

I've got a home in gloryland that outshines the sun

Way beyond the blue

-traditional

It was the summer of 2010, and Evan Barker was biting balloons and kicking over folding chairs in Matt Nelson's backyard when he found out Jason had killed himself.

The balloon-biting and chair-kicking was part of a self-righteous tantrum over seeing Cody Markowicz kiss Andrea Waters earlier that evening. The tantrum was part jealousy, part post-adolescent frustration, part gloomy intoxication, and part rage on behalf of Andrea's besmirched dignity.

He was roaring drunk, and he found the balloons popped easiest and most satisfyingly when he sank his front incisors into them, like a beaver with a ball. He would rip one from its string, sink his teeth in, feel the puff of escaping air, throw the remains to the dirt like a used condom, then grab another one and repeat.

There were rows and rows of balloons strung along the deck, pink and white, hung festively for Matt's younger sister Tiffany's birthday party. Evan tore them from their strings, chomping away.

When he was out of balloons to bite, he walked over to the rows of folding chairs set up in front of the deck and began kicking them over. Some folded up and fell to the dirt with a muted clang, some fell over on their sides.

He'd seen Cody lean down and peck Andrea on the lips upon their earlier departures. Andrea had been going around saying her goodbyes, giving friendly hugs to everyone and saying, "See you soon." Evan had relished his hug, blissfully enjoying the brief sensation of her torso against his and her arms around his shoulders. Hugs were the only female contact he'd ever had.

Andrea— a demure social butterfly who worked as a secretary at the Triple A— had walked over to Cody, who was a square-jawed, tow-headed former linebacker who worked for his dad's HVAC company. Cody had hugged Andrea tightly, and then, as they were letting go, he'd leaned in and kissed her. It was so quick and so casual it seemed as though Cody had done it almost on accident. Andrea herself had seemed quite flustered. As far as Evan knew, they weren't involved in any official way, and he hadn't even seen them so much as talk to each other that entire afternoon.

Once the deed was done, Cody walked off to his car without a word, and Andrea had fixed her bangs and walked in the opposite direction to her own car. Evan didn't think anyone other than him had noticed the incident.

Something about the exchange had made Evan very angry, and not just because of the jealousy he felt. Andrea was pretty and smart, with an open friendliness to her that most women seemed to have grown out of by twenty, and he'd been hoping to make some inroads with her that evening. But the hours had passed and he hadn't had the balls to even talk to her very much, and then she was leaving, and then Cody had kissed her like that. Like it was nothing. And he'd gotten away with it. Cody was no prize himself. Why did he, of all people, get to do things like that? If Evan had pulled that kind of move, Andrea probably would've screamed.

A couple hours and several shots later, with Tiffany off to her boyfriend's basement and Matt's parents safely tucked into their California king-bed upstairs, Evan was wandering around Matt's sizable backyard fuming to himself when he'd come across the rows of balloons tied to the deck. He'd snatched one and tried to pop it, squeezing it between his hands. It swelled outward like a bladder, refusing to explode. He growled in frustration and bit into it. It burst out of existence. He felt better. He seized another and his game began.

Evan's friends sat around a hearty bonfire, farther down the hill that comprised Matt's backyard. They were all drinking from various bottles of liquor.

"The fuck are you DOING?" he heard his friend Rob Van Gilder call up, as the racket from Evan's chair-kicking reached them.

"Nothing," Evan called back down.

His phone began to buzz.

>Be Evan.

>Be several summers back, freshman year of high school.

>Be at Rob Van Gilder's birthday party.

>Party is at the Mill Pond inside Island Lake State Park.

>Seventy percent of this communal body of water is surrounded by grass and swamp and woods, but there's a sandy beach on the southern end that's heavily populated in the summer months.

>Rob has elected to hold his low-key fourteenth birthday party here, and the only chaperone is his laid-back mother, who sits at the picnic table and discreetly sips tequila out of a water bottle.

>Evan is both ecstatic and nervous as hell about being here. Because, as it turns out, there are girls at this party.

>Rob's girlfriend Becky and Josh's girlfriend Monica have brought their friends Allison and Nina.

>Girls usually aren't at parties Evan goes to. But then, Evan doesn't really go to parties to begin with.

>He's never had a date, never asked anyone out, never gone to a dance with a partner, never had the courage to speak to any girl about such things, nothing.

>And now here they are in their swimsuits--bikinis for Allison and Becky, and one-pieces for Nina and Monica--lounging on their towels and sunning themselves while chatting and flirting with Rob and Josh and Matt.

>Evan isn't sure why he's been invited, as Rob and he aren't exactly close buddies. He has a sneaking suspicion that Rob's mother had something to do with it. She's the one person that's talked to him the most, asking him about school and his parents and his older brother, who's going to be a senior next fall. Evan even sat up front in the van on the way over.

>Evan brought his swimsuit but he's insecure about his fleshy white midsection and so he stays at the picnic table with Rob's mom. He bullshits with her and eats Fritos and drinks bottled Coke while Rob and the others cavort on the sand.

>They've been there since one or two o'clock, and everyone but Evan has been in and out of the water several times.

>Becky is a friendly sort and she gave Evan a hello hug when he was dropped off at Rob's house. But aside from quick introductions, none of the other girls have talked to him the whole afternoon, and he doesn't have the sack to go and join the conversation.

>Evan munches his Fritos and sucks his Coke down. His bare feet drum apprehensively on the grass below the bench.

>Rob and the others get up and head for the water, Josh and Matt charging ahead and belly flopping in with tremendous splashes.

> Rob calls up to Evan.

>Hey Barker, come down here, we need four on four.

>Rob's mom looks at Evan and smiles. She's a well-aged lady with bleached hair who still goes tanning once a week.

>Get down there, tiger, she says.

>Evan tentatively walks down the scorching sand, leaving his shirt on.

>He takes two steps into the waves and stops in the shallow end with his arms crossed.

>Rob and Matt and Josh have formed a triangle with the girls in the center. Now they open up to form a square with Evan at the fourth corner.

>What are we doing? Evan asks.

>Rob holds a small nerf football.

>We're playing four-way catch, he says. Bros against hoes.

>He tosses the ball to Evan.

>Evan fumbles a bit but regains his composure and quickly tosses the ball to Josh.

>No balls for you, Josh taunts the girls.

- >The girls feign offense and charge towards Josh but he flits the ball back to Rob.
- >The girls all pile on Josh and he sits down in the water hard, arms and legs a-tangle.
- >The game appears to have no specific purpose other than the guys keeping the ball away from the girls.
- >Becky and the others form a rowdy clump and stomp through the knee-deep water, sloshing it up white and wild as they advance on whoever has the ball.
- >They tackle Rob when he fakes a throw and nearly get the ball away from him but he tosses it to Josh and Josh tosses it to Matt and then Matt tosses it back to Rob.
- >Evan stands shin-deep in the water, arms still crossed, wind in his hair, watching and gradually wading in farther, keeping the square of males closed around the noisy females as the struggle shifts the eight of them into deeper waters.
- >He notices everyone nearby is shooting irritated glances at the rambunctious teenagers.
- >He's now waist deep and his t-shirt is getting wet.
- >He begins to contemplate retreating back to the picnic table as the girls pile on Rob again.
- >Finally, the girls split up. Becky guards Rob and Monica guards Josh. As Allison and Nina converge on him, Matt has no choice but to toss the ball up and over to Evan.
- >Evan snatches it out of the air and waits for Allison and Nina to charge him, but both of them just stop and crouch down in the water with the waves lapping at their shoulders.
- >Evan holds the dripping ball in his outstretched right hand.
- >It's so cold, says Allison. She shivers.
- >COME ON, NINA, GO GET HIM, yells Becky.
- >Nah, I'm good, says Nina, wiping water out of her eyes. I need a breather here.

>She doesn't look at Evan.

>Allison wrings her hair out. Becky and Rob and Josh and Monica wrestle with each other.

>Becky breaks free of Rob and sloshes over to Evan. She makes a swipe for the ball but he dodges her easily.

>She misses and falls to her hands and knees.

>Allison and Nina still don't make a move for it. They stay crouched in the water.

>Is there any more potato salad, Nina asks, looking up at the picnic table where Rob's mom sits, checking her Blackberry.

>Here, Barker, says Rob, clapping his hands for Evan to throw him the ball.

>Evan lobs the ball to Rob.

>Instantly, the game is back on. Becky leads the charge and soon Rob is submerged in a frothing frenzy of white.

>Monica leaps to the surface, the ball clutched in her right hand.

>I got it! I got it! I win! I win!

>Josh snatches the ball from behind and chokeslams her into the water.

>Evan stands there and watches some more, the bottom of his t-shirt soaked. He's cold.

>The game goes on.

>Evan continues to stand there, his arms clasped around his manboobs. He waits for them to pass the ball again but none of them are even looking in his direction.

>They splash deeper and deeper until they're up to their necks. Evan doesn't follow and the square is broken.

>Evan feels a number of the nearby beachgoers looking at him, wondering what he's doing standing there in the water by himself, and after another few moments, he slogs up the shore, back to his place at the picnic table.

One evening in early July, Evan sat in his bedroom watching that year's American Idol finale on Youtube.

That year, a fellow named Lee DeWyze had won the entire season, the show's ninth. He was a short, bearish twentysomething from Chicago with a husky voice and an unassuming demeanor. He sang unthreatening acoustic rock and Adult contemporary hits by artists like Simon & Garfunkel and Snow Patrol.

Evan had watched the moment live in late May, only a week or so before Jason's suicide. He'd watched it repeatedly on Youtube many times since. He found it comforting, distracting.

He needed distractions. In addition to the sudden gaping hole that Jason had left in the family, Evan's eleven-year-old sister Maddie had been the first one to find Jason after coming home early from a friend's house. Although it initially appeared that Maddie had weathered the incident with her sanity intact, that assumption was quickly proven to be short-sighted. She had been committed to a mental institution a week later and remained there since.

Jason had been cremated— something Evan didn't like thinking about— and Evan and his parents had scattered Jason's ashes the previous Saturday at a family-only ceremony in Leland, exactly a month after Jason had taken his own life at the age of twenty-three.

Jason left no note explaining his actions, but he'd stated very ominously and deliberately the week before that when he died he wanted to be cremated and scattered over one of the Great

Lakes. At the time no one in the family had thought much of it, but as the initial shock of his death began to subside, they remembered his request. His mother in particular was insistent they carry it out.

So that's what they did, driving the four hours north and holding the somber observance on the sandy shores of Lake Michigan. They dumped Jason's powdered remains into the waves and then drove back, all in the same day. They kept it between just the three of them. No friends or extended family.

After graduating high school, Jason had served a tour and a half in Afghanistan, but he had been other-than-honorably discharged from the military nearly two years before. As a result, there was no honor guard and no help from the government to pay for the memorial service. Though the death services were kept as inexpensive as the family could manage, the costs of the cremation coupled with Maddie's ensuing hospitalization and Evan's dad's most recent layoff had crippled the family's already fragile finances.

The previous few nights Evan had heard his parents talking fiercely with each other about losing the house, truncating Maddie's recovery by taking her out of the hospital before her brain was balanced, moving somewhere else and starting over. Evan's dad joked that perhaps he should start making meth. Evan's mom spontaneously burst into tears.

Evan watched Lee bend over and dissolve into his own tears as Ryan Seacrest shouted out his name amid the seizure-inducing glitter and gleam of the Idol mainstage. Confetti rained. Blue and white flashed. Music blared and Lee sang U2's "Beautiful Day." He looked like he'd just made it into heaven.

Evan watched Lee, the look of salvation and accomplishment on his face.

He opened a new window on his laptop and went to Google.

He typed.

He hit search.

>Be Evan.

>Be 19, two summers before.

>Come home one pristine evening to find parents and Maddie sitting at kitchen table.

>His parents look pissed.

>Maddie munches from a bowl of dry Honey Nut Cheerios. They're out of milk at the moment.

>Just got off the phone with your brother, says Evan's dad.

>Oh, yeah, how is he?

>He's coming home.

>Jason has done one complete tour in Afghanistan, and left for his second tour in April. The tours are supposed to last nine months.

>Really? It's only been three months.

>He's getting kicked out. Other-than-honorably discharged.

>Why?

>He won't tell us.

>Maddie dumps another handful of Cheerios into her open mouth.

>I'm glad he's coming back, she says, crunching away. I miss him.

>Not like this, honey, says their mom. This isn't good.

>Where's he going to live, asks Evan.

>He says he'll get an apartment but he'll be living here for the time being.

>We're not happy about it, his father says. But we'll deal with it when he gets here.

>When will he be home?

>A week or so. From what he says.

> Evan can tell his parents are furious, particularly his father.

>No one says anything, and the only sound is Maddie crunching her Cheerios.

>Could you eat those a little less obviously, honey, Evan's father snaps at her.

>Maddie seems to shrink in her chair.

>Sorry, she says.

>She chews quietly and slowly.

Evan's parents were downstairs having Jet's Pizza for dinner. They weren't talking. Evan noticed they talked much less these days, as most conversations dissolved into either panic-inducing diatribes about the future or withering, regret-laden musings on the past. Both situations always ended with Evan's mother in tears and his father red-faced and swaggering off to another room or out the front door.

Evan entered and sat down at the table. He asserted himself.

"I've decided I'm trying out for American Idol in Nashville this year," he announced. "I looked up the auditions. Nashville is the closest and it's on Saturday."

Both his parents looked flabbergasted.

"You're what?"

"I'm trying out for American Idol," said Evan. "In Nashville."

“Why the hell are you going to do that?” asked his dad.

“Because life is short, and I want to do it. And we need money.”

His parents sat there with their half-eaten pizza slices in their hands and their mouths open. They glanced at each other.

“Since when are you worried about whether or not we have enough money?”

“I’ve offered to pay rent,” said Evan. “I’ve told you guys I’m willing to contribute.”

“Yeah, and we appreciate it,” said his dad. “But I’m not gonna charge my kid rent to live with me. I told you, as long as you’re working and going to school, don’t worry about it.”

“Well, if I get on TV I’ll have way more money than I would working as a janitor.”

“I’ve never even heard you sing,” said his mother. She was an overweight, straw-haired woman who worked part time behind the customer service counter at Kroger’s.

“I’ve been practicing in my car for years,” Evan explained.

This was true.

“I want to try. Even if I humiliate myself, I could still maybe get us some money. It’s what I want to do.”

“I didn’t even know you watched that show,” said his father. He was also overweight, albeit more imposing and muscular in the shoulders, grey-mustached and wearing his ever-present camo hat to cover his receding hairline. He hunted deer in November and until the Recession he’d worked as an electrician at the Ford plant in Dearborn. After losing that job, he’d found work elsewhere at a few factories around the Metro area, but none paid what he’d made at Ford, and he’d been laid off twice.

“Maddie watches it,” said Evan. “I watched it with her this year. I’d always watched the auditions for the idiots and the freaks but this year I watched the whole thing right up to the finale.”

“And who are you going with to this audition in Nashville?”

“I was thinking of asking Brian. He’s unemployed so he’s always free.”

“Brian Dinkins?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t he the one who threw the propane tank into the bonfire last summer?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“Well, I haven’t made up my mind yet. If Matt can get work off I’ll take him.”

“You think your car can make it down there and back?”

“Sure,” said Evan. “It’s only got 90 thousand miles on it. It’s more than up to the task.”

Three years ago, with his parents’ help, Evan had bought a used silver 2002 Honda Civic from a Korean student in Ann Arbor. It was part birthday gift part-I-need-a-car-if-I-need-a-job. Despite its age and mileage it had proven to be reliable little vehicle. He’d never even needed to have it towed.

“And you didn’t feel the need to tell us about any of this until now because...?”

“I was thinking about it and I was probably gonna but then Jason killed himself,” said Evan. “And now I definitely have to do it.”

Evan saw his parents wince slightly when he said Jason’s name. Evan felt sorry about that but at this point he would call it like it is. Jason had always said, it was better to just admit a hard

truth-- piss everyone off and get it over with rather than piss everyone off by dancing around it and being a pussy.

“It’s free to audition, and I have the money for the trip. Kensington pays decent and I have overtime coming from staying all day on the Fourth so the bathrooms could get cleaned twice. I can afford the gas and the hotel room. It’s three days plus two for travel. I’m going.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Wednesday. I already took work off,” he said. He hadn’t-- he would deal with that when he got his check on Wednesday morning. “I’ll be back Sunday, probably.”

Evan’s mother shook her head.

“What is it with your generation and wanting attention? I just don’t understand it.”

“I don’t understand it either, but our family needs money. And the sob story will play really well with the cameras.”

“You don’t need to worry about whether this family has money,” said his father. “You need to worry about whether *you* have money.”

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt,” said his mother, looking worried as ever.

“Why would I get hurt?”

“They’re really mean to some of those people. And you’ve never even sang in public.”

“Mom, that’s television. If I even make it that far, it won’t matter. I don’t think I’m bad enough to make it that far anyway.”

“Sing for us now,” said his father. “Let’s hear it.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Cause it’s not the right moment.”

His parents stared at him.

“You think you’re good enough to get in?” asked Evan’s dad.

“Probably not, but my story is what’s interesting. I have a veteran brother who just committed suicide and my little sister is hospitalized because she found him.”

Evan’s parents stared at him some more.

“I’m just saying, that’ll play really well, with the cameras...”

More stares.

“I’m just saying...”

“You think exploiting your suicidal veteran brother and your traumatized younger sister on national television so you can be a rock star is okay?” his father thundered.

“If it makes us rich, yes,” said Evan. “We can pay for Maddie’s treatment, the whole thing. I can take care of all your guys’ debt. I can buy you guys a better house. Ryan Seacrest said when he got rich the best thing about it was buying his mother a house. Isn’t this at least worth a try?”

“You can do whatever you want, Evan,” said his father, remembering the pizza slice in his hand. He chomped into it.

“Military suicides are on track to surpass combat deaths within the next couple years. You can’t tell me there’s an easier sell than that.”

“What the hell do you mean by ‘easier sell’?” his father growled.

“I just mean, the producers will pick up on it. I’ll be more likely to get on TV, regardless of how good I am. If I get on TV, I get paid.”

“No one’s arguing with you that it might get attention,” said his mother. “That’s the problem! I don’t want to have to talk about what just happened to us in front of the whole damn country!”

“You won’t,” said Evan. “I will. I’ll do the talking. They can’t force you on TV unless you sign a release. Just say you won’t sign the release. If it ever even comes to that.”

Evan’s mom shook her head.

“Evan, this is out of nowhere...”

“Look, all these people just show up for these auditions and they get picked,” Evan said. “And a year ago, nobody knew who any of them were. Now, Lee DeWyze, the guy who just won? He’s some nobody from Chicago. Absolute nobody, just like me, and how he’s going to be a millionaire before the year’s over, completely regardless of whether or not he’s even successful.”

There was silence as Evan’s mother looked sadly at her plate and his father chewed a little too rapidly.

“What do you think Jason would’ve said about this?” Evan’s father asked after swallowing.

“I think he would’ve been fine with it,” said Evan.

He considered, then went on.

“But that doesn’t matter now. It’s not like he’s gonna care. He made his decision.”

Evan’s dad looked like he was might hit Evan, but instead he took a deep breath.

“Go for it,” he said gruffly. “Just don’t go alone. I want a full report before you leave on Wednesday.”

With that, he took his plate, got up, walked into the den and slammed the door.

“Will do,” said Evan.

Evan’s mother began crying again.

>Be Evan.

>Be in 5th grade.

>Be at Island Lake State Park, staying in a cabin with his Cub Scout Troupe on a weekend retreat.

>Jason is along even though he doesn’t Scout anymore. Their father thought he should come so Evan would have someone to hang out with. Jason’s in seventh grade.

>The day’s activities have included target practice with some handguns and rifles.

>Earlier, Mr. Haversham caught his son Oliver showing some of the older kids the forbidden M4 without permission. Rob Van Gilder and Rob’s older brother Steve are among them.

>Mr. Haversham is now bawling them out while the other dads, including Evan and Jason’s, all stand around the offending kids in an intimidating circle of discipline.

>Mr Haversham bellows at Oliver, “I find you holding that gun again without my supervision, I’m gonna whip ya! I’m gonna whip ya, right on the spot!”

>Jason sits with Evan in the cabin’s dining room, listening. It’s cold out. Some of the other scouts are already in their bunks in the adjacent bedroom.

>Their dad has left his revolver on the long table. It’s just been unloaded and the bullets sit in a row alongside the handle, like soldiers in formation.

>Jason picks up the empty gun.

>He points it at his head and pretends to pull the trigger.

>This is something that would cause their father to freak out the same way Mr. Haversham is freaking out.

>Bleeehhhhh, Jason says, rolling his eyes and sticking his tongue out.

>Heh heh, says Evan.

The next afternoon Evan was over at Matt's house again. It was Tiffany's graduation party.

Matt had scheduled a couple local bands to play, including his own band The Meanwhile. There was much grilling and socializing, and the Nelson's backyard was crowded with neighbors, family and friends. Matt's family held several of these events each summer, due to their enormous tract of property and their children's popularity.

A death metal band called Moth Corpse opened the festivities.

"WE ARE THE SONS OF THE CHILDREN," roared the singer while the band clanged and thrashed behind him on the deck. The sound was a soupy, muddled, earsplitting mess.

The audience, which consisted mostly of Tiffany's friends and friends of Matt's parents, gave scattered applause when the first song was over. There were a few college aged kids hanging about, but Evan noticed there were fewer and fewer of them every year now.

"This is just as weird for us as it is for you," the Moth Corpse singer told the audience with a hint of apology. He was a hulking greaseball everyone called Socky.

"Why's his name Socky?" Evan asked Matt as Moth Corpse launched into their second song.

“His last name’s Sockowski,” explained Matt. “I needed an opener. They’ve been together like a week.”

He shrugged.

Matt Nelson was slight and short with thick hipster glasses and an earring. Girls thought he was cute. They said he looked like Rivers Cuomo, or Skrillex with his hair cut. He was half-Armenian, his mother a second-generation immigrant.

After Moth Corpse played their brief set, The Meanwhile took to the stage to peddle their off-key, affected blend of indie and electronica. Matt sang and played keyboards, Rob was on bass and their other buddies Brendan and Derek played drums and guitar. Matt and Derek attempted falsetto harmonies and everyone pretended to like it. The songs were slow and meandering and there was near-constant feedback from the monitors. A palpable sense of relief settled over the audience once Matt announced their final song.

Once the show was finished and the grills were shut up and the food wrapped and put away and the parents and high schoolers dispersed, Evan sat with his inner circle of friends around the smoldering remnants of the night’s bonfire. It was just Evan, Matt, Rob Van Gilder and Brian Dinkins.

Though Evan, Matt, Brian and Rob had all run in similar social groups since 6th grade, once high school had ended they’d found themselves hanging with each other more and more. None of them had gone off to college, and for the most part all their other friends had. Evan was going to Schoolcraft while Rob and Matt both attended Oakland Community College and played in The Meanwhile. Brian was unemployed and living with his divorced mother. He drank a lot and hated talking about the future.

The four of them hung out at local band shows around the Metro area, particularly in Canton and Livonia. They saw movies at the MJR in Brighton and loitered at Twelve Oaks in Novi. They took walks through the bike trails in town and they pilfered booze from Rob's mom or Brian's mom or Matt's parents and they drank it in Matt's backyard. The previous spring all of them had turned 21, and tonight they'd bought their own booze.

This is the first time I've been here for a bonfire since the night Jason killed himself, Evan realized.

He didn't bring this up to his friends. Mentioning Jason only seemed to make everyone uncomfortable.

Brian Dinkins was obese, blonde and boisterous, and already quite drunk off a fifth of Captain's. There was also cherry Smirnoff and Jagermeister and a two liter of Coke for a chaser. Evan liked Captain's best, but Brian had commandeered the bottle and everyone knew not to get in Brian's way when it came to him and his liquor. Evan didn't feel much like drinking tonight anyway.

"I'm telling you guys," Brian exclaimed. "Rub and tug! We can go get a massage and they'll jerk you off for like twenty dollars at that new Chinese place in town! I swear to fucking God!"

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Earlier, fuckin' Socky was telling me."

"They give you handjobs at a fucking Fortuna Inn?"

"Not Fortuna Inn. The spa. It's called Lotus or whatever. Socky said his uncle went there last week and got a fuckin' handjob. For real. They've got a couple women there and you pay 60

an hour and they give happy endings in the back for anyone who knows how to ask for them. Table shower if you want it, fuckin' sauna, everything. You get a massage and a handjob, any time of the day. Rub and tug."

"I think Socky's a fucking retard," said Matt. "Besides, if I want a handjob I'm just going to the strip club."

"How would you know what you can get at a strip club?" said Rob.

"Dude, everyone knows you can get handjobs at strip clubs," said Matt. "You gotta be discreet about it, but you can get damn near anything you want."

"Strip club's more expensive, anyway," said Brian, tilting the Captain's back again and letting out a belch. "Plus, no guaranteed Asians."

"I heard Lily Trent's working at the Blue now," said Rob. "In Ypsi."

Evan snapped to attention.

"Wait, Lily Trent as in Marty Trent's younger sister?"

The Trents had lived in Evan's neighborhood for most of his grade school years. They'd moved to Brighton when he was a sophomore. He'd known Lily since she was in elementary school. They rode the bus together for years. Everyone at the fire was acquainted with Lily in some way. She'd been a grade below them.

"Yeah, man, I heard about it a couple weeks ago," said Rob. "She's working at the Deja Blue. As a dancer."

"Wait, wait, wait," said Brian. "You're telling me I can see Lily Trent NAKED, TONIGHT?"

"Yes," said Rob. "For fifteen dollars."

Brian spread his arms to the black sky and threw his head back.

“Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me,” he sang, woefully out of tune. It was not his birthday.

“Was she hot?” Matt asked. “I remember the name but not the face.”

Rob shrugged.

“She was cute, I guess. Decent face, pretty good body.”

“So we’re going to the Blue to see Lily, then,” said Brian. “I always fuckin’ said, man, if anyone I know is ever in porn, or working as a stripper—I’m fuckin’ seein’ that shit, man!”

“I’d go,” said Rob.

“I’d go,” said Matt.

Brian pointed at Evan. “Fifteen to get in. You in?”

Evan swallowed.

If he went, this would be his first time in a strip club. It would be his first time seeing a woman naked in the flesh. But hell if he was going to tell his friends that.

“Sure,” Evan said. “I’m down.”

Rob snorted.

“You’re down. He’s *down*, guys.”

“Can you drive?” Brian asked.

“Yeah.”

Brian was happy.

“Right, go to the Blue, see Lily Trent’s bare ass, then we get a rub and tug on our way back,” he declared.

The four of them walked up the hill to Evan's Civic.

>be Evan.

>be about ten or eleven, soon after he's moved to South Lyon.

>be outside in the driveway playing with Marty Trent, his neighbor from down the street.

>Marty's little sister Lily comes over and tells Marty that their mom wants to see him.

>Be right back, says Marty.

>Evan expects Lily to go with Marty but she doesn't.

>She's about eight, standing in the driveway, a knobby-kneed, stringy haired girl.

>I wanna show you something, Evan *Barker*, she says to him.

>What?

>I wanna show you something. In the woods. *Evan*.

>What do you want to show me?

>Just come with.

>They walk a block over to the bike trails that stretch for several acres between the western edge of Evan's neighborhood and the highway.

>There are large sand pits scattered randomly throughout the trees that line the dune-like bike paths. The pits are about ten to fifteen feet in diameter and several feet deep.

>Lily leads him through the undergrowth to the edge of one such sand pit and walks around to the other side.

>Evan stays on his side, unsure of what's happening.

>I've seen the sand pits before, he tells her. I come out here all the time with Marty.

>It's humid out, buggy, the air is heavy and thick.

>Lily was smiling at him, playing with her hair, putting it up in a ponytail and then letting it fall over her shoulders again.

>What sort of baaad things do you do, Evan? she asks him, grinning.

>Uhhh...what?

>Evan is at a loss for words.

>What sort of baaaad things do you do?

>...I don't know how to answer that.

>Evan legitimately doesn't have an answer.

>He's a very obedient child.

>He mumbles something about not making his bed every day, not brushing his teeth.

>Lily rolls her eyes and scampers off without another word.

>It's the most Evan has talked to Lily one-on-one since his family moved to the neighborhood.

>Evan feels stupid but doesn't quite know why as he trudges back to his house.

Evan and his friends arrived at the Deja Blue an hour later, Brian still drunk as a lord. He kicked the curb and nearly toppled over as they walked up to the old fashioned theater marquee.

"You better calm the fuck down, Dinkins," said Rob. "They're not gonna let you in."

The inside was loud and pulsating with neon blue. The four of them walked into the show room after flashing their IDs to the steel-faced doorman and paying their 15 dollar cover charge.

The place was busy for a Monday night.

"Something special must be going on," said Matt.

“Yeah, it’s half off dances until midnight,” said Rob. “Manic Mondays. Marquee said outside.”

“Half off?” Brian was intrigued. “What time is it now?”

“12:30.”

“DAMMIT.”

Nearly every seat was filled, though Evan somehow couldn’t make out a single feature on a single face. The chairs were filled with forlorn-looking men staring glassy-eyed at the stage. The poles and the mirrors gleamed. The carpets looked soft and feathery. The chairs were puffy and dark blue. The ceiling was painted black, and aluminum foil stars and half moons dangled on twine. TV monitors sat unwatched in corners, advertising dance prices and upcoming events. One showed a baseball game. A DJ sat up in his booth to the left. The bar was manned by a tiny girl with blonde dreadlocks.

Evan was torn. He’d always hoped the first girl he would see naked would be one that liked him for who he was, one that would not require money to take her clothes off. He’d thought about this for the entire half-hour drive down from South Lyon. He’d seen naked women in movies, (and online, of course) but never in real life.

And now, as they walked into the show room, Evan looked up and saw there was a naked woman onstage now-- a blonde with large, bare breasts. She was strutting about with a fiery stare.

Just like that, and the moment was over.

Well, I guess I can take that off the list, Evan thought, watching the woman as she mounted the pole in the center of the stage and twirled about. He didn't feel any different than he had the moment before.

"There she is," hissed Brian, pointing.

The strippers were all lined up against the back wall. The well-endowed blonde marched offstage on her platform heels and another one, a dark-skinned brunette, came up and removed her own top. It was a presentation of some kind.

One by one all the strippers came onstage and did a little dance or twirl on the pole. The audience gazed at each one, and there was a smattering of applause, polite and sparse. The DJ announced their names in a booming voice, half-heartedly trying to stoke the crowd into some semblance of enthusiasm. The men at the tables watched and sipped sodas out of tiny straws.

And indeed, off to the right of the stage, there was Lily Trent sulking against the back wall. She held an iPhone, tapping at the screen. Only a few of the strippers were talking to each other.

Lily was dressed in a loose string bikini. Evan hadn't seen her in several years, and though he'd never thought of her as particularly attractive before, he now felt himself immediately stiffening in his pants at the sight of her near-naked body.

Evan and his three friends took seats at a table near the stage. The line of strippers paraded up one by one to wiggle and shake their stuff. The DJ yelled their names over the PA. There were about twelve of them in total, and Lily was near the end of the line.

Evan's eyes stayed on Lily. She was entrancing, the same little girl who'd been introduced to him at a block party after his family moved to the neighborhood. Her eyes didn't

leave her phone until she was next in line. She still had her skinny arms and legs, but everything else had filled out. She had tattoos on her arms now, too.

“AND THE LOVELY LOOOLLAAAA...” boomed the DJ.

Lily walked onstage, phone still in hand, and struck a wide-legged pose at center stage. She reached down, grabbed her bikini bottom and flashed her vag twice at the crowd with a wry smile on her face. Evan felt his heart thud in his chest at the sight of the hairless slit between her legs. He saw she had another tattoo—words written in typeface across the v of her nether regions.

Brian and Rob and Matt leered up at her. The music throbbed. Evan gaped.

Lily smirked down and noticed the four of them. She frowned, and then recognition spread across her face. She pointed at Brian, who was cupping his hands over his mouth and yelling, “We’re so proud of you!” and gave him the finger.

>Be Evan.

>Be in fifth grade, waiting on bus as everyone piles on after class.

>It’s his first week at his new school and things are going okay.

>Marty is absent this week, he’s got a head cold or something. His mom’s really lenient about letting him stay home, unlike Evan’s parents who make him go unless he’s vomiting.

>Marty’s little sister Lily takes a seat by herself a few rows up from the back. Aside from Marty she’s the only kid Evan knows so far.

>There’s a gaggle of girls toward the back of the bus in brightly colored winter coats and scarves and earmuffs.

>Lily eyes them, looking like she wishes she was included.

>Hey Jessica, she calls back after a moment.

>The three girls cease conversation, look back at her with daggers in their eyes.

>Lily goes for it.

>Do you want to come over to my house today, and have a cupcake?

>The three girls look at each other and dissolve into giggles.

>Lily gets a look of resignation on her face. This is what she expected.

>Don't talk to us, TRENT, snaps Jessica.

>Lily turns around, and Evan half expects her to wipe a tear away, but she just pulls out her headphones and puts them on and looks out the window.

>Jessica and her friends go back to their conversation, talking in hushed tones. About Lily, no doubt.

>Evan turns around and puts his own headphones on and listens to the Fuel CD he's taken from Jason's room.

“Evening, faggots,” said Lily as she approached their table. The parade of strippers was over, and the stage was momentarily empty.

“Good evening, ma'am,” said Brian, still sloppy drunk. He'd finished the bottle of Captain's himself, chucking it into the trees before climbing in Evan's Civic. Everyone was tipsy except Evan, the perpetual DD. He sat there and wondered if Lily remembered him.

“Sup, girl,” said Rob, smiling that pretty-boy smile that Brian called the Pussy Crusher.

“Living the dream,” said Lily.

A waitress in a tight- fitting white lace leotard came over and asked if they needed anything. Everyone starting with Rob passed. The waitress looked miffed and walked off.

Lily pulled up a chair and sat down between Rob and Matt and chatted for a bit. She didn't acknowledge Evan or appear to recognize him. Nevertheless, Evan felt both aroused at her presence and uncomfortable at how aroused he was.

Lily paid the most attention to Rob, and after some superficial discussion the two of them stood up, locking eyes.

"What about me?" asked Brian.

"There's like twelve other girls here," said Lily. "Find one."

"Will any of them give me a rub and tug?"

"I don't fucking know. Ask them."

She and Rob took off to the back of the showroom where there was a door with curtains hanging in front of it. They disappeared through the curtain. Evan felt a brief urge to get up and follow them, just to see what was about to happen. But he stayed in his seat, a strange jealousy bubbling underneath his skin.

Brian got up and began badgering a group of strippers in the rear of the club. It looked for a moment like they might call over a bouncer to have him ejected, but eventually one of them took Brian's arm and led him through the same curtained door Rob and Lily had gone through.

Matt and Evan sat together. The bass from the stereo thumped as the latest stripper took the stage to gyrate and remove items of clothing.

Evan shook his head.

"I don't like it here," he said.

“Why the fuck not?” asked Matt.

“I don’t feel right,” said Evan.

Matt rolled his eyes.

“Look, man, this is a place of business,” he said. “You’re not a bad person for coming in here. You’re not a bad person for looking at their nakedness. You should enjoy it. You paid fifteen dollars to get in here. At least get your fifteen dollars’ worth.”

“I never told you guys this before, but this is the first time I’ve seen a woman naked in real life.”

The words spilled from Evan’s mouth. He felt there was no way to hide it now, surrounded by all this light and noise, feeling as exposed and obvious as the women onstage.

“No shit,” said Matt. “I thought you said you saw Elsa Riebesahl’s tits that one summer after senior year.”

“I made it up.”

“Well, thank God, dude, cause that would’ve been some nasty shit.”

Evan didn’t say anything.

“You’re sheltered as hell, man,” Matt said.

“Thanks?”

“It’s all right, dude, it’s just all that insecure shit you got in your brain, fucking you up and making you guilty about something you don’t need to be guilty about.”

“Yeah,” said Evan. “I just don’t understand the point of paying to look at a naked woman. I don’t want to look at a naked woman in real life unless I can touch her.”

“You can touch them if you want, depends on who you end up getting a dance from. And you gotta pay for it, obviously. But yeah, you can touch ‘em.”

“I’m still not sure I’d enjoy that.”

“Well, hell, man, let’s go up to the rail so you can feel yourself some tits in addition to seeing them for the first time. Then you can decide if you like it or not.”

“I don’t know,” said Evan. “I don’t want to spend too much money. I only have a little left until I get my check on Wednesday.”

“Just come on.”

Matt stood up and took a seat at the long, rounded table in front of the stage. Evan had no choice but to follow him.

The dancer onstage was older, mid-twenties, and she had auburn hair and a stony face. Stinkfist by Tool blasted from the sound system.

After dancing a bit, feeling herself up, losing her bra, and getting acrobatic on the pole, the stripper came down to the rail. One by one the seated customers distributed a bill into her g-string. The stripper would then lean over and gave them a faceful of breast. Evan gulped.

When she got to Matt, he neatly slipped her a twenty and she leaned in.

“I love this song,” he said as he was engulfed.

"Yup, best song about anal fisting ever," the stripper said. She leaned back and turned to Evan. Evan silently offered her a ten. She accepted it, slid it in with the others lining her waist and loomed over him.

Her breasts were soft and supple. Evan squeezed his eyes shut without knowing why. Her skin was cool and yielding. The contact was only seconds long. She smelled like sweat and powder.

Then his face was free and she was onto the next guy, and a few moments after that she was back up onstage and a few moments after that the song was over. The stripper counted her bills and was offstage again.

She strode down the steps, came right back around the rail and started talking to Matt, ignoring a couple of the other guys who tried to get her attention as she blew past them.

“Be right back, man,” said Matt after he and the stripper had exchanged a few hushed and flirtatious words. “You can go wait at the table. Rob and Lily’ll probably be done soon.”

They were off without another word and Evan was by himself in the neon ruckus. Evan left the stage area and plopped back down in his original seat near the back. He wished he had a smart phone to look at, but he only had a flip phone. Jason’s old flip phone.

The waitress came over again and asked him if he wanted a drink. He declined again.

“It’s mandatory one drink per entry,” she told him. Evan wondered why she hadn’t said that last time, but didn’t care enough to mention it.

“I’ll have a Coke,” he said. It was another ten dollars. Evan gave her a ten. She took it and looked at him.

“Are you gonna tip me?”

“Oh- oh. Oh, yeah-- yeah, sure, sorry.”

He gave her a one. The waitress looked at him like he’d handed her a severed rat’s tail and walked away in a huff.

“Are you the quiet one?” Evan heard someone ask from behind him.

He turned around in his chair. There was a skinny brunette in glasses, completely naked, standing in front of him with her hands on her hips like Wonder Woman.

She swept down, sitting on his lap without another word and giving him a broad, white-toothed smile.

“You the quiet one?” she asked again.

“Uh, yea, I guess,” said Evan.

“What’s your name?”

“Evan,” he said. “What’s yours?”

“Molly,” she said.

“Nice to meet you, Molly,” said Evan.

“You wanna go for a dance?”

“I’m not sure,” said Evan. “How much is it?”

“Twenty dollars a song,” said Molly.

Evan was hesitant. He’d already spent more than he’d intended tonight.

“I can’t get past the fact that all you want is my money,” said Evan.

Molly laughed.

“You’re never gonna get a woman if this is how you play it, honey,” she said.

The waitress appeared to set down Evan’s Coke.

“You want to buy your honey a drink?” she asked Evan.

“Uh, no thanks,” said Evan, and the waitress was gone again.

“So is that a no?” asked Molly.

“Well...” Evan felt her, bare and smooth on his lap, her arm around his shoulders. “One song, yeah, we can do that.”

“Okie doke,” chirped Molly.

“Just a sec,” said Evan. He grabbed the glass and gulped down his Coke.

Molly took his hand in hers and led him through the curtained doorway at the back.

Evan’s heart threatened to burst out of his chest.

>be Evan, two months earlier, a couple of weeks before Jason kills himself.

>Looking at porn on his laptop.

>Jason barges through his bedroom door.

>I gotta show you this fucking song, man, he says, brandishing a black CD.

>Evan snaps at him, NOT NOW, DAMMIT.

>No, but seriously, it’s the new Black Keys, it’s awesome, here, I want you to hear it.

>Jason loves showing Evan new music and usually Evan likes hearing it, but not when he’s got his lubed- up dick in his hand under the covers.

>Jason commandeers Evan’s ancient stereo up on his dresser, tapping the open button. The tray slides out.

>Not now, Jason, I’m busy, Evan says, his boner shrinking into his pants like a mouse into a hole. He discreetly tries to shift the covers, attempting to block anything that may be visible.

>He hides his laptop screen with his free hand, slowly shutting it.

>Jason doesn’t listen, puts CD in Evan’s stereo, hits play.

>The first track starts.

>Just this one song, Jason says.

>A heavy handed drumbeat and bass thump begins. It's bluesy, low, a pumping bass riff, falsetto vocals.

>Isn't this the shit? Doesn't this sound like something a stripper would dance to?

>I already told you I'm not interested, Jason, I don't fucking care.

>Jason looks at him, realizes he's not wanted.

>Looks like he might get mad, but then shrugs.

>All right then, Jason says. He removes the CD and leaves.

>Thanks for knocking, says Evan as Jason shuts the door behind him.

Beyond the curtained doorway was a labyrinth of carpeted cubicles with more curtains on them, everything the color of midnight.

Molly led Evan to an empty one and let the curtain fall behind them. Evan surveyed the small booth with the plush bench. There was a metal bar on the wall, like in a handicapped bathroom stall.

He turned and faced her.

"Look, I'm gonna level with you here," he said.

Molly looked at him, suspicious.

"I'm a virgin, and I've never done anything like this before, and—"

"Do you want to do this or not?" Molly asked him, smiling a little too widely.

"Yes," said Evan. "Yes, I do. Do I pay you now or after?"

"After," said Molly. "Sit down."

Molly spread Evan's legs and situated herself over him. Her vag was directly in his face. Puckered blossoms of flesh peeked out from her vertical slit below a wiry patch of pubic hair. Evan thought of the neat little lamb's hoof of cloven skin between Lily's legs and didn't know if he should feel bad for preferring it.

Molly slid two fingers down the middle of her womanhood and spread it wide right in front of Evan's face. She had a glow-in-the-dark clit piercing nestled among the folds. The insides of her vagina glistened in the blacklights. Evan's dick responded accordingly.

"Do you like it?" Molly cooed down to him.

Evan looked up at her.

"I'd be lying if I said no."

The song started. Heavy handed drumbeat, bass thump, falsetto vocals. Evan recognized it instantly.

"Hey, I know this song," he said.

"Oh, you do?"

"Yeah, it's Everlasting Light by The Black Keys," said Evan. "My brother tried to show it to me a few months ago but I was an asshole and didn't let him."

He sat rigid, his hands at his sides, his penis throbbing in his pants. Her body was fascinating, the presence and weight of her a great intoxication.

Molly stopped spreading her pussy and stepped off him. She reached over and grabbed her phone, and stood contrapposto, texting. After a moment she looked up and regarded him with her dark, half-lidded eyes.

“Sit back,” she said. Evan did as he was told, leaning into the plush goodness of the lapdance bench. Molly set her phone down next to him.

“Lord have mercy,” Evan whispered.

“What?”

“I’m just nervous. Sorry.”

Molly straddled him again.

“Your parents must be, like, the cleanest people who’ve ever lived.”

The Black Keys serenaded them as she twisted and thrust on his lap. He sat on his hands, certain that if he touched her a bouncer would appear in the doorway and haul him off, making sure to break some bones in the process.

She brushed her nipples over his face, gyrated her hips and belly in front of his face, spread her vag in front of his face, and dry humped his legs and crotch. His penis screamed to be let free. His hands stayed under his ass the entire time.

When the song was over and the drumbeat faded out, Molly stopped dancing and said, “You want another one?”

“Yes,” said Evan without thinking. “Yes, I do.”

He swallowed.

“How much for me to be able to touch you?”

“You can’t,” Molly grinned. “I don’t do extras. I don’t suck dick for money, either, so don’t bother asking.”

“I wasn’t gonna,” said Evan. His hands stayed under his ass.

She danced on him for three more songs. They chatted about where he worked, his community college classes, the oil spill in the gulf, and the upcoming midterm elections. She caressed his face with her cheek, breathed sensuously into his left ear, made little whimpering noises as she slid herself over the bulge in his pants. Evan sweated and hoped he didn't have bad breath.

"So what do you think of our first date?" Molly asked after four songs had gone by.

"I'll go as long as you're willing to go," said Evan.

"K, well, you're at eighty dollars now," said Molly.

"It's eighty dollars? I thought you said it was twenty."

"Yeah, for one song."

Evan felt like he'd swallowed an ice cube.

"I only have forty left," he said. "Until I get paid Thursday."

"There's an ATM out front."

"No, I mean that's all I have until I get paid next week."

Molly looked down at him, then sighed and got off.

"I'll just take the forty," she said.

"I'm so sorry," said Evan.

Molly didn't respond, just snatched the money out of his hand and was off through the swaying curtains.

Evan felt beyond stupid, standing alone in the booth with his dick wilting in his now damp pants.

Time to find his friends and get the fuck out of here.

>Be Evan.

>Be fifteen, a sophomore in high school.

>Jason's just come home from a party. He's a senior.

>It's Saturday night.

>Jason had sex again. Evan can tell. He has that extra spring in his step.

>Jason lost his virginity at the age Evan is at now.

>Evan doesn't even know what it's like to talk to a girl in that way, let alone seal the deal.

>Evan asks Jason if he got any.

>Jason rolls his eyes.

>Yeah, some drunk bitch. Lasted about five seconds before she passed out. I think she puked before we went off together. She tasted like Satan's asshole.

>At least she was into you, Evan says glumly.

>Jason shrugs.

>It's a middle kid thing, he says. I wouldn't worry about it. When it happens, it happens.

>He finds what he's looking for in the cupboards—a packet of Kool Aid.

>It's overrated, he says to Evan.

>What is? Sex?

>Yeah. It's overrated. I remember before I got any and I was all about it and like, 'This is gonna be the greatest thing ever!' but then it happens and it's like, 'That's it?'

>Easy for you to say once you've had it.

>I think you'll find all the stuff that's built up to be this big deal is no longer such a big deal once you actually get it. It's like, more fun to want something than to have it.

>Are you gonna make Kool Aid?

>No, I need to get the taste of vomit off of my tongue, says Jason as he tears open the packet and tosses the contents into his open mouth.

>He smacks his lips as he swallows the flavored sugar and throws the packet into the trash.

>Why did you kiss her if she tasted like puke?

>It didn't last long. I shifted gears pretty quick. We made out, I fingered her, she blew me, and that was pretty much it.

>Evan nods, wondering if he'll ever get to see, let alone feel, the inside of a vagina.

>Jason turns to go downstairs to his room.

>You know, there's that saying—sex is like oxygen, it's only a big deal if you're not getting any, he says.

>Thanks, I'll remember that once I finally see a pair of tits in real life.

>Jason smirks.

>Technically you already have.

>What? How? Whose?

>Mom's.

>Evan is disgusted. Jason is amused.

Evan was nearly out of the labyrinth of private booths when he heard Rob's distinctive laugh from behind one of the curtains. He stopped and listened. He could hear Rob and Lily giggling together.

"Lemme show you," he heard Rob say in a low, rough voice.

"Rob," Evan called.

The giggling stopped.

"Rob?"

"...Yeah?"

"It's Evan," he said. "Where are Brian and Matt?"

"They went to the Tap Room," he said. "We'll be out in a bit."

"I'm gonna wait with you."

"Don't come in," said Lily. "I'm naked."

"Well, I'm coming in anyway," snapped Evan.

He brushed the curtain aside and stepped into the booth. Lily was straddling Rob the same way Molly had straddled Evan, but whereas Molly had kept a certain professional distance, Lily was pressed up on Rob and their arms were around each other.

Lily took a swallow from a shining silver flask, side-eyeing Evan.

"The fuck, Barker," said Rob.

"I'm not waiting out at the table like a fucking loser," said Evan, scooching in next to Rob. "And I'm out of money. I'm not going out there again until we leave."

The last thing he needed was to sit and wait while Molly was probably telling everyone in the vicinity about the idiot who hadn't been able to pay for all the dances he'd agreed to. He needed to leave and soon. And he would most likely never be able to come back.

"Are you coming back to Nelson's with us?" Rob asked Lily. "I'm bored here anyway."

Lily nodded slowly.

"I think I will."

"K, I'm gonna go piss and then we'll go get the drunk-asses and Barker can drive us all back to Matt's."

Lily stepped off of Rob. He stood up and was out the curtain. Lily sat down next to Evan, theatrically batting her eyelashes at him. She was clearly wasted and still naked.

"So... Evan Barker... been awhile...how have you been?"

"Been all right," he said. "How have you been?"

"I have been just fine, thank you."

She picked up her phone and tapped the screen, watched it light up, set it down again.

