

Of Washington And Worcester

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[Original link](#)

Stanford, California

It's June 19. I'm still in school, in fact, I'm just dashing out of class into the cab waiting outside. The Ford Foundation is paying for a trip to Washington, DC for a meeting about Free Culture. I was initially hesitant about going to the meeting and in fact getting there has been quite a bit of a hassle — here I am at the airport and they claim they don't have my tickets — but I eventually manage to dash onto the plane just in time to get to DC late that night, where I take a shuttle to my hotel.

The next day I head out to get lunch and visit my friend Derek Willis who has very kindly offered to give me a tour of his employer, the *Washington Post*. But as I head out the door I hear a voice call from behind me. "Aaron?" it asks. I spin around and there on the couch, gleaming like a diamond among the hotel's tacky chandeliers and mirrors, sit three young kids — two guys and a girl — wearing stylish-yet-indie clothes and holding skateboards. 'Hey,' says the voice, 'it's Holmes. From Downhill Battle. These are my partners, Nick and Tiffiniy.'

Cambridge, Massachusetts — Present Day

"so, are you coming here? i really hope you will," writes Tiffiniy. "ok, i'll come — let me check the trains," I write back. Downhill Battle is headquartered in nearby Worcester, an hour away on the train. I agree to come by the next day, when I wake up early and pack a book and an umbrella and head west to Worcester.

I arrive at the elegant train station and head downstairs and through a ballroom being set up with tables. Outside I look around through the sea of cabs and cars and once again hear a voice call my name. This time it's Nick and I dodge across the street to meet him. 'Hey!' he says, embracing me in a hug. 'Welcome to Worcester.'

Washington, D.C.

The three of them, as it turns out, are just checking in. Having the keys made is taking forever, for some reason. I wait with them and follow them up to

their room where they invite me to lunch. We look for places to eat, eventually deciding on a Chinese place down the street. Outside, it's raining slightly and none of us have umbrellas. "Let's hoof it!" shouts Holmes as he takes off running. We all follow in close pursuit: four young kids, running like maniacs in the rain.

Worcester, Massachusetts

'So this is Worcester,' Nick says, as we drive past a large abandoned outlet mall on one side and a big gray convention center on the other. Nick drives me over to Tiffiniy's place, which she shares with Holmes's girlfriend, who let us in. We chat quietly until all of the sudden a noise comes running up the stairs, screaming into the room — Tiffiniy, wide-eyed, coming in and hugging me. 'You're here! You're here!' she shouts.

Tired, I smile a little weakly.

Washington, D.C.

We chat about technology and globalization — while they assure me they agree with my politics, they can't help but wonder whether there are benefits to globalization. (My new strategy for discussing globalization, which I haven't actually gotten a chance to employ, is to just repeat back whatever people tell me except replace globalization with colonialism.)

I then head uptown to the *Washington Post*. Derek comes down to meet me and sign me in. I notice that on the guestbook the last person to sign someone in was political reporter Dana Milbank. Derek takes me up to the *Post* newsroom, which looks just like it did in *All The President's Men* (not surprisingly because, Derek comments, the movie was filmed here): a vast sea of gray cubicles with men in suits walking from one place to another, surrounded by reams of paper (and now, of course, computer terminals).

Derek, formerly a Congressional reporter, now works as the *Post*'s research database editor, a job which has always struck a political geek like me as a rather sexy position. As we walk to his area of the newsroom, he points out the various other parts ('oh, there's Howard Kurtz,' he says, 'that guy is always working!'). He introduces me to his co-workers, one of whom tells me the most amazing story about facing down a powerful politician with a pile of data he'd found by crunching the numbers in his database. He points to a picture man being frog-marched which sits above his computer. 'End result was, this guy went to jail,' he explains. I can't help myself from smiling widely — it almost gets rid of by cynicism about journalism.

