, steeling myself. “Funny that it worked.”

“Shut the fuck up,” he said, pushing me down into a chair, hard. “I don’t know why the fuck you’re here or what the fuck you were talking about with those dumbasses, but it’s annoying the hell out of me. You’ve got five minutes to get your shit and get the fuck out of here, before I call the University and report you for trespassing.”

“Fine,” I said, my voice only wavering little. I checked my pockets for my possessions and stood up. This guy may have been giving me an instant escape route, but I was still angry from Chris’s spiel. “Give me my flask back.”

Blander laughed, his face contorting like a clown mask. “You kidding? You gave this thing up to get in here. You don’t get to ask for it back.”

What bullshit. But I had to at least try the soft-sell. “Look, you’re right. You got me. I just need it back.”

“Why?” he said. It took me aback, so I just came clean.

“It’s not mine, okay? I borrowed it, and now I need it back.”

He laughed in my face. “If it’s not yours, then why did you give it to me?”

I didn’t have an answer to that. “That’s not important,” I stammered. Something in my gut kindled.

“You’re a fucking Indian giver, you know that? But, still. It’s mine now. The least I can get for dealing with the assholes and old fucks trying to get in tonight. You were right about one thing, though. The Scotch was good. Made a good whiskey-and-Coke.”

I just sat there. His words reverberated through my head. Maybe the “old dude” who Blander kept mentioning was a bit younger than his words suggested. Maybe he was about thirty, with a broad jaw, and a thick Southern accent. In other words, Mr. Wylie. But I had no way to know for sure.

I had hoped that Wylie would put the slightest bit of daylight between us, but he could have confused my mission with his own – whatever it was. But what was my mission, anyway? See what the party could teach me about life at the university? By that logic, it seemed a spectacular failure. I had only learned what I had already suspected.

I gazed at the flask in his hand. I knew I had to do something, but I didn’t know what. I had driven three-hundred miles to discover something new, and all I got was the same treatment from the same type of asshole who had harassed me my entire life. But what could I do?

Before I could finish my thought, someone made the decision for me. A sharp rap came from downstairs, like someone snapping a bundle of two-by-fours. A silence; the only sound I could hear was the slow drone of a broken 808. Then, something like yelling, but not quite. More thumping.

“What the fuck’s going on down there?” Blander called.

Outside, blue and red lights exploded against the night, blurred by the window. A siren blared. He had gotten his answer.

“Oh, shit!” Blander said. “It’s the fucking cops!”

That was my cue. I lunged for the flask dangling from his off-hand; feeling the cool metal against my palm, I ran for it. A stunned cry shook the air; I think he reached to grab me, but all he got was the sharp thud of his hand colliding with the door. And then I was bounding down the

steps two-at-a-time, towards all the screaming and commotion. I didn't care; more than anything, I just wanted to get out of the house before I had to hear another goddamn monologue.

As I spun around the landing, I caught a glimpse of the third floor. Guys in bro tanks and girls in slinky dresses were stumbling towards the stairwell, vaguely aware that something had transpired. Red and blue lights took turns flooding the dark hallway, illuminating their confused faces. Then, I heard the shatter of a window behind me. Five girls shrieked simultaneously, harmonizing in the worst possible key. And a hulking man with Kevlar and an assault rifle climbed into the hallway, screaming for everyone to hit the deck. But by then I was already halfway down the next flight.

The second floor wasn't any better than the third. I had caught the men in the act of sweeping the hallway, and it wasn't going according to protocol. A dozen or so partygoers kneeled in the wings, their hands above their head; a couple of handcuffed brothers laid face-down. Another brother was desperately flailing at one of the SWAT-clad men; the cop promptly smashed him with the butt of his rifle, more annoyed than aggrieved. They were cuffing him when I headed down again. By this point my insides had reignited, but at least it was justifiable this time.

As I went down the last flight towards the ground floor, it occurred to me that the front door was probably not the best escape route. After all, it was probably their point of entry. Whether or not escaping was the right plan at all never occurred to me – call it fight-or-flight, anxiety, or sheer stupidity, it was what it was. But it was already too late; turning around was no longer an option. So, I just kept going down, telling myself not to think too hard about what would come next.

I don't know for sure, but I think I emerged from the stairwell just as the smoke canisters triggered. Slowly, my view began to cloud; the portrait of chaos unfolding before me began to slip away. Half-a-dozen cops were sweeping through the north-south hallways in rough formations; the pulsing dancefloor crowd cowered towards its far end, separating from the whole into fearful parts; above the divergent crowd a slim girl on a platform cried, grasping a caged stripper pole; and, right in front of me, the front door lay on the floor, moonlight streaming through the ragged opening. Through watering eyes I tried to make my way towards it, but black figures eclipsed the light as they moved towards me. I tried to turn back towards the stairs, but my sense of direction left me. Lost in the grey, I fumbled blindly towards an unknown heading as I gasped for breath; my hands met a wall, and I followed its path as fast as my legs would carry me. I thought I heard footfalls slamming behind me, but I couldn't be sure. I clasped the wall as I went, hand-over-hand, until it yawned open into another doorway, causing me to lose my balance. I stood up, slipped through the entrance, and immediately recognized it. It was the staircase that I had met Chris in. And it only went down. With no other options, I took the stairs as quickly as I could.

After what seemed like a dozen flights, I arrived in a concrete basement, filled from floor to ceiling with party favors of years past. I closed the door behind me as I entered, dust choking me. Kegs lined the walls adjacent to the entrance, and in front of me lay a cabinet stuffed with enough rolling papers, bongs, and pipes to last a thousand semesters. Faded posters of fraternity classes as far back as the 1950's were strewn about the room haphazardly. Pale light shone through a tiny rectangular window perched about a foot above my head. Even though I knew it was all just garbage, the combination of the dust and the subdued lighting made me feel like I

had stumbled upon some ancient artifacts of a civilization that everyone belonged to but me. Now I was trying to catch up – and badly.

Looking back, I don't know what I expected to happen down there. Presumably, the cops were going to comb every inch of the house looking for whatever the hell they were there for regardless of my own actions. In any other situation, I would have just stopped, surrendered, and went on my way. But I was underage in a strange new place, without an ID or anyone to vouch for me. I didn't know what the hell the city cops would think of that. So I resisted, as best I could. That turned out to be not very well at all.

A thump from upstairs snapped me to attention. Panicking, I moved to pull some of the kegs out of the left corner to make a kind of hiding spot, my sweaty hands slipping against the metal. Maybe I should have gone for the window, but I guess I assumed it was locked. As the thumping continued, I heaved the keg closest to me, moving it by fits and starts; it was a lot heavier than it looked, but I managed to get it out just enough. I was putting my hands on the second one when the banging upstairs suddenly ceased.

At that instant I froze, holding my breath, listening for the footsteps of the cops that had surely followed in my wake. By then, the booming beat that had shook my form earlier in the evening had long stopped, replaced by stomping. But now, nothing came. For a moment, it was blissfully quiet. My frayed nerves began to settle. I could at least imagine that I was somewhere else, somewhere far from all this anxiety. It wasn't River City, of course; even the peace supposedly offered by its quiet woods had long turned to fear that I would never quite be able to escape. But nor was it this place, where the sense of the unknown continued to overcome me. No; it had to be fictional. A gentle spring on the base of an indigo mountain, surrounded on all sides by sprites darting through the trees. A castle high above a windswept moor, replete with

enough furnishings and comrades to last me the winter. A futuristic city, pulsing with blue energy, spires curling impossibly into the heavens, darkening as the last lights of autumn faded in the sky above. I had been to all these places, and if the moment aligned, I could return there, easily and endlessly.

So I did. I churned the hot water in my hands; I felt the smooth marble of the outside wall; I traced the curve of the spire as it trailed upward. For that instant, I was there. But I knew it wouldn't last. It wasn't mine. No matter how much I wanted them, I knew they weren't my stories. The vision faded and the darkness crept back, and I was back in the cellar of a frat house in a new city, sweating bullets as unknown figures moved above and about me. A strange new focus seized me; I was through waiting this out. Either I was going to hide in earnest or I was going to get caught doing it.

I grasped the second keg again, its metal rattling against the concrete. I moved it once, twice, thrice. It was almost out. And that was when I heard the breath echo through the chamber. I stopped moving the keg; I stepped forward gradually, listening for it. It cut off suddenly. Then, stepping gingerly towards its source, I pulled the third keg as hard as I could. It gave way. A shriek pierced the air. And there she was, balled up, staring at me with lukewarm eyes that filled with sudden recognition.

They say a one-in-a-million event happens to each of us about once every month. I don't know how true that is, but looking back now, I guess I had saved all mine up. Suddenly, the spring, the castle, and the city seemed attainable, the fantastical made manifest in the settling dust. I didn't know how to react. Luckily, neither did she; we just stared at each other. It was a long time before I could form the word.

“Andrea?”

The color in her face lit. Slowly, she uncurled and rose toward me, bearing a leather purse and a confused smile. I hadn't seen that strange smirk since I told her I was a fan of *Dolemite* two years ago. She looked me over and whispered.

"Are you..." She trailed off. Her eyes hardened. "Aren't you supposed to be back in South Carolina? What are you doing here?" She had somehow made it sound playful.

I almost laughed, still overwhelmed. "Yeah, I am. That's the problem."

Her expression narrowed. "Then why are you here?"

"It's a long story. I guess you can say I got talked into it." I forced a chuckle. Her smile didn't return. "It's kind of a secret."

"Right," she whispered, pulling a compact out of the purse and checking her face. "Been a long time."

"Yeah," I whispered back, unsure of what else to say.

She put the compact back. "How'd you end up down here, anyway?"

Bewildered, I pointed upward. She didn't react.

"What does that even mean?"

"That means 'the fucking cops!'" I exclaimed, hoarsely. "It's a raid or something."

Honest shock, or what looked like it, swarmed her features. "Wait, what?"

"A bunch of guys in SWAT gear are busting through the windows. Front door's off its hinges. I came down here to hide from them."

"Oh," she said, thoroughly underwhelmed. "That's weird."

Her reaction disarmed me.

"What did you think the thumping was?" I said, still unconvinced.

"It's a frat party," she said.

I thought about it for a second. A “huh” was all I could muster. She checked her phone. While I watched her idly swipe, an obvious question clobbered me senseless.

“Wait. Why’re you down here, then?”

“Oh, you know...” she began.

Just then, the thumping started again. My respite was over. But maybe it had been worth it.

She frowned and locked her phone. “Maybe we should get out of here. You know, before they bust us.”

“Yeah. We can talk later.” I looked around the room; my gaze dwelled on the illuminated window a few feet above our heads. Just as I was about to speak, she pointed at it.

“I’d say that’s probably our best bet,” she whispered. The thumping intensified.

“Yeah,” I replied. “But I don’t see a latch or anything.”

“Oh, please,” she said. “That’s the easy part.”

She swayed on over toward the cabinet. In the soft light of the window I got my first full view of her. It was the same wide shoulders, the same boyish hips, the same confounding shuffle of the feet that had first struck me on the sun-soaked cobblestone of the Academy. I was surprised at the drabness of her attire; back in those days, she had always tried to stand out a bit more, with dyed hair and long flowing skirts. Now she wore fitted jeans and a not-too-revealing top, and her locks were reset to their natural black. Though they still glittered in the moonlight, I began to wonder what else had changed over the two years. After a moment of rustling, she turned around, struggling with an oversized trophy in her hands. The thumping grew even louder.

“Wait,” I yelled, my voice straining, watching as she crossed the room much quicker than I thought possible. “What are you-“

And before I could form the next word she smashed the thick-cast trophy into the window, shattering it into a thousand glistening shards. I stood there dumbfounded as she used the dented end of what looked like an intramural squash trophy to push out the jagged edges still lingering on the edges of the windowpane. Gritting her platinum-white teeth (a recent development), she stood on the rocking keg and stuck her head out the opening, doing her best to brush the glass away from the immediate exit. She peered out and, satisfied, returned to the room with a matter-of-fact expression. I was grinning from ear to ear, but she didn’t return the sentiment.

She looked down at my shoes and nodded. “Well, good thing we’re both wearing sneakers.”

Just then, a crack louder than I thought possible came from upstairs, causing us both to jump.

I grabbed her purse. “Okay, time to go. I’ll go first.”

She grabbed it back. “No thanks. I’ve got more to lose here.”

And, just like that, she was standing on the keg again, halfway through the opening. As she pulled herself through, the keg finally toppled over, so I moved towards the window to push her feet up and out. The once-intermittent clanging of boots had now grown to a cacophony, and it was growing closer. I rushed to right the lop-sided keg, but my coursing anxiety got the better of me; it slipped through my hands and crashed against the concrete. Now desperate, I jumped and grabbed onto the windowsill, forced my weight onto the long-side of the keg, and flailed my legs as it rolled all around, trying to get it to rest against the wall. Just when I thought I had it

positioned, Andrea grabbed me by both arms and heaved me out, smashing my knees against the wall in the process.

I tried to stand up. Pain shot through my right leg. “What the hell did you do that for?” I said, more confused than angry.

She shrugged. “You were taking a long time. Figured you needed some help.” She was standing under an oak tree, her left arm gently supporting her frame. Darkness loomed behind her.

“Yeah, well, I did. Just not that kind of help.” I hobbled over the grass to her, carefully avoiding the sea of broken glass she had unleashed. As best as I could tell, we were in the backyard, a handful of trees scattered on a grassy lawn. On the left I could see the indistinct red and blue flashes of the sirens. Besides that, the night was still; the invading lights betrayed no movement on the horizon. Apparently they were still inside.

“Well, sorry,” she said, playing with her hair. “But I meant it when I said *we need to get out of here*.” Though her tone was jovial, it stung me a little more than it should have. “Now, if we go adjacent to the street, we can take a shortcut and make it back to campus in no time.” She pointed into the darkness; at first, I couldn’t see the path she indicated, but after a moment I could just make out the outline of the road.

“How can you be so sure?” I said, my leg still smarting.

She laughed. “Please. This is a frat house. People have to book it from here all the time.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “And do those ‘people’ include you?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Why does it matter?”

Grudgingly, I gave her my best half-smile. “I guess it doesn’t.”

“Whatever,” she said. “Let’s go.”

“After you,” I said.

She went into the dark and I followed swiftly behind her, my thoughts about her and Wylie and the party swirling ceaselessly as we made our way back to civilization.

Part 2: Andrea

Cutting through the pitch-black woods was her idea, of course. It was a good impulse, but it made our three-mile trip back to the campus even more arduous than I had expected. Still, it did give us a chance to catch up. After all, we hadn't talked to each other in almost a year, and that had all been online. So, we proceeded like that; her, leading the way through the leaves, answering with curt tones and lyrical anecdotes; and me, following, asking an endless barrage of questions I had saved up since our last meeting.

She was majoring in Creative Writing and nothing else. She was trying to start a new literary magazine on campus but the established ones didn't like that. She hadn't grown an inch over the past year and that annoyed her very much. She hadn't had much time to play video games over the semester but she thought Tim Schafer's latest output was 'okay-ish.' She had submitted a story about her relationship with her mother to a couple of journals two weeks ago and was anxious to hear back. She was pretty sure she liked Queenspoint but she wasn't sure if the university liked her.