Evan saw the tattoo on her left shoulder was a skull with a joint between its teeth. The one on her inner arm was a long black feather surrounded by words scrawled in elegant, indecipherable cursive. The one on her wrist was a diamond jewel. He couldn't read the one above her vagina in the dim light, or see the ones on her other arm.

"It's been like, five years since I last saw you, I wanna say," she said.

"Yeah, something like that."

"How's your lovely family?"

"They're good," said Evan. "How's yours?"

“They are also good,” said Lily. “Same shit, different year.”

There was a pause. Evan asked the first thing he could think of.

“How long have you been working here?”

“A couple of months.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s okay. The money’s good. I’m saving up and I want to go to Eastern.”

“For what?”

“For either psychology or education.”

“Ah...”

“Are you going to school?”

“Yeah, just Schoolcraft for now. I have no idea what I want to do.”

He was trying to not stare at Lily’s exposed breasts but found his eyes drawn back to them every time he forced them away.

“How old are you now?” Lily asked.

“Just turned 21,” said Evan. “And that would make you 19.”

“Yeah, I turn 20 next month.”

“So what were you doing the past couple years?”

“Oh, you know, whole bunch of shit,” said Lily, looking at her phone again. “Uhhh... I dropped out of school, I worked at Moose Ridge for like a month and then quit cause I hated it.”

“Ah, yeah, that golf course off Doane Rd?”

“Yeah, that one. And, I don’t know, there was a lot happening at home...”

“Well, how’d you end up here?”

“Well, it wasn't *good* stuff happening at home.”

“Are you still living there?”

“Fuck no.”

“Where are you living now?”

“Brighton,” said Lily. “Same city, different area. I rent a trailer now.”

“Does your mom and Larry know you're working here?”

“No, I don't talk to them anymore. Haven't for like a year now. And even if they did I don't think their little hearts could take it.”

Evan nodded. He couldn't think of anything else to ask. He wanted to keep asking her about the job, to find out what had transformed her from the squirrely, chipper, bright little girl he'd known from his grade school days into this morose but stunningly attractive young woman sitting next to him cross-legged. Her naked body seemed radiant in the dull blue light. He could feel her shoulder brushing his. Her hands were in her lap and his hands were in his lap.

Lily's phone illuminated and she began texting again. Another amused smile broke out on her face as she read the text.

“Is that your boyfriend?” asked Evan.

He remembered his father teasing Lily about having a boyfriend when she'd come by with Marty one day. A day that now seemed eons ago. She'd wrinkled her nose up and yelled, “NOOOOO,” and Evan's dad had laughed.

“No, just a friend,” Lily said. “He works a night shift so he texts me a lot.”

“Ah, yeah, same schedule, gotcha,” Evan said. He swallowed.

He swallowed and tried to laugh.

“Good Lord, how long does it take a guy to piss?”

“He’s fucking wasted,” said Lily.

She brandished her silver flask and took a sip.

“They don’t serve alcohol here but I was nice and shared with him.”

She offered it to Evan.

“I can’t, I’m the DD,” he said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said. She texted some more.

“Well, looks like you turned out pretty good, Lily,” Evan blurted.

He didn’t mean to be looking at her body when he said it, but he was. He found her taut belly to be extraordinarily enticing. His mind flashed images of him rubbing his cheek on it, tasting that tattoo emblazoned across her waist.

“I hate my body,” said Lily. “All women hate their bodies. Little secret.”

Evan really wished Rob would get the hell back here so they could leave. He kept expecting a bouncer to stick his head through the curtain and point at him and say, “You. Come with me.” And Lily would laugh and he’d be gone.

“How’s Marty?”

“He’s good. He lives in Alabama now. Mobile.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. He’s in construction?”

“Yeah, he does drywall. He moved down there for the job... last fall I think? He’s got a girlfriend, works a lot. I’ll tell him you said hi.”

“Sounds good,” said Evan. “Please do.”

He needed something to take his mind off the fact that his dick was practically screaming at him. He thought of the memory of his father and Lily again.

“Do you remember when we were kids--” Evan started to ask, but Lily cut him off.

“Yeah, can we NOT talk about that right now?”

“Sorry,” said Evan, stung.

He sat quietly and waited for Rob.

>be Evan, eighth grade, on the bus.

>It’s winter, all the kids in their puffy coats and mittens.

>Evan sits by himself, listening to Jason’s Metallica CD on his Discman when he notices something peculiar.

>Juan Torres and Simon Johnstone are covertly disappearing one at a time from the seat in front of him. One of the two ducks down while the other intently watches the bus driver, Ms Dee, and then the one who disappeared will come back up and the watcher will disappear. They take turns like this several times.

>Evan leans forward, headphones still on, trying to make it look like he’s just about to rest his forehead on the back of their seat.

>He peeks between their shoulders, sees them playing rock paper scissors.

>Simon loses.

>Goddammit, says Simon.

>Juan quietly slips down between their seat and the seat in front of them.

>Simon swings his legs up onto the seat out of the way and watches Ms. Dee's sunglasses in the mirror up front.

>Juan lies on his belly down between the seats.

>Someone else is down there with him.

>Evan stealthily shifts his gaze over Simon's shoulder, getting a better view of the floor.

>It's Lily Trent, lying on her back.

>Juan is lying on top of Lily and the two of them are kissing, awkwardly. No tongue, just little nips on each other's lips.

>Lily is giggling wildly, peering up lasciviously at Juan.

>They kiss a bit more, and then she pushes him away.

>She looks up, sees Evan spying from behind Simon.

>Eew, what are you looking at?

>Evan throws himself back against his seat like the bus just went into warp speed.

>He looks out the window, heart pounding, knowing he's been caught.

>Juan appears next to Simon.

>They both smirk at him.

>Don't you feel so lucky, Barker? Juan says.

>Evan doesn't respond.

>I think we're gonna start calling you cherry-face, says Simon.

>Fortunately, the bus arrives at their stop next.

>They stand up to get off, slinging their backpacks over their shoulders.

>Evan looks out the window, still not acknowledging them. They take off.

>Lily waits for her companions to walk down the aisle, then slips up from between the two seats and follows them.

>Her black hair is in two long braids under her lime green wool winter hat.

>She doesn't look back.

Rob finally appeared from behind the curtain again.

“Y'all ready?”

“Your fly's open,” said Lily.

Rob didn't even look down at it.

“Yeah, I know, I figured it'd save time for when we get back,” he said.

“You owe me one-twenty,” Lily said. “That shit wasn't free.”

Rob looked slightly hurt, but then a large man in a white t-shirt stuck his bald head in the curtain over Rob's shoulder. Evan's heart stopped for a moment.

“The hell's going on in here?” the man asked. Evan's veins were ice. He had no explanation.

“I'm taking off, Clancy,” said Lily. “I'm done for the night.”

“You giving out doubles now, Lily Talent?”

“No, these are just my friends,” said Lily.

“And they gettin' you home?”

“Yeah.”

“A'ight. Daddy wants to see you before you leave.”

“I’ll meet you guys in the car,” said Lily. She slipped her string bikini top back on, covering herself, and was gone.

Clancy held the curtain aside for Rob and Evan.

“You gentlemen enjoy your night,” he said as they filed out.

“You too, sir,” said Rob.

A few minutes later, Evan and Rob pulled up to the front door of the Blue. Lily came out, trailed by another large bald man—this one white and older and flabbier than Clancy. He had a lazy eye and a neck tattoo and he bent down and kissed Lily on the forehead before she stepped away. She was wearing a loose-fitting grey hoodie over yoga pants and a t-shirt.

“Who the fuck is that guy?” Evan asked.

Rob shrugged, looking at his phone.

“I’d imagine that must be Daddy,” he said.

“Who the fuck calls themselves Daddy?”

“Apparently the type of guy who runs a strip club.”

Lily came up to the passenger window. Evan rolled it down.

“I call shottie,” she said to Rob.

“You can’t call shottie when it’s already been taken, you dumb whore,” said Rob.

“Fuck off, I want to sit next to Evan,” she said.

Rob snorted, but got out and sat in the back.

Lily slid in, smiling.

“Where’s the other two drunks?”

“Tap Room,” said Rob. “I texted them. They know we’re coming. At least Matt does.”

Matt and Brian were waiting on the curb when they pulled up to The Tap Room. Brian was being propped up by Matt, who was now visibly sloshed himself.

Brian saw Lily in the passenger seat. He thudded against the window, pressing his cheek against it.

“Rug and tub?” he slurred at her.

>Be Evan.

>Be 12.

>There’s a nature show on. It’s about wolves.

>Jason is discussing the concept of alphas and betas to Evan. The documentary has mentioned nothing about this and Evan doesn’t know how they got on this subject. That’s how his conversations with Jason just go sometimes. All over the place. Evan loves it.

>That concept applies to humans, too, you know, says Jason.

>How?

>There’s alpha males and beta males. The alphas get all or most of the females. The betas get whatever’s left over or nothing.

>Which one am I? Alpha or beta?

>Depends.

>Which one am I, like, right now, though?

>You’re a beta right now, but only cause you’re the fourth in line. Dad’s the alpha in our family.

Dads are the alpha in any family unit. Usually, anyway. Sometimes it’s the moms. But only if the dads are weak.

>Are you an alpha?

>Depends on what group I'm in. But sometimes, yeah.

>What's it like?

>Honestly? Exhausting, grins Jason. You're constantly having to assert your dominance like wolfy there. It's not something that you just get. You're constantly fighting for it, even if it doesn't look like you are.

>What about my group of friends? Who's the alpha there? It's not me, I know that much.

>Well, who's the one who gets the final say? Who can order everyone around and the least amount of people have a problem with it?

>The wolves on tv gnash their teeth over first dibs on a kill, the victor nipping at the loser on the neck, the loser's tail between its legs.

>Jason points.

>See? Alphas can snap at another male and not get snapped back at. Like, when Dad gets mad at you or me we have to submit before the confrontation's over, right? Or, from what I've seen, in your group of friends, when that Rob kid, the tall one, snaps at Dinkins, Dinkins doesn't challenge him, right? But when Matt or you does, Dinkins'll fight back. He lets Rob have it.

Therefore Rob's the alpha.

>Evan had never thought of that before. How interesting.

>So there you go, says Jason.

>I'm glad I'm not an alpha, says Evan. Being an alpha sounds like a lot of work.

>Spoken like a true beta, says Jason.

>They watch the wolf pack take down a caribou.

After a long, loud car ride back to Matt's house, the five of them slipped in the back door as quietly as they could and made themselves comfortable in Matt's basement. They sat on the couches in front of a massive plasma screen, lit from behind with soothing blue lights.

Matt's basement was half finished; carpet on one side with a home theater and a cement floor with haphazard storage on the other. There was a bathroom and a guest bedroom off to the left on the home theater side.

Lily sat in Rob's lap which made Evan feel jealous. Evan's heart had leapt with joy when she'd said she wanted to sit next to him, but she hadn't said much the whole ride back, only texted. It was a constant thing, her phone buzzing every few seconds, her thumbs dancing on the keypad.

She'd only spoken twice.

Once she asked, "Do you care if I smoke in here?" to which Evan had said, "Absolutely not."

She'd lit a cigarette up and smoked it, cracking the window and one-handing her iPhone. She lit up another as soon as the first was finished.

Then the other time she asked, "Hey, can I plug my phone in somewhere?"

"I only have the radio and CD, I can't plug in iPhones," Evan had said, wishing to God he had the most modern technology at his disposal.

"Oh," said Lily.

"Sorry," said Evan.

"It's all good, bro."

Evan couldn't think of a conversation starter and anyway Brian and Matt were drunkenly bickering about who was going to get the guest room in Matt's basement. Rob stayed on his own phone and occasionally growled at them to shut the fuck up and stop drooling on him.

Down in the basement, the argument continued.

"It's my fucking house, jackass, you're taking the couch."

"Go sleep in your own fucking bed, you fucking idiot."

"No, I'm sleeping down here, it's too fucking hot upstairs."

"I'm sleeping in your bed then."

"Fuck you, you'll go into Tiffany's room and feel her up."

"I'LL FEEL YOUR MOM!" screamed Brian.

"SHHHHH," everyone hissed.

Five minutes later they had settled down. Matt and Brian let the argument die off without a resolution, sitting side by side on the couch in a boozed-up stupor. Lily was comfortably positioned in Rob's lap like she had been at the Blue. Rob reclined back in the chair, cupping Lily's petite ass with one hand.

Evan looked through his photos on his flip phone. It was the only thing he could do with it when he wanted to kill time. They all just sat there, everyone drunk and docile and winding down. Everyone but Evan.

"Is there any alcohol left?" he asked abruptly.

"Yeah, there's that fifth of Jägermeister out by the fire, I don't think we finished it," said Rob, eyes on the ceiling and Lily's face peacefully pressed against his wide chest.

Evan went outside, letting the door close quietly behind him. The night was humid and smelled like smoke. The field behind Matt's house was dark and rustling in a thin breeze. A train whistle sounded off in town.

The fire pit was embers, a wisp of smoke curling off the ashes. Evan found the Jager bottle by the dull light of his flip phone. It was about a third full. He tossed it back and took two gulps, gagging at the burn and the cough syrup taste. He did another. Then another. The bottle was now only a quarter full. Evan felt the beginnings of a delightful sway kick in as he turned back to the house.

Back downstairs the mood had shifted. The stereo was on, playing some garage rock song Evan hadn't heard before. Lily was off Rob's lap, dancing in front of the TV. She'd taken her hoodie off. Her small t-shirt and leggings didn't leave much to the imagination. Evan's face burned red hot. His dick jumped in his pants again.

"I'm drunk," Evan announced.

"So happy for you," said Brian. He reached over to give Evan a fist bump.

"What are we listening to?" Evan asked, sitting down on the couch in between Matt and Brian.

Lily was directly in front of him. Evan stared up at her, delirious with desire.

"New Dead Weather," said Rob from the easy chair.

"This is my shit right here," said Lily, dancing and smiling dreamily.

The four guys watched her move. Her body seemed to melt into the air around her.

"Take something else off," said Rob.

Lily kept that knowing, closed-mouthed smile on her face and reached forward. She plucked the bottle of Jager out of Evan's hand and tilted it vertical, downing a shot. Then she passed it back to Evan.

"Now you take one," she said. "You're not drunk enough."

He did, sucking it down and looking into her dark eyes.

Lily resumed her dance. Evan's loins glowed red hot. The four young men stared, spellbound.

"Now pass it," she instructed Evan.

The Dead Weather banged out the blues softly through the surround sound, a bumpy rhythm under a dusty, southern-fried riff. The female singer sang about licking on the dust, or something.

Evan gave the bottle to Matt, who tossed back a swallow of his own. His eyes didn't leave Lily, either. They glistened behind his glasses.

In one graceful, fluid movement, Lily lifted her shirt off and Evan saw with a tremendous rush of adrenaline that she wasn't wearing her bikini top underneath. Her nipples were red and raw, like ripe strawberries, her belly milk white and so smooth it looked polished. Her shirt fluttered to the floor.

Evan saw the other tattoo on her right shoulder was a blue flower. He longed to know what was written on her waist. Her black pants covered it up, the tops of the letters winking out from above her waistband.

The bottle went around the circle, and when all four of them had taken their shot Rob passed it back to Lily and she downed the last bit topless. Her black hair, shoulder-length,

swayed like the curtains in the booths at the Blue. She reached back and turned up the stereo, but not too much. The skull seemed to wink from her shoulder.

Rob was stone stoic in the easy chair, eyes glittering. Matt was slack-jawed and gaping. Brian was positively drooling.

“Girl, lemme take you into the bathroom,” he slurred desperately. “Girl, I’ll make you cum. Girl, I’ll make you cum TWICE!”

Lily slid her thumbs under her waistband and slipped her yoga pants down around her legs. Evan saw with great revelation that the tattoo over her privates was only one word—
RESPECT.

Lily didn’t acknowledge Brian. She took two sultry steps out of her dropped pants and strode over to the easy chair to drape her naked self across Rob, who slid a hand up her side to give her left tit a squeeze. She gave a little squeak. The other three young men breathed heavily through their noses, primal lust surging through every conduit in their bodies.

“Look at that sweet little pussy,” Brian moaned, his voice fraught with a bottomless hunger. “I want that pussy, baby.”

Lily stopped her orgasmic movements on Rob and raised her head.

“You want my pussy?”

“Yea, baby,” whimpered Brian. “I want it.”

“Okay,” she said.

She took two fingers, stuck them in her mouth, sucked them, then reached between her legs and rubbed herself.

“Thank you, Jesus,” Evan heard Matt whisper.

Lily fingered herself, letting the moment simmer, and then suddenly she leapt off Rob's lap like a gazelle, ran over and smacked her wet fingers across Brian's face.

"There ya go," she said.

Brian shrieked, clapped a hand to his face.

"Holy shit, holy shit, gross, fuckin' bitch, fuckin' sick tease *bitch!*"

He ran to the bathroom and slammed the door. They heard the faucet running.

Rob got up from the chair and stood behind Lily. He took her by the shoulders and gently prodded her over to the spare bedroom. She went, Evan and Matt still watching every muscle in her body move under her skin. The door closed behind them.

"Son of a bitch," Evan heard Matt snarl beside him. "God fuckin' dammit, just take it all for yourself, why don't you?"

Brian came out of the bathroom after a few minutes, his face wet.

"Rob and her in there, I take it?"

He nodded at the closed door, from behind which there could be heard soft thumps and little moans.

"Yeah, fuckin' a," grumbled Matt.

"Thought so," said Brian. "Fuckin tease."

He rubbed his cheek.

"Let's play Halo," Matt said, getting up and crawling over to the Xbox and switching it on. He took a controller and passed one to Brian. He offered a third one to Evan but Evan waved it away.

Evan was slaving drunk. The room spun. He thought of Jason, reduced to ash and drifting on Lake Michigan somewhere. He thought of Maddie, sleeping sedated in a hospital bed an hour away. He thought of his parents, probably awake in their bedroom, his mother having more of her seemingly endless crying fits on her side of the bed, his father up and pacing and fighting the urge to go to the fridge for a beer. He thought of Lily and Rob, fucking the daylight out of each other ten feet away.

Brian and Matt played Halo while Evan lapsed in and out of consciousness on the couch.

Some time later

he woke up and Lily

Was back,

sitting at the other end of the couch,

with her shirt and pants on again

Rob was playing Halo with

Matt and Brian

Lily watched them without

A word, she didn't see

Evan, awake and

watching her

The melancholy expression on her face
in the melancholy blue light made her look both
Hopelessly tragic and
Beautiful

Evan nodded off again and

Then

He woke up again and now

It was dark in the basement

The blue light was off and

Brian and

Rob were gone and

Matt was in the easy chair

Now

and Lily

Was naked again,

humping on Matt and he

Was feeling her up, kneading

Her small tits with busy fingers

“Where’s Rob?” Evan asked them

Neither of them answered

Lily lay down on Matt and

Their mouths locked together

Their tongues intertwining over

their lips and teeth

“Where’s Rob?” Evan asked again,

Louder

“He took Brian home,” said Matt

Impatiently as he and Lily separated, not

Looking at Evan, Lily threw her head back

As Matt pinched one of her nipples and

Took the other into his mouth, suckling

Lily cried out softly and Matt

stood up, his arms still around

her, and

together

they both made for the spare bedroom

The door closed and Evan was alone.

But then

He was awake again

And Lily was lying down on the couch

Next to him

Fully clothed in her black t-shirt and

Yoga pants

she

curled up against him and

the sensation of her body

against his felt incredible

Indescribable

He wrapped his arms

Around her slight shoulders

Feeling how light and fragile

She was, how delicate, just

Lying there against him, her

Thin legs, little toes wrapped

In Band-Aids poking against

his shin, and they lay
there together in the
blue light
from behind the TV
the darkness
surrounding them, they
lay there for a good
while, and Evan
Realized it was the first
Time he'd felt at peace
Since he'd gotten that
Phone call in Matt's
backyard a month or so
Prior

He kissed Lily's damp forehead
And smelled her, a scent that
Made him think of winter
Turning into spring, and he
Cuddled her tighter and
Felt her own hands fold
Up against his chest like

A mantis and he pulled her
in and
He drifted off one last time
And he didn't wake up until
The sun was coming in through
The slim basement windows

>Be Evan.

>Be nine, turning ten.

>Family just moved to neighborhood.

>The neighborhood is throwing a beginning of summer block party, and the main drag of the neighborhood is closed off.

>Tables line the street, laid out with platters of burgers, dogs, chicken wings, bags of buns and bottles of condiments. There are coolers brimming with ice, beer and soda.

>Someone's got a bouncy house set up a few yards down, and Evan and Jason eye it with casual interest. There are volleyball nets, horseshoes and street hockey set up in other yards and driveways.

>Maddie occupies their mother's swelling stomach.

>The family wades into the throng of neighbors, it's a sunny Saturday afternoon, few clouds, not too hot, a perfect day for meeting people.

>Evan's father approaches their next door neighbors, whom they met briefly on the day they moved in. He shakes hands, gets introduced around.

>His mother smiles warmly at the other wives, formalities are exchanged, they comment on how well she looks and ask how the baby is coming along, and before long she is stolen off and gossiping.

>Jason and Evan stick together, observing the other kids.

>There are several of them but not as many as they were hoping for, and a lot of them are way younger.

>Two of the other kids who appear close to Evan and Jason's age, a boy and girl, stand in front of their father, who shakes hands with Evan and Jason's father and introduces himself as Larry.

>This is Martin and Lily, Larry says, pointing down at his children.

>Jason and Evan, says their dad, nudging them forward.

>The four kids look at each other.

>Martin says, My name's Marty, don't call me Martin, no one calls me that.

>Evan, I think you and Martin—er, sorry, Marty-- are the same age, says Evan's dad.

>You got any older kids? Jason asks.

>Larry chuckles.

>Nope, this is all I got right here. I have an older son from my first marriage but he lives with his mom. Sorry.

>The girl named Lily looks at Evan and Jason like they've been sent to eat her dessert.

>You have any girls? she asks.

>We're going to have a girl, their dad says, pointing at their mom. But she's not due til this fall.

>Lily looks disappointed.

>There aren't any girls in this neighborhood, she whines. None that are my age, not a single one, they're all too old or too little.

>Well, maybe that's why you need to get along with a few of them in your class, says Larry, who's actually probably her step-dad. You can't get mad at the new family because they don't have a girl.

>I'm not mad.

>Evan notices Marty's shirt for the first time. It has a red t-rex on it.

>He's suddenly engrossed.

>Is that Diablo from Primal Rage?

>Marty looks impressed.

>Yeah, it is.

>Where did you get that?

>What?

>Your shirt.

>Larry and their dad begin talking. Jason walks over to the coolers. Lily walks back over by her mother, chewing a strand of hair.

>I don't know, my aunt got it for me for my birthday, says Marty.

>You play Primal Rage?

>Marty smiles.

>Yeah, I do. I play it on my PC.

>Evan is in awe.

>No one else knows about that game, he says.

>I know, and it's damn shame.

>Evan was startled.

>You said the d-word!

>Sure did. How do you know about it?

>The arcade game was in this ice cream shop I used to go to.

>Come on, I'll show it to you, says Marty. I don't want to be out here anyway.

>Evan follows him, his nerves evaporating.

>On his way, he notices Marty's sister Lily standing by her mother and looking bored.

"You guys awake?"

Evan forced open his sleep-encrusted eyes.

"Uhh," he gargled out, his throat gummed up. His head felt like a dirty aquarium.

Lily was still snoozing against his chest, a portrait of peace.

Matt appeared in the stairwell.

"Hey, are you guys awake," he called down again.

"Yes," said Lily, her voice muffled by Evan's shirt.

Her own shirt was riding up her back, showing her prominent spine. Her skin was as pale as her namesake. The proximity of her warmth and softness struck Evan's now-sober mind and he felt limitless elation at his good fortune. Sure, his friends had fucked her, but she'd gone to sleep with him. Surely that counted for something. And that drunken ass Brian had only gotten a handful of pussy juice.

Evan kept his hands locked around her.

“I work later but I want chicken wraps for breakfast,” Matt called down. “You guys want chicken wraps?”

“Chicken wraps sound amazing,” said Lily. “Do you want chicken wraps, Evan?”

“More than anything,” said Evan, his mind sparking with serotonin. He kept his hands where they were, trying to preserve the moment for as many precious seconds as possible, but Lily slipped out from between his arms and climbed off the couch.

She stood up and adjusted her shirt down over her white belly before donning her hoodie, then pulled a comb from her purse and ran it through her thick hair, fixing snags. Evan lay and looked up at her.

“Sleep good?” she asked him.

She picked up her phone. Evan couldn’t help but notice she had a good twelve unread messages.

They went into town to the Chipotle. Evan drove, and Lily sat in the passenger seat again, texting away and having a morning smoke, the window cracked and letting in the cool air. Matt dozed in the back.

“My head’s killing me,” he said. “I really wish I didn’t have to work today.”

Evan barely heard him. His eyes were on the road but his attention was all on the girl next to him. He longed to reach over and take her hand, to squeeze it gently and feel her fingers mesh up with his.

Lily didn’t say much, except once when Evan attempted conversation. He saw her feet crammed into her small black shoes and asked why her toes were bandaged.

“Oh, it’s for my work shoes,” she said. “The outsides of my big toes and my pinky toes get rubbed raw when I’m on my feet all night. Really uncomfortable.” Then it was back to her phone, answering message after message.

“You’re popular,” Evan told her.

She gave a curt nod, a yeah-no-shit look on her face.

At another point Evan turned on the radio, which was tuned to 89X. They were playing Dreams by the Cranberries, which Evan thought was a beautiful song. He’d never admit that to anyone, certainly not Matt.

But Lily looked up.

“I love this song,” she said. “This is like, my song.”

Evan grinned at her like a drooling idiot.

“I love it, too,” he said. “It’s beautiful. I first heard it in a trailer for that old Babysitters Club movie.”

Lily looked up from her phone to smile at him.

“This song makes me think about, like, Cinderella’s carriage,” she said. “Like, the guitar part reminds me of like, shining, turning, silvery spokes.”

“That is so awesome,” said Evan, delirious with desire.

“Could you turn that down?” Matt asked from the back. “My head is killing me.”

It was another sunny, balmy, mid-summer day. It would be humid, hazy. Evan felt young and alive, like a flower opening.

He looked at Lily. She'd become appealing to him in a way he'd never felt before. The thought of her sweet face gave him pause, every love song he'd ever heard was now about her. All after one night.

He turned on the radio. Dreams by the Cranberries was playing.

"I love this song," she murmured, not looking up from her phone.

"Me, too," said Evan.

The daylight was not forgiving to her. Evan saw how malnourished she looked, how translucent and sickly her complexion was, how the dim light of the strip club and Matt's basement had hidden every blemish on her. She didn't smile much, and Evan began to find that endearing. He looked at her and listened to Dolores O'Riordan sing about her life changing every day.

They got to Chipotle. Lily looked worn and tired and sad standing in line with them. The chipper if mouthy little girl who'd lived down the street had been replaced with a sallow, gloomy young woman who somehow looked both younger and older than nineteen.

When they got to the cash register, the cashier asked if their bills were all together.

"Yeah," said Evan quickly. "I got it."

"Thanks, dude," said Matt, surprised.

"Yeah, thanks," said Lily, looking up from her texts to smile pleasantly.

Evan paid with his bank card, telling himself that the overdraft fee would be well worth it.

They ate in Evan's car, devouring their wraps, the sound of chewing and crumpling wrappers, and when they were finished Matt said he had to get home cause he had work in an hour. Matt worked at a Belle Tire.

"Yeah, I gotta go home, too," said Lily. "My roommate wants to see me."

"I can take you," Evan said, maybe a little too quickly. The wrap and Coke had cleared his head. His mind kept drifting back to waking up and seeing Lily resting on him, her eyes closed, her chest rising and falling with his.

She's perfect, he thought, watching her wad up her wrapper and wipe salsa off the surface of her iPhone. Her finger nails were as black as her hair, and chipping at the edges.

"It's all the way in Brighton," Lily said. "He said he'd just come get me, you don't have to."

"It's not a problem," said Evan. "After we drop off Matt I can take you."

"All right," she said, smiling again and thumbing her iPhone. "If you insist."

Evan noticed Lily's phone had a pink case on it. DADDY'S LIL' MONSTER was stenciled in black punkish letters, and a little devil girl in jeans twirled her tail seductively.

>Be Evan.

>Be a couple winters ago.

>Jason's about to ship out for his first deployment to Afghanistan. He knows he'll be working as a prison guard.

>Maddie follows Jason around, asking questions.

>What kind of a gun will you use?

>Standard issue M16. I've told you that like a hundred times.

>Where's the military base you're staying on?

>It's called the Qallabi Detention Facility. It's by a town called Heccherta.

>What are you going to be doing?

>Guarding people.

>What kind of people?

>Prisoners. You've known all this for weeks, Maddie.

>Jason's packing his bags, sorting clothes on his bed.

>Evan sits at Jason's desk chair, looking at a map of Afghanistan.

>Are you going to have to kill anyone? asks Maddie.

>Evan sees that Maddie is actually quite scared.

>I'm probably not going to be seeing much combat, says Jason. The guys I've talked to who've been there say it's pretty boring most of the time.

>Without warning, Maddie's faces crumples.

>I luh-huh-huh-huuuuvvvv you, she howls, throwing her arms around Jason's waist.

>Jesus, Maddie, Jason says.

>He tries to detach himself from her but she holds fast.

>I'm gonna be just fine. It's for nine months. I'll be back in time for your birthday.

>Maddie keeps crying.

>Jason bends down and hugs her. She clings to his neck.

>I love you, too, poopykins, he says, using a nickname of hers from toddlerhood. He rolls his eyes at Evan over her shoulder.

>Maddie lets him go, her outburst subsiding.

>Ooo-rah, Jason says, holding out his fist for a fist bump.

>Ooh-rah, says Maddie.

>They bump fists.

Lily's residence turned out to be in a shitty trailer park off a dirt road in Brighton. The trailer had a mustard yellow stripe down its side and looked like it had been made in the 80's. Ramshackle neighboring trailers abounded. The streets were cracked with weeds protruding, and the trees all seemed to droop.

Evan parked in the street out in front of the trailer. There was a large black pick-up in the driveway, and a decrepit set of wooden stairs leading to the flimsy metal front door.

Lily gave him a big hug upon their arrival. He felt her breasts against his arm and hugged her back.

"You're nice," she told him.

"Thanks," said Evan, reeling with emotion. "You're..."

He hesitated, then spat it out.

"...fucking beautiful."

She snorted laughter.

"Thank you, dear."

She opened the door and was out of the car.

"We should hang out sometime," she said, turning back and holding the door open.

"Definitely," said Evan. "When?"

“Oh, I think we’ll know when the time is right.”

“Well, I’ll need your phone number,” he said. “If we’re going to hang out.”

“Oh, right,” she said. “Here, give me yours.”

He told her, and she called him.

“It’s ringing,” she said, holding her phone up.

Evan felt his phone buzz. He didn’t want her to see his flip phone so he muted it through his pocket.

“Great,” said Evan, feeling as though his pocket was now full of priceless treasure. “Got it.”

“Thanks for driving me and for the Chipotle,” said Lily.

“Anytime,” said Evan.

Lily slammed the door shut. Then she was gone, up the rickety wooden steps and into the trailer. The flimsy metal door slammed behind her. Her scent, a mixture of cigarettes and sweet fruit, lingered in her absence.

Evan thought about her all the way home. He reflected on the years they’d known each other, how she and her family had been a constant presence in the neighborhood until they’d abruptly pulled up roots and moved the summer between Evan’s sophomore and junior year. Lily would’ve been fourteen then.

He thought of her dancing naked onstage at the Blue, flashing her shaved vagina to a crowd of men whose age averaged at least fifteen years older than her. The thought disturbed him, and so he thought of her smiling face instead, her dark eyes brightening, and the slight gap between her lower front teeth showing. Her prominent forehead with the hair swept back in a

thicket of tangles that never seemed to straighten out no matter how many times she'd run her brush through it that morning.

"She's like a sexy little witch," Evan said aloud, then laughed at himself. His emotions bubbled over, euphoria filling him. "She looks like a sexy little witch."

The way she'd moved the night before, her stomach and hips sending ripples of desire through him.

This was not Lily Trent he was falling for. Lily Trent was the skinny, bratty girl from down the street who always seemed to be fighting with her parents, particularly her step dad. The young woman he'd just dropped off and had cuddled with last night was Lola. The Lovely Lola of midnight, of hearts beating like a fist against a pillow, like a bed against a wall.

At a stoplight Evan dug around the mess in his backseat and found what he was looking for—a mix CD from the fall before, a giant X on its center to distinguish it. He inserted it in the CD slit.

On it was a random collection of songs he'd LimeWired. There were songs he'd heard off the radio in his car, in Subways, in malls, in waiting rooms, ripped off Youtube performances. He skipped through them-- Carbon Leaf, Cold, Social Distortion, Pilot Speed, Colbie Caillat, Aaron Lewis doing an acoustic rendition of Staind's All I Want, and finally he landed on a song by The Stills called Lola Stars and Stripes.

The hurried drum and bass intro gave way to a shimmering wall of guitars and he imagined Lily dancing the night before, her jungle cat body moving and writhing, with zero fear toward the multitude of eyes feasting upon it.

The mournful vocals kicked in, singing of chemical blasts and M16s and asking are you afraid?

Evan thought of holding Lily as the insurgent rays of sun ate the darkness in the basement. How her breath had felt against his collarbone, how quiet and innocent she'd looked with her eyes closed against his chest.

He sang along with the chorus, the notes flowing out of him like velvet and oil. He didn't know how he sounded, and he didn't care. The previous month was banished to the back of his mind, some dark and hideous wilderness he had passed through.

>be Evan.

>be sixteen, chilling in his room, reading A Storm of Swords.

>an explosive argument is ensuing in the living room.

>Jason is eighteen, and has just informed their parents he has signed up for the military.

>Their parents are not happy about it.

>Jason has already filled out his paperwork and is heading out for basic at a date Evan didn't hear correctly but sounds like it won't be too far off.

>He's been volunteering at the base in Howell recently, all while telling their parents he won't actually sign up.

>Their father is livid.

>You're not the guy who joins the military, you're the guy who runs his own business, you're the guy who gets his degree and goes to work for some place making six figures a year. You're not a soldier. You're not some politician's pawn.

>It's not your decision, Dad.

>There's a war right now, Jason!

>You're better than this, Jason, says their mother, trying to keep the peace.

>I need to get out of here, and I'm not gonna be able to save enough working at AutoZone. I need to just go, and this is the best way. I'll be taken care of. I can go to school after I get back.

>You're not going.

>You need to go to college NOW, for the last time.

>WHY?

>Because you need to get a job.

>You guys need to wake up. Unless you're the best at what you do you're not gonna just find a fucking job.

>Watch your mouth.

>It's true!

>If you get a degree you will find a job.

>I'm not going into any more debt. I've already got my car debt and that alone is hard enough to manage.

>You deal with that just fine.

>Can you pay for it? Will you pay for me to go to freaking Eastern? Cause I won't get in anywhere else, not with my GPA.

>As I've said before, everyone your age is taking out loans. You can pay them off when you get a job.

>I'm not going to just *get a job*. But if I serve, the military will pay for me to go to Eastern, or wherever the fuck I want!

>*Watch your mouth.*

>I'm losing my mind around here! It's always been about what you two wanted even when you said it was what I wanted! It wasn't! It was what you wanted!

>Jason gets quiet. Evan can practically hear him shrugging, throwing his hands up.

>I'm eighteen and there's nothing you can do to stop me, he says.

>You don't understand the decision you're making here. You don't *get* it, snarls their father.

>Evan thinks of two wolves, baring their teeth at each other.

>Right, right, I do get it. Don't feel it. Or, you can feel it! Or don't talk about it! Don't inconvenience anyone!

>Jason's ranting again, his voice is getting fainter now, he's left the living room and is headed out the front door.

>You're not leaving on the fifteenth, yells his father, his own voice getting fainter as he follows Jason out. You hear me? Not happening! I don't care if I have to say that to Bush himself!

>Evan hears Jason's car start up and pull away.

>Maddie comes into the room, scared at the fighting but trying to play it off like she's looking for one of her hair clips that she thinks she left in here.

>Evan returns to Storm of Swords, tells Maddie not to worry about it.

>Jason'll be fine. Go away, I'm reading.

>I can't have him go over there, Evan hears his mother say. That would eat me alive.

>He's not, says his father repeatedly. He is *not*.

Evan drove around singing Lola Stars and Stripes and picturing Lily's face for an hour or so. He had the day off and nowhere to be. When he finally did go home the first thing Evan did was make for his bedroom. He sat down on his bed, pulled his laptop into his lap and logged onto Facebook. No notifications, but that was nothing new. He searched Lily Trent.

The name Lily Trent brought up nothing, but he searched for Marty Trent under Matt's friends and found him almost instantly. He added Marty as a friend. They hadn't spoken much since middle school.

He began searching Marty's friends.

Only a few rows down, there she was.

Lily Talent was her profile name.

Of course, that's what Clancy the bouncer had called her.

Her profile picture was stylized in black and white; a close-up selfie, looking down her pointed chin at the camera, her eyes black and apathetic, her mouth hanging open in sultry indifference.

Evan's hand hovered over the friend request button.

Should I wait, he thought. I already have her number.

Fuck it.

He clicked it.

The last time she'd been on was three weeks prior, and she'd posted a status that said, "Play the pussy get fucked that's what I always say." It had ten likes.

Evan tore his eyes away from her profile picture, resisting the urge to look through the others. He lasted about three seconds and then clicked it, thoroughly examining her whole gallery, hoping to find at least one that showed off some portion of that luxurious body.

Lily didn't have many pictures of herself, and the ones that were posted only showed her face. She was smiling in only one of them, and it was more of a half-smirk. It looked candid, her sitting on a park bench on an autumn evening. She was dressed in a grey coat and pink scarf. It had twenty-five likes and there was a comment underneath it.

Adorable, said some emo-looking fucker named Tim McLachlan.

Lily had written a description underneath it.

In b4 bullshit about my zits, it said.

Evan continuously rifled through the four or five profile pictures she had, taking in her face and enjoying the feelings of bliss that flooded him when he looked into her eyes.

"Lolaaa, lolaaaa," he sang-mumbled to himself.

He opened iTunes and played Lola Stars and Stripes again. He put it on repeat.

He kept scrolling through Lily's Facebook, imagining scenarios in which they could be together. He Googled her name just to see what he would get. There were a lot of Lily Trents out there, but nothing related to the Lily he wanted.

Googling led to YouTube to look up the music video for "Lola Stars and Stripes." After watching the Stills run through nondescript urban streets in black and white, Evan went down the YouTube hole, losing track of time until he saw a trending video advertising Chris Daughtry's sophomore album tour.

Seeing Chris's bald pate shocked Evan into an important realization.

The audition, he thought. He hadn't done anything whatsoever to prepare for the audition. He needed a hotel room. He needed his paperwork printed out. He didn't even know what time he'd need to leave in the morning. .

He opened Google again and searched for American Idol. The auditions were that Saturday. He'd need to leave tomorrow. It had been a spur of the moment decision, but if he wanted it to happen he had to act now. In his head-mist over Lily, he'd nearly forgotten all about it.

After some minor research into the Nashville area, Evan booked his hotel for the weekend at a Motel 6 about twenty minutes south of the downtown area, the only place he could afford for three nights.

He'd need to get his paycheck from work before he left tomorrow. He would also have to convince his supervisor Rex to give him the weekend off, which shouldn't be a problem. Evan hadn't taken too much time off that summer. In fact, the only days he'd missed were due to Jason's suicide and Maddie's hospitalization.

He visited the American Idol website and read over the audition instructions for a second time. He printed off the paperwork he'd need and rummaged in his file cabinet for his social security card, which he kept in a sealed envelope.

After all that was done he clicked through various profiles of finalist and semi-finalist contestants on the official American Idol website. He looked at Lee DeWyze's profile last; all the questions they answered, all the enthusiasm and starry-eyed wonder they had to emit at being chosen for such an exclusive and coveted accolade. It looked tiring.

There was a knock on the door.

“Evan?” It was his mother. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

She opened the door. Her eyes were red and watery.

“We’re going to make an impromptu visit to Maddie. Do you want to come?”

Evan hadn’t known about this. He hadn’t seen Maddie in over a week, since their last visit. She had still been raving about a place called gloryland then.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, definitely. Just let me do one thing.”

“K, we’ll see you in the car in fifteen.”

The last time Evan had seen Maddie he’d given her a CD full of Idol performances to add to her laptop and iPod playlist. Her Internet access was limited so she couldn’t download music freely. Her latest favorite playlist was one comprising the previous season’s winner and runner-up—Lee DeWyze and Crystal Bowersox.

Maddie had loved Lee, thought he was cute, and she’d likened Crystal to something of a big sister figure. She hadn’t cared a fig for the rest of the finalists, although early on she’d flirted with getting behind the handsome Casey James and the power-belter Siobhan Magnus. She’d obsessively listened to a mix of Lee and Crystal’s early performances, all the way up until the finale, which aired the week before Jason killed himself.

The week following Jason’s suicide had been one of numb chaos, and Maddie hadn’t used her computer much, but she had used her iPod. She’d displayed a host of troubling behaviors-- first odd, then alarming, then enough to send her to the hospital she was staying at now.

Evan had always meant to LimeWire the last couple Lee/Crystal studio performances and bring them to her, but he hadn't gotten around to it for one reason or another. Now he speedily downloaded them all, added the extra songs to her Lee and Crystal playlist, and burned a CD. He took it from its slot, new and warm, and went downstairs. His parents were waiting in the car.

>Be Evan.

>Be in his room.

>Cheerful commotion going on in the living room.

>House is all cleaned, done up, everything smells nice, candles lit, giant banner stretched out over the living room. It says Welcome Home.

>Jason's been in South Carolina three and a half months for basic.

>He's getting back today.

>Big get-together, half of the family is here, both mother's parents and dad's mother is here, couple aunts and uncles, a few cousins.

>Parents are much cooler with Jason's training now. He and they had a talk before he took off for basic, and several military folks visited the house and filled them in on exactly what Jason would be doing. After that, things calmed down.

>Evan sits in his room, getting himself ready for Jason's arrival.

>Dad just picked him up from the airport.

>They're in the driveway, Evan hears his mother yell.

>The whole family crowds into the living room.

>Jason steps out of the car in cammies, and his head is shaved now. He's skinnier, more wiry, all lean muscle and grit.

>Maddie is very excited to see him. She made him a cake (almost) all by herself.

>Jason walks up front lawn, his bag in his hand, Dad follows him.

>Jason's got his glasses on. He hasn't worn those in a long time.

>He walks through the door and everyone greets him loudly.

>He gives a small smile, "Heyyy..." and begins doling out hugs.

>Evan hangs back as the family crowds Jason.

>Maddie is ecstatic to see him, hasn't stopped talking about it in weeks.

>She squeals happily, jumps into Jason's arms.

>How's my favorite brother? she yells.

>Tired and hot, says Jason.

Maddie was staying at the Alliance Health Center in Jackson. It was a large, imposing red brick campus off Jackson Rd. The car rides there and back were usually noiseless and tense. Evan's parents would never say it out loud, but it was obvious they were both petrified that their youngest child and only daughter had been permanently damaged.

Maddie's arrival had been both an upheaval and a blessing to the family. They had spent the last decade establishing themselves as a quartet when suddenly there was a squalling, messy addition to be looked after. Evan and Jason both noted how much more lively their mother seemed in the months after Maddie's birth.

"Usually moms get depressed after they have a kid," Jason had told his younger brother.

“She’s probably happy cause it’s a girl,” said Evan. He was aware his parents had wanted him to be a girl. It was the whole reason they’d gotten pregnant again.

She was born in mid-October, and her parents named her Madison Shea. She hadn’t even made it out of the incubator before they began calling her Maddie.

Evan’s mom turned in her seat as they backed out of the driveway.

“Evan, did you make another CD for Maddie?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it?”

“It’s Lee and Crystal. Their last studio performances.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“She’ll be fine,” said their dad. “They let her have her earbuds again. As long as that goddamn Kiss From a Rose song isn’t on it.”

“It’s not,” said Evan.

“I’m not comfortable with you giving her that,” said Evan’s mom. “I don’t want to set her off again. She’s doing so well.”

“It’s fine,” said Evan. “I just wanted to bring her something. Just thought it’d be nice.”

They drove out of the sub in silence.

“I think it’ll be fine,” said their dad. “It’s not like she’s never going to hear that song again. If it’s going to be bad, I’d rather it be now when she’s surrounded by help. I think Evan’s right, let her have something. It’ll help.”

“I’m not comfortable giving her anything having to do with Lee DeWyze.”

“You make it sound like it’s his fault,” said their dad. “The guy doesn’t even know Maddie exists.”

“I just won’t give it to her,” said Evan.

“I can ask the doctor when we get there,” said his dad. “If he’s fine with it, I’ll let you know.”

Evan’s mom sighed.

“Fine,” she said. “Ask the doctor first. I don’t know why she was ever even into that show.”

“Cause of Jason,” said Evan. “She’d watch it with Jason, originally.”

The conversation went silent. Evan could tell his mother was fighting tears again. Evan put his earbuds in and listened to his iPod and thought about his little sister.

Though they’d always gotten along, Maddie was never as close with Evan as she was with Jason. While the two of them enjoyed each other’s company, Maddie was always more interested in what Jason was doing, what Jason was about. Jason was an anomaly to her, a virtual adult that didn’t need to be directly obeyed and therefore could be learned from through experience and wisdom instead of discipline and order. Even his discharge hadn’t put much of a dent in her admiration.

In the recent years when Jason had been overseas, the one thing Evan and Maddie had bonded over was American Idol. Maddie started watching it in 2005, the year Carrie Underwood won and the same year Jason enlisted. Maddie already liked country divas, everyone from Martina McBride and Faith Hill to the Dixie Chicks and Shania Twain. She picked from their parents’ old CD collections, uploaded them onto the family desktop computer and walked around

with her earbuds in listening to them on her iPod. So when blonde Carrie had come smiling into her audition, Maddie was hooked and stayed hooked.

She loved the competition of the series, loved Simon Cowell and his verbal barbs, and she showed a perceptive ability to predict which contestants would be the top 3 finalists based on the way they were portrayed during the auditions. The only winners she hadn't gotten right were Chris Daughtry from Season 5, who ended up in a shocking 4th place, and Chris Sligh from Season 6, who ended up getting 10th place.

The previous season had been a real snore for Maddie, with the exception of Lee DeWyze and Crystal Bowersox. After Jason's suicide in June she had developed an unhealthy attachment to them. She'd first suffered from a paralyzing hysteria that then cooled to an ominous, tearful silence. Other than that, she hadn't initially exhibited any troubling signs.

The morning after Jason had been put in a black bag and taken out on a stretcher, there had been a grief counselor named Gretchen who had come over and insisted Maddie be brought in for analysis and treatment. Their parents had no choice but to turn Gretchen down, given the sizable cost and the fact that their father's health insurance wouldn't be kicking in for another month and a half. Gretchen had told them she would be in touch, and her concern had proven prescient, for Maddie took a sharp downward turn almost as soon as the bodyless memorial service was over.

Aside from an increasingly disturbing inability to fall asleep, her family noticed that she was absent-mindedly sucking her thumb again, which she hadn't done since she was five. She never seemed to take her earbuds out, eventually to the extent that she couldn't fall asleep at all

without them. Then, soon after, she began having to fall asleep in her parent's bed, which she'd never had to do, even as a toddler.

The truly frightening part of it came when she started talking of a place called gloryland, a strange mindscape she said Jason had told her about in a dream. She would awaken in the night clammy and weeping. She said she had visions of Jason visiting her and saying he'd been kissed by a rose—a line from one of the songs Lee DeWyze had covered, one of the songs she listened to obsessively on her iPod. The rose had sent him to this place called gloryland.

"It's open," she'd said when asked for a description. "Very open, this field thing. Like a prairie, with lots of long grass. It's really nice. It's windy."

"Where is gloryland exactly?" their dad had asked.

"It's in our heads," said Maddie. "But we can only see it if we're dead."

Evan's parents had allowed this to go on for a week and a half, telling themselves with increasing desperation that the behavior would pass, but then one Saturday night they had awoken to find her in the kitchen, stark naked and carving into her forehead with a steak knife.

They had rushed her to emergency, Maddie disconcertingly calm as rivets of blood ran down her face, her mother pressing a cloth to her forehead long after the relatively shallow cuts had stopped running.

They had called Gretchen the Grief Counselor and she'd come out to the hospital. Once Maddie's injuries were dealt with by the emergency room personnel-- no stitches, thank God, the cuts were all shallow-- Gretchen had said they needed to go to Alliance and right now.

"She needs to be sedated," Gretchen had told them. "She needs to sleep."

Maddie had gone that night and had stayed there since.

