

“So, I’m standing before a ring of seven enormous, cloaked ravens, and each raven has an orb in its hands. And they tell me the one I choose is supposed to be the one that chooses my, uh, my path.”

“Your path?!”

“Yeah, that’s what they tell me! And of course, of course, it can’t. But say you were me. Say you had to pick what orb.”

“Well... I suppose I would look at their distinguishing aspects.”

“You suppose you would, huh? Well, the orbs are numbered. Just that. A number. 1, 2, 3, 4 - and such.”

“... I don’t know. Whichever one seemed right?”

“Ah, I won’t press you for an answer. See, that’s the problem - just a number? Means nothing, until you pick it. ‘Scuse me,”

“Mercury in retrograde is said to predict things falling apart in your life. But what does it actually mean? Retrograde is not ‘real’ in the astronomic sense, so I mean, the planet appears to be moving backwards but

isn't actually. I'm already unconcerned with the astronomic sense, I mean, I'm talking about astrology. - Right - [unintelligible, murmuring] - So Mercury as an astrological concept holds travel, and communication, and logic, planning, arguments — so during retrograde, these things appear to be moving backwards, coming undone in a sense— they appear to be crumbling, and there is doubt, and there are hard times. Inevitably, it comes back around. It always comes back around. Times get good again. But see, the retrograde, it's - it appears to be moving backwards. Do you get that? Appears to be, appears to be. Isn't actually. It poses that any difficulty in our lives, we could resolve by reshaping our lens, by seeing the difficulty as the mere appearance of regression. When it isn't. It's the union between the astrological and the astronomical. Between the part that is willing to believe that there is force in the universe shaping our lives, and the logical part that knows nothing but that we just keep on going the same path."

All noise. All quiet in my head. I've got a heavy woolen coat on; my ears are covered, and I'm bundled up to my nose. The train is too warm for the way I've dressed.

I look up at the creaking, dark ceiling and wonder, how

many other people have sat here and wondered —  
damn, this is what my tax dollars pay for?

A time-honored tradition. The trains are hundreds of  
years old.

How many hundreds? I don't know. Too many hundreds.

“I was lying there, soaked in sweat, alongside my muse  
— she was big, glorious, held me and ate me up— and I  
was left nothing, a shell of a man beside her.”

“Hey man, that's not so bad.”

“Not so bad, not so bad, hell, pretty good I'd say.”

“This is not the fresh time, or the got-going time, or the  
doggone, miss-the-days time. This is beyond the end of  
the end.”

“They called it post-modern in the eighties.”

“Post-post-modernism.”

“Post post-post-modernism.”

“Add another one every ten years.”

The night is young, misty. The sun has fallen, just now,  
touching the sky with pink lights on the underside of  
each cloud.

*The dog died last week. You've got to do something with  
it.*

I take my time walking from the train stop to Tom's. It's

always nice to decide to take your time. It's always worth it, in the end, even if you don't know why you're doing it. I listen to music; an artist I like just released something last week. It's good, but it's not their old stuff. Something about it seems off— or maybe I'm off. Getting older. Already? Every day.

That said, it's still good. It's worth saving. Maybe I give the artists I already know too much leeway.

Trucks hurtle beneath my feet on an overpass. I stop to watch them go. Huge, stinking wheels. Clunky, industrious, ever-moving. Blood cells. They carry all manner of product from one place to another, though some are empty, returning. All of them are manned. Over time, their sedentary lifestyle and limited access to information will relegate them to an outsider status. They will be fat, old, and know little more than what their favorite DJ tells them. The truck will become a kind of home, and home will become a kind of work. An itch will be scratched behind the wheel that only grows around their families. A private world, all to themselves, where any behavior is acceptable. Listen to the public access racists, pay-to-pray religious advertising, conservative talk radio. Eat whatever. Burp, fart, stink,

whenever. When they retire, hopefully they'll find some small, glittering flecks of personality that stood against time and work.

Meanwhile, a new person will mount the truck and start it rumbling across the same old roads.

I dream about being an objectified roadie to a trucker. Who doesn't? Isolated, alienated, the weird, the other, are truly desirable. Their lives are so unknown, you can project anything you want. And desperate, too. Personal neglect is not a sign of confidence. To be the one who hands over the shared credit card at the pharmacy, picking up deodorant and cold medication. To fuss over his collar. To do the laundry. To complain, coquettishly, about the smell. To collect newspapers, CDs, and magazines to entertain the Working Man. To be sweat-sprawled in a hundred cramped motel rooms, where love and frustration eat each other out. To be ogled, to be fought over, for my husband to own a gun, never shave his back, and to have been addicted to meth once-upon-a-time. "Do you think I should lose some weight?" he'd ask me. No, I'd say. No, no, no. You work hard enough as it is. Let's go to Carl's Jr.