"What do you mean?" I said, foliage crunching under my feet.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. The distance clouded her features.

I decided to push a little harder. "Do you have many friends?"

A noise came from her throat. "Of course. That's never been the problem."

"Uh, right," I said, unsure of her meaning. "And are these people you like very much?"

She sighed and upped her pace; I had to nearly jog to keep up with her.

"What was that for?" I said, trying to follow her wispy form.

"You're asking stupid questions," she said.

“Well, maybe, but you were answering them up until now.”

“They got too stupid even for me.” She swept the hair out of her face; against the half-light it looked like a black tangled being out of a fever dream.

“I’ll try to smarten them up,” I said with a grin.

“Don’t bother.” She rocketed forward again, but I foresaw it and matched her burst with my own. I called her name, and when she didn’t respond I reached out for her as gently as I could. But when I got to her she had already batted my hand away, turning around swiftly to face me.

“How about we try a little role reversal, huh?” she said, her eyes raging in the darkness. “How about you answer a couple of my questions before you give me any more of your damn interrogation treatment.”

I just nodded, too shocked by her sudden turn to say anything.

“Good. First, the one you so neglected to answer in the frat house. What are you even doing here?”

“Same reason every high school kid comes. To see the university.”

Her expression tightened. “Most of those ‘high school kids’ come during normal operating hours.”

I sighed. “Yeah, and they all see the same fucking white-washed tour and hear about how all the dead white men who paid the school to name buildings after themselves were real stand-up guys.”

For a second, the mortar in her expression cracked – there was some of that old ardor. But it disappeared in an instant. “Go on,” she said, impatient.

“So we – I, really – decided to see how things really were, I guess.”

“By going to a frat party.” She savored the end of the sentence a bit too much for my tastes.

I shrugged, trying to look casual. “Hey, look, I hated it. Wasn’t my idea. Why do you care, anyway?”

She looked away. “No particular reason. I just thought it was weird.”

“Thought what was weird?” I said.

“What did I tell you about questions?” she snapped. I caught a slight waver in her voice – what was this? “Okay, next. Who are you even staying with? Do you have friends down here or something?”

I laughed. “Not exactly,” I said. “I think I’m the first person from River City High to ever even apply here.”

“Ooh, fancy,” she said, with appropriate condescension.

“I don’t want to hear it, Ms. Charleston Prep,” I said, perhaps more forceful than necessary. “Anyway, I’m staying with a teacher... friend of mine. He has a condo down here.”

“You came down here with a teacher? From your high school?” Her voice dripped with acid.

“Yeah,” I said, pulling my jacket in tighter. A cold wind was blowing.

“That’s weird,” she said.

I scoffed. “Yeah, maybe, but he’s way more qualified to help me out with this than anybody else.”

Her eyes shifted downward. The wind gusted. “Even more than me?” Her voice seemed to hollow out at the end.

I laughed at the thought. “I don’t know, maybe?”

She stiffened, her tone steady again. “Yeah, right. What has he shown you, anyway? Besides frat parties. And the dead white guy tour.”

I thought it over. “That’s about it, honestly.”

She smiled, a little too proud of herself. “That’s what I thought. You need a better tour guide.”

I gave her a puzzled look. “And I suppose that’s you?”

“Maybe,” she breathed, winking. She brought a hand to her temple. “What did I tell you about questions?”

I sighed.

She gave me one of her smiles. “Okay. One more.”

“Alright,” I said, stifling a groan.

“Why are you even following me?” she said, her eyes burrowing into mine.

A wave of panic swept through me, but I knew it was unwarranted; more of an old reflex than anything else. I met her gaze as solidly as I could muster. “Because I don’t know the way back otherwise?”

Slowly, she nodded, but she had yet to look away. “Uh-huh. Is that it?”

We both knew what she meant, but I couldn’t bring myself to ponder the question. Putting my hands in my pockets to escape the creeping cold, I merely shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. Maybe?”

Her eyes slipped from me, an old, familiar question darkening her features. “Okay,” she said.

The wind etched trails through the trees as we stood there shivering in steely silence. Neither of us faced the other.

Finally, I spoke. “Now that you’ve pried the truth from me, can I ask you something?”

“You just did,” she said, her voice distant.

“Alright. Here’s the one that’s really been burning me up. What were you doing in that basement anyway?”

“I could ask you the same question,” she said.

“Fine,” I said. “Go ahead.”

The shadow on her face lengthened as she turned toward the path. “It’s embarrassing.”

I laughed. “Like mine isn’t?”

She didn’t reply.

I changed up my approach. “Look, how about we switch? I’ll tell you about mine, and you’ll tell me about yours.”

She shrugged. “It’s a long story.”

But we had a long way to go, so we both had a chance before the walk was through. I didn’t skimp on any of the details, though I think I might have embellished some of my own quips. She laughed frequently, but it was hard for me to tell if it was at the absurdity of the situation or at my own incompetence. She demanded to see the flask at the end, which I produced for her benefit.

After much prodding, she finally spilled the beans on her own experience. Apparently her roommate had made fun of her enough for skipping social events that she felt obliged to attend at least one more frat party before the end of her first semester. Going along with her roommate’s suggestion, she decided that she would attend the last “big one” – the idea being that she was going to get enough frattiness to last the rest of the year. It was a good plan, but the trouble came in the follow-through. Her roommate had talked to some upstanding brother who she knew was

going to be there, and the guy's friend got some ideas about what Andrea's presence at the party meant. It was all okay for a little while; they hung out in one of the guys' rooms, drinking cheap hooch and complaining about their workloads as the party raged around them. But then the guy's friend, emboldened by the quart of liquor burning a hole in his stomach, decided to make a pass at Andrea. Her roommate bounced out of the room, apparently too drunk and embarrassed to deal with the situation.

"He wasn't bad-looking, honestly," she said; I tried to hide the cringe that resulted. "But he wouldn't stop saying awful stuff about race. Like, Asians, blah blah blah. Israel. I just couldn't stand it anymore."

Alone but undeterred, Andrea rebuffed him and made her way out just as the frat guy began to puke on his own shoes, taking the nearby stairs all the way down to get away from the havoc.

I chuckled at the right times. Afterward she had spoken the last words, I tried my best to comfort her, but she just laughed and pushed my hand away. "I'm okay, really. Stuff like that happens all the time."

I nodded. "I believe it."

"Yeah," she said, trudging forward. "But really, it's nothing compared to the cops showing up."

"Really?" I said. Images of black-clad figures sweeping silently through dark corridors seized me.

"Of course," she said. "That's really rare. I've never heard of it happening, at least."

"Well, yeah, but you've only been there for one semester." My imagination sprung to life. "Maybe it's a once-a-year thing. The cops pick the frat on campus they suspect of dealing

drugs or something and then take it. Makes sense to me.” I was picturing it like a movie set – men in suits swapping briefcases behind an abandoned building, an unmarked car idling behind them.

She looked at me as though my head was slowly shrinking. “Right, and they chose to do it during one of their biggest parties...why, exactly?”

“Easy,” I said, my head still in Hollywood. “To send a message.”

“What message?” she said.

I sputtered for a response. “Uh...don’t deal drugs.”

She laughed so hard that we had to stop walking. When it finally let up, she clapped me on the shoulder. Like she might to a brother – if she had one. “You’re crazy. The cops don’t care about the frats.”

I could feel my face heat up. I hoped she didn’t notice. “Oh,” I muttered.

“Just think, okay. Who WOULD want to send a message to this specific frat?” Her eyes glistened in the darkness.

After a moment, it came to me. “Another frat, I guess.”

“Bingo,” she sing-songed. “To me, this reeks of Greek politics. Except escalated. It’s gonna be weird tomorrow.” Distance crept into her features. “Seems the most likely explanation to me, at least.”

“Makes sense,” I said, still working it out in my head.

A sly smile crossed her face. “Or maybe you brought them with you.”

“It’s certainly possible,” I said. “After all, I am the most wanted man in River City.”

She guffawed.

I closed the space between us. Peering back into the faraway lights of the main road, I realized just how nonsensical our route was. I had thought we were cutting a direct path into the woods, but the broken branches and disturbed leaves revealed a zig-zagged mess.

“Where are we going, anyway?” I called up to her.

“I haven’t quite decided,” she said.

“Then why am I following you, exactly?”

She ignored me. “My original plan was to go back to my apartment and get some sleep before this thing I have tomorrow. But now that you’re here, I feel like you need a real tour. Not that crap led by sorority sisters. So, once we get to campus, we could do that.” The notion breathed fire into her expression.

I could feel it cross into my own. “Sounds good to me.”

So onward we went, back through the dark forest to the coiffured lawns that she seemed to know so well. And once we were there, she led me off the bright grass, into the twisting alleys of the ancient dormitories, to show me the spots where she had done her best living. I sat in the benches she did her reading on; I walked the paths she took to class every day; I watched the slim slope of her back disappear behind doorways and slip into darkness, beckoning me to follow. I followed her deep into the concrete heart of the sprawling hospital in the center of it all; surrounded by the everlit windows of the suffering, she told me it was the best spot to smoke up on campus. She led me behind the university’s behemoth of a library to the remains of the old one, lined in young kudzu and cracked by the flow of time. I used both hands to peer into a ruined window while she explained that the university had been trying to sell the furniture and books out of it for the better part of a decade, holding yard sales in the gravel lot adjacent. She

showed me the glass-fronted opulence of the new business school, complete with the fresh-scrubbed walls that a few liberal arts students had defaced in protest.

We criss-crossed the center of campus again and again, following her whims and impulses as closely as possible. I simply came along, trying my best to internalize everything she said, to note for later use. I can't say I enjoyed it, exactly. I was too aware of its transience, that in a few dozen hours I would be back in River City rain or shine, armed with only memories to make my decision. This was what I had wanted all along: an honest, human take on the university, slanted only by the experience of someone I trusted. The fact that it was Andrea giving it to me made it feel like a fantasy regained – an unknown wish actualized by nothing more than simple chance. True, she had changed a bit: her vitality, so overflowing when I had first met her, had now been muted to a more socially-acceptable hue. And her more passive mannerisms gave a sense of social compromise that I would have never expected of the girl I had spent so much time with that summer. But I had changed as well: where I once had tread one toe at a time I now jumped in with no hesitation.

As she led me around these paths once more, another change began to work its way inside me. This could be the place, I realized. I could feel the old lamentable bits of myself still wriggling around within me, unwilling to fully shake themselves loose within the confines of the hometown I so despised. But Queenspoint could be the place where they finally cracked off to dissolve back into the earth, finally letting me grow and develop in a more hospitable ecosystem. Maybe it really could happen.

But something she said earlier continued to broil in the back of my mind. Did she really have doubts about all this? We were at the top of a parking deck that loomed orange and enormous in the night when it finally bubbled over.

“You see that satellite dish over there?” she said as we emerged from its concrete depths into the whipping wind. I followed her finger, and sure enough, there it was, a dish with the diameter of a livable apartment yawning up towards the starry sky. It looked like the hand of a minor god asking another for some much-needed assistance.

I answered in the affirmative.

“Yeah. Rumor has it that the government used that same dish as part of Soviet counterintelligence during the Cold War. Pretty cool, huh?”

I didn't reply. I merely watched her struggle against the wind for a few moments. Her face had no trace of emotion in it; it gave the impression that she was unsure what exactly we had been doing for the past hour and a half. I studied it in the moonlight. She wasn't pretty, exactly, or at least not in the way that people usually mean. It reminded me of my own reflection in a way. I had always thought I was one step away from handsome – something in the subtle interplay of my jaw, cheekbones, and nose prevented me from believing it. I thought the same about her, though the flaw seemed even more arcane. The fact that I couldn't place it made me want to be closer to her even more.

She stepped toward me. Instinctively, I stepped back. She giggled and pointed behind me. “Look.”

I did. Over the slight edge of the parking deck I could make out the whole of the university: the quadrangle and the buildings flanking it, sculpted out of shining Georgia marble; the far-off lights of the student center, perched on top of the hill; the library, and the hospital, and all the other places that we had managed to go that night, an encapsulation of it all.

Flooding with sudden emotion, I could barely manage a reply. “Hell of a view,” I muttered.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s not quite home. But it’s definitely something.”

A whip lashed within me. “What does that mean?”

She turned to face me, confusion twisting her expression. “What?”

I kept looking out at the lights. “Sorry. I mean...” I wanted to just let it lie, but something in her face made me continue. “It was just something you said when we were in the woods. About how you weren’t sure if the university was right for you.”

She squeezed her hands together, keeping them close to her lap. “Yeah. What about it?”

“Just...what makes you say that?”

There was nothing but the wind for a long time. The lights twinkled on. I spoke.

“I’m looking down at all this, Andrea, and I’m seeing a way out. I’m seeing a library stocked with all the books I want to read and all the movies I want to watch. I see clubs I want to join and a city I want to understand. I see a thriving social scene, with more students that my hometown has people. That’s not a joke. That’s a fact. And...I’m seeing a creative community that’s teeming with people for me to learn from. That’s what I’m looking at right now.”

She just stood there. I continued, too far to go back now.

“So, I need you to tell me. Are there stars in my eyes, or what? They’re offering me enough money that it makes sense for me to do it. I need you to tell me that this is where you want to be, the kind of place we used to talk about. Because everybody I know is going to River City U or USC, and I have to know if this is the real thing or just another fantasy I’m expected to purge from my head.”

She walked over beside me, facing the edge, eyes deep in thought. She pointed down, past the lip. “You don’t see that stuff, do you?”

I followed her finger again, to the sidewalk caped in darkness. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“A lot of that stuff you just said. The social scene. The creative community. The students. You haven’t seen them, have you? You don’t know them.”

I gave her my best “no-shit” look. It wasn’t very good.

She sighed. “You know what I mean. Nobody’s here. It’s 2 AM on a Sunday. You’ve been here what, a day at most? You don’t know if any of that stuff is here. Not really. Hell, there might be a lot of stuff here that you really don’t want. You don’t get that from 24 hours. Nobody can.”

She sounded tired, almost beat-down. It annoyed me. “Exactly. And that’s why I’m asking you to help me with it.”

“I did help you,” she snapped back. “I just showed you everything there is to show, least as far as I know. I’ve only been here a couple of months, it’s not like I’m an expert. I’m telling you to draw your own conclusions here.”

“I just want your take,” I said, half-pleading with her.

“That’s not fair,” she said, her voice cracking in the night air.

I stepped back, surprised by her sudden emotion.

“You can’t just...” She stopped for a moment and collected herself. “You can’t just put that on somebody else. A decision like that. That’s what you’re basically doing, you know? It’s not fair.”

“I don’t mean to,” I said, the words brittle on my tongue.

“If I’m not sure if it’s working for me, how am I supposed to know if it’ll work for you? It doesn’t make sense,” she said, gazing at me as though I was a lost lamb.

“I’ve been to schools all over South Carolina,” I said, my voice carrying bad intentions. “I’ve done the stupid tours, I’ve talked to their brainwashed ‘student volunteers’ who are getting the fuck out of there in six months, I’ve heard all the stock lines a million times each. And this is the first one that actually seems okay.”

“And I did all that last year. And that’s where I was, too. That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” she said, her tone building like a runaway wave. “I was so sure before. Now I’m here, and I’m not. What else is there to say?”

