

MISS HONEY

The first thing I saw when I entered the American Apparel in Chicago was a girl (who obviously worked there) carrying a clutch of soft t-shirts. The store was small, an empty box like SuperCuts, but with racks of clothing on the walls.

It was starting to rain outside, the wind splattering raindrops and cum tree blossoms against the storefront.

The girl ignored me. It took me like ten minutes to look at and touch everything in the store. I'd told my brother to go drive around for an hour before picking me up. I can't remember what I expected to happen in that hour, just that my expectations were painfully high.

I forced myself to walk over to the checkout counter and ask if there was an application for a job.

"Uhh," the girl said, "I don't know...Seth is coming back soon, he should know."

"Oh," I said. "I'll wait?"

"Yeah, okay."

The girl looked back at the checkout computer, her blonde scene hair hiding her tiny face. She looked like an American Apparel employee, not like a model from the posters, but the retail version of that.

I'm still seduced by those fucking ads.

I touched everything again. The clothes had nice materials, but I knew they wouldn't look good on me. I don't have dysmorphia or anything – I'm normal looking. I've always just wanted to look like my mom, who I associate with Miss Honey from Matilda. Up until middle school I thought my mom was

really just like Miss Honey and I thought I would grow up to be perfect like her. Realizing that my mom wasn't really Miss Honey, and that I was even worse, was part of what made me get into stuff like American Apparel.

A few minutes later, Seth arrived through the back door, with a bag from Pret a Manger.

"Want to come out back?" asked Seth, shaking the water from his coat. "It's dry by the dumpster."

"Okay," said the girl, pulling her jacket around herself and walking towards the back of the store. I thought I was going to be left there alone.

As Seth turned to leave, he saw me and said "Hey, can I help you find anything?"

"Oh yeah," said the girl. "She wants to apply for a job."

"Oh, cool, haha," said Seth. "Come out back with us then."

I followed them to a narrow sheltered area between the cinder block wall and fences.

Seth passed a drink over to the girl, and rolled a cigarette against the arm of a wet plastic lawnchair. He cupped his hand against the wall to light it, then offered it to me.

"It's a spliff," he said, voice somewhat overwhelmed by the sound of wind and rain.

I took it and inhaled a few times without saying or thinking anything.

I felt that I was finally where I was supposed to be, with Seth and this girl out behind the store, smoking weed.

"What makes you, uh, want to work at American Apparel?" asked Seth.

I thought of my MySpace friends from Rockford. I'd never met them, but from their photos, I knew John from SALEM worked at this American Apparel. Or used to work there, before I started listening to SALEM.

But maybe I should say something about the clothes? I ended up saying "Music, I guess, I'm into SALEM and that stuff."

"Oh yeah, I heard one of those guys worked here. He got fired, right?" Seth said.

"I'm not like that," I said.

“Oh yeah, I can see.”

In retrospect, Seth was probably twenty-three years old, maximum.

“Well, we don't have any open roles right now,” he said, looking over at the silent girl, “but you should submit an application. I'll send it to you. Are you on Facebook?” Seth pulled out an iPhone.

“Uh, yeah, one sec, I don't, – use my real name,” I said. Actually I didn't even have Facebook at the time, so I frantically went to create a new account on my feature phone. Because it was taking so long, Seth started talking to the girl.

“Here we are, again,” Seth said.

“Yuppp,” she said with a little self-conscious eye roll.

They talked like this as the Facebook website loaded. I thought you needed a college email so I used my new Northern Illinois University email, with my first name and a few letters of my last name.

“How do I friend you?” I asked Seth. He took my phone, and added himself as my first friend.

“I'll send you the application,” he said.

I spent the month before my first semester of college writing answers to the weird questions on the application and taking pictures of myself in the bathroom mirror.

I was on my mom's schedule, sitting next to her on the couch with my laptop as she talked to the TV. She was relaxed, giving me mixed drinks. She was obviously relieved that the hardest part of her job as a mom was done: I was graduated, my brother wasn't getting in trouble.

She got me into *Real Housewives*, I tried to get her into my music.

I finally emailed Seth my application the night before my first day at NIU. Of course I didn't tell anyone I was applying. I had a painful sense of my own potential, that going to college and working at American Apparel was a chance at being different.

I quickly realized NIU was like high school but worse, harder to romanticize. It's humiliating even just remembering how I was back then. My brother dropping me off at freshman writing and accounting classes, constantly listening to my Coby MP3 player thinking I was “Witch House” but I'm sure everyone just thought I was goth (but blond).