I fantasize about the kind of men who, in a certain time

and place, would've killed me and depending, might still. But then, in a certain time and place, I believe anyone might kill anyone.

"He just bitches so much."

"It's normal to bitch, without complaining you'd never know you were being wronged."

"Yeah, but all the time?"

"You're bitching right now."

"All the time?!"

The bridge's sidewalk is suddenly crowded. Time to go. Anyway, I just reaffirmed things I know already: that the world moves, and I, a small part of it.

Tom's house is big. She affords it through some means that I don't really pry into. I can't help selling it to myself on the way in. The land sprawls, an emerald lawn, a deck, a pool — fit for a 100-person BBQ. The interior is poorly kept, but it's got four bedrooms, each with their own bathroom, and a gas range in the kitchen. Poorly kept, I say, because Tom and her roommates (of an unknown, ever-changing number) live a simple life unhindered by domestic disciplines. They just — awaken and confront the day. There is no time to clean off the stains on the backsplash. No time for the dust in the

seam between the baseboards and the linoleum. The secret filth of the toilet's innermost lid lies unseen, until one of them makes themselves sick from partying. Bile spills out to cement an association with the urge to clean it, the alcohol that didn't make it out helps them forget about it. There are projects to work on, things to listen to, people to talk to. There are things to do, dreams to dream, makes to make. That is, until there is nothing — or not nothing, but an exhaustion and fatigue that leads them all the way to bed.

Awaken and confront the day.

Tom takes me downstairs to show me her current fixation. It's ninety minutes of sparsely edited footage of the Middlemann University Swim Team doing laps, with low, endless droning notes underneath it.

Her hand hovers above the mouse, eyes sucked into the screen. "What do you think, man? Is this anything?"

With every powerful stroke forward, the tone changes, as though the swimmers are creating the music with their movements.

"Everything's something, queen, y'know." I don't really know what to say. "Tight ninety."

"Yeah... it was just so hard to get it down to only ninety

minutes.”

“You could make a director’s cut.”

“Yeah...”

A 19-year old started subletting with them. Named Ally. She replaced the roommate who was always stealing food from the fridge. And not even subtly, for that matter. The old roommate would get caught red-handed with leftovers in one hand and labeled Tupperware in the other. Not Ally. Apparently, Ally seems cool so far. Tom’s partner Zach quit another job on the first day. Then there’s her friend Dawn, and Dawn’s childhood best friend Parker. They’re doing the best they can, considering Parker’s boyfriend is a piece of shit abuser and she finally left him. And Tom? She’s doing alright, but they’ve got a show to go to tonight and no one else has woken up yet.

“Let’s hope they do, huh?”

“Yeah, let’s hope.”

We watch an old horror movie while the house stirs.

“No!! Don’t hurt me!!” people scream on screen, before they are eviscerated.

“It’d be different if it was me,” I say, “I’d be fine.”

“Yeah? You’d talk your way out of it?”



“Sure, or, I dunno. I’d be fine, though. I know that.”

Before I go, I try to make up for things.

“I really did like your movie, I thought you did a good job.”

Tom sighs. “The point wasn’t... I mean... thank you. Thank you, Kevin. For watching it and for giving me your honest opinion. I know it’s not really your thing.”

“It’s my thing, it totally is. I get it.”

She bunches up her mouth in a blobfish’s frown, but hugs me before I leave. “You text me when you get home safe, okay?”

Crossing the street at night. It’s late enough that there are no cars. I don’t have to wait for the light to change, but I do, standing like an asshole on the corner and staring at the orange hand. WAIT.

“Sex isn’t nothing. It’s not a big deal, either. But it’s not nothing.”

“It’s vulnerable, it’s intimate. People don’t like to be vulnerable. Or intimate. But they like to have sex.”

“We can’t just act like being vulnerable is nothing, can we? Oh my god, Kevin?”

The light changes, but the little walking man who appears in place of the hand didn’t call my name.

Someone else did.

“Hey!” I say, and turn to look with false recognition. The face doesn’t help. It seems familiar in a background actor way. “How’s it going?” I ask, nonetheless. The WALK sign is already counting down.

“Hey!!” The familiar face opens its arms and I accept a hug. An ominous smell of smoky alcohol. “I’m good!! Kevin, this is Albrecht, we’re taking a philosophy course together,” they say, and withdrawing, show me their companion. Bookish, tall. Light yellow denim jacket. Albrecht gives me a simple handshake. “Nice to meet you.” I look into his eyes to see if he can tell I don’t know the name of his companion. His gaze is piercing.

“We’re on a date,” the familiar face adds, in a conspiring air.

“Oooh, fun,” I say.

“Kevin was in that comic book club with me, freshman year.”

Comic book club. A clue. I vaguely remember a small, windowed room in the library. And this person? A K-sound. Like me. Katherine? With my luck, it’s Kat.