“But you know me!” I challenged, heaving, now very close to her. “You know who I am. You know what I’m like. You should be able to tell me if this is a good fit or not!”

“Good fit?” She laughed long and cruel, rattling in the wind. “You still believe in that shit?”

“Of course I do,” I said, now almost shouting. “Different places suit different people.”

“Right, but that doesn’t mean there’s a place waiting for everyone,” she countered. “This isn’t some utopia on a hill that’s been waiting for you all your life.”

“I don’t think that,” I said, trying to de-escalate.

Her eyes flashed in the dark, mocking me. “Are you so sure about that?”

“Yes, I fucking am!”

The emotion had escaped me before I knew what was happening. She turned away from me, shocked by the outburst. Something inside me had ruptured, but I was trying my best to suture it. The broad campus slept beneath us; the gently-rustling trees reminded me of home, but the paths that cut beneath them still seemed alien. In the distance a flood-lit sculpture of a man and woman trying to split what looked like a watermelon down the center cut through the

darkness. I couldn't make out their expressions, but I found myself assuming they weren't having a good time.

She faced me, her expression as smooth as stone. "I know you secretly think that things have been easier for me, being from a bigger city and all, but...it's been challenging for me too. I wish I could convince you of that."

I didn't reply, or even look at her.

"I know I can't. But I can try, I guess."

I coughed.

She continued, her tone unwavering. "Sorta as a result of all that, the whole idea of 'fit,' and 'different places for different people' just don't really work for me. It's true to some extent, but once you get down to people like us it just doesn't make sense. It's self-help book nonsense. For me, it doesn't really matter where I am. I'm always going to be doing my own thing, whether that's writing or building a community or... whatever."

She paused for a moment; her eyes began to twinkle. I hadn't see them do that for quite a while.

"I like to think about it like this. I basically build sandcastles for a living, you know? I come in, I do my best work, make everything as beautiful as possible – you know, without disturbing too many people - admire it as long as I can, and eventually the tide comes and takes it. Sure, they don't really do anything for anybody, but I still enjoy it. It doesn't matter where I go, because the sand is the same everywhere. It doesn't matter if somebody comes and kicks it over, because it was going to go back into the ocean anyway. All I can do is build my sandcastles and try to make it easier for everybody else to build theirs – wherever I am. That could be in

Queenspoint, that could be College of Charleston, that could be Harvard. It just doesn't matter that much to me. For me, it all just goes with the tide."

"It's a very Zen view of things," I said, with acrid intent. Judging by her expression, it didn't land.

"Yeah, you could say that," she said. "I didn't always feel that way. And honestly, a lot of the down-home political stuff still bothers me when I go back to Charleston. But I just try to let things roll off my shoulders."

Her sudden calmness disturbed me; it reminded me of the blank expression a certain teacher adopted when he talked about his past, before River City. It reminded me of an inflatable set of hands, looking to hug all the strife and angst out of me before I brandished a pinhead against it. I wanted to explain myself to her, to Wylie, to everyone, to make them understand those emotions. I needed to justify my actions. I couldn't do that, of course – everybody else was tucked away, fast asleep, unable or unwilling to hear my spiel. But she was right here. And I knew exactly what would get to her.

I pulled the scarred notebook out of my pocket and showed it to her. "Remember this?" I said, in a halting voice.

"Yeah, of course," she said. "You took it around with you everywhere."

"Yeah," I said. "I still do."

Confusion crossed her face. "Honestly, I would have thought you'd have filled it up by now."

"Yeah," I said, struggling to even speak. "You'd think, right?"

I handed it over to her; she flipped through it voraciously. I smiled weakly. After reaching the halfway point, she found what I was trying to show her. She gave me one of her looks. “Wait. Is this it?”

I met her gaze. “Yeah. That’s it.”

I couldn’t tell if she pitied me or envied me. “So...nothing?”

“No, not nothing. There’s a little bit, here and there. But it’s all poetry. Bad poetry. And even that was difficult to get out.”

“No prose?”

“Not since the day I started my senior year.”

She looked down at the blank pages. “Why?”

I laughed bitterly. “Stress. Time. My hometown. Take your pick.”

“That sucks.” She handed it back to me.

A silence festered. “I guess that’s my reply.”

“To what?”

“To what you said about sandcastles. About place not mattering. It just doesn’t work that way for me. I want out. Hell, I need out. Badly. And, to be frank, I’m jealous.”

I followed her eye-line as she slowly gazed upon the entirety of the college she had chosen to be a part of, perhaps unwittingly. I swear I saw a tiny slice of doubt crystallize in the hollow of her cheek. But it always seems that way in retrospect.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I checked it; it was around 2 AM. Below the illuminated clock I saw the message. It was from Mr. Wylie.

[Came back to pick you up and saw the sirens. Are you okay?]

I unlocked it and pounded out a reply. [I’m fine.]

“You know,” she said, her gaze growing. “We had a way of dealing with this back at the Academy. We never really did it, but Professor Morgan used to talk about it all the time. Do you know what a writing jam is?”

“Not really. But I’ve heard of it,” I said.

“Well, basically you just get together with a bunch of other writers and just crank out as much as you can before you pass out. It can be ideas or drafts or just whatever comes to mind.”

“Hm,” I managed. “Sounds like a great way of getting a lot of unsalvageable crap.”

Her shoulders slumped. “It was just a suggestion.”

My phone buzzed again. [Where are you?]

[On-campus. Found somebody I know. She’s giving me a tour.]

“Well, I appreciate it,” I said, trying to sound diplomatic. “But I think it’s a much bigger problem than that. And I don’t know if it’s even solvable.”

Another buzz. [Oh, good. Is she hot?]

I didn’t reply.

“You’re a really negative person,” she said, suddenly. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” I snapped. “It kinda comes with the territory.”

“Oh, get off it,” she scoffed. “You’re not there anymore. You’re here. Yet you still can’t shut up about it.”

“I don’t even know where here is,” I said.

“Queenspoint University,” she said. “Home of five thousand insufferable prep-school kids not rich or smart enough to claim their Ivy League birthright. Home of the most unnecessary athletic program this side of the Mississippi. And home of several pretty good departments,

including creative writing. That's it. Everything else is just window dressing, including everything I just showed you."

"You're the one who sounds negative to me," I said.

"I know how I feel about it," she said. "I've come to terms with reality. I'm not sure you have."

"Why do you think I'm here?" I said, shrugging.

"It's just college. Come here or not. You can't screw it up that bad."

"That's not what Mr. Wylie says," I muttered.

"Who's Mr. Wylie?" Her face burned with intensity.

Like clockwork, another buzz came. [I'll take that as a no. Anyway, I've got something to show you. There's a park on the south edge. Meet me there in fifteen or so. If she's a student here, she'll know what I'm talking about.]

I sent a terse but affirmative reply and looked at Andrea again. I explained who Mr. Wylie was to her to the best of my ability, though I had a great deal of difficulty describing how we had arrived at our current relationship. Disgust would cross her face whenever I would quote him directly, but besides that she listened at rapt attention. When I had finished telling her about how he wanted to meet with me, she lit up like a firework. Grabbing my hand, she pulled me down the staircase of the parking deck, skipping towards an unknown destination. Though I was happy to see her excited, I somewhat resented that she was more excited to meet a new person than she was to see me.

We made our way through the growing fog to the edge of the campus. As we drew closer to it the buildings around us seemed to groan, giving up the immaculate marble of the inner circle for crumbling gray boxes built of artless necessity. Andrea pointed out one particularly

hideous edifice as a haven for both asbestos and math majors, two things she seemed to hold in equal contempt. Within sight of the lightly forested park the line between Queenspoint University and Atlanta collapsed entirely – the hairline fractures in the sidewalk became full-blown fissures that sighed underneath my sneakers.

Thanks to Andrea’s pace, it didn’t take us long to reach the park. Despite its clearly impressive size, the entrance didn’t announce itself – I had to fumble around with my phone’s flashlight to find the break in the tall fence surrounding it. A tiny plaque next to the opening identified it as “ORCHID PARK.” The indistinct trees ahead of us rose up against the moonlight like the fauna of a night terror.

Just then, headlights cut through the bleary darkness, accompanied by the slight rumble of an engine. They left just as quickly as they came. A figure emerged from the car, slamming the door behind him. The illuminated pinpoint of a cigar glowed against his hard mouth. It was Mr. Wylie, and he was frustrated.

“Where the hell have you been?” he said, spewing a cloud into my face. I fanned it away.

“You saw it,” I said. “Cops raided the party. I found her and made my way out. Where the hell have *you* been?”

“Driving around,” he said.

“Around where?” I said.

“You know, around.” He shrugged nervously; it was almost like a twitch.

“Alright,” I said, trying to keep my tone steady and failing. I was always bad at that, but this was even more pitiful than usual.

“Yeah, whatever,” he said, dumping ash onto the asphalt. “Where’s this girl?”

I pointed up towards the park, and he shined a beam in the direction I indicated – it was the flashlight he kept in the glove box. There, Andrea was trying to figure out the best way to hop the thick gate. It was bolted tight, and she wasn't doing a particularly good job. Surprised, she faced the light, then immediately shielded her eyes from it.

“You mind?” she called, to a few feet left of us. She slipped down off the bars, cursing all the way.

“Nope,” Mr. Wylie said, bringing the light down somewhat. “Though I am getting a kick out of watching you try to climb it.”

“Well, glad I could entertain you two,” she said, pounding on the fence one last time. She sauntered towards us.

Mr. Wylie offered his hand. “Rob Wylie. I'm this guy's teacher.”

“Andrea,” she said. “We went to art school together. For a little bit.” I felt a hint of bitter emptiness in her tone. It made me anxious.

She offered her hand. Swift as a thief, Mr. Wylie brought it up and kissed it. I think both I and Andrea gasped, but it was hard to tell. He dropped it and eyed me sideways.

“Sorry,” he said. “Old habits, you know.”

I cringed in muscles I didn't even know I had.

“It's okay,” she said, with a hollow giggle. I wondered if she was blushing. All I could see was the outline of her soft features.

So, with that awkward inception, we proceeded through the pleasantries. Andrea discussed her course of study, which Wylie regarded with cordial respect laid as sickly-sweet as the glaze on a Southern country ham. She tried her best to keep up with his nostalgic recollections of certain classes, professors, and events, but their experiences were so far apart

that their attempts to bridge the gap were rather unsuccessful. Finally, after spiraling around one too many times, the conversation finally focused on the here and now.

“So, you ever been in here?” Mr. Wylie said, walking towards the silver gate.

“A couple of times,” Andrea said, giving me a furtive glance. I wondered what it meant.

“Yep,” he said, walking back to the car. “Me and the boys used to come here after the bars to relax, smoke a little. You know how it goes.” He winked, seemingly to no one in particular. “Eventually the management wised up, starting locking the place down early, even reinforcing the fence. That’s when I started bringing these around.” He popped the trunk and produced an object – in the hazy dark it was difficult to make out, but it appeared to be some kind of hinged weapon. He approached the fence and brought it against the slim lock.

“Hey, wait,” I said, but he didn’t even slow down.

He squeezed the lever – the bolt popped off with a loud *clang*. The gate edged open.

His laughter conquered his entire face. “There’s a little Wylie magic for you.”

I tried to protest further, but Andrea was already ahead of me, half-skipping towards the entrance.

“You used to do that all the time?” she said, her admiration for him naked and cloying.

He kept laughing. “Yeah, of course! It was a good, romantic place to take young ladies that I would meet in such establishments. Nice and quiet, you know? Anyway, follow me.” Full of newfound pride, he swaggered off into the dark.

“Wait! Where are we going?” I challenged, following close behind him. I felt Andrea’s presence in the periphery, closer to him than to me.

“Oh, just to a place I found back when I was a student here,” he said. “I was just kinda shocked it wasn’t on the tour this morning, so I figured I’d show it to you tomorrow. But since we’re all still up, why not have it tonight?”

I looked ahead to Andrea, who nodded enthusiastically. Something in Wylie’s tone made me uncomfortable, but I had no grounds to challenge it. So, with halting agreement, I followed him.

We made our way through the black hollow of winding roots at a grueling pace, listening to Mr. Wylie monologue about the sordid history of the land beneath our feet. It had apparently been the site of some minor but bloody Civil War battle that had ended with the Union massacring men who had surrendered - revenge for another long-forgotten skirmish on the outskirts of Queenspoint. The commanding officer’s wife had died in the crossfire of that battle, so, overcome with grief, he gave the order to shoot any men who were still standing. He was promoted for his actions. According to Mr. Wylie, this was absolute, incontrovertible historical fact; he even challenged us to “check the textbooks.”

Andrea found the anecdote very affecting – I even heard her sob a few times. Trying to lighten the mood, I cracked a joke about Mr. Wylie’s flair for dramatics. Neither of them acknowledged I had even said anything.

As we made our way towards the heart of the forest, the embers of anxiety began to kindle inside me once more. Blue security lights simmered surreally throughout, casting an otherworldly glow onto our surroundings. A hazy moon winked at me through the boughs of the trees, telling me secrets in a language I could not parse. Andrea clung close to Mr. Wylie, hanging on his every word, feeding him the easy questions he needed to continue his self-serving diatribe. I slunk far behind, my hands buried in my jacket, blinking my way through the bleary

dark. My tired brain kept trying to process all that had happened thus far, but its machinery was gummed up, shocked by the weight of the here and now.

Things began to malfunction. I started thinking about my reasons. Why I woke up in the morning, why I bothered to go to school, why I was even at Queenspoint to begin with. All that stuff people always said about living for the moment had never made sense to me; the moment is so rarely worth living for, after all. They do exist, but they reveal themselves when we least expect it. All the tiny bits of infinity that have to line themselves up to produce even one speck of perfect stardust – it's enough to make a person take long walks in dark woods, alone, searching for something that makes any sense at all. Mr. Wylie and Andrea were two people I could rely on to shock me out of that stupor, to bring me nearer to those silver shores. But, together, they were just another inexplicable force driving me away from that understanding. Their newfound friendship no longer depended on me; as far as I could tell, I was socially obsolescent.

So, as Mr. Wylie droned on about his college days, I found my tired recollection creeping back. Those snatches of perfection are indeed rare, but the first brands the mind with volcanic force. Even now, I can still taste the dewy sweetness of the early morning air rising around us, see the first reflections of the peeking dawn eclipse her face. Earlier that day she had shown me how to pick the locks on the dormitory doors with one of her bobby pins – just stick it in the hole and feel around for the tumbler, like this, see? It was easy enough to replicate. We met outside of the building's rustic exterior and made for the stately fences, the vanishing dark at our backs. Leaving the Academy in our wake we found ourselves wandering through the wooded foothills that surrounded the overgrown small town beside it. As I had visited it over the years I had grown up alongside it, watching the forests get paved into strip malls and the skyscrapers climb

higher and higher into the blue. But the land around the Academy, lurking in the shadows of the growing metropolis, was still as verdant and lush as my own backyard a hundred miles away.

We sat there together in the clearing and witnessed the light of our last day crack the horizon, glinting off the great glass towers and the smooth concrete of the school. It shone against her pale expression, neither sorrowful nor contented. We sat there in silence. I had things to say but not the means to say them, and I suspect it was the same for her. We had met because of seating assignments – our last names happened to share a first letter – and it felt like the quirk of a cruel and unjust universe. Just as it began, it was over.