The doctors were pretty certain it was just some kind of temporary psychosis brought on by acute post-traumatic stress, and while Maddie would carry both the physical and mental scars for the rest of her life, a full recovery was more than likely. Just the same, they elected to keep her as long as deemed necessary. The last thing anyone wanted was a relapse.

They fed her an extremely low dosage of sedatives and other drugs. She ate rubbery cafeteria food and she wasn't allowed around sharp objects for the first several days. They made her talk about her feelings and take sleep medication for the first week until she could get through a night without waking up in cold fear, with something new to report on gloryland and what Jason was doing there. They let her listen to her iPod when she was out in the hallway and the game room where they could see her, although she had to give it up before bedtime in exchange for her sleeping medicine.

The ride out to Alliance took about forty-five minutes. Evan listened to his own iPod on the way.

When he wasn't thinking about Maddie, Evan wondered what he would sing for his Idol audition. He knew he'd want to sing rock music if he got onto the show, like Daughtry or the David Cook guy who'd won a few seasons back. If he became an actual musician, he figured he'd like to do something like Radiohead or Coldplay or U2. But he didn't really know.

I could sing Lola Stars and Stripes, he realized. If they can get it cleared. I could sing it for Lily.

Truth be told, the thought of performing in front of anyone else had seemed so uncanny and unlikely that Evan had barely given it any serious thought. He didn't even really consider himself a serious music fan. He liked songs that caught his ear and made mix CDs and had a few

bands that he admired, but he wasn't an audio nerd and didn't know every bit of trivia about even his favorite bands. He was, at best, a casual listener.

In the car he liked to sing Pearl Jam and Fuel and Kings of Leon and other things that were baritone and 90s and relatively easy. He'd first discovered he could belt to Creed and Default, something he'd never admit out loud to anyone.

A few months ago he'd recorded his singing voice into a tape recorder he'd taken from Jason. He sang I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For while sitting in his car in the driveway one late night. The noises that had come out of the speaker when he played the tape back had embarrassed him so much he'd thrown it straight into the garbage bin. For a few days he hadn't sung at all.

But soon enough the itch had returned, and he'd tried again, starting with more of the low stuff, and he kept practicing. Soon he felt like he was getting better. If he kept trying, he knew he would get better. He sang along with Bono, he sang along with Chris Martin, he sang along with Thom Yorke, Billy Corgan, Eddie Vedder, Julian Casablancas, Jack White, Alex Turner, and Isaac Slade.

"You still going to Nashville tomorrow?" his dad asked, interrupting his thoughts, the dashes of the highway disappearing under the SUV one by one.

"Yeah, planning on it."

"Who you going with?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well, you're not going alone. Find someone."

"I will."

>be Evan, earlier that year.

>nondescript late winter afternoon.

>Jason has some poker buddies over, parents are out for the day.

>Maddie comes into the kitchen, goes to the fridge.

>One of Jason's buddies notices her, begins asking questions.

>Hey Maddie, he says.

>Maddie looks at him with disinterest.

>What?

>What's going on, Maddie?

>The guy's name is Logan.

>Logan's an asshole and has been winning all day.

>Evan's watching Futurama in the living room and has been listening to Jason get more and more vexed with Logan as the game has gone on.

>Jason wasn't happy when his friend Rafael brought Logan with him, but it was more money in the pot, so whatever.

>Jason is now looking across the table at Logan suspiciously, cards in hand.

>Logan is smirking at the sixth grader over by the fridge.

>Can you tell me if you like carrots, Maddie?

>Maddie stares at Logan, knowing she's getting fucked with but unsure of why.

>Um... no.

>Everyone at the table but Jason chortles.

>Do you like... popsicles, Maddie?

>Um... no.

>The chortling continues.

>Maddie's glaring at the table now, her hand on the fridge door handle.

>Careful, Meeks, Jason says to Logan.

>Do you like... corndogs, Maddie?

>There is max chortling, the game is forgotten for the moment. Half the table is laughing with Logan and half is chuckling nervously and looking between him and Jason.

>Tension is rising, Evan's attention is now solely on the kitchen.

>Do you like...cucumbers, Maddie?

>One more warning, Meeks, then I have to do something about this, Jason growls into his cards.

>Um... no... says Maddie.

>She's noticed the darkness on Jason's face, tries to lighten the mood.

>I like pickles, she proclaims.

>The table dissolves into gales of laughter.

>Jason calmly puts his cards down and walks out of the room.

>I'm proud of you, girl, I'm proud of ya, Logan roars jovially.

>Jason appears with his Glock 19, the same gun he'll use on himself less than two months later, and shoves it in Logan Meeks' face.

>Get outta here, you redneck sack of shit. I've had it with you. Ten-

>Jesus Christ, Barker—

>Nine- Maddie go to your room.

>Really?

>EIGHT

>Maddie scurries off.

>SEVEN

>You're not gonna shoot me, Barker.

>SIX

>Jason loads the chamber.

>FIVE

>You're not gonna fuckin' shoot me in your fuckin' parents' house.

>FOUR

>Logan looks worried, Rafael grabs his shoulder, he's been on his feet since the gun came out, telling Logan, "I told you not to be a dickwad, I TOLD YOU, let's go--"

>THREE

>The gun's barrel is a foot away from Logan's face. Jason has it trained right between his eyes.

>TWO

>The defiance fades from Logan's face.

>ONE

>ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT, I'm outta here, you fuckin crazy motherfucker.

>He stands up abruptly, the gun stays trained between his eyes.

>Go, says Jason. Go. Go.

>I'm going, I'm going-

>Logan reaches for his money.

>No, no, Jason snaps. You leave that. You leave that. That's mine now.

>Logan's face contorts with snotty insolence, Glock be damned. He points a finger at Jason.

>Careful now, Barker. You be careful now.

>Rafael pulls Logan away from the table.

>Don't bring him again, Raf, said Jason. How many fuckin times I have to tell you?

>They're out the sliding door in a few seconds.

>Jason calmly walks out of the room again. The gun is gone when he comes back out.

>Jason sits down, picks up his cards again.

>Evan realizes his been gripping the arm of the couch so hard his hand is sore.

>He's not gonna forget that, says one of Jason's friends. Was it even loaded?

>The fuck you think? says Jason.

There were hallways to traverse and an elevator ride before Evan and his parents arrived at the heavy metal doors that had separated Maddie from civilian life for the past three and a half weeks.

The waiting room was small, fitted with chairs and a coffee table. A lifeless TV resided up in one dark corner. Half the lights were turned off.

They were only allowed in two at a time, so Evan took a seat while the nurse waved his parents through the doors. He thought about Lily and his audition, to keep his mind off the sterile fluorescence. The place gave him that uneasy feeling of needle pricks and starched sheets and tissue paper and bad news.

Maddie had been quite frightened when she'd awoken here—they had sedated her in the ambulance. She'd hated it at first but the friendly staff had been both accommodating and comforting. Combined with regular visits from her parents and Evan, she had begun to show improvement almost right away.

Evan didn't know what meds they were feeding her, and he didn't want to know. His parents said it was a very low dosage, and they'd been weaning her off it as she improved. He also didn't want to know how much it was costing his already-financially strapped parents to let her stay in this place.

The minutes ticked by. Evan looked through the pictures collected on his flip phone— an old car turned into a fountain at the DTE Energy Music theater, a little Disney Quasimodo doll sitting on the dashboard of one of the janitor trucks at Kensington, a pink flower beaded with rain that he'd found in his parent's garden one spring morning, a painting of a devil in a tuxedo on the back wall of the merch shop in the Chicago House of Blues. He'd snapped the devil picture when Jason had taken him to see the Pixies at the Aragon Ballroom the fall before.

The doors opened. It was his father.

"Your turn," he said. "Doctor says the CD is fine as long as you take it with you when you leave."

Evan went back and saw Maddie and his mother sitting at one of the visitor tables. The visiting space looked like a first grade classroom. Maddie had her earbuds hanging off her shoulders and her iPod and MacBook open in front of her. That was a good sign. They had originally only let her use the earbuds during the day, steadily giving her more access to them once it was proven she could get to sleep without them in. She'd been allowed the iPod after a

few days, and her family had brought the laptop soon after. She only had limited internet access in the common area which meant no LimeWire or torrenting but it was a welcome distraction.

The cuts on her forehead were red and glaring the first time Evan saw her after her incident, crisscrossed over her left eye. For a few gut-wrenching hours it seemed she'd grossly disfigured herself, but once the blood flow was contained it became apparent that the wounds were only superficial. She hadn't peeled any skin off her skull and the cuts themselves were narrow. The bleeding had made them look more severe than they actually were. Now the cuts were just three faint red lines slashing diagonal down over her left eye. Evan considered making some kind of Harry Potter joke but thought better of it.

Maddie saw Evan and gave him a side hug. Over the course of her stay, her demeanor had progressed from frightened to anxious to embarrassed. She now preferred to act as though this was all a passing thing, a blip on the radar to be tolerated and then forgotten.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," said Evan, presenting her with her new CD. "Here."

"It's only Lee and Crystal?" she asked, noting the label scrawled in Sharpie.

"Yeah, it's the studio versions of their last couple performances. I don't know if you have them or not but you do now. You can put them on your laptop and add them to the playlist."

"Thanks," she said.

Their mother stood up.

"I'm going to talk to Dad," she said. "I'll be right back."

The nurses were out in the hallway, and there weren't any other patients in the room with them. The ward had been relatively quiet, only a few other patients coming and going, and they hadn't socialized with Maddie much, at least not that Evan knew of.

"So guess what?" Evan said to Maddie.

"What?"

"I'm trying out for Idol," said Evan.

Maddie gave him the same perplexed look he'd received upon telling anyone of these plans.

"You're trying out?"

"Yeah."

"You can sing?"

"I've been practicing in my car. And yeah, I'm gonna try out."

"Where? When?"

"In Nashville. On Saturday. I booked the hotel this morning."

Maddie looked at him, surprised but impressed.

"You know you don't get to see the actual judges in the stadium, right?"

"Yeah, I looked up how it works. And Simon's gone with Paula, now, too. So he won't even be there if I make it that far."

"Yeah, and they don't even know who's replacing them yet."

"I heard it's the guy from Aerosmith and Jennifer Lopez."

"Oh," said Maddie. "I don't know who either of them are."

There was a bit of a pause. Then Evan spoke.

“How are you feeling?”

Maddie shrugged.

“I’m feeling a lot better now. I can’t wait to go home. Thank God this happened in the summer so everyone at school isn’t going to know.”

She actually had missed the last two and a half weeks of classes, but it was assumed that it had to do with Jason’s suicide, and nothing more.

“You shouldn’t feel bad. Just, you know, get some rest. And enjoy your meds.”

“Yeah,” said Maddie. “I am.”

She brushed a finger on the laptop’s touchpad, aimlessly moving the arrow around on the desktop.

“I can think about what happened now without, you know, freaking out completely. The episode, not Jason. I still can’t think about Jason too much.”

Maddie was still looking at her laptop screen, clicking and pulling down a box, highlighting the clusterfuck of folders and pictures on her desktop and then clicking them blank again. She had a Justin Bieber wallpaper. In it he wore a bloated blue vest and sang on a shining stage to a stadium of riotous tweens and teens.

“I dunno, it’s stupid. I started feeling, like, normal a week after I got here but they wanted to keep me here. I read online they’re only supposed to keep you a week, so I don’t know why I’m still here.”

“Mom and Dad probably wanted it,” said Evan. “Or maybe they talked them into it. “

“Mom and Dad today were all, you have to go by what they say and I’m like, yeah, no shit, but still...”

“You should really stop the casual swearing,” Evan said, not knowing why he was even bothering to say this.

“Okay, Mom,” said Maddie.

She was quiet again for a moment.

“That night I’d listened to Kiss from a Rose like a hundred times. I know cause my playlist counted it, I just kept listening to it and I knew that if I, like, saw my own roses, like I’d seen Jason’s, I’d be able to sleep. Roses help you sleep, they kiss you and you get to sleep.”

“So roses are blood, then.”

“I guess. That’s what I was thinking. They’re your insides. They kiss you and turn you inside out and send you to gloryland.”

“Gloryland again?”

“Yeah, like in the song, at Jason’s funeral. The Johnny Cash song.”

“Yeah, I know, that hymn they played,” he said. “You’re still thinking about gloryland?”

“Yeah, but like, I know it’s not real, but I know, like, if it were, gloryland is where you go when you die. It’s not heaven, it’s, like, closer to earth. But if you’re a good person and you do one bad thing, like Jason did, you don’t go to hell, you go to gloryland. It’s like heaven, it’s just as happy, but it’s not hell either. It’s like your perfect life on earth. It’s the happiest you can ever be. And you spend so much time in gloryland, you learn how to be happy again and then they can let you into heaven. Dr. Sung says that was just my way of coping with, you know, with seeing Jason like I did.”

“Yeah, I remember you telling me,” Evan said. He remembered what his parents had told him about the weird stuff that Maddie would say. Hearing her speak about it like this was very

comforting. She used to only babble on and on about gloryland and how roses sent you there. It hadn't made any sense before. Now she sounded like someone explaining a dream.

"What made you want to audition for Idol?" Maddie asked him.

"I don't know, I'd been thinking about it. Just seemed like the right time. I want a weekend to myself, you know, get away from Mom and Dad for a few days, see a new place. I've never really taken a vacation on my own like this before."

"You think you can get in?"

"Probably not, but I'm doing it more for the experience than anything. Just to say I did, you know?"

Maddie nodded.

"It's really hard to get past the stadium round anyway," she said. "Like, really hard."

"I don't know, I think it might be easier this year, given how boring last season was and how Simon's gone now so people won't be watching like they used to."

"Yeah, last season sucked. Lee and Crystal were the only decent ones."

The conversation lulled as Maddie anxiously fingered her keypad.

Something was bothering her.

"Evan," said Maddie.

"Yeah?"

"Could you, like, not mention me if you do get through? I don't want anyone to see me like this."

Evan hadn't thought of that. He was struck. Then he was ashamed.

“Yeah, definitely,” he said, stammering a bit. “Of course. ...I’m going to have to mention Jason, though.”

“Why?”

“It’ll be more likely to get me on TV.”

Maddie looked uncomfortable.

“But then they’ll ask who found him, and that’ll lead to what happened to me, and then-“

“No, they won’t. And you don’t have to go on TV if you don’t want to. I won’t say a thing about you being in here. I promise.”

Their mom came through the door again.

“Evan, your dad wants to sit with us while we talk to the doctor,” she said. “You mind waiting outside again?”

Evan hugged Maddie again-- this time with both arms.

They exchanged farewells, “See you, love you,” and Evan went out to the waiting room while Maddie and their parents had a lengthy discussion with one of the doctors, an affable Korean named Dr. Sung. Maddie liked Dr. Sung, and so the family liked him, too.

On the way home his parents’ moods had improved.

“They say she’s doing much better,” Evan’s mother told him. “She’ll probably be out next week. She looks better, doesn’t she?”

“She does,” said their father. “She’s rolling her eyes at my jokes again.”

“That’s really good to hear,” said Evan.

He meant it. He thought about Maddie and how her face would light up if he could tell her he’d made it through at least one round of Idol.

>Be Evan

>Apply for job at Kensington Metropark, turn in application to park office.

>Don't hear anything for weeks.

>Then, in early May, receive a phone call from a man with a brusque voice who asks if he can come in for an interview at 8 AM the following day.

>Evan moseys up to the park office the next morning. It's a rectangular, brick building at the top of a hill on the park's north end.

>Secretary directs him to a seat in a small lunchroom.

>At 8 sharp, a huge tattooed biker fellow with chest length beard comes in and sits down.

>Howdy, he says. Rex Reedy.

>He extends a huge hand. Evan offers his.

>Evan Barker.

>They shake.

>Rex looks at Evan's one-page resume.

>Haven't done much yet, have you?

>Yeah, says Evan. I only just got a car a little while ago.

>You ever cleaned before?

>Uh, no.

>You gotta problem cleaning up people's crap? Cause that's gonna happen. We see some heinous shit around here. And I mean that literally. Poo-poo platter.

>No, I think I can handle it.

>Rex nods, looks over his resume a few more times.

>Hours are 6 to 2. Can you start Monday?

>Yeah, sure, great, says Evan. He's relieved—he'll finally have his own income.

>Great, see you then. Now get out of here and enjoy your last few days of freedom.

>They shake again.

>Rex gets up and is about to leave but then he stops.

>How old are you?

>20. I'll be 21 on the 17th.

>My daughter's two years younger than you. Hannah. You got a girlfriend?

>No, says Evan. Why?

>She's single, says Rex. You seem like a smart enough kid. Maybe you could talk some sense into her. I haven't felt close to her since she went on the rag.

>I guess, says Evan. He wonders what Hannah looks like.

>You gotta do me one favor, though, Evan, if you start working here.

>What's that?

>You gotta not talk so much. Jesus, man, I mean, you're killing me here with all the talking you're doing.

>Evan gives a nervous laugh. He decides he likes Rex.

>I'll try to, you know, talk more.

>Rex nods.

> See you Monday. 6 AM. Please actually show up, for God's sake, so many people find out this is a piss-wiper job and I never hear from them again.

>Evan nods.

>I'll be here.

When Evan got home he went and lay on his bed and stared at his flip phone. He opened up the contacts and stared at Lily's name. He paced about his room.

But now there was another problem-- Dare he go through with this?

Who else was he going to ask?

No one. No one else was worth it.

Besides, he knew in his heart he wanted to ask Lily. If he didn't ask her to come with, he'd be thinking about her the entire time anyway.

Quit being a pussy and just fucking do it, he heard Jason say in his head. *You know that's what you want. Just ask. Worst she can say is no.*

He opened his phone again, started writing a text to Lily, and then deleted it. Better to call her on this one.

No, he should text her to call him. Put the ball in her court.

That was it.

Evan lurked on Voteformtheworst for a while to loosen his mind up. The site was where he got most of his information on Idol. He browsed the gleeful threads on Idol's current alumni tour, which was pulling in the most dismal attendance numbers in series history.

He'd discovered Voteformtheworst a few years earlier, when Maddie had begun complaining about a contestant named Sanjaya Malakar, an Indian kid from Seattle who, while seeming like a very nice person, was not a very good singer. Somehow he'd lasted well into the

finals, and Maddie was incensed about it, blaming some website where they intentionally chose the worst contestants and tried to get them as far as they could. Evan thought that was a genius idea.

For the past few months, as the idea of auditioning had surfaced in his mind, Evan had sought to learn more about the show-- its history, the winners, the losers. He Youtubed performances of the finals and the semi finals. He Youtubed auditions by the score, seeing how the contestants who did well performed and how the rejects screwed things up.

Evan's thoughts drifted back to Lily and asking her to come with him. He looked down at his phone, still waiting in his hand.

Fuck it, he thought.

He opened his phone again. He typed in a text to Lily, then chickened out and put the phone down.

He read more of Votefortheworst, glancing over at the phone lying open on his comforter.

After another thread or two, he picked up the phone one last time, his thumb hovering over the send button.

Can you talk? he'd written. *I have an idea and I need to ask you about it tonight.*

He exhaled slowly—what's the worst that could happen?—and pressed send deliberately, weightily. He hoped Lily wasn't working tonight. It was a Wednesday. Evan assumed it would be slow enough for her to respond to him. If she was even there at 8:30 in the evening.

His phone lay dark. He tried to pay attention to the videos he was watching, but his eyes darted back to it every few seconds. Minutes passed. Then more minutes.

She's ignoring me, he thought. He was such a loser. God, he was such a loser. Christ Almighty.

Then-- a miracle— his phone buzzed. The sound of a honeybee's wings. Lily's name appeared on the screen.

Heart pounding, Evan opened the phone, opened the text.

Sure, call whenever.

Evan gulped. He opened his contact list.

Should he wait? Should he respond immediately? Or would that seem obvious and desperate? What a dilemma.

He should wait, even if it was just for a little bit. He'd call her in ten minutes. He calculated that he'd need to watch about five Idol-related Youtube videos, and then he would call her.

Evan watched the videos like a kid eating his vegetables. When the last one finished, a video of Season 5's gray-haired crooner Taylor Hicks singing Elton John, he slammed his laptop shut. In one motion he opened his phone, opened Recent Calls, scrolled to Lily's name, hesitated for a dog's hair of a moment, and hit send one last time.

The phone rings seemed to take an eternity. One ring... two rings... three rings... oh god would she pick up did he want her to pick up?... four rings... then a click.

"Hey."

"Hey, it's Evan," Evan said, his voice cracking on 'hey'. He silently cursed his vocal chords.

"Yeah, I know," said Lily. "What's your idea?"

“Do you know American Idol?”

“Uh, yeah, why?”

“I’m trying out for it this Saturday in Nashville and I’m leaving tomorrow and coming back Sunday. You want to come?”

He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for impact, expecting her to tell him she would have to work.

There was an agonizing pause on the other end as her brain loaded the information.

Then, suddenly, Evan heard a curt voice ask Lily something on the other end of the line.

“Hang on a second,” she said. He could hear the faint conversation. Evan clenched his teeth in frustration. The suspense was unbearable, as if the very universe was taunting him.

The other voice was gruffly firing questions at her.

“It was hot in here, I wanted to air it out a little,” said Lily.

Muffled question.

“No, I wasn’t.”

A pause.

“I’m sorry.”

Another pause.

“No, it’s a friend of mine.”

Another pause.

“He’s trying out for Idol this weekend in Nashville.”

Pause.

“American Idol. The TV show.”

Pause.

“Nashville. Yeah.”

Lily came back on, just as Evan became certain the anticipation would wither him like a wet leaf in the wind. He braced himself.

“Sorry,” she said.

Evan’s heart raced.

“Sorry as in you’re not coming?”

“Uh, no. Sorry as in, sorry I just had to put you on hold for a second.”

“Oh, you’re fine,” said Evan, his heart rate normalizing slightly. “Yeah, you know, I just, uh, just wanted to see if you’d be interested... you said we should hang out, and I thought this was a perfect opportunity.”

There was one, final, agonizing pause.

“Uhhh....yeah,” Lily said, brightening up. “Yeah, that’d be fun.”

“You will?”

“Yeah, I just said I would. I’m not doing anything. And I don’t feel like working this weekend.”

“That’s awesome,” said Evan, elated but trying to hide it. “I already booked everything, the hotel, the audition, I got all my paperwork, and you can just come along. I’ll come get you in the morning.”

“All right,” said Lily. “I didn’t know you sang.”

“Yeah, I’ve been practicing. I want to sing for Matt’s band but I don’t think I’m good enough yet.”

“But you’re good enough for Idol?”

“It’s worth a try,” said Evan. He didn’t want to get into his sob story with her. Not yet.

“K, well, I gotta go,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Everything all right?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” said Lily. “Just gotta go.”

“K. I’ll be there at your place at 7,” said Evan. “It’s like an eight and a half hour drive.”

“All right, see you then.”

“See you.”

Evan hung up the phone, his heart singing.

She would sleep with him, no doubt about it. What girl would agree to spend three nights in a motel with a guy and not sleep with him? Especially if she’d already initialized intimate physical contact a mere 24 hours before?

His friends wouldn’t be particularly impressed—both Rob and Matt were pretty adept at getting whatever women they desired when the need arose. Poor Brian was a fat trainwreck whose personality was so foul that the ladies would still avoid him even if he had a male model’s body and the best plastic surgery available.

Evan imagined holding Lily again, this time between the cotton sheets on a cheap Motel 6 mattress. He imagined them frolicking naked together, he imagined her sliding her lips down over his cock, and he imagined pounding her doggy-style up against the wall, her wails of ecstasy. He imagined getting the golden ticket after a flawless audition on Saturday, coming out to meet her, her face lighting up at his success.

“Let’s go take another nap,” she’d say with a naughty glint in her eye. Then she’d probably blow him in the car on the way back to the motel, too.

For a second, his mind flashed to Maddie’s description of gloryland, the ultimate comfort and bliss.

He pictured telling his parents he would be handling the medical bills from now on, and on top of that, he was now instructing them to take a month-long vacation on his dime. He pictured handing them the keys to a rented luxury sedan.

“Just go,” he’d tell them. “Just go and don’t come back until you feel like real Americans again.”

“We love you, son,” they’d both say with tears in their eyes.

He pictured Maddie throwing her arms around his neck when he informed her he’d gotten three yes’s and was on his way to Hollywood. He pictured introducing her to Lee DeWyze and Crystal Bowersox and Adam Lambert and David Cook and Carrie Underwood and all her other favorite contestants, all of them now his close, personal friends and allies.

He pictured his own friends’ dropped jaws when they saw him singing his way to an easier life right in front of their very eyes.

Evan felt confidence surge through him. The world was suddenly a bright and beautiful and promising place.

He treated himself to a fast and feverish jerk-off session, groaning Lily’s name when he finished. It didn’t require any porn to get going, just the memory of Lily’s nude dancing in Matt’s basement the night before.

After he cleaned himself up, Evan fell asleep early with a hot forehead and a deep, satisfied ache in his gut. He didn't wake up until his mother stuck her head in the room on her way to bed.

"Good night, Evan," she said.

"I'm taking Lily Trent," he told her, startled out of his velvety doze.

"What?"

"To Nashville," he said. "Tomorrow. I found someone to go with. Lily Trent."

"Who?"

"Lily Trent."

"Lily Trent that used to live down the street?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, I didn't know you two still knew each other."

"Yeah, I ran into her the other night with the guys. She said she'd come with."

"Well, great. She was always such a nice little girl."

"Yeah, she was."

"What's going on?" came Evan's father's voice from the hallway.

"Evan is going to Nashville with Lily Trent," said his mother. "So he's not alone."

"Lily Trent, the girl from down the street who moved away like five years ago? The one with the stepdad who turned out to not be a good guy?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Are you two an item now, Evan?"

"No. I'm just taking her to Nashville with me. She said she'd go."

“Oh, great. We’re going to bed. What time you leaving tomorrow?”

“6, 6:30, somewhere in there.”

“Great. Make sure you stick your head in and say goodbye, will you?”

“Sure.”

“All righty then, good night, Evan. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Evan drifted off, the happiest he’d been in a long time.

>Be Evan, earlier that year

>Entire family is watching Idol.

>Crystal Bowersox is auditioning in Chicago. She’s an earthy-looking hippie single mother with blonde dreadlocks.

>She’s good, says their mom as Crystal belts Piece of My Heart. The Idol judges light up, instantly impressed with her.

>I like her, says Maddie.

>I think she sucks, says their dad.

>Harold!

>Dad!

>Jason comes into the room, silent. Everyone tenses up. He’s clearly in a bad mood.

>Their dad looks at him.

>S’happenin’?

>Jason doesn’t say anything.

>How's life in the basement?

>Jason turns and speaks to their parents.

>Can I have a word with you and Mom really quick? On the deck?

>Sure.

>They leave Evan and Maddie as Idol goes to commercial. Evan mutes the TV and they listen.

>They can hear their parents and Jason talking. Jason is upset.

>They might be going farther, he says. They might be pressing charges against me after all.

>Jason, you have to tell us what happened.

>I already did.

>Well, did someone get hurt?

>All you need to know is that I might have to go to court for awhile. I might be... going away, or whatever. Until this gets sorted out. I don't know what they're going to do with me, court marshal me or whatever. I don't think it'll actually go through. The discharge was supposed to make it go away.

>There's quiet for a bit as the two parents digest this information.

>But if I have to pay for a lawyer, I'm in trouble.

>Did you find a job yet?

>I'm looking.

>Where have you applied?

>Places.

>How much money is left in your account?

>None of your business.

>You're living in my house, it is my business.

>Jason snaps. It's alarming.

>Evan can't even hear what he's saying, he's kind of whisper--snarling and babbling at them.

>Evan makes out "I'm fucking sick of this shit."

>His parents keep their patience.

>Boy, I gotta say, I'm not impressed by your display here, says their dad. Now it looks like you got yourself a problem. And you're either gonna be an asset to this family or a liability.

>Their mom says, When you figure out what you want, just let us know.

>Jason doesn't say anything.

>He storms back inside and down to his room, slams the door.

>The commercial break ends as their parents return to the room.

>What's wrong? Maddie asks.

>Your brother's still dealing with some b.s. from the military, says their dad. Did that crappy Bowersox girl get through?

Evan pulled up to Lily's trailer at seven sharp. It was another moist summer morning, the air thick and flowery. The dirt road leading to Lily's trailer park stank of rot and mud. The sun struggled through a lace of mist.

Evan was really hoping he wouldn't have to go inside and get her and potentially meet her male roommate, who was undoubtedly a drug dealer of some kind, big as a junkyard pit bull and just as mean-- a hulking predator of a man who would probably belittle him in front of her, totally compromising his chances of scoring.

Fortunately when he pulled up, there she was, waiting for him on the dirty wooden porch steps with her bag next to her, surrounded by dead leaves and cigarette butts overflowing from an old coffee can. The black pick-up was gone from the driveway.

She was smoking and texting and looking serene.

He waved through the window, the car running, but she just gave him a cursory head toss and continued texting and smoking her cigarette. He sat and waited a moment, then rolled down the window.

"Hey!"

"Hey."

"You ready?"

"Yeah, I'm just waiting for someone."

"Oh... well, do you want to wait in here with me?"

"No."

"...oh, okay."

She exhaled a jet of smoke and looked at her phone.

"He's almost here. It'll only take a second."

Evan sat back and waited. And waited. And waited. After five minutes he began to want to say something to Lily, and after ten minutes he opened his mouth to speak up.

"How long is—," he began, but then Lily waved vigorously at something behind him and he turned to look.

A black sedan with shiny silver rims rolled up behind Evan. The driver door opened and out came a threatening-looking guy in sunglasses. He glanced Evan's way like a coyote looking at a tortoise.

He strode over to Lily and hugged her with his tattooed, piledriver arms. The two of them went inside.

After an additional five to ten minutes, they emerged and the threatening guy went to his car and Lily came over to Evan's car.

Lily was now as sunny as could be, her bag over one shoulder. She reached the car and tried opening the door but it was locked.

Evan scrambled for the button, unlocked it, accidentally locked it again when she tried to open it, then unlocked it again but she pulled the door handle at the same time and fucked up the locking mechanism and it didn't catch. She let go of the handle and waited. He locked and unlocked the door one final time and she opened it and got in, swinging her bag into the backseat.

The black sedan pulled out from behind them and rolled down the street like a shark prowling the shallows. Evan started his Civic and followed the guy out towards the entrance of the trailer park.

"What was that about?" he asked her, nodding at the sedan.

"Look, I brought my old book of CDs," said Lily, not acknowledging the question.

"Cause I remembered your car doesn't have any way of hooking up to an iPod."

"Oh, cool," said Evan. "Yeah, I just listen to CDs or the radio. I've got mine, too."

He gestured to the backseat where his own fat black book of CDs lay open faced.

“And here,” said Lily. She handed him a CD. “This is for you.”

“What is it?”

“It’s really special,” she said. “It’s something I never show anyone. But since you sing, I thought I’d give it to you.”

Evan went to put it in the CD slot but Lily stopped him.

“Wait,” she said. “You can’t listen to it until I’m not around.”

“Uh, okay...” said Evan. “What is it exactly?”

“What’s your favorite band,” Lily wanted to know, not answering.

“Uh, probably U2,” said Evan.

“UGH,” said Lily, disgusted. “*Bono*. Yuck.”

“Hey, they-they’re- they’re, like, one of the biggest bands in the world,” Evan protested, shocked and a little hurt by her reaction.

“Yeah, more like, were,” said Lily, half-playfully, half-derisively. “I guarantee you in like five years they’re gonna put out another album and no one’s gonna care.”

Evan was offended but didn’t want to be too confrontational.

“W-well, who do you like,” he asked. He should give her some sass back. She was being sassy. “Miss Sassy-pants?”

Lily looked at him like he’d just told her he’d shit himself.

“Oh, my God,” she said. “You are so fucking adorable, I can’t. I can’t, Evan.”

Evan’s entire body rang like a cloister of church bells at the compliment.

Lily flipped through her book, reading off the names of CDs.

“Let’s see... I like Alkaline Trio, I like Death Cab, I like Pantera, I like pretty much anything Mike Patton does, I like Deftones, Clutch, Tool, Mastodon, Rise Against, I LOVE Billy Talent...”

She flipped through the book.

“God, I haven’t looked through this in so long, I usually just go off my phone.”

“Who’s your favorite band, though?” Evan asked her. “Like your most favorite?”

“I’d probably have to go with Billy Talent,” she said, after considering for a moment.

Evan hated Billy Talent but he wanted to be nicer about it than she’d been about U2. At the same time, he didn’t want to give her the wrong impression and get stuck listening to the Billy Talent singer’s nasal voice all day.

“Well, it’s funny, cause I gotta say,” he said. “The way you feel about U2, I feel about Billy Talent.”

He waited, then added, “There’s few bands in this world I can say I legitimately hate, and Billy Talent is one of them.”

“That’s too bad for you,” said Lily. “I’m all about them. Clancy at work calls me Lily Talent cause I used to dance to Devil On My Shoulder all the time.”

“Who’s Clancy?”

“You remember, the black guy the other night? One of my managers. It’s my Facebook name.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Evan’s mind flashed to the friend request. Had she seen it?

“I almost never go on Facebook, by the way,” said Lily. “I haven’t been on it in like, months.”

Whew.

“So who are you staying with in the trailer?” he asked.

“My friend.”

“Oh, the night shift guy?”

“No, another guy.”

“And he’s not your boyfriend?”

“No, he’s just a friend. He’s also my boss.”

Daddy. She’s living with Daddy, Evan thought. Daddy, with the lazy eye. Old, flabby, scary Daddy.

His gut turned to liquid metal.

That kiss the older man had planted on Lily’s forehead the other night now took on an even more sinister bent.

Evan played it cool. But a thin scrim of sweat broke out on his forehead, and his abdomen now felt like a hollow winter cavern with bats fluttering around in it.

“Oh, is that the guy you were with the other night, when you were leaving the Blue?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“How old is he?”

“Like in his thirties, I think.”

“Ah.”

Unbelievable. He thought of Daddy's massive hands around Lily's tiny waist, his hips thrusting violently.

Evan nearly began to cry. He swallowed.

It was official. She was having sex with someone on the regular. Evan had a face to put to the action. And it was the most horrific possible face. Why had Evan not known this? Of course he had. It was obvious. Why was he such an idiot dweeb?

"Let's listen to something," said Lily, thankfully derailing his train of thought. "You want to pick or should I?"

"Can we wait until we get on the freeway, actually?" Evan said, hoping his distress wasn't showing. "I have to stop at work and get my check and then deposit it, so we're still about forty-five minutes away from actually leaving here."

"Oh," said Lily. "Well, we can still listen to something. Here, let me put in Billy Talent and if you don't like them by the time we get to your work we don't have to listen to them again. As long as you don't make me listen to U2. Deal?"

"Deal."

He thought of Daddy and her cuddling. He thought of them spending every night together.

Lily threw in a CD. A song began, loud and jagged.

Yes, Evan definitely still hated Billy Talent. The guy's voice was what really killed the whole thing.

"Where do you work?" Lily wanted to know.

"Kensington."

“Oh, the park?”

“Yeah.”

“Nice. What do you do?”

“I’m a janitor.”

“A janitor?”

“Yeah.”

“In a park?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you like, sweep the dirt paths or something?”

“I clean the buildings. The park office, the nature center, all the bathrooms. There’s four of us, janitors.”

“Ohhh, right... right. Must be nice. Y’know, to, like, be outside all the time and stuff.”

“It’s all right,” said Evan. “I like it. I like the people I work with, and mostly I just drive around all day. Occasionally there’s some godless messes but mostly it’s really peaceful. And I make decent money. This paycheck is covering this whole weekend.”

“Do you get paid every week or every other week?”

“Every other week.”

Lily nodded, half-interested. She turned up Billy Talent and pulled out her phone again.

Evan said nothing.

Twenty minutes later they pulled up to the carpenter shop behind the park office at Kensington. Evan killed the Civic’s engine, neatly parked in his usual spot.

Rex and Rex's assistants James and Greg were standing out by the picnic table near the carpenter shop door. One by one they headed inside. It was just before 8:30, break time.

"It'll just be a second," said Evan, turning down Billy Talent and undoing his seat belt.

"I'll be here" said Lily, her eyes on her phone. She pulled out her cigarettes and lit another.

"I'll leave the keys in for you."

"Thanks, bro."

>Be Evan.

>Be 12, standing outside church at catechism, waiting in line for the church staff to unlock the doors so classes can begin.

>Lily Trent from down the street comes over and makes small talk.

>What up, Barker the Younger?

>Nothing, he says, teeth chattering. Can't wait to get inside.

>Yeah. Hey, do you know the Nicene Creed?

>The what?

>The Nicene Creed?

>The Nicey Creed?

>No, the NICENE Creed? I have to have it memorized. It's really long. You're smart, so I thought you might know it.

>Oh. No. I had to memorize it too but that was last year. I never had to recite it again so I forgot it.

>Oh. Damn.

>Lily stands there a moment.

>Why do they make us do all this anyway?

>I have no clue, says Evan.

>They're standing underneath one of the snow-covered crab-apple trees that line the asphalt drive in front of the church entrance.

>The tree branches grasp and grope over top of them, dusted with snow.

>All of a sudden, a disturbance in the top of the tree.

>Snow drifts down like powder.

>In the thick of the tree's top branches, a huge hawk spreads its wings and flaps out into view, cruising away over the front lawn of the church.

>Holy shit, yells Lily.

>Evan sees a dead rat or chipmunk or something grasped in the hawk's talons, dangling limply as the hawk beats its wings in the January air.

>Did you see that? Lily shrieked.

>Yeah, it got a rat or something.

>It was eating it. Right above us, the whole time!

>Yeah, I know.

>It was like, why don't you guys shut the fuck up, I'm trying to eat this fucking chipmunk!

>Yeah, it sure was, says Evan. He's shocked by Lily's language. This is the first time he's heard a girl younger than him say the f-word multiple times. And she said it right in front of a church.

>Lily chuckles.

>She steps closer to him, gets her face right next to his.

>You ever smoke weed? she asks him.

>Uh, no. I haven't.

>You should, she says, her eyes twinkling. It gets you... closer to God.

>She darts off, laughing.

>Evan is good on the weed. His parents would kill him if he ever even thought about it.

>He decides he should probably avoid Lily Trent for awhile. She cusses and is probably a pothead. He'll get in trouble if he hangs around with her.

>He watches Lily join another group of kids, make small talk, and ask if any of them know the Nicene Creed.

“What’s going on, boss, how we doin’?” Rex the Foreman asked as Evan walked in. The maintenance crew was gathered around the break table, sitting in their designated chairs, eating their mid-morning snacks and breakfasts-- cold chicken, yogurt and breakfast pizza from Holden’s.

“Going all right, thanks,” said Evan. “How you doing?”

“Can’t complain,” said Rex. “Wouldn’t do me any good if I did anyway. Check’s in the usual spot.”

Evan walked over to the desk against the wall. His check was in the top drawer, encircled with a rubber band, the only one left to be collected.

His check was for nearly seven hundred dollars. More than enough. Evan smiled at the number.

“Who’s the lil’ chickie you got in the car with you?” Greg wanted to know.

“That’s just a friend,” said Evan.

“Sure,” said Greg. “She looks like a friend.”

“We’re just friends,” Evan said again.

“No such thing,” said Greg, shaking his head.

“Damn straight,” said James. “Two straight young folks hanging out, the girl’s either getting it put in her or getting something else out of it.”

“You looking to play hide the weasel?” asked Rex, eyebrows raised.

“I’m hoping,” Evan admitted.

“She’s a cutie,” said Rex. “Good luck to ya.”

“Where’d you meet her?” asked Greg.

“I’ve known her since we were kids, but I ran into her last night at The Blue,” said Evan, bracing himself for the response.

“The Blue?”

“Yeah.”

“As in, Déjà Blue? ”

“Yeah.”

“In Ypsi-tucky?”

“Yeah.”

“And I assume she works there,” said Rex.

“Yes.”

“As a dancer.”

“Yes.”

His co-workers all snorted laughter.

“Young Evan’s spending his Wednesday afternoon with his little stripper friend!”
exclaimed James.

“You use protection now, for the love of God,” said Greg.

“What’d you think of the Blue?” said Rex.

“It was all right,” said Evan. “I didn’t get a dance with her or anything. I didn’t really like it, to be honest.”

“But you got a dance, though, right?”

“Yeah, I got a bunch.”

“What’d you think?”

“Kind of pointless. You get all worked up for nothing.”

“Well, if she already danced on ya once and now she’s spending time with you outside of work, it shouldn’t be too long before she’s doing a different kind of dance on ya,” said James.

“I didn’t get the dance from her,” said Evan. “It was another person.”

“I used to DJ in one of those places, you know,” said Rex. “Back in the day.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, for like three years. Three good years.”

“I never knew this,” said Greg.

“I didn’t really like the atmosphere,” said Evan. “Really forced.”

“Yeah, there’s no way you can have any compassion for another human being and still really enjoy those places,” said Rex.

“Plus they’re only fun if you’ve got real money,” said Greg. “Gotta work somewhere other than here to have fun at the Blue.”

“What was the girl you got your lap dance from like?” said James.

Evan was starting to think about Lily, waiting in the car. He wanted to get going. And he still had to tell them he wouldn’t be here this weekend. He played with the corner of his check, dog-earing it.

“She was okay, y’know, brunette, skinny, typical stripper,” he said, eyes on the door.

James guffawed.

“‘Typical stripper’, he says!”

“Before you take off there, lemme give you some advice that’ll make you appear more gentlemanly,” said Rex. “You know, for the next time you find yourself in the Blue.”

“K,” said Evan, still toying with the corner of his check.

“It’ll help you stand out from all the other wankers. First, don’t sit up front. Sit in the back or at the bar. Second, look them in the eye when you talk to them, make a point of it. You can check them out, cause that’s fucking normal, but don’t just stare at their tits or vag or anything for too long. Talk to their face. Third, and this is the most important-- don’t try to, you know, save them or show sympathy or pity. Just, like, comment on how much money they must make. Make them laugh, if you can. If you get to know them enough they’ll eventually tell you how fucked up it really is. Do that next time, and go in with more money, and you’ll have about twelve little friends following you around instead of just one. Then if you show up enough, eventually they’ll offer you a job. Happened to me.”

“Thanks, Rex,” Evan said.

Time to move things along.

“Hey, uh, listen. I apologize for the short notice on this but I’m going to need tomorrow through Sunday off. Is that a problem?”

“Tomorrow through Sunday? Why, what’s going on?”

“My family is going to take Maddie on a little road trip once she’s out of the hospital, and so...yeah, is that all right?”

It was a harmless lie, more a half-truth than anything if Maddie was indeed getting out next week. Better to keep the whole audition thing under wraps for the time being. Evan wanted to get going, and bringing the audition up would escalate a whole other conversation.

“They’re letting her out, eh? How’s she doing now?” asked Rex, looking concerned.

He leaned on the table with his immense forearms, browned from years working in the sun. James and Greg chewed.

“She’s a lot better. Still coping, but way better,” Evan said. He hadn’t gone into detail with Maddie’s self-mutilation, only that she had been hospitalized from the trauma of discovering Jason’s body.

“Where you guys going?”

“Up north, just up north. Til Sunday. I’ll be back Monday.”

“Again? Isn’t that where you scattered your brother’s ashes the other week?”

“Yeah, but we’re going all the way up to the upper peninsula now,” said Evan, now pulling sentences out of his ass. “My parents think the clean air will be good for her. No distractions or reminders or anything. I think they just thought of it, like, off the cuff here. No real plans. Just something to do so we can get away from everything for a few days.”

“Gotcha,” Rex said, looking squarely at Evan, the can of sardines he always had at break opened in front of him, the little silver fish swimming in oil.

He shrugged.

“Yeah, that won’t be a problem. Nothing special going on this weekend.”

Greg motioned at Evan.

“Just make sure you tell your friend there what’s going on before you split on her. Looks of that one, she’ll have someone else by the time you get back.”

“Yeah, probably,” said Evan. “Thanks again, Rex. I gotta go.”

“See you next week, boss,” said Rex.

“Take care,” said Greg. James nodded as he sipped his iced tea.

“See you guys,” said Evan.

He made for the door. He was free.

When Evan got back out to the car he was pleased to see that Lily was flipping through his copy of Lincoln’s *Melancholy*. Evan had bought the book that previous spring and was gradually eating through it when the feeling suited him.

Evan got in and started the car. The day was beginning to heat up, and he cranked the air conditioning.

“Hey, you like Lincoln?”

Lily was halfway through a second or third cigarette. The car was filled with cigarette smoke. Evan didn’t care. It was Lily’s cigarette smoke, exhaled from her beautiful lungs.

“Sorry for going through your shit,” she said. “I was just looking at your books. You’ve got like five of them. You’re gonna read them all this weekend?”

She put the book back in Evan's backpack and zipped it.

"No, but I'm in the middle of that one and if I get bored with it I can start another one."

"Ah. What else did you bring?"

"I got Lisey's Story by Stephen King, Just After Sunset by Stephen King, a couple other paperbacks, I don't know, I just kind of grab them out of my collection and throw them in. Do you read much?"

"I don't think I've ever read a book, like, even once."

Evan set about putting the Motel 6 address into the TomTom his parents had lent him. He awkwardly attached the suction cup to the windshield, adjusted the small monitor, and entered the address.

"I love Abraham Lincoln," gushed Evan as he punched in the numbers. "He's my favorite president. That book is about how he suffered from depression. I just got it a couple months ago at the Border's in Ann Arbor."

Evan finished and their route was laid out before them, the red line snaking down through Ohio and Kentucky. He muted the bothersome voice lady, resolving to navigate by visual only.

"Yeah, my mom has depression," said Lily. "And so did my step-dad. I have depression, too, actually."

"It's really common. But, yeah, they're like ninety percent sure Lincoln had it, too. But he used it to make himself stronger. He was put on suicide watch a few times when he was in his twenties. But then when was around his mid-thirties, he made a decision to never let it kill him."

"No, Booth took care of that for him," said Lily.

"Uh, yeah," said Evan.

They took off out of the park. Bright green July scenery shimmered with summer heat all around them as they passed the fields where the grounds crew mowed in their diesel tractors, the fishing area where a few solitary fishermen cast their lines, and past the boat launches with the sail boats and their tall metal masts clanging in the breeze.

Evan made for the nearest PNC Bank. There he deposited four hundred dollars worth of his check and took the rest in cash. They stopped for gas outside the highway at a Mobil station where he filled up his tank, and then, finally, they were turning onto the entrance ramp at Kent Lake Rd. and accelerating down I-96 West.

Evan looked at his travel companion. She looked so charming and unassuming in her thin-strapped top. Her cleavage stood out like generous scoops of vanilla Dairy Queen ice cream. She had her sunglasses on, big aviator-style ones. She had a nose ring in, too. How had he missed that the night before? The skull's somber face stood out on her bare shoulder, dead socket holes to oblivion and the cracked teeth clenching the small joint.

"I like your tattoos," Evan remarked. "When did you get them?"

"I got these last year," Lily said, pointing at the skull and the flower on either shoulder. She pointed to the black feather and the diamond. "And these I got two months ago."

"What do they all mean?"

Lily exhaled, as if she explained this to everyone.

She tapped the blue flower on her right shoulder.

"This is a blue lily, and blue flowers are supposed to be symbols for desire and hope and love and eternity. I don't have to explain to you why it's a lily, do I?"

Evan forced a chuckle.

“No, you don’t have to.”

Lily pointed at the skull.

“This I picked out of a book the tattoo artist showed me. It was my first one, and I was a huge pothead at the time so I wanted something weed-related.”

“Huh.”

She tapped her wrist and then her forearm.

“The diamond is because diamonds are unbreakable and it’s to remind me that I’m unbreakable, too. And the feather and the Dickinson quote is to remind me of my biological dad.”

“What’s the quote say?”

She held up her forearm so he could read the swirl of cursive. He could make out the word “nobody” and nothing else.

“It’s an Emily Dickinson poem. I have a book of her poems that my dad left.”

“Huh,” said Evan again, turning his head to examine the quote. “Why a feather, though?”

“It’s a raven’s feather,” she said. “My dad has one tattooed here.”

She tapped her chest just above her left breast.

“Cause his nickname was Poe when he was younger. He liked to write.”

Evan nodded, not sure what to say next.

He cleared his throat.

“What about the one on your, uh, under your stomach?”

“Yeah, I got that one the day I turned 18,” she said. “I regret it.”

Her tone shut him up. He wanted to ask more but drew a blank on what questions to ask.

The Billy Talent CD had thankfully stayed off since Kensington. They rode in silence for a few moments. Evan looked over at Lily a few times, but was so captivated by her that he couldn't think of any conversation worthy of starting.

He finally settled for telling Lily all he knew about Abraham Lincoln. Lily listened politely, lit up another cigarette and cracked the window. The blast of air from the freeway caused him to raise his voice a bit, but she still nodded as she inhaled and ashed. He had just gotten to the death of Ann Rutledge when she cut him off.