“Oh, that’s cool. Do you still make art?” Albrecht’s voice is dubious.

“No, not really. I mean, yes, but. Y’know. It’s hard.”

“It is hard! Shit, we’ve gotta go, right? What time does Angelique close?”

Katherine, or Catherine, or Cat, or Kate, and their beau, head down the street with a little goodbye.

I look back at the light signal. Orange again. Time to wait, and now there are a few cars whipping by in front of me. My stomach gurgles.

I check the clock when I go to text Tom from my front porch. It’s 3:33. A sign! I strain into my knowledge of numerology. Three is the story of two-plus-one, of one-plus-two. One deciding between two, two converging into one, and back around again. Three is the story of a choice, and the person who chooses. Agency, or the illusion of it. A commonplace story. It’s about unity and disparity. The flourishing number, the magic number. The neat number, into which all sets and lists aspire to fit. It must be a good sign. I check my phone for what seeing ‘333’ means.

It peers at me from the screen. Arcane knowledge via digital transmission. There must be something to the harnessing of energies — through the phone, to the person — like lightning rods or dowsing rods or

alchemical rods. Only, the contemporary phone isn't nearly phallic enough to be a sacred device. It says to me,

Permission to take a bold leap.

I'm not the kind of silly person who makes decisions based on weird coincidences. I'm one of the few who gets it. Nonetheless, it's good to know that when the moment arises, I have permission to take a leap. I suppose.

...

"Professor Eidel was arrested on campus yesterday. He was naked and screaming — like, total mental breakdown."

"Anyone see his dick?"

"Everyone saw his dick, man."

I enter into the conversation via my cereal bowl, held in front of me as I sit down on the couch. "What happened?"

Neil points his pencil at me. "What happened? I'd like to know that too. Last week when those other kids got arrested for tagging Beckham Science, it was the actual

police who showed up. But this, it's just some glorified mall cops."

I'm in no mood for tangents. "I mean, did anything trigger it? Or, what, one day he just stripped naked and —"

"Yep, that's what happened."

"Huh. — But why?"

"That's what I'm saying, it was a freak thing. We don't know why." Connor is insistent, as though Neil and I are arbiters of truth. "Sometimes this shit just happens. Sometimes people just snap."

Being persuaded by someone is uncomfortable. An itchy, suffocating sweater. "I mean... do they?" I ask the question tentatively to the kitchen window. Outside, a worm dangles from a thread. It taps on the glass. I'm in no mood for signs from the universe, either.

"What about that guy downtown who killed his whole family on, like, a whim?" Connor, criss-cross applesauce, holds his hands out with his palms up, to channel his holy wisdom on the matter.

Neil talks as though he's chewing. "No, no, I read about that. There was shit leading up to it."

"But what shit?"

“What guy are we talking about?”

“Daniel - something. The, uh, podiatrist? Or — no, no, he was a pediatrician.”

"A man kills his family every five days in America."

Mouth full of corn and sugar and fat.

“There's not *no* reason for that."

"Then what is the reason?"

"I don't know. But nobody just snaps.”

“You going out again tonight, Kevin?”

It's a quiet dark bar, five stops past the furthest I've ever gone. His name is Samuel, and he introduced himself with his dick a while ago. Right away, I was allowed to see the most private part of him; it's unsurprising and a shock at the same time. In the picture, it's erect. I imagine it flaccid. It's like so many things in the world — barnacles, snails, mushrooms, leafless stems and tubers. But none of them quite describe a penis without losing something in translation. Suffice to say it is a pale, unshaven pelvis, with a medium-sized dick straining up from it. The reds and whites are unfortunately augmented by the camera.

We meet out front and he puts me in his car and takes me

back to his house. The entire thing is a dumb idea, I know it full-well. The radio is on, loud, to keep me from thinking about it too much.

“Stress affects everyone. That’s why Thorman & Byrd are introducing Ease Plus, a stress-relief medication that requires absolutely no prescription. Thorman & Byrd: Relief, at last.”

Radio. A.C. “Do you want your seat warmer on?”

“What a gentleman. Yeah, sure.”

“Arf! Arf! Aww, who’s a good boy? Grrrr. Oh, you want your Chuskies with all-new chicken and beef flavor, don’t you? But you’re not a puppy anymore! Arf! Arf! Oh, really? Chuskies is for puppies of all ages? Well, here you go! Chuskies: now for bi-i-g puppies too!”

“Inundated with ads? Try killing yourself,” I say.

“That’s not funny.”

“If I have to hear that Chuskies ad again, it’s not gonna be a joke.” He seems uncomfortable, and I add, “anyway, what do you do?”

“I’m a civil engineer.”

“Wow, fancy.”

A shrug — whether it’s a reluctance to admit anything, or a burden that no attainable status can shake: “It pays

the bills.”

