

PART THREE

“When it rains it pours.”
-Henry’s Father (Paul)

Henry and Jack had many play dates.

At first they were play dates, then they were sleepovers, then when those were awkward they just hung out. Both were always welcome at each other's houses. They were treated as members of each other's family.

One stormy day, when both children were nine, Jack's mom, the one who raised her, took Henry and Jack to downtown Toronto. The kids were, of course, excited.

They always got the tourist view of Toronto when they were younger. It was all Front St. and no Parkdale. This was before it began to gentrify. They had an intimate knowledge of the downtown core but knew nothing of Kensington Market. They had no clue what a Scarborough was.

Barbara, Jack's mom, was looking for something to amuse the children. They had already eaten fast food so a meal was out of the question. The zoos, amusement parks and old Forts were outdoors. There were no baseball or hockey games that day. They were all already bored with the misshaped penis that loomed over the city.

The windshield wipers squeaked repetitively.

Barbara wished the rain would stop.

In case you hadn't guessed, Barbara was the lady who sat near Paul at The Sand Castle worrying about her bank's finances. It was she whom Henry had ran to for help when he found Jack injured.

The kids had gone to the museum and art gallery on field trips recently and had no interest in returning. They were 9.

The rain continued to pour, lightning flashed, and thunder roared. They were getting restless from all the driving around looking for something to do. The first thing they decided on was to pull into the nearest gas station to refuel.

Henry and Jack drew doodles of comic book characters on their fogged up windows, ignorant that Barbara would be cursing the streaks they made later.

Barbara was a small town mom. She was short, a little hefty and dressed in whatever was on sale. She had shoulder length black hair and big framed red bifocals. She topped up her minivan, grabbed a newspaper for hints of what to do, then picked up some potato chips and paid at the counter.

By the time Barbara was back in the minivan she was soaked. She dried her face off with tissues, shed her drenched rain coat and threw the chips at the children in the same fashion a cartoon burglar would throw a steak at guard dogs.

These are the days parents want to fast forward through and grandparents want to rewind to.

As Barbara sifted through the paper it deteriorated to pulp against her damp fingers.

Jack suggested, "Let's go to the mall."

Henry looked disappointed. He asked, "What about a movie?" Of course there was a movie theatre in their town, but there they could only choose between two movies at a time.

Barbara thumbed her way to the entertainment section. All the movies playing were either inappropriate for children or of no interest to those two.

They were driving north on Yonge St. then. They turned left, west, at Bloor and found themselves honked at for making an illegal turn. What Barbara actually screamed was "Fucudge", but that was only because she caught herself. She hated driving in Toronto. The traffic drove her batty.

They debated visiting bookstores, a pool hall (Barbara would have none of this), and the campus of a local university. Then Barbara looked right and all her problems were solved. A beat down repertory theatre was screening an absolute classic.

Henry loved movies. His dad had died a year earlier and he enjoyed escaping into cheerier worlds.

Henry had a complicated past.

Everyone and everything he had ever loved seemed to be taken away from him or crippled. At his gravest moments Henry believed everything was his fault. Henry loved Sam and Sam died. Henry loved his dad and his dad died. Henry loved his mom and she suffered a fate worse than death. Henry's mom was a walking talking pharmaceutical zombie.

The story of Henry's parents was a sad twisted tale. Sam was born to Bret and Lily. Lily was both Sam and Henry's mother. Henry was born to Paul and Lily.

Paul and Bret were childhood best friends ever since Bret moved to Canada from upstate New York. They were as close as brothers. They were nothing alike. Bret was always playing sports while Paul was always nose deep in a book.

Bret fell foolishly in love with Lily in high school. Lily and Bret were always fighting. They had a ton of physical chemistry, but could never agree on politics, religion, or anything else they felt important. Bret believed in God, and Lily believed in Science. Paul barely knew Lily in high school.

A year after they graduated, Bret had trouble finding work and eventually returned to the States with Lily and enlisted in the army. Bret and Lily tried to stay together during his basic training and a short while thereafter, but eventually it became clear that they wanted very different things, and Lily came home to small town Ontario.

Bret, wanting space from Lily, went overseas and eventually fought in Iraq the first time around; then called Operation Desert Storm.

Sam was Bret and Lily's lovechild.

One seemingly ordinary day Bret asked Paul to grab a few of his things

from Lily. Paul went over to Lily's house, about a year into Bret's tour of duty, to find a six month old baby, Sam. Paul was shocked. Lily didn't even recognize Paul at first, let alone why he was hyperventilating. When everything was sorted out Lily explained to Paul that she didn't want the baby to stand in the way of Bret's life. She told Paul that she would tell Bret, eventually, once he had settled and would not feel an obligation towards her. Paul instantly felt an obligation towards her.

Paul was a kind man. He checked up on Sam weekly. He would chat with Lily and over time they formed a friendship. Lily made Paul promise not to tell Bret anything until she felt the time was right. Paul even began to occasionally watch Sam for Lily. He bought necessities, groceries mostly, for both the child and his mother and even helped Lily find a job at the bookstore he managed (he would eventually also own it).

One terrible day Bret disappeared in Iraq. Lily mourned Bret. Paul and Sam seemed to be the only ones who could cheer Lily up.

Five weeks later, when Paul and Lily held no hope that Bret would return home, they sought comfort from their sadness and loneliness with each other and 53 shots of whisky.

They regretted it instantly. Lily was once again pregnant. Within a week Bret had been found, tortured but alive. Bret was of course sent home and given an honorable discharge. He no longer believed in God. Bret felt free and happy that he was not a slave to anyone's master plan.

As soon as Bret was healthy and relaxed they told him everything. They had fallen in love. They wanted his blessing. They were both surprised when he actually gave it to them on the condition that he would be allowed to see his son when he visited.

As he saw it at first, holding no hope for a relationship with Lily on his return, he had simply gained a healthy son, kept a friend that he had thought he had lost, and his best friend had found a fiancée that everyone knew he approved of.

Bret had endured war-torn Iraq; compared to that his ex-girlfriend and his best friend shacking up was, for him then, a non-issue.

When Paul and Lily got married Bret was the best man. There were awkward conversations and looks. Harsh words flew from onlookers who didn't understand the situation. Paul and Bret were forced to break up fights about how they should be fighting.

When Henry was born Lily began to believe in God; she felt blessed to have such a beautiful healthy baby boy. Shifting hormones, probably.

Even though Paul and Bret still seemed to have a very brotherly relationship they now saw each other less often. There would be the odd fishing trip or deep conversation at a social gathering, but long gone were the days when they would be inseparable. Bret lived in New York, which made things easier. At times Bret was jealous of Paul. More often, as the years went by, Bret simply felt very lonely. Bret had other personal tragedies as well, but Henry didn't know the specifics.

Paul and Lily raised the boys without catastrophe until one late July evening when an unknown driver, who was going the wrong way down a one way street, hit Paul's sedan head on and killed Paul. They never caught the driver.

"Sometimes shit just keeps happening."

When Paul died in the car crash, Henry, Sam, Lily and Bret were crushed. Henry and Sam lost a father. Lily had lost a husband. Bret had lost a brother.

From then on Bret would watch both boys instead of just Sam. Bret was, after all, Henry's godfather. Bret liked Henry. Bret even moved to Toronto in order to be closer to the boys.

After over a year had passed since Paul's death, Bret and Lily began to date. In time they were married. They had been married for 12 years when Henry and Jack started down the road. Bret became a father to Henry.

It was only after Sam's death that Lily began taking anti-depressants. It was even later that she agreed that there was probably no God.

"Sometimes shit just keeps happening."

Lily made a speech at Sam's funeral.

This was before she turned to her mother's little helpers. She said, "Goodbye Sam. I'm sure Paul will look after you now. I've loved four men in my life and I've now buried two. It's not fair. It's not fair. Now all your troubles are gone. God take my son and protect him as we couldn't. I will miss you always Sam."

Henry wept during the speech. He was furious at his mother. He shook because Sam wouldn't give her Christian God the satisfaction of his salvation. Sam would have spat in his face or cursed his mother on behalf of little black babies from Africa with potbellies.

Sam had asked his mother once, "If God is omnipotent then why would He make people suffer?"

"Some people suffer for their sins and others are victims of bad luck. This is all part of God's plan for us. God created everything, everyone, and set in motion all that will happen. A person's life is only a gateway. I believe that the innocent go to heaven and that bad people go to hell."

Sam said, "But if God set this in motion and his plan determines what will happen then he makes people suffer and determines which countries should have salvation as different people from different countries have different religions and your church believes only Christians go to heaven. This poor Indian girl from my class is Hindu because her parents are, God must have chosen her to be hell-bound from the start, but she's still really nice to everyone. From that people could determine that God is a racist, only concerned with popularity, and a snob. Is that who you want me to worship?"

Sam was twelve years old. He never went to mass again. As an adult when Henry heard this story he laughed so hard he lost his voice for a full hour. Out of the mouths of babes...

"You look really pretty in your dress," said Henry.

Jack interrupted Henry. She repeated, "You look really pretty in your dress." She shook her head. "Is that it?" she asked.

Henry started to drive. "I can see an intersection up ahead," he announced.

The crossroads were empty, dirty and old. All roads appeared identical except that the left and right ones had been paved more recently.

Henry looked over at Jack. He then looked over at the intersection and stopped at the side of it. "This isn't the time," said Henry with a manner of fact air.

Jack warned, "There isn't going to be another time."

There is always another time; getting there is the challenge.

Henry asked, "Why does it have to be when the world is going to end?"

Jack thought for a second. Jack wondered, "When will it be the time?"

When

In all likelihood it will happen or has happened. Time and possibilities, as we've discovered, are endless. Your mind is landscape somewhere. Even allowing yourself to contemplate possibilities means, at the very least, they made a TV movie about it at some time, in some place.

When contemplating a when question ponder if what you really want to know is where something has happened, is happening, or will happen and how you can get there the easiest.

If you are wondering the specifics of a sure event then a when question may have merit but this supposes the question has a qualified asker and answerer. I would not consider the average earthling to be qualified of much and nothing is ever certain except change.

When proper answers to properly asked questions on Earth are received I attribute it to pure dumb luck.

Think about if you should be asking "When should..." or "When would..." as opposed to "When..." when you normally would be asking a when question.

Earthlings should avoid when questions.

As the doors swung open they were greeted with the smell of buttery popcorn.