"...and then, the girl he fell in love with and broke up with Mary Todd for ended up dying, too—"

"Hey, I meant to show you this," Lily interrupted. "I found something I thought you'd like."

She pitched her cigarette stub out the window and rolled the window up. The silence evened out with the pressure of the car's interior.

"K," said Evan. "Is this your CD?"

"No, you have to listen to that after I'm gone," said Lily. "I can't be around when you listen. This is something different, though, and probably better..."

She tapped on her phone, showed Evan a web page with Youtube. She turned her phone volume up.

"I found this guy the other day," she said. "He does Alice in Chains covers. He's from Michigan. He goes by Phyllotaxis. Listen to this guy's voice."

Evan glanced at her phone screen. In the video, a twenty-something guy in glasses strummed an acoustic guitar in a modest-looking bedroom studio with a mic and music stand in

front of him. He had dark hair swept back and an olive complexion, wore a black wife-beater with thin-framed glasses and a trimmed goatee. There was a tattoo on his neck and on his arm. He sang with his eyes closed, in a voice drenched with reverb. It was a cover of I Stay Away. It did sound haunting and impressive. Evan listened and felt jealous, wondering if Lily wanted to sleep with this guy.

Lily sat back in her seat, holding her phone aloft, sunglasses on her face.

She turned to Evan.

“Travel south this year,” she said. “Just like we are. Get it?”

Evan smiled back.

“Yeah,” he said.

The GPS read eight hours to Nashville.

>Be Evan.

>Be 19.

>Be hanging with his buddy Brian Dinkins, whom he met in sixth grade English class.

>Brian has discovered a book called The Game by Neil Strauss. It’s about Strauss’s time in the Pick-Up Artist community.

> Neither Brian nor Evan has ever kissed a girl, nor done anything more than a hug.

>They both feel very cheated about this. Very left out. It seems the rest of their friends get laid on a damn near regular basis, whether they have a significant other or not.

>It is an excruciating condition, a pain that can only be shared with another male that understands it.

>But The Game teaches unsuccessful guys how to get women to be interested in them without the women even knowing it.

>Brian explains.

>I read this in ONE NIGHT, man. You know how I feel about reading. And I got through it in ONE NIGHT. It's THAT GOOD.

>What does it teach? Like, what do you do?

>Dude, it's like, you have this way of manipulating women. They base it on evolutionary biology and, like, mating and shit.

>Yeah, but what do you do?

>The key is, to like, find them in a club, and you have THREE SECONDS- got it?- THREE SECONDS to go and approach them. Any longer and they'll think you're a pussy and they won't be interested. You blow it after three seconds. But if you see one you like you have THREE SECONDS to just go up and start talking to her.

>What do you say?

>Well, that's the thing. You just look at them and get a feel for the situation, and then the key is to INSULT them but REALLY subtle-like. They call it negging.

>Nagging?

>No, negging. With an 'e'. I think it's short for negative or something like that.

>Oh.

>Yeah, so you neg them. And by negging them, you make them think you're not interested.

Remember that movie Homeward Bound? It's like in Homeward Bound when the cat pretends to not want the shrimp and then the little girl gives her the fucking shrimp, right? And then the

Michael J Fox dog is like, “Fuck, it works,” right? It’s the same thing here. You act like you don’t want it. And that makes them interested in you. Cause they’ll start to get pissed off, like, why is this douche making comments about my hair and shit? And sooner or later, she’ll start to think that’s kinda hot. Cause women like guys that don’t give a fuck, right? You have to act like you don’t need it. Like you can get it from fucking ANYWHERE, right?

>So you, just, like, insult them?

>Yeah, but not, like, blatantly. You just have to make little comments, or make them feel insecure. That’s the key—make them feel insecure.

>Huh.

>So they let their guard down.

>Yeah.

>And then when their guard’s down, you FUCK them.

>Huh.

>Yeah, and then you covertly, like, just ask them if, like, they want to go back to your place. Or you take them to another bar. Just get them comfortable to hanging out with you. Cause if you negged them right, they’ll think you don’t give a fuck and that’ll make them want to impress you so you’ll give them your valuable attention, right? But anyway, you always make sure to end up back at your place. And once that’s done then you like, chill for a bit, and finally, you ask them if they want to kiss you. And if you’ve done it all right, they’ll say yes. And you’re in. You’re in to WIN.

>Evan doesn’t quite get it, but he asks if he can borrow the book.

>No, man, I still need mine for reference, but I can show you where to buy it. We can go get one right now if you want.

>They do so, speeding to the Borders in Brighton.

>Evan stays up the next few nights devouring the book.

>He imagines the relief of finally subduing the rampant storm in his bowels.

>But somehow, still, as the weeks pass, neither he nor Brian find themselves in positions where there are girls around with whom to try the PUA tricks.

>I think we've been had, says Brian one day during a particularly depressing outing to the mall.

>They see many attractive young ladies walking about, always in groups just like the book says.

>I never noticed how women are never alone, says Evan.

>Yeah, it's bullshit, said Brian. I can't even get the balls to go say hi.

>They sit in the food court, trying to get up the courage to go and "open" a group.

>A few times Evan tries to get up and head in the direction of a potential target, but his body fails him and he stays seated at the table.

>They got Taco Bell upon arrival, and their half-eaten chalupas and burrito lay forgotten on their wrappers.

>Brian's acne-scarred cheeks are beet red. He finally explodes after yet another appealing group comes and goes without being approached.

>Why can Rob and Matt just get them without even fucking TRYING and we can't even get ONE?

>I dunno, says Evan.

>I'm not a complete slob, I shower every day, I brush my fucking teeth, I wipe my ass, I try to be nice to people... what more is there?

>I dunno, man, says Evan.

>I can't pretend I don't need it, says Brian as they get up and head for the exit. That's the problem. I can't pretend. I DO need it. Once I've had it once, I can probably act like I don't. But I gotta break through that one barrier. The glass ceiling, man. Fuck.

>They take off and drive home, stewing in their own bitter juices.

Lily put in the real Alice In Chains after the YouTube guy's cover was over. The first hour of the drive was filled with Layne Staley and Jerry Cantrell's quavering harmonies. Lily switched out Jar of Flies for Dirt once the last chords of Swing On This had faded into the sound of the wheels on the pavement. She didn't ask Evan if that's what he wanted, she just hit eject and took out Jar of Flies and flipped in the new CD without a word.

The startling crunch of Them Bones detonated outward from the speakers, making Evan jump.

"Wasn't expecting that," he said.

"What?" said Lily.

"I wasn't expecting that!" Evan repeated, louder.

"What?" Lily reached and turned down the volume, her fingers still on the knob.

"I wasn't expecting that sudden intro," said Evan.

Lily cranked the volume again without responding. She went back to her phone. She had gotten noticeably fussier as the trip had gone on.

“You must have unlimited texting,” Evan said, again drowned out by the music.

Lily nodded without looking at him.

They didn’t talk much for the first leg of the trip. Evan would look over at Lily from time to time. Lily would look at her phone. She asked him if she could plug it in.

“I brought my own charger,” she said, producing a spiral cord that plugged into the cigarette lighter. Evan said yes and she removed his ancient charger and inserted her own. Then she went back to texting.

By the time Dirt ended, they were well into Ohio. The woods and towns and wetlands of Michigan had given way to flat fields and farmhouses some miles back. The sky seemed to widen above them, big and blue and cloudless.

Spinning rubber hummed on cement. A semi barreled past them on the left.

Evan struggled to find something to ask Lily.

“So why did you decide to come with?”

Lily shrugged. She held up a hand and ticked off reasons.

“I didn’t want to work this weekend, I’ve never been to Nashville, it’s pretty much free cause you said you’re paying for the hotel and everything, I’ve known you and your family for years so I trust you...” she trailed off, glancing over at him, her eyes regarding him languidly behind her sunglasses with the fake diamonds.. “...yeah, so that’s why.”

“You still consider me a friend? Even though I haven’t seen you in years?”

“Yeah, I mean, I remember you and my brother hanging out, like, all the time. I remember you guys playing street hockey almost every fucking day in the summer.”

She leaned forward and hit eject on the CD player.

“What should we listen to now?” said Lily. “You should pick, cause I picked Alice In Chains.”

“Let’s listen to Smashing Pumpkins, if you have them,” said Evan. “They always remind me of summer.”

“Works for me,” said Lily, reaching for his CDs. “Which one you want?”

“Siamese Dream.”

“I have that.”

Lily flipped through her CD book, found a burned copy of Siamese Dream, pulled it out, and inserted it. The drumroll intro of “Cherub Rock” and the subsequent shiny-clean chord chops filled the car.

“This is a good album,” said Lily. “This and Mellon Collie. I hate Billy Corgan but I love these albums.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Evan. “It sucks this kind of stuff isn’t, like, mainstream popular anymore. It’s all Lady Gaga and Katy Perry and the other whores of Babylon now.”

“The other whores of Babylon?”

“Yeah, that’s what I call all the female pop stars these days. Taylor Swift, Pink—all of them. They suck. They’re ruining the world.”

“Jeez,” said Lily. “Lady Gaga’s okay. You can’t argue with Bad Romance.”

“Yeah, Jason used to say that,” Evan said, gauging her reaction at the mention of Jason. He hadn’t told her about Jason’s suicide and she hadn’t asked. He wondered if she’d heard and that’s why she hadn’t said anything.

She didn’t take the bait, only continued to text, her knees drawn up to her chest now.

“I don’t know if you heard about Jason,” he ventured. “You know, my older brother.”

She glanced over at him, looking like she didn’t want to get into this now.

“Yeah, I did. I didn’t think I should bring it up.”

“It’s all right. How did you hear?”

“Matt, the other night, mentioned it.”

“Ah. Yeah, the first week of June.”

“How old was he?”

“23.”

“God, that sucks.”

“He had been having a lot of problems lately, he’d joined the military and went to Afghanistan and had just been just fucking around for the past couple years... He was probably clinically depressed but he wouldn’t get any help for it, cause, you know, masculinity and all that. Plus, we’re all broke.”

“That sucks,” Lily said again. “That really sucks. I didn’t know he was in the military.”

“Yeah, he served in Afghanistan for a tour and a half and then he got discharged.”

“Why?”

“We never really found out, but it had to do with him having panic attacks or something of that nature. He got diagnosed with something but wouldn’t get help for it once he was out. He was, like, in denial. And my parents don’t believe in that shit anyway, they think it’s all just Big Pharma making money.”

“Yeah, I can understand that,” said Lily. “Still sucks, though. Suicide is... I don’t know.”

She shook her head and put her phone down.

“How’d your sister take it?”

“She’s in the hospital. Has been for a month. She was the one who found him.”

“Oh, God. That’s horrible. How old is she now?”

“Eleven.”

“Eleven, GOD, I can’t even picture what she looks like. She’s still a baby to me. What hospital?”

“Alliance. In Jackson. She’s getting better though. They said she might be out next week. They’ve kept her way longer than normal.”

Lily nodded. She seemed loosened up now. She was curious. That was a good thing. Evan hadn’t talked about this with anyone outside of his parents. His friends were all too chicken to broach the subject. They got all tongue-tied and began spouting platitudes if they were willing to discuss it at all. It was like they were worried that the tragedy was somehow contagious.

“How did Jason kill himself?” Lily asked. She quickly added, “And if you don’t want to talk about it, I completely understand.”

“No, it’s fine. He shot himself in the head. With his Glock.”

“Oh my God. And your sister found him like that?”

Evan told her everything, right down to the steak knife.

“Oh, my God. That’s fucking awful,” Lily said. “I can’t even... like, that’s just, like, the worst thing I’ve ever heard. Why would she cut her forehead?”

“It’s kind of a long story, but basically she had been having a lot of trouble sleeping, and she thought that somehow by doing that she would be allowed to sleep.”

“Jesus fuck. Is she, like, okay? Did she, you know, permanently...”

Lily made a line across her forehead with a finger.

“She’ll probably have scars, but they’re not that bad, considering what it could’ve been.

When I saw her that night I thought she’d like, peeled her scalp back, scalped herself. But it looked worse than it actually was cause head wounds bleed a lot. She only cut like three or four lines in. The kitchen looked like someone had been murdered.”

“Goddamn.”

“Yeah. But I heard the doctor talking to my parents last time I was there, just before we left, and they said she’s a lot better. I got to see her. She still talks a little weird, she’s got this weird idea about this place called gloryland where she says Jason went, but she’s a lot better than she was when she went in. She’s, like, aware that she just went through some sort of psychotic break. So she’s still scared, still a little fuzzy, but she’s back. The first time I visited her she didn’t want to talk to me. They said she was afraid that I was going to kill myself, she was afraid my dad would kill himself, my mom...”

“Are you?”

“What?”

“Going to kill yourself?”

“No,” Evan said, shaking his head firmly. “No, not planning on it...”

That was something he’d made his mind up on the moment he’d set foot in the house, piss drunk on the night he’d been called home from Matt’s. The night he’d seen flashing blue and red lights on the tree tops before he’d even turned the corner on his street. He thought of Maddie, how she’d seemed hollow, hollowed out and silent, and his parents, lost and afraid. The look on

his father's face had been the most frightening of all. And the thought that had crashed into his brain over and over: *Jason is gone, Jason is gone, Jason is gone.*

"But she doesn't think that anymore, right? That you're going to kill yourself."

"No, she's way better, now. But honestly, that hurt way more than anything else. I mean, honestly, like, even if I did really want to, you know, do that, just seeing what it did to her, what it did to my parents... "

Evan shook his head.

"No, I'm stuck here. I'm staying. If I go early it'll be because something took me. It's better to just stay. No matter how much it sucks, it's better to just stay."

"And how are you after all this?" Lily asked.

Evan was struck. It occurred to him that no one had really asked him this before.

"Uh, I mean, I guess I've been fine. I'm more affected by what happened to Maddie than what happened to Jason. You know, at least, like, as far as Jason, his problems are over, you know?"

"Yeah," said Lily, grim-faced. "Yeah, I guess so."

She looked out over the fields towards the patches of trees and the farmhouses gliding by in the hot, clear day.

"You said she was talking about a place called gloryland? That was her, delusion or whatever?"

"Yeah, from what she said, it's like this utopia or version of heaven where people can go if they've been mostly a good person for their lives but if they've done like one or two really bad things they can go there and learn how to be happy again so they can get into the actual heaven."

“So it’s like purgatory.”

“Yeah, kinda, from the way she describes it, yeah, but not really. It’s a positive place, like a happy purgatory. It’s a place you can forget about everything that’s wrong and just learn how to be your best self again. I mean, she made it up in her head to make herself feel better about what she saw. That’s what the doctor said. She needs to believe Jason didn’t, you know, just end like that.”

Lily didn’t say anything.

“We were really religious growing up, so it’s like, an off shoot of that,” said Evan. “She got the term gloryland from this Johnny Cash hymn that they played at Jason’s memorial service.”

“So it’s, like, an actual thing?”

“No, gloryland isn’t, it’s just a lyric in the Johnny Cash hymn. *‘I’ve got a home in gloryland that outshines the sun,’* is how it goes. Jason loved Johnny Cash. So that’s where it came from and she just made up this shit in her head to cope with the trauma of the memory and all that.”

“That sucks,” said Lily again. “Really don’t know what else to say to that.”

“Yeah, it was that, and then she was also fucking obsessed with Lee DeWyze and Crystal Bowersox. That was another coping mechanism. They said she probably zeroed in on them because that’s what she was focused on the most right before everything happened. That was like, the last thing she associated with when she felt normal last.”

“Who the hell are Lee DeWyze and Crystal Bowersox?”

“The winner and the runner-up of the most recent season of Idol. She has their studio performances on her iPod, we got them off LimeWire, and she would listen to them all the time.

“Ah.”

“Yeah, it got to the point where couldn’t fall asleep unless she was listening to them. That’s all she would listen to, just that playlist or whatever, front to back. But yeah, that’s how we started to know something was wrong. She was fine, like, I mean- like, not fine, but not acting crazy, for like a week after it happened, and then like a day after the memorial she couldn’t sleep, she was sucking her thumb again which she hadn’t done in like seven years, she would not take her earbuds out, she only listened to that one playlist, she started talking about gloryland and being kissed by a rose, which she got from one of the Lee DeWyze’s songs—“

“Kissed by a rose?”

“Yeah, Lee sang it at one point this season. It’s that old Seal song. Like, the--”

Evan mumble-sang a bit of the “*ba-da-da-ba-da-bah-da-bah-daaah*” intro.

Lily nodded.

“Yeah, from that old Val Kilmer Batman movie.”

“Yeah, that’s it. It was the Lee DeWyze version. And it got to the point where she could only sleep with her earbuds in, in my parent’s room, and then when they tried to get her to sleep in her own room, they ended up finding her in the kitchen like half an hour later, and now she’s in the hospital.”

“Jesus fuck,” said Lily. “I’m so fucking sorry you guys are going through this. You guys were always so nice to us. How are your parents?”

“Shitty. My dad just got a new job and he’s getting health insurance again in August, which is good, but they’re going to be in debt for Maddie’s hospitalization and the memorial service and everything else for a long time. Dad was pretty much unemployed for like two years before he got this new job, since the Recession, so... yeah.”

“Yeah, my step-dad was unemployed, too, before I moved out. My mom was supporting them both, working at the bank.”

“We’ll make it,” said Evan. “I feel like the worst is over now. That’s one of the reasons I’m trying out for Idol. For the money. And cause, fuck it, you know? Life is short.”

Evan knew he was probably sounding stupid but he couldn’t stop talking.

“Follow your dreams, even if you’ve never told anyone about them and you know everyone will think they’re stupid. You know? Fuck it. It’s like the lottery, you know? Who knows?”

“Mmm,” said Lily.

She picked up her phone again, attending to another text.

>be Evan.

>be twelve.

>be talking to Josh Harris from down the street.

>Josh has just made out with someone for the first time.

>Evan is very curious to know what it feels like.

>Evan's parents have warned him to stay away from Josh, as Josh was seen torturing a frog he'd fished out of the corner pond one day, jabbing it with a sharpened stick and pinning it to the street.

>Evan doesn't know if that story is true, because Josh has always seemed like a nice enough guy, but he's cautious around him as a result.

>What does her tongue feel like? Evan asks him.

>Josh considers, thinking.

>It feels like, if you take, like, maybe a slice of peach or something, and like, slide it around in your mouth. Kind of like that.

>Who was it with?

>Trent's sister. Lily.

>Lily? Where did you guys do it?

>In one of the sand pits back on the bike trail.

>No way.

>Yeah, she took me back there, said she had something to show me. Next thing I know she's all over me.

>How long did it last?

>I dunno, like, maybe fifteen minutes or something. Kind of hard to tell.

"Do you believe in God?" Evan asked Lily when they were nearly to Cincinnati.

"No," she flatly replied, but then she cocked her head and re-considered. "Well, not the guy in the clouds with the beard God. But, like, the universe itself as a higher being or something

outside the universe controlling things in a way that we couldn't perceive or understand, I guess there's no way we could ever know that. But I think most of the evidence points to we're on our own, generally. I definitely don't believe in religion."

"That's kind of what I think," said Evan. "It's like, we only have five senses, and we're always perceiving the universe through those five senses alone. It's like Rick Warren, the guy who wrote the Purpose Driven life said, us trying to understand God would be like an ant trying to understand the internet. But the Internet still exists whether or not ants can understand it."

"I've never read that. The Purpose Driven Life."

"Me neither. I just heard him say that somewhere. But yeah, my mom used to make us go to church every Sunday when I was a kid."

"Mine didn't. Larry did, though. For a little while."

"You're lucky. It was boring. I didn't really get anything out of it, ever. I remember you at catechism, though."

"Yeah, we only went for a couple of years. Cause of Larry. Then I got caught smoking pot and they kicked me out of catechism and we stopped going after that."

They were silent. Then Lily spoke again.

"I think that mostly has to do with the fact that people are afraid. They're afraid of not understanding what it means to exist, and so they make up their own reasons for it so they can have something to lean on. It makes them feel better."

"I hope existence is more than a void," said Evan. "Kind of a whole lot of something for a whole lot of nothing, you know?"

“I mean, I do, too. But it might not be. And even if it is, so fucking what? We’re still here, we’re still doing our thing, and it doesn’t change anything.”

“Well, I hope I can get onto Idol and become a celebrity then,” he said. “If that is the case, the only thing you can do is get the best possible deal out of this one existence you’re going to have.” He paused. “Make it to gloryland. Like an earthly version of gloryland.”

Lily looked at him, and he couldn’t read her expression.

“Yeah, that’d be nice, wouldn’t it?”

The Smashing Pumpkins were still playing, but it was a slow, boring song.

Evan reached for Lily’s CD book on the backseat.

“I think we need a new CD,” he said. “Siamese Dream is good, but the first half is way better than the second half.”

“I concur,” said Lily.

“Pick something,” said Evan, tossing it into her lap. He glanced over to see what she would pick.

She chose a Mastodon mix. Evan didn’t care for them but said nothing.

“Do you sing or do anything artistic,” he asked amid the opening chorus of Blood and Thunder.

“No. I used to draw, but I was never really any good at it so I stopped.”

“What do you do now, like, in your free time?”

“Uh... I work out. I watch TV. I go on the Internet. You know. Stuff. I work.”

“How is your mom and Larry?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t talked to my mom in a while. Last I saw her she was smoking a joint on the couch in her underwear. Larry actually died awhile ago .”

“Holy shit, how?”

“He killed himself, actually.”

“Holy shit. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Fuck him.”

“Why not?”

“He was an asshole.”

“Why? Did he drink at all?”

“No, he smoked weed all the time but when he wasn’t smoking it he would just be this abusive asshole. Sometimes even when he was smoking. He’d get really angry over the slightest shit.”

“Like what?”

“Like, you know, you turn a light on at the wrong time or something.”

“Did he ever hit you?”

“No, he would, like, grab you and throw you in a room or something. I mean, he’d spank me when I was younger. But my mom would’ve killed him if he’d ever punched me or something like that.”

“Did he ever hit Marty?”

“A couple times I thought they were going to get into it, but they never did. I think Marty stood up for himself enough that Larry didn’t want to mess with him.”

Lily paused.

“I think he wanted to fuck me, too,” she said.

“What? Why?”

“You can just tell, you know, you start to recognize the look that men give you when they wanna, you know, get it in, when you’re like, twelve. They do it even when they don’t realize it.”

“That’s fucked up. He never touched you, though?”

“No, like I said, my mom would’ve straight- up murdered him. But I saw him looking at me a few times, and the way he would talk... he was always meanest to me out of anyone. That’s one of the reasons he was so angry. He was getting old and he’d never had much sex and I was kind of this constant reminder of what a failure he was. That’s just what I think, though.”

“God, I hope that doesn’t happen to me,” said Evan, thinking of the book Brian had shown him two summers ago, *The Game*.

He’d completely forgotten about it. He scrambled to remember the techniques used to seduce the women. He needed to start looking for opportunities to neg Lily. Even though he hadn’t had the guts to try anything out with a stranger, surely it would work on someone you were already familiar with.

“How old were you when you lost your virginity?” he asked.

“14.”

“Who was it with?”

“This guy, Juan Torres.”

“No way. From the bus?”

“Uhh... yeah, him.”

“Where?”

“After a football game. In his car. Wasn’t that great. He didn’t know what the fuck he was doing. What about you?”

“I’m still a virgin.” Evan said.

I shouldn’t have said that, he thought immediately.

Lily raised her eyebrows.

“You’re 21 and you’re still a virgin?”

“Yeah.”

“That fucking sucks. I think I’d be losing my mind by now.”

“I am,” Evan said. He tried to laugh.

“Were your parents ever mean to you?” asked Lily.

“No, they never did anything except for like, occasional spanking under extreme circumstances. They were controlling, though. They didn’t mean to be, but they were. You lost your virginity at fourteen; I didn’t know what a condom was until I was fourteen.”

“You didn’t know what a condom was?”

“No, I got it mixed up with condo. I thought somehow having sex in a condo would prevent pregnancy.”

Lily let out a genuine laugh, a beautiful sound. It lit up Evan’s heart.

“That’s hilarious.”

“Until I was a freshman in high school. I mean, come on. Yeah. But yeah, no, they didn’t hit us or throw us around or anything. And I never had to worry about getting molested, which was nice.”

Lily gave a snorting laugh.

“I saw a black woman get slapped in a KFC once, though,” Evan said.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, I was there with Matt and we were in line and there was her and this other black dude working behind the counter and the dude was obviously pissed at her for something and he like, leaned in to say something to her and she was kind of dismissive of him, like, didn’t even look up at him, and he just hauled off and gave her one and walked off. Really hard, I mean, just —“ Evan took his hands off the steering wheel and quickly whapped the fingers of his right hand against his left palm. “Right on the cheek.”

“What did everyone in line do? Was it just you and Matt?”

“No, there were a bunch of other people, plus the people working there, and no one did anything. They acted like it hadn’t happened. Even though it was, like, right in front of all of us.”

“What did the woman do?”

“Nothing. She just came back over and gave us our food and said ‘Have a nice day’ and that was it.”

“And then you left.”

“Yeah, then we took off. The guy was smoking a cigarette out back and I remember I told Matt we should go over there and kick his ass. I felt really angry the more I thought about it but

we obviously didn't do anything. We just ate in my car in the MJR theater parking lot. It was right before we went and saw The Dark Knight, actually, now that I think of it."

"Yeah, people like to not get involved in other people's shit. Especially strangers. It's like, better to not get involved. It's just easier to leave it alone. You don't want to get any of it on you."

"Was your biological dad abusive?"

"I don't know, I barely know him. I saw him like twice a year when I was little then when I was eight he moved to Houston and I haven't seen or heard from him since."

"That sucks."

"Eh, no it doesn't. I don't need him."

Evan nodded.

Lily suggested they listen to something else, something quieter, and Mastodon was switched out for Death Cab for Cutie. Lily skipped to the second track.

A thrumming bass was joined by drums under frosty sustained guitar notes and a percussive, descending piano riff.

Lily hit fast forward on the CD player.

"This intro lasts like five fucking minutes, though," she muttered.

She let up on the button just in time for Ben Gibbard's breathy voice to sing an ominous refrain about possessing an unrequited lover's heart.

"Good lyrics," said Evan. He knew it was fate that they were listening to this song. It felt like it had been written for them, in this moment. He tried to suppress a smile. All of a sudden

Lily's relationship with Daddy and any other guy seemed an easily surmountable obstacle. They were all back in Michigan. Evan was the only one here with Lily.

They drove on, Ohio now behind them and Kentucky farmland spreading out all around. The sky was an imposing dome under which groves of trees stood defiant against the sun, the buildings baking.

>Be Evan.

>Be 16.

>Dicking around on laptop, lying in bed in the standard position, head propped up on pillow, laptop on chest.

>Dad comes home from work, Evan can hear him talking to mom in kitchen.

>Hey, how's it going?

>No answer from Dad.

>What's wrong?

>Evan can tell his dad has taken a seat at the table without a word.

>It's a blood-letting, Nancy, he finally says after a few minutes.

>Evan tenses up. His father is always quiet when he's in a bad mood.

>Another one? How is there anyone even still there?

> I don't think I'm going to make it this time. No loyalty. Fifteen years, and it means nothing.

>What? When?

>Later on in the month, probably. If not then, definitely by the end of the year.

>Are you going to take the severance?

>I don't have any choice. But I'm not going to find another job that pays as well. Not around here.

>We can't move.

>No, we can't.

>More silence. Heavy, heavy silence.

>I'll be damned if I dip into our retirement, says Evan's dad finally. We have enough in the savings to last a few months. I'll be able to find something by then, even with the economy the way it is... I'll travel or something. Contract. We're not sunk yet.

>More silence from the kitchen, then Evan's dad speaks again.

>Life is not fair. I thought I knew that when I was younger. Guess I didn't.

>His mom says something he can't hear.

>The world's moved on, Nancy. It's moving on. It just... doesn't need people like us anymore.

>Evan isn't sure if they know he can hear them.

>He gets up and closes his door. The latch clicks.

>He hears his dad clear his throat and asks how everyone else is doing. Their voices turn cheery again.

"So are you seeing anyone right now?"

Evan knew the answer was probably no, but he wanted to confirm it.

"No," said Lily. "Not, like, officially."

Evan tried to conceal another relieved smile.

"You're not with your roommate slash boss?"

“I mean, we fuck and stuff, but, he’s not, like, my boyfriend.”

Instantly, Evan’s gut turned to liquid metal again. The agony crashed in. Horrid thoughts flooded his mind’s eye. He fought them away as best he could. The verbal confirmation left her lips and ripped apart his stable mood like wild dogs.

“You fuck a lot of guys,” he said, trying to keep the conversation going, saying the first thing that he could think of. He quickly realized it was the wrong thing to say.

Lily’s eyes flashed at him, the female human’s telltale warning sign to back the fuck off.

“What kind of a fucking statement is that?”

Evan backpedaled, realizing his error.

“I’m just, you know, asking.”

“Yeah, I fuck a lot of guys,” Lily said. “You probably wish you could fuck a lot of girls, but you don’t.”

“I wasn’t trying to piss you off. I mean, I saw you sleep with two of my friends the other night.”

“I only fucked Rob, I just sucked Matt off.”

“Oh, well, that changes everything.”

He meant to sound playful, but it came off as prickly.

Lily didn’t say anything for a moment, then spoke again.

“I met Rob for the first time that night. I liked him, he liked me. So what?”

“So nothing. None of my business. You’re right, I wish I could get that kind of action.”

“It’s really not that great. It’s like, just another thing that you think will fix stuff but it doesn’t. I don’t have the stomach to, like, sleep by myself more than once or twice a week. I hate being alone for long periods of time. My depression acts up. I’ll fucking cut myself.”

“Cut yourself?”

“Yeah, when I’m depressed. I cut myself. Sometimes.”

“Where?” Evan had seen her entire body and hadn’t noticed any scars.

“On the inside of my leg here, like, in the crease between my vag and my leg.”

She ran a finger up and down the space on her jeans. Evan’s dick chubbed up.

“It’s really sensitive there so I don’t need to make it very deep or long. Just a little nick.”

Evan’s mouth was going dry at the sight of her finger in the vicinity of her womanhood. He thought of the other night when she’d fingered herself in front of the four of them.

“What do you use to cut yourself?”

“Straight razor usually. I’ll just do little nicks. Sometimes I’ll go—,” she gasped a little gasp, demonstrating, her eyes widening.

“And only on the inside of your left leg, huh?” Evan side-eyed her, his gaze darting down to her crotch then back up to her face.

“I keep it localized. I never wanted anyone to find out. Good thing, too, I never would’ve gotten my job with scars everywhere. Not at the Blue, anyway.”

“How long have you done it?”

“Since I was like 12, I think. I don’t know, I stop doing it for a while and then I’ll go back to it.”

“Do you keep the razor clean? Do you use the same one every time?”

“Usually, and sometimes. Sometimes I’ll, like, pour vodka or something over it or something. Sometimes I just don’t give a fuck. Sometimes I just need to let it out.”

“Hmm,” said Evan.

He’d pulled himself out of the quicksand, evaded her wrath for the time being. But she’d verbally confirmed what he’d already suspected—she was sleeping with Daddy. That was both horrifying and despair-inducing.

“How’d you get your job at the Blue?”

“Well, my boss. I met him through another friend of mine who was a dancer there. And I needed a job and place to stay and he hooked me up.”

Evan thought of Daddy eating out Lily’s pussy and shoved the thought away.

“That was nice of him. Does your friend live with you guys, too?”

“No, she never did, but she’s not at the Blue anymore, either. People come and go a lot. You make your own schedule. That’s why I didn’t have to come in this weekend. You’re basically a contractor, you just come in a couple days a week and pay the house out at the end of your shift and keep whatever’s left.”

“How much do they take?”

“Thirty-five percent.”

They fell silent again, Death Cab filling in the space. Evan focused on avoiding any and all thoughts of Lily with Daddy.

The sky was white with sun and the world seemed bleached. Kentucky was rushing by, Louisville behind them.

They passed a white pick-up with a couple of hard-ass redneck boys riding in it, their muscled, tanned arms draped out the open window frames. They both wore baseball caps and had mountain man beards. The one on the driver's side had sunglasses on. He spotted Lily, lifted the sunglasses, and winked at her.

Evan felt a wave of jealousy roll over him as Lily gave a coy smile.

"I'm hungry," he said, brimming with insecurity.

"Me, too," said Lily.

They pulled off at the next exit. There was a Waffle House advertised on the exit sign along with a McDonald's, Arby's and Taco Bell. They parked at the Waffle House and marveled at the heat that enveloped them as they stepped out of the car.

"Hot as balls out here," commented Lily.

Their waitress was short and chubby and ponytailed and homely. Evan ordered waffles, and Lily got an omelet.

"So you must make a lot of money dancing," said Evan, tearing open a sweet and low and emptying it into his coffee. He still fought off thoughts of Daddy going down on her, plowing her with sweat dripping off his chin. He still felt like his body was full of sickly white light, like there was a faulty fluorescent tube up his middle that sent bolts of psychic pain through him every time it flickered.

"Fuck yeah, thousands," said Lily. "I've got almost ten grand saved up and I haven't even been there five months."

"And you're going to go to Eastern?"

"Maybe."

“When?”

“I don’t know. Maybe in another year. I don’t know. Gonna wait and see. I think I need my G.E.D. first or something. Cause I dropped out of high school when Larry killed himself.”

“What year was it?”

“My senior year. I was failing almost everything anyway.”

Lily played with a straw wrapper.

“And anyway, I’m still getting used to, like, having any money to begin with. I still spend it like I don’t have any. I’ve found out I’m actually pretty good at saving.”

“You haven’t gone shopping with any of it or anything yet?”

“No,” said Lily. She sipped her coffee. “I really should. I need a bunch of stuff.”

Evan nodded and surveyed the Waffle House.

There was a big, beer-bellied, white-bearded farmer John-type sitting at the counter, an aged married couple over in a booth on the other side of the diner, and a solitary Middle Eastern-looking guy sitting by himself in the far corner and perusing a USA Today over his toast and jam. Their chubby waitress shared the space behind the counter with a surly looking fry cook. The two occasionally exchanged words with Farmer John, but other than that, the place was silent.

“Do you ever feel...” Evan was about to say ‘dirty’ but restrained himself before the word could get off his tongue. He reconsidered, then said, “...*weird* about doing what you do?”

Lily looked up from her phone.

“What do you mean?”

“Well...” Evan hesitated, then spat it out, “Technically a lot of what you do is technically, you know... prostitution.”

Lily's eyes flashed again.

"Uh, no," she said sharply.

"It's not?"

"No, it isn't."

"But--"

"No, it is *not*."

"But—"

"And since I know you didn't actually *mean* that, I'm going to let it go."

Their food came and the waitress mutely passed out their plates. Lily doused her omelet with hot sauce and tucked in without another word. Her phone was next to her plate. She tapped at it, wiped hot sauce off her mouth with her napkin, tapped some more. She must've been hungrier than she realized—her omelet was nearly gone in only a few bites.

"Who are you always texting?"

"Whole bunch of people," said Lily. "Why do you keep asking me?"

"Cause I'm just wondering. You spend a lot of time on it."

Lily shrugged.

"Welcome to the 21st century."

She clicked the phone's screen off and frowned, as if remembering something she'd been meaning to say.

"Why should I feel guilty about something that *men* want, anyway? I mean, like, what were you looking for when you came in with your friends the other night?"

“I don’t know. Brian was the one who wanted to go. Brian and Rob. I’d never even been to a strip club before.”

“You’re a twenty-one year old virgin and you’d never even been to a strip club before two nights ago. Wow.”

“Yeah,” Evan said. “Brian wanted to go.”

Lily snorted.

“Brian. Fuck that guy.”

“Yeah, he’s definitely...” Evan searched for the word. “Rambunctious.”

“He’s a drunk asshole is what he is,” Lily said, wrinkling her nose. “Nasty.”

“I can’t believe you wiped your vagina juice on him the other night,” Evan said.

Lily sipped more coffee and smirked.

“He was asking for it.”

“What’s the weirdest thing a—” Evan stopped himself from saying ‘john’ at the last second and instead said, “...customer has asked you to do?”

Lily drizzled more Frank’s Red Hot on her dwindling omelet.

“There was this one guy, who used to come in every Friday, and he’d have ketchup and fries with him, like, from McDonald’s or something, or maybe Five Guys, I don’t know, but he’d have me bend over and he’d get the fries all ketchupy and throw them at my ass and legs, and watch them, like, drip down my legs and ass. Then he’d eat them.”

“Oh, God.”

“Yeah, but he spent a lot of money and he never wanted anything else. Just that. I made like two grand just off that one guy on a Friday one time.”

“Weird. What did he do that let him spend that kind of money?”

“I don’t think he was really rich, just an engineer or something. If a guy doesn’t have a family to spend the money on, he can spend it wherever he wants, you know?”

“I guess. Where the hell does a guy get a fetish like that? How does it develop?”

“I know, right? Fuck if I know.”

Lily rolled her big brown eyes up and to the left, thinking.

“I’m tryin’a think... most guys just want to feel me up... there was this little guy who wanted me to slap him across the face and insult him and stuff. I had a lot of guys that wanted to be dominated, but this guy wanted to be, like, physically assaulted. He’d get the VIP room every time. Every. Fucking. Time.”

“So you’d actually slap him?”

“Yeah, it was kind of fun actually. He had a beard and I’d hit him so hard my hand would tingle after. He wanted me to hit him *hard*.”

“How would you insult him?”

“I’d just like, strip him naked and make fun of his tiny penis, his fat rolls, his height, his baldness, stuff like that. He would almost always cry, too.”

“Did he actually have a tiny penis?”

“Yeah,” smirked Lily. She held up a crooked pinky finger. “Like this. When it was hard. You could hardly see it when it wasn’t.”

Evan guffawed, spraying wet crumbs of chewed waffle. He clapped his hands over his mouth, embarrassed, and distributed the bits in his napkin.

Lily kept talking.

“He liked me a lot because I’m little. He said he loved being slapped around by littler girls.”

“How old were these guys?”

Lily shrugged.

“In their forties and fifties, probably. I dunno.”

“How does someone get to show their dick in a place like that? Molly wouldn’t even let me touch her even though I said I’d pay her.”

“Well, I’d just make fun of it,” said Lily. “I’d never actually touch it. You can do pretty much whatever you want in VIP provided there’s no actual penetration. Some places do that but you can’t get away with it at the Blue cause they have cameras.”

“Oh,” said Evan.

“But you had a dance with Molly? With the glasses?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, Molly’s not about that. I don’t really know her that well, though. It depends on the dancer you get. She could probably also tell that you didn’t have much money on you anyway. Young guys almost never have any real money.”

“Have you ever given blowjobs?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes. Not the ketchup guy or the dominance guy, ever, but I’ve done it before. If the guy’s not gross and he has the money, I’ll do it. It’s not like attractive guys are, you know, always going to be interested in me. My mom’s a fucking cow, so... but yeah, I only do it if I think the guy’s hot. And if he can pay me. As long as you’re not doing it all the time you can get away with it. It depends. People kind of feel it out.”

“How much do you charge for oral?”

“It depends. Like, usually like 300 to 500 minimum. You kind of gauge what they’ll agree to. I’ve done it for 150 before, but that guy was hot. He was a firefighter.”

But you’re not a prostitute, thought Evan, watching her swallow the last bite of her omelet.

The waitress brought their check over, set it down.

“You guys need anything else? More coffee?” she asked.

“I’m good,” said Evan. “Are you good?”

“Yeah,” said Lily.

“All right, well, no rush,” said the waitress. She sauntered away.

Evan reached for the check but Lily lightly slapped his hand.

“Let me get this,” she said. “You’re paying for, like, everything already.”

Evan was touched.

“Thanks, Lily,” he said. “Thanks a lot, that’s nice of you.”

“My pleasure,” said Lily, smiling sweetly. She gathered her little handbag and phone and headed for the cashier.

After she paid, they waded through the humidity to the car and resumed their journey.

Lily put in Radiohead, suggesting they round out the trip by listening to The Bends, OK Computer and Kid A in one successive binge. Then she lit another cigarette.

The GPS read approximately two and a half hours to go.

>Be Evan.

>Be in middle school.

>Classes are over, and Evan is in a pickle.

>He has missed his bus home due to a savage case of the runs.

>He runs to the bathroom after his last class, regretting every bite of the suspicious-looking sloppy joes the cafeteria served for lunch.

>By the time he's finished, Evan's anus feels like it's been bleached and half the busses have departed from the circle behind the school.

>He knows the second-to-last bus in the line goes to the subdivision next to his, so he can take this other bus and get off at the closest convenient stop and just walk home.

>He doesn't want to call his parents, who are both at work.

>Better this than pestering them and having to explain he was shitting his brains out for a good fifteen minutes.

>He sprints to the back of the line and makes it in the door just before the bus is about to take off.

>The driver gives him a look that says, "I've never seen you in these parts before," but Evan avoids eye contact as he slips by and the driver doesn't say anything.

>The bus is packed and noisy as hell.

>Evan walks down the aisle to the back, unfamiliar faces everywhere, every seat filled.

>He hates doing this.

>Only one seat left in the whole bus, in the back, second to last seat on the right.

>Big kid sits in it, greasy and obese.

>Evan approaches the seat.

>Can I sit here? asks Evan, not sure why's he's bothering to ask.

>The kid doesn't look happy about having to share his seat. His considerable gut, contained in an XXL blue Detroit Lions hoodie, takes up a good two thirds of it. He also stinks.

>You can if you give me a drink of that, the kid says.

>He gestures to the bottle of Coke that Evan is holding. Evan hasn't had a drink from it since before his stomach began its gaseous rebellion while he sat in seventh hour.

>Evan hands over the bottle and slides into the seat just as the bus takes off.

>Confirmation consummation, says the kid. He takes a hearty swig.

>He goes to give the Coke back and Evan waves him off.

>You can just have it, he says.

>A girl sits behind Evan in the final row, straight brown hair framing a pinched face.

>She asks Evan, Are you gay?

>Evan turns to her.

>What?

>Are you gay?

>Evan is incredulous.

>No. Why?

>You sound gay.

>I sound gay?

>When you talk.

>...Okay, says Evan, turning back around.

>The bus pulls out of the parking lot

>The big kid cranes his fat neck back to look at the girl.

>You wanna know if he likes the cock?

>Yeah.

>Why? You wanna ask him out or something?

>No, says the girl. He's, like, the ugliest thing I've ever seen. Plus, he sounds gay, too.

>Evan says nothing, can't wait for his stop.

They drove another twenty minutes before stopping for gas in the foothills of lower Kentucky, the gas station standing on a great grass bluff overlooking a green valley. It was vast and beautiful, like something out of a fantasy novel.

Lily walked over to the guard rail and snapped pictures with her iPhone, standing sickly pale in the sunlight.

She really does look unhealthy, Evan thought as he pumped the gas. He noticed several other guys at the pumps, all of varying ages, noticing Lily.

Evan had a very satisfying nose-picking in the bathroom stall. The bathroom smelled like strawberries and farts. He flicked away the huge booger he'd dug out of his left nostril and whistled while he washed his hands.

Lily emerged from the ladies room as cheery as she had been that morning. The meal seemed to have rejuvenated her.

"Sorry for being a snippy little bitch earlier," she said when they both got back in the car. "I'm really glad you're taking me on this little mini-cation."

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you could come with. It’s, uh, you know, it’s nice to catch up with people,” said Evan as he pulled back onto the highway.

The cluster of towers that comprised downtown Nashville spread out along the southern horizon not too much later. They were listening to the Deftones, Lily having changed her mind about Radiohead halfway through OK Computer.

“There it is,” said Evan.

“Yep,” said Lily, texting again. She gave the shining city in the miles ahead a perfunctory glance, then it was back down to her phone again.

She had been quiet since they stopped for gas, leaning back in the passenger seat and taking what looked like a very nourishing afternoon nap. She placed her phone on her stomach and dozed until one of its periodic vibrations awoke her.

Evan furtively gave notice to a few of the names that popped up on the screen—Marcus, Nathan, and the one that turned Evan’s heart to cold stone-- the infamous Daddy, he of the creepy forehead-kisses and the lazy eye and the violating of Lily’s small body with his diseased, vile, thirty-six-year-old dong. Evan wondered if Lily called him Daddy when they were fucking, and then wished he hadn’t. He wondered what Daddy’s real name was.

Evan steeled himself to not thinking about her relationship with Daddy. Maybe Lily didn’t really like Daddy. Maybe she was just sleeping with him out of convenience or necessity. Maybe she was looking for someone to rescue her.

Either way, thought Evan. He’s not here, and you are.

Evan longed to know what sort of expansive conversations she was having with these men. He hadn’t seen a single female name pop up on the iPhone’s screen.

Her thumbs must get really tired, he thought as he watched her drum away.

They'd had several decent conversations along the course of the trip thus far, but those conversations were perforated with dry spells filled by the CDs they chose and the ceaseless drone of the wheels turning, and they were almost always caused by a text that Lily would receive.

She would briskly engage in conversation with the sender and Evan would feel like he was being put on hold. In those moments Evan looked at her narrow shoulders and the soft skin behind her ears and he thought of holding her the other night and he longed to reach over and touch her again, but didn't.

They hurtled past downtown Nashville, the skyscrapers and stadiums rearing up to the west. A thick, winding rope of river coursed through the center of it all.

After about twenty minutes of driving south they took their exit onto a road called Harding Place, made one last left and arrived at their Motel 6 just as the sun began its final descent. Evan listened to the engine tick and Lily's text- tapping as he pulled the key out of the ignition.

Despite the evening's onset, the air felt like a warm bath when they stepped out of the frigid, air-conditioned Civic. Lily stretched her arms skyward with her phone clamped in one hand. She groaned, her belly showing under her lifted shirt. She twisted her wrists, and Evan heard them crackle. She gave a content little sigh and sniffled. It was all adorable and Evan wanted to run over and shower her with kisses. Instead he made for the front entrance.

Could be cuddling with her again just hours from now in any of these rooms, he thought, surveying the three stories of motel. A flurry of butterflies erupted in his abdomen despite his intuition still insisting it was all extremely unlikely.

They checked in, the lobby small and lit like a DMV, the tiles drab and cracked under their feet. There was a long blue rug on the floor that got caught on the door when they opened it. The clerk was a dumpy-looking woman with hundreds of wet, tightly-wound curls. She clicked on a keyboard and handed Evan their key cards.

Their room was on the second floor, up a cement flight of stairs past vending machines and an extremely slow elevator that they gave up on waiting for when they realized they could've walked upstairs in the time they'd spent waiting. The room's window and door looked out on a balcony that gave view to hazy hills and rooftops. The Nashville skyline shimmered in the distance, miles to the north.

"I like the tower that looks like it's giving devil horns," said Lily, taking in the sights as Evan stuck his key card in the door slit. She made devil horns with her pointer and pinky fingers. She scrunched up her face in a mock metal sneer and poked Evan in the side with it.

"Grrrr," she said. "Devil horns..."

"You know, it's funny," said Evan, wincing as her fingers made contact with the side of his torso. "The devil horns. They were originally a curse—the evil eye."

"No shit."

"Yeah. You pointed your hand like that at someone you wanted to die."

"I did not know that."

“Yeah, but nowadays, if you add your thumb,” Evan demonstrated, sticking his thumb out with his pointer and pinky finger sticking up. “It means ‘Nothing but love’.”

“That’s fascinating,” said Lily.

Evan’s heart sank when they entered the chilly room.

There were two beds.

It dawned on him that he hadn’t actually confirmed Lily was coming when he’d booked the room. Even if he had, he wouldn’t have had the presence of mind to book a room with only one bed. He wasn’t even sure Motel 6 had rooms with one bed.

He tried to hide his disappointment as Lily strode right in and set her stuff on the bed nearest the bathroom. Evan stood in the doorway a moment before setting his own bag on the one nearest the window.

The light-killing curtains were drawn and the room was dark. Lily turned on a lamp over the night stand between the beds, then the light over the sink next to the bathroom. The air conditioner rattled and hummed.

Evan weighed his options. He must start negging her soon, if it wasn’t too late already. It was probably too late now. She had made physical contact with him, though. What was that called in PUA speak?

Kino. That’s what it was. She had touched him. That was a good thing, wasn’t it? Even if it had been in the sign of an ancient curse, it was the first time she’d made physical contact with him since they’d left Michigan.

Evan noted the TV and desk on the eastern side of the room. The floor was hard wood. The sheets and comforter on the bed were thin, and so were the pillows.

“Wanna go to Wendy’s?” Evan asked. He’d seen one across the street when they pulled in, and he wanted to get out of this disappointing room. “I’m hungry again.”

“Sure,” said Lily. “Lemme use the bathroom first.”

They walked to the Wendy’s. Lily was cheerful, a spring in her step.

As they ordered, she told the cashier, “I love your accent.”

The cashier smiled and asked them what they were doing in town.

“I’m trying out for Idol on Saturday,” said Evan.

“Idol?”