Hours later, in his bed, which smells like a weird kind of laundry detergent and cat hair. I have seen no cats so far.

“Hey, Samuel?” — “Hm?” — “Do you ever think about how things work? Since you’re an engineer?”

“What things? Like, infrastructure?”

“Yeah, like infrastructure...”

“I don’t really know what you mean.”

“Like, the way everything fits together. How - things just happen.”

“Give me an example.”

His skin's smell is faintly sour, like a warehouse. Itchy, foreign-soap smelling sheets. He’s warm and unexplored.

“I dunno, I keep thinking about trucks, taking things everywhere. And people showing up to drive them, and take the deliveries.”

“... Yeah, man. It’s crazy.”

“Yeah.”

Back at home. What happened to yesterday’s long walks and train rides? The feeling of significance in my movements? I’m longing for that mood again.

Lying in bed, I regard my version of a spiritual tome. A



text from Dawn awaits me in its cold light. They tried to reach me sometime during my date.

Can Parker stay with you guys? Josh showed up at the house tonight and scared her. If not, it's okay, we're going to try and file a restraining order tomorrow, and I think she might be able to stay with her mom for a while.

Hey, sorry, I was out. Sure she can stay with us, let me ask Neil and Connor.

Do you need a lawyer for that?

It's cool. Parker's gonna go to her mom's next week.

She can still stay with us until then.

Are you sure? What'd Neil and Connor say?

Hey guys can Parker stay here so her ex can't find her?

ye

sure

They said yes.

Can we come over like. Now?

Yeah!

First, I hate to say it, but I masturbate and fantasize about better sex with Samuel than what we actually had. I think about a porn I saw. The emotional crux was that one participant hadn't experienced a satisfying orgasm in their entire life. I think about days, months, years, decades, without satisfaction. I think about hair building up in a drain, and the tub running over. A snake in the drain. Motorized, insatiable, crawling in. Leave it clean and steel and stainless. The drain slurps down the water gutturally. It echoes and rattles. The water goes out to a plant to be treated. Some of it is thrown into the ocean. An ocean growing ever-dirtier with hair, excrement, and pollution. The filthy water licks the shore. I experience a miniature ejaculation.

Wash up. Get clean. Make the space safe and sacred, with blankets, stuffed animals, soft lighting. Kleenex by the bed. A change of pajamas — a pair of my own. Neil and Connor's swivel chairs squeak in their rooms. I

imagine a pair of gnarled goblins on either side of a great big portcullis, the image long severed from its origin. Between Neil and Connor, which one is playing video games, and which one is studying?

Which one always lies, which one always tells the truth? What is that? Where did it come from? Is it from a folk-tale? An old movie? I'm pretty sure I remember hearing it in a cartoon first, but I can't be sure. It's been sublimated into the bank of pop-cultural reference.

Candles and incense. A rich piny smell fills the air. Ah, I flutter to the kitchen. And wine.

Wine for Parker. Dawn finds a place for the bags, while they speak in the new kind of poetry:

"There's that,  
and we'll see about more tomorrow.

Do you feel safe here?"

"How can I feel safe anywhere?

I want to  
and I'm glad you have me here.

I'm glad I have you here.

But there's no part of me he wasn't.

Where I go, he goes.

Where I have a body, he's embodied.

It's so much worse when it's true.

I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

I want in on the tenderness and beauty, but I'm a stranger with an open-mind, a kind heart, a place to stay, and there isn't anything else they need to know about me. There's nothing to say. I don't know for sure what happened to Parker; all I know is believing her, and wanting her to be okay, someday. This is right, I chant. This is right. My desire for attention mustn't displace Parker's need for comfort.

Wine and a stuffed animal for everyone.

"I loved him and -

and I loved him and -

and I don't know why that wasn't enough."

"It was enough. You are enough.

It was him.

He wasn't good. He hurt you.

That's not your fault.

I know, somehow, it's worse this way  
but

there was nothing you could've done."

Parker sobs, fumbling for the Kleenex.

A bedroom door opens; the bathroom door opens, closes. We all sit in awkward awareness of the toilet flushing, and this process reversing. Open, close, close.

“Dawn?” I submit to the hovering, tragic silence. “Can I ask you something?”

“What’s up?”

“It’s off-topic, but... you heard about Professor Eidel?”

Dawn stares at me, holding Parker close to her. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“No, Neil and Connor did.”

“He’s been working on this - I don’t know, he said it was an article. For months. Years, maybe. He was already ‘halfway’ when I started TAing. Well, he sent all of us — his TAs, his coworkers — his final draft and asked for notes about an hour before the whole...” she grabbed at the air in front of her belly and tore upwards, as if to rend herself nude.

Parker cups her glass of wine:

“Things never stop.

Even when everything hurts.”