Movie theatres are modern day temples.

Concession stands' cash registers are collection plates. Popcorn and soda pop are your bread and wine. Your sacrament has been reduced to salt and sugar. In America your sacrament is various forms of corn.

It's easier to believe in what you can see.

Actors are devils and angels for rent. Directors are shamans or priests for a few hours. What people want is a happy ending, not the rapture. For them, Hollywood is God.

Audiences only want apocalypses so they can be delivered from them. They don't want to earn anything.

They don't want a preachy messiah. They want a kickass action hero. Pacifism has never screened well.

All anyone needs is a good story.

Incense was the original special effects.

Theater speakers are the new organs.

The taking and tearing of tickets symbolizes the breaking of bread.

Jesus Christ has been replaced by sexy A-list celebrities.

Barbara's hands were full carrying various munchies and sodas. The kids, naturally, wanted to sit in the balcony seats. By the time they actually got to the seats half the popcorn was gone.

Seated behind them were a group of teenagers that smelled peculiarly. They were dressed in various black logo shirts for rock bands, ripped light blue jeans and canvas shoes. They laughed incessantly. Their eyes looked dry and red. To Henry and Jack they seemed really weird, obnoxious and lame.

They were the first stoners they would ever see. Barbara couldn't quite place the smell.

When the curtain had risen the movie began. Henry and Jack stared at the screen transfixed to the images—of a copyrighted film, which will remain nameless.

The novel's in the public domain, which is good enough, right?

Jack said, "Oh."

Henry quickly pulled a cigarette from his pack and lit it. He took a puff. He felt relaxed. Henry said, "I think I should probably shut up before I say something I shouldn't."

Jack took a sip of beer and admitted, "I miss this place, the town, the comfort; I miss you."

"This town is a turd receptacle; this place is literally called 'The Shithole.' Just think: all those years you wanted to get out and here you are just a visitor. You finally fucked off and the whole town is worse off for it," said Henry. Henry took another puff from his cigarette. He felt happy.

"So am I," observed Jack.

Henry coughed suddenly. "What do you mean?" questioned Henry. "You're free; you have a hundred bars to choose from. You have variety and choice. You have your boyfriend, Rick, who's a fucking fire fighter. What do you mean?" he asked. He took another puff from his burning cancer stick. The craving subsided.

"He's a prick: Rick's a prick," Jack rhymed quietly and ashamedly.

Henry stubbed out his cigarette. "What?" Henry questioned.

Jack's mood shifted to bare melancholy. Jack whispered, "He, um, he works late every night." She burped.

Henry responded, "Well he is a firefighter."

Rick was actually not a firefighter then, he had been fired. Jack had found this out months earlier after she had called Rick's old station and was informed that Rick wasn't there and was not welcome to return. Jack didn't

know where Rick spent most of the time. She couldn't tell Henry any of this: she was too worried he would think her a fool for staying as long as she had.

"When he comes home he never smells like burning timber or insolation, he smells like beer, cigars and... women. He used to buy me flowers every week. He used to come home smelling like daffodils," whispered a trembling Jack. She lowered her head in shame. Daffodils were Jack's favorite.

"Jack, I'm so sorry," said Henry.

Henry took Jack's hand again. It was clammy.

Jack raised her head. She smiled dimly. She sobbed, "I want to come home Henry. My diploma's done. I want to come home. I can't stand it anymore. I hate him now. I hate him so much. I'm so stupid"

"Then you should come home: he isn't worth it. You deserve better Jack," pleaded Henry.

The door swung open and into the bar wobbly waddled Rick. He was an oaf of a man. He was tall and wide and pure muscle. He had the appearance of ignorance and self-confidence; at least that was what the backwards baseball cap suggested. He looked like a poor life decision.

Henry and Jack let go before Rick spotted them, even though both were unsure what the hand-holding meant.

Rick was obviously and unnervingly drunk. The left pocket of his navy blue jacket held a stainless steel flask. He smelled of debauchery.

Henry waved at Rick, who in turn clumsily made his way towards them.

Jack muttered, "Speak of the devil."

One of the whiz-kid witches, an ex-fling of Henry's, looked at Rick and then Henry. The waitress's name was Brittany. She was chewing bubble gum. She was young and generically pretty. She had pink hair and wore tight black jeans and a black t-shirt that read "Hot Bitch" in hot pink. Her lips and nails were hot pink as well. Her lower back was tattooed unoriginally: she wore a

“tramp stamp”. It was the sort of tattoo that marked easy women. She also looked like a poor life decision. She looked over at Jack.

Jack was wearing a purple hoodie; she had a black and yellow horizontally striped polo tee under it. Jack wore black yoga pants. Jack was a mess; her hair was uncharacteristically disheveled.

Brittany grinned, “I enjoyed having you.” Brittany handed the bill over to Henry. She shot an exaggerated wink at Henry and walked away. On the bill, alongside the price of their meal, was a hot pink lipstick print and the words “call me” in hot pink also.

Jack said, “Small town whore.” It wasn’t clear to Henry whether Jack was referring to Brittany or him. Brittany either didn’t hear, or pretended not to. She just walked back to the bar, while blowing a bubble. It, of course, was hot pink in colour.

Rick approached them. Henry asked Jack if she wanted him to go and she shook her head vigorously. Under her breath she said to Henry, “I want him to.”

Henry walked home.

The scene unfolded on a brisk autumn afternoon as Henry walked home from school leisurely listening to something angsty when CD players still existed. Henry was 18 then, was a tad skinnier and had long straight hair underneath a black wool tuque.

Henry walked past a park, a bank, a convenience store and the pizzeria. He then walked past the only video store, another bank, a big chain yuppie clothing store, a grocery store, a third bank, the grade school, an ice cream parlor, a second convenience store, and a different branch of the first bank all before crossing the main street which separated the residential area from the “downtown” area.

We were back in The Shithole when Rick first drunkenly spoke.

"Hey," said Rick.

"Hello," said Jack.

Henry downed the rest of his beer and said, "Hi."

"Your mom said I could find you here."

"I didn't want to be found. I thought I made that clear."

"Look, am I missing something? You're mad. I get it. Let's talk about it. I don't need shit."

Henry thought, "Rick should get out of The Shithole."

Jack turned away from Rick and pointed out, "There's nothing to talk about; at least not now." Her face became flush.

"Hank, can you give us some privacy?"

Jack, with her back still turned to Rick, scolded, "You can call him Henry."

Rick looked at Henry and asked, "Whatever, buddy, can you give us some privacy? I need a minute to talk to my girlfriend." Rick grabbed his flask and gulped down some whisky. That's what his breath suggested it was, anyway.

For Rick this was attempting to be civil.

Henry poured himself another beer from the last pitcher. It was then empty. He felt remarkably uncomfortable, but wouldn't dare show it.

Henry always tried to be a perfect gentleman; what that meant to him anyway.

Henry demanded little of his friends but was reliable to them. He stood up for the meek, unless the meek were just asking for it. He was generally smart, generous and kind. He had a refined appreciation for sarcasm and wit,

but could never get the timing right in a joke. His temper was reserved for the deserved (mostly). He was peaceful. He was strong.

The flaws I found in Henry's character were far from benign. He belittled himself. Inexplicably he lacked confidence. He dwelled on the sad and the bad. He was a worrier. He was an underachiever.

Sometimes he was a bit of a boy scout. Other times he was a slacker or rebellious. It was hard to peg him, with so many conflicting traits. He was a confused person.

Henry also kept his best thoughts trapped in his mind, sheltering them from the outside world's criticism and his inarticulate speech.

Like millions of other North Americans Henry drove a vehicle that consumed an unnecessary amount of fossil fuel. They were all slowly smoking your world. Nicotine and gasoline are two drugs which elicit cravings that never fully go away. Henry was addicted to both. Henry obviously had his reasons for wanting to keep the truck.

When I first came to Earth, owing to human simpletons, I sometimes hoped millions of years from then you would all be ironically consumed in internal combustion engines, by the hyper intelligent dinosaurs you will no doubt engineer.

Gas

Solar power exists. So does wind power. Hydroelectric power is not a pipe dream. Nuclear power could even be clean if it was processed correctly. Why are your cars driving on bone juice?

Why are other vehicles powered by corn, which requires more energy to grow than it produces and still results in the emission of greenhouse gases? Even switch-grass yields more energy than corn. So does hemp.

I'm not going to get into climate change. It's beneath me, tee hee. I will simply tell you it does in fact exist and that if you don't believe me watch

more documentaries, look at photos of the diminishing Arctic, pay attention to the increased regularity of natural disasters, look into increased skin cancer rates and pick up a grade school science textbook that explains both the carbon cycle and the flow of tides. Also, you should probably consider changing news channels.

Henry's greatest flaw

Henry's greatest flaw was an unshakable faith in the potential for man's triumph despite overwhelming evidence suggesting that man inevitably corrupts.

Then again, it took me 1,000 Earth years to emerge from the cocoon of my gestation into the breeding pools of my sort of childhood. The cocoon was only the size of a walnut and Henry was only 23 years old.

Everything is relative, but Jack knew even then that Rick was incomparable to Henry.

I must admit that I was proud I chose them.

Well I thought they would do anyway.

They arrived at the crossroads.

Henry and Jack exited the truck eagerly. They leaned against the truck's side. A creepy intersection is at least stationary. The lack of momentum, and claustrophobia overcome, combined to do wonders for the morose travellers. They had some levity. The illumination in the distance began to triumph over the moon. Shadows haphazardly overlapped each other silhouetting every move the pair made from different angles. The sheer beauty of rural southern Ontario captivated Jack. She lamented the scenery. The maple trees, with hues of red, orange, yellow, and green, were worthy of gift shop postcard photos. Jack's vision made her feel at home. Her other senses betrayed her.

Jack missed the sounds of nature. Jack missed the wind. Jack even

missed the foul smells of civilization. The odd streetlight here or there would have been all she needed to calm her unsteady nerves.

She wasn't nearly home. She wasn't breathing fresh air. The air was stale, stagnant and neither cool nor warm. Eventually she felt even more trapped than she had in the truck. She felt hermetically sealed. In the truck she could pretend this wasn't happening. She could pretend that she had fallen asleep and had dreamt all her night's peculiarities. Jack began pacing back and forth. She became desperate.

Jack said, "It's the exact same fucking intersection." Jack began clumsily walking towards the newly paved roads.