I wish I could rewrite that sentence. I wish I didn't have to footnote it, or append it, or explain it. But I can't. Even if it wasn't true, it never would have happened. Ever. There was no "it." But gazing at that dawn together, I knew it made no difference. We had reached the end of the old-song-and-dance, so it didn't matter if we ad-libbed a little at the end.

Just as the early-morning traffic began to congeal on the highway, she spoke. "So, what's next?"

"What's next?" I echoed, shielding my eyes from the growing light. "Two more years of South Carolina public school. That's what's next."

"Oh," she said, betraying a sigh. "You don't know that. You could apply for next year. Be a resident, like me."

"Nah," I grunted.

"Why?" Birds sprouted from a nearby tree, darting away from the city.

"Because I won't make it. I don't have a prayer."

"They let you in here! The summer programs are just as competitive." She wiped her too-bright red hair across her brow.

“Yeah, but that was before they knew me.” The brisk morning breeze stung my face.

“They think you’re talented,” she muttered, almost whispering.

“They think I’m an asshole,” I corrected.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” she said.

“It sure means something to me,” I said. My throat was aching dry.

“That’s not what I meant. I don’t think you’re an asshole. And it’s not a popularity contest anyhow. You would make it.”

I just shook my head. She yanked my shoulder and turned me toward her.

“Look. The professors suck, okay? They’re dry and boring and stuffy. You’re here writing what you want and getting yelled at for it while everybody else writes about how much they hate Mom and Dad. I like your spy story. I think it’s cool. And I want you here so I can read more of it.”

By now the morning was out in full force; the aimless drivers of the pre-dawn had been supplanted by angry motorists anxious to get to their dead-end jobs on time, clogging the streets with their massive SUVs. The clangs of industrial machinery began to fill the air. Slowly, agonizingly, the streetlamps began to flicker off one by one.

“They won’t pay the tuition,” I said. “They never will.”

She looked out towards the growing light, away from me. “So get financial aid.”

“It’s not that they can’t,” I said, barely managing the words. “It’s that they won’t.”

“Oh,” she said, with crushing emptiness.

Until then, I had done a good job of holding back the tears. Of course they came anyway. But by then she had already taken me into her arms, gripping me as all the fear and hatred spilled out of me and into the stark light. And when that was all over, when there was nothing left of

myself but the part I had never called myself, she was still there. Overcome, I reached towards her, and our lips met. That was it. That was the snatch of stardust, the spark of the faery, the lived fantasy come true. But we both knew what it was, or at least she did – the spirited but futile improvisations of the band just before the fall of the curtain. I saw it all in her expression as she pulled away. It was the only time it was going to come for me – so how could I do anything but deny that it was over for good?

Over the time we had been apart, the memories that had once sustained me began to wither. Anything that reminded me of my time at the Academy became anathema, from the backpack full of pens I had stolen from their classrooms to the stationary that I had written my first good short story on. That moment with Andrea had just been another point on the timeline – the meeting of two compatible but unhappy people too busy yearning for the last puzzle piece to appreciate the beautifully incomplete set they were born with. She probably felt it too. That's why we drifted apart so easily.

But now, here we were, stuck together again, a grand cosmic punchline to a joke no one wanted to hear. Standing behind them, watching Mr. Wylie flirt with a woman almost half his age, I began to realize how necessary that denial had been. Maybe I had just been awake for too long, but I felt myself slipping into the past, continually reminding myself how important she had been to me in that one golden interval. I felt myself swallowed by the forest around me – the thought of the university grew dimmer and dimmer as we pressed on. The mission had grown confused – was it Andrea or the university that I wanted so badly? Did I even want anything at all?

I could hear Mr. Wylie calling my name. They had reached the clearing. He wanted to show me something. I stayed back, behind a twist in the path. I let him call for me, again and again. I wanted someone to come for me. I wanted someone to show me the way.

At length, I heard her voice, and my feet carried me automatically forward. That's when I felt the horrible truth. It sunk in my stomach like a liver shot.

I emerged onto a leafy circle flanked on all sides by trees, faintly lit by a lone bulb jury-rigged into a power-line. Though the leaves from the shuddering trees covered all, I could still make out the patches of overgrown weeds that no one had bothered to pull out. Lines and lines of crumbling white gravestones peeked shyly from the ground, as if they were ashamed of their condition. Most were unmarked, and the few that still bore names towered above the rest with all the marble grandeur a dead person could muster. They had names like "SGT. CANDLER" and "LT. KANE"; they could have been anybody. But none of them bore any sort of tribute – not even a single rose.

Further up the path Andrea and Mr. Wylie were gawking at what looked like a family tomb. I approached them, unconsciously girding my footfalls. I felt like a tourist eavesdropping on a foreign culture I could never hope to understand. They stood close to each other, but far enough away that their relationship would be ambiguous to any observer. Mr. Wylie was clearly enjoying himself; Andrea's expression was inscrutable, as usual. Based on their voices, they were having a mild disagreement.

Falling in with them, I examined the tomb. It was an ostentatious thing, built to all the specifications of a dearly departed with more money than taste. Below the double-etched edges it was marked "BUTLER." It struck a vaguely familiar tone buried deep in my brain, but I didn't know where from.

“Hey, look, he’s finally here,” Mr. Wylie said, his tone that of a hunter happy to meet another deep in the woods. “Back me up here, won’t you?”

“Back you up on what?” I said, leaning down to examine the tomb further. Mr. Wylie grabbed my arm, stopping my progress. “What?” I said.

“Nah uh uh. You can’t touch it until you graduate. It’s a tradition.” I thought I saw him wink at Andrea, but it could have just been a trick of the light.

I wrenched away from him, perhaps a little too forcefully. “Yeah, that’s bullshit,” I said. But I didn’t touch it.

“It’s a real thing!” he said. “Really.”

I didn’t respond. Andrea cleared her throat.

“Anyway,” Mr. Wylie said, “I’m trying to tell her the story of Benjamin Butler and the origins of Queenspoint, but Ms. Politically Correct here won’t let me.”

Andrea laughed, far more loudly than she usually did. “Please. Like it’s a political thing. I’ve just heard bits and pieces of it around and it just seems kinda...I don’t know. Weird.”

“Oh, come on,” Mr. Wylie said, giving her a soft shove to the shoulder. “I brought you guys all the way out here. I might as well tell you the story. You haven’t heard it either, right?” He pointed at me with characteristic gusto.

“Uh...no, I haven’t,” I said, shrugging.

“Exactly!” he said. “He’s gotta hear it before he makes a decision. This is a mandatory part of the tour, as far as I’m concerned. I can’t believe they cut it out.”

Andrea sighed, but offered no further resistance. She sat down on the ground, beside one of the tiny gravestones. I also sat, but kept a bit of distance from her. My accidental dive into my memories gave her current form an almost inhuman sheen, like high-grade plastic. Was she even

the same person? The writer I had met back at the Academy loved storytelling of all kinds; we would tell each other our most embarrassing exploits just for the fun of it. I found it hard to believe that she would refuse a performance by someone as animated as Mr. Wylie.

“Alright,” Mr. Wylie said, rubbing his hands together, looking as though he was willing himself to grow a bit taller. “Can you guys see me okay? Everything cool?”

I nodded; Andrea just sat there.

“Oh, okay. Well, just to make sure.” After reaching in his small bag, he climbed on top of the tomb, his clam-shell phone in one hand and a virgin cigar and lighter in the other. “You mind lighting this?” He motioned to me with his cigar-hand.

Before I could even refuse, Andrea had already stood up. “I’ll do it.” She swayed over to him, took the lighter, and flicked it to life in one try. She even coated the entire tip in flame, like an expert. Something like jealousy coursed within me.

Mr. Wylie flashed a corsair smile and laughed as she made her way back. It seemed like she had inched closer to me, but it could have just been my imagination again.

“Thank you, thank you. Now, lady and gentleman, I am here to tell y’all about Ben Butler, one of the illustrious founders of Queenspoint University.” He took a tremendous pull on the cigar; haze unfurled from his exaggerated gyrations, coating the tomb thickly. “Ben was born in a humble log cabin in the heart of south Georgia during one of the worst blizzards ever recorded in the year of our Lord eighteen-hundred and forty-seven. His mother thought he wouldn’t even last the night. But, thank the Lord, once the snowdrifts cleared, it became clear that this was a special boy.”

I snuck a glance at Andrea – she seemed to be looking past Wylie, utterly serene.

“Yes, Ben was a special boy indeed. He taught himself to read at the age of six, just after his father had shown him how to chop his first wood. The Butlers lived a hard life, but Ben sought to better himself in all aspects, from philosophy to trigonometry. He was young, and he was happy. Soon enough, he won a scholarship to the boarding school up in town, and he was all ready to go. But one day, strange men came to the cabin and spoke to Ben’s father, whispering about insurrection and confederacy. Soon after, Ben’s father left home, inspired by the words of the strangers, towards South Carolina. The War Between the States had begun.”

In my periphery I saw Andrea shift slightly in her seat, the serenity in her expression undercut.

“It was a long and terrible war. American pitted against American. Brother against brother. Ben watched it all unfold, hearing the terrible news in his fortified schoolhouse, wondering if his father would ever come home. Even after Appomattox, Ben held out hope, hope that his father would one day come strolling in the door. But such hopes were ultimately dashed against the cruel shores of Cape Reality.”

Mr. Wylie took another long puff and crossed his cigar hand over his heart, as though a great national tragedy had just taken place. After a moment, he continued:

“But Ben knew that his father had wanted – nay, expected – great things from him. He decided that the best way to honor the memory of those who passed on was to steer the newly reanimated corpse of Old Georgia in the right direction. In the direction that his father had believed in.”

I felt Andrea’s eyes focus on me. She mouthed something; I couldn’t parse it.

“So young Ben began to study law. In the meantime he had become a very successful farmer, renting his farm to a wide variety of less fortunate folks-“

“You mean sharecroppers,” Andrea said suddenly, breaking the reverie. “Right? You mean former slaves.”

Mr. Wylie cocked his head. “Yeah, I suppose I do. Sharecroppers.”

“Okay,” Andrea said. “I just wanted us to be clear on that.”

“Sure,” Mr. Wylie said. The performance broke for a second, but he took another puff and started up again. “Let’s be precise. Yes, Ben had inherited some land from his aunt, who had died tragically during the war, and he used that land to mighty prodigious effect. Anyway. So, young Ben began to study law, as voraciously as you or I may binge Netflix on a long weekend. Oh yes sirree, Ben had grand ambitions for himself – and he lived to see them fulfilled. After passing the state bar with ease and practicing in and around Atlanta for the better part of a decade, Ben knew that it was time to seek higher office. It was the late ‘70s. Reconstruction was in full swing. Ben saw some of the changes that honest hard-working folks were being forced to go through by big government and decided to fight back. He started a few grassroots organizations that harnessed the will of the people – made their intentions clear. Word about him began to spread.”

Above us the cloud-cover shifted slightly; the waxing moon bore down. It illuminated Mr. Wylie’s skin and gave him the appearance of a sullen wraith, cursed to tell the tale of his untimely demise. The shafted moonlight cast down on him at an odd angle, producing a pale shadow that ended just sort of me and Andrea. Andrea looked like a lost waif in the gray.

“Ben ascended to public office on a wave of public sentiment. He and his wife Queenie were the toast of the town. First, he was the postmaster. Then the lieutenant mayor. Then state Senator. Finally, a full five years later, he climbed the high ladders of governance to the Big Enchilada itself. The House of Representatives.”

Something about all of this was beginning to make my stomach turn. Andrea's reactions began to augment my own – her eyes darted back and forth, unsure of where to look.

“Ben led a long and storied career in the House, fighting for what he and his constituents believed in. Maximum liberty. No federal thugs manning the polling booths down South. And, of course, education.” Mr. Wylie's motions had begun to settle down, building towards an explosive climax.

“And, so, when the time came for Ben to determine how to split his acres of farmland among his many heirs, he had an earthly vision. He saw rolling green lawns, with students just like him walking to classes, learning the same subjects he had taught himself with naught but a ruler and a pencil. He saw a place where the learned could congregate and teach the next generation the ways that he had fought so hard to keep alive from the meddling hands of the government. So, he split it in half. He called it Queenspoint University, after his beloved wife.”

In full histrionic mode, he wiped a tear from his eye. Even to this day, I suspect it was real.

“And that is the story of Ben Butler, the man who gave Queenspoint University its campus and its name. He is gone, but he is not forgotten.”

He stepped off the tomb and took a bow. Neither I nor Andrea clapped. The moon hid again. A chorus of crickets serenaded us.

“That was...” I struggled to find the words. “...quite the performance, Mr. Wylie.”

“Thank you,” he said, idly rubbing out his cigar on the side of the tomb.

Andrea stood up, looking out back towards the campus.

“Do you really believe that stuff?” Her voice was almost a whisper.

I felt something collapse in my chest.

Nothing in Mr. Wylie's expression changed. "What do you mean?"

Andrea just kept looking, her expression hidden from view.

He continued. "I mean...it's not really a matter of belief, you know? I've read the history books. I teach it. It's all right there."

"You know what I mean," Andrea said, her words laced with bitterness.

Mr. Wylie cocked his head, this time the other way. "I'm not sure I do." He pulled out another cigar.

"The way you framed it. What you kept in, what you left out. It's not what I've heard." She picked up a stick off the ground and began to make marks in the dirt. Tension rippled across her face.

"Look," Mr. Wylie said. "I'm in the business of history. I feel like Ben is largely forgotten by today's scholars, and I wanted to give MY student the full story." He exhaled acrid smoke everywhere. "What's wrong with that?"

"Do you know why they cut this part of the tour out?" Her words were biting, but she was staring directly at me. I didn't know how to react.

"No, I don't," Mr. Wylie said, like it was something to be proud of.

"Well, I do. One of my best friends is a tour guide, and he wouldn't stop complaining about people making a big deal out of it. They cut it out because Ben Butler was a racist hater who lynched innocent blacks and made a political career out of bragging about it. You know that, right?"

A sharp frown crossed Mr. Wylie's thick jaw. His puffs came fast and furious now. "Of course I do. I'm not an idiot."

Andrea stomped over to him, righteous fury emanating from every pore. “And you don’t think there’s something wrong with leaving that out?”

I had never seen this aspect of Andrea before; though it shocked me, I felt a sort of camaraderie between us that I had no real justification for. I had known Mr. Wylie long enough to see the anger brewing behind the genteel mask he always wore so well. With each passing second I could see it growing thinner and thinner.

“I just don’t see how it’s relevant,” Mr. Wylie said, with a flippant wave of the cigar.

“Are you kidding? You’re standing on a man’s tomb giving his life’s story, and you don’t think to mention he was a murderer and a bigot? You don’t think that’s ‘relevant’ to his life?”

Mr. Wylie, deadly calm, measured his words as though he was speaking to a rabid animal. “I’m telling his life as it relates to the university, to his legacy there. It ain’t exactly going to appear in the pamphlet.”

“But you can’t do that,” she said.

Mr. Wylie laughed his laugh, big and explosive. “I just did, didn’t I?”