Dawn rubs Parker’s back between her shoulder blades. I wish Samuel had done that to me; or held me, at least. A selfish voice bites that I should get myself hurt, so

people will come around to my aid.

“It’s not long. Like three pages. After months of work. And he makes the argument that everything is everything. That the barriers we’ve put up between things like outside, inside, private, public, one person and another person — even the distinctions between good and bad — are all equally flimsy.”

Then, we’re always hurting. We always need people coming to our aid. All I have to do, if that’s what I want, is wait. And speak up, when my time comes.

Parker looks pale.

“You okay?” I ask.

“I want to talk about something else.” She looks out my window. “Things are flimsy enough as it is.”

*The dog died almost two weeks ago. You’ve got to do something with it.*

“Well, he’s wrong. I can tell that we’re inside. I’m Dawn, you’re Parker, you’re Kevin. And we’re having a private moment. And we’re all good.”

That night I have a weird dream. There’s a piece of paper in front of me with two choices on it:

NICE                      or                      KIND

I look up at the classroom around me. The teacher waves their pen in my direction, and the pen wiggles like it's made out of rubber. They say, "This is a test."

The paper becomes a bird in my hands, and I'm in a forest, starving. It's nighttime. I'm shivering. I eat the bird, beak and all.

"This is a test."

"This is a stupid test," I reply, "everyone knows it's good to be nice, but it's better to be kind."

"The first step, is to forget about God."

When I wake up, it's 6 in the morning and I'm thinking about the word 'rut'. I know what it means to be in a rut; I know what it means to rut. But what's a rut? Is it the same as a divot? Someone who'd been listening to the same music every day for years wouldn't say, 'I've been in a divot'. There is an additional, sinking connotation. It's not only being dug in, it has an added movement towards depth.

This thing my Dad used to say plays through my head: when you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.

I'm sweaty and disturbed, so I have no choice but to get out of bed and start the day. Still thinking about ruts.

Their alternative meaning - desperate, animalistic pursuit towards pleasure.

It's the second to last day before classes start up again. Middlemann's been quiet, wrapped in wintry fog, ever since they let out. We're two hours from the sea.

The weather has gotten strangely nice for the start of January. Everywhere I can feel people tense, ready for the cold to come back. People carry their coats and look around. Restless. Winter can't be over, we all seem to agree, and it's going to get us soon. But today, the fog has lifted, and the sun is shining. I think of the millions of poor little bugs who take this as springtime, emerge from their buried eggs, only to be wiped out next week with a crisp frost. And I do the dishes in our communal kitchen. I'd vacuum, if Connor and Neil and Parker weren't still asleep. I realized recently that I can't tell Connor and Neil apart. Parker's easy. She's short, curvy, and has fifty piercings. But Connor and Neil? Both are tall and have a feeling of straw about their hair. Both are freckled. They could be brothers, but their faces are completely different. Connor has thin features, Neil has wide, flat ones. But it doesn't matter. We agreed at the start of the year that we were roommates, college



friends, and that our relationship is destined to end:

“Don’t even think about texting me when you’ve graduated. It’s a dirty trick. We’re together by circumstance. Forcing us to come together when it isn’t necessary suggests a desire to be together. A choice.”

“And what’s so bad about choosing not to be alone, again?”

“Come on,” he spread his arms, “would you really choose to be with me? Would anyone? Don’t lie. There’s better options out there for you.”

“No point in getting attached.”

“Yeah, what if one of us turns out to be an asshole?”

“What if we turn out to be in love?”

Snort. “Roommate Rule Number One. No falling in love.”

I retrieve an artifact of myself from the computer repair center on campus. Though school hasn't started up again, there is some activity.

"So don't, just tell her you don't want to go."

"But if I don't go, I'm just going to sit around and hate myself for being lazy."

"So don't do that either!"

"If you replaced the road with solar panels they'd break."

And that's not the problem, anyways. The problem is the tires."

"They wouldn't break, and if the problem is the tires, let's just do what they do in Japan. With the magnets."

"You're dreaming."

"The ravens are all looking at me and waiting."

I turn my head in time to see someone with enviably curly hair, and a nice, tall stature walk by, saying these words. Their companion asks,

"What'd you choose?"

The response is unintelligible.

When I take back my computer I look deep into the technician's hazel eyes to see if they know. Did they look? Or did they just fix the charging port? If I was a technician, I'd look. I'd want to know. Maybe just at first; maybe after a few probes that turned up nothing interesting, I'd stop. But what if one of those first few was like mine? Mine would be like a treasure trove to the peeping IT tech.

Or maybe not. Maybe what they want is photos. Maybe they want to open the gallery to see a pornographic expose of the user. I don't have any nudes saved on my laptop; they're all on my phone.

Even if they did peek into my private folder, what are the odds they read any of it?