"Where are you going?" Henry asked.

"Off this road. Right now I didn't need to remember the bar," said Jack. She quickened her pace, trembled with anxiety and occasionally stumbled in her heels. A second later she turned sharply and asked, "How are we both remembering everything?"

"They say your life flashes before you when you die. It's literally an out of body experience: like a movie with smells and sensations, but it all plays out, the only thoughts are my own," Henry answered.

Jack turned away spitefully, unamused with Henry's fruitless realization. "No shit stupid head. I'm not retarded. I meant, why are we remembering each other's memories?"

Henry didn't like the 'R' word, but decided to let it slide. "We died together," he replied.

"Uh huh,"

The problem with communication is the better it is the more patronizing it seems. When you explain notions simply you have the potential to offend like an instruction manual for a toaster.

"Where are you going?"

Jack continued to walk awkwardly down the road and shortly disappeared. She seemed to literally blink out of existence. "Poof!"

"Jesus Christ!" Henry exclaimed.

Jesus Christ was another notable escape artist.

Jesus Christ

I had met many creatures who claimed themselves to be gods and even more who were proclaimed gods. In the end all such “gods” haven’t measured up to a God. I think it’s safe to assume that Jesus (if he existed) just wanted everyone to be nice to each other. I also think that it’s fair to say that if he were corporeal today he would be disgusted with the religious plutocracy associated with his name. Remember Jesus preaching against corrupt temples (Matthew 21:12, Mark 11:15-16, Luke 19:45).

Remember the story of the beggar and her coins (Luke 21:1-4): God cares not for money. Religious bureaucracy led as far as the selling of salvation. People were told they could buy their way out of purgatory early, one coin at a time. Judas betrayed Christ over coins (Matthew 26:15).

Remember the story of the golden calf (Exodus 32:1-34:17): God cares not for idolatry. The second commandment, or third if you’re catholic, reads, “You should have no other gods before me.” So... why does the pope speak ex cathedra?

A crucifix in wood should be worth one in gold as far as Jesus would be concerned, right? For Christ’s sake, the dude was a carpenter. Why (and I know this maybe a fruitless why if your mind is already made up) does abundant wealth matter to churches?

But you don’t have to take my word that churches are defunct.

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you,” Matthew 6:5-6.

Jesus Christ said that... oh snap!

Why would someone fight for his or her religion?

Religious wars result in catastrophe. Holy wars are not God's pissing contests but completely mortal men conning their populace into indentured servitude. Remember Israel and Palestine... always, always with the bombs.

Both on Earth, and where I'm from, there seems to be a misunderstanding that one should fight for his or her beliefs, when the great thing about beliefs is that they are free to all of us whether someone else controls the bigger gun or not.

Beliefs are not something that you should feel obligated to fight for. Believe what you want to believe. Let others believe what they want to believe. Do not allow others to manipulate your beliefs. Unless you're the son of God don't preach. On Earth, thought is free. You lucky devils.

In the bible Jesus died for non-violence, love and brotherhood. That should be remembered. Henry was an atheist, but he believed in those things.

A thick fog rolled in from both sides of the truck.

The mist was opaque.

Henry was in shock. If you had asked Henry his name he would have been at a loss for words. He just kept staring at the spot where Jack disappeared dumbfounded. Henry's eyes watered. At the top of his lungs Henry screamed, "Jack, come back Jack."

Henry's head began to throb.

Chewchewchew... it felt like jackhammers had mistaken his cranium for reinforced concrete. Henry mumbled, "My head is..."

All of a sudden Henry was somewhere else.

It was nearly pitch black. His head no longer hurt. He felt paralyzed. He was so hot he felt like he was boiling alive. The only objects he could make out appeared to be various forms of computer screens, which displayed only a different shade of black.

Some form of music was playing faintly in the background. Henry quickly recognized it as Beethoven's 5th symphony. A nearly invisible figure that looked like it had on night vision goggles began to walk towards him from a distance.

The shades of darkness betrayed that the figure was roughly seven feet tall and that the little light produced by its night vision goggles was the area's only source of ambient light.

It was only when the figure was within arm's reach that Henry discovered the goggles were his eyes and that the figure's body was completely red including its tail.

The eyes of the figure looked to Henry like they were fire trapped in a skull.

Henry suspected the figure was the devil and that he was in hell. He was terrified.

If you thought I was God, you were wrong.
I was the figure.

You Are All Animals

That's why you search for God: you'd prefer to live in denial. You don't want to be the products of hydrogen, helium and traces of lithium. You want to be a star, not stardust. Or rather, you want to watch stars, and dream yourself amongst them, while growing older, fatter, and more complacent concerning your place in the world.

Why do you waste your free will? You will die even if you never really lived. You will die whether you like it or not.

Does this really trivialize anything? I once believed in God. I still believe there's a miniscule chance of one (or more). I'm, in part, a scientist. Throw me a falsifiable hypothesis about it that doesn't involve me dying and I will test the hell out of it.

Have you heard the one about the old man who wanted to know God's thoughts? He figured out mass can be turned to energy and vice versa. The joke is that he's dead and going to return to the sun soon enough, where he'll prove his theory right.

How doesn't this trivialize everything? Simple. Humans are highly advanced by one criterion. You belong to the relatively small percentage of the universe's animal population that can both realize it's an animal and shape its environment for the better. Good job so far. But hey, enjoy your planet while it lasts.

If you doubt me pay close attention to other primates. Go to the zoo then look at your cubicle or apartment with eyes anew. You, too, have just been flinging your shit around everywhere.

Even if you believe in an infallible God do you honestly believe that man has relayed, or even could relay, that God's story? Have you ever played broken telephone? I sound like a depressing cynical bugger, don't I?

What do I believe in, if it's so simple? Change and desire, process and purpose; I believe in the action/reaction chain. I believe in function.

I, like you, Jack, and Henry also worry.

I worry that my consciousness and the consciousnesses of those I love and have loved are make believe. I fear the reaper. I fear the dry cold dirt and time as much as Nahoto ever did.

But I will face my fear for hope. It's times like these I envy the dolphins.

Dolphins

Dolphins are nearly as smart as you in some ways. In others they are vastly superior. For one, they're adorable even after adolescence. You humans think you're the most advanced species on the planet, and dolphins are stupid animals, because of your tools, your science and because they eagerly jump through hoops for you. You invented the internet, the almighty cellular phone, indoor plumbing, and the printing press and they get trapped in tuna nets.

But... you also brought Earth daytime television, gas fueled automobiles, plastic, cigarettes, and microwave ovens. You are responsible for the continent of garbage in the Pacific Ocean, climate change, deforestation, a colossal drop in your planet's biodiversity, genocide, nukes, poverty, fast food culture, social media, war, GMOs, bureaucracy, hypocrisy, plutocracy, and the fucking tuna nets.

Thanks to you, dolphins may enjoy a premature extinction. Maybe dolphins just realized that a life that is solitary, dull, brutish and short is better than one driven by consumption. Consumption kills, you know?

Maybe you'll figure it out by the time that you get to your second world, just like the dolphins did. You know that stupid grin on their faces: that's you, when you glimpse a newborn.

Henry was walking again, 18 again.

The walk was short and simple but trying on the soul, as his senses had suffered an onslaught of advertisement smut.

The worst of it was that the town was considered pure wilderness by city dwellers. That was actually nowhere near the worst of it, but Henry didn't know that then.

Henry walked down Vista avenue, covered with its trees, its condos, its townhouses, its manors, its mansions, and its mildew infested hovels belonging to holdouts from before the real estate boom happened. Henry then hit River Cliff Avenue; which appropriately ran along the river and housed the eldest and grandest of the town's estates.

The wind near the water didn't bite you: it chewed you thoroughly and spit your chattering bones back into being. Frostbite was a serious concern during never ending winters.

Henry walked past Paul's old bookstore, "Pocket Universes." It was then run by Henry's uncle, Tom, but still owned by Lily and promised by both to Henry. It was here that Henry received his informal education from Tom, a former professor who was disgraced due to his fondness for sorority girls.

Henry walked up to a large white colonial home with black trim, a red door and a beautifully manicured garden.

A green thumb ran in Henry's family.

Henry was instantly back standing on the road.

"Henry," said Jack. She had reappeared on the road across from where she had vanished. To her she had never left the road and merely walked amidst the mist for a bit.

"Jack," said Henry. He turned around to see her. "Jack, it's ok, everything will be fine," added Henry.

Jack punched Henry in the gut as hard as she could, which wasn't very hard. She couldn't tolerate Henry's paternal tone. Jack was pissed. She stormed, "I'm not fucking fine, I'm dead, you're dead. Things are not fucking fine. Things are not rosy. Don't you get it? This isn't a rural road. The goddam Grim Reaper is chasing us. We weren't saints, and I, I just told you I love you and you brushed me off like it didn't even matter, and it hurt." Jack demanded, "Why aren't you panicking? Why aren't you scared?"

"I am scared! Is that what you want to hear? I think I just had a vision of the devil heading towards me. I am scared. I'm just trying to help, by lying to you, because I care about you," spoke Henry sternly.

Henry knew why he remembered walking home after school.

Jack complained, "Fuck, Rick, he's my best friend. You can't talk like that."

"Oh I can't now?" Rick asked sarcastically.

"Rick, we'll talk later. Henry and I are catching up."

Henry just sat there pretending to mind his own business. His phone was out.

Rick said, "Dude, get the fuck away from my girlfriend for a minute, we have couple stuff to talk about" to Henry.

Jack turned around sharply. She said, "That's it, that's it, it's over. I'm not your fucking girlfriend, there's no couple, to have stuff to talk about."

Rick, belligerent and drunk, questioned, "You're drunk aren't you?"

Henry shook his head and grabbed another cigarette, flicked his lighter and entered flavour country. "Rick you should go. You should sober up and call her tomorrow. I'll make sure she gets home to her mom all right," advised Henry. Henry had never seen Rick like this: he was friendly when they met and thereafter. Henry wanted to at least give Rick a chance to cut his losses.

Rick arrogantly responded, "You fucking faggot, get away from my girlfriend. I see the way you two look at each other, you think I'm leaving her here with you, you little bitch?"

Henry took a puff from his cigarette. He snidely said, "Rick, it isn't your choice, she isn't your property." He was secretly starting to enjoy how much his simple presence there was aggravating the situation. Henry hated Rick worse than taxes. Schadenfreude is a normal human response when dealing with villains: the Germans just had the gall to coin the term.