[image not found] Holmes (L) and Nick of Downhill Battle
photo: William Huber/Mother Jones

Holmes and Nick first met going to high school in Worcester. They soon moved to a Massachusetts math and science magnet school at a local university, where they met Tiffiniy Cheng and others. The group split up to go to college but ever since then they've slowly been reassembling, living cheaply in Worcester and spending their time fighting the abuse of copyright law.

Their organization, Downhill Battle, first appeared on the Internet scene with [iTunes iSbogus](#), a vicious parody of the website for Apple's newly-launched iTunes Music Store. At a time when most copyright activists were painstakingly careful to insist they opposed downloading copyrighted music and arguing that the music industry should find a way to make downloading music legal, the website's opposition to one of the first moves in this direction and its full-throated support of file sharing software was nothing less than shocking. Here was someone not just saying what all the kids were thinking, they were actually providing a pretty careful intellectual justification for it. "iTunes is just a shiny new facade for the ugly, exploitative system that has managed music for the past 50 years," they wrote.

Downhill Battle continued to grow, launching sites like [What A Crappy Present.com](#) (humorously warning parents not to buy CDs), [Coal for Christmas](#), and [Grey Tuesday](#). And with the help of another high school friend, programmer Nick Nassar, they begun developing software-based websites like [Blog Torrent](#), designed to make sharing files through BitTorrent as easy as posting to a blog.

With little more than a computer in the attic of Nick's parents' house, they became a major force in the Internet copyright debate. Cory Doctorow lavished praise on their youthful humor and energy ("one of the best, most effective group of copyfighters on the net, fast turning into a MoveOn for the P2P wars," [he once called them](#), "my favorite gang of take-no-prisoners copyfighters") and Larry Lessig begun denouncing their "extremism" (the anti-copyright analog, he argued, of those who think everything should be copyrighted forever) in speeches, positioning himself as a centrist between such extremists.

And Downhill Battle continued to grow, launching two more non-profits — the Participatory Politics Foundation, which develops the kind of political technology hacks in a way I once dreamed of doing myself (current projects include [a Slashdot-style news site for politics](#) and [a website for tracking current congressional legislation](#)), and the Participatory Culture Foundation, which is [developing a Internet TV platform](#) which will let anyone start their own television network (delivered over BitTorrent) which can be easily downloaded from a GUI player (Al Gore's cable channel and the SEIU, among others, have already signed on to provide content).

With the non-profits came actual funding — up to then, the thing was funded by meager merchandise sales, savings, and living cheaply (including living out of their parents' houses and buying clothes from the Salvation Army) — and stuff that seemed more like actual work: giving presentations to funders, calling people to invite them to provide content for the TV platform, and so on. No more dashing off web pages attacking major media corporations, now it's a long slog toward shipping, all under the guise of professionalism. But it's not like they've started wearing suits or anything...

(And now they want *you* to [join them](#)! What a sweet job that would be...)

Worcester, Massachusetts

Tiffiniy's friend is also visiting from Vermont this weekend and the Tiffiniy decides to take us all on a little tour of Worcester. Worcester is an odd city. It's an hour away from Boston, yet it looks just like part of the city, not a suburb. But despite looking like a city — blocks and blocks of retail and business and things — the streets are completely empty. And while it contains several colleges, it doesn't feel at all like a college town. And — and maybe this last part is just the Downhill Battle guys — but everything looks like it's from the 70s.

Tiffiniy's apartment, for example, has old draped couches and tables, sinks and stoves — even [the new books](#) have retro covers. And the first place Tiffiniy took us was an old shopping mall where they considered buying office space (they needed a place to invite bands, they claim) and the whole thing looks run-down and wooden. Then we head to a hot El Salvadoran restaurant that similarly seems like a throwback. And, of course, all of them dress in retro clothes.

At the restaurant, Holmes shows up on his skateboard (also giving me a hug) and getting really into the soccer match playing on the TV. Holmes's girlfriend mentions she's getting a tattoo of a Jimmy Corrigan bird on her arm (Holmes's sister, I noticed, has the Tristero logo) and Holmes asks me if I've read Jimmy Corrigan. 'No,' I reply. 'Oh, you have to,' he insists. I say I want to, that I've read some of Chris Ware's other stuff and I really enjoyed it — in fact, I saw him do the most amazing thing with Ira Glass. The whole table groans (with the except of Tiffiniy's friend, the other visitor). 'Ira Glass is a such a jerk!' they insist and I get into a long argument about Ira Glass, who I actually really like, but they argue saps all political meaning out of life.