Soon I was skipping class, telling my mom that it was cancelled, so I could sit on the couch with her doing "homework". Actually, I was looking at Seth and his friends on Facebook. Neither Seth or the girl ever messaged me or liked my posts, but I felt like I was learning a lot about my chances by looking at their feeds, adding their friends.

People messaged me, so I also started messaging people, people in Rockford or Chicago who seemed like they might be connected to SALEM. This is how I met James. He was tagged in an photo album of an early tour, a tall hippy-looking guy in a baseball cap staring at the camera with a mean smile.

I asked him what he did for SALEM, etc. He never really explained things clearly. It had something to do with graphic design and merch. But he also made music.

The night before my first midterm I drank a whole two liter of Mountain Dew and even after I gave up on studying I couldn't sleep thinking about how James didn't really seem interested in me. In desperation I asked him a question that I'd always wanted to ask: "was there one moment in your childhood when you realized your life was going to be disappointing no matter what?"

I don't really remember exactly what James said - something about killing a rabbit - but I remember messaging him until my phone overheated, telling him my specific story. The moment I actually started feeling fucked came out of nowhere, on a class field trip to Lake Michigan in middle school.

I was standing apart from the other kids on a big dune looking out at the light on the lake when it happened very suddenly, like a glow stick breaking in my head and the cold loneliness quickly spread through every part of my brain. I felt like I'd never be okay again and I started panicking, confused. I couldn't move, I was frozen, I wanted to call for help, and even though I could hear the voices of the other kids over at the picnic table it was like there was no one else in the world. I felt embarrassed, like I'd peed myself.

Eventually someone yelled my name, yelled that we were leaving. I climbed up onto the bus, and my teacher (bitch that she was) asked if I was okay. I must have looked like shit.

I've constantly looked for someone (or something or somewhere), that could undo that moment, make me feel un-fucked. In high school, it was ugly guys from other schools, guys who pretended to make music.

That night, as I finally fell asleep, James said that we should meet. We could meet at the animal hospital owned by his cousin, about halfway between my mom's place and Rockford.

I told my brother I'd let him play his favorite music (Unreal Tournament 2000) if he drove me there instead of my midterm. I was so nervous during the hour long car ride, but exhausted, I bit my tongue as I fell asleep and woke up every few minutes.

When we arrived and I walked up to James in the parking lot, there was a moment when I felt like it was all a big mistake.

But James grabbed my hand, hard, without saying anything. He led me inside and we sat down in a big cow sling, he started talking and everything was fine, just different than I expected. Then he kissed me.

After meeting at the animal hospital a few times, then his place in Rockford, James said I was his girlfriend. Around Thanksgiving, he got me an office job at the vet clinic, so we could hang out more. I told my mom that I was going to fail all my classes but accounting, but – I got a job! I told her about the animals, didn't say they were farm animals. She just teared up a bit and made me promise I'd try again next semester.

Over winter break my brother drove me out to the animal hospital every day. He liked going there because he got to play with the chickens, pigs, and computers while James and I did stuff in the construction trailer office out back. I wanted to do my job, but James said it was more important that we work on our EP. He wanted me to write the lyrics but I could only write in the most blunt and unappetizing way because that's the only way I know how to describe the world. I used one of my mom's old VCR camcorders to make videos of James recording and some of the shows we went to. That's what was beautiful and important to me – I was hurt when my mom got made at me for taping over video's she'd made of me and my brother.

On Christmas Eve James got out a seed bag of Ketamine. It was the first drug I really liked, it made me feel normal and it made James really crazy in a way that I liked.

We went into the grain silo because of the resonance and pigeon noises. James had the idea of turning the silo into a big drone instrument, and he got my brother to wire it up with the 240V power, so it actually worked.

On New Years James brought a rifle in there. He pointed the rifle up at the top of the silo and fired it, the muzzle flare illuminating the roosting pigeons for a moment, burning their shadows into my eyes.

In the darkness there was the echoes of the gunshot and a burst of pigeon noises, the alarm feathers feathers my brother told me about, the pigeons blindly smashing into the corrugated sides of the grain silo, bashing down and down.

Suddenly the lights turned on. My brother was standing by the circuit breaker.

"Don't do that again," he said, his voice unusually clear. "The right way to remove pigeons from grain silos is with a high-powered air rifle."

I expected James to call my brother a faggot but he just said, okay, got it, and put the shotgun back on its mounting. We watched as the pigeons flew back up to their roosts, and then my brother turned the lights off, talking about how the pigeons could see the electromagnetism fields.