"The hell she isn't my property," shouted Rick. The whole bar heard him. It went quiet. The Wiz was casting dagger eyes at Rick. He was just waiting for the right moment.

"Rick, get the fuck out of here, and if I ever hear that you harmed one fucking hair on this sweet girl's head I swear to God you're going to find out first hand why dog's yelp when they're castrated." Henry took another puff and then calmly put out the smoke.

They don't yelp, if they're put under first, but that's not the kind of statement one instantly wants to challenge.

Jack was paralyzed in disbelief.

"I'm not afraid of you," Rick said mocking Henry's size.

Henry grabbed the drunken Rick; he pushed him to the front and shoved him outside. It happened very fast. Nobody expected it, least of all Rick. Henry said during this, "While right now you fucking should be. I'll fucking kill you if you hurt her." As he walked back alongside the bar Jack couldn't help but ogle him.

From outside the Shithole you could hear Rick yelp, "You fucking faggot."

The Wiz, with a big goofy grin on his face, and a nod to Henry, turned the music on to drown out the background noise. As Henry reached the table Jack had her face hidden in shame.

"Sorry about that," said Henry.

"I'm so fucking embarrassed," said Jack, trying to hide her smile.

"You saw the devil?" questioned Jack.

"I think it was the devil. I saw a creature that was tall, all red, had a tail, and two eyes of fire," answered Henry.

"Sounds like the devil, minus the pitchfork" said Jack. "I was only gone for a second."

Henry suggested, "Let's just get in the truck before that disappears too." Henry wondered, "Where the hell are we?"

Where?

Don't ask, "Where is?" or "Where are?" Ask instead, "Where is the closest?" The universe is so colossally huge that a "Where is" question will just waste everyone's time. Plus, in most instances the end of your question should be, "in relation to my geographical position on this planet at this time."

Don't ask, "Where are we?" Ask instead, "Where are we in relation to the closest instance of where we want to be."

This should be common knowledge for any four-dimensionally bound creature.

The door to the pub swung open and out waddled Henry and Jack.

Henry instantly indulged his urge for nicotine and Jack sparked a fatty. To say that Henry and Jack were drunk would be an understatement. Henry and Jack were the only passengers in a fully automatic two-seated transcontinental jumbo jet heading to Bonkersville and they were climbing in altitude with every puff and second. Henry and Jack were flying monkeys. The two were passing the “J” as frequently as an STD passed through a catholic school, which is to say, very often.

Neither Henry nor Jack paid for their pot.

Back then Henry got his free from Sam and Jack was given a plant of northern lights from Sam as a prize for drinking her age in blue raspberry vodka jelly shots on her eighteenth birthday. Sam was always very generous to those he cared about: he tried to be selfless.

Sam was also attached to those gifts from others that obviously displayed great thought and care. After Anne died Sam’s mouth seemed super glued to the old smiley face bong she gave him on their one-year anniversary.

Before Anne died Sam only smoked weed occasionally on weekends to relax. He never used to sell pot, either. He was opposed to what it did to friendships. After Anne died Sam dropped out of school, increased his personal garden and became the town’s biggest dealer. Sam very quickly went from a B student to a degenerate. He just gave up and gave in to the numbness.

Before Sam died he was considered a twenty-three year old burnout by most. His eyes were always beet red. His mind had turned to a pea soup like mush and he liked it that way; but eventually even stuffing himself with pot wouldn’t make the pain go away. Sam had the potential to be a botanist or at minimum a mechanic but in the end he was labelled a chicken.

Henry was walking Jack home so she wouldn't pass out in the snow and die.

The two intoxicated friends were almost at Jack's mom's house. They walked using hand crank flashlights along a dirt and gravel road blanketed by half a foot of fluffy snow. Wire fences alone indicated the property lines of the surrounding farms. Sporadic streetlights shined and lit part of the road white. Only tire tracks betrayed that there was a road there at all.

"Thank you," said Jack.

Henry shrugged and said, "What are friends for?"

"I just feel so lost."

"I do too; I think everyone does."

"Tell me one of your stories."

"I actually have one of them on me. How lame is that. I feel like such a knob. I brought it because I wanted you to read it. I hope it makes you feel cheerier, sunshine."

Henry grabbed a small notebook from the right leg pocket of his black wool winter jacket.

"It's about the most bad-ass little kid ever."

The Lemonade Stand

The first thing I remember is right before the crash. Levity.

Suzie is playing with a doll, brushing its long blonde hair. The face of the doll looks like the product of Fluoxetine, as if she's the catalogue wife posing for her man's appreciation, or as if she's a 21st century bimbo just waiting for her likeness to be captured, altered and finally made into her new profile pic. She's plastic fantastic.

I remember my sister was joyous too, but her face in the memory is plagiarized from a photo I've kept from better days. I see the smile frozen in time.

My mom's driving, sitting in front of Suzie. She's got her straight strawberry blonde hair back in a bun. She wears fire engine red lipstick. Her just bought blue polka-dot summer dress matches her eyes. This is the only solid memory I have of her. There are bits and pieces of nursery rhymes, a warm feeling of being hugged long ago, and her soothing smell. All are waves worn to a tiny ripple.

I miss them, I hate that they left without me.

My father pulled me from the wreck. He was that hero and that unwitting villain in disguise.

Before the accident he was troubled. I remember, but I don't know why. Could have been financial problems, infidelity, the conflict in the Middle East, or that he had to get the hell out of Dodge for all I know. I'll probably never know. But it's as if written on his face, plain as day was, "Son, don't be happy, there's always more to come."

The picture I've seen of him and the memory I have don't coincide. Memory builds fantasy out of the past.

I swear, when I think about it or during the nightmare, I have visions of him ripping the door right out of its hinges as if he couldn't even be bothered to try the handle. Not a scratch on him, his muscles pulsating, as he effortlessly lifts me to the sidewalk in one hand. Then, and this is like yesterday for me, he runs after the fucking car, as fast as lightning made flesh.

There was nothing he could have done for the others.

What I was told was that he was severely lacerated when the windshield shattered and that he died in a pool of his blood shortly after the ambulance arrived. He did save me. He was a hero. His name was Vincent. His friends called him "Vin." Me and Suzie called him Pop.

Apparently he worked in an office shuffling papers from 9 – 5 for an auto insurance company. That is, until a month before that dreadful drive. I don't remember this, it's all just second hand information. This wasn't just ironic, it was a textbook example of bad timing: we were no longer covered by the corporate plan. It seemed contrived even to me, like God was laughing somewhere.

If he hadn't saved me I would have died when the car erupted in flames. Explosions just happen on cellulite. He popped me out just in the nick of time.

Sixteen years later and I still don't know if he did me a favor. I'm not sure if I owe my gifts to him, or the crash, or to God, or the radiation from TV dinners. A scientist would attribute me to evolution in motion. Maybe I'm just another comic book writer's attempt at distracting teenage boys from masturbation.

Maybe it is just skill, but my modesty tells me otherwise. Nobody's this ninja due to blind happenstance. It's corny but I feel I have a purpose waiting for me. Call it destiny, or call it a niche, but I think I'm needed.

Why me? Why these gifts?

After the crash I went from being briefly under the care of Uncle James, who was nearly a kid himself at 22, through a string of foster homes.

Uncle James just couldn't afford to provide for me, he was nearly bankrupt due to his student loan payments, and having a kid isn't exactly cheap. I think he was actually trying to be selfless by putting me up for adoption. Sadly, I think he had comfy dreams that he assumed were reality, where the government would whisk me away to a loving, eager, wealthy household with little Scotty dogs, stainless steel appliances, ethnically diverse siblings and wood burning fireplaces waiting for me. He must have thought Sundays would be family fun days. It was a common delusion of foster homes shared by people with faith in the world.

The only thing I'm thankful for, during my travels from crack house to shantytown, is that I was never sexually abused. I've avoided hypnotherapy just in case. As is, I remember, as if it was happening now, getting teeth smacked out of me, cigarettes put out on my arms, and this one wiry old prick chuckling as he hit me with his mahogany cane until I was black and blue. Fucker wondered why his own kids never called. Can you believe that?

I went through seven families in three years and not one of them was responsible enough to watch a boiling pot let alone children. I'll spare you most of the nitty gritty. Wouldn't wish that experience on my worst enemy.

By the time I arrived at Mr. Stain's place I was malnourished, developmentally stunted and filthy. I looked like one of those Bosnian kids from the news at the time. I thought I was defective. I thought it was my fault.

To this day I feel indebted to Mr. Stain for feeding me regularly, talking to me at all, allowing me cheap clean clothes and a daily shower. I have to reason with myself to stop my natural inclination to feel sorry about the way things went down.

I know the guilt is unwarranted, but I can't help thinking that a couple hundred years ago what he gave me would have been considered good Christian charity and I would be understood to have spat in his face.

Although... hell, there were days I would have preferred a cane, or even a bullet to the brain, to the things he said to me. The things he said about my mom and dad...

How horrible is that? The man was an asshole to me, I suffered the worst verbal and emotional torment I've ever even HEARD OF, but because in some small way he provided for my necessities I felt indebted. I hate it when people pretend they aren't still animals. I was a stray mutt taken in and broken dogs hardly ever even nip the hands that feed.

As a kid I didn't realize that the Canadian government was actually paying these deadbeats for my constant care. I'd demand a refund on behalf of taxpayers everywhere for their negligence 'cept Mr. Stain's in the middle of paying their debts to society, with interest, presently.

Word of warning, be nice to children, they get older and you never know...

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger and I'm a 'roid raging linebacker named Hercules. Figuratively, of course.

I guess in a way he WAS a kind of guardian for me. He made me know the kind of man I'd want to be: his exact opposite. He challenged me. He was strict and cruelly demanding. Because of that ignorant, redneck, bemulleted metal-head I would become me. I was enlightened, transformed and reborn like the phoenix from the ashes. In a strange way I am what he made me. I am my foster father's son.

I sometimes fear he made me special.

As you might have guessed, my emancipation was due to a lemonade stand. The story itself started on my seventh birthday, with a standardized letter's completion of an awkward journey from a post office to our particular red rusted metal mailbox at lot 3 on Rural Road 14. The letter was long overdue.