'The whole point of Ira Glass,' Holmes explains, 'is so that some yuppie sitting in their car can listen to some sappy story about a girl who lost their dog and think that now they've experienced what it really means to live in America. The show makes no distinction between whatsoever between whatever little yuppie bullshit their average listener has to put up with and the real societal problems that face America. Whether they're talking about silly kid or about gun control, it's the same stupid background music, the same smarmy tone.'

Washington, D.C.

American University is hosting the Free Culture conference (they're the ones with the Ford Foundation funding) and they're ferrying us all from the hotel to the campus in a series of cabs. Inside an innocuous-looking building at the center of the AU campus, they've taken out a whole room and done it all up with fancy lighting and real caterers.

I try to get around and chat. Colin Mutchler, an artist and and activist who is hosting the discussion, made waves the past year with his [Free Culture Tour](#) in which he traveled the country performing on the subject of copyright law and things like Creative Commons. He repeats the presentation for us (it includes, I was later told, a photo of me wearing a CC shirt to represent Creative Commons — I noticed the CC logo but somehow missed the fact that it was me wearing it!) and it's amazing. For some reason, I find spoken word incredibly powerful in a real, visceral way.

Afterwards, the apparently famed [DJ Rekha](#) took over and the Downhill Battle people cleared out some space and started dancing away, eventually drawing others in to join them. I tried to but couldn't shake my self-consciousness.

Worcester, Massachusetts

Back at Tiffiniy's apartment, Holmes is carrying his girlfriend, who is not feeling well, inside. Tiffiniy is hanging out with her visiting friend and so I head with Nick to a place he calls "the collective", which sounds interesting enough for me to get in the car without asking further questions. The collective's full name, as it turns out, is "Collective á Go-Go" and Nick explains that while his friend Jake is on tour with his band, he's staying in Jake's room there.

As we drive Worcester becomes increasingly less city-like, its tall blocks fading into strip malls and then disappearing altogether, leaving houses surrounded by trees. Eventually we pull into the drive way of one especially large house and cut the engine. As I step out, the first thing that hits me is the overwhelming silence. The place is beautiful, tucked into luscious green woods.

The house tries to be mostly self-sufficient. Water is taken from a nearby reservoir but is heated by hand over a stove powered by firewood which they cut to size themselves (the wood itself comes from a tree removal service). In lieu of bathrooms, they run their own composting process. They have a garden where they grow some food, the rest is bought from local organic farms. Chores (of which there are a lot, Nick says) are shared equally.

In fact, we're here now to help chop firewood. Nick tries to show me how to chop the wood down to size by hand with a thing that looks like an axe (but

blunter, Nick says). As you might expect, I'm terrible at it. We eventually pull out the heavy duty wood-cutting machine, in which a hydraulic piston pushes the wood through the axe blade. Even this is something of a challenge, since the wood has a tendency to try to jump up and get stuck and other such things.

Washington, D.C.

It's surprising how few people I know at this party. People keep having to explain other people to me.

Worcester, Massachusetts

After chopping wood, Nick shows me around the collective. The garage houses a full silk screening system, which is where they make the Downhill Battle tees. Jake used to be in charge and then Holmes's girlfriend, who used to live here, begun helping out. Jake calls on the phone and Nick talks to him for a bit, asking how the tour is going.

Inside, Nick introduces me to some of the other collective members and they talk a bit more about Jake. And then, a thought hits me. 'This isn't Jake Berendes, is it?' I say. Nick looks taken aback. 'You know Jake Berendes?' 'Well, I know of him.' 'How?' 'My friend Leonard Richardson is always making jo—" 'Oh, you know Leonard! Wow, that's incredible.' The fact that I knew of Jake Berendes quickly became the most interesting thing about me and Nick eagerly told everyone.