After that, my brother wouldn't drive me to the animal hospital anymore. My mom didn't like James either, wouldn't let him come over. Sometimes he'd camp out in the woods behind our house.

I finally gave up on college when someone did a mass shooting on Valentine's Day.

(I wasn't on the NIU campus then, I was up in a deer stand with James drinking a hot mix of Everclear and apple cider from a thermos.)

This all makes James seem lame, and yeah he was kinda: he never had any money. But he was a lot stronger than me, and he kept making music.

He let me move into his big room in Rockford, and my real adult life started. I think I was pretty happy then, for reasons that are hard to explain to normies. I got a job as a bookkeeper, and after work we'd hang out with his roommates. Drinking beer with those guys and doing Adderall and watching stuff on YouTube was basically heaven for me.

At least I wasn't living at home like my brother, who got fatter and fatter each time I visited. My mom told me got my old job at the animal clinic and stayed up all night talking to his "friends" online, "friends" from the DHGate agricultural products review section or something like that.

I had online friends too, but with James online friends were becoming my real friends.

My twenties passed.

It felt like swimming down, past where I'd be able to make it back up to the surface. But the water got warmer instead of colder.

We moved every few years, going to places that were supposed to be relevant. James could predict where the world was going. It was sort of scary. He started getting design work.

I stopped caring so much about music. But I also became closer with my mom, James, other friends. I even talked with my dad a few times, but he just wanted to talk about how private equity was ruining the HVAC industry.

When COVID happened, a bunch of our friends moved to New York. I felt sort of betrayed, because some of them said they'd never do that. Even my brother moved somewhere for a "real" job.

We went to go to stay at my mom's for the Fourth of July. James got there first, I was getting hot dogs and pop from Aldi's. When I got there, he was waiting in the kitchen listening to Vivaldi on his phone.

"Bum me a cig from your mom," he said.

"She'll get mad," I said.

"No she won't," he said. "Just ask."

I said fine whatever and went upstairs.

I looked at my mom. She had purple lips my first thought was was: she is wearing some weird lipstick, then I started screaming MOM, MOM, MOM, over and over and ran downstairs to get my phone and called the cops.

James came upstairs and said "dude she's dead" I said "shut the fuck up shut the fuck up" and he left.

It was from Roxicodone and alcohol.

My brother wasn't responding to my texts, so I had to deal with everything. He sent someone who came over cleaned out the house, I don't know where all the stuff went.

A month later I got a big life insurance check. Overnight I became a total alcoholic (if I wasn't already). I put most of the money into crypto.

I was truly fucking devastated. Everything felt dead to me.

But I was still stubborn enough to want to try something, try to betray everything about myself that had made my life turn out so bad. It was my last chance, I knew that. And James was my best chance, almost because of how fucked he was.

The happier, more successful people I knew were kinda cold, kinda sociopathic. And James was like that, deep down, under layers of other craziness.

I told James we should move to New York. We could get jobs there, from the people we knew.

After a year of bullshit we somehow got our shit together and moved to an apartment in Ridgewood.

It was fall, and as the weather cooled I began to feel at home. I felt like I was getting another chance at being nineteen.

I felt old, but I told myself: at least I'm not in Rockford, I'm with James, in New York.

I could go to bars six nights a week and see my boyfriend and a bunch of other friends, I wasn't alone or bored.

I did notice a growing difference between me and other girls my age, they were getting really fucked up for fun and I was just getting as fucked up as possible and hoping something new would happen. This difference wasn't obvious until later in the night. Part of it was that other people had real jobs while I had trading crypto and buying drugs on the darknet. Which did make shittons of money but people would always lowkey shit on it, or talk about their stupid startups that I knew were dumb, because I knew how the internet really worked.

New things did happen: the best moments I had were outside smoking an unfiltered cigarette at like 4AM, with someone I'd just met, both of us high to the point where our consciousness was reduced to little points, little flames flickering close to each other.

At least I felt close to someone then, intimate. I felt like my mind was so small I could feel how my mom felt, I could understand her. Months were browning out, faster and faster.

James went on a trip to Rotterdam to visit the production company he was working for.

He extended his trip, then missed a flight. I guess staying in Europe was his way of breaking up with me, without really breaking up with me. He promised he he wouldn't do that. He messaged me all the time, sent me dissociatives in the mail. Some were really cool.