Still, I look for disgust or interest, some kind of judgment, from this sleepy-looking technician. His eyes betray nothing so it seems likeliest that he betrayed nothing whatsoever. Still, I feel judgment.

My stories are the one thing I've never shared with anyone.

There's anywhere between one and two hundred. Some short, some embarrassingly long. All of them filthy, even the ones where I tried to make a story. It's the kind of smut that doesn't get published and read, the kind you use to amuse yourself, explorations of self-indulgence. This is not necessarily the key factor that makes me want to keep them secret, but it is a factor.

No. I'm ashamed of my work. Because instead of doing the bare minimum and creating my own characters, I'm borrowing them - and their source is a lonely place, one that I never want to go back to.

The Challengers. When I was 14, I would've cried to see any one of them. I had four posters, six t-shirts, a set of bedsheets, and zero comrades. Everyone at school was too busy watching their own, more popular shows. The

Challengers were bigger in the nineties, before I was born. My English teacher thought it was cool I was into it; then, he didn't know I was retreating into my bedroom every day after school to write about the characters doing things I wouldn't do until years later.

Even when I did those things, they weren't the same as when the Captain and Second did them.

Walking home, waiting for the light to change, I remember a particular detail about my stories. In the show, the Captain's Second in command was a bouncy, bubbly redheaded woman named Paloma. In my version, the Second is a bouncy, bubbly redheaded man named Paolo. Captain Mallohan is the classic stoic - scarred, dark-haired, and brooding - but with a softness underneath, a love of games, and a compassion for all of his men.

There I go. It's always a rabbit hole with the Challengers. I have an excess of thoughts about it. It'd make me a nice career if anyone wanted to read that kind of thing. But nobody does. I'm probably the only person in the world who cares about the Challengers, except for a couple of weirdos on the internet with stranger fetishes than mine. Anyway, they're all obsessed with the Navigator because

of course they are. He's exactly the kind of blandly likable POV character that proliferates in our slop-driven media economy. In my stories, Navigator Jeffery Roaten is always the bad guy. He's jealous, rude, dumb, and homophobic. He starts the fight that gets him punched. He makes the big mistake. He gets on the Captain's nerves. Paolo tolerates him, as a coworker might. My earlier work often referred to Roaten as 'pudgy', 'greasy-haired', and 'pig-nosed'. But the longer I wrote, the worse I felt attributing my dislike of him to his appearance. It went deeper than his looks. Nowadays I prefer to call him a 'cad'.

But in the show, Roaten gets a lot of attention. He gets most of the funny lines, while the Captain has to sit and look dour or tired, and he's always at the center of the action. The idea is, they're a group of veterans who, long after combat has ended, chose to continue on their wartime mission. So Roaten is a recently promoted, hyper-competent, sort of awkward, sort of charming fighter-type. A neutered jock. He's loyal to Captain Mallohan because he's served under him his whole life. They have a mentor-student relationship. A father-son one, at times.

Paloma never gets a story for why she's loyal to the Captain. We're left to figure it out on our own - why she always listens to and trusts him, why she's able to tell when he's been replaced by the Pheltin, why she doesn't give him up - even when she's being interrogated by Dreck Razer. When I watched it was clear to me, the reason for her devotion was always that she truly loves him. Underneath his hardened exterior is a desperate longing, a longing that only she recognizes. Everyone else is too busy with themselves to notice the Captain's feelings. I figured this all out on my first watch.

Paolo emerged pretty soon after that. I couldn't shake this certainty that Paloma was always meant to be a male character, and that he and the Captain were supposed to end up together.

In the show, there's a love triangle between Paloma, Roaten, and the ship's cook Zirina. At the end, Roaten gets captured by their big rival: the new admiral of the intergalactic army they once fought for, Admiral Shrindi. Neither Paloma nor Zirina end up with him. Actually, nobody ends up with anybody. After Roaten is captured, the entire crew decides to activate this core-thingy (it's not very well explained) that resets the whole universe.

They go back to wartime, when they all first met, and begin their story anew without their memories. They choose to go to the beginning and relive it. Over and over again.

You could watch the show on a nonstop loop and it would flow narratively, which was pretty novel in the cable era. That, along with its special effects, is what's talked about most now.

I take my computer home, feeling a little like a parent toting their child home from camp, wondering what malicious influences might've entered without my knowing. But I have it now, and even with the limited privacy of my apartment, I feel secure enough to sit down and write that afternoon.

Parker and Dawn and Neil and Connor and Tom. The five of them are all chatter and laughter when I get in and slip into my room. Of course, I hear only Connor and Tom -

"- when the worms show up,"

"Yeah! That's when it turns,"

"Yeah and it becomes clear: there's no way out."

Giggles.