'Indeed,' I said, 'sometimes Leonard needs to [assure people that Jake is a real person!](#)' 'Jake doesn't sound like a real person?' laughs a collective member with an air that suggests sometimes Jake can be all-too-real. 'Not the way Leonard tells it,' I reply.

[Aside: To discuss Jake Berendes would not only be going far beyond my area of knowledge but also to delve into a strange world of [magical realism](#), [amateur music](#), [nested in-jokes](#), [Repetitive Electronic Music](#), and [giant squid](#). Not that that's a bad thing.]

Nick takes me up to Jake's room. "Jake is the most creative person I know," Nick says. Every day he writes [a weblog entry](#) and [makes a stuffed animal](#), he writes numerous songs, draws, makes posters, puts together zines, and on and on. It is truly incredible. Nick gives me a CD to take home.

Washington, D.C.

The university kicks us out at what seems like an unreasonably early hour and we head outside to wait in the cold for the cabs that are supposed to take us back to our hotel. Nobody shows up for what seems like forever until a stationwagon finally arrives. Desperate, we decide to all pile in; the Downhill Battle people and me all lying together in the trunk. Someone snaps a photo. “No rich metadata!” Holmes cries. ‘You can post it but I don’t want it to be found by searching for my name.’

We realize, piled into the trunk of a cabbie’s stationwagon, that the night is still young. We decide to ask the cabbie to drop us uptown near some bars. I ask Holmes if they’re sure they want me along, but Holmes is nothing if not accommodating and thinks we’ll be able to make it work out. When the cabbie drops us off, Holmes stops someone on the street and asks him if he can recommend any bars I might be able to sneak into. ‘Not a chance!’ says the guy.

Undeterred, we head to the first bar we spot. One of the Battlers has a recently-expired ID whose photo looks a decent amount like me and I give it to the bouncer. He looks at it for a second and then lets me in. The actual battler holds back for a while and enters with the real ID soon after.

It’s my first time in a bar and, like most such firsts, it is inevitably disappointing. It looks much like any other restaurant. It’s quite stylish, with globe lights and fake branches as plants. The waitress takes some orders and the music pounds. We sit in a booth and chat with our neighbors.

I first met Holmes at [a party hosted by Zack Rosen](#) months ago. Zack, who looked so at home when he was at a party...well, at home, now looks sort of out-of-place, like I often feel at parties. Unfortunately he’s too far to talk to.

Worcester, Massachusetts

Back at Tiffiniy’s apartment, they’re inflating a new raft. We all take turns getting lightheaded on hyperventilating over plastic fumes. We throw the raft on top of the car, each grabbing a side, and drive to the top of a hill overseeing a lake. Nick throws the raft onto the hill and we take turns sliding it down (it’s not a very steep hill). We throw the raft into the mud surrounding the lake. For a moment it looks like I’m going to go with Tiffiniy’s friend, but this mistake is quickly rectified and I hang back with Tiffiniy until its our turn.

The sun is setting and the lake and trees are all drawn in pale blues and greens. The lake is like a shimmering mirror, the yellow raft hanging in the middle. When its our turn Tiffiniy goes in first and I go in after but end up slipping in the mud, falling on top of her, getting water in the boat, and getting myself all swampy. We embark anyway, using brooms brought from the apartment as paddles. The mood is slightly ruined, as are my clothes.

Washington, D.C.

The law school graduate fighting medicine patents is rather obviously hitting on Nick. ‘*Tell me your dreams*’, she says lusciously. ‘Well, uh,’ Nick replies, stiff and nervous, ‘our group tries to fight, uh, the expansion of, uh, copyright law by—’. ‘No’, she interrupts. ‘*Not the group’s dreams — your dreams*.’ ‘Oh. Well, uh.’