A few months after James left, I met Annicka at one of the non-dive bars in Ridgewood. I liked her because she seemed both excited and knowledgable, in a sort of grown up rockabilly way. I don't know.

Over the course of five, dix drinks she told me about her KonMari cleaning consultation business. I'd already read "The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up". No matter how degenerate James and I got, I always kept our place clean. I freaked out if it was a mess, couldn't enjoy our little benders.

For Annicka, the KonMari book was literally magic (I thought it was okay). I was more into the natural cleaning products she said provided her employees. She had samples with her and she let me smell them and explained which suited different types of clients. I gave her my number when she asked.

When she texted me the next morning, offering me a job, I was stupid enough to respond. I'm not stupid enough to get recruited into a cult, but at that point I was willing to do whatever to fix my horrible sleep schedule and eating habits.

In my "shadowing sessions" I realized the whole Kon Mari method thing was kind of a gimmick. Some clients took it seriously, we'd talk over how they wanted their space to 'feel'. Other clients were just like "I'm in a rush" (fake rush movements towards door) "I'll leave you to it!".

Having a job in New York was not like having a job in Rockford. It didn't make me feel normal. Instead the job seemed to disrupt my schedule even more. At least I got out of my apartment and saw new parts of the city, got to drink at new places.

I'd tell people at the bar that I had just finished moving out, that's why I was dressed in soggy sweatpants and had a backpack full of spray bottles. Sometimes I'd ask to use their showers.

At home I had a whole jewellery box full of Netherlands Post packaging and plastic bags labeled with chemical formulas and hazard pictograms. Some of the bags had sticky notes with the names of James's friends. I was supposed to arrange pickups, but I think most of those guys were like, afraid

of me, so they never asked.

I often did a keybump in a park or bathroom before showing up at clients, in the elevator if I was late. It made me open up to other people, made me actually care about the stuff in their apartments. It made the Marie Kondo method feel important and real to me, like I had a special futuristic job, bringing meaning into people's homes.

Some of my "clients" were older, maybe rich or important, but a lot seemed like me, with dumb jobs and not enough time. Also maybe drinking problems too, I could smell it even in big nice apartments. Basic bitches with a little layer of manatee body fat and pink shower slime. Often it was this type of GroupOn client who didn't really want to do the Kondo method, they just wanted me to clean while they "took a call".

So much of what these people owned was trash anyway, there wasn't much point in going all Kondo on it. But I could get emotionally involved with their Ikea stuff, pretend to set up Craigslist curb alerts. No one would find the stuff amid hundreds of identical black trash bags blocking the sidewalks outside "luxury" buildings.

Maybe the Kondo thing was just a way to make having a servant feel principled and new. I'm glad I guess, normal cleaning would be worse. The Kondo thing paid better, \$26/hr, still nothing compared my crypto.

A few of the people I cleaned for seemed truly better than me. In my opinion these people actually deserved a cleaner, a chef and driver too. But they seemed in control of their lives, so that if they had to do everything themselves they could manage that anyway.

Like a designer guy who wasn't gay maybe? After I re-arranged his bedroom he gave me his copy of "The Art of Swedish Death Cleaning".

Or there was a woman with a ground floor apartment in Fort Greene. Her and her husband had a toddler, his room was already so clean, I sat on the floor and played with his toys, sliding captive beads and cars along wire tracks. On the door there was a little velcro calendar with the correct date set.

When I googled the woman's name I saw art reviews by her, and I found her Egyptian husband, also

a writer.

If it wasn't for these clients I would have totally lost belief in quiet good families, due to my daily-increasing dull heavy bitterness. Maybe the writing family did make their living from writing, what do I know. They were nice, but they didn't schedule another cleaning. Maybe Annicka sent them someone else.

I think I try too hard sometimes. I'd accept jobs at weird times or places, covering for other people, telling myself it didn't really matter.

If Annicka fired me for being late to appointments or whatever, it'd be so humiliating, it'd crush my fragile vanity world.

Part of my vanity was the videos I made of people, like I videos I made back in Rockford, videos of people talking outside of SALEM shows, stuff like that. I was uploading them to Facebook groups, editing them into one giant video.

If I really stop and think about it, it's all so small and sad.

Obviously in a lot of ways I was better off in Rockford, where at least I had a walk-in closet and central AC.

The next summer, the humidity made me think about getting a bookkeeping job or something. But then the economy got more and more bad and weird. So I just looked forward to winter, my favorite time to do drugs.