Andrea’s face tightened. “No. You can’t. You can’t just take a part of someone’s life and say, ‘that’s the part that’s good.’ That’s not okay.”

“Then there are no heroes,” Mr. Wylie said.

“So what?” Andrea said. “Maybe there aren’t any.”

The steel in Wylie’s expression gave way. “You’re wrong,” he said, his voice almost a growl. “It’s all about context. That’s why you have to cut some things out.”

“But you didn’t cut it out, did you? Not completely, at least. You called them ‘grassroots organizations.’ What kind of half-assed white-washing is that?”

He scoffed. “So I glossed over it.”

“No,” Andrea said, eyes burning in the dark. “You glorified it.”

At that, Mr. Wylie flinched. It was a very slight motion of the arm; looking back, it was probably less than nothing. But just then, I thought he might hit her. And it made me very angry.

“That’s crap,” he said. “I accurately represented the political situation he was born into. I don’t think he’s a great guy or anything – nobody does – but he did found my Alma Mater, and he deserves to be remembered for that.”

Andrea turned away from him briskly and came toward me at an oblique angle. Suddenly, she was in my face.

“Does this guy still teach you?” Her question had an exposed edge.

“Uh...yeah?” I said, still too shocked to say anything more.

“Does he say shit like this...like...often?” Between her words, I thought I saw a flash of something. I don’t know what it was, but it seemed like understanding. I wanted that. So I was honest.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, he does.”

“Oh my God,” Andrea said, taking her head into her hands – I saw her delicate fingers squeeze against the bridge of her nose. I raised my arm to her shoulder gingerly – I didn’t know if it was the right moment. I didn’t know if there was such a thing anymore.

By now Mr. Wylie was walking over. “Now, come on ya’ll. Andrea...was it Andrea? It’s not that big of a deal, really. I was just trying to give a little lesson about Ben here.”

Andrea pushed my arm away, retreating from Mr. Wylie. “I know, I know,” she repeated, as she tried to gather herself. I shadowed her as she went, which seemed to make her go faster.

“What’s wrong? Really. I want to know,” Mr. Wylie said.

Andrea stopped. There we were, in the eerie light of early morning: Mr. Wylie, with one foot still on the tomb; Andrea, vanishing into the edge of the narrow glade; and me, stuck between them, in a field of tiny graves, reaching out for her.

“I just can’t believe someone like you went here,” she called, shrill and clear. And she took off into the forest, back toward the university.

I started off after her immediately. Then I heard Mr. Wylie call my name. I turned. He looked more lost than angry.

“What are you doing?”

I didn’t know how I felt towards him, not anymore. We were the friends each other had needed back in River City, but for me River City was quickly vanishing in the rearview. Now he was something else, a walking symbol of the contradictions and idiosyncrasies I had wanted to leave for as long as I could remember. I didn’t know how I felt towards either of them. But I knew I couldn’t let her vanish for a second time.

So I didn’t stay for the sermon. I was gone, back into the cloistered woods, sprinting towards the marble opulence of the University. I followed in her wake, branches snapping and brambles catching on my form all the way back. I ran with all the muster I had. I let all the anxiety and hate that had laid fallow in my chest for so long out into the cold night air. I used it up, left it behind me; or, at least, I tried my best to. And when I had almost caught up with her right where the forest ended and the broken streets began, I called her name, long and loud. I didn’t expect her to stop. I didn’t want to expect anything anymore. Maybe I would have tackled her, maybe I would have followed her still, or maybe I just would have gone back and given up all over again.

But she did. She turned around, her eyes still wet with tears.

“How do you deal with that? How do you deal with them?” Her voice quivered, and I was fearful that she would start up again and that I wouldn’t know what to do.

“I just...” I started, my senses failing me. But looking into her tired expression, I knew that a part of her understood. And that was enough.

“I guess I just never had a choice.”

I counted the cracks on the sidewalk while she gathered herself. And then she started telling me things.

She told me how Mr. Wylie had reminded her of home, with all his zealous gentility and exaggerated drawl; how he had impressed her with his knowledge and compassion.

“And...I don’t know. There was just something about him. I felt like he was trustworthy. After all, you know, you brought him here. From what he was telling me, you must confide everything in him. Why should I be any different?”

So, while I reminisced about the past, she began to tell him about her recent struggles – about the contest that she had won, about the reading that she had to do tomorrow, about how her attempts to start a better literary journal on campus were stalling on all sides. All the things she had unwittingly kept from me while trying to form the right words. We were too close. Sometimes you need that little bit of distance before you can really open up. And Mr. Wylie just nodded again and again, giving her the words that she knew she needed in order to keep going. Sure, it seemed like he was getting an eyeful of her at every opportunity, but she found it more quaint than hostile.

He told her a couple of stories about his first semester at Queenspoint, though he left out the phantom blonde: how he and his frat brothers had trained a dog to shit on the Dean’s porch on command; how he had managed to convince a brother that he was deathly allergic to tequila;

and how he had led his intramural football team to the top of Queenspoint's rather anemic league. He told her about his struggles, too, though in far less thrilling detail. Still, it made her feel like her problems were transient specters that would soon rise up and float away.

But then I showed up and ruined everything.

That's not what she said, of course. But it felt like the sentiment. It was a complete transformation. They had been sharing something resembling a moment, but upon my arrival it was time for tombstone speeches delivered with maximum pathos. Again, Mr. Wylie reminded her of home, except with the steadfast manners and beautiful plantations replaced with whispered epithets and gleaming church spires. The divide had never been made so clear, and it overwhelmed her. She barely knew what it was, but she had to get away from it, away from him – away from me.

But, as always, I had chased her down. I suppose it had seemed like a choice at the time, but when inertia ensures the same outcome at every juncture, is it really a choice? Even today, we could repeat it a thousand times and I would never stay in that Confederate graveyard. I have to go, through the thickets and the brambles, to her. Otherwise, what happens?

I don't know. I'm not here to make myself look good. This is just what happened; everything else is theory and conjecture, rooted in empty air.

She got up and started walking somewhere; I followed her, as close behind as a tail to a dog. We crept our way up a sparsely-lit suburban street, passing ripped-up lawns and vacant McMansions waiting for an enthusiastic yuppie to dive in. Through all this, she kept talking. Maybe it was the right moment, or maybe she just felt guilty, but she started telling me about this reading she had tomorrow. Apparently she had won a fairly prestigious thing: the most

promising freshman writer as voted by the Creative Writing faculty. However, it wasn't for any particular work; they simply picked the person who they thought had the most potential.

"That's really awesome," I said, still trying to figure out where we were going. By now, the darkness of deep night had begun to lift slightly.

"No, it's not," she said, an annoyed edge to her tone. "It sucks. I hate it." She increased her pace and walked out a bit further. I let her keep the distance for a while.

"And why is that?" I said. I could probably have guessed the next words, but I wanted to hear her say it.

"It's like I just told you. I have to read at this thing that's normally reserved for upperclassmen. There's going to be a lot of people there. People I know." She pulled her wisp of a coat tighter around her, as if to gird herself from some nonexistent gust. I thought about giving mine to her, but it seemed too direct.

"So?" I said. "You've done plenty of readings before. At your old school, at the Academy. What makes this one any different?"

She stopped, right there in the middle of the street. I looked both ways about five times to make sure we weren't about to be killed by some drunk frat boy. She yielded a half-smile and stepped to the side, leaning against a mailbox.

"You don't have a cigarette, I?" she asked, trying to use her phone's light to smooth her hair.

"No," I said, my voice cracking in surprise. "Why would I?"

"I don't know," she said. Her tone was flat, artificial. "That guy – Wylie, right? He smokes. I thought maybe you picked it up from him."

"No," I said. "If anything, it's what keeps me from it." I swallowed.

“Oh,” she said. We didn’t say anything for a while.

“Do you smoke?” I said, trying not to sound too prying.

“Only when I’m nervous,” she said. She reached into her purse and produced a pack of her own. They might have been Virginia Slims; it’s hard to tell.

“Well, if you had those, why...” I began.

“I don’t like these. But I save them for special occasions.” She lit one. “When I really need them.”

“Do I make you that nervous?” I said. It sounded flirtatious to me, but it might have stunk of insecurity.

“Of course not,” she said, as if we were talking about filing taxes. “It’s the reading.” She paused. “Do you mind holding these for me? I don’t really have room for them in my purse.”

“Sure,” I said, glad to be of service. I stuffed the pack into my jacket. “If you would just explain it to me,” I continued. “Maybe then I would understand better.”

“I get that. I wanted to bring it up earlier. Honestly. But it’s a matter of pride, okay?” Her deep pulls reminded me of Mr. Wylie grading exams. Billows of smoke escaped. Then, finally: “They want me to do new material. They’ve read all my old stuff, and now they want more.”

“So what?” I said, not comprehending.

“So...I’ve got the same problem as you,” she said, exhaling the rest sharply. “I don’t have anything to show them.”

She looked away, but it was too late – her expression had transmogrified into something I had never seen before. I didn’t know what to say.

“Nothing?”

She gave me the look a comedian might give a heckler who hit paydirt. “Nothing I’m proud of, that’s for sure.”

Up the road, twin headlights peered through the grimness, passing as swiftly as they had appeared. In their hard light the harshness underlying Andrea’s features was exposed. I couldn’t tell if she was more annoyed by my presence or the apparent crisis I had helped her ignore.

“If you’re so worried about this,” I said, trying to keep my prying as gentle as possible, “why did you go to the frat party in the first place?”

She didn’t reply, but she didn’t have to. She gave me a look that should have told the whole story. But for me, it never did.

“Don’t give me that,” I said. “It’s a legitimate question.”

She avoided my gaze, focusing instead on the perfectly-formed smoke rings she was creating. “I don’t have to answer to you.”

Her words clawed at my nerves. “That’s fair, but it doesn’t exactly help me understand your problem.”

“So what?”

“So...if I don’t understand it, I can’t help you solve it.”

“Who said I wanted you to help me solve anything?” Her playful tone had hardened up.

“Why else would you tell me about it?” I said, my brain running in too many directions.

She sighed; the accompanying cloud of smoke emphasized it.

“This is exactly why I didn’t want to bring it up,” she said.

“And why is that?” I said, failing to control the growing intensity in my voice.

“Because you get like this. You want to follow me around, solve all my problems, be my hero. You think that’s what I want.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

The words hung in the still night air like unlucky barflies at closing time.

“Because it makes me feel like a damsel-in-distress. That’s why.”

She threw her cigarette down and stomped it into oblivion.

“And what did I tell you about the questions? Jesus Christ.”

I stood there while she lit another and smoked it to the butt. I considered going back to Mr. Wylie, but I figured it was too late now. Besides, though her words hurt me, I was tired enough to admit that underneath all of the bluster they might have had the faint stink of truth about them. Still, the way she was behaving was totally irrational. I was sure she needed my help, even if she was too proud to admit it.

She calmly brushed the burning quick against the sidewalk. “Look, I just...I just wanted to not have to think about it for a while. My roommate mentioned the party, and suddenly it seemed like a perfect out. I went, and it was fun for a little while, but then all that weirdness happened and I freaked out. But then I ran into you...” She gazed out at the growing light. “And, I don’t know. It’s just like back at the Academy, you know? We could hang out and I could give you the tour and we can both laugh and laugh and laugh. And I could pretend everything is totally okay for a little while. But now...I have to actually do something about it. And that sucks.”

Though she was only a few feet away from me, I suddenly felt like we were acres apart – like the ground had yawned open between us, swallowing up a part of the invisible cord that had bound us together.

“So it was just a fantasy?” I said, my voice small and distant.

“Oh, don’t be dramatic,” she said, whipping her hair backward. “Think of it more like...a distraction. Like a theme park. Or ice cream.”

“Right,” I said. “Ice cream.”

I had no reaction. There had once been something, but now it was nothing more than pure vacancy. I felt very tired. But I had an idea. And, like all my best ideas, it was half-stolen.

“How much time do you have left?” I said, stifling a yawn.

She wrestled her phone out of her purse. “Eighteen hours as of five minutes ago.”

The tension in my shoulders subsided. “That’s not so bad. We can still do something about it, then.”

“Like what?” she said, rubbing her shoes against the asphalt.

“Well, I was thinking,” I said. “We could do that ‘writing jam’ thing you suggested earlier.”

“Yeah?” she said, trying to be coy. I saw through it.

“Yeah,” I said. “Burn the midnight oil trying to write as much material as possible. Then, go to bed, get a good night’s sleep, and polish it up before you have to go to this thing.” My voice halted at the mention of sleep – what exactly was I proposing?

Her eyes darted. “I don’t know,” she said. “Seems stressful.”

An annoyed sigh wrenched itself from my chest. “Look, Andrea,” I said, making no attempt to hide my emotions. “We had a good time tonight, right?”

She nodded weakly, enthralled by her own smoke rings.

“Right,” I said, swallowing. “But we both have this problem. A problem that needs to be solved. And right now seems like the best time for that, doesn’t it?”

She gave no response. I was undeterred.

“So, frankly, unless you have a better plan, I feel like this is what we both need. It’ll be fun. Right?”

I studied her lithe form in the pale light, waiting for a sign – a slight nod of the head, even a handwave. But it wasn’t as subtle as that. She met my gaze directly and walked back towards me. An anxious tremor shot up my spine – just another reflex from a time long past. But by then I already knew.

She craned her neck to the right. “My dorm’s this way. You wanna try this?”

“Yeah,” I said, too quickly. “Yeah, I do.”

So off we went, through the battered streets, all the way back to the rolling hills surrounding Queenspoint’s campus. She led me up one of those hills to an enormous tower made of twinkling glass. Before I could even say anything, she tapped her purse against a black pad jutting out of the blank wall – the door opened automatically. It was the first time I had ever seen a mechanism like it, and it made me feel very silly.

I followed her closely as we rounded the stairs up to her fifth-floor room. Much like the frat house, the designer had clearly prioritized the exterior over the interior – the hallways were narrow cases of thin plaster that rained down at the slightest impact, and the staircase dwelled in a concrete shell that somehow felt colder than the windy night.

We wasted no time upon arriving. Her roommate was gone – “probably still trying to get lucky at a frat,” as Andrea put it – so we had plenty of room to work once we had moved all the empty take-out containers and library books. We both sat there on the floor in silence, ready to make our mark – I had my battered notebook, a borrowed pencil, and my old muse, all ready to go. So I waited for it to come. I braced myself for the inspiration to strike me like a thunderbolt from a lesser god. I watched Andrea sketch some notes on the side of her freshly-bought journal,

emblazoned “QP” in bold red print. I watched her draw up a utilitarian structure for her piece, all thick black lines and latticed subheadings. I watched a small bead of sweat trace the curve of her face as she got down the first words of her opening draft.

It continued like that for a while. Occasionally she would ask me a question, and I would answer it to the best of my ability. I got on my phone a couple of times, browsing through the news stories that had accumulated through the night. I played a few rounds of a twitch action game that I had long since mined the fun out of. I expected a text from Mr. Wylie at any point, but he didn’t bite.