We’ve left the bar and are now walking the streets in search of dancing, although we can’t quite seem to remember the name of the place we’re heading for. Captain something, perhaps? Oh, there it is. We try to pull off the ID trick again, but we’re foiled by the \$5 cover charge. “Five dollars!” someone exclaims. We head back to regroup. Law school girl heads in to see if she can pull out a friend.

Her friend is a shortish snobbish fellow, with a manner that was the subject of much derision but which is rather hard to describe. ‘Oh, boy, there’s sure a lot of you. Well, uh, I could probably get you and you in — who wants to actually get in? — yeah, you and you.’ He looks at me. ‘Sorry buddy, but there’s no way I’m gettin’ you in.’ Holmes decides that maybe he doesn’t want in and we head home, joking about what a jerk he was. ‘Please, you could get in,’ he assures me.

Worcester, Massachusetts

Back at Tiffiniy’s apartment, they’re cooking up some dinner. I’ve taken off some of my more swampy clothes, borrowing some of Tiffiniy’s pants. Afterwards, we make plans to head over to a swimsuit-themed party. They call up their friend programmer, who I will call Sam, and invite him to come over. When Sam arrives, Nick suggests we discuss RSS, a prospect which Sam is not particularly enthusiastic about (and, to be honest, neither am I).

We apparently get to the swimsuit party a little too early, since nobody has really arrived yet. We stand in a circle and talk for a bit with the lights on and then mill about for a little while. Topics for conversation are not particularly forthcoming. Sam tries to spark a new one: ‘I spent the day rereading *Ender’s Game*,’ he suggests. This sounds rather awkwardly geeky, but I can’t help but chime in: ‘Oh, I did that once too! Just sat started looking at it and before I knew it I’d reread the whole thing.’ ‘What’s *Ender’s Game*?’ asks one of the girls. We’re apparently the only two who know.

Sam is clearly socially awkward so it doesn’t surprise me too much when a little later he announces that he’s heading home. But it does surprise the Downhill Battle folks. Word spreads that apparently Sam was asked to leave, which

strikes me as a little much. I mean, he obviously wasn't a party person, but to throw him out?

It turns out that things are much stranger than that. In fact, Sam's ex-girlfriend who broke up with Sam after cheating on him, is coming over soon and apparently they don't think he should be around for it. Holmes thinks this is monumentally unfair and, he later tells us, he seeks out the girl who asked Sam to leave and gets in her face. 'Maybe next time you could tell me in advance who I can and can't bring to your parties,' he tells her.

'I've been watching the OC a lot,' he later explains, 'and on that show if someone has a beef with someone else they just go right there and tell them. The Worcester scene's too small for people to be having beefs like this; it's noxious. We just need to get this all out into the open. We could have a Worcester beef wiki. You know, you've got to write up everybody you've got a beef with.'

So at the party, he just kept staying on the girl, asking her why Sam couldn't stay and what the problem is and she repeatedly declined to comment. 'They're never going to invite you back,' someone comments. 'Oh, I knew that,' Holmes says. 'I don't care. I don't want to go back if that's how they're going to be.'

Washington, D.C.

The Ford Foundation, foolishly, did not bring us all out here simply to hang out and party. Instead, they've provided what I assume is the standard summit garb: a long white U-shaped conference table with a projector at one end along which we can type on our laptops while sharing insights. Such sessions are certainly popular, but I'm not sure how effective they (as opposed to the discussions outside them) really are.

The last major one I went to was a alternative [music] compensation system (ACS) meeting hosted by Harvard Law's Terry Fisher. I took copious notes of the discussion, which Terry suggested I not post on my blog, but those don't seem to have been worth anything and instead what I remember is being snowed into the Sheraton Commander with Ed Felten and Ernest Miller and friends.

One problem is that such events have rather unclear goals, like "fostering discussion". One can certainly have a conversation — two, maybe even three or four, people talking to each other — and one can have many such conversations. But one cannot have conversations involving groups of twenty or thirty people, especially when the topic is boring and the people are prone to speeches. It's just doesn't work. The only useful part, as the participants will readily attest, is the conversations in the hallways.