It was clear I was spiraling to somewhere unimaginably worse. Because I was unstable. I know girls with dog walking jobs, guys who do art handling, who seem stable, on time, they'll be fine.

I was constantly trying to convince myself I knew better by knowing things, knowing facts I didn't need to know. After a day cleaning out the UWS apartment of some former frat bros with their girlfriends watching me, I'd get drunk at a bar near the train station and start reading the bitcointalk forum on my phone, and I'd get home past midnight and fall asleep with my shoes on and my phone in my hand, dehydrated and face greasy.

After about two years of this, I realized I was transitioning to being a totally undesirable person, experiencing the associated irreversible psychological damage.

On the subway to jobs early in the morning I'd see middle aged women and old women with probably shittier jobs than mine, and also maybe kids to deal with too, and I just felt like I wasn't strong enough to do that.

I had to stop the spiral, somehow.

I decided to "ask for help", as they say.

The next time Annicka invited me out I told her things were getting bad, told her about my mom, James, the research chemicals.

I remember the first thing she said was "It's called PTSD and it's totally normal."

Annicka was yelling into my ear because we were at a club.

She told me: step one, she was giving me the week off from public transit, I was in fight or flight mode. She told me "she'd been on that type of medicine before," I'm not sure if she really understand what I meant by designer dissociatives but whatever.

"Let's give your brain some rest," she said. She told me to go to the river and watch the water, watch birds circling to land, following things with my eyes would help metabolize things.

"When do you feel most relaxed?", she asked me.

"Sucking dick," I said, thinking of James.

Annicka sniggered into her drink.

It realized it was crazy we were still texting almost every day, he was still mailing me drugs.

Thanks to the religious certainty of an abstract and animal-like life, I was finally less afraid of people and it didn't take much courage to DM guys, starting with the names on the drug baggies.

At this point I was trying to stop doing the drugs on weekdays. I'd try to be normal for a few days, but eventually a pressure built up, and I just couldn't take it anymore.

One day in the fall, in a client's bathroom, I emptied a stray bag into a large Dunkin' Donuts iced coffee and opened Facebook Messenger. I looked up the name on the empty baggie on Instagram.

I drank the iced coffee sitting on the toilet looking at his pictures: it was clear he lived in Greenpoint,

near where I was.

Soon my head was pleasantly simmering. His pictures made my eyes shimmer with tears. I was lucky to know such people. I DM'd him and said I was around: did he want to get a drink? It was 2pm, but a Friday. Maybe it would rain, but it wasn't humid, it was the beginning of autumn.

I'd been in the bathroom for half an hour already. My vision was going from super smooth high 60fps to choppy, a lovely effect. I added water to my bottle of peppermint essential oil and wiped down the shower. I could smell myself very clearly, as well as a vague indefinite smell from the shower: I poured some vinegar down the drain.

Then I cleaned the big mirror, a fancy one with warm LEDs beneath the glass. I got lost staring at my face, running a super fine microfiber through my hands thinking about the nose job I'd planned to get after moving to New York. I fantasized about calmly using a jigsaw to slice away of a bit of jaw bone.

My phone buzzed against my leg. There was a DM from Patrick. I sat down on the toilet. It seemed incredible that he actually existed. He asked what I was up to. I wanted to be honest with him, so I took a picture of myself half visible in the mirror, like a faded devotional icon. "Haha nice," he responded. He said he was working on music but would be free in the evening. I asked him to send some of his stuff and I played the Bandcamp link with my phone.

It sounded really insanely good. I tried to stand up to clean, but realized I was fucked up beyond my usual levels as I slid down to the floor. I tried to wipe the base of the toilet.

The light from the small window was gray, ambiguous light from an air shaft. A pigeon was standing on the sill, resting. I watched the light cycling from midnight blue to the golden yellow of a beautiful morning.

My phone vibrated. 3pm. A new message from Patrick appeared and then glitched, disappeared. My phone was hot, my skin was dry. I started hearing rapid tapping noises, maybe some sort of auditory hallucination.

I tried to stand up again, feeling anxious.

I didn't want to watch Patrick working on music, I'd had enough of that with James, it was like watching someone jerk off. I tried to open my phone to text Patrick but it was emergency locked

or something. I felt like something was preventing me from using my phone to contact others. I'd broken reality too much, no phone allowed.

I pulled myself up using the sink, and then over to the window, where the tapping noises were coming from. It was the pigeon: the pigeon was tapping its beak on the small window, in short rhythmic bursts like someone banging on a door.

I clacked my nails twice on the window, seeing if the pigeon would scare away.