“Yeah, American Idol. The TV show?”

“Oh, well, good luck,” said the cashier, handing him his change.

They brought their food back to the room. On their way back in Lily took the “Do Not Disturb” sign from the inside doorknob and hung it on the outside knob.

Another good sign, thought Evan. Literally. She doesn’t want anyone bothering us. She wants us to have our privacy together.

His heart fluttered.

You’re grasping at straws, said that killjoy voice.

Fuck off, thought Evan.

Evan figured out how to operate the TV while Lily sat on her bed and chowed down. He flipped through the channels, finding nothing worth watching, before finally settling on Back to the Future.

Lily finished her spicy chicken sandwich and said, with her mouth full, “I’m gonna take a shower. I’m all gross from the car ride.”

She crumpled her wrappers in the Wendy's bag and stuffed it all in the small trash can under the desk.

"K," said Evan.

An undeniable thought was creeping up on him-- she wasn't treating him in a way that suggested she was attracted to him. She was treating him like a companion and not a potential lover.

He had to start negging her.

Lily took her travel bag into the bathroom with her and Evan heard the shower hiss. He reclined on his bed and thought about his dick, lonely and unwanted in his pants, untouched by anything his whole life except his right hand and the dirty socks he jacked off into.

He was hoping she would come out of the shower naked and dripping with arms wide open, begging him to take her. Instead she came out fully dressed in some comfy-looking baggy pajama pants with Twix bars on them and a loose blue tank top. Her jet black hair was wet and dangling and stringy. She ran a brush through it, grimacing as she worked out snarls.

Maybe she'll say we should sleep in one bed, Evan thought hopefully, telling himself that was retarded before the sentence was even fully formed in his head.

"I'm fucking tired," Lily said as she took a seat on her bed. "Don't be offended if I fall right asleep."

"I won't," said Evan.

GODDAMMIT ALL TO HELL.

He had to neg her. There had to be something he could say.

He examined her and fired off the first thing he could come up with.

“Your hair looks like shit,” he blurted.

“What?”

“I just- I said, your hair, it looks like shit,” he said. “Cause you know, it’s, it’s all wet and stringy and stuff.”

“Uh, thanks, asshole,” said Lily.

She went over to the mirror and finished combing.

Evan sat on the bed, watching Doc Brown tell Marty McFly they wouldn’t need roads where they were going.

Had his neg had any effect? It didn’t feel like it.

“That was really mean,” Lily said, sitting on her bed again and checking her phone.

“What’s your problem?”

“I don’t have a problem,” said Evan. “I just thought, you know, I just thought—I don’t know what I thought. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I guess you are,” said Lily, texting. “Shit...”

Back to the Future ended. Evan had hunted all over the room for a channel guide but found none. He channel surfed until he found another movie. The Usual Suspects.

“This’ll do,” he said.

“Whatever,” said Lily.

As the usual suspects stood in their line-up, each reciting, “Gimme the money, ya fuckin’ cocksucker,” Evan broke out his laptop and checked his sites. Mjsbigblog and Votefortheworst were both talking about the Nashville auditions, the first of season 10. There were numerous

articles on the inevitable decline of the show, Simon Cowell's departure, his potential replacements, and what all this meant for the future.

Maybe this time next year I'll have my own thread, Evan thought.

Lily had snuggled in under her covers, sending yet another text. She looked sleepy.

Evan frantically tried to think of something to ask Lily, something to clear the bad air left in the wake of his failed neg.

He really wanted to crawl into the bed with her, but that clearly wasn't the right thing to do now. If she wanted to, she would crawl in bed with him just like she had the other night. And maybe now they'd be able to do something more. If she did, Evan vowed that he would make a move.

Then he remembered something he wanted to ask her.

"What's your favorite song?"

"What?"

"What's your favorite song? Like of all time?"

Lily yawned, thought about it.

"The first thing that came into my mind is 'Girl of Colours' by 24 Gone," she said after a moment.

"Never heard of them."

"Here," Lily said, and typed on her phone. She leaned across the space between their beds and handed him her phone. She'd pulled up a YouTube video and pressed play. "Listen."

An ethereal arpeggiated riff drifted out the iPhone's speakers. A wistful melody. Very eighties alternative, a haunting and mournful drift of a song, like blue and grey clouds coming in off a mountain range.

"I like this," said Evan, genuinely intrigued. He made a mental note to LimeWire it. "I think I've heard it somewhere before."

The volume lowered to signify the arrival of a new text. The message popped up on the top of the screen. It was Daddy.

For a second Evan felt like he was falling.

I'm not sure you should mention anything about the pick-up, honey, I'm not happy about — said the message before it cut off.

"Doubt it," said Lily, snatching her phone back and hitting pause. "I can't find the CD anywhere, not even online. The album it was on came out in 1990 and they re-released it in 2003. I still can't find it."

He called her 'honey', moaned Evan internally. He felt tremendous rage at the man's nerve, calling her "honey" like she was a daughter or something.

He wanted nothing more than to lie down next to Lily on the bed and kiss her cheeks and face and lips and slide his hands up the loose tank top to feel her little pink nipples and pinch them until they stiffened.

He shoved the thought of Daddy away yet again.

"Who was the band again?" he asked.

"24 Gone, they were a Canadian band. They were only together like five years. This was the only album they put out."

“Why’s it your favorite song?”

“I don’t know,” said Lily. “It reminds me of being a baby, or a toddler or whatever. I remember there was this apartment we had and my dad was still around and I remember him holding me in the car and looking up at this jetstream above the roof of the apartment building, and this song was playing on the radio as he was putting me in the car. It just makes me feel very safe. Makes me think of, like, flying through heaven or something.”

She pointed at him, a poignant thought occurring to her.

“Makes me think of gloryland.”

That made Evan smile.

“Where were you going? With your dad?”

“I don’t know. It’s just, like, a flash of a memory, but when I was older I heard it on the radio again and got the Internet and looked up the lyrics, and... yeah.”

She typed out another message and put her phone down on her chest.

“What’s your favorite song of all time?” she asked.

“Right now it’s this,” said Evan instantly. He opened his laptop and hit play on Lola Stars and Stripes by The Stills. He’d had his answer ready even before he’d initiated the conversation.

Lily listened politely, looking up at the ceiling. Her phone lay dormant. The conversation with Daddy must’ve been finished for the time being.

“They’re a Canadian band, too,” explained Evan. “This is the only song I’ve heard by them but I love it.”

“It’s pretty,” said Lily, her eyes on the ceiling.

“Yeah, that’s a good way of putting it, though. It makes me think of gloryland. I hear gloryland when I listen to this song.”

“Word.”

The air conditioner under the window kicked on, and its guttural buzz forced Evan to up the volume on his computer.

“Notice anything about this song?”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen to what the guy’s saying,” Evan said. “Or singing, I mean.”

Lily listened some more, her brow furrowed. She looked like she didn’t know what exactly she was listening for. When the chorus kicked in, she raised her eyebrows.

“Ah, yeah,” she said. “They’re singing my work name.”

“Yeah,” said Evan. “This song reminds me of you.”

Lily nodded over on her bed, eyes still on the ceiling. She didn’t look impressed or moved by that. And why would she be?

I’m losing her, Evan thought. He began to sweat.

“Why did you pick Lola as your name, anyway?”

Lily shrugged.

“The day I had to pick one I’d just watched Space Jam, and—“

“Lola Bunny?”

“Yeah.”

Evan laughed.

“That’s awesome.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t think of anything better... so yeah, Bugs Bunny’s girlfriend.”

She gave her full attention back to her phone.

Evan continued talking, hoping against hope to keep their first evening together alive. If he didn’t make a move tonight, he might not get another chance. According to The Game, he had to do it tonight. It may already be too late.

He kept talking.

“They opened for Kings of Leon last summer.”

“Who?”

“The Stills.”

“Opened for Kings of Leon?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I wanted to go, but I couldn’t.”

Lily’s phone vibrated again.

Evan kept talking. The show must go on.

“You know what I don’t understand about Kings of Leon? They started up the band and all of a sudden they just had a deal. I mean they didn’t actually have to tour or anything. They just had the connections right away. That’s how it always is with a lot of successful bands. They just form and then all of a sudden they’re just successful. They never talk about how they had to actually get there. They always, just, like, skip over it in their biographies. On Wikipedia or whatever.”

“Mmm...”

“I’m telling you man, it’s all who you know,” said Evan. He forced a laugh. “And I don’t know anyone. Gotta make people like you. Make the right people like you. That’s all that matters. I can’t even get Matt to let me sing in his band.”

“That sucks,” said Lily. She set her phone down, clicked it off. “I’m really tired, and we should probably get to sleep. Did you set your alarm?”

Shit, he hadn’t.

“Uh, yeah,” lied Evan, not wanting to look unprepared. He hurriedly flipped open his phone and set it. “Yep, got it set right here...”

“Good deal,” said Lily. “Well, good night.”

She shut off her lamp and turned away from him.

Evan sat on his bed, looking at her, now a faded lump in the dark.

Just do it, he told himself. Just do it.

If you don’t, you’ll regret it. Just do it.

He thought of a Mark Twain quote: “In forty years you’ll regret the things you didn’t do more than the things you do do.” Or something.

He got up, took two steps, and lightly lowered himself on top of the covers, getting into a spoon position with her. He couldn’t get his right arm under her because of the securely tucked-in blankets. He snaked his left arm around her midsection and tried to pull her in closer.

“Uh, what are you doing?” she said, turning to look at him over her shoulder with a look of foreboding annoyance.

“Uh,” said Evan. “I thought—I thought cause, you know, we... we cuddled the other night, we could maybe, uh, you know, cuddle again, tonight.”

Lily let out a long sigh and turned away, but didn't protest.

"Sure, whatever makes you happy," she mumbled.

Fuck yeah, good enough for me, thought Evan as he lay his head on the pillow and tried to hug her. His dick began to fatten in his pants. She smelled like a cherry orchard. He laid his cheek on her damp hair, splayed on the pillow.

"God, I needed this," whispered Evan. "You have no idea how much I needed this, Lily."

"Just... don't talk," said Lily.

Evan's dick was now reaching gargantuan proportions. It poked Lily's butt through the covers.

Should he call attention to it?

Brian Dinkins' face flashed in front of him.

In to WIN, he said, grinning widely.

If this was to go anywhere else, he would have to make it happen. But he shouldn't overdo it.

Best to be subtle.

"Uh oh," said Evan, giving a little thrust of his hips and trying to sound frisky. It was all he could think of.

"Uh oh, *what?*" Lily snapped.

She turned and faced him, her dark eyes burning into his in the dim light. She was glaring at him.

"Uhhhh," Evan said, the look on her face causing blood to rush out of every extremity in his body.

He swallowed.

Now or never.

“Do you want to kiss me?” he asked, timidly.

His voice cracked on “want”.

“Not really,” said Lily, still glaring at him.

Evan observed the furious look on her face for a few seconds longer, then got up without another word and retreated to his own bed where he lay back down, under the covers. He felt like a dog that had just been told to kennel up.

Lily turned away from him again and put her head on the pillow. Evan’s dick wilted, seeming to give a deep and mournful groan as it shrank back into his groin.

He lay there in the dark, eyes wide open, face on fire.

“I hope that doesn’t make things weird now,” he said aloud after a few moments. His voice cracked on ‘things’.

There was no response from the other bed.

Lily was already asleep, her breathing measured and steady.

Evan fell asleep cursing his very soul.

>Be Evan.

>Be two or three summers back.

>Jason has paid the family a phone call from his base in Afghanistan.

>Evan is taking his turn with Jason on the phone.

>His parents sound both relieved and worried all over again at hearing from Jason.

>I figured something out about the universe, I think, Jason told Evan after about ten minutes of bullshitting.

>What?

>Time moves in cycles.

>Cycles?

>Yeah, like, you know, the seasons and everything and the ways we measure time and space, there's boundaries that we create and then there's natural boundaries that are just outside of our senses. You can tell they're there, but you can't control them. But these boundaries, they move in cycles, you know, just like the four seasons revolve around the year. They move in cycles. And you see, you gotta plan your life accordingly according to the cycles.

>I don't get it.

>It's binary, evens and odds, positive and negative. That's what I've been reading about since I've been over here.

>Jason guards a prison. He says it's a boring job, and when Evan asks him to describe what he has to do on the daily, he says he's not allowed to say specifically.

>It's so fucking hot here. I hate it. I feel really off here.

>Well, I mean, you're in a war.

>Yeah, but it's not that kind of war.

>Jason hasn't seen any combat, and says he's not likely to.

>Evan's thankful for that, but doesn't say so

>But yeah, cycles. If you try something on an odd year or an off year that was supposed to happen on even year, it's gonna go worse than it would've if you waited and tried it in an on year. You get it?

>Yes, Evan lied.

>I tried this, my little military endeavor, on an off year. 2005 was when I enlisted, right? A year ending in an odd number. So I get it now. That's why I'm not feeling it. That's why I think I might have fucked up.

>Huh.

>I'm coming home in a few months, though.

>Good. For how long?

>Don't know yet. Hopefully as long as a year. Don't know yet, though.

Evan's alarm woke him at six. He rolled out of bed, tearing at the tendrils of sleep that held him to the pillow. He split the drapes to see the city waiting for them in the distance. The eastern sky was soft with dawn.

The idiocy of the night before resurfaced in his mind with all the welcome of a flooded basement. He cringed to himself.

You deserve to die, he told himself as he showered and dressed. *You are a fucking loser.*
And you deserve to die.

A groggy Lily was sitting up in bed when Evan came out of the bathroom. She was texting with sleep-puffed eyes, her hair a medusa's snarl.

"I need something to drink," she said. "You want anything?"

Evan passed, and Lily went downstairs to the vending machine still in her PJs, coming back a few minutes later with a can of Sprite. She then spent a good half hour in the bathroom.

Evan sat on the bed and fretted over a day that would consist of him getting a wristband with a number on it, determining his place in line as a contestant.

When Lily came out of the bathroom, Evan did a double take.

She looked stunning, almost blindingly pretty in a dark, cottony sundress with a white flower in her hair. She was such a vision that Evan nearly choked up. It gave the previous night's events even more of a sting.

"Are we going to get searched today?" Lily asked him.

"Uh, what?"

"You know, is security going to search us? At the stadium."

"Uh, no," said Evan, still awestruck at her appearance. "No, I don't think so. I just get my wristband."

"K," said Lily.

"Why?"

"Just wondering."

Lily's angelic facade aside, it didn't look like she'd slept well. Her eyes were clouded and her expression sour. She smoked a cigarette, sipped her Sprite and texted as they forded the crowded freeway to downtown.

She's probably telling Daddy I tried to put the moves on her last night, Evan thought miserably. He's probably going to have me killed when we get back. Good.

But Lily made no mention of the incident the night before, and Evan wasn't

going to bring it up. He felt as stupid as he ever had in his life. What did she think of him now? If he brought it up she might say he tried to rape her. What would he do then?

Best to not mention it unless she did, and if she did, and if she was hostile about it, he would just apologize like a gentleman and see what happened from there. It was done now.

Evan focused on the day ahead. He was tingling with anticipation.

Bridgestone Arena was located nearly right in the center of downtown Nashville, an enormous silver and glass building that resembled a giant spaceship with banners and flags flying from its roof. There was already a long, colorful line of people gathered around the arena's eastern side, hugged to the outer wall by metal fences and barricades.

The crowd was passive and kept to themselves, everyone either chatting amongst their inner circles or looking with heads held high towards the front of the line. There were cameramen walking around and filming random folks in the crowd, who would wave and whoop and make noise for attention. Little pockets of commotion would form whenever an operator lifted a camera to his shoulder.

Evan and Lily joined the back of the line after parking a few blocks away. Evan was surprised to find himself hoping the gaze of those cameras wouldn't fall on him. He felt painfully shy. The thought of one of the cameras catching him unawares gave him a serious case of the jitters. He felt naked, out-of-place, an imposter.

Lily kept to her precious phone and didn't say much. She wore her sunglasses up on her head, and her bare shoulders were smeared with sunscreen. Evan had dabbed some on his ears and cheeks in the car, not thinking to bring his own and not wanting to use up too much of hers.

The only time Lily spoke was to ask Evan what time the doors opened.

“8,” said Evan. “The line should move fairly quickly, too.”

Lily nodded, eyes on her iPhone. Evan longed to put his arm around her.

At precisely 8 o’clock there was a sharp give in the line ahead of them, and they all shifted forward like cattle. Evan was pleasantly surprised as the line lost nearly half its mass in the first five minutes alone. People filled in behind them, packing in from all sides.

The crowd was diverse in every way except age. The people that surrounded Evan and Lily were mostly in their twenties, although there were quite a few teenagers with their parents. The teens were trying to look mature and unphased. The parents looked either bored or even more excited than their kids.

Almost everyone Evan saw looked like they could be a finalist, like they could be hiding a magnificent, dazzling singing voice under their unassuming, everyday exteriors. Every single race was represented. There was a near-equal amount of females and males.

Evan saw pretty boys in preppy v-necked shirts, beauty queens with tiaras and sashes, stone-faced gangstas with their eyes covered by Maybachs, a few veterans decked out in full camo (his mind flashed to Jason, then away again), overweight cowboys, club kids with blue hair, scene girls with pink hair, dweebs with bowlcuts, frat boys with beer guts, boyfriends and girlfriends in Polos and blouses who refused to let their arms leave each other’s waists, girl-next-door types looking like they were waiting on their next piano lesson, bombastic sistahs with hips as wide as the interstate, and more. All looked simultaneously self-conscious and confident. They all treaded water in a sea of desperate individuality.

I look like the most boring person here, Evan thought, with his brown, regular haircut and his t-shirt and jeans and shitty neckbeard and his average fatness. He had no distinguishing

features whatsoever. No piercings, tattoos— even Lily had her jet black hair and her nose piercing and her tattoos and that wonderful white flower in her hair.

At one point a couple of younger girls came over and told Lily she looked like Idina Menzel.

“I don’t know who that is,” Lily responded.

“She’s a Broadway actress,” one of the girls said.

“You know, from Wicked,” said the other. “And Rent.”

Lily shook her head.

“It’s a compliment,” said the first girl. Both of them were probably sixteen or seventeen.

They didn’t look at Evan.

“Aww, is she pretty?” asked Lily.

“Yeah,” said the girls, nodding.

“Oh, well, thanks,” said Lily, smiling at them. “You just made my day.”

“And she’s an amazing singer, too,” said the first girl. “Are you auditioning?”

“No, I can’t sing.”

She pointed at Evan.

“He’s auditioning.”

The two girls’ eyes turned off as they looked up at sweaty, overweight Evan. He gave them a small wave and smiled in what he hoped looked like a friendly manner. They tossed their heads in his direction in an obligatory greeting and quickly melted back into the crowd. Lily went back to her phone.

A big-bellied, long-haired Samoan guy in front of Evan was strumming an acoustic guitar. A camera filmed him for a bit while the crowd clamored for attention all around, waving peace signs and gang signs and homemade posters and whooooo-wooo-wooooing.

Evan hung back, his arms crossed in front of him. He tried to look inconspicuous and disinterested, too cool and confident to care. Lily looked up from her phone and watched it all with a bemused look on her face.

The line was truncated by metal barricades set in front of a short staircase about thirty feet from the arena's main entrance. Stern security guards periodically allowed chunks of the line through before cutting people off once a certain amount had crossed the threshold. There was about fifteen feet of empty cement between the security guards and the ends of the newly-formed lines, which filtered into the arena doors.

After what felt like ages of shuffling shoulder-to-shoulder with the horde of strangers, Evan and Lily finally ducked under the muscular arms of a security guard, joined the last segment of line, and crammed themselves into the arena.

Inside there were rows of folding tables set up with people in Idol t-shirts behind them attaching wristbands to everyone who stepped up. If one didn't know better, the event could've been a very popular church raffle or high school dance sign-up.

Getting the wristband took only seconds. Evan chose a line in front of a table, waited with Lily by his side, then stepped up when it was his turn and handed the seated woman his folded up paperwork. He showed her his driver's license and social security card, and held out his right wrist.

"Do not get it wet," said the woman as she put the wristband on him.

Evan turned and followed Lily out the doors, noticing how many male gazes she drew as they went against the flow of traffic.

They emerged into bright sunlight, the day only just beginning.

“Well,” said Evan, examining his new green wristband with a ten digit number on it.

“That was easy.”

>Be Evan.

>Be at middle school dance in 8th grade.

>Cafeteria is packed with kids on Saturday night.

>Tables with snacks and punches line the cafeteria walls, parent chaperones stand around looking like they want to go home already.

>Evan stands alone, bouncing between groups of casual acquaintances. He’s not sure why he’s even here, other than a vague desire to become more social.

>There’s karaoke onstage.

>A group of 7th graders gets up and starts doing The Offspring’s “Pretty Fly (For a White Guy).”

>Evan recognizes Lily Trent in the gaggle of girls gathered around 7th grade stud Danny Ratliffe, who’s singing lead.

>Danny rides Brian Dinkins’ bus.

>Danny’s a skater- type, quick of the tongue and narrow of the shoulder. He has an earring and a buzz cut and he wears his Tony Hawk baseball cap backwards.

>All the ladies dig him, and there’s a rumor he’s already gotten more ass at the age of twelve than a lot of the male teachers have gotten in their entire pathetic lifetimes.

>Now he's up on stage doing karaoke with his harem of admirers, Lily included.

>Lily is enthusiastically singing the 'Give it to me, baby' part.

>Brian Dinkins comes over to Evan.

>There's Danny, he says, pointing and gesticulating wildly with both hands. Danny and his hoes!

>Evan watches Lily dance and chant. She's dancing very provocatively for an 11-year-old.

>*Give it to me, baby. Uh-huh! Uh-huh!*

>Danny notices Lily's enthusiasm and begins sharing the mic with her and her alone.

>She dances up on him.

>The other girls look like they want to kill her. Some try to dance more noticeably, more like Lily, but Danny's attention has been captured.

>A good portion of the attending populace is now watching the stage, including some of the chaperones, a couple of whom are starting forward to put a stop to the not-quite-so-family-friendly display.

>That bitch has some moves, son, Brian comments.

>That's Lily Trent, Evan says. She lives down the street from me.

>That's Marty Trent's sister?

>Yeah.

>*Day-um.*

>A female chaperone that Evan realizes is Ms. Grover, the school's strict librarian, walks up to the stage and grabs Lily's ankle.

>Evan can see her mouth moving.

>Lily looks down at Ms. Grover and turns to Danny, who holds the mic out to her.

>She grabs Danny's face with both hands and smooches him.

>The kids all cheer, thrilled at the blatant lack of respect for authority, the sheer insubordination, the defiance.

>A few chaperones smirk. Kids these days.

>Danny is flabbergasted, forgets to sing, the karaoke music blasts on.

>His female entourage is now peevishly prodding Lily and bidding her to obey Ms. Grover.

>Ms Grover yanks Lily's ankle and she nearly goes tumbling to the stage floor.

>Ms Grover takes Lily out of the cafeteria, admonishing her all the way, and she is not seen again for the remainder of the evening.

>Naughty naughty, Brian says.

"I need to use a bathroom," Lily announced.

They stood on the corner of the intersection in front of Bridgestone Arena. The wide street stretching east and west was called Broadway. It was lined with museums, bars, restaurants and shops of all sizes. The day was already a scorcher.

"K," said Evan. "All I want to do is buy a CD. I don't want to blow too much money when we've still got all of tomorrow plus Saturday and the drive home Sunday."

"Word," said Lily.

Evan wondered how much cash she had on hand.

They walked over to the nearest bar and Lily disappeared inside without saying anything. He stood out by the doorway, forced to think. He tried looking at the pictures on his phone but they didn't do any good. His mind was on Lily and Lily alone.

On top of the humiliation from the previous night's rejection, Evan was unable to shake a nagging feeling of negativity, a feeling that told him that Lily was never going to feel for him the way he had come to feel for her in the past few days. The previous night had confirmed it. He didn't know why he had fallen for her so suddenly. He'd never felt more than an inkling of attraction toward her. He'd never even crushed on her. He'd always thought she was cute, but he hadn't ever felt this red flush of emotion, this primal urge to possess and protect her. He'd never felt it before, in his life, ever, for anyone. It had all started when she'd crawled in with him on Matt's basement couch.

The sensation was a hint of the infinite. He didn't feel infinite himself, but he felt that she was, and yet he could only watch her like a child watching a jet leave a contrail in the evening sky.

He thought of her emerging from the bathroom that morning, smelling of that fresh fruit scent and with that flower in her hair. She'd activated some brand new instinct in him. He'd become infatuated with the light behind her eyes.

I love her, Evan realized. I'm fucking in love with her.

He remembered her smiling coquettishly at the redneck hard-asses winking at her on the freeway, the deep hurt it had caused him. Her smile made him feel like the world was worth saving. He completely forgot everything else. Why was he falling for her so profoundly when she was so obviously not falling for him? He felt weak, he felt undesirable, he felt stupid and vile and Neanderthal-like.

Lily came out of the bar sighing in relief with her little handbag swinging from her elbow.

“I’m a new woman,” she declared. The sun glinted off her sunglasses. The flower in her hair looked like it was made of white frosting. Evan wanted to rub his face in her black hair and inhale her scent.

“All right,” he said. “Shall we?”

They wandered aimlessly afterwards, ambling by numerous establishments, none of which spiked their interest enough to venture inside.

Outside one bar, a guy in an apron tried to get them to come in and sing karaoke.

“I see your wristband, man, I know you can sing,” he called to Evan.

“I can’t, man, not today,” said Evan, passing, head down, his hands in his pockets. He was such a timid fuck, but he was too close to the audition now to screw up his vow of silence.

“How about your little lady, can she carry a tune?”

“I’m not his lady,” said Lily, turning and smiling that killer smile that made Evan want to kneel down and repeatedly bash his head against the sidewalk.

“Ohhhh,” said the apron guy, throwing up his hands. “My bad, my bad.”

He turned to harass another passing couple.

They went to an old record store that smelled of dust and cedar. The old floorboards creaked under their feet as they perused the rows of vinyl albums and CDs nestled in old wooden bins splintered at their edges. There were black and white portraits of country stars on the walls, old guitars hung up with their strings rusted out.

Evan bought himself a Johnny Cash CD. It was called My Mother’s Hymn Book, originally part of a boxed set called Unearthed.

“This one’s the one that’s got Do Lord on it,” Evan told Lily as they walked out, his plastic bag swinging from one hand. “The song they played at Jason’s memorial. The one that Maddie got the term ‘gloryland’ from.”

“Yeah, I remember,” said Lily. “Huh.”

“Jason loved Johnny Cash. He had a poster of him in his room. The one where he’s giving the finger.”

As the day went on the street became as crowded as the line outside the arena. Live music, loud and luscious, boomed out from between the doors of several establishments.

Evan and Lily went into one and there was a short-haired blonde woman advertised as Michelle McDonald playing an acoustic guitar onstage, belting out Loretta Lynn. A coffee can overflowing with dollar bills was set next to the foot of her stool. There was no backing band, just Michelle and her fabulous, rich voice. As Evan listened, he understood why people said there were no amateur musicians in Nashville. This woman sounded as good as anyone on CMT. Evan didn’t like country music much as a genre, but he could enjoy this.

“You wanna chill here for a bit?” Evan asked Lily. She had been texting intermittently but mostly she’d just walked along with one hand on her purse and the other swinging next to her. Evan had longed to grab it, entwine their fingers together and feel her soft palm against his, but obviously that hadn’t happened.

“Sure,” she said. Beads of sweat stood out on her forehead. The temperature outside had reached boiling.

Evan got a Pabst Blue Ribbon and Lily got an iced tea. They listened to Michelle for a bit. After the Loretta Lynn cover, she sang a few originals. Then she set her guitar on its stand, came offstage and peddled her CD to the people sitting at the bar.

Evan and Lily finished their beverages and Evan left a ten on the table as they moved on to the next establishment, which was even louder. It had a trio playing—a female singer, a guitar player, and a mandolin player. Their music was fast and furious. Evan thought of a term—thrash country. He and Lily didn't get anything to drink there, but they stood against the wall, listened to a couple songs and moved on again.

It was a decent outing, an okay walk in the city, but it didn't feel special-- at least not the way Evan had hoped it would when he'd asked Lily to come with him. Lily seemed bored, and Evan felt bored. He thought perhaps if he'd have come alone against his parent's wishes, it would've been better. He would've been able to focus on enjoying himself and taking in the sights, instead of being distracted at Lily's angel face and her lethal smile.

Lily yawned as they trod the sidewalk. They went into a few souvenir shops, admired the trinkets, looked at the shirts and sweaters and the multitude of different hats, the ceramic bears and beavers, the classic car models, the little novelty acoustic guitars. Neither of them bought anything although Lily nearly got herself a scarf she found. At the last minute before they left, she put it back.

"Well, I guess we should head back to the hotel," Evan said.

"Yeah, good idea."

It was now mid-afternoon and the sun was the hottest Evan had ever experienced. He wanted to wrap his hands around Lily's shoulders and cuddle with her once they got back to the

hotel, but he knew this was only more wishful thinking. With this thought on his mind, he and his companion traipsed back to the car on their tired feet, the green Idol wristband scratching the inside of Evan's wrist.

>Be Evan.

>Be the day before Jason leaves for his first deployment.

>Evan approaches him in his room.

>Jason is sitting on his bed, clicking on his laptop, chilling.

>What is it?

>Just wanted to, you know, hang out a bit, since you're going to be gone for months.

>It'll go by quick. I can't wait to get out of here.

>Evan takes a seat at Jason's desk.

>What you up to?

>I'm researching this rifle I'd like to buy, Jason says, and turns the laptop to show him.

>Ah.

>Evan is thinking about something else to ask Jason, but then Jason speaks first.

> I feel like this is the only way I can make a difference in the world. I want things to be better, I want people to not be ruled by money, and everyone respects veterans. I just don't want to be average. I'd rather be dead than average, honestly.

>You want to run for office or something?

>No, not really, but I want people to listen to what I have to say. I want to matter. I don't want to be some nobody from a shit lower-class white neighborhood in suburban Michigan.

>Do you ever worry about, you know, getting killed?

>Jason shook his head.

>I doubt I'll see any actual combat. Not my unit.

>Are you worried how Mom and Dad would be if you did get killed?

>Not really. I'm kind of done with them. They're idiots.

>Evan started.

>Uh, what? They're idiots?

>I mean, I love them. I do. They're good people, and they love me. But the way I look at it, if it did end up going that way, they kind of deserve to lose me for getting it so incredibly wrong.

>What the fuck? They deserve to lose you? What did they get wrong?

>It's not so much you and Maddie, but, I mean, come on, Evan. They had no fucking idea what they were doing when they raised me. They tried too hard. It didn't work out. They did better on you and especially Maddie, but that's just cause with age comes wisdom and the best way to learn is to learn from your mistakes.

>Evan doesn't know what to say to that.

>It's only like a two year difference between you and me...

>Two years is a long time when you're a baby.

>Jason ranted.

>They should have raised us to be self-sufficient, and I mean, clearly, they didn't. It was always, 'Never worry about it, we'll take care of it,' over and over and fucking over. And now we're adults and we can't do shit because we settled into that and thought it was normal. Cause we're

not out living on our own, we're not successful, and, I mean, Christ, I'm only a couple of years away from being the same age they were when they had me.

>It's a different time now, says Evan.

>He knows it's a dry and lifeless excuse, but there's truth to it.

>Can't tell them that. They've always been right. They're never going to treat us like adults. And I don't mean in a cute, you'll-always-be-my-baby way, I mean they're always going to be talking down to us, long after it's necessary and long after we turn into the ones who know better. They don't get it.

>Jason closes his laptop.

>But I do love them. That I'm not gonna lie about. I do love them. I just need to be away from them and away from this house and away from this town for awhile. I'm sure when I get back I'll be in a better state.

Later that evening Evan and Lily sat on their respective beds. The rest of the day had passed slowly and sadly. Evan fiddled about on his laptop, checking Facebook and his other sites in a continuous loop and wishing he was creative enough to think of something else to do. He thought about Lily's untouchable beauty and how he'd blown his one shot at becoming intimate with her. It was going to be a long weekend.

In addition, he had realized that getting through the audition was not a promising prospect at all—standing in line with all the more outgoing people today had given him a stark sense of reality. He now knew he stood a snowball's chance in hell of being picked out of the crowd, let alone getting on TV-- sob story or not. And he'd been so uncomfortable whenever a

camera was just around him, let alone if it was zoomed in on him. How would he handle being put on the spot in prime time if he couldn't even handle getting filmed as part of a crowd?

Lily reclined on her bed and texted while commandeering the TV remote.

"Their cable selection sucks," she said after rifling through the channels several times over and finding nothing.

"It's Motel 6," said Evan. "You get what you pay for."

Evan was restless and tired of doing nothing and being trapped in his own head. He went with the only thing he could think of.

"You want to go for a drive?"

"To where?"

"Nowhere, just go look around."

She shrugged.

"Sure."

They hopped in the Civic, the evening humid and a spectacular orange sunset blazing up the western sky. They headed west down Harding Place first.

Once they got past the standard suburban mecca of fast food and mini-malls and grocery stores, the countryside was like a postcard-- all rolling green hills with healthy old trees and white churches like fortresses, their steeples needle-sharp.

Now this is what I thought Tennessee would look like, Evan thought.

Lily was silent but her vibe was content. She had spent more time in the bathroom when they'd gotten back from downtown, then gone to sleep almost immediately. Evan had sat on his

bed on his laptop, worrying over everything for no reason. When Lily woke up she looked dazed as hell, and asked how long she'd been out.

"I dunno," said Evan. "An hour, maybe two."

She didn't answer him, only reached for her phone like a toddler for a pacifier.

The road under them was fresh asphalt; oil and tar and bright yellow lines of paint.

At a stoplight Evan opened up his new Johnny Cash CD and inserted it in the slot. He half expected Lily to object to the religious subject matter, but she stayed in the same stupor she'd been mired in since they'd returned from the city.

She was lethargic, lying sideways in the reclined passenger seat with her sockless feet curled under her like a cat. Evan again felt the strongest urge to reach over and pull her head onto his shoulder and hold her there and let her rest. The sensation would be peace on earth but instead he gripped the steering wheel with two damp palms and listened to Johnny and took in the scenery flying by at fifty miles an hour.

When Johnny's rendition of Do Lord came on, Evan felt oddly affected by it. Not because it flooded him with emotion, but because he didn't feel much at all. He hadn't heard it since the memorial, and he thought he would've felt some sense of closure about the whole thing, but it wasn't coming. And for some reason he was fine with it.

That night, when he'd come home from Matt's, he'd been intoxicated and anxious, but his parents hadn't even seemed to notice he was drunk. His mother was terrifyingly hysterical. Maddie sat in her lap, her eyes made of glass. His father talked stone-faced to the cops while they asked him question after question about Jason and if there were any other guns in the house and on and on.

Evan had stumbled in the front door and the cops and his family had turned. His mother came forward and threw her arms about him, sobbing. His father was next, squeezing him so tight he thought his spine might snap. Maddie shuffled forward and limply hugged him, then went back and sat on the couch.

One of the cops had taken Evan by the arm and led him to the kitchen, saying he had to ask him some questions.

“You been drinkin’, haven’t you,” he said in a low voice once they were alone. It wasn’t a question.

Evan was horrified, but then he remembered he was twenty-one. But he’d driven home. He began shaking.

“I have,” he said, too stupefied by the situation to come up with anything less damaging.

“And you drove home, didn’t you?”

Evan’s lip began to tremble. Humiliating.

“I did.”

“Can I see your license?”

Evan produced it and the cop looked it over. Then he gave it right back to him.

“Given what your family’s about to go through, I’ll do you the favor of keeping this to myself, as long as you think you can hold it together in front of them for the night. But this is the only pass you’ll ever get. If I ever see you in front of a judge for a DUI, you’re fucked. Deal?”

“Ok,” said Evan. He swallowed his tears, his face hot and his head heavy.

“All right then,” said the cop. His nametag read Williams. He was forty-ish, thin, goateed.

After asking Evan some more questions about Jason and his family and the house, Officer Williams had gone back into the living room.

Evan had gone to his room for a second, to be alone and calm his head. Then he'd gone downstairs and taken a peek into Jason's room. They'd already removed his body, and the lights were out.

He'd seen the Cash poster on his brother's wall of snarling Johnny giving the warden of San Quentin the finger. It was covered in a black, gunky substance.

Evan stared.

It wasn't Johnny giving the finger and making that face. It was Jason. Jason giving Evan the finger with that fuck-you snarlface. He'd left. And now he was gone forever. He'd canceled himself out.

"Hey," said Lily, yanking Evan back to the present and pointing at the radio.

I've got a home in gloryland that outshines the sun, sang Johnny.

"Gloryland," she said. "This is the song your sister got gloryland from?"

"Yeah," said Evan. "This is why I bought the CD."

"Oh yeah, I remember you saying that now," she said. "Huh. It's the same melody as some other song, but I can't remember what."

"It's a standard folk melody," said Evan. "It's kind of similar to the Battle Hymn of the Republic, though."

"How's that go?"

"That's the, 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,'" Evan sang tonelessly.

“Ohhhhhh, yeah,” said Lily.

She turned and looked out the window, surveying the countryside, the sun finally disappearing over the horizon.

“This looks like gloryland,” she said.

“I guess,” said Evan, looking out her window. “Maddie always said it was a field with wind and long grass.”

He turned around in a random gas station parking lot and made back for the hotel. It was nearly dark now, the sun reduced to a thin fiery line of daylight on the horizon, the sky fading from purple to blue to black.

“Do you know why your brother killed himself?” Lily asked.

“Not really,” said Evan. “He didn’t leave a note or anything... he used to talk a lot about how things are going to get really hard for regular people in this country, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah, sure,” she said. “Tell me.”

“It’s a long fucking theory. He used to go on rants all the time.”

“Just tell it.”

Evan exhaled and tried to remember.

“Well, throughout most of history, like, almost all of it, up until the 20th century, society was structured with a really small group of people at the top who owned almost everything, and then everyone else who owned almost nothing.”

“K...”

“And the people at the top played all the people on the bottom against each other, using their power and influence to keep their power and influence. And Jason said there was a little interruption in that in the 20th century, but the only reason it happened was because of the two most devastating wars ever fought, plus the worst economic depression ever. And people thought it was going to last forever but it didn’t. And it’s been slowly reverting back to the old way now for decades, and everyone’s too stupid and lazy to do anything about it.”

“Uh-huh...”

“And the elite’s gotten it back now and they’re never going to let it go again. And with technology going the way it is, with everything getting more interconnected and monopolized and everyone giving up their information and letting everything they do be monitored, it’s just looking more and more like we’re fucked... he thought by becoming a soldier he could make a difference, you know, like, get in on the inside or whatever and change some things, but I think he realized he was just another pawn and that was really devastating.”

Lily nodded. Evan found talking about this very therapeutic.

“Why was he so sure nothing was going to get better?” Lily asked.

Evan shrugged.

“I dunno. He used to just say that ‘Most people are worthless’. Not like in a mean way, it was just a logical conclusion based on how our society operates. If you’re not the best at something, you’re nothing. It used to be you could be average and make a living at like a factory or something, but Jason would say that’s all gone now. That was his thing. ‘Most people are worthless.’ And that seems to be true. Most people never do anything of consequence in their lives.”

Lily frowned.

“But why does anyone need to do something of ‘consequence’ in the first place? What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know exactly, but our society is really, really focused on wealth and success, to an extreme degree, and I think that’s why people think like that. I mean, look what I’m doing here. I’m trying to become rich and famous. Cause that’s what we were taught when we were growing up. Follow your dreams really just means, ‘get rich and powerful’. But not everyone can be rich and powerful, so the most people end up feeling shitty about it no matter what, and the people that do become rich and powerful become total assholes because they have confirmation bias and still think it’s something anyone can do.”

“I was never taught that,” said Lily.

“Yeah, you were,” said Evan. “Culture taught it to you. Every freaking Disney movie we ever watched. The idea that every nobody who follows his or her dreams becomes a somebody. Life’s not like that. Not everybody can be somebody.”

Lily shook her head.

“I don’t need to be somebody,” she said. “I just need to be...”

She trailed off, thinking.

“I don’t even fucking know anymore. I just need to be okay, I guess.”

“Jason was saying our generation doesn’t even realize how fucked we are. And he would always say, our parents aren’t going to be any help, cause they don’t get it. They can’t see it.”

“You know,” said Lily. “This might surprise you, but I don’t think it’s that bad. Most people, I mean, in the big scheme of things, most people are doing at least okay. There’s a lot of fear about losing what you have, but there’s no way it’s as simple as what you just described.”

“It probably isn’t, but I see his point. I don’t know. I feel like anyone who wants to feel marginalized nowadays, you know, *can* feel marginalized, cause we’ve all been so divided up. Jason used to say we’re dividing ourselves up for them. White vs. black. Immigrant vs. resident. Male vs. female. Just the way they want.”

“Who’s them?”

“The elite, the people that own everything.”

“Oh, right. I gotcha.”

“And our parents’ generation just blames it on us being soft and coddled and everything. But I feel like my parents never really wanted me to feel bad when I was a kid. They were afraid of me feeling bad, so they sheltered me. That’s the thing-- part of the problem of growing up sheltered is you’re never actually aware of it.”

“True,” said Lily. “I remember your Mom saying you’re not even allowed to say the word ‘hate’ in your house.”

“When did you hear that?”

“When I was over with Marty once. In the backyard. Jason said he hated something and your mom freaked out on him, like, you can’t say the word hate. I was like, you know, fuck, if she could hear what we said in my house, her head would explode.”

“I know, right? You’re right. Like, telling someone to not say the word is somehow going to just make the emotion go away or something.”

He thought for a second. He was rambling. He sounded like Jason. He hadn't even known all these thoughts were inside him. They were pouring out of him now. He knew that Lily probably wasn't really listening but didn't care.

"I honestly don't even know what I want, other than to be happy or content or whatever. But getting to that spot involves being emotionally able and mature, and if you've had everything done for you throughout your childhood and adolescence you never figured out how to do it for yourself and so you're screwed."

Lily shook her pretty head. The white flower was still in her hair, rumpled from her nap.

"God, I need some more sleep. That's a lot of information to process. I see his point, but... Jesus."

"Sorry. You asked."

"I know. You know what I need now?"

"What?"

Lily took out her pack of cigarettes, lit one.

They drove back to the motel, the green hills around them in the burgeoning night, Johnny Cash singing hymns low on the radio.

>Be Evan.

>Be eleven or twelve.

>Be over at Marty's house, playing Need for Speed.

>They're playing as cops, running speeding perps off the road and arresting them.

>Marty's telling him he looked up the cheat for the Porsche cop car but that the Caprice works fine.

>Lily comes downstairs and sits on the couch and watches them play. She's quiet, her arms crossed over her chest.

>Their stepdad, Larry, comes down a few moments later. The look on his face makes Evan uneasy.

>Lily, what did I tell you?

>Lily ignores him.

>Lily, he growls.

>Evan can tell he's super pissed about something.

>Lily doesn't reply.

>The air has changed, everyone senses it.

>It makes Evan very uncomfortable.

>Young lady...

>Lily's eyes stay fixed on the TV, her skinny arms folded over her chest.

>You will respect me, young lady, he says.

>Fuck off, says Lily.

>Larry darts over, and the unexpected viciousness of the motion causes Evan to jump. He drops his controller and his cop car slows on the TV screen.

>Larry snatches Lily from the couch, yanking both her arms up.

>She struggles, cries out.

>Marty's glassy-eyed, focusing on the game, he's tuning it all out.

>Evan watches, unable to look away.

>He's never seen a parent let loose on a kid like this, even his own parents have never thrown Evan or Jason around like that, even at their most furious. Maddie's never even been spanked.

>Lily cries out in pain as Larry smacks her on the tush once, twice, three times, then drags her upstairs.

>She starts crying as he yanks her along.

>They hear a door slam, Larry's muffled yelling can be heard.

>Larry hasn't said anything to Evan or Marty, hasn't even acknowledged them.

>Marty says, "Yeah, Caprice works fine."

>Evan is numb the rest of the time they hang out, he excuses himself after the next game.

Something really feels wrong. He'll never feel the same going over there, and never feel completely safe around Larry again.

>His father is working in the garage when he gets home. Evan tells him what he saw.

>Maybe we should call the cops, he tells his dad, his voice shaking.

>His dad shakes his head.

>That sounds like something that Lily and Larry need to work out, he says.

>And that's the end of it.

They stopped and got Subway before going back to the motel. Once they were back, they stretched out their stiff limbs out on their beds, spread the rolls of Subway paper and ate their subs. Lily got chicken teriyaki on wheat, Evan got turkey on white.

Lily turned the TV on and tossed Evan the remote.

“You pick now,” she said with her mouth full of sandwich.

Evan turned the TV on and flipped around. The tail end of *The Green Mile* was playing on AMC. They sat on their beds, devouring their subs and watching. Evan was way hungrier than he’d thought, and Lily seemed to be, too.

We haven’t eaten all day, he realized.

They watched John Coffey get strapped into the electric chair, they saw him tell Tom Hanks not to put the hood over his head because he was scare’t of the dark. They saw John Coffey get executed and they saw Tom Hanks put the St. Catherine necklace on John Coffey’s corpse.

“Poor guy,” said Lily, licking the teriyaki sauce from her fingers.

Evan finished his sandwich and tossed the balled-up paper into the wastebasket under the desk. Lily wasn’t texting as much as she had been, but she still looked at her phone from time to time.

“You want a cookie?” he asked her. He’d gotten three chocolate chip cookies. Lily had gotten only her sandwich and a bottle of water. They’d paid for their own orders.

“Naw,” she said, picking lettuce out of her teeth with a finger. “I’m good.”

After, she went into the bathroom, jamming her garbage into the now- overflowing trash can on her way in.

Evan ate his cookies as old Tom Hanks took his lady friend to see Mr. Jingles the immortal mouse living in the shed behind the old folk’s home. He sucked down the last of his Coke, listening to Lily bang the toilet seat.

When she came back out dressed in her pj’s, he noticed she hadn’t flushed the toilet.

“What a sad fucking movie,” she said as the Green Mile credits rolled speedily across the TV screen. “I remember the first time I saw that guy get fried with the dry sponge, I freaked out. My mom was like, ‘It’s just a movie! It’s just a movie!’”

“Did you forget to flush?” asked Evan.

“Huh?”

“You just went to the bathroom and I heard the toilet seat go down but you didn’t flush it.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Lily, “I was just putting my pj’s on.”

“Then why put the seat down?”

“Uh, why do you even fucking care? Maybe I wanted to sit down on the seat. What does it matter to you anyway?”

“It doesn’t, just wondering,” said Evan.

Lily lay down and stretched out under her covers. She groaned with pleasure. Evan imagined wrapping his arms around her body and holding her close and he hated himself for it.

Evan switched channels again, and found Judd Apatow’s Funny People. The plot involved a skinny Seth Rogen’s character being taken on as a joke-writer by Adam Sandler’s famous comedian movie star character. Adam Sandler’s character has recently learned he has a terminal illness.

They watched most of the movie in silence, but there were a two moments that made Evan and Lily interact:

1) In one scene, Sandler and Rogan meet two women after a gig, and they all end up at Sandler's mansion. One of the women quickly gravitates toward Sandler, while the other makes it clear she isn't interested in Rogan. Evan feels his pain.

2) Later, a scene comes up where Rogan discovers that a girl he's interested in played by Aubrey Plaza has been with someone else—a smug TV actor played by Jason Schwartzman. It escalates into an argument.

“What a bitch,” said Evan, off-handedly, watching Rogan and Plaza argue.

Lily looked over at him, incredulous.

“She did nothing wrong.”

“She was very clearly leading him on, and then she fucks his roommate. You don't think that's not cool? Why say she'll go out with him at all?”

“That's his fucking problem. She can do whatever she wants.”

“She's using him,” Evan said, a little more harshly than he meant to. “She's using him and she thinks he's too stupid to notice.”

“Geez, what's your time of the month?” Lily snorted. “Why are you being such a little bitch about this?”

Realization washed over her face. She pointed at Evan.

“You're pissed at me for last night! That's what this is about!”

Evan hesitated, but the overall dullness and general malaise of the trip so far had gotten to him. She'd called him out.

“I was only trying to cuddle with you last night.”

“Bullshit,” said Lily. “*Bullshit*. I felt what you wanted.”

“You kind of gave me the impression the night before that it was going to be an ongoing thing.”

“No, I fucking didn’t! HOW?”

“You fucked both my friends and then unexpectedly came over after I’d passed out and slept with me. It’s kind of difficult to go from that to spending a night in a hotel room with you alone and having nothing happen. Can you see how that might be confusing to someone?”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with anything! Last night, I was trying to fall asleep when suddenly your *erection’s* pushing into my *buttcheek*.”

Evan clenched his teeth.

“Look, I misread the situation. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t misread anything! You wanted to make a move on me so you did and I rejected you! So what? It happens hundreds of times a day! Deal with it!”