Through all this, Andrea didn’t say anything. I was glad of it. To be honest, at that very moment, I didn’t even feel like writing. After trying so hard for so long to get something down on the page, it was refreshing to admit that to myself. I wanted to enjoy the moment, to not only seize it but internalize it forever, there, basking in the stillness as one of the only people in the world I had any connection with at all did the thing that she most enjoyed doing. For the first time in a long while, I felt no insidious pulse under all my actions, no sudden shocks wrenching my gut. That was enough for me. That was what I wanted.

The sentiment struck me – not a revelation, but an old light whispering to life a few seconds after the pull of the switch. It would make for a good poem: a short thing, maybe just under a page. So, with the heater whirring and the steady drip of our second pot of coffee brewing in the background, my pencil met the page for the first time in over a year. I would like to say that the lines came easily, but that would be a lie. My voice was out of practice, and my hazy consciousness kept grabbing for the wrong words in the dark of the early morning. Still, though it was a difficult battle, it was one worth fighting, if only to reintroduce myself to the process.

When I finally finished something resembling a first draft, I slid the pock-marked page over to Andrea. We had been at it for hours, and by now she was already on her third sheet of paper, comparing it to the marks of her previous revision in order to refine it. At first, she didn't see it – I had to tap her on the shoulder. I motioned for her draft. She hesitated; I pressed. Then, with clear conflict in her expression, she handed it over.

A wave of nostalgia hit me as my eyes scanned over her piece. The words themselves didn't bring it; it was the act of reading her work itself that brought it upon me. Something about it – the vocabulary, the style, the flow – seemed achingly familiar, like an old pair of gloves that still fit years later. It was called “The Archives,” and it described a “buttressed tower” that contained all of humanity's forgotten knowledge. As my eyes slunk down the page, I kept expecting for some kind of narrative to kick in, maybe a hero to take the knowledge back to the deserving people. But none came – she dwelled upon the eaves and corridors of the building for far too long. By the end, it felt more like a travel brochure than a literary work. But the warm rush of the familiar had engendered something. In that moment, it seemed almost beyond criticism.

I turned to tell her this, but I found myself following her eye-line to the notebook she was ruffling through. It was very red and very mine.

I called to her; she looked up for a brief second, almost like an owl, and then burrowed her head back in it. Annoyed, I ripped it out of her hand.

“That's private,” I said, closing it with careful certainty.

“You know, nightingales aren't native to North America,” she quipped, spinning her pen around her thumb with expert precision. Something seemed off – she was still Andrea, but with a kind of mechanical sheen, a reproduction that embellished where it should have emulated.

“Huh,” I said, dumbfounded.

“Yeah,” she said, overloaded with peppy brutality. “Neither are skylarks. So you can’t have them both and still have this setting.”

“It’s a poem,” I said.

“So?” she said.

“So yours is about a fucking metaphorical library. It’s art. Who cares?”

“Your readers will. Such as myself.” The pen spun so fast I couldn’t track its path.

“It could be any university,” I said. “Nothing about it says Queenspoint specifically. I could make it German. It doesn’t matter.”

“But it does matter,” she said, her voice now a sudden quiet. “It needs to be consistent in your head. Otherwise, you can’t make art. That’s how you get authenticity.”

“Whatever,” I said, flipping to the poem again.

“Well, besides that, I really like it,” she said, her voice tumbling over itself. “But it needs that authenticity. That’s the only way you get *duende*. And that’s what you need right now.”

She wrote for a few more minutes, but I was too preoccupied with the draft to notice. I read over it again and again, looking for the “authenticity” that she had spoken of. What did it mean? She had always spoken in abstractions, but now she was taking it to a new level. Somehow, she had developed our once-shared vocabulary into something I could no longer parse.

“Aren’t you gonna ask me what I think of it?” I said. I was unaware I was even saying anything until the words formed, yet she kept scribbling away.

“Oh, no,” she said, moments later. “I appreciate it, really. But I just got a brand new idea of how to make this whole thing happen.”

“Wanna bounce it off me?” I said. Honestly, it was more like a plea.

“That’s okay,” she said. “I’ll run it by you when I’m done with it. That way it’s fully formed.”

“Oh,” I said, crestfallen. “Sounds good.”

“By the way...I’m tired. I think I’m going to go to sleep soon,” she said, as casually as she possibly could.

The pit of my stomach clenched. “Wait, what? What about the jam?”

“Oh, I think I’ve got it,” she said. “I feel really good about this idea. I’m probably just going to work on it for a few more minutes and finish it up tomorrow.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said, still processing. I made a gesture towards the bed. “So...”

She walked over to the bed and threw a small pillow at me, hard. I barely caught it.

“If you turn to your right out the door, there’s a study lounge with a couch on it. It’s Sunday, so nobody will bother you. You can borrow some of my pajamas if you want – they’re unisex.”

I didn’t say anything. I felt a glittery ambition I didn’t want to admit I had collapse around me.

“Bathroom’s on the other side of the hall. Make sense?”

My dry throat made my words creak with exhaustion. “If your roommate isn’t coming back, can’t I just use her bed?”

She laughed. “No, not happening.”

“Why not?” I said, my tone hard.

“Come on.” She said my name. “Please.”

I tried to peer into the fire behind her eyes. I couldn't tell if it was the same shade, the same intensity. I wanted to believe it was.

“Fine.”

She opened the door. I went out.

I found the couch. I fell into it. And the fitful bliss of sleep soon enveloped me.

I had a dream. Under all the waves of fatigue, it rendered faintly, but the memory of it lingers in my mind still.

I was in an enormous library, stacked from floor to ceiling with imposing, exotic tomes of all shapes and sizes. I tried to examine them, but all their names were in a language beyond my comprehension. The wall ahead of me was adorned with large bronze plaques that directed visitors to the various wings. There must have been a dozen of them, but several pointed in impossible directions: *BOXING* was up a staircase that spiraled to a single point high in the clouds; *B-FILM* was down a chute that opened into a perilous slide; *MYSTERY NOVELS* challenged me to climb a tree to reach its trove; and *VIDEO GAMES* was straight to my left, through a field of broken glass lit by sun-dappled windows. Not knowing what else to do, I gingerly stepped through the shards, trying my best to avoid the sharpest ones. I could see people all around me, but something made me ignore them – they seemed withering phantoms, flitting to and fro, trapped in a self-sustaining fantasy they no longer wished to be a part of.

After a few minutes of that, I staggered over to the colossal bookshelves, my feet leaving a red trail behind me. They were easily fifty feet tall, each marked by a video game console – *SUPER NINTENDO*, *PLAYSTATION*, etc. I peered in them and found shelf after shelf of games stacked so close that they seemed on the verge of overflowing. They were arranged alphabetically by genre – apparently someone had developed the right answer to the question that I had pondered for so long.

Ahead of me I could see carrels of a lighter hue. These contained every book about games I had ever heard of and many more, with names like *Ludonarrative in the 20th Century*

and *The Post-Colonial Magic Circle*. I reached out to grab one, but it was in the same gibberish language of the previous volumes. My feet ached.

Limping my way forward, I saw a small group of the pale phantoms having what appeared to be a lively discussion around a table. I sat down in a beanbag chair beside them and tried to contribute, but I couldn't seem to follow the logic of either side. Every time I would ask a question, one of the phantoms would give me a look that silenced me utterly. It was a mix of pity and hate.

I stayed there for a long time, gradually building my understanding of their arcane rules and strange language. I was beginning to make points that would make the wan faces nod at me, or clap their sallow hands against my back. It hurt in the best way.

I felt contented – maybe even happy. Within this strange building I had finally managed to find a group of people who “got it.” They didn't sleep. They didn't party. They didn't ask me unnecessary questions. They wanted to talk about what I wanted to talk about, forever. And they were beginning to appreciate me.

I turned to the phantom nearest me. His black eyes regarded me as a stranger in a strange land.

“What is this place?” I said.

“Queenspoint University,” she said, the voice echoing forever. “Duh.” He was Andrea.

“This isn't what I thought it would be,” I said.

“It never is.” She laughed a long, dramatic laugh. It was Mr. Wylie's. “What are you here for?” she asked.

“Creative writing,” I said.

“Oh, that's not what you want,” she said. “You're so good at math!”

“But I don’t like it,” I said.

“You’ll get over that,” she said. “They always do.”

“And why is that?” I said.

“What you love cannot be sustained. It’s like your nightingale. It learns. It sings. It takes flight. And when the night is over, nobody notices that it’s gone.”

“My nightingale doesn’t do much flying,” I said. “It was born on the ground.”

She laughed again. “And whose fault is that?”

I gritted my teeth. “It’s not a matter of fault. It’s a matter of what’s next.”

“Is it really?” she giggled.

“Yes,” I said.

“Then what’s the answer?”

I hesitated. The phantoms were talking about *Final Fantasy* again.

“This seems great to me,” I said.

“Too bad,” she said, in a mocking tone. “You can’t stay here.”

“And why not?” I said.

“Because this isn’t how you learn.”

She pushed me off the beanbag. I fell for a long time, my gut flipping over again and again and again as anxiety shot up my spine, into every extremity. Finally, I hit something. It was soft, cold, and pointed. I looked down. I traced the irregular lines of crumpled notebook paper. And then I was shaken to life again.

Part 3: Me

She didn't even try to make it gentle. My first sensation upon waking up was her throttling me. I pushed her away – she rebounded like a thrown basketball.

I couldn't tell what was going on. A blinding light was screaming through a nearby window, reflecting off the notebook she held directly in front of my face. She was saying something, but I wasn't sure what. She flipped open the page to the poem.

“Revelation! I had a revelation about this,” she said, or something close to it. “I've decided that it's really good.”

“That's nice,” I murmured, still half in my falling dreamscape. Tilting my head slightly, I realized what the light was – it was the sunrise. Or, rather, as my tired mind reminded me, sunset.

“Listen, listen,” she said, yanking my head in her direction. “Remember the reading thing I told you about yesterday?”

I rubbed the fresh sleep from my eyes and moved further up the couch. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Well, I don't know,” she said, trepidation clouding her features. “I think you should come with me.”

The clarity of her expression shocked me awake. “Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Why?” I was stunned.

She swallowed. “Oh, well, honestly, I don't really know anybody there. Plus, it'd be nice for you to meet some of the professors. Maybe it'll be like a little preview for you.”

My stomach clenched at the thought of meeting all these professors before making my

decision. Plus, Mr. Wylie and I had both agreed to head back on Sunday afternoon. Andrea's warm smile made me reluctant to admit that. So, with nothing else better to do, I decided go with her. I couldn't let it pass by – anxiety be damned.

As she got ready, I went ahead and shaped up the poem I had written the previous night – cutting out unnecessary verbiage and adding a couple of images as the clatter of water on tile filled the dorm. I used my last fifty cents to launder my old clothes. Finally, after polishing just a little bit more, we headed for the heart of campus side-by-side, strides measured to one another.

She led me out past the clock tower and into the woods, where the leaves shimmered in the afterlight. The sun had well and truly set when we finally emerged outside the Old Chapel, gray and dignified in the cool evening air. It was the kind of landmark that the brochures and tour guides talk about without ever actually showing it to you. According to an article I had read, it had once been the heart of the university's religious community, back when its Baptist affiliation was more than just nominal. However, with the diversification of the school's student body in the middle of the century, given the building's spotted history, the management had left its stones unpolished, having built a glass cathedral closer to the central campus. Now, vaguely aware of its historical importance, various left-leaning groups within the university began using it for their own purposes, including performance art and theatre. The article called it "inspiring" – Mr. Wylie called it "borderline heretical," with a loud snort. Still, it was easy to tell why the groups had been drawn to it – its dusty, half-ruined exterior gave it a fantastical ambience, like the ruins of a long-forgotten kingdom.

As we approached its oaken doors, I began to feel something pulse inside me once again. Here I was, over a hundred miles from home, without a way back, hanging out with someone I hadn't seen in years, and now I was going to read in front of a bunch of professors I hadn't even

met yet? I placed my hand upon the oak; it was almost like I could feel its history beneath my palms, see the mysteries of the past hinted at in the ridges and grooves of the weathered wood. It seemed unthinkable that I had gone from River City to here. I hadn't traveled that far in either distance or time, but it felt like eons had passed between Wylie's bright classroom and this chapel in the glade. Now, I just had to open the door and make it happen.

"Now, this might be a little weird," Andrea said. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be," I muttered. I pushed the door – it didn't budge.

She laughed and put her hand on it. Together, we heaved, and it finally gave way.

We were late – that much was obvious. The hall inside was dim, lit only by luminous cylinders hanging from high above. Row after row of empty pews rolled on before us, tapering off to a dark-clad group forty or fifty strong near a makeshift stage. It was a former altar, complete with lecterns flanked by a number of shuddering candles. The peeled-back wallpaper was a garish pink and red pattern that would have looked more at home in a nursing facility. As we approached, a pesky breeze blew at my back; despite the building's apparent importance, it wasn't very well-insulated. On-stage, a shriveled fifty-something man with a porkpie hat and a voice like an electric drill read what sounded like nonfiction. I have no recollection of its content.

Once we drew close enough, I sat down. By now, my heart was clanging in my chest, the old self-doubt was beginning to claw its way back into me. What exactly was I doing here, anyway? Did I really think that the first piece that I had composed in a year was worthy of an audience? I wasn't ready to put that kind of faith into it, and I knew it. I shoved my shaking hands into my coat.

Andrea sauntered on ahead, her full floral skirt swaying in the heavy air. Her attire now was what I remembered from those two weeks, none of the understated preppiness I had seen her

in the previous night. She was in full quirk mode now, but I wasn't sure if I bought it anymore. She approached one of the spectators – a vivacious woman trying to convince the world she was younger than thirty-five – and tapped her on the shoulder. The woman smiled from ear to ear and hugged Andrea. They had a short conversation; at one point Andrea pointed at me. It was hard to tell, but I thought I saw the woman's expression fog up, like the windshield of a car in winter. But Andrea managed to thaw it in no time. She sat down next to me.

“Who's that?” I whispered.

She just shook her head. “We're up next!”

“What does that even mean?” I meant to whisper, but it came out as a near-hiss.

“Don't worry. I'll make it obvious.” She tittered.

The quick of my being trembled in the cold.

The man on stage finished his spiel; scattered applause followed him off the stage. The older woman ascended to the front in three sleek strides. She introduced Andrea with a lot of words that would score you high on the SAT – I counted “adroit” and “sagacious” among them. Still, from the lilt of her voice I could tell that her opinion of Andrea was no affectation. There was a part of me that burned with jealousy as I watched Andrea hop onto the stage and accept the certificate. I was supposed to believe that my turn would come, but it was hard not to feel like the woman's inflated praise for Andrea was an insult to everyone else.

The woman handed the microphone to Andrea, the sound buzzing and popping through the exchange. Andrea cleared her throat. She had one hand on her hip, just where it met her waist. She must have felt like a superstar up there.

“Uh, I'm very happy to accept this award. I really don't think I've done much to earn it, but...it means a lot to me. So, thank you very much.”

Soft applause echoed through the chamber.

“But...actually, if you’ll hold on for just a minute, I have something I want to show all of you. You see, there’s someone here that I would like you all to meet.”

All motion in my body ground to a halt.

“Now, he’s a prospective student that I’ve been showing around, and I know he’s gotten a big scholarship from the university. I’ve known him a long time, so I’m biased, but I think he’s really something.” She gestured in my direction. I shrunk in my seat as a hundred eyes bored into my chest.