It pecked back twice. Suddenly my phone got even hotter, burning through my sweatpants, to my hips.

I managed to get the scorching phone out of my pants with my fingernails, but as it fell to the floor I clearly heard in the male Siri voice: "Beautiful woman, open the window, I need to get in."

"Come on, open the window," my phone said. "I have a big pile of shit to do today," it continued.

The pigeon pecked more insistently at the window.

At this point, after years of experience with accidental megadoses of designer drugs, I knew that I should just roll with things so long as there didn't seem to be risk of major bodily harm. Fighting it would just result in a major headache, nausea, blowing chunks.

If the pigeon was asking to get into the bathroom, that was the drug telling me that the pigeon wanted into the bathroom. I could either try to be rational about the talking pigeon and try to claw my way back to reality, or I could have fun, let the pigeon in (if there was really a pigeon), and try to figure it out later. Usually there was an explanation.

I pushed up the small sliding window and the pigeon immediately scurried in. I jolted away in surprise and slid back down to the floor.

The pigeon flapped up onto the toilet rim, at my eye level.

"Well, here's how it is," said my phone, or the pigeon. The pigeon was making intense eye contact with me.

"My job is to inform you that you have people who care for you. They are very busy, but they feel hurt, hearing lately how you have been."

The pigeon kept readjusting its gaze, like pigeons do, but he was seeing me and I was seeing him in a way that I'd never experienced with a person before.

The pigeon plopped down from the toilet and marched over to my tote bag full of cleaning stuff. It jumped up onto the brim and started pecking at the wax paper from Dunkin' Donuts, then bit at the plain glazed donut (the brown lady gave me one free), ripping off the crushed bits.

Pigeon wanted to come in because he's hungry, I thought.

The pigeon shook the donut around its head like a dog with a toy.

"This bread is not good." The pigeon flung the donut on the floor.

"Already soon winter, need to eat protein. Barley, peanut, thin-rind nut, millet."

"This is rich people house, probably many organic foods, go to kitchen? Let's go." The pigeon jumped down off the bag.

I smiled, less and less conscious.

"You can help me open the refrigerator. Maybe some leafy greens inside, celery, amaranth, purslane."

Recently, I tried amaranth based on the pigeon's recommendation. It's like quinoa but somehow worse.

"Get up," the pigeon said.

"I am special police for North Brooklyn area, listen to me."

"Get up."

My center of gravity seemed to be somewhere a few feet under the floor and I was starting to experience all sorts of Interstellar-like hallucinations.

"Come on, get up. Get up! Everything requires effort! You think it is easy for me, pigeon in New York City? No! I risk life every day, determined to fulfill the mission! Well, but the feral hens, fuck! A little compensation!"

"Okay, no? Then, here, I will tell you."

The pigeon walked across the bathroom tip-tap-scratch-scratch and jumped up on my leg.

"Me, smart pigeon, can talk, pigeons on the internet, incredible. Everything is struggling more and more, but when I learn this sister lives in Brooklyn, my district, I decide to see her, probably also incredible, maybe big beautiful woman. But, result, she is loser, doing drugs all day."

"Here's how it is," said the pigeon. "I understand you. More than you understand yourself. You just need to listen to me and your life will get better."

"You can be good," the pigeon said. "It will be extremely hard for you, this time, but it's still possible."

I winced, not so much because of what the pigeon was saying, but because I was struggling to stay conscious.

"Oh, drug bug," the pigeon said, jumping up on my shoulder.

"Actually, you are good. From very awesome family," the pigeon said, sticking his head under my chin and cooing.

The soft noise from the idling dehumidifier was starting to sound like angels.

I could see the pigeons wing twitching out of the corner of my teared-up eye. "I think you will be okay, huh? It is hard for everyone!"

That was the last thing I remember the pigeon saying before the universe began folding onto itself, rapidly over and over until it was a single point that flickered away, wind chimes in flowing grass.

When everything came back I wiped the drool from the corner of my mouth. The pigeon was gone, the bathroom window was still open.

The light from the air shaft told me that the afternoon was over.

I think I have early onset sundown syndrome.

I immediately stood up and started pacing in circles around the kitchen, enjoying the luxury of having enough space to do that.

I needed a drink. I suddenly remembered Patrick.

"Free soon," I messaged Patrick. "Can you pick a bar?"

I could do the cleaning in an hour. I lit candles and aligned all the coffee table books. I started

to process the experience I'd just had, which was pretty different to say the least (but of course the whole reason I was doing these drugs was because they provided a sort of new childhood-like experience every few weeks).