They sat there, the TV flickering, Jason Schwartzmann trying to make up with Seth Rogen, who wasn’t having it.

“You need to get over the whole virgin thing,” Lily said. “Sex is not the absolute pinnacle of human existence.”

“That’s easy to say for someone who’s been getting it whenever they want since they were fourteen. If you were ugly or fat you wouldn’t be saying that.”

“It doesn’t solve your problems! Look at Adam Sandler in this movie, he fucks all sorts of people and he’s still miserable. And he’s rich and famous!”

“Yeah, he’s sad because he’s *dying*. And I’d rather be miserable about being successful than miserable about not being successful.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Lily.

“I don’t wanna watch this anymore,” Evan said, reaching for the remote and flipping off the TV.

“Good, I’m tired anyway,” said Lily.

She threw the covers back and tucked herself in.

“I’m going to sleep,” she said. “Do *not* come over here.”

She turned away from him, and two seconds later he saw the glow of her phone and heard the tapping of her thumbs on the screen.

Evan cracked open his laptop, plugged his earbuds in, and listened to U2. He loved U2 but hadn’t listened to them since he’d found out Lily wasn’t a fan. He put on All That You Can’t Leave Behind, and sat there listening to every song. When “In A Little While” came on, he thought of Lily dancing in Matt’s basement.

Evan thought of Lily as a child, bundled with her face hidden behind her scarf at the bus stop, running through the sprinklers in their front yard while he and Marty and Jason shot at each other with Super Soakers.

She’d always been by herself, he remembered. He couldn’t think of a single time he’d seen her playing with any friends her age.

He thought of her lying on the bed three feet away, and for all the presumed mangling that had been done to their friendship thus far, for some fucking reason his body still longed for

hers, and his heart was full of disappointment.

>Be Evan.

>Be 7.

>Jason's 9.

>They're at the old house in Livonia.

>They're in the living room waiting for their parents to come downstairs so they can go to some function.

>Their mom is playing the Beauty and the Beast soundtrack on their stereo. The Celine Dion/Peabo Bryson duet version of the title song comes on.

>Jason sits on the couch, bored, listening. Evan sits next to him. They're both dressed in uncomfortable tuxes. They look at each other.

>Jason looks into Evan's eyes and begins lip syncing the lyrics.

>Jason begins ostentatiously performing, being goofy out of boredom.

>Evan laughs. This is entertaining.

>Jason gets more into the show, he stands up and begins gesturing grandly, a overblown presentation.

>During the instrumental break, Jason grabs a blanket from the easy chair and drapes it around his shoulders like a cape, swoops it around with a dramatic, faraway look in his eye. He runs over to the window, looks out theatrically.

>Evan is laughing, hysterical.

>The family dog Alfred comes in in the room, drawn to the commotion, his tail wagging. He's a young, high-spirited black lab, just out of puppyhood.

>Jason gets down on his knees and begins singing the song to Alfred, who's named after Batman's butler.

>The dog gets excited and begins circling and playing with Jason, who tries to hold him in place so he can sing to him like they're in love.

>Alfred won't cooperate, thinks it's a game, keeps dodging Jason, tears out of the room, thinks he's being chased.

>Jason follows, his arms outstretched, singing about it being bittersweet and strange.

>Their dad roars from down the hall to stop getting the dog riled up, they're about to leave.

>Evan rolls with laughter on the couch.

>He laughs until his cheeks hurt and his stomach hurts and his eyes are watery.

>Jason comes back into the living room. He takes off his cape and takes a bow as the song ends.

The next day Evan and Lily both slept in until late morning. By the time they got up it was stifling outside.

"The signal here sucks," said Lily, sitting up in bed, hair a tragic nest once again. "I can't get on Facebook and I need to."

After two nights going to bed angry, Evan felt a dagger in his heart when his eyes met her face.

"It worked fine last night," he said.

"Well, it's not working now."

Evan called down to the front desk. The Wi-Fi was indeed temporarily down.

“What do you need Facebook for?” Evan said as he hung up the room phone. “Why not just text whoever this is like usual?”

“His number’s in the Facebook message.”

“Whose number?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Why?”

“Cause I don’t want to?”

Evan paused. Something didn’t add up here but he didn’t know what. They looked at each other.

“It can’t wait?”

“No, it can’t,” said Lily. “Do you have somewhere else to be or something?”

“No,” said Evan. “Fine.”

Evan got dressed, Lily went into the bathroom and hastily got herself ready. She was cheerful again when she came out.

“You’re in a good mood all of a sudden,” Evan commented.

“Felt good to sleep in,” she said, stretching. “Needed that shit.”

The day was incendiary. The blacktop was a stove. The car was a hellish oven when they got in, Evan cringing as the steering wheel seared his fingertips. He cranked the air conditioning. The vents blasted hot air until after they were out of the parking lot.

They drove up and down Harding Place, scouring the businesses and restaurants for any free Wi-Fi. After a few unsuccessful go-arounds they finally spotted a sign-- FREE WIFI—in the front window of a big blue Laundromat a couple miles down the road.

As they stepped out of the car, the heat felt like someone draping a hot blanket over their faces.

“You want to go back down to the city after this?” asked Evan once they were inside and Lily had started her important Facebooking. They sat on hard plastic chairs in front of the windows advertising detergent prices and the free Wi-Fi in big yellow letters.

The washers and dryers thunked and clunked against the walls. Laundromat customers glumly folded their clothes and tossed in dryer sheets and slammed doors.

“And do what?”

“I don’t know, look around.”

“I’m really tired. This heat is fucking terrible.”

“True,” said Evan.

You’re always fucking tired, he thought.

Lily sniffed as she tapped her phone. She pursed her lips, looking like she wanted to say something but was unsure if she should.

“I might have something for us to do,” she finally said, giving Evan an impish side-glance.

“Does it have to do with your message?”

“Yes,” she said.

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I’ll find out in a few minutes here.”

“What is it, though, what would we do?”

“We can go visit a friend of mine.”

“Who’s that?”

“Just a guy who I met through work.”

“Through the Blue?”

“Yeah.”

“What would we do with him?”

Lily looked at the other occupants of the laundromat. There were only about four or five other people.

“Let’s go back out to the car and I’ll tell you,” she said.

They left the Laundromat, the door clinking shut behind them.

The car already felt like a sauna even though they’d only been inside for fifteen minutes or so.

“Jesus Christ,” said Lily. “I’m melting.” Sweat beaded the hollow at the base of her neck. Evan wanted to lick it off and again reviled his libido.

“So what is it we can do with your friend?” Evan asked. He had a bad feeling about this.

“I just need to go get something from him.”

“Is it drugs?” Evan asked sarcastically.

Lily laughed. She laughed hard. Evan stared at her.

“Yeah,” she said, getting control of herself long enough to answer him. “Yeah, it is.”

“Yeah, drugs?”

“Yeah,” she said, giggling. “Drugs.”

“Really?”

Lily looked at him, still giggling. It was adorable and infuriating at the same time.

“Yeah, really,” she said. “Drugs.”

“What kind of drugs?”

“...heroin.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“You do heroin?”

“Yeah.”

“*You* do heroin? Really?”

“Yeah, but, like, I don’t shoot it. I just snort it. I’ve been doing it all trip. I can’t believe you didn’t pick up on my bathroom breaks.”

“I did, sort of,” said Evan. “I’m just too much of a pussy to really say anything.”

Lily snorted laughter and shook her head.

“Oh my God,” she said.

“I knew something was going on,” said Evan. “How long have you been doing it?”

“Couple of months.”

“That shit will kill you.”

“Only if you do it ALL THE TIME. And only if you shoot it.”

“I don’t think that’s accurate.”

“I’m fine, I don’t need it. I just like it. And my friend is offering me a lot of money to pick this up. I could’ve lied to you but instead I’m just telling you. At a Laundromat. With free WiFi.”

She started laughing again. Her laughs were sparkles of sunshine on an ocean, raindrops on a picnic table.

Evan frowned.

“You lied to me last night after I called you out about not flushing the toilet.”

“Well, yeah, I didn’t want you to know then. But that was before I was sure this was going to happen. Now you do know, so do you want to do it? We don’t have anything else going on, do we?”

Evan looked at the cars rushing by out on the road and felt empty and powerless inside.

“If you don’t come with I’ll just get a cab and you can do whatever you want,” Lily said. “Believe me, I understand.”

Evan groaned to himself. He didn’t want to stop spending time with her. That was for sure. He didn’t want to sit in the motel watching movies on TV while she took a cab down to the city and probably fucked the guy she was picking up the heroin from.

“Well,” he said, slowly, giving in. “I was looking on my laptop earlier about the Parthenon and shit and apparently there’s been a bunch of flooding recently and so the Grand Ole Opry’s closed. And we can’t get into that park cause of the flooding either, so the Parthenon’s out. I figure we’ve already seen the gist of downtown Nashville. And I got my CD, so yeah... Then tomorrow’s the audition and then Sunday we get to go back home.”

“Yep, that’s how you explained it to me,” said Lily. “That’s how I understand it. But what do you want to do right now? Cause I’m going to get this shit. And you can either come with or not.”

Evan pulled out his phone to see what time it was.

It was 1:00.

“Sure,” he said, going against every nerve in his body. He quickly added, “As long as it’s not, like, a huge shipment or anything. I don’t feel entirely comfortable smuggling heroin across state lines. In fact, I don’t feel remotely comfortable doing it.”

“It’s not a lot, it’s like a couple grams, it’s just some other shit that my boss at work might want to start selling. He found out I was coming down here and asked if I could do it if it came up.”

Evan gritted his teeth.

“Daddy? Your roommate, again?”

“Yeah, him.”

“What’s his deal?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, what’s his deal? Who calls himself Daddy?”

“That’s what everyone calls him. He didn’t come up with it. His real name’s Dan. And he’s a manager for the Blue and a couple other places in the area. And he does, like, some amateur music producing. He’s got a little studio—”

“And he’s a heroin dealer.”

“Yes, and he deals some heroin and weed and other things.”

“And he’s your roommate.”

“Yes, sometimes.”

She texted, always texting.

“Sweet,” she said as she typed. “He says we can meet him whenever.”

“Daddy? He’s down here now?”

“No, the guy I’m picking up the H from.”

“I take it that’s who the Facebook message was from.”

“Yeah, Daddy said he’d be getting in touch with me with a temporary Facebook account this morning. Then he’ll delete it once we’re done talking.”

“You’re not worried about us becoming drug smugglers now? You don’t have a problem turning my car into a fucking drug smuggling operation? You’re not going to ask my permission for this?”

“Jesus Christ, I said you don’t have to come if you don’t want to. And I can hide this shit easily and even if we do get pulled over I’ll just take all the blame for it. But I won’t have to. Cause that’s not gonna happen.”

She tapped send with a theatrical flourish of her hand. Evan had a sudden urge to grab her phone and throw it out the window, get out and stomp on it until it was a scattered pile of metal and glass shards. Instead he just watched her.

“How do you not have a smart phone yet, anyway?” she asked him, not looking up.

“Just haven’t got one,” he said, knowing full well it was because he couldn’t afford it and neither could his parents. His phone had originally been purchased by Jason in 2006. “I know once I do get one I’ll be addicted to it, so I’m putting it off as long as I can.”

“So we’re going then,” said Lily, a keen smile on her goddamned beautiful fucking face.

“Yes,” said Evan through clenched teeth.

Please God, don’t let me regret this, he thought.

“This calls for a new CD,” said Evan.

He grabbed his CD book and put in Be Your Own Pet’s first album and went to track 2.

Breakneck punk clanging and out of tune riffing issued from the speakers.

Jemina Pearl screamed about being an independent motherfucker.

Evan fired up the Civic and pulled out of the laundromat parking lot.

“This is my shit right here,” said Lily, reaching forward to turn the music up. She bobbed her head, smiling. “This is, like, my song.”

“Have you heard them before?”

“No, I really like it, though.”

Jemina screamed about putting you in a trunk and taking you around the world.

“They were only around for like a couple years,” said Evan, nervous babbling. It was too late to turn back now. “They only put out two albums and then broke up. They were really young too. I think they were like 16 when this came out. And they’re from Nashville, too.”

“Fascinating. You know where we’re going?”

Evan realized he didn’t.

“No. Where are we going?”

“Here’s the address,” said Lily, showing him her phone. Evan hurriedly put it into the TomTom, then wished he hadn’t. It was traceable now. FUCK.

Jemina screamed about how she loves you so much so you’d better love her.

The TomTom revealed their destination was outside of the city, about half an hour away.

“He knows we’re coming,” said Lily. “I’m actually really glad you get to meet him.”

>Be Evan.

>Be a few months earlier, in March.

>Be discussing shit with Jason, sitting out on the deck, looking out over their neighbor’s backyards all empty and cluttered with suburban crap. A compost pile there, a trampoline there, an overgrown garden there.

>Pulp Fiction is playing on Jason’s laptop, it’s the scene where Vincent and Jules are sitting in the diner discussing Jules’ newfound faith.

>Ah, so by that rationale, if a pig had a better personality, he would cease to be a filthy animal, says Vincent. Is that true?

>Well, we'd have to be talkin' about one charming motherfucking pig, replies Jules. I mean, he'd have to be ten times more charming than that Arnold on Green Acres, you know what I'm saying?

>Evan and Jason are only giving the laptop half their attention.

>Jason is on another one of his rants, this one about pay. He had made a decent amount of money thus far from his military earnings but he says he’s realized something as a result.

>What’s that, asked Evan, knowing what’s coming.

>Hourly wages are a step up from slavery, Jason said.

>Really.

>Yeah, no matter how many hours you work, if you're making below a certain rate you'll never get anywhere. You need big payouts, like thousands of dollars at a time, if you want to get anywhere. Saving a couple hundred dollars a paycheck isn't going to do jack shit for you. And most people can't even do that. They're spending everything they get on necessities.

> Ok.

>That's the thing, so few occupations actually pay like that. Hourly work, the jobs that most people can get, especially since the Recession, are just a step up from slavery. No one can live on fucking minimum wage anymore. It's a fucking ripoff.

>If I get this job at Kensington I'll make like ten an hour.

>And that's good for someone who's about to be twenty-one, but you'd have to work like thousands of hours to even get something close to retirement. And now think about if you had to raise a family on that. Not gonna work.

>Evan nods, tries to focus on the movie. Jason keeps talking.

>You need to get in on the club, man, Jason tells him. Join a cartel of some kind. Make yourself useful to the right people.

>Cartel?

>Yeah, one of the cartels that run the world. The people that push the product. That own the product. The access. The information. The identity. The world's all run by different mafias, man. That's all it's ever been.

>They watch Pumpkin and Honey Bunny share a passionate kiss before they begin robbing the diner.

>When was the last time you got laid? Evan asks.

>Been awhile, says Jason. Why?

>Is it hard, once you've had it, to not get it?

>It's always a pain in the ass to not get laid, but, I mean, I don't know, I guess I just don't really care that much anymore.

>Have you had, to, like, lower your standards at all?

>Naw, it's nothing like that. I could get it if I went looking for it. I just don't.

>Have you ever fucked a fat girl?

>Jason thinks about it.

>No, I haven't. Never had to. Why, you got one that's interested in you?

>No. Not that I know of. Do you think you'd ever consider it, though?

>I don't know, says Jason. I guess. If she had a cute enough face. And I mean, if she wasn't like, too fat. Like, chubby, or thick, definitely. There's some hot-ass thick girls out there. But, like, obese? Probably not. I mean, that'd have to be some special circumstances there. That'd have to be—

>Jason pauses and thinks, then a grin spreads on his face.

>-- that'd have to be one charming motherfucking pig.

>Evan laughs, Jason laughs, the sun shines, Pulp Fiction plays on the laptop, it's a good time.

"Maybe you should stay in the car," said Lily.

"I'm fine with that," said Evan. He turned off the engine but left the key in the ignition.

The house was on a dirt road that branched off from a two-lane highway. It was one-story, old, decrepit. The grass was yellow and long. There was a rusted old tractor sitting in front

of the dilapidated garage. A white Lexus sedan was parked in front of them, looking incredibly out of place. The whole area gave off a Deliverance atmosphere.

“I’ll be right back,” said Lily, but before she could get out the front door of the house flew open and out came a powerful-looking dude in a stained white tank top. He was six foot six, at least.

Evan watched in awe as the guy approached the car, arms swinging. His head was shaved and he wore baggy black pants. He had a scowl on his face when he first appeared, but his expression softened when he saw Lily.

Evan was nervous.

“That guy has definitely killed someone before,” he said.

Lily didn’t answer. She looked very excited to see him.

“Tyrone,” she exclaimed happily.

Tyrone came over to the car and opened the passenger door without being invited. Evan kept his hands on the steering wheel.

Lily leaned out and threw her arms around Tyrone’s considerable neck. He kissed her cheek as Lily clung to him like an excited monkey. She looked as small as a child in his arms.

“Lily Talent,” boomed Tyrone. “How you been, girl?”

He offered Evan a meaty hand and Evan extended his own, his fingers crushed in Tyrone’s grip.

“What’s happening, friend,” said Tyrone, grinning, showing two rows of dazzlingly white teeth. “Thanks for chauffeuring my girl here.”

“Evan,” said Evan, intimidated beyond belief. “You’re welcome.”

“It’s so good to see you again,” Lily squealed, releasing Tyrone and falling back into the seat to smile up at him gaily. “How have you been?”

“Can’t complain, business is good,” said Tyrone. “I’m glad I made it down here, though. Daddy said you’d be by yourself, though.”

“Yeah, Evan is cool, don’t worry, though.”

“Yeah, he looks cool,” said Tyrone, grinning again.

Evan didn’t have a response.

“Do you miss Michigan at all?” Lily asked.

“Other than this heat? Hell, no. Tell Clancy he needs to get his ass down here, too.”

Tyrone reached into his pants pocket.

Evan’s balls went into his throat.

Here it is, I’m gonna die, he thought.

“I got something for you,” said Tyrone. “Make this quick.”

“Whoa,” said Lily, watching his hand as it shuffled around inside his pocket. “You don’t want to go inside and do that?”

“We’re being watched,” said Tyrone. “They gotta see me give it to you.”

Who’s ‘they’? thought Evan.

“Just don’t pull a gun out and it’ll be fine,” said Tyrone. “Ain’t no one gonna look at this car and think you got anything special in here. The hell’s a Yankee girl like you doing all the way down here anyway?”

Lily gestured at Evan.

“He’s auditioning for American Idol and I just came with him and Daddy found out and asked if I could pick this up.”

Tyrone chuckled.

“Sure he is. Open your hand.”

He produced a small twisted baggie of white powder and handed it to Lily. Lily was right, the baggie was 90 percent wadded up around a ball of what looked like powdered sugar. It was about the size of a large marble. Lily dipped a hand into her purse and made the baggie disappear neat as you please.

“You be careful with that now,” said Tyrone. “That shit is pure as the driven snow.”

“You know me, I’m careful as fuck,” said Lily. “How’s Daddy paying for this anyway?”

“You don’t need to worry your little head ‘bout that. You don’t think he’ll have a problem knowing you weren’t solo on this? You know how he gets when you do shit behind his back.”

“Well, he doesn’t need to know, does he?”

Tyrone looked at Evan.

“I guess not. As long as Evan here is cool.”

“Are you cool, Evan?” Lily turned and asked.

They both looked at him, wry smiles on their faces.

“Yes,” said Evan, feeling light-headed. Both his hands were still on the steering wheel.

“Yes, I am cool.”

Tyrone chuckled heartily. Lily snorted laughter.

“See?” said Lily, turning back to Tyrone.

“Good to see you again, Lily Talent. You two best be on your way,” said Tyrone.

He lifted his head and made a strange squawking noise at the house. There was no one else visible but Evan knew Tyrone had just given some signal that the package was delivered.

What the fuck am I doing here, he thought.

“You want to come hang with us?” said Lily, sweet as can be.

She never uses that tone of voice with me, Evan thought against another pang of jealousy.

“I can’t, boo,” said Tyrone. “Love to, but can’t. You make sure Daddy gets that now.”

“Thanks, Tyrone,” said Lily.

“Off you go,” said Tyrone. He looked at Evan.

“Don’t want nothing bad to happen to you, now.”

Lily leaned out and hugged him hard one last time.

“I’ll text you,” she said.

“You do that,” said Tyrone.

Tyrone slammed the car door shut, stepping back and heading into the house without a word or a wave.

Evan threw the car into reverse and backed out of the driveway. He sped off down the dirt road, kicking up dust and praying they wouldn’t break down or get a flat tire. There were no other houses or driveways.

“He’s Clancy’s younger brother,” said Lily. “Remember Clancy?”

“Yeah, I remember Clancy,” said Evan. He was on edge, full of fear and fury. This had not been a good idea. “So I guess I’m your drug mule now?”

Lily frowned at him.

“Uh, what?”

“I’m your drug mule.”

“Who said that?”

“No one, but now I’ve got however much of that potent heroin in my car, in addition to whatever you already brought down here without telling me. You probably should’ve just kept it a secret.”

“We’ll be fine. You saw how little it is, right? And I had my own stash on me this whole time and we’ve been fine.”

She put a hand on his forearm, which prickled with gooseflesh.

“Look at me,” she said.

“I’m driving,” said Evan.

“Just look at me, Evan.”

Evan turned his head. Her brown eyes were wide and clear.

“If we get caught, I’ll take the fall,” Lily said. “Don’t worry. You didn’t know anything. That’s all you have to say.”

Evan didn’t quite buy that, but what was the point in arguing now? It was done.

“K,” he said.

“K?”

“Yeah, all right.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll try not to.”

They turned off the dirt road onto the two-lane highway again.

“What does heroin feel like anyway?” Evan asked, needing to change the subject. “Like, the high?”

Lily thought about it, pulling out her phone and sending a quick text. Probably letting Daddy know they’d received his package.

“Like gloryland,” she said after thinking for a second. “It feels like gloryland.”

“Can you be more specific?”

Lily sighed.

“Uh... it feels like, you know, like, right after an orgasm? When you’re lying there and your body’s all worn out in a good way and has that glowing feel? Kind of like that.”

“I want some,” Evan said, surprising even himself.

“You what?”

“I want to try some heroin.”

“No, no, no, no. No way. This is Daddy’s,” Lily said, tapping her purse. “And you can’t start with this shit anyway. This’ll knock you on your ass. You’ve never even smoked weed before, have you? You’ll lose your fucking mind. To be honest, it might even kill you.”

“Then I want some of whatever you’ve been using since we left. The normal quality stuff.”

“No,” said Lily. “You can’t.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Cause, I said so. Cause it’s mine. And it’s expensive. And you wouldn’t be able to handle it anyway.”

“How the fuck do you know that?”

“I know,” Lily said.

Evan seethed.

“You shouldn’t have told me about this,” he said. “What if I just take some when you’re not looking?”

“You won’t. And even if you do take some, you won’t be able to audition tomorrow. Trust me.”

“What if I just turn you in?”

Lily batted her eyelashes at him.

“We both know you’re not gonna do that, Evan.”

“So you set me up, then.”

“No, I did not! Come on, I could’ve tried to lie to you and told some extravagant lie about, like, meeting up with my friend in the middle of nowhere for coffee or some shit, but I respect your intelligence too much for that, and I trust you and I wanted to be honest with you.”

“Was this the whole reason you came down here with me? To potentially pick up some dope shit for your strip club boss slash fuck-buddy roommate?”

“No. I didn’t know I was doing this officially until last night. He asked me then.”

Evan shook his head.

“I don’t know if I can believe you.”

“Well, it’s the truth. But I can’t let you have anything, either, it’s just not a good idea. You’re too good for this shit.”

“Too good for it?”

“Yeah, you are. And so please, let’s just let this go. It doesn’t have to be like this. Let’s just enjoy the rest of our vacation.”

“I’m too good for heroin and too good to have sex with you, got it.”

“OH MY FUCKING GOD,” Lily exclaimed. “JUST STOP. FUCKING STOP.”

Evan didn’t say anything.

>Be Evan.

>It’s the end of gym class, random weekday, sophomore year of high school.

>Evan is waiting with Kyle Granger for the gym teacher to unlock the door to the locker room.

>They’re the only two in the hallway right now, they came in early from the soccer field before the rest of the class.

>Kyle is a muscular farmboy kid who hangs out with Evan in class from time to time. They’ve been acquainted a couple years. Evan met him through Brian Dinkins.

>Kyle likes to talk about ATV racing and hunting deer with his grandfather. Evan doesn’t particularly find Kyle interesting but tolerates his chatter anyway. It’s better to have someone around than to be alone.

>However, now, as they stand next to the door, Kyle looks at Evan, and just like that, without any warning, starts punching him in the chest.

>The blows are hard and direct. One after the other. Evan doesn’t know how to respond. He puts his hands up but Kyle slaps them away.

>Come on, Barker, FLEX, says Kyle, landing punch after punch to Evan’s ribcage. FLEX.

>He goes high, he goes low, Evan can double up and try to block.

>Kyle backs Evan into the corner, raining hit after hit upon him.

>FLEX, says Kyle.

>Evan's chest will be bruised later. He will tell no one of this.

>FLEX.

>Evan's dressed in an old t-shirt, ratty gym shorts.

>FLEX.

>As he gets pounded, all he can think is how this came out of nowhere. Kyle has always seemed like a chode, but he's never been a bully.

>Come on, FLEX, says Kyle again. He jabs and hooks. His fists make a meaty thunk when they collide with Evan's torso.

>Evan can tell Kyle's pulling his punches. If he was hitting as hard as he actually could he'd be shattering ribs, and Evan wouldn't be standing.

>*He's doing this for fun*, Evan realizes. *He's doing it cause he can.*

>Still, Evan can't fight back. He doesn't know how. He's scared and confused and humiliated.

>Later he will imagine pummeling Kyle into oblivion. He will be so angry he'll see stars.

>*I'm getting my ass kicked*, Evan thinks. *This is what an ass-kicking feels like.*

>This goes on for another couple of minutes until voices echo down the hallway as the rest of the class files in from the soccer field.

>Kyle stops, steps out of the corner and leans up against the wall again like nothing happened.

>We gotta toughen you up, Barker, he says casually.

>Evan catches his breath, stands up.

>There are scattered blossoms of pain opening all over his mid-section.

>The teacher comes down the hallway and opens the door.

>Kyle is first into the locker room, and Evan follows the rest of the class in.

When they got back to the motel, Lily announced she was going to sit by the pool. She wore what appeared to be the same string bikini she'd worn at the Blue. Evan had thought it was black but in the light of day it turned out to be dark red.

She kept the little ball of sampler heroin in her bra until they got back to the motel room. There she hid it in the bottom of her bag, sticking it in a balled-up pair of socks.

"What's your other stuff look like?" he asked her.

Lily dug in her handbag and brought out another rolled up baggie of similar size, though a smidge bigger. This powder was slightly greyer than the bundle they'd just picked up.

"Can I hold it?"

"Sure."

Lily handed it to him. He rolled it around in his fingers.

"I've never touched a hard drug before," he said.

"Well, now you have," said Lily, snatching the baggie back.

"You going to have any of that now?"

"Nah, I'm good," she said. "Probably tonight before we go to bed."

She disappeared into the bathroom and reappeared in the bikini.

Her body, while still the young miracle it had always been, now seemed significantly less inviting than it had the other night. Evan made a concerted effort not to look at her when she stepped out of the bathroom with a towel under her arm. Try as he might, he betrayed a seconds-

long side-glance up and down her legs, up to her thighs and along her pale cream belly, and he saw her catch him looking and jerked his eyes back to the TV.

“You coming?” Lily asked him.

“Yeah,” said Evan, although he really didn’t want to.

The pool was empty, not that surprising on a Friday afternoon at a low-end motel in a 110 heat degree index. It was rectangular, mid-sized, the little blue waves dipping and bobbing in a low breeze, winking with sunshine.

“This isn’t going to take long,” Lily said.

She applied sunscreen on herself, reeking of coconut by the time she was done. She slathered it all down her arms, on her neck, her cheeks, ears, her collarbone, her legs, the tops of her feet, her stomach and sides. She didn’t ask Evan to do her back, which he told himself was not that disappointing.

“You want some?” she offered.

“Nah, I’m good,” he spat, bitterness ruling his every impulse. He didn’t know what to do. He felt like he had as a child when being disciplined, furious with rebellion but his limbs and tongue refusing to obey his crackling neurons.

“If you’re gonna be out here you should probably take some,” said Lily.

“I don’t care,” he said.

“You should take some,” she insisted. “Or tomorrow’s gonna be really uncomfortable for you. Here.”

She grabbed his hand and was about to squirt some into his palm, but he jerked it back.

“Fine, good point,” he snapped. He snatched the bottle out of her hand and dabbed some on his cheeks, forehead and earlobes.

I hate you so much, he told himself in his head. No one listens to you. No one takes you seriously. Lose some weight, you fat fuck. Then maybe she'll let you put sunscreen on her lovely pale back. And she'll share her heroin with you like a big boy.

Lily lay down on a beach chair, lowered her sunglasses over her eyes and lounged. Evan sat in his beach chair, sweltering in his jeans and t-shirt, trying to read Lincoln's Melancholy.

Honest Abe's dreary face looked out at him from the cover, seeming to say, “I feel ya, bro, this is some real shit.”

Evan thought about getting up right then and there, heading back to the room, grabbing his belongings, loading his stuff in the car and taking off without saying anything to Lily, leaving her there as she lay half-nude next to this cement hole filled with chemical water.

But he didn't. He sat there next to her in the molten sunlight and felt sorry for himself. He sat until his sweaty fingers left imprints on the pages of the book he could not seem to read no matter how many times his eyes scanned the same page over and over.

They stayed there a good hour, until it was late afternoon and the tyrannical sun was beginning to slide down the sky. There were ominous thunderclouds coming in from the west, accompanied by a faraway rumbling.

Evan looked over at Lily and saw she'd fallen asleep. Her belly was stretched taut, her breasts cupped in the blood-red bikini bra, rising and falling placidly. His dick whimpered at him. His brain waged war on itself.

He reached over and poked her in the arm. She started and looked at him, raising her sunglasses.

“Storm’s coming,” he said, nodding to the west as the clouds overtook the sun. “Should probably go inside.”

They went back up to the room and Lily showered, followed by Evan.

Every time she uses the bathroom I’m going to be wondering if she’s getting high now, he thought as they switched places. The bathroom was filled with the scent of her shampoo and soap.

As he rinsed the day’s sweat from his hairy gut and pimply butt, Evan reflected on how, if only he were more of an alpha, if he only understood the game, he could be fucking Lily in this here shower right now. His dick began to swell at the thought, but he paid it no mind.

The thunderclouds rolled in at an alarming pace, and within ten minutes they were drenching the parking lot with torrential rain. Water spilled over the gutters and splattered to the cement balcony floor. In the distance, Nashville’s skyscrapers were obscured by walls of white and grey.

Evan and Lily braved the deluge and drove to the Applebee’s across the street for dinner. Lily got a chicken salad, Evan got a burger.

“Can we buy some beer or something for the hotel room tonight?” she asked him after they’d handed their menus to the waitress.

“Yeah, sure,” said Evan, glowering.

You mean, can I buy us some beer, he thought of saying but didn’t.

“What exactly is your problem?” said Lily. “You were fine all the way down here and then ever since you got that wristband you’ve been moody as hell.”

Evan shook his head.

He looked out the window at the rain beating on the pavement and flooding the grass.

At least she didn’t appear too bothered about the awkward pass the other night. That had already come and gone like yesterday. She hadn’t even brought it up other than to admonish him the night before during Funny People.

“I dunno,” he said. “Just been a shitty summer, I guess.”

Lily nodded sympathetically, her enormous brown eyes boring into his.

“Don’t worry about our little errand today. It was nothing, really. You’re probably not even going to remember it in a few months.”

“I’m fine about that,” said Evan.

He struggled to think of an excuse.

“I... I just don’t know... I just don’t know if I actually want to do this tomorrow. Just sit in an arena all day just to be told no thanks, go home.”

“Why the fuck would you leave now? Even if that’s probably true, why would you leave now? Why come all this way and then blow it less than 24 hours before?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m aware of that. I’m not going to. It’s just, reality is setting in. Harsh, harsh reality.”

Their drinks came. Evan had a Coke, Lily had a water.

“Look, I know you’ve had to witness some really fucked up shit recently,” said Lily.

“But, I mean, you have parents who clearly love you and are still letting you live with them for free, even though it seems like you really don’t go to school, you have a little sister who loves you and clearly looks up to you who you said is probably going to make a full recovery, you have a job you don’t hate... you have friends... you’re trying out for American Idol tomorrow... for a twenty one year old guy in this day and age, that’s doing okay.”

“It’s not stripper money, but yeah,” said Evan.

Lily glared at him.

“You want to be a stripper? Start working out. They have male strippers. You can be a little gay boy toy. I can even get you started, if you’re really serious.”

“I was just trying to make a joke,” said Evan, though he didn’t believe himself.

“Sitting here and bitching at me isn’t going to do anything about anything,” said Lily.

She looked back down at her phone, tuning him out.

“I’ve decided what I’m singing tomorrow,” said Evan, fleeing his thoughts.

“What?”

“That Johnny Cash song,” said Evan. “Do Lord. It’s the obvious choice, and I’d been leaning towards it but now I know for sure. It’s easy as fuck. Easy melody. Then when they ask me why I picked it I can tell them about my brother and they’ll hopefully let me through. Plus, Idol loves religious shit.”

He stopped to sip his Coke. It tasted bland, flat.

“I thought you said you were going to choose once you got to the stadium?”

“It’s an arena. Not a stadium. And I changed my mind.”

“Hmm. Well, glad you figured that out,” Lily said, still looking at her phone.

“Yeah.”

Lily looked up and sipped at her water.

“Can I ask you something that I’ve been wanting to know?” she asked. “It might be really uncomfortable.”

“Sure,” said Evan. “It’s about Jason, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“What is it?”

“I want to know, when Jason committed suicide,” Lily said, hesitating. “...you never actually saw his body?”

“No,” said Evan. “Apparently Maddie came home from her friends’ early and found him and freaked out and called 911 and my parents got home like right after and they found her in the kitchen screaming with the phone still in her hand. They got the authorities or whatever on their way and then they called me.”

“Where were you?”

“I was over at Matt’s. Fucked up. I was worried about being drunk but they didn’t even seem to notice. If they knew, they didn’t say anything.”

“Did the cops say anything to you?”

“They knew it was the less important issue right then, but yeah, one of them took me aside and basically told me he knew I’d driven home wasted but given the circumstances they wouldn’t do anything about it.”

Their food came. Lily picked at her chicken. Evan stared at his barbecue burger, the grease soaking into the bun.

“But no, I didn’t see him,” he said. “I went down there after they’d taken him out and had been working in the room. The lights were out but I could see his brains on the wall. On his Johnny Cash poster. Then they called me back upstairs. They had someone come that night and clean it and they took the bed and the mattress all that same night, too. Normally you have to wait for that but they did it for us.”

“You could see his brains? What did you do after?”

“After everyone was gone, I just went to bed. I just went to bed and passed out and when I woke up I thought the whole thing was a dream but then I got up and saw my parents and I was like, yeah, that wasn’t a dream.”

“Have you been back in his room yet?”

“No, nobody really goes downstairs anymore at all. My mom does laundry and that’s it. And she avoids doing it until absolutely necessary. She used the laundromat for a while, too.” He half-heartedly tucked into his burger, the grease spilling over his fingers. It tasted plain, the bacon rubbery.

“The reason I asked was that I didn’t see Larry’s body either,” said Lily. “I just remember my mom waking me up and saying I had to go to my grandma’s.”

Evan had completely forgotten about that. He remembered Larry, paunchy and balding and gregarious. He’d seemed friendly on first impression but that had all gone out the window the day that Evan saw him lose his temper with Lily. He’d seen Larry’s true colors, and Evan had always avoided Larry after that.

“Did Larry shoot himself, too?”

“No, he hung himself in the basement. My mom just woke me up and told me I had to go with the cops. I was smoking weed at the time, so I was really scared about getting caught but they just thought I was tired from getting woken up at 3 am. They drove me to my grandma’s and I stayed at my grandma’s for a month, then I stopped talking to my mom.”

“Do you still talk to your grandma?”

“Sometimes.”

“Did you move in with Daddy from your grandma’s?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I stayed with her for like two years, then I got my job at the Blue this past winter and I moved out.”

“Was she sad to see you go?”

“I think so,” she said. “But I had to leave. I had to be on my own.”

Evan looked at the rain again. He took another bite out of his burger. It tasted like shit.

Lily chewed her chicken salad and, voila, there was her phone again, and, gasp, what was this? Why, she was texting again!

Now Evan knew her conversations were probably all about heroin and stripping. She sent a text and set the phone down again and looked at Evan. Evan wanted those brown eyes to look at him like they never wanted him to go away, and he hated himself for it.

“I can’t imagine getting to that place where you want to end it all,” Evan said. “As shitty as life can be, I can’t imagine it.”

“That’s depression,” said Lily. “It’s not rational.”

“When were you diagnosed with depression?”

“When I was 15.”

“What meds have you taken?”

“Nothing at first, but eventually they started me off with a low dosage of Prozac, and it was only when I was on my period.”

“What does depression feel like?”

Lily thought.

“It basically feels like everyone hates you and you deserve it and you don’t know why. No one’s honest. They’re all just playing you. Using you. And you know you deserve it so there’s nothing you can do but accept it.”

She went on.

“It’s not even really a sadness, it’s just this, like, resignation. Like you’re a piece of shit and everyone knows it and you know it but it’s not even worth bringing up so everyone just carries on with it. Whenever you picture yourself or think about yourself, you can only think about the worst parts... you can only think of yourself as your worst self. Just standing on the edge of this deep and never-ending pit and looking in and knowing you’re going to fall and wanting to fall and get it over with but you never actually do so you just stand there and feel nothing.”

She stopped.

“I don’t talk about this with anyone,” she said. “I’ve never talked to anyone about this before. So thanks for asking.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re the best therapist I’ve ever been to.”

“Thanks. Thanks for talking to me about Jason. Matt and Rob and Brian never want to.”

“Did Jason ever talk to you about depression?”

“No,” said Evan. “No, he didn’t. All he’d talk about was the stuff I told you earlier.”

“I can’t believe the military didn’t help him out after he fought in Afghanistan,” said Lily.

“Don’t they have free health care for vets?”

“It sounds like it’s not as great as they make it out to be,” said Evan. “And he got an other-than-honorable discharge anyway, so he forfeited any right to any of that. It’s why they didn’t have a flag folding at his memorial or a gun salute or anything even though he was in Afghanistan. It was just basically my family and a bunch of his friends standing around a bunch of pictures of him.”

Evan ate a fry. It was dry and tasteless, sponge-like.

“I’m actually just really pissed at him,” he said. “That’s really the main emotion I’ve gotten out of all of this. Just being pissed. Cause it’s like, what’s the point? I watched him, knew him my whole life, he was always there, with everything he went through, and then, just like that, it’s over. All that for nothing.”

Lily shrugged.

“The point isn’t to inflict pain on anyone else,” she said. “The point is to be gone. The point is to not be conscious ever again. The point is to end being on the edge of that pit. The point is to jump in and get it over with. You’re not capable of thinking of anyone else. Just the pit.”

“Do you think that pit is the void that we all feel in ourselves? The void that the universe is expanding into?”

Lily stuffed a lettuce leaf into her mouth and clenched her eye socket at him in confusion.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Towards the end, Jason would always talk about the void. It’s like, the universe is expanding, right? But what’s outside the universe? What’s the space that it’s expanding into? He called that the void, and he said that the void is always calling us home. Like, you know how you get nervous when you’re standing in a high place or somewhere where you could die easily? It’s because part of you actually WANTS to die. That part of you want wants to give in to the fear or whatever, that’s the void beckoning you and saying, you should come back. This is where you belong.”

Lily nodded slowly, chewing.

“Yeah, like, that faraway feeling you get when you’re on a tall building or doing something dangerous? I feel like that sometimes when I’m dancing and I’m hanging on the pole upside down or something. I could just slip and break my neck in front of everyone. It’d probably be a front page story. Dancer at Deja Blue falls off pole, breaks neck.”

“Do you still feel depressed?”

“You never stop feeling depressed. You just kind of get used to it. You distract yourself. The medicine helps but not always. So yeah, I do. Not as bad as I used to. But yeah.”

“Do you feel depressed right now?”

“No, not really. Not while we’re talking here. It’s good to talk to people like this. It’s good to not feel alone.”

“Do you think that your current occupation is contributing to your depression?”

“Not really. It doesn’t really, you know, help some of the time, but the money’s too good. I’d be depressed at any job. At least with this one I get lots of money and I feel, you know, wanted.”

“Do you think your heroin addiction is contributing to your depression?”

“I’m not addicted to it,” Lily said sharply. “And don’t say it so loud.”

“You’ve taken some multiple times a day since we’ve been down here.”

“No, I have not.”

“You said every time you went into the bathroom—“

“I did it like, once before we left, and then--“

“When that scary-looking guy came over before we left,” Evan said, interrupting her, remembering the guy in the black Cutlass.

“Right, that’s Jorge, that’s one of Daddy’s runners. And he’s not scary, he’s really nice.”

“He’s nice to you. But he brought you your stash, that’s what you were waiting for.”

“Well, yeah. Duh.”

“Daddy couldn’t give you any of the heroin he deals?”

“He doesn’t keep any in the trailer where he lives a lot of the time. You don’t shit where you eat. But yeah, as I was saying, I did it once then when you came and got me, once on the way when we stopped at that gas station in Kentucky, once when we were downtown yesterday, and then I’ve done it like three times since we’ve been in the motel. And I’ve snorted it, and not a lot. Like, one line at the most. I’m not a heavy user. I’m not shooting up a full syringe five times a day. I just use it to take the edge off.”

“The edge of your depression?”

“Yeah,” Lily said, and skewered a chunk of chicken with her fork. “It’s the only thing that’s ever worked, like, consistently.”

Evan thought of what his boss Rex had said about girls not wanting to be “saved” and decided to go against it.

“You know, Lily, I know it’s pointless to say this and I know it won’t mean anything, but... you know don’t have to do that, you don’t have to sell yourself like that. You don’t have to snort H to feel all right.”

Lily rolled her eyes.

“Uh, well, yea, when it comes to the dancing, I kind of do. The only reason I’m doing it at all is because I have to. If I didn’t, I fucking wouldn’t. So I do have to. At least for now.”

She paused.

“Not forever, though. Like, another year. And the H, I’ve only been doing it for like four months. I’m going to quit when I feel like it.”

“Don’t they all say that, though?”

“Well, now I’m saying it, too. I’m good. You don’t have to lecture me.”

“Are you going to have any of that stuff Tyrone gave you?”

“Hell no, that’s Daddy’s. I’m just bringing it back to him.”

“How much is he”—Evan swallowed and spit out the name—“*Daddy* paying you for this?”

“He said we’d discuss it when I got back, but it’s going to be a lot. More than I make in a week, probably.”

“What exactly is so special about this particular H?”

“It’s the purest stuff on the market right now. Daddy’s been trying to get ahold of it for months.”

“So Daddy’s a heroin dealer in addition to running a strip club.”

“Yeah, we went over this already. He does what he has to, like everyone else.”

“And he still lives in a shitty trailer with one of his dancers even though he could probably afford something a little better?”

“First of all, he doesn’t actually *live* with me. He has a house somewhere, too. He comes over a lot, but he gave the trailer to me. The trailer is technically mine. And you gotta hide in plain sight, sometimes, I guess. Why, are you jealous of him or something?”

“I just find that odd. And it’s creepy that he calls himself ‘Daddy’.”

“Yeah, I know. I thought that same thing when I met him. But he’s okay. He really is.”

Evan didn’t buy that for a second, but he kept his mouth shut.

Lily continued.

“But yeah, so he got ahold of this pure stuff cause Tyrone moved down here like last month and ended up telling him about it. He was going to send one of his guys down here to get a sampler to see about pushing it but then he found out I was coming down here with you and so we ended up doing it.”

“Does he know that I know about this?”

Lily hesitated.

“He doesn’t, no. He told me not to tell you, actually. But I was like, how the fuck am I gonna lie about that? Even if I took a cab, you’d still be like, ‘Where the fuck did you go?’”

“So what will he do if he finds out I know?”

“He won’t find out. How will he find out? You’re never going to talk to him. And I’m never going to tell him. So there we go.”

Their check came. Evan reached for it but Lily slapped his hand away again.

“I’ll get this one,” she said. “Thanks for driving me to Tyrone’s.”

“Don’t mention it.”

They walked back through the rain to the car and stopped at a gas station where Evan purchased a case of Bud Lite and Lily bought more cigarettes. They splashed back across the street to the motel. The rain died down and the sky cleared as night settled in.

They drank some of the beer and watched Family Guy, Lily putting away four or five cans before heading to the bathroom.

“You don’t have to hide it anymore,” he said when she took her baggie out of her travel bag and headed for the door. “I know what you’re doing now.”

“Yeah, I’d rather not have you watching,” she said, tipsy.

She was in the bathroom about ten minutes.

“You’re a nice guy, Evan Barker,” she told him when she came out, stoned silly. “A real nice fuckin’ guy.”

Evan lay in his bed, eyes on the ceiling, not responding.

“Don’t you change now,” she said. “Don’t you go changing on me.”

Her head hit the pillow and she was snoozing shortly after. Evan listened to Lily’s breath and turned his thoughts to the audition in the morning. It made him feel slightly better.

“Anything’s possible,” he said to himself, but he didn’t know how to believe it.

>Be Evan

>Be ten, playing PlayStation in the living room.

>Dad is nursing baby Maddie with a bottle at the kitchen table.

>Jason and their mother are out somewhere.

>Dad, when the new millennium comes, will we have to go live underground?

>I'm not planning on it. Why?

>I just heard we might have to.

>No, I think the worst thing that'll happen is the computer's clock might get messed up.

>Why?

>Because, son, computers are stupid.

>Evan keeps playing the PlayStation. He's playing Crash Bandicoot: Warped.

>His dad has a beer in front of him and takes a sip.

>Evan looks at him.

>Can I have some beer?

>Sure, his dad says without hesitation. Just a sip.

>Evan takes one. It's terrible.

>Maddie gurgles, her mouth milky with formula.

>Dad dabs Maddie's lips with a cloth napkin. She starts fussing again.

>Do you got a real sad story? he coos.

>I don't like beer, Evan tells him.

>Don't tell your mom how you figured that out, their dad says as he gets up and pats Maddie on the back, trying to get her to burp.

>Maddie starts to get louder.

>Banshee's got a real sad story, their dad says again, more to himself and the baby than to Evan.

She's taking a little detour through Searing Gas Pain Land, yes, she is.

>Evan watches as his dad walks from room to room, doting on the fussy infant.

>Hey Dad, he says.

>Not now, Evan, says his dad. Little busy.

>Evan watches him some more, wants to say something but can't think of anything good enough to say.

>After a minute, he goes back to Crash.

Evan barely remembered waking up the next day, but he did have the presence of mind to wear the lucky Vonnegut t-shirt he'd purchased in Ann Arbor a few summers before.

The author's wise face was printed in blue, with a quote from Player Piano under it, the one about staying as close to the edge as possible without going over. Evan pulled it over his head and felt somewhat better about everything. Lily wore tight jeans and her hoodie, not bothering to doll herself up like on wristband day.

The two of them sped down to the city where they parked in the same lot they'd parked in on Thursday. They waited in the same line they had for the parking ticket and the ATM.

It was 6am.

As they approached Bridgestone, Evan noticed a tall, rotund guy in thick spectacles with a dark, expansive afro of loose curls walking around the edge of the multitude. He carried a reporter's mic and had a TV crew in tow. Evan recognized him instantly.

“That’s Chris Sligh,” Evan said, nudging Lily.

“Who’s Chris Sligh?”

“He was a finalist on season 6. He made 10th place. He probably would’ve gotten higher but he gave a shout-out to the founder of Votefortheworst on one of the live results shows, so the producers kicked him off as soon as they could. Maddie really liked him.”

“You should go talk to him.”

Fear flooded Evan. He watched Sligh walk around the metal barricades, searching the crowd for potential interviewees.

What would Evan say to him? Nothing of consequence. He felt exposed. He felt unimportant. All at once in that moment he felt insignificant and average and lower middle-class and worthless.

“No, it’s good,” he said, pushing out. “I don’t have anything to say.”

Lily shrugged.

The line was much longer today, winding back in on itself for a couple blocks, ending next to a construction site where a parking lot lay torn up in chunks with the earthmovers sitting silent like sleeping dinosaurs.

Lily and Evan reached the end of the line. They took a seat on the curb and began the wait to be let in. Lily took out her phone. She lit up a cigarette and exhaled into the cool morning air.

A male contestant with an acoustic guitar slung around his back was talking to female contestant a few feet away.

“...see, my sound’s kind of edgy, more like Kings of Leon,” the guy was saying.

The woman listened politely with a blasé look on her face. They talked about what it would be like to get through.