I shut my door and sit down on my bed, opening up my

laptop. I've had a particular idea for a while where Captain Mallohan is a commercial pilot and Roaten his co-pilot, while Paolo is a frisky flight attendant in tight pants. I stab out an establishing scene, before immersing myself in the invented chemistry of these characters. These antiquated, childish, forgotten characters. They are mine, because nobody else wants them, and that fact makes me feel as wonderful as it does lonely.

Maybe you don't judge me like I judge myself, whoever you are. Who are you? Hearing what I hear, seeing what I see, reading what I write and knowing me, more than anyone else? Are you the kind of person who relates? Did you grow up - well - I was already grown, age fourteen - but did you ever see the Challengers? But did you like it? Did you care about it?

No. You've never heard of it.

...

It was after that night that I stopped going to school for good. I don't really know what happened. I can't exactly tell you why.

I woke up the first day with a stomach ache. So I stayed



behind, telling myself that nothing that important takes place in class right after winter break. I made some excuses over text to my roommates, to Dawn - hidden in my bedroom - and even suggested that they ought to play hooky too - but they had their reasons to go.

Then, when the apartment is quiet and enough time has passed that I can't reasonably be encouraged to go after all, I emerge from my bed and walk out into the empty space. I could eat. I don't feel like eating. I could write. I don't feel like writing. How I spend the time, I can't tell you either. Doing small chores. Watching pieces of a movie that looks sort of interesting, before getting so indulgently bored I can't even train my eyes, and switching it off. Touching myself, I guess. Putting on clothes, taking them off, putting on slightly more comfortable clothes. Looking at my phone. Looking at the ceiling. Time slips away and I wish I could be drunk, or high, or with someone else. These things would make it all tolerable, but it's still somehow less intolerable than going to school. But it isn't. But it is.

When my roommates get home, I've secreted myself away in my bed. The covers are pulled up around my head, and I strain one ear into the hallway to listen if any

one of them is going to come in and check on me. After all, I was in here all last night working on my *stories*. Maybe that's why they weren't coming in. They knew; they judged me; or, better, but also worse, they didn't want to interrupt me.

As the talk and laughter from the other room grows louder, I get more and more resentful of the fact that nobody, nobody at all, has knocked on my door or texted me or even asked about me - from what I can hear in the rest of the apartment, anyways.

*The dog died and it's still there. It's not going anywhere. You locked the door.*

Everything dies. Everything will be dead.

The next day, I feel even worse than I did at first. *I should go to a doctor.* But I know they won't find anything. *But maybe they will.* If I let myself dream, they'll find some small, easy-to-miss thing, and be shocked and horrified by how long I've survived without treatment. Honestly, I wouldn't care if it was drastic, like a new parasite or even an amputation. They'd tell me, "This is why everything is so difficult for you. Why you feel sluggish, why you feel so much discomfort. This is what's been holding you back."

Suddenly, everything embarrassing and horrible I've ever done would be washed away by the sympathy people would feel for me. I would have been struggling this entire time. My failures would be permitted - it would explain it all.

*But I am struggling. My failures are permitted. That is what I keep trying to believe. In today's post-post-post-postmodern society, we are all existentialists, struggling under the weight of our own existences. We are looked at all the time. We are analyzed and judged. Not to mention mine is a country founded on the rewarding of few and the punishment of most. Capitalism. Colonialism.*

*Calvinism. I was raised to browbeat myself, to believe I will never be rewarded.* So I can reward myself. I can treat myself to this, these long, pointless hours alone in my apartment.

The second day I stay home I get the idea to write an original story. *Make something.*

I open up my computer and confront the blank page, an action so routinely disappointing it almost sends me back under my covers. I close my computer, and I call Tom.

"Hello, this is Thomas?"

"Tommy?"

"Oh, shit, Kev? Why are you *calling* me?" People chatter in the background.

"Sorry, I wanted to ask you something, and I didn't want to text."

"Oh, no, it's okay - just, I don't have your number saved and it threw me off. Thought it was collections, hah."

"Oh. No, not collections." *Why doesn't Tom have my number saved?* I nearly give up.

"So what did you want to ask?"

"Oh, yeah, so, well." I stand up, pressing the phone to my ear. The glass is warm. "The other day, when I came over, did I do anything wrong?"

"What, the - on Friday? Umm... no. I don't think so."

"Okay. Got it. Cool. Just checking."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just. Okay. Listen. You're a very nice person."

"Thanks!"

"And I don't want to put you in an uncomfortable position, but I'm - I'm sure there's something I'm doing wrong."

Tom is quiet on the other end, but I can hear the faint sounds of conversation disappearing. Did she go into

another room?

"Aw, Kev, everybody feels like that sometimes. It's okay. I'm sure you-"

"No!" My voice reaches a loud octave. "No, I'm sorry, I don't mean to yell, but no, it's - it's not like that."

"Okay." Her voice hardens slightly and I cringe. "So what is it like?"