Still, you obviously want to go to such summits, if only for the prestige and fun of hanging out with such cool people. And something about such meetings seems to compress people, making them into more concentrated coolness than

normally. Hanging out with the amazing Ed Felten at the ACS meeting led me to go home and apply to Princeton (where he teaches) and, as we will see later in this story, hanging out with the Downhill Battle people had a similar effect.

And so, I'm in something of a bind, since I want to get invited to such meetings but I don't really like them. So I can't really talk about them much on my blog. Nor can I tell the organizer what I really think about them, although they always ask. And worst of all, I sort of tune out during the actual meeting-part conversations which makes me shy about speaking up lest I betray this fact, which in turn makes the organizer regret inviting me. 'I invited this Aaron kid because I thought he was a genius,' they say to themselves, 'but he didn't say a word!' (As a last ditch attempt to justify flying me out they try to pressure me into saying something but I'm not very cooperative.) It's all so sad.

Winnetka, Illinois — Ninth Grade

But perhaps not as sad as me at a party. In junior high and high school we would routinely have what the school insisted on calling "socials" — basically dance parties. I was practically alone in almost never showing up and my classmates, who showed the same surprising social generosity I see in the Downhill Battle Kids, went so far as to start bribing me to come.

Even when I did come I mostly stood in the corner, perhaps twitching occasionally, maybe talking to some people. During a slow dance a girl finally grabbed me from the corner (perhaps even ditching her date) and pulled me out to the floor, putting her hands on my shoulders, as was the custom. I reacted, naturally, by putting my hands on her shoulders but a within a few seconds noticed this was quite wrong and that all the other men had their hands on either side of their partner's waist, so I quickly corrected myself. I still had no idea what to do with my feet, but to my recollection I didn't do anything incredibly stupid with them, but I can't say the moment was particularly enjoyable, seeing as how I was gripped with fear the whole time.

Further bribes led me to try to participate in the bizarre actions that seem to make up modern "dance", which make my twitching look tame by comparison. Dance has never really made a whole lot of sense to me, but its modern version is surely especially odd, consisting as it does mostly of people huddling close together and sort of writhing and shaking various appendages in some vague relation to the music.

The worst thing about it, however, is that stupid as it is you can do it poorly and look even stupider. And, as you might expect, falling from such an already low level could leave one's self-esteem at rather perilous lows. So in dancing, one tries to keep a sense of just how stupid one looks at this moment, in order to determine whether to cease such activity. Unfortunately for one, however,

it is precisely this self-conscious monitoring that is the primary cause of poor dancing.

Worcester, Massachusetts — Present Day

Taking all this into account, I am sitting alone at a table in the kitchen with a neckache while dancing grows in the other room and people start smoking pot on the porch. Holmes, frustrated with the stereo system, has commandeered it and attached it to an iBook and is now downloading songs to play off a peer-to-peer network. Once he feels he has sufficient songs queued up he comes over and sits down with me.

‘Are you OK with just sitting here?’ he asks. ‘Because I want to know if I should pressure you to come join us and I know there are some people who are just totally OK with who they are.’ I’m rather surprised at the question and not really sure about how to articulate my feelings. ‘Well, um,’ I say. ‘No, then. If you have any question about it, then the answer is no.’ ‘Well,’ I finally say. ‘Right now, this person I am right now, has no desire to go dancing. But I’m beginning to wonder if I should be a different sort of person.’

This too apparently means no and Holmes drags me into the other room and I slowly begin twitching again, expanding until I reach a range which might be considered moderate dancing, which I still am not doing very well at. Holmes and friends decide to liven up the party but running into a mattress that’s laid up against the wall at high speeds, causing them to bounce off of it and into the crowd. I decide to join in and it’s the first fun thing I’ve done all night.

Washington, D.C.

One of the cooler groups here are the folks from Third World Majority (website cultureisaweapon.org, who manage to combine some of the most radical rants with support for the power of technology. The tech industry, as Thomas Frank superbly documents (notably in *One Market Under God*), consists mostly of radical politics as sham — letting 20-year-old kids run companies is supposed to replace economic democracy — but TWM has radical politics as extreme as anything I’ve seen.