12 months after my adoption, a milestone I had never achieved before, the letter was automatically issued from Children's Services detailing that if I was to remain Mr. Stain's ward I would need to be enrolled in formal

schooling immediately. One could make an application for permission to home school, but that deadline had come and gone thanks to the letter's tardiness. I guess you could say bureaucracy saved the day.

It was the only birthday present I would get that year. I've never received a better gift.

So I went to school and learned to read and write. They dropped me in to grade 3 and expected me to sink or swim. I started off dead last in the class and a few heats, or rather months later finally joined the pack. By winter break I was doing multiplication and long division. I owe it all to Ms. Lowry. If she hadn't spent the extra time tutoring me during lunch breaks, if she hadn't bothered explaining things that I should have learned years earlier, my formal education could have been just a path to a drive-thru window.

I'm no academic, but I did finish High school with A's and B's. I've also found what I learned in Art School invaluable. Not invaluable enough to list it on my resume instead of a non-existent MBA from one of the country's most respected universities though.

I went to school by day and by night I would do errands, tend both crops, do chores and cook supper. On weekends I was expected to mow the half-acre large lawn as well. I was a cheap farmhand for Mr. Stain. I was his solution to slavery being outlawed. I learned to love the harsh winter, even with all its setbacks, because it offered a short reprieve from backbreaking labor.

I never did get any Valentines that first year 'cept the one from Ms. Lowry. She told me she was proud of me. When parent teacher night came she was eager to see the man that had adopted me and seen me through so much change. Too bad we never showed. I don't think they ever had a conversation that was more than a few sentences while he was picking me up.

Not once did we stop at the ice cream parlor on the way to the farm. The bastard spent most of his time on the porch drinking a beer, smoking a cigarette or a joint and reading the paper, so I don't know what he was so eager to get back to. He was never a dad to me. I was just the help.

I was the best behaved child on the face of the earth. I never acted up irrationally, I didn't cuss back then and I always asked permission for whatever it was I was supposed to ask permission for. I didn't whine, I didn't hold grudges and I did as I was told. I was told by adults that I seemed very mature for my age. Granted, most of those adults were Mr. Stain's stoner friends.

I also always went to bed on time. I never once asked to stay up. When I got to bed I hardly ever slept right away. I would lie awake thinking about school. I was starting to make friends. I loved to learn everything and be treated like a normal kid even though I didn't really fit in. I was socially awkward back then if you can believe it.

I also avoided sleep in case I had the nightmare.

One day, when summer was approaching, Ms. Lowry took me aside and congratulated me on the progress I had made in her class. She said, "You've come a long way in a short time," and I said, "I wish the school year would never end." That's when it came out. Ms. Lowry told me that Mr. Stain had made an application to home school me the next year. I had what little I had threatened.

I fought back, "Mr. Stain treats me like garbage, he makes me do all the work on the farm, he hates me and he yells at me all the time." At this point I was sobbing like a sprinkler. I cried, "He won't teach me nothing."

When Mr. Stain picked me up Ms. Lowry recounted what I had said in a raging fury. Mr. Stain laughed. He said, "Pfft. Kids. A few chores and some positive re-enforcement and you'd swear they were trapped in an iron maiden. I'll teach him... (he cleared his throat) I have a huge book collection."

That was all it took. My word against his and I couldn't say anything while he was actually there. I was too afraid of him. I knew what "upset" foster parents were capable of. The scars were a constant reminder.

When we got back to the farmhouse he told me that if I tried a stunt like that again he wouldn't be so nice. He was nice enough to withhold food for a

full day and take away the teddy bear that my mom gave me. It was all I had left from them, aside from a few pictures I hid away. I cried myself to sleep.

He never gave it back to me. It was soft and brown. It had black button eyes and a velvet black nose. It wore a mostly red plaid shirt that concealed a zipper that lead to its stuffing.

Ms. Lowry wasn't as nice to me as she was before either. She stopped tutoring me at lunch. She looked at me as if I betrayed her when it was more the other way around. Still school was my favorite place to be. Playing with blocks amongst friends in Room 42 was the closest I'd gotten to happiness since the crash. Still is, I guess.

Then the summer came and I was busy with farm work. That wouldn't last.

All the neighbors that weren't close friends of Mr. Stain assumed that he did the bulk of the work. If they knew that he barely got off his ass long enough to inspect that I had done all the chores, someone surely would've contacted Children's Services. I was always covered in bumps, bruises and blisters. It would not have gone well for Mr. Stain.

The problem for him was that he broke his leg in two places that summer when trying to ride a horse for the first time, whilst high, outside his cousin's house. His words of genius before this endeavor? "How hard could it be?"

Since it was common knowledge that he had broken his leg in the small town nearby he was forced to hire farm hands while he healed. I figured I would have 4-6 weeks of nothing to do. Finally the silver lining showed.

By the time his leg was better he was behind bars.

He brought it on himself, the bastard.

The farm's two crops were corn and cannabis. Mr. Stain's "friends" were really his customers. He decided to employ a couple of neighbourhood teens, promising as much pot as they could smoke, instead of dipping into his

savings. He bragged to me that this was because he was, “a shrewd businessman that was always in the goddam green and never in the red.”

It seemed like Mr. Stain had everything he wanted and so, for a time, I wanted to be a businessman in order to get everything that I wanted. When I told Mr. Stain that I wanted to be a businessman when I grew up he shot me a distinct look of pride. It creeped me out at the time, but in retrospect I think he was actually flattered. He said mockingly, “All this time I thought you were a mule whose worth was in what he could pull, but now I see that you are snake who will slither unseen until it’s too late and will take his worth from me in his teeth.” Where the fuck did that come from?

It quickly became apparent that Mr. Stain wanted me as his personal servant until his leg was better as he kept yelling orders to me. I was forced to stay near Mr. Stain almost constantly, but I was permitted to read in what little down time I did have. I set out to learn everything I could about the world of business, sales, the economy, marketing, financing and banking. I read ravenously.

He really did have all kinds of books around the farm. A local old man, a building superintendent with bad arthritis, would pay Mr. Stain for pot with paperbacks and the odd hardcover. The old man had run his temple’s yard sale for over 50 years and had kept every book ever donated for his personal collection. When he decided to settle in a small bungalow paid for by his old age pension, he started to read science fiction to fill his overwhelming leisure time. Soon it was all he read. Eventually the old man began to doubt that someone upstairs had any answers at all. As a very old man he became an agnostic. As a result there was a wide variety of works all over the farmhouse with certain genres (religion, romance, gardening, mystery and the occult) over-represented. There was no science fiction to be found.

Most of the time, when I had a question about something I read, Mr. Stain would answer it if he wasn’t busy. However, such answers were often misleading or inaccurate. He was only after his own amusement. If I was to ask something like, “What does a fiduciary relationship mean?” I could expect

an answer such as “a fucking fiscal relationship coming about from the mouths and privates.”

If I were still confused he would seem frustrated and add something along the lines of, “Shit. What I’m saying is it has to do with the exchange of money for loyalty in deed and lip service. What the hell does some fucktard kid need to know what a fiduciary relationship is for anyway?”

Decoding what was truth from fiction became an arduous task.

I never got the impression he was a truly stupid man, just that he was everything wrong with the world.

I can thank the two teens for the idea of a lemonade stand. Mr. Stain was smoking an L-joint with them, bitching about my “godforsaken incessant curiosity with making money” when one of them turned to the other and whispered, “Chip off the old block, that boy.”

I listened from the kitchen window.

The mouthy boy was Barney, a local short brown haired jock nearly twice the size of Mr. Stain and a bully himself. Barney was the ubiquitous jerk that wanders around being a drunk dumbass at 2am.

The other kid, Randy, the ginger, he was timid around Mr. Stain. He didn’t linger on the farm when he came to pick up or do his share of the farm work. He rushed along as if in fear of a raid at any second. You could smell the paranoia on him.

The truth is raids never came. Every farmer in that region was probably growing something he shouldn’t have. Buying local produce can mean supporting the neighborhood drug cartel thanks to government subsidies going to big business instead of small farms.

The trend has only escalated.

Then Mr. Stain said, “Something’s wrong with him. I swear I think he’s too smart for his years. He has too much spare time while my leg’s getting better. I can’t keep him busy enough with housework.” It was Randy who suggested a lemonade stand to keep me busy. He said it would be cheap, take

a lot of my time, and teach me that I had no hope in the business world. He told Mr. Stain that it was the perfect way to fool me into obedience.

I was truly excited for the first time since school let out. As soon as Mr. Stain told me I could have a lemonade stand I made straight for the woodpile from the old barn. The leftover birch 2x4s, from a small staircase added only a few years earlier, were sheltered from the elements under some blue plastic tarps there. The rest of the wood would come from the tool shed, along with white latex paint, a paintbrush, a hammer, some nails and a rusty saw.

It took me two long days to construct the actual stand and three times I cut my fingers with the rusty saw. Thankfully the benefit of being an orphan was that the government made sure I had my tetanus shots up to date.

Huh... I guess that's why I like going to the doctor's office. Twice I was immediately taken from neglectful dumps as a result of mandatory check-ups. That would also explain Mr. Stain allowing me my basic needs. I always wondered why such a selfish man would care if I didn't have breakfast in the morning.

The lemonade stand was remarkably simple. It was four feet wide, two feet long and two feet tall, aside from the sign that ran overhead and the two four foot long birch 2x4s that connected the sign to the stand. It was just the right height for me to sit at my stool and be able to serve orders. It may seem tiny, but so was I: I was 8 at that point. I used my school markers to spell out, "Lemonade Stand" in various colours.

Mr. Stain, meanwhile, had spent the last couple of days grudgingly without a manservant. He had finally gotten some real use out of his crutches. When he saw the stand he was in a piss poor mood. He called it, sarcastically, "A franchise opportunity if ever I saw one." I was and still am proud of that stand.

In case you didn't know this, lemonade itself is ridiculously simple to make. Add the juice from six lemons to a cup of sugar and six cups of water. Then you stir. Add ice. That simple. That was the way my mom use to make it. One of the few things I remember about Suzie was that she loved lemonade.

Our road had little traffic. On the first day I sold a cup of lemonade to a neighbour. On the second my two customers were Barney and Randy, and Mr. Stain said not to charge them. On the third day my only customer was a highway patrolman coming home from a long day of clocking speeders.