At the bar with Patrick, everything felt kind of tired and broken. At times I was totally unable to speak. A little temporary brain damage. I'd be fine. Patrick and I barely looked at each other, our eyes wandered around the bar. James had done most of the talking before.

I ordered myself a double and drank it, but it didn't do anything for me. So I played with the ice in my drained glass while mentally replaying the mysterious feeling of being reborn in someone else's bathroom.

I felt comforted that I had just experienced something big, close to a mystery of life. Rare maybe, even for druggo losers. Maybe I could stop doing drugs now.

Patrick and I talked about music and some gay sci fi shit but it felt hollow and forced. The date or whatever felt pointless.

Annicka texted me asking if I could take a job in Williamsburg, the normal cleaner had hurt her back. She said it was a super cool job and that she'd pay extra because it was so late in the evening. I would have said yes even without the extra money because I'm a loser.

"I have to go," I said to Patrick. "Nice to meet you."

"Bye," he said, maybe relieved.

I did a bump of K in the bathroom on my way out. Annicka told me to make sure to read the job notes, which were really long, explaining that the store's owner was super environmental, that I should use their supplies, be careful about streaks, etc.

I walked south. At first it was quiet. When I passed under awnings I sometimes heard the sounds of pigeons getting ready for bed and wished I lived in Greenpoint. Then I entered the area around McCarren Park. There were so many young people at bars of all types, wearing chunky oversized outerwear, standing outside sandlots, brasseries and dives.

Maybe if I was like these people this would end with me going to rehab, I could turn it all into an "experience", invent a transition to the next thing. But I'm not moving back to Rockford, I'm not going

to a substance abuse place. I needed more K and I needed to pee.

I found somewhere with only cars passing by and pissed on the green construction site hoarding.

When I arrived at the shop around 8:20, the big window display was all lit up. I got freaked out for a sec when a girl waved out at me with some weird towels pinched under her chin. As she climbed out of the display case I read the sign on the rack: Reusable Family Cloth Toilet Paper, a great complement to the TUSHY bidet toilet.

As she unlocked the doors of the shop, another mousier girl appeared behind her.

Inside, Four Tet was playing. Wooden shelving rose up two stories around the edges of the store, concealing dozens of Sonos speakers. The taller girl introduced herself as Willia in a quiet monotone and started to "show me around". Nothing special, a little office and bathroom to clean, at the end I could do the front windows, when they were done with the display.

"The shelving looks really nice," I said. "Very geometrical." This was the drugs speaking. Willa said "thanks" kind of ironically. Her clothes were expensive in a way that I recognized but didn't understand in terms of brand.

I put my headphones in to listen to the same gabber mix I'd been listening to all day. The office was basically free of hair and slime so I dusted and aligned. When I was done I walked through the dark store to the front. The girls were still working on the display, but it looked the same.

"Where do I put the trash? I couldn't find a can." I asked.

"Oh, we're a zero waste shop," said the non-Willa girl.

"Oh, okay," I said, embarrassed and kind of annoyed. "What should I do with this then?" I said, lifting up the bodega bag I'd filled with a few seltzer bottles, tampon wrappers, and dust bunnies.

Willa interrupted whatever the other girl was going to say.

"Oh yeah, I'll take care of that," she said, extending her hand.

I laughed. Willa was expressionless. She squatted to stuff the trash into a MOMA PS1 tote bag.

"How do you like working here?" I asked.

"Hah, well, my mom actually founded the brand," she said. "It's alright."

Willa stood up and for a moment we looked directly at each other. I could suddenly imagine her mom, her Instagram stories, an older, less beautiful version of Willa talking confidently, the type of woman that makes me want to kill myself. I asked Willa what her job was called, pointing at the pyramid of stuff that they were arranging. "Director of Product". Willa talked for a bit about how she picked out zero waste products, something about animal testing in China and how it was "not ideal from a global justice perspective."

I went to get the Miele vacuum. It was quiet but powerful.

At some level I was pissed at this stupid scammy store but I'd already gone down this track of thinking. Many times. Sometimes on jobs I'd get into a mood and my thoughts would run faster, banging back and forth like a car on a track, but after so much sameness and nothingness I knew some tracks to avoid or block.

When I was done vacuuming I went outside to clean the front window. It was probably the first cold night of the year. This made me feel hopeful, like it has every fall in New York. On the other side of the glass, Willa was instructing the other girl. I couldn't hear what they were saying.