“And though he’ll never admit it himself, I read a poem of his recently and I think it’s really great. So, if we have a little time...I think you guys would really appreciate it if he came up here and read it for you. Also, he didn’t know that I was about to do this, so...”

A chorus of soft laughter hummed from the crowd. I didn’t move.

She pointed an accusing finger directly at me. “Come up here.” Her next words were implied: I know you have it with you.

The hard pulse of dread followed me as I made my way up that row. I swore I could feel the stares accumulate, linger on me as I slowly climbed up one-by-one. I didn’t look at them, though. I just followed Andrea’s expression, perhaps like a beacon in the night, or perhaps more like a dog to a bone.

I was standing in front of Andrea and the woman, looking down on fifty people I had never met. None of them were below the age of forty – they were almost certainly the professors who would be teaching me next semester if I took the scholarship. Their expressions seemed utterly scientific, as if I was a subject they were going to see at a nearby zoo. Perhaps that was just the complimentary wine. Or my nerves, creating panic where there should have been calm.

Andrea handed me the microphone. I breathed directly into it; the microphone let out a piercing howl. I thought maybe I should say something to them, but I didn't know what it was supposed to be. I fumbled with the notebook, opening it to the proper page. Someone coughed. I breathed in, then out. And I said this:

“This poem doesn't have a name, but I really wish it did.”

And then I gave it to them. I gave it to them as much as I ever could. I let them know how even after being bound kicking and screaming for seventeen years in a hell-pit of someone else's creation, you learn to appreciate every opportunity that someone gives you. I let them see the alienation that had overwhelmed me for so long take form in syllables and silences. I let them touch the detestable parts of myself that I had left in a frat house, in a Confederate cemetery, in a shitty dormitory, and even back in River City. I let them taste all the anger and the hate and the fear and the sickness and the confusion and the desperation and resentment underlying it all, but also the love that made me wonder if it could maybe be all worth it in the end. I let them hear the names of my illusions: Andrea, Wylie, Blander, Mom, Dad, Tidus, Yuna, River City and many more, all wrapped up in the insidious layers of pure fantasy that I could never seem to break through, no matter how much I writhed.

And then I saw it. I watched the luminiferous orbs drop from the steeple, leaving naught but stardust in their wake. I knew they didn't understand – that much I had always assumed. But I could tell by the shine in their eyes that they had listened. And it was all okay.

Through it all, I could barely hear the applause detonate in front of me.

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you.”

I turned to Andrea; she was smiling an uncomplicated smile, for once. I hoped she was proud of herself.

Andrea pointed down the hall; I was too dreamy-eyed to follow at first, but I soon refocused my effort. Peering into the distance, I could just make out the shape of the scowling jaw. It was Mr. Wylie. Apparently he had cracked open the door during my performance.

Andrea gestured towards him. I shook my head and walked out to him.

“That was quite a performance,” he said, much too loudly.

I didn’t reply. I took him by the arm and led him out into the cold evening. We were out in the glade; the hard lights of the adjacent parking lot blared down on us.

As soon as we were in the lighter air, he pushed my hand away forcefully. “What the hell have you been doing here?”

“Look, Mr. Wylie...” I began.

“Don’t give me that horseshit, boy.” His nostrils flared. “We had an agreement. Besides the frat party, we were going to stay together. I had no idea where you ran off to last night. Do you realize how much fucking trouble you’ve made for me?”

I just stood there. His anger paralyzed me.

“I come down here to show you the university. That was the deal. But instead, you ditch me to go try to fuck some girl. Do you realize how much work it took to even track you down?”

“I can guess,” I managed.

“A fuckload. That’s what.” Sweat trickled down his nose. “All that so you could try to get lucky. What a joke. You didn’t, did you?”

Something caught inside me. “It’s not like that.”

“Uh-huh, sure. Keep telling yourself that. But don’t lie to me, son.” He spit. That’s when I realized he was chewing tobacco. He never chewed tobacco.

“You don’t know anything about that,” I said, rage clenching against my chest.

“Oh, I know all about that,” Wylie said. “How long have we known each other? Since you were a sophomore. So, three years now, huh? You don’t think I don’t pay attention in the damn classroom? Trust me, I know who fucks, and who wants to fuck. And you’re in the latter camp.”

“You’re an asshole,” I said, quietly.

“Maybe,” Wylie said. “Maybe not. I’m just trying to talk some damn sense into you. What was that in there, huh? Is she trying to get you to be a ‘Creative Writing’ major or whatever the fuck she is? Do you realize what her career prospects are?”

I swallowed.

“Jack shit, that’s what. I’ve told you son. If you’re going to come to a school like Queenspoint, you need to do something that can actually pay the bills. Like finance. Or economics. Or anything other than fucking ‘Creative Writing.’”

He spat, again. My arms clenched.

“It’s my money,” I said. “I’m going to major in the thing I’m passionate about.”

Wylie laughed his laugh. “That’s for suckers.” He laughed again, but it almost seemed to overpower him – he staggered about. A thought struck me.

“Are you drunk?” I accused.

His expression was raw, primitive – I thought he might attack me. Then the Southern charm came roaring back.

“There’s a lot of steps between sober and drunk, boy.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I snapped.

He eyed me. “I drove here just fine.”

“Fine,” I said.

The wind howled.

“It’s Monday at 10 AM, right? The deadline? You’ve got less than twelve hours now,” he said. “You know that, right?”

A shiver of recognition shot up my back.

“Yeah,” I said.

“So, what’re you going to do?” He crossed his large arms.

I looked out into the woods, trying to trace a path back to campus, but I couldn’t find my bearings. “I don’t know,” I said.

Wylie exploded. “What the fuck do you mean you don’t know?” He closed the distance between us in a flash. My entire body tightened.

“I just don’t know, okay?”

A branch cracked. And, in an instant, Wylie had picked me up by my collar. I barely recognized him; his eyes blazed with incoherent rage.

“Do you not realize the fucking magnitude of the opportunity you’re being offered here?” he yelled, directly into my face. “I came here to convince you, and you’re still not sure. Are you kidding me?”

I tried to wrench his hand away with all my strength, but it was in vain – I couldn’t get any leverage. I kicked at his leg, as gently as I could. Then, not so gently. Finally, he let go.

I took about five steps backward. He just kept repeating himself.

“Why can’t you see?” he said. “Why can’t you see?”

“Why do you fucking care so much?” I said, panting.

That did it. His tough façade seemed to crumble before my eyes. I thought I saw tears welling in his eyes, but it could have just been the adrenaline.

“Because...because...”

He spat again.

“Because I had to fucking leave, okay?”

I just stood there, shocked.

“My parents ran out of money, okay? Aid fell through. I couldn’t even finish my second semester.” His words wracked him, almost like sobs. “I had to go back to Mississippi, go to community college. Do you realize how hard that was?”

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t bring myself to pity him.

“But I did what I wanted. Oh yes, at least I had that. Ended up with a fucking History degree. Guess what is fucking useless in this job market? A fucking History degree!”

“You have a good job,” I said, quietly.

“Oh, really?” he said, inconsolable. “Because you can fucking take it. I don’t want it. Do you think I like living in River City? No, you idiot. Everyone hates it. I hate it. But some of us don’t get a damn choice. See, what you’re going to realize is that this doesn’t matter that fucking much. You go to college, you get the degree, you do the job. That’s how it works.

“But not you. I knew it after five minutes with you. ‘He’s different. He’s not like the others.’ I knew I didn’t have to simplify things for you, like I have to do with every other piss-ant who walks in my classroom. I could be myself around you. I could talk to you about things like freedom, or Ayn Rand, or slavery, or abortion without having to worry if you’d run and tattle to the administration. You wanted to have the hard talks. You wanted to learn. Right?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Right?” It was a plea, even I could see that.

I nodded.

“So we had those talks. And we debated. And we hung out, and grilled together. You told me about your plans for the future. I wrote the damn letters and gave you the damn advice. And you listened. Didn’t you?”

I nodded again. Faint applause broke in the chapel.

“Then why can’t you realize it? We’re here, and it’s all going to shit. You have a fucking opportunity here. You get to get away from it all. You get to go to the good school. But you’re thinking about turning it down, for what? Because you’re afraid you won’t fit in? How have you not gotten it yet? How is it even possible?”

“That I haven’t gotten what?” I said.

He just shook his head. “That fitting in really doesn’t matter that goddamn much!”

I looked at his eyes, filled with anger and sadness. I didn’t know how I felt about him, or our relationship, or what lay ahead. But, for the first time, I saw the parts of us that were the same. And I saw that they were the parts that I had already begun to shed. I wonder if he saw it too.

“I appreciate your friendship,” I said. “More than almost anything. But I have to make my own decisions. Your certainty is not my certainty. There’s more to this than just the two of us.”

He sighed. “You’re deluded,” he said. “You’re making the same mistakes I did.”

I stared at him, long and steady. “No, I’m not. They’re my own. You still don’t see it, do you?”

“What’s that,” he growled.

“That I’m not you.”

His blazing eyes gave me no quarter.

Just then, I heard the crack of the door opening. Andrea emerged from the chapel, concern furrowing her brow.

“What’s going on?” she said, eyeing Wylie.

“We have to go back,” Wylie said. “It’s time.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “We still have twelve hours. You said it yourself.”

Andrea just stood there, unsure of where to go. For once, that didn’t concern me.

“You have twelve hours. I’ve got work in the morning, and it’s my car. I’m taking you back.”

“I’m not going back, Wylie,” I said.

He looked me over. He laughed.

“I’m not,” I repeated. “I’m taking every second I have, right here. I’m making my decision here. It’s my choice.”

He took a bold step towards me, then another, his hands raised. Andrea shrieked. Fire welled inside me, but I was patient. I let him get as close as possible, let his left leg get within reach.

And then I snagged his keys from his pocket in one swift motion.

He roared, comprehending instantly. But by then I was already sprinting towards the car with Andrea in tow. I don’t know how close it was. All I know is that when I turned the keys inside the car, he was banging on the window, calling me every name he knew. I didn’t hesitate. I put it into gear and peeled out onto the road, leaving him in a heap in the lot.

I was laughing like a madman as we drove through the winding roads around the campus. Andrea just sat there, looking vaguely pleasant as question after question continued to cross her face. Finally, they could no longer wait.

“So...what’s next?” It was a gentle lob.

“Honestly...I don’t know,” I said, laughing. “I wanted to talk to you about it.” A strange sentiment struck me. “But first...how about you read me that poem?”

She flushed. “What poem?”

“You know, the one you wrote last night,” I said, idly strumming my fingers against the steering wheel. “I didn’t get to hear it earlier.”

“Well,” she said. “Honestly, it’s not that great. I like yours a lot more.”

I smiled. “I appreciate that. But still. Let’s hear it.”

She got out the packet of paper and began to read. It was longer than I thought it was, and twice as beautiful. It was about a journey.

She was sitting on a sandy beach alone, tiny lights peeking down from above. Everyone else had gone home for the day, but still she stayed, letting the fog envelop her utterly. After a while an enormous shiphead broke through the mist, shattering the reverie, coming closer to shore than she had ever thought possible. At its helm was a strapping young man, with locks as black as gunpowder and eyes like the glint of noon on a sabre’s edge. He beckoned for her to come aboard, and, without a moment’s hesitation, she complied, climbing onto a rusty chain he threw onto the beach.

He enthralled her with tales of the world outside of her small port town, from the bronzed she-devils of the deep jungles of the South to the gleaming ivory towers of the Northern cities. He was there for only one night, to gather the final supplies he would need for his greatest adventure yet: out to the treacherous West, where the seas foamed endlessly under blackened clouds. He had heard there was an island past there where not a single person wanted for

anything, and he wanted to see it for himself before retiring. But he was lonely, and he wanted some companionship that didn't stink of stale grog.

She knew that she couldn't leave her school, her family behind. What would everyone say? But, ultimately, the fear of judgment could not outweigh the thrill of adventure, so onboard she stayed as they unfurled the sails in the first morning light.

It was a long and treacherous trek, just like the sailor had warned. She spent many nights in the damp hold, tumbling along at the mercy of the waves, questioning her decision at every drop of her stomach. Her teeth cracked against the hard biscuits that she was expected to eat, and she struggled to keep each sip of the drinking water down. Still, the men treated her with some respect, and the sailor's gentle mood seemed to make it all worth it in the end. They grew close, but his intentions seemed as muddled as the sea they rode upon.

After three months, they had finally gotten out past the dreaded whirlpools, into uncharted waters. But supplies had dwindled in the long storms, and morale had sunk to an all-time low. Now more than ever did she wonder if she should have stayed home safe in her bed rather than go on a strange journey. The sailor had never so much as touched a hair on her head.

Then, one day, land was spotted, and there was much celebration. They drank the last of the whiskey and ale, all while singing shanties as they pulled into shore. They were saved. But, alas, it had come at a cost. Her surprise turned to utter dread. The natives required a sacrifice to enter their perfect society. And that sacrifice was her.

She resisted all right; but the men eventually overpowered her. They took her out to the cliff on a smooth metal pole which burned her limbs in the hot sun. There were no ancient idols, no icons for them to consult before they did the deed. Their society was not a spiritual one; no, the price that had to be paid was purely cathartic. And as they tied her to the spit above the fire,

she cursed herself for ever leaving the idle comfort of her tiny seaside town. This was what adventure was. This was how it ended.

And that was how it ended; her poem, at least. I watched the line down the center of the road bend and twist as she recounted the tale. I didn't know what to think anymore. I loved it. I really did. But I had heard it all before. It had taken me the entire piece to remember where from. But I had remembered.

"Is that it?" I said, when she finally cut off.

"Yeah, I think so," she muttered, folding the paper back up. "I don't feel like it would be true to the piece to resolve it."

"I respect that," I said.

The Volvo's engine hummed softly as we made our second circuit around the same roads. Luckily, Wylie had filled the tank up before coming. I opened the windows. A night breeze whipped through the car, scattering Wylie's papers. The cigar box below Andrea's feet began to rattle.

"Why'd you do it?" I inquired, my voice cracking against the wind.

"What do you mean?" she said, honest confusion marring her face.

"Steal those lines," I said. By now the wind had become unbearable – I don't know how fast I was going, but it felt like we were about to go off the road.

"What?" Did she not know?

I stopped the car. I had to.

"We read the same book, Andrea. Remember? At the Academy." I faced her; I could see something beginning to form in her eyes. "I don't remember the poet. But I remember this concept."

“So what?” she said. “So you read a poem one time that’s similar to mine. What does that mean?”

Something had crawled up my esophagus, into my throat. It made it very hard to speak. “There were some lines in there that were straight from it.” I quoted them; I don’t recall what they were. They might not have even been the right ones. But I knew that she had ripped them out.

She began to cry, in earnest. I began to wonder what I was doing. “You were right there when I wrote it. How could I have possibly...plagiarized it?”

I gesticulated wildly. “I don’t know! You had the idea in your head beforehand. Or you waited until I went to sleep to write them in.”

She stared at me, wide eyes uncomprehending. “Listen to yourself! Why are you doing this?”

I laughed. It echoed bitterly. “Why?”

“Yes, why?” she cried.

“Because...I don’t know! When I see plagiarism, I say so. That’s just how it works, right?”