Mr. Stain was not happy about this. The cop was fifty meters from five hundred pot plants. He was none the wiser, but if Mr. Stain had been smoking from his water bong, instead of a cigarette at the time of the visit, things would have happened differently. There were also two hundred plants that were already dried out and hanging upside down in a small garage behind the barn (there was no chance of deniability). All the cop said that was unrelated to his 50-cent purchase of lemonade was, "I think my boy went to school with you this last year," and "You make sure to take breaks going inside from the sun, son." Mr. Stain was concerned that I was conspiring with the police against him.

I had met the officer before. He had given a speech to my class on "Saying no to drugs" at the request of Ms. Lowry. It was the second most terrifying ten minutes of my life 'til then. He stood like a giant towering over us; he carried a GUN and told us that people who used, grew, and/or sold drugs were dangerous. He said we had to stay away from them. He told us we could tell our parents or a police officer if someone we knew was selling drugs or trying to get us to use drugs. He said, "Just say no." He said drugs were bad and only bad men dealt drugs. At the time the prospect of continued schooling, regular meals and physical safety compelled my silence. Somehow I knew the cop was trying to help people like me but I couldn't help seeing him as a threat.

In hindsight I just didn't realize that more often than not kids find nice foster homes. I was unlucky.

Mr. Stain grounded me until his leg healed. He told me I'd only ever leave the house to do chores from then on. He called me a "son of an ugly kike whore and her deformed retard brother." He said I was an "abomination" and that God saved me from the car that killed my family so that I could continue

to be punished and atone for my parents' sins as his loyal servant. This was the first and only time Mr. Stain ever mentioned anything vaguely religious.

He also said that my mom steered straight for that car so that she'd never have to set her eyes on such an ugly child, as was I, ever again. He told me that he hated me, and that I would only be permitted to talk when spoken to from then on. I was never allowed to read books or watch TV ever again. He told me if I spoke to a police officer again he'd gladly send me under the tractor, or into the woodchipper.

I think that was the second worst week in my life. I was hopeless and horribly depressed. I thought about suicide. I stopped reading even though I had a few books hidden in my room. I stopped thinking. I felt lethargic and angsty at the same time. I felt uncomfortable and unwilling to fix my situation. There was a void where my internal organs used to be. I hated and feared Mr. Stain but mostly I felt like I was pregnant with a BLACKHOLE. I cried, a lot.

Late at night, when I was all cried out, I went downstairs to watch some television. I didn't even think about what would happen if Mr. Stain would catch me, I just didn't care. There was nothing left he could take from me. TV was a luxury for me, even before it was taken away. He used to let me watch an hour a day, and whenever he was watching, if I had done my chores. We only got two channels anyway.

There was an infomercial advertising a product that was supposed to take the challenge out of cooking an egg on the first channel. It was effectively a frying pan that would have another frying pan connect over it when it was time to flip the egg. The cooking apparatus would then be flipped without any chance of the egg eggscaping. Then you could remove the original frying pan. It was designed to remove the need for a spatula. The white-toothed creep on screen claimed it could be used for steak, burgers, crêpes, and pancakes as well. The cheap gimmick was described as "revolutionary," "life-changing" and "the solution to your all problems." It only cost three easy payments of \$14.99. The host explained that this special TV offer would include a second unit at no extra cost. If we acted in the next thirty minutes, it would have included a spatula. There was free shipping and a money back guarantee.

How could we resist? I watched the infomercial for half an hour, zoned out the whole time, before finally switching the channel.

That moment would change my life forever.

There was this foul mouthed boy and he had a lemonade stand, but he was selling beer and not lemonade. There were questions about the legality of what the boy was doing, but after all it was just beer. It was just beer. It was just television. It was really funny.

Eureka. Hope. It was time to take a stand.

The next morning when Mr. Stain opened the veranda's screen door he grabbed the paper below him as he always had and sat on the cream coloured Barcalounger. He turned on his stereo and pressed play. He listened to death metal. He opened the paper to the sport section as his morning ritual dictated. He drank his coffee and read about baseball. He, himself, was about to become front page news.

He would sip his coffee often over the next five minutes as he read the newspaper in peace. A smile then came to his face as he smelled marijuana smoke. Without hesitation he reached for a pack of smokes from his pocket and sparked a joint he had stashed there. He figured Barney and Randy were hard at work

He was happy. Soon the crop would be harvested and his leg would be better. Soon the boy would go back to doing work and stop causing him headaches.

Mr. Stain was wrong.

Not even the seemingly random flailing on the drum could drown out the sound of approaching police cars. I watched as he slowly lowered the newspaper to reveal his undoing.

A sizeable percentage of the nearest town's population was just beginning to disperse from Mr. Stain's front yard and the road in front of his farm. He saw flashing lights everywhere and a parade of police cruisers. In the

distance he could even make out that the regions only helicopter was making its way towards him. Mr. Stain felt like he was just beamed in the head by a curveball.

I hadn't smiled as big as I did then for a long, long, time. Not since being thrown up in the air and caught by Pa. According to Uncle James I always lost it. It was then that I knew I was special.

The night before I made my preparations. I brought out the stand from the shed, and put it at the edge of the road. I crossed out the word "Lemonade" with a green marker and wrote instead "Marijuana." I crossed out "cents per glass" and wrote "dollars per ounce." On the counter I had placed a scale and a box for the money. I grabbed two economy size boxes of jumbo freezer bags from the cellar. I also grabbed garbage bags. The two hundred plants were bagged and to the side of the stand. I called up every single customer in Mr. Stain's little black book and either told them or left a message with the same few words, "Mr. Stain told me to call you and tell you, two hundred is now fifty, just for tomorrow, show up at 5am sharp, come alone." I'd hang up the phone after that.

I had quietly snuck into his bedroom the night before also. He had left his devil's music playing quietly on repeat before falling asleep. The room had heavy metal posters everywhere and was painted red. Mr. Stain, like so many other human beings, was a walking talking cliché. I took the bear from where he had hidden it, underneath a black beanbag chair in the corner. I slowly, and trying not to breath loudly, crawled on hands and knees over to the wall safe to the right of the bed and pressed "420" on the digital keypad. The safe chirped and I panicked for a second, but Mr. Stain, who was only four feet away, slept on undisturbed. I removed two tall stacks of fifties and closed the safe's door. I tiptoed out of the room.

While Mr. Stain sat petrified, with his mouth agape, I quickly grabbed handful after handful of the money that had been made. I lifted back the plaid shirt of my teddy bear and removed more stuffing to accommodate the currency, as I had for the two stacks prior. I covertly added all the large bills that could fit. I left the rest. My pockets and hands were bare, in case I was

searched. I had my luggage packed already. I hoped against hope that the next family would be different. I pitied the fools if they weren't. I drank slowly from the fruit punch juice box to my left, and eagerly awaited whatever change would have me. I never cried again.

Tomorrow would be a new day.

That's really when my luck changed. Uncle James, who had recently finished an internship after passing the bar, took me in. He had been hired at a prestigious downtown Toronto law firm. His luck was changing too. He bought a condo in Parklawn (with a hefty mortgage) and leased a brand new family sedan. Imagine his surprise when he received the following letter (and its contents)...

"I was a friend of your late sister. I was so sorry to hear of the tragedy that has befallen your family and am so happy, upon reading in the morning paper, you have chosen to be the guardian of her poor boy. I have enclosed the \$12,374 that I was saving for a trip to Mexico in order to help you start your new life. Please treat him well, and love him as much as his parents did. I would like to remain anonymous, because I can't in good conscience take my gift back should you reject it. Also, from what I remember, the boy is allergic to Brussel sprouts, spinach, seafood and black liquorice."

From then on it seemed like there was nothing I couldn't do. I had an uncanny ability to steal from those who had more than they should. I was very, very good at doing wrong to bad, bad people. I was faster than most kids, to the point where I had to pretend to be slower than I was to fit in. I could jump higher and farther, lift more and perform unnatural acrobatic feats. I was a quick learner: no genius, but smart enough. I was a deadeye too, at first with only water and toy dart guns.

It all started when I was a young kid. Even Captain America got to have a childhood. Not me. I knew from the get-go that the world desperately

needed heroes. I knew that villains ruled the world. They were almost everywhere. The big ones controlled the coffee, tech, booze, tobacco, oil, gas, war and entertainment industries. The worst drug peddlers.

They were the same sort of people that were paying my uncle, a man who set out to change the system, to screw the little guy.

One little guy was not going to let this happen.

After the story was over...

Jack stopped walking and Henry followed her cue. Her face, rosy from the cold and the beer, took on an expression of deep contemplation. She asked, "Why do you think life is so hard?"

"Because rewards are unsatisfying if not earned."

"When did you get so smart stupid head?" questioned Jack with a smile, and she inched herself closer to Henry hoping he would catch her drift.

"Smart... we passed smart a few pitchers ago," replied Henry. He inched closer to Jack. He would have tried to kiss her too if his left foot had not found a patch of black ice originally concealed by only a millimeter of snow.

He slipped and crashed to the ground along with any esteem Jack had had for his machismo.

Jack laughed her ass off. Henry blushed.

He had hit his head hard. He said, "That hurt."

"You okay?" asked Jack. She reached down and grabbed Henry's hand.

As Jack helped Henry up the sleeve of her hoodie receded from her wrist displaying a nasty purple bruise that caught Henry's attention.

Jack's eyes followed Henry's. She fixed her sleeve and stated sharply "Oh, that's nothing."

"What from?"

"I fell off my bike last night."

"I thought you said you gave up biking."

"I wanted to go to downtown after the subway had stopped running,"

Jack lied. It would have been a clever excuse for injury if it weren't the middle of winter.

The remainder of the walk was silent. They were at a loss for words, but when they were both finally upon her front door they drew close and Henry hugged her. The hug lasted just a few seconds but both would have preferred it endured.

Jack's bike, rusty with a flat tire, was locked up on the porch where it always was.

"Don't take him back," was all that Henry said. He wanted to kill Rick.

"I won't," were Jack's only words.

Then we were at a different door, the front door to Henry's home.

Henry walked into a beautifully decorated "Gothic" inspired foyer. Paintings, tan-painted brick, stained glass and solid oak aged to perfection created an aura of relaxation. As per usual the entrance smelled of lemon scented wood polish: a scent deeply implanted in Henry's mind he recognized as synonymous with home and childhood. Lily kept the entrance spic and span. Any nicks or chips in the wood or bricks were carefully calculated.