“It’s basically like winning the lottery,” said the guy.

Evan thought about his parents, about Maddie. He hadn’t heard from them since he’d left. Lily smoked next to him.

Evan pulled out his phone and decided to text his parents.

He made a group text with both of them and sent, *In line now for the audition. hope all is well.*

It struck him that for all the texting Lily did, no one ever texted him. The only texts he ever received were from Rob or Matt or Brian, usually inviting him to come drink with them. And they would invariably ask him to be the DD.

Eventually the line began to move, people shuffling forward with their backpacks and guitar cases. It felt like a mass exodus of some kind. They were all reality show refugees, shuffling towards an unknown fate.

They promenaded down the block, through the fences that kept the sight-seeing gawkers separate from the droves of contestants. They walked up a shallow cement staircase and through the arena’s south entrance, the ushers directing people left and right. Security indifferently rifled through Lily’s handbag and gave it back to her. Evan got a pat down and that was it.

Once in the arena, everyone was sorted into sections based on their wristband numbers. Evan and Lily’s seats turned out to be on the west side of the bowl, only a few rows from the floor. The hockey boards and ice were gone, replaced with smooth cement.

There were several rows of folding chairs set up on the floor in front of Evan's section, and twelve curtained booths were lined up straight down the center from goal to goal.

Evan and Lily filed to their seat numbers and sat down. Pop music echoed through the chamber, up to the rafters where banners hung with hockey players' numbers. The blue American Idol logo was spinning up on the big scoreboard. There were advertisements for Pepsi everywhere, which was odd because Evan was pretty sure Coke was the official soft drink sponsor for Idol.

The grizzled young blonde guy sitting next to Evan had an acoustic guitar and a fauxhawk. He placed the bulky plastic case between his legs, spreading his knees out. His right knee dug into the side of Evan's left knee. The backs of the seats in front of them pressed against their kneecaps. The seats were hard plastic. There was very little room. This was going to be an uncomfortable wait.

"How long is this going to take again?" asked Lily, looking jostled and cross.

"Probably all day," said Evan.

"Goddamn it."

The arena filled up gradually, the noise of the chattering crowd getting louder by the minute as voices were added. The rows of chairs down on the arena floor filled with people, too, mostly distinguished-looking types, prep school kids and their Armani-wearing mothers with expensive haircuts.

The festivities started when a chubby, frazzled-looking guy in glasses and a bandana came out from the north entrance under the stands bellowing, "WHAT UP NASHVILLE!" into a

mic. The audience responded with an ear-shattering cheer. Most of the sections were packed completely full, and even the ones in the upper balconies had occupants.

The emcee explained that they would be doing some crowd shots and he needed everyone to be up and on their feet and animated. Camera men sprinted onto the arena floor, cameras on their shoulders. Two big cranes with cameras perched on the ends of their arms rolled in through the Zamboni entrance. The crew moved fast.

The emcee, who never actually introduced himself, had everyone yell WELCOME TO NASHVILLE and WELCOME TO NASHVILLE, THE MUSIC CITY and I'M THE NEXT AMERICAN IDOL about four or five different times each.

He would tell the audience the line they'd all need to recite, then count down from three. The cameras would roll, doing their sweeps and cuts as the arena of hopefuls blew their voices out. Then after each take, the emcee would look over at a director for approval. If the director liked it, they would move on. If not, they'd do another take.

"Where's Seacrest?" someone above Evan wondered aloud.

Ryan Seacrest never materialized, but the emcee led them through several more chants and yells. They also collectively sang several takes of Sweet Home Alabama. Those that did not participate were threatened with eviction.

"YOU CAME HERE TO SING, RIGHT," the emcee yelled into the mic. The crowd responded with another eager roar.

The cameras on the cranes captured the magic. The contestants did as they were told, their cheers rising and falling on cue as directed by the emcee. In between takes there was an

amusing sight as the thousands of people stood with their hands clasped in front of them, like the world's biggest, most ostentatious classroom waiting on instruction from a teacher.

Evan stood and clapped, doing enough so as to not be singled out for lack of participation, but not so much that he would be singled out for being showy, either. He wanted to blend in and nothing more.

Lily stood up for a while and watched the audience yell their lines but sat back down with her phone after only a few takes.

"This is gay," Evan heard her say.

A few rows down in front of Lily and Evan, there was a large guy in a silver suit and top hat with an enormous Flavor Flav clock around his neck. He looked much too old to be auditioning but he yowled with the best of them and quickly got the attention of the cameramen.

"SMASHVILLE CITY, SMASHVILLE CITY," he hollered, brandishing his clock.

The camera on the crane trained on Pseudo- Flav a few times before sweeping up over the entire arena for a wide shot. Evan tried to hide behind the people in front of him. He was still very uncomfortable in the camera's eye. It felt like, no matter what, he just wouldn't be captured in a way that would be flattering to him.

I shouldn't have come here, he thought gloomily, looking at all the flamboyant displays around him.

It was like a manic pep rally at a supersized high school. He thought of Maddie seeing him on television sometime next January and somehow felt dirty about it. He didn't feel special at all. Something in him did not want to be filmed, now that the cameras were actually right there in front of him. He had an intense and concentrated feeling of not belonging.

After about an hour's worth of getting the needed responses from the crowd, the emcee explained how the day's auditioning process would work.

Most everyone in the stands had taken a seat by now. Evan felt like he was at church. Stand up, sit down. Stand up, sit down.

Evan noticed the curtained tables in the center of the arena floor were beginning to fill up with judges. The judges didn't look much different from a lot of the more average contestants, casual and unassuming. They could've been a group of programmers at a software company filing in for a morning meeting. Almost all of them were male and looked to be between thirty and fifty years old.

The emcee explained, his voice echoing through the PA-- they would all be called down by section, and they'd be sorted to the various booths and given approximately fifteen seconds to sing.

The distinguished-looking kids and their parents who sat in the free chairs down on the arena floor would be called first, as they had won some sort of contest to be bumped to the front of the line.

"Yeah, it's called being born into money," someone above Evan snorted.

The opening off the arena floor to Evan's left were the 'non-winner' doors-- WE DON'T HAVE ANY LOSERS HERE, DO WE?!—through which the vast majority of the audience would pass in the coming hours.

The lucky few who got a golden ticket would be sent through another opening at the opposite end of the arena where they would go to begin getting processed for television. Evan felt a flutter of excitement despite himself.

When the emcee was finished with his directions and the cameras were moved out, they finally began having contestants file down to the floor. Evan and Lily's section was directly across the arena from the very first section called. They would be the last section called before the balcony.

Evan looked at the sheer number of people, all the sections in the lower arena completely filled and teeming with life. His odds were not good. He thought about leaving right then and there but kept it to himself.

Instead, he sat back and resigned himself to being stuck in this seat all day.

This is what you came for, he reminded himself.

If, by chance, those judges sitting and prattling blithely amongst themselves did happen to let him through, this would all be worth it. Maybe Lily would even sleep with him. Probably not, though. No matter, he'd find someone else.

There was a short, chubby girl of about sixteen with freckles and short brown hair sitting next to Lily. She had big fat legs stuck into wide blue jeans. Her eyes were beady, her nose piggish, her hair cropped short and pudding brown. Her face was sunburned pink and had the look of someone who doesn't speak up unless they're absolutely sure they're going to be agreed with. Evan heard her shyly strike up a conversation with Lily, asking her what she used on her hair.

Lily was cordial, taking on a tone of voice that sounded for all the world to Evan like a big sister. The din of the numerous conversations around them cut out most of the specifics, but Evan heard them discussing hair products and make-up and Lily's tattoos. The chubby girl didn't seem to know much about them, but was interested in learning.

“I’m Amelia,” Evan heard the girl say.

“I’m Lily,” said Lily.

The first section alone took a good half hour to empty out completely, and then the second section stood, row after row, and began waiting their turn.

It’s like communion, thought Evan. He thought of waiting in the pews with his parents and Jason, he and Jason whispering to themselves how they were going to try and drink as much wine as they could before they were stopped. He felt a small twinge at his temple at the memory, and pushed it out of his mind.

The twelve tables down front slowly consumed the lines that formed on the arena floor. There was a steady trickle through the non-winner door.

It was nearly two hours later when a shriek went up from behind the tables and the other side of the arena began to applaud. A young, hysterical blonde girl ran towards the winner’s door, waving a yellow sheet of paper. The first Golden Ticket had been given out. Though a fair number of people cheered and helped celebrate the girl’s success, the rest of the arena also seemed to be eyeing each other nervously. One less chance they’d be the ones through the winner door.

The morning stretched on. The winners ebbed and flowed, and the non-winners were a steady river. Sometimes golden tickets were given out what seemed like every fifteen minutes, then the merriment would die off and another one wouldn’t be given for half an hour or more. The seated sections always gave a polite, congratulatory ovation to the golden ticket winners.

Evan sat there, Lily trading between her iPhone and chatting with her awkward teen neighbor.

Amelia would sit with her bored-looking mother, look around the arena and then turn to ask Lily a question-- What do you use on your skin, I love your skin, what does that flower mean on your other shoulder, you look like the girl from Wicked, did anyone ever tell you that? Lily politely answered while thumbing her texts.

“You look like the girl from Wicked, and you also look kind of like Kara,” Amelia told Lily. “You’re really pretty.”

“Thank you,” said Lily. “Who’s Kara?”

“Kara DioGuardi. The judge.”

“The judge?”

“Yeah, you know. On Idol.”

“Oh, she’s a judge on Idol?”

“Yeah, she’s the fourth one they added last year. You look like you could be her daughter.”

“I don’t watch Idol,” Lily said.

Then came the inevitable question.

“Well, what are you auditioning with?”

“I’m not auditioning,” Lily told her, pointing at Evan. “My friend is.”

“What are you singing?” Amelia asked Evan.

“I think Do Lord by Johnny Cash,” said Evan. “What are you singing?”

“Angels, by Jessica Simpson.”

Evan didn’t know that song. His mind was strangely blank. He imagined Amelia didn’t know Do Lord, either.

“Well, good luck to you,” said Evan.

“You, too,” said Amelia, smiling pleasantly.

>Be Evan.

>Be a week before Jason kills himself.

>Be having dinner with family, some sort of casserole .

>Jason does not look good. He’s pale and silent. He spends almost all his time in his room these days, living off the money he made from the military.

>Father is pontificating to the family. Just like Jason has his own rants, Evan’s father will also go on long rants of his own.

>Right now he’s talking about the state of the world and how networking is the most important asset you can have to building a career.

>You gotta get out there, and put yourself out there, and find something to do, he says.

>He’s saying this to everyone, but they all know it’s directed at Jason, who’s been unemployed for about a year and a half.

>His parents have been patient, especially because Jason hasn’t had to ask them for money, but they stipulated that he could live under their roof only if he was searching for a job, and Jason has been slacking on that recently. He put forth effort at first, but nothing came of it and he gave up.

>Evan’s dad talks some more about broadening your horizons and not making excuses.

>Then he looks straight at Jason.

>The world will not help a weak man. The world'll help a lady out, but not a weak man. World doesn't care about a weak man.

>Jason doesn't say anything, just eats small bits of the food.

>There was a time in his life where he would have argued the fuck out of this, but now he keeps his mouth shut and his eyes down.

>Their father continues. He's not trying to be an asshole, he's just trying to be honest. He finally found a decent, steady job after being unemployed on and off for two years and he wants to impart his hard-won wisdom.

>You gotta make your time while you can. Early. Get in there good and early. Cause it doesn't last forever. Just ask your grandparents that. And no one, and I mean no one, owes you a damn thing.

>Their mom eats silently at the other end of the table, staying out of it.

>I'm not worried about dying, Jason says suddenly.

>Their father turns on him.

>Oh, really, he says condescendingly. So are you saying we should we start planning your funeral now, then?

>I don't want a funeral, Jason says, picking at his food. Don't deserve one.

>Oh, poor baby. What would you like us to do then?

>Jason seems to think about it for a second.

>I'd like to be cremated and scattered over one of the Great Lakes up north, near Leland, where we went that one time when Evan and I were younger.

>Well, you make sure you write that down, says their dad. Put it in your will. Tell your siblings, cause I'm not gonna be around to do it, that's for damn sure.

>I don't wanna be cremated, says Maddie, looking disgusted.

>You're not going to have to worry about that for a long time, says their mother to all three of them. She focuses her eyes on her husband.

>Harold, that'll do.

>Someone's gotta tell 'em. This one here-- 23 years old, served his country, gets kicked out, still lives in his parent's basement. Like I said, that shit ain't free forever.

>Jason doesn't say anything, continues looking down at his plate.

Evan sat until his ass was numb on the plastic seat. He decided to get up and take a walk. The sections across the arena were draining out like sand from an hourglass.

"I'm gonna get something to eat," he told Lily. "You want anything?"

"No, I'm good."

Evan got up and mounted the steep stairs to the nearest exit, grimacing as his pinched nerves awoke and set his buttocks on fire.

The vestibules were packed with roaming contestants. The waiting sections in the arena had emptied as everyone killed time in the atriums upstairs, where their legs and hindquarters could be free to breathe.

They conversed, paced, and practiced their singing into corners. They wore earbuds and sang in the bathroom stalls, in the hallways. The air was filled with mediocre voices and shy, feeble attempts at glory notes. Everyone seemed to be sizing everyone else up, but there was also

a jubilant spirit of camaraderie. Everyone was going to be on TV, together. Most people were smiling.

Evan took a place in line at a concession booth advertising hot dogs, nachos and hot pretzels. He watched an ad for Justin Bieber's upcoming tour repeat on the television monitors that hung overhead. Justin flashed his killer teen smile and sang his syrupy teen ballads to hordes of dancing, horny teen girls.

Bieber wasn't worth the effort it takes to hate someone, but he was annoying. Evan thought of Maddie, who'd always liked Justin Bieber but had the grace to be somewhat embarrassed about it. Her desktop was the only thing that betrayed her fandom of him, besides a small poster in her bedroom and the playlists on her iPod.

That little fucker never has to worry about anything again, Evan thought, watching Justin dance. *He'll go through life thinking he's better than everyone and no one will ever tell him different.*

When Evan got to the front of the line nearly twenty minutes later, he ordered some of the worst-looking nachos he'd ever seen in his life. They were like paper made from corn, and the cheese was like heated snot. Evan ate them anyway, and he got a Pepsi to wash it down with. The nachos cost ten dollars and the medium Pepsi cost seven.

He took his snack over to an area with rows of chairs. He sat down and crunched the chips and gulped down the Pepsi. He was so famished it took him only a few minutes to render the greasy cardboard boat vacant. He tossed it in the nearest trash can with his empty Pepsi cup.

Next, he took a stroll around the internal perimeter of the arena, enjoying the sensation of his stiff leg muscles getting some movement. He took in the sights, all the different people who'd come to try their hand at pop stardom.

He passed a group of people watching a chubby blonde teenager sing I Don't Want To Miss A Thing in a country twang. She was very good, and the people around her applauded when she finished. She looked young, early high school at least. They'd lowered the qualifying age to fifteen for the first time in show history that year, probably hoping to find the next Bieber.

Evan took a few laps and then headed back. The arena was nearly half empty when he got back to his row. Amelia and her mother were gone, off to stretch their own legs. Lily looked stir crazy, her knees up against her chest, texting obsessively as usual.

"We should have brought trail mix or something," Evan said as he sat down. "I don't know how you're going to go this long without eating anything."

"I'll be fine," she said. "I don't need to eat. I refuse to eat the food at any sporting venue. I need a cigarette, though. And to piss. BRB."

She got up and was gone up the stairs without another word.

Evan knocked knees with the fauxhawk- sporting emo kid next to him and watched the lines down on the floor shift and bustle. Everyone seemed to be bouncing with anticipation, and the judges at the tables all looked like people at work behind a fast food counter.

Evan noticed the rare golden ticket getters all had distinct looks about them. There was one guy who looked like some psycho biker cowboy, another like a dreadlocked stoner extraordinaire. There was a manic pixie dream girl, all short hair, scrawny hipster face and knobby-kneed energy. There was a guy who appeared to be a Hasidic Jew, there was a bald kid

who looked albino, there was a bandanna'd ballerina type girl, rockers and crooners and jocks and teen queens. They all strode towards the winner's door like bosses, the guys all swelled up with pride and the girls all high school cheerleader crazy-happy. They were characters.

One of the girls from the seats down on the arena floor came running over from her turn at the judges tables.

She spoke to her mother, stammering with excitement and frantically motioning over at the winner's door before taking off without waiting for an answer.

The mom followed as quickly as her hippo legs could carry her.

Amelia and her mother came back from wherever they'd been and settled back into the seats. They sat down, chatting about Gilmore Girls. They didn't acknowledge Evan. Grizz the Guitar Wielder on Evan's left played some Tetris-like game on his iPhone.

Evan noted he hadn't received a reply from his parents after he'd texted them. The nachos were not sitting well with him. His stomach churned and protested absorbing them.

Lily returned from the bathroom and plopped down in her seat again.

"Christ, I need a cigarette," she said.

"They don't have a smoking area?"

"No, they told me I have to wait until you audition before I can go outside again."

"Oh," said Evan. "Sorry."

Lily shrugged. Out came her phone again.

"Service in here blows ass," she said.

"Can I by chance see some of these epic conversations you're having?" Evan asked, reaching for the phone.

“Uh, no,” said Lily, pulling it away from him. “You don’t know any of these people anyway.”

“I know Daddy well enough to get drugs for him, apparently.”

“The answer is no, Evan. That’s actually really fucking rude to even ask.”

“Like how it’s rude to ask someone to move drugs for you? How many of these conversations are about drug trafficking?”

“Right now none of them.”

“How many are about your job?”

“Probably like 30 percent.”

“How many conversations are you having right now?”

“Two, but they’re not really conversations because the service is so bad.”

“What’s the most you’ve ever had in one day?”

“I don’t know, why do you care?”

“Because I’ve never seen someone text as much as you do. I wonder what your life would be like if you didn’t have access to your phone.”

“It’s like you said-- once you get a smartphone, you’re addicted to it.”

“I guess so. But I still won’t have a bunch of people clamoring for my time.”

“It’s not, like, that great or anything. And it’s not all guys, either. There’s my work friends...”

“Do you ever text Marty?”

“I don’t really talk to Marty that often, but every once in a while, yeah.”

“Tell him I say hi, would you?”

“I will.”

Lily’s thumbs flew once again. The tint on her screen prevented Evan from seeing what she was typing. The pink DADDY’S LIL’ MONSTER case was still present.

Evan sat back in his seat and looked up at the rafters and the bright white lights blasting down and the immense scoreboard with the American Idol logo spinning soundlessly. He wondered if he could sleep then decided it was impossible.

The arena was more than half-empty, they had about three sections to go before Evan’s, and the lines of contestants down on the floor shuffled along in an undying current towards certain destiny.

>Be Evan.

>Be in high school.

>His friends have trapped him in the back of Matt’s two-door pick-up, and he’s seriously about to wet his pants.

>Evan has had to piss since they left Matt’s house. He’d asked to use the bathroom but Matt said they had to get going and he could do it later. They’d stopped at Dairy Queen but didn’t let Evan out.

>It’s just him, Matt and Rob.

>They pull into the Busch’s parking lot and park.

>Matt and Rob have been talking among themselves with the radio cranked up. Evan hasn’t participated in the conversation, watching the town out the back window. He usually drives.

>Hey guys, I really gotta go, can I get out?

>It feels like the fiftieth time he's asked them this.

>Rob turns and grins at him.

>Yeah, Barker we'll let you out, all in good time.

>He goes back to talking to Matt, who's ignoring Evan completely.

>Guys, please, I need to go—

>Just a sec, Rob says.

>Evan catches a look of aggravation on Matt's face.

>Evan's back teeth are floating, his groin muscles threaten to give way.

>Matt, I'm gonna piss all over your back seat—

>You do that and you're fucking paying for it to get cleaned.

>What?

>You are.

>Yeah, Barker, you can't just piss all over someone's seat and not pay to get it cleaned up, says Rob, still grinning back at him.

>If you guys would let me out, I wouldn't have to!

>Evan strains, clenching his crotch with all his might.

>Please, guys, just let me out. Rob, please.

>You want to go potty, Barker?

>YES.

>You really want to go potty?

>FUCKING YES.

>Say, 'I wanna go potty.'

>FUCK YOU.

>Say it, or you're gonna be paying like hundreds of dollars to get Matt's backseat re-upholstered.

>I FUCKING WANNA GO POTTY.

>Rob looks at Matt, who's rolling his eyes.

>Okay, Barker, God, you don't gotta yell.

>He opens the door and Evan shoves the seat forward, but it doesn't budge.

>Careful, Barker, you're gonna break it, Matt yells.

>Here, Barker, lemme help you out here, says Rob.

>He slides out of the truck and pulls the lever. The seat swings forward and out of the way.

>Evan scrambles out.

>Why do you guys have to mess with me like that, he whines, his bladder screaming.

>Rob chuckles.

>Better get used to it, Barker, he says. It's gonna be happening your *whooooole* life.

>Evan doesn't say anything, sprints to the front door of Busch's.

In early afternoon, a guy in a blue Idol shirt stood in front of Evan and Lily's section, megaphone in hand. He was young, around Evan and Lily's age, and he looked like the teller at a gas station, with curly, shoulder-length blonde hair sticking out from under a blue Idol baseball cap.

"Section 12," he said into the megaphone. "How we doing, party people?"

Everyone had filed back in to Evan's section as the wave had come around the arena.

There was no reprieve if you missed your section getting called. Evan's section-mates all cheered

ardently like plane passengers taking off after a day-long layover. Evan clapped. Lily didn't even look up.

The megaphone intern re-explained the process to the section. Contestants would line up in four rows down on the arena floor, and then they'd be sorted out in groups of four and sent to the audition tables. There they would sing and get a final judgement. Family members and companions would have to wait outside.

"Thank God," said Lily, still craving her cigarettes.

"I'll see you later," Evan told her.

"Good luck," she told him, standing to head out, still looking at her phone. "I mean, break a leg."

"Thanks."

Evan stepped out of his seat. Lily went up, Evan went down. The rest of the process seemed to fly by, the mirror-opposite of the day so far. Hours of waiting for about ten to fifteen minutes of action.

He took his place in line. The arena floor was smooth and gleaming under his shoes. Everyone was shooting nervous glances at each other. A few people bullshitted, yammering anxiously. The sorters stood like TSA agents at the end of the line, looking the contestants up and down with their arms crossed. When Evan reached the end, the sorters looked at him and his line-mates and said, "You guys are going to Table Five."

Evan walked over to Table Five. There was a bored-looking black guy and a bored-looking white guy behind the judges table. Both looked like they were struggling to stay awake, watching the four rows of contestants step up one by one and sing their stuff. Everyone in line

was quiet. Evan couldn't really hear the singers over the general clamor, even though they were only about six feet away.

When Evan arrived at the back of his line there was a teenaged country girl at the front of the line. She held a guitar and took a moment to tune up before launching into her song. She sang Jolene. She was mediocre. So was everyone else in her row. Everyone was mediocre. No wonder these judges looked so sedated.

None of the tables that Evan could see were putting anyone through. No one had gotten through in nearly an hour. That wasn't a good sign. They were just looking to thin out the herd, not bothering to take anyone who wasn't exceedingly exceptional. Just moving the assembly line along as quickly as possible.

Evan wondered how many people around him were hiding tragic stories of their own, ones that would trump even his own family's recent tribulation.

The judges weren't really talking to anyone, either. They just listened, then called the groups of four ahead to dismiss them with a short speech. Also not a good sign.

The lines disintegrated quickly, and then suddenly the people in front of Evan had been dismissed.

It was his row's turn, all of them naked to the bored faces of the judges. Evan was in the row farthest to the left. The guy on the far right started, stepping up in front of the table and singing, without a word from the judges.

Evan stood and listened. The first guy sang Respect by Aretha Franklin in a throaty country voice. The second guy sang I Want It That Way by Backstreet Boys in an overly affected

boy band whine. The girl next to him sang Chasing Pavements by Adele in a thin choir-trained soprano. None of them were anything special.

Then it was Evan's turn. He walked to the table and handed the black guy his paperwork.

The black judge pointed at Evan's T-shirt as Evan stepped up.

"Vonnegut," he said, nodding. "I like that."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said Evan hurriedly, his head vibrant with anxiety and the pressure of the moment. "It's-it's good stuff."

He took a step back, drew breath, and started singing.

But he didn't sing Do Lord.

At the last, last moment, he had a thought.

A memory of Molly the stripper dancing on him, his first lap dance.

A memory of Jason trying to show him a song on the stereo, a couple months before.

He opened his mouth.

He began to sing Everlasting Light.

It was a simple melody, derivative of old religious folk songs, just like Do Lord.

He sang it down the octave, not in falsetto like The Black Keys. In that way he made it his own, or hoped he was making it his own, just like Simon, Paula and Randy had always encouraged.

The black judge perked up.

"Black Keys," he said to the white judge, who still looked bored.

Evan sang the first stanza twice, and then looked down at the judges. He'd closed his eyes for the entire performance.

It was done.

“Yeah, man, good song choice,” said the black judge. “You’re the only one... only one who picked them. Black Keys.”

“Thanks-I-,” stammered Evan. “Yeah, I-I really liked their latest album. I-I-I wish it had been, y’know- y’know, m-more like the early stuff. Though.”

He stepped back into line, his hands folded in front of him. How had he done?

He hadn’t sounded bad. He’d sounded...okay. Maybe.

One thing was for sure, though— he hadn’t embarrassed himself. Now would they ask him anything about why he was here?

They didn’t.

The white judge remained mute and jaded-looking. The black judge beckoned the four in Evan’s row up to the table.

The judge rubbed his hands together.

“All right guys, you know, it’s a really tough year, we’re looking for people who are as good as Carrie and David and Adam, and we appreciate you all coming out but unfortunately it is going to be a no for all of you.”

As he recited this, the judge looked everywhere but at Evan and his fellow contestants.

Then it was over.

Evan didn’t feel any different than he had in the moments before. No crushing sense of loss, no urge to dissolve into tears on his knees while cameramen rushed in and filmed the breakdown. He felt disappointment, but he’d been feeling disappointment since he’d arrived in

Nashville. He filed out around the table with his fellow failed contestants and headed towards the non-winner door.

He'd made it about five steps away when he heard an elated squeal from behind him.

Amelia was running headlong toward him, making for the winner door, golden ticket in her hand.

Evan stood in place, shocked.

"Holy shit," he uttered as she approached at top speed. "Congratulations!"

He bent and tried to give her a congratulatory hug, but she charged right past him.

"Thank you," she exclaimed, then she was gone, through the door of the winners. She was the only person to have gotten through in the past hour.

Good for her, Evan thought.

He wondered if she was actually good or if they'd put her through because she would make a good reject. He genuinely hoped it wasn't the latter. If she got humiliated on national TV her cutting habit would never be broken.

The walk to the non-winner door was very short, very somber. Evan went up some stairs, rejected contestants all around him.

The doors to the outside were up ahead. Sunlight expanded Evan's pupils, making his eyes ache. The air was full of unhappy acceptance. There was a girl in tears talking to a camera near the outer doors. Evan burst through them and into the afternoon heat.

Lily was waiting for him at the front entrance of the arena, near the same doors they'd walked through two mornings earlier. She pitched a finished nub of cigarette as soon as she saw him.

There were consoling families and sad-looking people on their cell phones everywhere. It was melancholy, and yet at the same time no one seemed that broken up. There were no hysterics, no made-for-TV freak-outs. People were just talking quietly on their phones or talking quietly to each other.

Evan shook his own head as he approached Lily. He shrugged.

She smiled up at him. Put her phone into her handbag. She opened her arms.

He hugged her. She hugged him back, squeezing him a little. His heart fluttered. She pressed her cheek into his manboob, then released him.

She looked up at him, still smiling.

“Let’s go home,” she said.

>Be Evan.

>Be a child, probably in preschool.

>Be at church, with Father Ben giving the benediction in his deep voice.

>Church is nearly over, and for Evan and Jason that’s great.

>Father Ben has invited the kids of the congregation up to the altar for a goodie bag as a reward for being quiet during Mass.

>One a piece, he booms.

>Evan’s mom nudges him and Jason to go get their treat. Jason’s probably five or six.

>Evan toddles up the long, long aisleway to the altar where Father Ben hands out baggies of Dum Dum suckers and a little coloring picture of Jesus with crayons.

>Jason takes his and heads back to the pew, but Evan is too excited to see what he's getting and stands there and opens the bag and looks inside it.

>Before long the line of kids is gone and he's the only one left at the altar.

>Looks like we've got a straggler, says Father Ben, smiling down warmly.

>Evan looks around and realizes the whole church is staring at him, laughing quietly.

>He begins to feel very scared.

>But then, there's Jason, sent back up by his mother to retrieve him.

>Evan, he says, holding out a hand.

>Evan takes it, the baggie swinging from his other hand.

>Come on, honey, says Jason, trying to sound motherly.

>Father Ben hears Jason.

>Honey?

>His thunderous voice echoes throughout the church.

>He tilts his bald head back and laughs.

>To Evan, it sounds like God laughing.

>Jason tugs him away from the altar.

>All the faces of the congregation are laughing and beaming down at them as Jason tows Evan back down the aisle to their seat, Evan's goodie bag clenched in his fist.

On the way back to the motel, Evan stopped at the same liquor store where they'd picked up their beer the night before. He bought himself a fifth of Jack Daniel's Tennessee Honey.

"I'm getting drunk tonight," he said to Lily as he parked the car. "Are you?"

“I’ll probably drink,” said Lily. “We have to finish that beer, too. I won’t be getting too fucked up, though.”

“You gonna have some H, as well?”

“Probably.”

“And I still can’t have any.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Even though I just lost out on the one opportunity I had to make everything that happened this summer have some sort of purpose.”

Lily sighed, looking at her phone.

“Evan, I’m not going to be the person who got you addicted to heroin. You don’t know what it’ll do to you or how you’ll react—“

She kept talking but Evan got out of the car and slammed the door.

His phone had buzzed twice as soon as he and Lily had started back to the car. His parents had texted him back earlier that morning, the shitty service preventing the texts from getting through until he was out of the arena.

Good luck, hon, said his mother. *Love you.*

You’re going to knock it out of the park, said his dad.

Evan didn’t text them back. He couldn’t think of anything to say. He’d fill them in when he got home.

Later on, he and Lily sat in the darkness before the flickering light of the motel TV, like siblings on their separate beds. They watched Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven*.

The prostitute who'd been disfigured by a knife attack earlier in the movie offered Clint Eastwood a free fuck.

"You're a right pretty girl and if I was to have a free one it'd be with you," said Clint without looking at her, before making an excuse about his wife waiting back home.

Evan sat sipping the Jack, trading it off with a beer. He was feeling good and drunk already, but he was determined to get absolutely shitfaced. It was his last night in Nashville, and he'd accomplished neither of the things he'd come down here for.

Evan hadn't eaten since his snot nachos, and Lily hadn't eaten at all, but Evan wasn't hungry and Lily didn't mention it. She had indeed taken a line of heroin when they'd gotten back, making a beeline for the bathroom and rubbing her nose and sniffing when she came out, that same old serenity on her face.

Lily opened a beer of her own, and she took maybe one nip of Jack for every four of Evan's. She hadn't said much since they'd left downtown. She hadn't texted much, either. She seemed down.

She watched the movie silently, and then during a commercial break she lay down on her bed and arched her back, stretching and giving a satisfied groan. Evan heard her spine pop. Her mouth was a little twisted ribbon of pleasure. She looked down at herself, her breasts swollen under the dark t-shirt she wore.

Evan watched her lay there with her hands over her head. He had a sudden and intriguing thought.

Try again.

Now or never.

Why not?

One last try.

His veins filled with alcohol, he got up, went over and lay down next to her. No hesitation this time.

Lily reached down and lifted her shirt up to just below her boobs.

“I need to lose weight,” she said, running a hand over her bare belly.

“No, you don’t,” said Evan.

He reached his hand out over what felt like a great chasm between them, an infinity of air. He put his hand down, rested his fingertips and palm and felt the warmth of her skin. He slid his hand back and forth twice, slowly, savoring.

“I love your tummy just the way it is,” he said.

He propped himself up on one arm, head swimming, bent and kissed her just next to her belly button, feeling the rush as his lips touched her, seeing the little shine of saliva they left on her skin.

Lily reached up and gently pushed his head away.

“Don’t,” she said.

Evan felt a terrible and calamitous rage course through him for a brief moment, but then he regained control and stepped back off the bed. Lily pulled her shirt back down, sat up again, and looked up at him with those brown eyes.

There was so much he wanted to say but it was all stuck in his throat. Finally he got something out.

“What is about me that you don’t find attractive? Just tell me and I’ll change it.”

Lily looked up at him. She didn't answer.

"Cause no women seem to like me and I want to know what I'm doing wrong. What is it?"

"It's not that you're unattractive," Lily said slowly. "It's just... I don't want to do anything with you. I like talking to you. I like that you're not the type of person who just sleeps with anyone and I don't want to ruin that."

"That's bullshit," said Evan. "Then why let me lay down next to you and kiss you on your stomach like that and then push me away? Why lift your shirt up after I've already laid down next to you? Why come with me at all when you know you'll be spending three nights with me alone in a hotel room and then sleep in a separate fucking bed? I mean, we're both adults here."

"Jesus Christ, just because we're alone doesn't mean I'm going to sleep with you."

"You'll sleep with anyone. Anyone but me."

"Because I like you," said Lily. "As a friend. I don't want to ruin that."

Evan was disgusted.

"That doesn't make any fucking sense."

"Too bad," said Lily.

"Whatever," Evan said. "What the fuck ever. Time for bed."

He capped the Tennessee Honey, but not before sucking down on final, burning gulp.

From the second Lily's hand had pushed him away, all he'd wanted to do was pass out.

Swooning back onto his own bed, Evan shimmied out of his jeans and t-shirt and lay down under the covers in his boxers, drunk and delirious with rejection. He heard Lily shut the TV off.

“I will say this...” Lily said from across the divide.

“What?”

“You don’t take rejection well at all. And *that* is unattractive.”

“That’s because rejection is all I’ve ever known,” Evan said.

“Yeah, see, right there. All you do is feel sorry for yourself.”

Evan didn’t answer.

“If you wanted my brutal honesty, there it is,” said Lily.

Evan still didn’t answer. He heard her get up, shut off the light over the sink, lay down, draw the covers to her chin.

He drifted off, his mind awash in acrimony and whiskey. He faced away from Lily, and she didn’t say anything else to him.

That night Evan dreamed the most vivid dream he’d had in months.

He dreamed of an infinite open prairie with green, green grass and a vast dome of a sky so wide and huge it chilled him.

The sky was day-blue at the horizons but inky-black at its epicenter. The effect was disorienting. There were no stars. It looked like a tunnel to hell.

“The sky is intimidating, if you think about it,” said a voice from far away.

He looked across the expanse and he saw Jason, standing knee-deep in the waving grass, hair ruffling in the wind. His hair was shaggy again, the way it had been when they were kids.

“You’re not looking at a ceiling,” he said, his voice like a roll of thunder. “You’re looking into eternity, when you look into the sky.”

Jason was smiling, and he had no teeth. His gums were red and raw.

“There’s only ever one moment,” Jason called across to him, his voice echoing over the miles.

Evan looked to his left and saw Lily lying on a bed of clover. She was naked save for a green winter hat, and she was writhing with lust.

“Don’t you want me,” she moaned. “Don’t you want me?”

Evan saw she was crying, tears seeping from her beautiful brown eyes. He looked between her legs and saw her pubes were shaved into a heart.

“It’s heart-shaped,” said Lily, patting herself. “For easy entry.”

Evan tried to bend down and take her into his arms, to show her how beautiful he thought she was, to release the tension in himself. But the more he leaned down, the farther away she seemed to get.

Evan looked up and he could see Jason, very far away, wading in the grass that seemed to be growing longer and longer, swallowing him.

He looked down at Lily and sucked in his breath.

Lily was gone, and in her place was a decayed corpse, her black hair the only living thing on her peeling skull, her eyes dead sockets, her mouth a shriveled, gaping hole like the center of the sky.

The wind picked up.

He awoke in darkness, sopping with sweat.

>Be Evan.

>Be two weeks before Jason killed himself.

>Watching another movie with Jason in the living room.

>This time it's Scorsese's The Aviator with Leonardo DiCaprio.

>Leo/Hughes is in a hangar somewhere, looking for new recruits for his business.

>Tell him whatever they're paying him, I'll double it, he barks at an underling.

>Jason speaks up.

>You know all biopics are horseshit, right?

>I figured as much, Evan says.

>They're just what the elite wants us to know about some particular event. They're plays.

They're ways of getting people to buy into the charade.

>*Here we go*, thinks Evan.

>Jason begins yet another one of his famous rants. It seems like he does them several times a day. Everyone in the family is sick of it, even Maddie.

>He talks about the emasculation of the male populace, particularly the white male populace:

> Being a self-confident male is socially illegal now. Everyone feels marginalized because everyone is. We're all divided up. If a guy tries to be tough towards a woman or a white guy tries to be tough towards a minority, everyone's instantly against him, even if he's in the right. He's always the villain. Every time. Even if he's right.

>He talks about his '2 lives theory':

>Everyone alive in the modern age actually has two lives. There's the one they live through their own eyes, in their day-to-day. Then there's the life that they live in the greater society, which is experienced through the matrix of the media and the Internet. To this second life, most people do not actually exist. They are only observers. Only the famous and the powerful exist. And this second life is becoming more and more prevalent, taking more and more prevalence over the average person's day-to-day life, as more people live alone, the only experience they have of other people is through this second life. So, the question becomes, if you cannot achieve to the point where you are part of this second life, if you do not achieve to the point where you exist on this second level, do you really exist at all?

>Jason goes on like this for a good twenty minutes, all the while The Aviator is playing and Evan is irritated.

>He's about had it with Jason's constant bitching about the elite.

>Why do you constantly focus on what they're doing? he finally asks when Jason pauses to take a breath. If they're really as powerful as you say, does it really matter one way or another?

>Jason gets worked up, leans forward, gestures forcefully with a finger.

>Yes, it does fucking matter. We're being fucking ruled. And everyone wants to pretend like it's some fairy tale kingdom of democracy and capitalism. And everyone is really hurting because they all know it's not fucking true but they can't even articulate it. One of the things you get taught as a kid is that this country was formed so that people wouldn't have to be ruled by the people with all the money or resources or whatever. It's all horseshit. We never stopped being ruled. Our generation's spiritual crisis'll be more about, like, accepting our limits. The boomers

were all focused on branching out and becoming something and trying to figure out who they are. And as a result of that, we'll be stuck with accepting what we're not.

>Why has it never changed, then? Why do we always fall back into the 'being ruled' thing?

>Jason looks sad, gets quiet for a moment.

>People are stupid, people are scared.

>Scared of what?

>Existence, I guess.

>That's deep, says Evan.

>It's true, says Jason. Doesn't mean you can't enjoy it, though.

>He paused, and then said the final thing.

>But don't buy into what people with power tell you. Never. Trust. Power.

The next morning Evan awoke to the sound of the shower through the bathroom wall. Lily was already up and getting ready. Probably snorting more H while she was at it. A little morning pick-me-up for a day on the road.

Evan got up and opened the curtains. The day was clear and already warm. He dressed and consolidated what few clothes he had lying about the room, then zipped his bag up and took it down to the car.

At the bottom of the stairs Evan heard a voice and a guitar coming from the vending machine area.

It was an older guy, with long white hair and a cowboy hat, sitting on the ground next to the Coke machine, belting out a song that Evan didn't recognize. He sang like he was in his own

private home, loud and unapologetic. The lyrics were about the man in him hiding sometimes, because he doesn't want to turn into some machine.

The busker saw Evan coming and stopped singing.

"Sounds good," Evan said to the stranger, even though he was just being nice. He couldn't care less. The guy sounded okay. Nothing special. Better, at least, than the three people Evan had auditioned with the day before.

"Thanks," said the busker.

He looked down and noticed Evan's wristband. Evan had forgotten to take it off.

"How'd the audition go," the busker asked.

"I didn't get in."

"Eh, that's not surprising," said the busker. "That shit's on the wane anyhow. You play?"

"No, I barely even sing," said Evan. "Just wanted to give it a try."

"Was it worth it?"

"I'm not sure yet."

The busker chuckled, a dry sound, like leaves scraping across an empty parking lot.

"It's always worth it," he said. "Now you know."

"Yeah, I guess," said Evan. "You play out around here?"

"Try to," said the busker. He finger picked a chord thoughtfully. Cheerful notes rang out.

"How's the music scene around here?" Evan asked.

"Oh, it's brutal. You go to open mic nights, you're lucky if you even get to sign up. And even if you do get on the list, you're on at 1 in the morning. Naw, I just do this for fun, mostly."

"How long you been in Nashville?"

“Just checking it out. Been here a week now. Gonna head back to Missouri on Monday.”

“You got a website or anything I could check out?”

“Naw, don’t need no website,” said the busker. “I’ll get one of those when I make it.”

He grinned.

The elevator door opened and a fiftyish woman came out. She was frumpy but merry-looking, with dark hair and liberally applied make-up.

“Here she is,” said the busker, standing and dusting the seat of his pants off. “Best of luck to you, young man.”

“You, too,” said Evan.

The busker and his lady walked over to an old Buick sedan. The busker threw his guitar in the backseat and they drove off.

Evan tore off his wristband, looked at it crumpled in his palm, and threw it into the nearest trash can.

>Be Evan.

>Be gardening with mother out front, summer after 6th grade.

>Evan usually doesn’t like working outside like this, but for some reason today he does.

>Jason and his father have gone to the shooting range. Evan doesn’t like guns. Never has. Evan’s dad doesn’t seem to mind— he has Jason to share in the hobby with.

>Getting dirt between his fingers is strangely satisfying this time, and Evan’s hands are caked with it. There’s dirt underneath his fingernails, something he usually can’t stand.

>His mother is on her knees, weeding.

>Maddie, a mouthy two-year old, is gurgling in the grass behind them, babbling to herself and playing with two matchbox cars she's found.

>Alfred the black lab is snoozing in the shade over by a tree, keeping an eye on Maddie and blinking flies away.

>Evan is following behind his mother, digging little holes and placing Queen Anne's Lace in them.

>They already have about half the garden done, it's a major improvement over the weed-choked pit it used to be.

>His mother has taken it upon herself to clean the place up for the first time since they've lived there.

>She usually never has the time because of her work schedule and taking care of Maddie, but today she's decided to use her day off and tend the garden.

>I like this, Evan says to his mother out of nowhere. He just feels like it's something he needs to say.

>His mother smiles at him.

>I like it, too. I don't know why we waited this long.

>They work a bit more, Evan digging a hole with the trowel, then squeezing a patch of flowers from the plastic tray, burying the roots and smoothing the dirt.

>You know why this is fun?

>Why?

>Cause it's simple.

>Oh.

>Enjoy the simple things, says his mother, as she tosses another bundle of weeds into the wagon behind her.

>The little things. Like how your hands feel right now, with all the dirt on them? Notice how refreshing it'll feel when you get to wash that dirt off. That's a simple thing. Enjoy the simple things. Cause if you notice the simple things, you'll start to notice that there's a lot of them.

>I don't mind the dirt on my hands, says Evan.

>It matters more the older you get, his mother says. If you can't enjoy the simple things, you won't be able to enjoy anything.

Evan and Lily loaded the Civic and
Started back

Evan put in his parent's address
And felt wistful as the TomTom
Showed them the red line once again
Tennessee to Michigan

They pulled out of the Motel 6
Parking lot, Evan taking note of
The lobby, the balcony, the distant
skyscrapers, the haze, the devil horn
Skyscraper, knowing he'd likely

Never have a reason to
see any of it again

Lily was quiet, didn't text
As much, didn't talk much
Either

Did you do a line? Evan asked her
When they pulled out

Yeah, I did, she said, looking out
Her window.

I finished the rest of it,
Actually
But stop asking me that. It's none
Of your business

You're the one who told me about
It.

Don't be a buzzkill

Evan didn't respond

He put in a mix CD

The first song was

Girl by Beck

Lily was asleep

for the first half

Of the drive

Evan watched the city of

Nashville go by to his left

Farewell, he thought

He set his eyes to the road ahead,

let the highway hypnotize him

He listened to three mix CDs,

Then Them Crooked Vultures, then

The Pixies, then a mix CD, then another

Mix CD, then he put in My Mother's

Hymn Book again but took it out

Before Do Lord played

Louisville was in the rear view

Mirror before Evan even realized

They'd passed it

Lily awoke soon after, blinked,

Rubbed her eyes, pulled out

Her phone, looked at it for a moment

Then put it away

Let's listen to U2, she said

What?

Show me a U2 song you think

I'll like

I thought you hated Bono

I do, but you should show me

A song

Evan knew exactly which one

He'd show her

He pulled out his burned

copy of All That You Can't

Leave Behind from his book

and put it in

He skipped to Track 6

And from the speakers

came the opening riff of

In A Little While

Lily listened to the whole

Thing without saying a word

That was nice, she said when it

Was over

What's that called?

In A Little While, Evan said
Joey Ramone, or the singer
From the Ramones, I can't
Remember which one he was-

You're right, Joey was the singer,
said Lily

Yeah, well, he was listening to that
song
when he died

Huh. How poetic

Yeah

Yeah, that wasn't bad

Want to hear more?

Sure.

Evan tried to start the album from
The beginning but Lily shut him
Down once the opening synth
Chords of Beautiful Day sounded

Ugh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no
She said, hitting the volume knob
I hate that song, that's
The song I hate

Evan ejected the CD

You pick something then, he said

Lily pulled a CD out of her own case
And inserted it

It was loud, expansive alternative punk
Music. Evan didn't recognize it

What is this?

Rise Against

Which album?

It's a mix. I don't really know

Song titles

Evan listened. The song was loud and

Exultant, the chorus about running away

and outgrowing the things you love

>Be Evan.

>Jason's driving him home from school. It's Jason's senior year, and he's just had his last day of classes.

>It's a Friday.

>Today, Jason is the happiest Evan has seen him since they were kids.

>They're almost back to the sub when Jason turns to Evan.

>Hey, have you seen the Hill yet, and the God's Eye?

>No, what's that?

>It's this quarry up by the GM proving grounds. Past Kensington. It's beautiful.

>No, never even heard of it, Evan says.

>I gotta show you.

>Jason takes a detour down Peer Road, tears down 12 Mile and makes a right on Rushton where it turns to dirt.

>They ride Rushton until it curves east and turns to from dirt to pavement again. Jason takes a left at a blinking stoplight near an industrial compound, drives up Kensington Road. He passes Island Lake, over 96, passes Kensington's west entrance.

>Eventually the road begins to slope up and up and up, past farmhouses and woodland.

>Evan's ears pop as they ascend.

>I had no idea this was here, he says.

>Yeah, me neither, I just found it this year.

>Up ahead, the road levels out on top of the hill, and there's an immense cellular tower, a skeletal sentinel of a structure, standing a hundred and fifty feet high, at least. A cluster of fin-shaped sensors comprises its summit.

>See the tower there, says Jason. You can see it from our sub division, you can see it from freaking Wixom Road over by Target, from Brighton, from inside Kensington, from that park built on the dump near the Five Corners, from like, freaking everywhere.

>What kind of tower is it?

>Just a radio tower or something.

> Jason does a fast illegal u-turn. He comes to a stop on the western shoulder, facing south, on a worn-out patch of dirt where many other cars have stopped.

> To their right, there's an old chain-link fence, sealed shut with a padlock. Through it Evan could see the land to the west, laid out before them like a carpet.

>Come on, check it out, says Jason.

>He gets out of the car and Evan follows him. The air is warm and smells like wildflowers. Jason crawls through a hole torn in the fence to the right of the padlocked gates, the chain-link all bunched up on the ground from people stepping on them.

>Evan follows and the two of them stand on the grassy edge. It's probably five hundred feet to the bottom of the hill. The slope is covered with grass and small brush and small trees.

>They are overlooking a vast quarry, in the middle of which is a reservoir with an old steam shovel stooped in its center.

>I had no idea there was anything like this around here, says Evan again.

>Yeah, says Jason. Highest point in Livingston County.

>The white bulb of the Brighton water tower and the red MJR movie theater marquee are visible in the distance, small enough to fit into a thumbnail.

>More communication towers blink on and off all along the horizon.

>The day is quiet and breezy and warm. Birds sing.

>Evan and Jason inhale the late spring air and take it all in.

>The giant cell tower Jason mentioned is off to their right, up on top of the hill, farther up the road.

>Yeah, you can see that thing from everywhere, Jason, says, pointing. It's why they call it the God's Eye.

>Why the God's Eye?

>Cause it sees all.

>Evan feels young and amazingly alive.

>The great distance before him makes him feel like he's a part of all things. It's comforting. He wants to wrap his arms around it all.

>*The God's Eye*, he thinks, looking at the tower on the top of the hill.