Her eyes were dry, now. They had a dim glow. It reminded me of something. “You don’t even know if I did.”

But I did. I was certain. As certain as I had been when I nicked the keys from Wylie’s pocket. I had read the poem. I knew what it said.

“I do,” I said.

“What is this really about?” she said, her tone turning malevolent. It surprised me.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Is this like...” She shook her head in disbelief. “Is it because the guy in it isn’t like you? Is that the problem?”

I just stared at her. My utter certainty had just cracked in my chest. “No, of course not,” I muttered.

“That is what it is, isn’t it! You just don’t want to admit it.”

“No, it isn’t!” I yelled back.

She shrunk slightly in her seat. And then grew once more.

“I don’t know what you want from me.” It was very matter-of-fact.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“Do you think I owe you more than this?” she said. “I showed you around. I talked you through all your weird shit. I even helped you overcome your problems that I don’t really understand. But that’s not enough for you, is it? I have to be the person you want me to be. There’s a *right* way of writing, a right way of living. And, according to you, I’m not doing that, am I?”

I traced the outline of her features one last time.

“Am I?”

“No, you’re not,” I said, very quietly.

“Exactly,” she said. “Because I am not like you. I am not yours. I am my own person. Can’t you see that? If it were anyone else, it would be okay. But I can’t have that, can I? I have to be perfect. Just for you.”

I could feel my own tears begin to flow. I didn’t understand why. What she was saying cut so close it was almost like she was saying nothing at all. It would only be later that I would understand its significance.

I spoke.

“Andrea...”

“I don’t want you to come.”

I ruptured.

“Honestly. I don’t. I don’t want you to come here. Maybe that’s just selfish. But this happens *every fucking time*. Every time we used to talk, it was always about you. Your problems. Your family. Your writing. *All your shit*. And I’m sick of it. I can’t be a person around you. You swallow me up. My personality, my space, even my stuff. You want me to be a fucking paragon you can constantly check yourself against. I’m sick of being that. So, please. Don’t come to Queenspoint.”

She wiped her eyes.

“And I don’t want you. I don’t want you here.”

And that was it. I tried, in vain, to get her to talk some more, but she wouldn’t. I begged. I pleaded. Eventually I just put it in gear. I drove her to her dorm. I tried one last time. I let it all out there. I told her I loved her. I told her I needed her. I told her I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t know how to make the decision without her.

She didn’t reply. And I don’t blame her.

She got out of the car. I looked down at the frayed notebook, battered and bleached from the passage of time. I watched her as she dwindled into the distance, winding up the garden path to her dormitory. She pounded her wallet against the black square and threw open the cast-iron door. I caught the last flash of the yellow light as it sealed behind her. And just like that, she was gone.

What did I do after that? Well, it's hard to say. What would you have done? I thought about doing all the wrong things: waiting in front of that dorm for her to realize her mistake and come back to me; going back to Mr. Wylie with my tail between my legs; or just casting it all aside completely and high-tailing it back to River City, back to an existence I had secretly come to accept under my veil of anger and bluster. But, I didn't do any of those things. Instead, I turned west, down a random street, through a graffitied passage that smelled of gasoline, into a part of Atlanta I had never seen. Brutalist towers rose above the landscape; weathered streetlamps flickered down, lighting my path. I drove up and down what looked like the main drag, trying to find signs of life, passing by boarded-up storefronts and throngs of chain restaurants. "Closed" signs winked at me, mocking in the darkness. I had no idea where I was, but that didn't matter; I didn't know where I was going, either. I thought about looking in the notebook, to see if the answers were there, but I couldn't find a good place to park. It was all too quiet. Stopping again at a flashing yellow signal, I checked my phone. It was almost two. But I kept driving, tracing a latticed path through desolate streets.

I stopped for a moment to search the Internet for the book we had both read in the Academy. I found a copy of it online and flipped through every page, searching for the poem that I was sure existed. But I didn't find anything. I had been sure in the moment, but now I doubted everything. Either it had been the wrong edition, or it was just another one of my fantasies.

I finally noticed the park the fourth time I drove by it. It was hard to make out in the darkness, initially appearing to be no more than a great black vacancy nestled in the heart of the district. The trees flanking it gave it away, though. I didn't love it, but it was the best I was going to get, so I parked my car at a nearby meter and walked towards it. I didn't bother paying.

I wandered out into the empty space, crunching through the grass, using my phone's flashlight as a guide. I got out towards the middle of it all and faced away from the buildings, trying to clear my head. To the east, I could see the lights of the university twinkling in the distance, reflecting off of the polished white marble of the bell tower. I sat down in the wet grass and thought about Andrea, and Mr. Wylie, and the reading, and the frat brothers, and my decision, and my idea of the school versus the school itself. It all compounded on itself in the darkness, looming, waiting for my response. I didn't know what it wanted, so I just sat, hoping it would curl back into its hole and never come back out. But it didn't move. So we sat there, together, watching the moon take turns hiding and emerging through the clouds above the trees.

When the light finally came out in earnest I noticed that one of the trees was much larger than the others. It was a great oak, and it rose up from the middle of the muddiest part of the field like an enormous monolith. Every now and then a breeze would roll by and its multitude of branches would shake, giving up a legion of leaves unto the field. Eventually, it began to surprise me. Each time a strong wind would start up I would think, "*This is it. It doesn't have any more to give,*" but its branches would rattle and the leaves would come down even thicker than before, fluttering towards me. I stood up and walked towards it, stepping under its enormous canopy, its branches rising endlessly into the darkness of the sky. All light, from the lamps of the university to the moon, seemed to dissipate under it. I leaned against the tree and flipped open the notebook; in the darkness, I couldn't read a page. I felt myself smile. I was among the whole. In that moment, the strongest wind I had felt all night ripped through the canopy and the leaves fell swiftly, bathing me in their soft retreat from home. One caught in the notebook, and I captured it.

I stepped out of the canopy and began to walk towards my car. In the new light I noticed a basketball court on the edge of the park. When I walked towards it, I found a barely-used

package of chalk that someone had left near one of the goals. I pulled out my phone and illuminated the court's surface. There, in pink chalk, someone had written: "*YOU ARE NEVER ALONE.*" I picked up the instrument, marked a line, and scrawled under it: "*YOU ARE SOMETIMES. AND THAT'S OKAY.*" Satisfied, I dropped the chalk back into the package and took it with me, back towards my car.

Then I saw it. Beyond the court lay a narrow access road, blocked off by posts running between the two major streets of the district, as long as the park. I walked towards the end of it nearest to me and stared down at the other side. It had to be about two hundred yards from end to end, easy. I flipped through my notebook, looking for the right lines; the leaf fell out. I grabbed it, put it back in, and pocketed it. No; it had to be something new.

So I pulled out the chalk, started at the top, and began to sketch words on the concrete, about River City, about all that had happened, about the pressure and the games and the things nobody else seemed to understand. The words flowed forth freely, as fast as I could write them: images and characters and feelings all rendered as I had never been able to before. As I moved on down towards the park my hand began to cramp up, so I changed to the other, making sure that each letter was legible. Nobody came, but I didn't care if they did. I had captured something and I wasn't going to let it go.

I don't know how long I was out there for, writing and scuffing and revising, but I was about halfway down when a figure emerged from the dark street. It was a woman, but I couldn't tell much about her. She lingered just outside of the streetlamp at the corner nearest me, murky darkness clouding her features. I kept writing, but she drew closer, hands deep in her jacket.

"Hey. I normally don't do this but...I've had a weird night. So, do you have a smoke?"

I didn't stop; I was sure I had misspelled "renaissance," I just didn't know where the mistake was.

"Hey, you! I'm talking to you. Got a smoke?" She called louder this time.

"What?" I said.

She stepped forward. "I said...*do you have a smoke?*" In the distance, a cat screamed, woken from its slumber. A streak of light hit her face; she was young. Far younger than I had thought.

"Oh," I said, feeling into my pocket and hitting pay-dirt. "I actually do." I pulled out Andrea's old pack and passed it to her.

"Oh. I only need one," she said.

"No, take it all. I don't need it," I said, returning to the writing. Was it N-I-A or N-A-I..?

"Okay, I guess," she said sheepishly, bringing a match to life. She turned as if to go, but then caught herself. "What are you doing?"

"Writing," I said.

"With chalk?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I don't have a pencil."

She chuckled. "I think there are easier ways of dealing with that."

I shrugged. "Well, I guess I didn't think that far ahead."

"That's fair. What're you writing?"

"Don't really know yet."

"That seems impossible. You're like...what, a hundred lines in?"

“I don’t know. Haven’t really been counting.”

“It has to be at least a hundred. Just eyeballing it.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

Silence for a moment; she inhaled deeply, keeping the smoke in for as long as possible.

“Fine, I’ll do it for you. As thanks for the pack.”

“Okay.”

She stumbled her way to the start of the road and began to walk back to me, using her steps to count. She returned with a smile on her face.

“You’re at one hundred and one. Just getting by.”

“I’m impressed,” I said, continuing to work.

“So... what’s it about?”

I hesitated. “It’s personal. Hard to explain.”

She chuckled again. “Oh, come on. That’s a cop-out.”

“No, really. It’s personal.”

“So, it’s personal, but you’re chalking it out on a public road, for everyone to see.”

I laughed. “It’s more like a walking path.”

“Oh, shut up,” she said, taking a drag.

“If you really want to know so bad, you can do what everybody else does and just read it.”

“Really? That would take forever.”

“You’d get a better idea than just sitting here asking me.”

“How do you know I’ve even got time for that? You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know you’ve got time to sit here and ask me a bunch of questions.”

She sighed. I looked up from the work.

“Okay, look,” I said. “I’ve had a weird week. I’ll tell you. As best as I can, I think.” I took a deep breath. “Ever since I can remember, my dad has said this weird turn of phrase. He treats it like a truism, like something everybody says, but I kinda think he came up with it on his own. He says, ‘no matter where you go, you’re always under the same damn sky.’”

She laughed. “What does that even mean?”

“I don’t really know. Depends on the context, I guess. But, to be honest...I wanted him to be wrong so badly. I wanted to come back and tell him to his face, throw it back at him.”

“So...” Her eyes turned to the buildings bulging above us. “What’s the verdict?”

The soft, familiar blues of the growing light smirked at me.

“I was wrong,” I said. “It’s the same damn sky.”

“How far did you come?” she said.

“Oh, about two and a half hours,” I muttered.

She laughed. “Well, what’d you expect?”

I thought about it for a second, and laughed with her. “Something different, I guess.”

The blues grew bolder.

“It wouldn’t have proved anything anyway,” I said. “It’s not supposed to be literal, I don’t think.”

“Then what’s it about?” She stared down at the lines.

“I don’t really know. But I’ve always suspected. That every place is the same in some indefinable way. And, somehow, that justifies never moving, never doing anything at all. Because, why bother?”

“Oh,” she said. “I kinda get it, I think.”

“Yeah,” I said. I shrugged. “And...that really gets to the heart of a lot of stuff that happened to me recently, I guess.”

“Right,” she said, puffing on the cigarette.

“Anyway. So, what’s your story?”

She eyed me, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” I motioned to the road. “This is my story. What’s yours?”

“Oh, uh...” She kept puffing. “I don’t really know.”

“That’s fair,” I said, picking up the chalk again. “It takes a while.”

“Yeah,” she said, idly curling a strand of her hair. It was blonde. “It’s just hard, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said, continuing to work.

A silence. “My boyfriend just broke up with me, actually.”

I dropped the chalk. “Oh, wow. When?”

“Uh...just now. At Waffle House.” She wiped something off her face.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said, half-heartedly. “I appreciate it.”

“Yeah,” I said. “No problem.”

I stood there for a while, trying to decide what to do. Eventually, I spoke.

“I went through something similar recently. Not exactly the same, but...kinda the same. So I can relate.”

“Yeah,” she said. I thought I heard a snuffle, but it could have been the wind.

“It started back in South Carolina,” I began. Then I stopped. I studied her face, the movement of her lips, the undulations of the smoke. I thought about what her story might have been. And I didn’t go on.

She puffed. “What started back in South Carolina?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing started back in South Carolina.”

“Oh. That’s not a very good story.” She chuckled.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s not, isn’t it?” And I laughed with her again.

We stayed there for a long time.

She spoke. “So, what’re you doing today? Besides writing.”

“Making a big decision,” I said.

“Oh, really? How big?”

“I don’t know. Like, ‘my future’ big? It definitely feels important, at least.”

“Yeah,” she said. “They always do.”

I laughed. “You sound jaded.”

“That’s because I am.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it’s 4 AM on a Monday and I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing with my life.” She rubbed her cigarette out and reached for a new one.

“Join the club,” I said. I pointed out towards the bell tower. “You see that university out there?”

“Yeah, of course,” she said, lighting another.

“They offered me a ton of money to go there. I’m not sure if I want to. I came here two days ago to figure it out, and I’m no closer to any sort of decision or anything.”

“Wait,” she said. “That’s what this is about? That’s your big problem?” I could feel the bitterness in the smoke she spewed.

Her words stung. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to like...insult you. But, it just seems like a nice problem to have. From where I’m sitting, at least.”

“Oh,” I said, putting my hands into my pockets. I wanted to break the chalk in my hand, to pontificate to her, to make her understand. But I knew, deep down, she did have a point.

“I can see where you’re coming from,” I said. “But it’s still a hell of a dilemma.”

“Yeah. I can see that,” she said, gesturing to the scrawl. But really, she was wrong. It wasn’t really about the decision, in the end. Not the trip, and not the work I had scrawled out on the sidewalk. It was just what got me here. And now I was here, and the here hurt, but I knew it was what I needed.

“So,” she said. “What’re you going to do?”

I looked out to the university again, to the east. Above its winking lights the unceasing dark of the sky was beginning to give way. Soon it would be dawn.

Yet my work rolled on below me, the chunky scribbling illuminating unknown images, delicately spiraling around what happened and what did not happen; Andrea’s smile, and Mr. Wylie’s laugh; my dreams deferred, realized, and squandered; the reflections of the clock tower in the distance, ticking away. I wondered if I had finally begun to unravel the threads of the endless and shapeless fantasy I had unwittingly draped upon my own shoulders, or if I had just burrowed through to a deeper fold of brittle dreams and glittering stardust. I wondered if I would ever know.

But as I looked up, I realized something. I wasn't unraveling the fantasy – it had been deflated. They had shown me the seams, and now I was piercing them, one by one. It would be a long process, but it had finally begun.

And with the fantasy pierced, how could the sky be far behind?

The empty black pavement loomed in front of me.

I pointed down to it. "I'm gonna finish this."

"Okay," she said, continuing to puff on the cigarette.

I watched her puff; she watched me, watching her. Neither of us moved. Then I spoke.

"What are you waiting for?" she said. "Go ahead."

"You don't have to be here, you know," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...if you have something better to do, you should go do it. This is my thing."

"I'm not sure what you-"

"I don't need you to be here. I just want you to know that. I'm fine. I'll be fine.

Everything will be fine. If you want to be here, that's your business. But I can do it alone."

"I want to be here."

"I did it before. I can do it now. You don't have to-"

"I want to be here, okay? I do."

"Okay," I said, bringing the chalk down again. "Then stay."

I felt her gaze level on me in the bright dark.

I kept writing.