Worcester, Massachusetts

A dark-skinned youth in what I guess are called hip hop clothes enters the party. He wasn’t invited, he admits readily, but he saw the noise and decided to come by. Back in Illinois, I’d have to say, they’d probably be trying to kick the kid out right about now, but these Worcester kids just toss him a beer. Conversation with him is perhaps a little strained, but there’s no overt tension.

He invites a few of his friends over (which is probably exactly what the Illinois kids were afraid of) and while for the most part they associate among themselves, nobody seems to mind them.

Washington, D.C.

Aside from the Downhill Battle folks, the coolest person here is Hannah Sasser-man of the [Prometheus Radio Project](#). Prometheus, [profiled in *The Nation's* radio issue](#), started as a collective that started illegal “pirate” radio stations. The group has lately gone legit, lobbying for the legalization of Low-Power FM (LPFM) stations and building community radio stations instead of pirate ones. Hannah is intelligent and articulate and passionate and good at balancing the legal and illegal sides of her job. “She’s definitely one to watch,” I wrote a friend afterwards.

A professor asks if some students can practice by filming us and Hannah comments by saying something about them filming her ass. ‘It’s not supposed to be X-rated,’ the professor explains. ‘Oh, don’t worry,’ Hannah replies. ‘My ass is not X-rated.’

Worcester, Massachusetts

Back at the Tiffiniy’s apartment, my neck still hurts, the pain crawling up towards my head as it usually does. As the party went on people begin taking off their clothes, revealing the swimsuits underneath (it was a swimsuit party, after all). Even Holmes strips down to some tight-fitting swimming trunks. Some of the girls even started swapping swimsuits. I think I finally understand what Aimee Mann meant when she sang “trading clothes and ringing Pavlov’s Bell”.

We left probably around probably 4am. (I remember I once was at a rather geekier party and I was introduced to Miguel de Icaza. Miguel and I really didn’t have all that much to talk about, so he started flipping his sexy cell phone open and closed and telling me about the dance parties he went to. Where he was from, he told me, the music didn’t even *start* until 4am!)

I ask if there’s any aspirin for my head and they tell me that the solution to headaches is to drink some water and eat stuff. I try this but tell them that I don’t think it’s going to work and when I don’t take aspirin in response to a neckache I generally end up waking in the middle of the night with a searing pain tearing apart my skull. After repeating this story several times in a rather subdued tone, they kindly get some aspirin from the local 24-hour pharmacy.

Holmes arrives later and debriefs us about the night, giving the above riff about the OC, which leads to a discussion about how things are much better on television. ‘You know what else is good about the OC? The kids just totally ignore the parents. You want to go visit someone? You drive over there and next thing you know you’re in their bedroom.’ I suggest that another good thing about the OC is that you get places instantly, but Holmes assures me that the show’s realism includes actual driving.

Eventually we go to sleep — I’m allowed to use the bed out on the glass-enclosed second-floor back porch.

Washington, D.C.

After the day’s long meeting we’re taken on a bus to a crowded fancy restaurant. We’re stored in three tables up in the top floor’s corner. At one point I have to go down to the bathroom and I swear it looks just like the choreographed office number from *Brazil*: people in colorful clothing go up and down the stairs, a waiter with a tray cuts in front of me, a scenic view from the second floor over a crowded restaurant, people pass pieces of paper back and forth in front of me, all while a perfectly steady camera shot takes it all in.

Back at the table, I sit next to Tiffiniy. She says she’s not feeling very well so she sort of slouches down in her chair quite a bit and to keep talking to her I slouch down and do face the same way. While we’re oblivious, someone snaps a [photo](#) and laughs and shows it to us. It looks like we’re swooningly in love.

Worcester, Massachusetts

I wake up to the sun streaming through the glass ceiling. I get up and spend an hour just sort of staring at my hands. Later I head in and we go out to breakfast.

Washington, D.C.