"Mom, dad, Sam?" Henry called out. There was no response so Henry walked along a tan-painted-brick lined hallway lit by more stained glass windows and cast iron faux candle lamps which actually ran on gas and left the room always balmy. The floor was solid oak all over save the kitchen and the master bedroom's bathroom; which were marble.

The manor had been in Henry's family (on Paul's side) for over a hundred years. His great grandfather grew up in it. Almost everything in the manor, as old as it looked, was a convincing imitation of an expensive item. Henry didn't know how his family's affluence had waned; money was, however, always there whenever truly needed. He supposed it originated from oil, gambling, thievery, politics, brothels, pharmaceuticals, war

profiteering, booze, tobacco, cotton or French nobility since its origins were kept secret. Henry knew enough not to ask.

Henry walked towards a wooden circular staircase that led to the boys' half of the upstairs hallway.

They were on the road, helpless, and wanting to escape.

Henry started the truck without incident. He looked down at the clock that was stuck flashing 4:20 in red. Henry started to drive slowly. He asked himself out loud, "What are the chances that the clock would stop at 4:20?" The answer, of course, was one in seven hundred and twenty.

Henry hoped he would not remember what he assumed was coming next.

Jack put two and two together. She knew what day she and Henry would be forced to remember. She got scared. She guessed correctly that the sinister turn the flashbacks were taking would not be confined to Henry's past alone.

Jack walked through a putrid pink hallway.

The dilapidated hallway belonged to a typical unkempt 8 floor, eye sore, brown brick, 1950's apartment building that was located near Queen West in Toronto.

Jack and Rick chose their apartment over a slightly better find simply for their apartment number, "666."

Jack quietly searched through her purse and found her set of keys, before realizing that the door was unlocked. Her keys were held together by a silver lemniscate key-chain. She paused blankly at the door and then slowly turned the brass knob. She flicked on the light switch.

Rick was seated on a lazy boy with his eyes fastened to Jack. Next to his brown corduroy chair empty beer bottles, an overflowing ashtray, and his flask littered the cream coloured shag carpet.

Jack said, "I've just come for my things," to an unresponsive Rick. Rick didn't even blink. Jack was trembling, she said, "Just stay there."

Rick stood up.

Jack had a look of unabashed horror on her face. She pleaded, "Please Rick."

Rick lunged forward and Jack screamed.

From then on Jack would always be afraid of the dark.

According to heavy metal "666" was the number of the beast. Some scholars contest this. The earliest known Book of Revelations lists the number as 616 as does the Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus.

A beast lived in 666 after all.

Henry joyously walked along another hallway.

The hallway joined Henry's bedroom to Sam's bedroom. A door, which used to be dead-bolted from the boys' side, separated them from their parent's master bedroom.

Each side had stairs and a washroom and so the deadbolt, which began a statement of teenage rebellion, became welcome segregation and soundproofing (from the closed door), to both sides for years.

Sam and Henry's half had matte finished black latex painted walls, which were covered in Henry's artwork. It stank of ganja and teen spirit.

In contrast their parents half had beige walls, Monet prints, smelled of lavender, and stank of conformity.

The privacy that everyone enjoyed only shattered when Bret intercepted a phone call from one of Sam's frequent fliers. Bret had every intention of immediately telling the caller that he was Sam's father, but the idiot opened the conversation with "Sam, dude, I need a half quarter of your finest chron, stat, man." Bret knew the boys smoked it occasionally, but couldn't fathom Sam also sold it.

Bret issued an unlocked door policy for his sons. Sam hid his plants in his linen closet, where Bret didn't check, and began only sparking outside. Sam's only alternative to this was couch surfing, which would have been humiliating to him at 23.

This is why when Henry got to Sam's door he wasn't surprised to find it open. Henry and Sam had been arguing recently and Henry hoped they could bury the hatchet. It was almost 4:20 p.m. and Henry was wondering if Sam wanted to smoke a blunt outside. Henry knocked on the door and said, "Sam I finished school early. Can I come in?"

There was no answer.

4:20

4:20 is an internationally recognized pot reference. It was the combination of Mr. Stain's safe. It was also the time the truck's clock stopped and Henry's watch stopped. The sometimes number, sometimes time is used as a multipurpose flag. It helps stoners recognize other stoners and allows certain part-time dopers a time to indulge or aim to hit.

April 20th, the twentieth day of your fourth month, is recognized as pot day. Hippie Christmas, if you will. April 20th was the birthday of Adolf Hitler, Karl Müller and Napoleon III. The Columbine high school massacre also happened on 4/20. These things are incidental to the use of the 4:20 reference.

People often wonder the significance of the number 420 in cannabis culture. References to the number are all over TV, in many rap and rock songs, and in Hollywood movies. The actual penal code number regulating medical marijuana use in California is 420 if you believe the rumors that Henry and

Sam did.

If you believe rumors the weed symbol of 420 all started because a bunch of kids gathered outside a high school after class, in the 70's in California, to smoke some chronic, under a statue of Louis Pasteur.

The biggest criticism of pot smokers is that they never get anything accomplished.

I know this because Henry does. Henry knows this because Sam did.

Henry opened the door anyway.

He found Sam hanging from a noose.

Henry thought he was the victim of a horrible joke.

Henry rushed to his brother and looked for a pulse. He didn't find one. Sam's skin felt cold. Henry could see scratch marks around Sam's bluish neck. Sam's neck didn't snap. Sam had strangled himself to death. He must have been wondering, "Who am I?"

Henry called "911" immediately and reported everything. At first the operator on the other line thought Henry was playing a horrible joke on them. It was, after all, 4:20.

Henry cut the rope, removed the noose and attempted CPR to no avail.

Until the authorities arrived Henry busied himself with removing all of Sam's hidden pot plants and paraphernalia to his room. This wasn't what it seemed.

Henry knew that otherwise as soon as the police opened Sam's room's door it would be no longer Sam's room and only a "grow-op crime scene." Henry hated that small town cops spent most of their time either flagging down people speeding ten miles over the limit, or trying to prevent stoners from enjoying themselves.

Henry didn't want Sam's death to be marginalized, or worse, rejoiced upon, simply because he dealt petty pot to grown-ups.

Henry didn't want his parents to be on the cover of the local Christian newspaper, their grief a public spectacle, their home a crime den, their son dead and themselves gossiped about by gray haired grannies with too much time on their hands.

Henry didn't want Sam dead. When he was done covering up his brother's twisted obsession with marijuana Henry mourned.

Henry couldn't bring himself to call his parents. Henry couldn't bring himself to do anything but weep. The adrenaline had subsided.

When help did arrive they found Sam next to Henry, and Henry passed out on the floor.

In the TV movie somewhere out there in the cosmos of Henry and Jack's lives, this is where the montage would go. Cue the sad music. Flashes of Sam's childhood, high school, girlfriend, truck, biology lectures, pot abuse, and depression would lead to his silhouette hanging from a rope against the blazing sun streaming through his room's westward facing windows.

Cut to:

Henry, his mom, and Bret had sat around a pine kitchen table. The room was a mess and starting to smell.

The three looked like gloomy black and white silkscreen prints of their former selves painted onto corpses.

All of Sam's recent mail was on the table alongside neglected Chinese food take out boxes that had been pushed towards the empty corner where Sam normally sat. The boxes stank horribly of rot and had already attracted fruit flies.

Bret said, "He left a letter, I think we should all hear it." Bret started to cry quietly and then composed himself instantaneously, betraying he had seen some action overseas.

He opened it with some trouble and said, "I think I should read it out loud because it was addressed to me."

Lily said, "Yes, dear."

Henry only said, "Ok."

Bret's voice cracked as he said, "'The truth is I just never thought I'd be this lost. It wasn't supposed to be this long or this hard. I miss Anne. I know I'm going to hurt people and I'm so goddam sorry. I guess I can't see a point to my life anymore. I'm only ever happy when I'm stoned. I love you mom and dad and Henry. I'm so sorry Henry. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm so lost,' and he just put his name."

Lily stood up and ran from the table bawling.

Bret put the letter down, put his hand on Henry's shoulder and then followed after his wife.

Henry began to look through Sam's mail for any hint of why he was brother-less. Four letters out of the small bundle perhaps provided clues.

The first was from the University. The letter said,

"We regret to inform you that because you have not been enrolled in classes at this university for three(3) consecutive years, as of the date on this letter, you will no longer be considered a student at this university. All credits you've earned so far are forfeit and your student card henceforth is invalid. If you wish to contest your change in status all objections must be made in person at the dean's office within two(2) weeks (fourteen(14) days) of this letter's date.

"Academic performance is weighed heavily when status change exceptions, which are rare, are made. If medical emergency barred enrolment please bring all supporting documentation with you as proof towards exemption.

"Thank you for attending [our] University. We wish you luck in your future academic and non-academic endeavors."

Some snotty bastard signed it. Between the lines lived a shit eating grin.

The second was shockingly even less personal. It established a pattern of general money problems. It was about Sam's credit card. The summary of the letter read, "Your account payment is overdue. A late charge has been added to your account amounting to 9% of your total outstanding balance. A minimum payment is due within two weeks of the date on this bill and the entire balance is due one (1) month thereafter. You may make payments online or by the accompanying postage paid envelope. To talk to a representative over the phone please call 1-888-###-####..."

It just went on rambling for three pages.

Given the date on the letter it was possible the debt had motivated Sam's drug dealing.

The third was a letter from the same credit card company simply notifying Sam that his account had been terminated. The letter was surprisingly brief. It didn't even say explicitly whether or not the outstanding balance had been paid off.

The fourth letter enraged Henry. He couldn't remember it clearly. The basic gist of it was: "This is your final notice that a minimum payment for the ungodly sum of money you owe us is overdue. If you can't afford to make the payment by the above specified date then please notify us at least twenty-four (24) hours ahead of time at 1-800-###-#### so we can make arrangements to get it out of you via blood, sweat, tears, first born child, appendages, eyes, kidneys or sperm."

The letter was basically signed "your supreme overlords."

This letter of course referred to Sam's student loans.

Sam's money woes could have been solved with one appeal to Bret or Lily for help. They weren't why he did what he did. Henry knew that and deep down he knew why Sam took his own life.

Cut to:

Jack was once again in a white hospital room. She was covered in bumps and bruises. She was pink, black, blue, yellow, purple and mauve. She was now in an adult sized hospital gown. She was under a paper-thin white cotton sheet. She had cried all night. There wasn't anything permanently wrong with her.