About fifteen minutes before 10pm the other girl walked out the door towards the train, barely saying good night to me.

I walked back and forth under the orange streetlights, looking streaking on the glass. I really hated when Annicka had to "relay feedback from the client" to me.

Right when I was about to go back inside Willa came out, hugging herself and shivering.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"It seems like there's something stuck on the glass there, can't get it off."

"Yeah," said Willa. "Don't worry about it. I'm going to get the key from the lockbox so we can leave."

I grabbed my microfibers and tried to go inside but it was locked.

"Fuck!" yelled Willa. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, Willa sounded like she was about to cry, the word fuck sounded weird in her mouth.

"What? What's up?"

"Rachel forgot to put the key in the lockbox."

"Oh shit," I said. "My stuff's inside."

"Fuck fuck fuck," said Willa, and then stopped pacing, made herself calm down.

I felt really uncomfortable. I looked at the lock.

"I'll tell Rachel to get a car back here, hopefully she has service on the train."

I thought of all the times where I paid like \$30 for a Lyft to a job where I'd only make \$70, and suddenly felt bad for Rachel even though she was clearly retarded.

"Wait," I said. "I can get us in probably."

"What?"

I took out my keychain. My brother taught me how to pick locks years ago, one of the many nerdy things I'd learned from him, like bitcoin back in 2011. That Christmas he gave me a little folding lockpick, I used it a lot back when I was into tagging. I still had it attached to my keys. The front door wasn't dead-bolted, I'd be able to pick it, probably. As I started torquing the lock Willa didn't say anything. I realized it was dumb to do this in front of a client. But I guess I wanted to show off. And I missed my brother and it was cold.

When the door swung open I felt a shudder of pleasure, more satisfying than an orgasm.

"Wow," said Willa. "Thank you. That's a cool skill."

I stood aside, held the door open for Willa.

"Do you have any cool skills?" I asked.

Willa looked me up and down.

"Can I do something to your upper back?" Willa asked, when we inside, where it was warm. She made squeeze gestures with her hand: massage.

"Yeah," I said, surprised. "It's constantly, like, inflamed."

"I can see that."

Willa moved to stand behind me and I tensed up. I always feel extremely aware of my body in a bad way, except, of course, on dissociatives. At this point I was pretty sober, and could feel Willa's fingers running over my shoulder blades. Her knuckles stabbed into my back at a set of symmetric points. My shoulders snapped back and it felt like very cold or hot water was running down my back, collecting at the base of my spine. I instantly felt lighter.

"What – was that some sort of kung fu thing?" I said. Willa gave me a sidelong smile. "I'm going to grab the spare keys from the office," she said.

I packed up my stuff and waited by the door. As we went outside she thanked me for my help and handed me a book.

"Here, I – you might find this interesting. Someone gave it to me and it helped me understand myself better."

I turned the book over in my hands. "Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age".

I stared at the cover art, which reminded me of "Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul". Did she think I had autism? Because I had this shit job, or maybe was I acting weird because the drugs?

"I'm heading to the train," said Willa.

"I'm heading that way," I said without looking up, pointing the opposite direction, towards the East River.

"Good night, take care," said Willa.

"Good night."

I turned and walked while flipping through the book. I walked past the low rise luxury apartment buildings, to the park by the river, next to the newer, taller buildings.

When I got to the river I considered sitting there and reading the whole book in the freezing cold. I always do shit like that. But another part of me was very sad, full of self pity. I felt like the butt of a big joke.

Fuck. Like maybe I was playing all the wrong games in life, messing around with stuff that just wasn't

for me.

Maybe the best case scenario for me was to end up lame like Willa. Or get my shit together so my kid could be like her mom.

I stared into the dark water, thinking about my day, the comforting pigeon, the rest of my life, the Christmas when my brother gave me the lockpick. I realized I could barely remember anything else about him, how we were as kids. I yelped like a kicked dog. I couldn't come up with a single other moment.

It was like finding an empty space in my mouth where I expected a tooth. There was just years and years of bullshit instead.

I paced back and forth for a few minutes, conflicted, and then turned towards the train.

Walking past dive bar after dive bar, I tried to remember stuff from my childhood. Maybe if I had some of the video tapes my mom made, tapes of us doing normal stuff, I could remember more.

When I got to the Bedford Avenue stop, I decided to try calling my brother. If he picked up, I'd ask if he had any of the tapes. And what the fuck he'd been up to for the past decade.