After dinner a fellow from the Consumers Union (nonprofit publisher of *Consumer Reports*, although they’re actually much more political than that would suggest) invites us over to his house, which looks a little like the kind of old abandoned places that people throw wild parties at in movies. He hasn’t been letting the place go to waste though — he installed a large stripper pole in the middle of the living room.

Some loud music is put on and I head out to the back porch to escape it. Holmes decides to take a seat and as water starts squirting out from under him, he realizes he's sat in a puddle. He takes off his pants and throws them on the nearby barbecue, where they proceed to start steaming. It looks like smoke, of course, and one wonders what the neighbors think when they come out on their porch and observe us.

The Downhill Battle kids have brought their skateboards and we take turns trying them, the more adventurous racing down the hill. Just the driveway's tilt is too much for me — things go too fast and I arch my back and scrape my wrist and knee.

I hang out with Tiffiniy on the front steps for a bit and then she grabs my hand and drags me across the street and over a fence, up some stairs into this amazing urban meadow between two houses that's been allowed to run wild, grass growing tall and crawling up a defunct fountain in the middle. 'Isn't this beautiful?' she asks and indeed it is. After some time we head back and some time after that she heads off with some people to a bar. 'Do you want to come?' she asks and I do but I also don't want to cause trouble again so I stay behind and head back to the hotel, looking at myself in the hotel's many mirrors, checking out how I look in the tight-fitting Downhill Battle tee they gave me.

Worcester, Massachusetts

We pile into a place that looks like your typical breakfast diner, ordering one and two dollar meals which Holmes pays for entirely in the quarters he has in his pockets. Holmes asks me what sort of political software I want to work on and I tell him that as I've radicalized I've had trouble thinking of software radical enough to keep up with my politics. 'But projects don't have to be explicitly political to have political effects,' he says. 'Look at Wikipedia.'

'Yes, look at Wikipedia,' I say. 'Wikipedia was founded by an Objectivist and its policies are explicitly anti-truth.' 'Anti-truth? Wikipedia's policy is truth through process.' 'The Wikipedia [npov policy page](#) explicitly says that it doesn't matter whether something is true or not — it can only be put on a Wikipedia page if it's popular. And that makes some sense from a certain perspective, but it's certainly not political. In a messed-up society like ours, neutral policies don't have neutral effects. The process will just reinforce the status quo.'

'Does this really happen?' 'Sure, I tried an experiment. I picked one page — the article on *From Time Immemorial*, a book that claimed there were really no Palestinians — and tried to tell the full story, which involved such shocking facts as a journal article exposing the book as a fraud couldn't get published anywhere. My well-cited additions kept getting deleted and when I asked why someone explained on the talk page that what I was saying was silly — nobody

rejects journal articles that are accurate. Well this was precisely the point I was trying to argue against!

‘So what’s the solution? Does a wiki have to have an explicit political point of view?’ ‘Well, that’s one possibility — one that I’m sort of trying. But a simpler answer is to just say that instead of only including things people believe, only include things you can provide citations for. Require people to provide evidence for their claims. That’s a much better way of getting truth and it’s much more useful too, since people can get the cites to learn more.’

Washington, D.C.

The second day of the Free Culture meeting is much shorter and emptier. Under pressure, I give a short talk on my radical wikipedia and, shockingly, one of the people from Third World Majority comes up to me afterwards to note that she’s actually used the site (which I haven’t even told anyone about). And then I say my goodbyes (Tiffiniy says it feels like the last day of summer camp) and drive to the airport with Zack Rosen, get onto my plane, and fly back to California.

Worcester, Massachusetts

After breakfast, the gang takes me on a small car tour around Worcester and then back to the train station. ‘This didn’t really work out the way I expected,’ Tiffiniy says. ‘We’re not usually this social. I thought we were just going to hold hands and walk around the city. You’ll have to come back. Think of Worcester as your home.’ I thank them for their food and beds and tight-fitting pants and party invitations and so on and then head into the grandly architected Worcester station and onto the train and back to Boston.