Nothing is permanent except change.

A nurse came into the room slowly. She told Jack not to go back to Rick. She said, "Men like that are just boys in suits." Jack knew Rick didn't even own a suit. Jack told the nurse that she felt, "...so stupid." The nurse hugged her, told her that everyone makes dumb mistakes when they're young, and said, "Just learn from your mistakes." The nurse, whose name inappropriately was Joy, said, "This wasn't your fault or your mistake."

The nurse gave Jack the morning after pill. The nurse's job was on the line because she kept things off the forms.

Cut to:

The rain clouds darkened, thickened and sank until they seemed an impregnable canopy.

Lightning zapped the road in front of them and as the thunder roared the ground shook. The rain intensified until even driving straight on the flat consistent road became challenging. The tires skidded slightly. Visibility was a nightmare.

The trees that surrounded the road swayed in the wind.

Windshield wipers wiped in vain, powerless to decimate the army of raindrops bombarding the beastly truck. The engine still screamed though. Not even all this nature could drown out its mechanical growl.

Henry couldn't bring himself to look at Jack. Jack couldn't bring herself to look at Henry, or do much aside from cry and feel pain.

The road played tricks on them. The gates seemed permanently fixed on the horizon and a stop sign, which was now almost upon them, seemed to have, just a moment earlier, appeared from nowhere.

Henry was mute aside from puffs on his breast substitute. The only noises from Jack were subdued whimpers and gasps for air.

The two knew all they had was each other.

Cut to:

Henry and Jack were crying by Sam's tombstone. They felt little but emptiness. Henry was furious at his parents for always being on Sam's case. Henry hated them then for making their own son feel himself their enemy. For the first time, beyond inkling or hypothesis, Henry firmly believed there was no fate. Henry lost faith in what he always thought life was.

Henry looked across Sam's mourners. Henry didn't know half of them. Henry and Sam were close. Sam probably didn't know half of them.

The music that played during Sam's funeral wasn't rock, or alternative, or industrial, or grunge, or punk, or blues, or jazz, or anything that Sam would have liked. Sam's mother actually had the nerve to choose gospel for an atheist's funeral.

The food served was hamburgers, hotdogs, and potato salad and Sam was vegan.

What Sam wanted was to be cremated. He wanted to smoke. He wanted his ashes spread where Anne's were. Sam wanted the last few little particles of his being to chase after the remaining tiny flecks of her. Henry knew this. Henry confessed this, and was ignored. Lily couldn't process the information because she couldn't stand the idea that Sam wasn't in heaven.

Bret thought it didn't matter where Sam was buried, since Sam was dead. I suspect Bret was angry with Sam.

What Sam wanted was a going away party where Henry and Jack and his other friends smoked joints, ate lentil and tofu veggie dishes, listened to his MP3 player's music library, drank chai tea and talked about him in a positive manner while seated in a communal circle.

To tell you the truth, Sam didn't really care. Sam was dead. Sam just would have preferred, while he was living, that when he died those he loved wouldn't try to re-imagine him.

Henry couldn't see what the fuck was wrong with that. He loved his brother unconditionally. Henry at least had the decency to show up fried. He slipped Sam's smiley face bong into the casket when no one was looking. What Henry hated most was that there was no mention of Anne.

Sam's funeral was really his parent's "poor us" party. There were cocktail shrimps served at the wake. They weren't enjoying themselves; they were just playing their parts. They didn't know how to act. It gave them something to do between bouts of despondency.

Cut to:

The clock read 4:20.

The dice made snake eyes.

Henry was nursing a cigarette. His teary tired eyes were focused on the endless road, the pearly gates and a stop sign inching towards them.

Having to relive your worst moments is a torture akin to having to judge reality show auditions.

Henry wanted an Americano, or a light roast mixed into a saline drip, or a jumbo extra whip mocha, or a quad espresso, or all 24 ounces of a \$5 iced coffee. Henry was so hard up for caffeine he would even have drank a green

tea latte. He would have snorted matcha powder. People do ridiculous things when they're craving something.

Every cup is hours of work taken for granted. But will you stop drinking that delicious cherry pit juice? No.

Coffee is the perfect example of supply and demand gone mad. Some of the coffee you've drank has been the result of backbreaking child labor. Caffeine is not very different from cocaine. Substitute fruits for flowers and the cultivation is much the same. Whether arabica or robusta, there is no fair trade.

What there is, sometimes, is guards in machine gun nests making sure the locals don't get in to the farms (or out). Those workers are treated worse than your nation's homeless. Most of you can only imagine a cliché third world. The truth is you only have the one.

Henry halted at the stop sign. About twenty feet in front of them the hitchhiker lay in his navy blue rain jacket. His flask was five feet to his left. For a while Henry sat still smoking his cigarette. He contemplated rolling a joint. He thought, "I wonder if St. Peter would recognize the smell."

On most of the known "civilized" worlds selling tobacco-like plants is a serious crime. For tobacco to be legal and marijuana to be illegal is illogical to me. The only reason I can think of for tobacco to be legal is population control. The only reason I can think of for marijuana to be illegal is to protect a population without willpower from itself.

That's your species' fatal flaw: you are out of control.

Lack of control would explain: multinational corporations, pollution, overpopulation, addiction, deforestation, drop-out rates, gambling, failed marriages, crime rates, unemployment rates, pornography, genocide, war, religion, depression, recession, repossessed homes, suicide and world famine.

Cut to:

Henry and Sam were in Sam's room. The walls were full of car, truck and motorcycle posters. Bret had already made sure the pot posters were taken down. Sam especially hated taking down the white widow poster from behind his door. The THC crystals were enormous.

The desk where Sam would eventually write his suicide letter was then crowded with stationery, boxes, a black clamping lamp and a laptop with a silver case. Sam's typewriter was set off to a side. Sam was seated at the desk with his face planted in his laptop. He wore a sepia housecoat over a green shirt that said "Puff Puff Fail" in white. He also wore striped flannel boxers, but no pants. He was, despite Bret's reluctance, allowed to wear whatever he wanted still.

Henry was seated on an oak framed twin-sized bed wearing dark green cargo shorts and a black polo tee with a white undershirt.

Both brothers wore sandals on their feet.

Henry's focus was concentrated on a sketchbook. His pencils moved rapidly and every so often he looked up at his brother.

Sam asked, "So, how are things with Jack?"

"Pretty good I think: she's dating a guy named Clint," answered Henry.

Sam mumbled, "Sorry Henry."

Henry stopped drawing for a second. He looked up at his older brother. He questioned, "What about?"

Sam responded, "Don't man, don't. I know you like her. I know she likes you. Problem is neither of you had the nerve to risk your friendship to bring it up."

Henry shook his head in a contrived manner that basically admitted Sam was right. Henry was conscious of this. Henry, red faced, said, "I don't want to lose Jack."

Sam instructed, "Lose her? You want to know what loss is? It's forgetting the way she smells, where all the dimples are, the exact way she

feels against your hand, the way her tongue feels against yours, the way her lips feel, the sound of her voice and the precise shade of her eyes. Lose is forgetting the warmth she inspires in you when you're just next to her. Loss is being discontent. Fuck! You want to know what loss is little brother? It's forgetting the details of perfection. Loss is being alone."

Henry said, "Chill."

Sam said, "Chill? Henry look down, look at your balls because you aren't ever going to get to use them if you keep being such a pussy."

Henry questioned, "What about you Sam? It's been, what, three years since Anne died and you don't even leave the house. She wouldn't want this."

Sam, agitated, answered with his voice shaking, "Henry, it's not the same. You're being a fucking asshole now."

Henry screamed, "How, how is it any different?"

About then I'd posit he was being more of a boob.

Sam sadly said, "Look, look I'm not like you. I'm not so good with words ever since I began self-medicating hourly. Whenever I try to talk about something I care about I sound like I'm one of those butt-fucks from a teen drama. This is important though. In case I'm ever not around. Maybe I sound cheesy. She was my great love—that's how it's different. She was my Juliet and all that. Now if you actually tried with Jack and it didn't work out I wouldn't be calling you a pussy. The fact is though, as it stands, with the one woman in this fucking world I ever truly loved dead, it's hard for me seeing my little brother being a little pussy. That's how it's different."

For the record, Romeo only ever knew Juliet for a few days and was prone to melodramatic crushes. Does anybody in the age of DVRs, streaming and piracy, actually read Shakespeare when it wasn't part of a curriculum? You should.

Henry shouted, "Yeah well, fuck you, Sam. All you ever do is mope around: when are you going to stop listening to depressing tunes. When are you going to class? I see it's fair for you to tell me how to live my life but what

the fuck about you. It's spring out there you know. You can't just stay locked up in your room all the time except when you're selling and smoking pot. You have a life ahead of you. She wouldn't want you like this. I fucking love you and I'm really worried."

Sam grinned, "Thanks for the advice little bro, but I can take care of myself." Sam pointed at the door and yelled, "There's the door and fuck you too."

The two never normally talked to each other like that.

Henry got up to leave and left the sketchbook on Sam's bed open to his most recent drawing. The sketching of Sam expressed futility. Henry slammed the door behind himself.

Under the drawing was written "R.I.P. Romeo," even then.

Cut to:

The behemoth's engine was dead silent.

The stop sign was dead ahead.

The hitchhiker was dead on the ground.

The flask was five feet to his left.

The clock read 4:20.

The dice made snake eyes.

The storm raged.

Henry flicked his finished cigarette out his rolled down window.

The moon shined through an opening in the clouds above and illuminated the stop sign.

Jack opened her door quickly, got out of the truck, ran towards the hitchhiker and fell to her knees beside the corpse.

Henry followed her.

Jack said, "I didn't realize, I didn't realize because it wasn't his voice. I didn't realize because he's so thin and old looking. I didn't realize. Three years—what have they done to him?"

Henry didn't recognize the man.

Jack said, "Don't you see though? Don't you recognize him? The dark blue coat, don't you see?"

Henry didn't recognize the coat.

Henry walked towards the flask on the ground. He picked it up. He read the inscription. He knew what Jack knew.

Henry had only ever seen one such flask, once, in a bar. He said, "This can't all be coincidence."

Jack said, "He's Rick, we killed Rick."

On the stainless steel flask was an inscription: it read, "Shit happens."

FADE OUT:

Continue to Part Four