>It's got two white lights at night, said Jason. One in the middle and one up top. I'll show it to you tonight if I remember.

>They soak in the scenery for a few more wordless moments.

>We'd better get going, says Jason. Don't tell anyone about this place or there'll be too many people coming up here.

>Evan takes one last look at the view and makes a note to come up here some other time, at a sunset or something.

>He and Jason crawl back through the hole in the fence and are gone.

Cincinnati came and went

And Columbus soon after

Now the flat, farm-laden plains of

Northern Ohio extended out

Before them once again under

Low, gray skies, clouds scudding

Like stones across the fields and

Over the trees

Evan's mind was tormenting him

He thought about the ball of white

Powder in Lily's bag

He thought about how Jason was

Still dead, and would be dead

From now on

What had gone through his mind

Just before that bullet had?

Why had he left them?

For all of Jason's trademark rants

And his political posturing and

His opinions, one would've thought

He'd leave some sort of final statement

But then, maybe the act itself had been

The statement

Evan thought about

How his parents were still broke,

Despite his father's new job

How his father had toiled a lifetime

On a line that spit out thirty cars

A minute at twenty grand a pop,

For a company that had spit him

Out as soon as things had gone

South

How both of them would be

Bailing themselves out of a

Perpetually sinking ship for

The rest of their lives

They probably wouldn't even

Get to retire

Evan thought about

How Maddie was still in the hospital

And even if she got out, she would always

Carry the psychic wounds of her stay
And have to take pills for the rest of
Her life to make sure her conscious
Mind never lost balance again

She'd only gotten eleven years of peace
And quiet in her head before everything
Was shaken up like a spray paint can

The closer Evan got to home, the shittier
He felt

His thoughts crushed him, he had trouble
Keeping his head up, the highway
Eternal in front of him
unforgiving and interminable

He felt the gravity of everything
pull him down

He was twenty-one, a legal adult

In ten years he would be thirty one

Then forty-one

Then fifty-one

Then sixty-one and getting old

by every definition

Then seventy-one and having to truly face

The knowledge of his own impending death,

Of impending eternity, it would all be over

And what would he have to show for it?

Evan prayed that Jason wasn't still

Conscious somewhere, he prayed

That Jason had escaped the bonds of

Consciousness

Living forever would be the real hell, retaining

All your memories, all the good but all the bad, too

Everything you ever did

Carrying them forever and ever

And ever and ever and ever

He would remember the way Lily looked at him

When he'd tried to get with her the first night in

The motel, the contempt in her eyes

that would always be sealed in his mind, never

to be forgotten, every time he tried to make a

move on a girl, every time he tried to seek some

physical comfort in existence

The only real solace is blissful nonexistence

Floating in the abyss, unaware, everyone

Equal in the end

Evan thought of the judges, their bored gazes

Not seeing him as he attempted to sing for them

How had he sounded?

Probably terrible

He'd never know

At the time he didn't think he'd embarrassed himself

But now he wondered

He had been one ant for them, an ant in a day-long

March of ants opening their mouths and making

Noises in hopes that they'd be chosen to be made

Into real people

if you only exist in the eyes of someone else, then

the famous exist more than anyone else

It was a farce, all a farce

He would need to move out soon

Where would he go?

He could go anywhere and at

The same time he could go nowhere

Money was the only real freedom

And money was something he'd never

Understood, something he'd never had

Something his parents had never really

Had

Where would he work?

His job at Kensington was such a

Solace, the people not perfect but

At least they weren't bitter and

Angry losers like his father's friends,

Oily burnouts staring wide-eyed

Into the void, wondering what had

Happened to their lives, to their hope

But

His position was seasonal, over at the

End of the summer, and even if
They did take him on, he couldn't
Survive on ten dollars an hour

What could he do?

He'd fucked up, just as Jason had
Said, he'd fucked up his life by not
Ever becoming good at anything
And it was all his fault

Now he was without a future, no
Doubt about it

He could go to school, sure, he
Could go to a degree mill like
Eastern and rack up twenty to
Thirty years of debt for a
Degree that may or may not
Give him a solid foundation
On which to build a life

But he wasn't interested in
Anything, he didn't want to
Dedicate his life to some
Entity that used him to
Make their CEO and
Shareholders wealthy
While his only compensation
Would be basic survival
At best

The rest of life seemed now a
Menacing ocean before Evan

An impassable storm-ridden
Chasm

He was coming home empty-
Handed, empty- hearted and
Completely unchanged, nothing
Had gotten better, nothing would
Get better

The road stretched on, a wretched
Stone river, the day an iron fist clamped
Around Evan's heart, squeezing

Aside from a semi trailer half a mile
Up the way, he and Lily had no fellow
Travelers, the road was desolate

Lily stared at her phone, captive to
Its white glow

He meant nothing to her, he had been
Just an excuse to pick up some grade-A
Heroin, and she'd only told him because
She hadn't had a choice, and she was withholding
Information even now, only telling him
What she thought she could get away with
Only what she needed him to know

She could probably only stomach him at all
because she was doped up all
The time

He wasn't a fucking baby

He was a grown-ass man

He demanded the basic fucking respect

That everyone else demanded

Up ahead the low clouds were

Fatter and blacker, the wind was picking

Up, rocking the car gently to the right as it

Gusted from the west, a calm hand tenderly

Trying to guide them off the road

at seventy mph

There was what looked like a curtain of white

Hanging from the black clouds up ahead

A wall of water, a wall of rain

Lily looked up from her phone

Evan saw her glance over at the speedometer

Then up at him

She looked the speedometer again, then out

At the wall of water, then back down at

Her phone, her nerves palpable

“Might wanna slow down,” she said,

trying to sound casual

Evan softly pressed the accelerator

The needle climbed to 75

He wasn't a fucking loser

He demanded respect

He was in control

“There's a shitton of rain up there, you

Might wanna slow down,” said Lily

Evan didn't answer

"Evan?"

"What?" he snapped at her

"SLOW THE FUCK DOWN."

His foot was no longer his foot

It pressed down on the pedal, the

Civic began to shimmy

The semi disappeared into the wall,

Its brake-lights flashing

The needle climbed

Eighty, ninety

Fat raindrops began to smack the

Windshield like bullets

The curtain of rain loomed to
The sky ahead, a shifting, violent
Phantom clasping both horizons in
Two black hands

It closed down on them

Lightning flashed in the billowing
Clouds above

“EVAN?!”

Evan didn't answer

They tore into the curtain

Evan was blind and deaf for a moment

The only sound the sudden roar of
Rain, the only sight
White bearing down

Evan felt weightless

It was as if they'd been buried in

An avalanche

Lily screamed

Evan slammed on the brakes and the

Car spun, throwing them both to the left

in a petrifying lunge

They spun once, twice

They did not flip, the storm raging

They came to a rest, Lily freaking

Out beside him, Evan dazed and cold

A sheen of sweat on his face

With the car at rest the rain was

no louder than the

Air conditioning,

it was a downpour
but it was no worse than
the one they'd endured
when they'd gone to Applebee's
two days before

Evan could see the tail lights of
The semi receding into the
Distance up ahead

A few hundred more feet and they
Would've slammed right into it

Lily was furious, shaking, big
Beautiful eyes wide and ferocious

"WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG
WITH YOU?"

Evan's daze lifted

He felt something inside him snap

“WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG
WITH YOU?!” he screamed back

And for a split second he saw the anger
Lift from her expression and there was
A surprised fear in her eyes

He wanted to scream at her until
His voice gave out

But he didn't

Instead he just said, in a low and tattered
Whisper

“I'm what's wrong. I'm what's wrong,
Lily.”

He paused and breathed.

“You're a fucking asshole,” said Lily, no

Longer afraid, now looking at him like
he was a child throwing a fit in a grocery
store, disgusted and embarrassed for him

He didn't care, he couldn't care

"Well, you're a cunt," snarled Evan.

"You knew exactly what you were doing.

You're doing it to make yourself feel good

And wanted at my expense. Well, fuck you."

"No, no, no, no," Lily snarled back, temper escalating,
her integrity questioned by someone who had no
business questioning it. "No way, no way,
fuck you, FUCK YOU."

She leaned forward into his face, eyes blazing.

"Who the fuck do you think you are? You don't
Know what the fuck I'm thinking. You want the
Entire world to just, like, start caring about
You right now just because

Some bad shit happened to you?

FUCK OFF!

You think

By acting like a sensitive little pussy you're gonna

Somehow get me interested in sleeping with you?

You're a pussy. You're a fucking pussy. I'd never

Fucking TOUCH YOU."

"I'm a good fucking person," shouted Evan.

I do the right thing. I try to do the right thing.

And you know what? It doesn't matter!

It doesn't matter if you're good or not, it

Just matters if you have power, it just matters

If you have money, and I don't have either!

Lily looked at him, shaking her head.

"Poor fucking baby," said Lily. "Cry me

A fucking river."

Evan calmed down a bit, the worst of the

steam blown off.

“Jason was right,” he said.

A car blew past them, twin jets of water
Spraying off its wheels.

The initial torrent had subsided to
A mild rain, the clouds were lighter,
the storm had been no more than a
brief summer squall, now receding
into the east.

Evan turned the windshield wipers on.

The windshield cleared.

They’d come to rest on the eastern shoulder
Of the highway, the rumble strip underneath
the left wheels.

Slightly off-kilter but still facing the right
Direction.

Evan turned the Civic's headlights on.

They were lucky, Evan realized.

They'd done a complete 360 turn in a
Downpour and hadn't hit anything
Or flipped over.

They were extremely lucky.

Transcendentally lucky.

The fields stretched out to either side
Like before.

An exit sign stood about twenty feet away.

Why had he done that?

He'd been angry

But why?

The stupidity crashed into him

He was not a good person

He was a moron

He was a spoiled brat

He was a fucking peasant loser

“It doesn’t matter, you’re right,” he said. “I’m
A shit person, and I should blow my head off,
Too.”

“Fuck you,” said Lily. “Just take me home.”

Evan exhaled, took his foot off the brake.

He’d been holding it all the way to floor,
His leg locked.

They pulled off the shoulder, Evan's
Hands trembling on the steering wheel
As they got back up to speed, gradually.

Another car blew past them in the
Fast lane, its horn blaring.

Evan flipped the wipers on to high, and they began their
metronomic dance.

They rode in the heaviest of silences for another few
Miles before Lily spoke again.

"I can't believe you just fucking did that."

Evan didn't say anything. He looked at her hands
Holding her phone. She was shaking, and her
Eyes were wet and scared and still beautiful.

"There's a McDonald's up here at this exit. I want
You to drop me off," she said.

Evan's ribcage seemed to cave inward.

"What? How will you get home?"

"Daddy's coming to get me."

"You told him that just happened?"

"Yeah, he said he'll be right down to
Get me."

Evan swallowed hard.

"I don't blame you."

They took the exit, the windshield wipers
Shearing the water off the windshield,
Gushing like tears.

The McDonald's was off to the left

The rain was letting up already, the summer
Heat creeping back in to mist the moisture
From the blacktop as Evan parked the Civic

The air reeked of ozone

Lily undid her seatbelt, reached in the back
Seat for her bag, grabbed it.

Evan was so ashamed he could hardly speak.

“I can’t believe I just did that either, Lily.”

“Yeah, you really just fucked up. I thought
We were dead.”

He swallowed again.

“I’m sorry, Lily. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I guess you are.”

Lily opened the door, swung her foot out.

“Wait, Lily, please.”

Then she was gone, slamming
The door.

Evan sat there, not moving.

He lay back, shut his eyes, and
Thought of nonexistence.

>Be Evan.

>Be in high school.

>Rob and Matt and Evan all hanging out in the hallway at the end of the day.

>It's Friday, so everyone is extra jazzed to be leaving.

>Hallway's bustling with kids.

>Everyone moving at high speed to get out for the weekend.

>Rob's talking about Jenna Kalinski, a girl he's trying to bang.

>She's a cutie, but I'm like ninety percent sure she munches the rug, he tells Matt. She's kinda got that artsy thing going on.

>Hot girls have it so easy, scoffs Matt. The world's just like-- he holds out both his open palms in an offering gesture-- here's all your free shit.

>All of a sudden, Evan feels a strong arm around his shoulders from behind.

>He jerks his head to the left and sees Kyle Granger's grinning face.

>Barker, he says. Long time no talk.

>Evan hasn't talked to him much since the spontaneous beating earlier that year.

>He's avoided him in gym class, never spoken to him about it.

>Granger, says Evan, nodding into Kyle's face and trying to not look nervous.

>Hanging with your homies, I see, says Granger.

>Evan is acutely aware that both Rob and Matt despise Kyle Granger.

>Look, you're a smart guy, Kyle says to Evan, and I need to ask you a favor. Can I borrow you a second?

>I'm kind of in the middle of something, Granger.

>Kyle releases Evan.

>Oh, really? What's that?

>We were thinking about going to get Coney Island.

>Granger doesn't let it phase him.

>Well, shit, you guys mind if I come along?

>Granger grins down at Matt.

>You guys wanna get some Coney Island?

>Yeah, for sure, says Matt with mock eagerness.

>What about you, Van Gilder? Kyle asks Rob. You getting Coney Island?

>Rob has been leaning on the locker on his phone, not paying attention, now he looks up.

>Excuse me?

>You hanging with us? You in?

>Am I what?

>Yeah, I think you are. We'll even let you buy.

>Rob puts his phone in his pocket. Granger outweighs him but Rob's about the same height, and all muscle.

>I'm buying now, huh?

>Yeah, we know you can afford it. You can use your food stamps.

>Food stamps?

>Yeah, you got any food stamps?

>Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do, Rob says.

>He steps forward, the punch is like a rattlesnake strike, swift and clean and out of nowhere.

>He lands a blow directly under Kyle's chin.

>Kyle goes down, hits the carpet, choking, hands at his throat.

>The flow of traffic breaks around his crumpled form like water around a rock, a bunch of people take notice and look down and one kid yells, "Holy shit, WRECKED" but no one stops and no adults come forward to dole out order and punishment.

>Shithead, growls Rob, looking down at his felled opponent.

>Evan is stunned, looks at Rob like he's a Greek god.

>Let's get out of here, says Matt, shutting his locker, and the three of them take off and disappear down the nearest staircase.

Evan's eyes shot open.

He was startled by a sharp rapping on the window.

It was Lily, knocking rapidly, her face peering in at him through beads of rain. The sun was out again, shining its holy goodness down, waterfalls of light over the fields.

Evan rolled the window down.

"I forgot Daddy's shit," Lily said in a hushed, hurried tone.

"I thought it was in your bag."

"I put it under your seat before we left."

"Without me knowing?"

"Yes. Just give it to me. And hurry."

Evan reached back, felt around, and yes, there it was, a puff of plastic under the floormat, buried under the seat beneath garbage and CD cases.

He was about to grab it and hand it to her, but then he stopped.

"Lily," he began "Can we talk about this?"

"No."

"Please?"

"No, Evan. Just give it to me."

"I'm not giving it back to you until you talk to me."

"Too fucking bad. Give it to me or I'll fucking scream."

"Just two minutes. Then you can go back in there and I'll never see you again."

Lily glared at him, then stomped around to the other side and slammed the door when she got in.

Evan poured it out.

“Lily, I know apologizing for what I just did isn’t going to do anything to change your mind about me. I assume you didn’t like me much before and I know you probably don’t like me at all now. I don’t have any excuse. I feel very shitty about myself right now. The only excuse I can think of is that I’ve been through a lot lately and I was just thinking too much and I-- I don’t know, I just wanted to have control of something. I wanted to scare you, and I did, and I wanted to hurt your feelings, because you’d hurt mine, and I did, and now you’re leaving, and I don’t want that. So I’m sorry.”

Lily looked out the windshield at the red brick wall. Her jaw was set. A family passed on the sidewalk, parents jolly and big-bellied, the kids swinging their happy meals.

Evan swallowed hard again.

“I have no excuses. Other than I’m fucked up right now.”

Lily looked calmer, but still angry. Her bag was on her lap.

“You really are,” she said, looking him straight in the eye. Her arms were folded across her chest, closing him off.

Evan tried to look as sorry as he felt.

“I don’t blame you for being fucked up,” Lily said. “You’ve been through a lot.”

She paused.

“And for the record, no one’s saying you should blow your head off, too.”

She let that sink in, then said, “But everyone’s fucked up. And because everyone’s fucked up, ‘doing the right thing’ or ‘being a good person’ or whatever you said, doesn’t entitle you to my vagina or anything else. And it’s really, really pathetic and immature that you would even think that way.”

“I know,” Evan said. “It’s just, it hurts. It sucks. I’m lonely. I’ve been more lonely this month than I’ve ever been in my entire life.”

“Sometimes everything hurts, Evan,” Lily said. “It sucks. You have to grow the fuck up and get over it.”

Evan was calmer now, and feeling ashamed and feeling angry that he should feel ashamed.

“I understand that,” he said. “But I have to say, I didn’t feel entitled to anything. But seeing you fuck Rob and then fuck Matt the other night kind of gave me the impression that you’re, you know, the type of person who isn’t really picky about doing that with people. And so when you don’t want to do it with me it makes me wonder what the hell is wrong with me. Especially after we’d already spent several hours in a very intimate position together, and then you agreed to spend three nights alone in a Motel 6.”

Lily looked at him.

“All right, first off—for the last fucking time, I didn’t fuck that little ratface Matt, I sucked him off because he wouldn’t leave me alone. And, yeah, I fucked Rob, but I was drunk and high. I do shit like that when I’m drunk and high sometimes. I need to stop. And I slept with you—cuddled with you, it’s not like we did anything-- because Matt told me about Jason. And I

felt really bad about it and I felt really bad for you and I was drunk. Honestly, I barely remember any of it. I woke up and I was like, ‘Uh-oh, what the fuck did I do?’”

Evan looked at her in the sunlight. She was still beautiful and he hated it.

“Well, that answers that,” he said.

“I honestly feel like I have nothing to apologize to you for,” Lily said.

“It’s just, I never touched you in Matt’s basement,” Evan said. “When you were dancing. I had the decency to not touch you even when everyone was feeling you up and Brian was drooling over you. I didn’t touch you. Not until you came over after Matt.”

“So what? I saw you looking at me. You wanted to.”

“Fuck yeah, I did. But I still fucking didn’t act on it. If that isn’t good enough for you then there’s not much else I can do.”

“Do you want, like-- do you want *credit* for that or something?”

“No, but I thought it mattered. I wanted to and I didn’t. I didn’t even say anything like Brian did. I think you’re the one with the problem, Lily. You’re the one who snorts heroin here.”

“I’m not the one who just almost wrecked his car out of fucking nowhere and for no apparent reason. And as for the basement, you not doing anything... it wasn’t cause you’re a ‘good person.’ No one’s a ‘good person’. There’s just people that are afraid to take what they want and people who aren’t. And you were afraid to. Rob wasn’t, and that’s why I fucked him.”

“You were the one putting on the show. You were the one stirring us up.”

Lily’s eyes flashed.

“Look, we’ve already been over this like eight fucking times already. I owe you nothing, and, while we’re on the subject, I’ve done more for guys that I never would’ve even looked at

otherwise if it hadn't been for the money they gave me. Men are fucking *evil*, and I'm not going to feel sorry for them for being evil."

"Men are evil? Do you think we like being horny all the time? I'd get rid of it just the same way you'd get rid of your period. It's, you know, it's the price we pay to have so many fucking people around in the first place."

Evan stopped talking, checking himself, feeling nothing but shame.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry about everything. You shouldn't have come. I shouldn't have asked you to come with me."

"I know."

"But can I please take you home?"

Lily looked at him, shook her head. She looked sad.

"I don't know, Evan. I don't think so. After that... you were really quiet and all of a sudden you pull something like that. I don't think I can ever trust you again."

Those words struck Evan in the face like rocks from a slingshot. They hurt because he knew they were true, and he almost didn't register what Lily said next, which was, "And Daddy's already on his way."

"It's like an hour and a half to where we are at least. You'll be waiting here the whole time."

Lily shook her head again.

"Please?"

Lily leaned in and reached behind him, her shoulder digging into his, felt around on the floor behind his seat.

She came back up with the bundle and made it disappear into her bra again.

She opened the door.

She turned her head, those brown eyes looking into him one last time.

“Go home, Evan,” she said.

She was gone again.

Evan sat, both hands on the steering wheel.

He exhaled, humiliated and humbled.

“What a shitty summer,” he said aloud.

>Be Evan.

>It’s the end of the previous May.

>Wake up in wee hours of the morning, hear strange noise coming up through the vent from Jason’s room below him.

>Sounds like a hooting.

>Jason’s making a lot of noise down there.

>Evan angrily walks down to Jason’s room to tell him to keep it down.

>Knocks on the door several times, gets no response.

>Throws open the door, turns on the light.

>Jason’s lying in fetal position on bed.

>He turns and sees Evan.

>Evan sees he’s in the throes of some terrible panic.

>Shut the door, Jason croaks.

>What's going on? Evan asks him.

>I'm fucked up, Jason says. Something's really wrong with me. And I'm fucking scared, Evan,

>He wails into a pillow.

>Evan is scared now, too. He's never heard Jason make a noise like that.

>What is it you're scared of?

>It's like... I'm too aware. I'm too aware...

>Too aware of what?

>Of being alive. I don't feel like me. I feel like I'm trapped in this body and I don't know what's going on. And I'm done with awareness. I'm done with it.

>Jason's pillow is soaked with tears. He's been in this state for awhile, probably just after he went to bed hours earlier.

>You need to ask for help, Evan tells him.

>I can't.

>Why not?

>I just can't. I can't have Mom and Dad and everyone look at me like I'm mentally ill. I can't have that. I can't have it. And I can't start taking pills. I won't be dependent on pills for the rest of my life just to feel normal. And I can't have everyone know that about me. I can't have... I can't have it.

>Evan was at a loss.

>I don't know what to tell you, he admitted feebly.

>Jason mumbles something into his pillow.

>What?

>I said, the void's too big, Jason snaps at him. The void! It's too fucking big!

>Jason, you need to talk to mom and dad for god's sake. You need to.

>Parents are no help. They don't get it. I really wish I didn't need them.

>I'm getting Mom and Dad, Evan says.

>He turns to leave.

>Jason suddenly jumps from the bed and is on him.

>Evan sees with horror that he's had the Glock in his hand this entire time. He was cuddling it to him like a stuffed animal.

>Jason grabs Evan by the shoulder in a vice grip and shakes him, and his face is contorted in unmitigated rage. Tears and saliva are dripping off his chin.

>If you say anything to them about this... ANYTHING, he snarls, his voice tattered and unhinged. I'll fuckin' END you.

>Gobs of spit fly from his lips.

>If they come down here and try to covertly get me to go to the hospital or ANYTHING, do you know what I'll do?

>Jason lifts the gun and cocks it and jams it into Evan's temple.

>Jason, Evan tries to say.

>I'll kill them, I'll kill you, and I'll kill Maddie.

>He takes the gun from Evan's temple.

>He points it at his own.

>And then I'll kill me. Do you understand?

>Evan can't respond.

>Do you fucking understand?

>Yes, Evan says softly. I understand.

>Not a single word. NOT ONE SINGLE WORD. I am NOT going to let this CHANGE me. Do you understand? I'm going to BEAT THIS. I am A GOOD PERSON. I do the RIGHT THING.

And I DON'T DESERVE THIS. And I WILL BEAT IT. ON MY OWN. THE WAY IT SHOULD BE. LIKE A MAN. A REAL MAN.

>He releases Evan.

>Are we clear, he says, his eyes bright with a desperate, flailing rage. You will let me beat this on my own.

>Evan can only manage a quiet nod.

>Jason sneers at him, his eyes red and wet.

>He goes back over to the bed, puts the gun under his pillow, and buries his head in it.

>Just get out, he tells Evan, his face to the wall. Just leave, there's nothing. Nothing. We're all nothing.

>Evan slips out, shuts the door quietly.

>He's back in his room, heart pounding.

>He tries to sleep but can't.

Evan pressed north as the day turned into evening.

He kept the radio off.

He kept seeing Lily's face, the way she'd looked at him when she'd left. Like he was dangerous. Like he was damaged.

I'll remember this for the rest of my life, he thought.

He'd seen Lily sitting at a table in the McDonald's as he'd pulled out of the parking lot, on her phone with the DADDY'S LIL MONSTER case. Her bag was next to her. Her feet were crossed underneath the table. She hadn't looked up.

After Lily had slammed the door for the final time, he'd sat in the driver's seat as a strange feeling of detachment floated through him.

She was really gone. He felt it.

He'd blown it. Christ Almighty, he had blown it.

He wanted to go back in time to the previous Tuesday, to stop himself from hitting send on that text.

Evan took the stick shift in his pulsing fingers, put the car into reverse, tapped the gas pedal, felt the car move backward, turned the wheel, put his foot on the brake, put the transmission into drive, hit the gas again.

He stopped only once – to fill up-- feeling like everyone at the place was judging him as they filled their own tanks.

Half an hour later he was passing the Pure Michigan sign.

An hour after that he was taking the exit off the freeway to South Lyon.

Fifteen minutes after that he was approaching his neighborhood.

He drove past it without even noticing. He wasn't ready to go back. Not yet.

He drove past his old high school.

He drove past his old middle school.

He drove past his old elementary school.

He drove past McHattie Park. Past the Witch's Hat and the caboose out in front of it.

Past downtown and all its handsome red brick buildings with white wooden trim, a perfect portrait of small town America.

Past the theater.

Past St. Joseph's Catholic Church where he'd gone to catechism with Lily, back when they were kids.

He drove past the library.

He drove down Dixboro Road all the way to Five Mile, then turned around and headed back to town.

He even took a lap through Kensington, just for the hell of it. He drove past East Launch, Mitten Bay, Shore Fishing, circled in the big roundabout, past the Farm Center, the Park Office, Playfield, Orchard Hill, Bay Woods, Turtlehead, the Nature Center, and West Launch. He took a right out of the park.

He drove up to the hill where the God's Eye stood blinking its white lights. It was nearly dark now, and Evan parked and got out of the Civic. He stepped through the hole in the fence and stood on the western side of the hill where he'd once stood with Jason. He watched the sun sink down past Brighton and all the radio towers blinking their red lights, talking with the God's Eye.

He took a seat, and he stayed up there, sitting until his butt was as numb on the dirt as it had been on the hard plastic seat in Bridgestone Arena.

He kept seeing the curtain of rain, the white bedlam of the spinout, Lily's frightened scream. The way she'd looked at him after. Always, the way she'd looked at him.

He felt like he should berate himself like he usually did, curse and beat and punish himself within his head. But he didn't. Every time he started to it just felt absurd.

Evan watched the stars come out, stared at them, thought of the dream he'd had.

"The sky is intimidating if you think about it," Jason had said in his dream.

Jason had only been able to focus on the negative truths of the world. That was his problem.

Evan lay on his back on the good, soft earth. The dry grass on the slant of the hill was a comfortable natural recliner. He focused in on the little white pinpricks of lights spread out above him, blinking just above the pinnacle of the God's Eye, the God's Eye lights just like the stars.

The world turned, and Evan thought.

>Be Evan.

>Be in middle school, headed to lunch with Brian Dinkins.

>Stop in front of cafeteria doorway. It's blocked by a happy teenage couple. Cheerleader wearing her beau's football jersey. The portrait of adolescent puppy love.

>They embrace and kiss each other on the lips before parting ways.

>Isn't that nice, Brian says mockingly.

>The couple breaks their liplock and head their separate ways.

>Brian and Evan make to walk through the cafeteria doors, but a group of eight graders suddenly barges through from the other side.

>Brian dodges out of the way just in time, but the largest one plows his shoulder into Evan's chest and Evan goes sprawling.

>The eighth graders keep moving down the hall, not stopping.

>Brian slips into the lunchroom without a word.

>Evan lies on the floor, embarrassed and winded but not hurt. Spectators are snickering, murmuring.

>Then he hears a voice from above him.

>Evan, are you okay?

>He looks up.

>It's Lily Trent, who rides his bus.

>She's got her backpack over one shoulder.

>She looks irritated, like she can't believe the guy who plowed into him would choose such a target.

>I'm fine, he says, and climbs to his feet.

>Just ignore him, she says. He's an asshole.

>It's all good, Evan says, dusting himself off. No harm done.

>You're a nice guy, Lily says to him. They shouldn't have done that.

>Thanks, says Evan. He appreciates the concern, but he wants to put this moment behind him.

>He runs into the lunchroom after Brian.

>See you, Lily calls after him.

Evan walked in his front door. He half-expected Alfred to come out of the kitchen and greet him, tail wagging and a shoe in his mouth like always, but Alfred had been dead for years now.

And of course, Jason was gone, too.

The house seemed extremely empty.

His parents weren't home, the driveway vacant.

Evan looked to his right and saw a framed picture on the living room table. He walked over to it.

It was him, Jason and Maddie about nine years prior. Maddie was a chubby, gabby toddler, with her blonde curls. Jason and Evan were in middle school. The picture was taken at a fireworks display on the fourth of July that year, on the beach at Kensington. He and Jason are on their knees, thrusting their heads out and giving over-sized, gum-bearing smiles that make them look like Joker gas victims.

They were all sitting on a blanket on the grass, the sky faded blue behind them over the lake. There was a large, skeletal radio tower visible over the treetops across the lake.

It was the God's Eye.

Evan picked up the picture and poked it with a finger.

"No way," he murmurs. It had always been there, but he'd never noticed it.

Evan remembered his parents trying to get the shot. His mother kept saying, "Come on, guys, you're going to look at this picture and wonder why you didn't smile nice," but that just seemed to make their fake, over-zealous, lantern-eyed leers all the funnier. His dad had laid on his side with a beer in his hand and chuckled at it all.

In the picture, Maddie has sensed the play going on, and she's squealing laughter as her brothers do their wide-eyed rictus grins, her plump legs splayed out from under the little red dress she has on over her diaper.

How long has this been sitting here? Evan wondered.

Evan put the picture back down. Next to it was a picture of his parents on their wedding day. There was Evan's graduation portrait, and Maddie's most recent school picture. Their mother had taken Jason's most recent picture—his Marine portrait—down a few weeks before. Evan didn't know what she'd done with it.

Why the fuck did I ever grow up, he thought.

He didn't feel grown up.

He went to his room down the hallway.

He flipped the light on.

His mother had cleaned the room for him while he was gone. It had that freshly-vacuumed smell to it, and everything was organized neatly. The room had been dusted, and his book shelves, desk and night stand were all the cleanest they'd been in months.

Evan set his bag down on the bed, admired how much bigger his room seemed when it was clean.

I have good parents, he thought.

He then turned around and speed walked down to the basement.

He threw open Jason's door, for the first time since Jason had held a gun to his head and threatened to kill the whole family if Evan ratted on him about his nervous breakdown.

The room was empty, all the posters, all the furniture, all his belongings and clothes, everything removed, thrown out or donated in the days after his suicide. Evan was sure his parents had kept a few trinkets and tokens here and there as reminders, but the majority of the

stuff was just too painful to keep around. The room was as bare as Evan's mind. He turned on the light, the same light that had been hanging overhead the night Jason had shot himself.

For the first time since he'd left earlier that week, he forgot about Lily.

He went and stood in the center of the room, looked at the four circles of smooshed-down carpet where Jason's bed had stood. After all this time, the carpet still hadn't changed.

Jason would always be in here, in some way or another. This was where he'd spent most of his life, this was where he'd chosen to end his life, and here he would always stay.

All was quiet, and Evan felt the silence cradle him.

He needed something, desperately. He didn't know what it was, exactly. He didn't know what he wanted, but he did know he wasn't getting it.

He stood there in the center of Jason's empty room, hands in his pockets, breathing and looking at the space where his older brother's bed had been. He stood there until he lost track of time.

He remembered the night Jason had threatened him. Evan hadn't believed he really would've murdered the whole family. But then, he hadn't really believed Jason would murder himself, either.

Even so, Evan had kept his promise. He'd told no one.

He could feel his throat fattening, his eyes welling up, but then, above him, the garage door opened.

He left Jason's room, shut the light off, shut the door, and walked upstairs into the kitchen as they came in through the front door.

He swallowed his tears.

For Maddie. He couldn't have his moment now.

His mother smiled when she saw him. Maddie was tagging along behind them. She held a bag with her stuff and her laptop under one arm. His dad held her suitcase.

She was pale, her new scars now only white threads on her forehead. Other than that, she looked herself. The moon-eyed lack of presence she'd displayed was now extinguished. She was back. Changed, but back.

Greetings were exchanged. Evan hugged his parents. Maddie gave him a hug.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her.

"Better," she said.

"Better?"

"Yeah," she said, in a tone that said she didn't want to discuss it further.

"So how'd it go?" asked his father.

"I didn't get in," said Evan to the three of them.

They were quiet for a second, assessing his level of disappointment.

Finally, Maddie said, "Did you see Ryan Seacrest?"

"No, there was just some guy with a microphone who lead all the cheers and everything."

"Did you see anyone?"

"I saw Chris Sligh."

Maddie's face vivified.

"You saw Chris? What was he doing?"

"He was interviewing people for TV."

"Did he interview YOU?"

“No,” Evan said. “No, I was too far away.”

Maddie looked disappointed.

“Oh.”

“That’s too bad, hon,” said his mom. “That you didn’t get in.”

“Eh, no it isn’t. There were thousands of people there and fewer than like two hundred got in. Odds were never in my favor.”

“Was the arena full?” asked his dad.

“Yeah, pretty much.

“Well, we’re proud of you for trying,” said his mother.

“Yeah, now at least you know,” said his dad. “You have your answer.”

“Yeah,” said Evan. “That’s what I’ve been telling myself.”

“How’s Lily?”

“Lily’s fine,” said Evan. “I probably won’t be seeing her much anymore, though.”

“Why not?”

“Eh, she’s just… she’s busy,” he said. His parents looked like they wanted to ask more questions, but Maddie cut in.

“I have something to show you,” she said.

“What?”

“It’s on my iPod,” she said.

“She’s been waiting to show this to you since Thursday,” said his mother.

Maddie gave him her iPod and earbuds.

“It’s all set up, just go in your room and hit play.”

“I can’t listen to it here?”

“No, you should listen to it in your room.”

Evan did as he was told, walking slowly down the hallway and plugging in the earbuds as he went.

“Don’t look at the screen,” said Maddie, walking alongside him. “Just hit play and listen.”

“All right, all right.”

He went to his room, sat down on his bed next to the fan. He hit play.

The song started. Pleasant acoustic chords, twinkles of cymbal. A husky female voice, singing. Everything had a compressed, glossy pop production sound to it. She sang about seeing someone at a reception, with a glass of wine in her hand.

After a moment, Evan recognized the voice. He looked at the screen.

It was Crystal Bowersox, runner up from the most recent season of Idol. She sang about now always getting what you want, but if you try sometimes, getting what you need.

Evan chuckled to himself.

Maddie smiled at him from the doorway.

“You remember this?”

“Yeah, I do,” he said.

“It’s Crystal. She sang this for the top 10. Rolling Stones week. And Lee sang Beast of Burden.”

“I know, I remember, good one,” Evan said. He did his best to smile at her. “Appropriate choice. Thank you.”

He took the earbuds out.

“I know how it goes,” he said. “I get what you’re saying.”

“I thought it was really cool you tried out,” said Maddie. “But I didn’t think you had much of a chance. Cause you never sing in front of other people. But it was really cool that you tried anyway.”

“Thanks,” said Evan. “Did Mom and Dad tell you to say that?”

“Yeah.”

Evan opened his arms.

“Come here.”

She walked over and he wrapped her up in a bear hug.

“Thanks,” he told her.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For staying my brother.”

Evan let her go. He looked at her.

They didn’t say anything for a moment. Then Maddie broke the silence.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m more worried about whether you’re all right,” said Evan.

“I have doctors, though,” said Maddie. “I’ll be going back so they can check on me, and they worked out a deal with Dad’s insurance at work, they’re going to help him out, so it won’t be as bad as they thought. And I’m fine now, really.”

“That’s really good to hear.”

“But I’m worried about you.”

“You’re worried about me?”

“Yeah. I think Mom and Dad have been thinking about Jason and me so much that they’re forgetting to ask about you. Not on purpose, but they are.”

Evan exhaled.

“I’m just disappointed, I guess. I was hoping I could help us out by getting onto the show. And... the girl I went with... Lily, she used to live in our sub but she moved away before you were old enough to really remember her—“

“You liked her, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Evan. “I did.”

“And she didn’t like you back.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Well,” said Maddie. “Does it really matter?”

“What?”

“Does. It. Really. Matter?”

Evan stopped, taken aback by the asperity of her words. He thought for a second.

It doesn’t, he realized.

All the shit, it was done. All the embarrassment, the awkward pass, the rejections, the spinout in the storm, all of it. It was done now. He couldn’t undo it. He couldn’t undo any of that other than he could undo that night in Jason’s room, or the fact that he hadn’t said anything.

He could only go forward. Just like Lily would have to. Just like Maddie would have to. Just like everyone had to. He could either let it chain him to the past, or accept it and try to do

better. Excoriating himself wouldn't change it. Nothing would change it. There was only the time he still had left. And he had a lot of it.

"You're right," he said. "It doesn't."

Maddie nodded at him. She looked older.

"Want to watch the finale again?" Evan asked.

Maddie shook her head.

"I think I'm done with Idol," she said. "I'm getting too old for it. Plus, now that Simon and Paula are gone it kind of sucks."

Evan chuckled.

"You know what? Me too. You want to watch something else?"

Maddie considered. She looked at Evan's DVD collection on his bookshelf. She turned back around.

"Can we watch Are You Afraid of the Dark?"

Maddie loved Are You Afraid of the Dark.

"I don't have Are You Afraid of the Dark," said Evan.

"You can find it online."

"Sure, but I mean, why that?"

"Why not?"

"...good point."

They sat together in his room on his bed, and Evan opened his laptop and found some Are You Afraid of the Dark? episodes online.

Maddie selected The Tale of the Manaha.

Jason had hated that episode. He'd felt ripped off by the fact you never actually got to see the Bigfoot monsters. Thereafter he'd always referred to the episode as "The Tale of the Macaca." At the age of nine, this had been funnier than hell to Evan.

He felt the usual sting at the memory of Jason, and he knew right then that he was going to have to get used to remembering him. Sooner or later, he'd have to get used to living with Jason as a memory only. It would take a very long time, and most likely, he would never truly get used to it. But he would have to live with it, one way or another.

Evan and Maddie sat there together, watching the laptop, and everything was okay for the time being.

>Be Evan

>Be five years later, fall 2015

>Be working at an office, doing controls work for automation

>It's an okay gig, he's not very good at it but he's learning, and it pays well.

>He's sitting at his desk in the office one October afternoon, typical day, working on an AutoCad drawing.

>He gets a phone call from a random unrecognized number, lets it go to voicemail.

>He listens to the voicemail during a bathroom break a few minutes later.

>The voice is one he hasn't heard in years.

>Hey, man, it's Marty Trent, your childhood friend from down the street. Not sure if you remember me... but, uh... but yeah, I thought I'd check in on you. Been years and years. Give me a call, let's catch up.

>Evan is so surprised and excited to hear Marty's voice that he can't wait. He tells his co-worker he'll be back, gets up and goes to his car.

>He dials the number. It rings for a bit and the line clicks.

>Hello?

>Marty, it's Evan. What's going on?

>Hey, man! How you been?

>Been all right, how you been?

>Been good, been good. Been fucking forever, man.

>It has! How did you find my number?

>Your LinkedIn page, man. I googled ya.

>Ah, I gotcha... so, wow, I was not expecting to hear from you, but it's really good to, man.

What spurred this sudden phone call?

>Well, kind of a couple things, actually-- my mom just passed away last week.

>Oh, wow, says Evan. I'm so sorry.

>The words sounded as hollow as they had when people had said them to Evan over Jason. It was obligatory, shallow, insufficient, and necessary.

>Well, thanks, but yeah, she was really sick for a long time, so... but anyway, I was going through all my old shit cause I'm selling the house she was living in, and I found that old fucking Diablo shirt, man, the one I was wearing when I met you, waaaaay back when. At the block party.

>No shit.

>And the thing is, guess what? That actually wasn't Diablo, it was just some random red t-rex that kind of looked like him.

>I was gonna say, now that I think about it, I don't think they ever made Primal Rage shirts.

>But yeah, so I saw that and I thought about you and I was like I need to see about getting in touch with that motherfucker again. But I saw you don't have a Facebook anymore—

>Yeah, I deleted it, says Evan.

>--yeah, I barely use mine, but, yeah, I googled you just to see if anything would come up, and got your LinkedIn, and, yeah... so, how you been? What you up to?

>I'm all right, man, I'm all right. I'm doing controls work now, for the auto industry. It's all right. It's finally allowing me to live on my own and save money. I feel like a real grown up now, haha.

>Ah, good to hear, good to hear.

>How are you?

>I'm good, man, I'm a contractor, uh, I do construction, lotta commercial shit, got a team working for me all over the state. Got a wife, two kids, two dogs, mortgage. Fully domesticated male.

>Evan laughs dryly, cordially.

>Wow, yeah, I didn't know you were a dad. How old are your kids, how long you been married?

>Uh, been married for three years now, and I got a three year old and a one year old. Boy and a girl.

>Wow, that's amazing, man.

>What about you, you got a lady?

>No, man, still single, single as hell. Just work too much, I guess. It's cool, though.

>Ah.

>Evan asked the question he'd wanted to ask since getting the voicemail.

>Uh, so how's Lily? You talk to her at all lately?

>Uh, Lily died, actually, man. Uh, she died like three years ago.

>The words go off in Evan's head like grenades. He asks what anyone would ask next, even though he knows the answers.

>What? How?

>Yeah. She, uh, she overdosed, actually.

>Evan's mind flashes to her in the McDonald's, through the windows beaded with summer rain, her feet crossed under the table, texting. The last time he'd seen her.

>It flashes to her chewing on a strand of hair at the block party as he and Marty walked inside so Marty could show him Primal Rage, the first time he'd seen her.

>It flashes to her coming out of the bathroom at the Motel 6 with a white flower in her hair, her brown eyes shining.

>It flashes to waking up in Matt's basement with her face resting on his chest and his arms around her.

>Evan hasn't thought of any of this in years. Now he's thrust back into it.

>Wow, Evan says. Wow. That... that fucking sucks, man. I really don't know what to say.

>Yeah, neither did I. I hadn't talked to her in a couple years, at that point.

>The knowledge sits in the pit of Evan's gut. All the memories and all the guilt, back in an instant after time had buried them.

>He's always thought someday he'd get a chance to make up with Lily, to really apologize.

>He says the first thing he can think of.

>Do you by any chance know where she's buried?

>Uh, actually, dude, I feel like the shittiest brother ever for saying this but I honestly don't know, man, I don't know, I just heard she died because my mom called and told me when it happened, and the cops had called her... they'd found her in this apartment she was living in, she'd been dead for like a week. I think they cremated her and my mom scattered the ashes somewhere. They never held a service or anything, my mom couldn't afford it cause she was getting sick right around then, and she didn't like talking about it. I don't know, I never talked to her much about it. I'll regret it the rest of my life, though. I was afraid to ask, and now I'll never know.

>Evan doesn't say anything, the news has struck him dumb.

>Marty keeps talking.

>To be perfectly honest, she had kind of severed ties with me once we both moved out. I tried to keep in touch with her but she moved around so much it got kind of hard, she rarely answered texts, would never use her Facebook or anything. I, kind of, was pissed at her over it and so I kind of pushed her away, too. But I think she wanted me out of her life just like mom and Larry.

>I remember Larry. I heard he hung himself.

>Yeah, fucking years ago. I hate to say this but he kind of deserved it, too. He was a nasty dude.

>That's what Lily said.

>Yeah... I didn't think it would hit you like this, bro.

>I just, I don't know, I wasn't expecting that, I guess... you know she came to Nashville with me back in 2010 when I auditioned for American Idol, right?

>Yeah, I remember, she'd mentioned something about that the last time I'd talked to her. You didn't get in, right?

>No, no, I'm glad I did it, but no. I'm just, that's kind of why. If that had never happened I wouldn't have ever really known her as anyone other than your sister, you know? So yeah, I'm kind of... that really sucks to hear, man. I wasn't expecting that.

>Yeah, shit, man, I'm sorry to dump all this on you. I just wanted to see how you've been. I've been doing way better lately, I guess I kind of pushed it all to the back of my mind or something... but yeah. Sorry to be so fucking depressing. I really just wanted to talk to you. We had a lot of good times in the old neighborhood.

>Yeah, we did, says Evan. I'm glad you called me. It's good to hear from you. Where are you living now?

>I'm down in Texas. Outside of Dallas. You should come for a visit sometime. Meet the wifey and the kids.

>Yeah, that'd be nice.

>They chat for about a half an hour longer, Evan sitting in the car in the warm autumn sun.

When they hang up, Evan says he's glad to have heard from Marty, and he hopes they can get together sometime soon. Marty concurs.

>But once the call is over, all Evan can think about is Lily.

>He types a text and sends it to Maddie.

>Never do heroin, it says.

>An almost instant reply buzzes in.

>HURRRRRRRRRRR, it says.

>Maddie's a junior in high school now. Her GPA is good enough that she's thinking of applying to U of M early. She's thinking about becoming a teacher but doesn't know for sure. These days the scars on her forehead are only visible if you know where to look for them.

>Evan can't go back inside yet.

>Almost on cue, his boss texts him.

>Where'd you go?

>He texts his boss back, I'm taking an early lunch.

>He pulls out of the parking lot and drives.

>He turns the radio on, trying to give his mind something else to focus on.

>Then he remembers something.

>He opens the glovebox thing on top of the dashboard. There's a stack of CDs in there. A ton of them.

>At a stoplight, Evan files through them. He finds one. It's a CD he'd always meant to throw out but could never bring himself to follow through with it.

>He puts it in.

> *You can't listen to it until I'm not around.*

>He's not sure what he's expecting, but then something starts playing.

>There's some shuffling. Then, a voice.

>Lily's.

>If you tell anyone about this, I'll kill you. I'd never have the guts to tell anyone I try to do this.

But yeah.

>An acoustic guitar starts playing.

>A voice starts singing.

>It's Lily.

>She's singing Dreams by the Cranberries. The song that had come on the radio on their way to Chipotle, the morning after she'd slept in his arms on Matt's basement couch.

>Evan listens, heart pounding. She's good. Not great. She's off-time with her finger-picking, unsure in her pitch. But she can carry a tune. Her voice is light, pretty.

>He jerks the wheel, pulls into the nearest parking lot, car behind him honking. Evan barely hears it. He stops the car, not worrying about parking in an actual spot, and listens to Lily sing.

>Evan can't help but wonder. If she'd tried out, what would've happened? Maybe she would've made it past the first round. If Amelia had made it through, maybe Lily could've, too. Maybe she'd even wanted to.

>He makes it about halfway into the song, hypnotized, when he feels it. He's not expecting it, but he should've been.

>Evan turns the radio off, but the damage is done.

>Lily's face flashes into his mind, involuntarily, and will not go away no matter how much he wills it.

>Her smile, her jet black hair. Her dancing in Matt Nelson's basement, naked. At the Deja Blue, leaning against the wall on her phone. Always on her phone.

>The way she'd looked the day he'd gotten his wristband, after he'd made an awkward move on her the night before. The flower in her hair, the transformation she'd undergone, how she looked without the make-up the first couple days, tired and unhappy but with a natural beauty and allure that turned heads anywhere she went.

>How appropriate that he had seen her like that, at her most beautiful, for the first time, only hours after making a pitiful attempt to fuck her.

>He hadn't been worthy of her, stripper or not, drug addict or not, easy lay for so many other men or not.

>He'd been so lonely and scared. He'd only wanted to touch her again, and for her to want him, like he'd foolishly thought she'd wanted him, the night he'd awakened from his intoxication to find her crawling into his arms.

>*Oh my life*

>It's a wave. Evan feels it well up inside him, crest, spill over.

>Evan feels himself crack. He puts a hand over his eyes. His throat swells. Out comes a pathetic noise. Then another. Then another. His eyes gush salty.

>He pulls over onto a residential street and parks in front of the first house on the right.

>He lets it take him over.

>As he crumbles, as he struggles to contain himself, he knows that he isn't crying just for Lily-- he's crying for Jason. Half a decade later, he's finally letting it out.

>That was what he had wanted when he had stood in Jason's room the day he'd come back from Nashville. The day he'd nearly killed himself and Lily. The day he'd scared her off forever. The day he'd gone to the hill at watched the God's Eye blink at the stars.

>He'd wanted to let it out.

>And now he was.

>For a moment it's so strong, he's afraid it'll never stop.

>But stop it does, tapering off, like a summer thunderstorm.

>And when the waves subside, he feels it all lift from him.

>Somehow, just like that, it lifts.

>He sits there.

>What now, he thinks.

>After everything.

>What now? What do I do?

>The answer is simple.

>Now you keep going.

>Now you keep going.

>Evan puts the car back into drive, and is off again.