I pace around my room. "It's like - it's like - I just *know*, I just have this gut feeling that - that something I did wasn't right, or - that *something* isn't right. And no matter what anyone says, what I do, I can't get over this feeling."

"That... that just sounds like mental illness."

I stop in my tracks and shut my eyes. "I'm sorry, Tom. You're right. I should go to a therapist."

"I didn't say that, I just mean - maybe you would feel better if you went and hung out for a little while, outside, or with your friends."

"Yeah." I nod. "You're right."

"You can come over here if you want."

"No, nah, that's okay. I... I'm fine. Can I just say one more thing?"

"Yeah, of course."

"I really liked your movie."

Tom sighs on the other end. "Thanks, Kevin."

"Well. Anyway. See you around." I hang up before she can say another word.

--

Before I can lose the motivation burning my cheeks and neck, I search for therapists.

The only options I can afford are subscription services through the internet. Some are free, using volunteer labor, and I cynically brush by them before a stray thought catches me back. What if there is someone out there, kind and empathetic and thoughtful enough to volunteer to talk people through their difficulties with the patience and care of a trained pro? I picture them. Maybe they took a few years of Psychology in college, but they ran into troubles and flunked out. Now, by day, they work at a non-profit, and in their free time, they sacrifice time and energy to the less fortunate. To people like me. I would be a perfect match for this person. For one, our troubles are more or less the same. I haven't been to class for two days, and they never received the

certification they intended.

I lie down on my bed and start making my profile on Truttle, 'a free mental health app'. In the back of my mind, I consider that my friends still haven't texted or knocked on my door. In the forefront, I revolve a growing image of my ideal free therapist: someone who can help me, sure, but also someone who needs my help in his own way too. After all, what personality besides the self-sacrificing one would volunteer to work on Truttle? Someone who would rather spend their time talking to mentally ill people than relaxing, recovering, writing their own dirty stories?

Maybe someone who's looking for vulnerable people. It hits me like a slap in the face. Serial killers. Scam artists. Plain old abusers. My phone prompts me to enter my home address and phone number, and suddenly my stomach curdles. I exit out of the app and delete it, feeling no closer to therapy than I did when I started.

But maybe Tom is wrong. Tom *was* wrong. Because I had clearly messed something up - or why had she sighed when I said I liked her movie?

Ever take a real look at your life? I've never vacuumed before. Not even when I lived at home. My carpet is sandy. Do you ever look at all your books with the intention of reading every single one? I know I haven't. But that afternoon I take them all off my shelves and make a stack. If I'm not going to college, I'll educate myself. Wait - who's not going to college? I've just missed a few days. I can still go back. Can't I? The months loom ahead of me. Why did I think I wanted to go into Philosophy again? And where will I be, in 10 years?

A cheap apartment. Temporary roommates. Phone-based loving.

I have too many books. It takes me back to English class, 8th grade, two samples: The Great Gatsby, with his study of unread books, and Fahrenheit 451 with its burning, cleansing, *simplifying* fires.

Samuel has texted me simply 'Hi'. It fills me rage. How can he be so boring about this? I ought to ignore him, that's what he deserves. But too, it fills me with



desperation. Finally. Days without contact from the outside world and finally, someone, somewhere, reaches out to me - if only because they want to fuck me - and I would be ungrateful not to respond. So I text him back. And our conversation is a very normal one, full of pleasantries, until one of us floats the idea of another meet, and the other responds non-committing, and the other pulls back, and we feel both like we're never going to see each other again *and* that we owe one another our time. And we stop texting.

Fantasy Samuel would think of something better than 'hi'. Of course, in my fantasies, Samuel looks suspiciously like the stoic Captain Mallohan.

--

By the third day I'm so desperate for company, I decide to get showered and dressed and leave the house. I ignore my roommates, just like they ignored me. Their company isn't compelling, now that I know they don't care about me. Instead, I paint in my mind the perfect stranger, and go out to a bar.

The bar is a great institution that has carried over time, culture, and border. The drinking hole. My dad once told me that beer wasn't always how it is now. Back in ancient Egypt, beer was a thick, mealy mixture, that combined the sedating and reward-activating part of alcohol with the calories and substance of bread. It was a drink for their slave laborers. It kept them fed and I'm sure, in some cases, docile. Now, the thickest part of beer is the bubbles. Even as I think it, I can see a man in the corner of the bar grab his gut to ease the sudden onset of bloat. But going down, it feels thin and fresh, a little sweet, a little malty, the fizz lightening everything around it.

"Sucks don't it?"

"You notice everything sucks now. The plastic panels on my outlets, for example. All falling off."

"All?"

"Not one is properly secured. And I bought the place 'recently redone'."

"Yeah. Don't know what to tell you about that."

"Can we just sit anywhere?"

"It's not a restaurant, Matilda."

"Oh, but last time the server was so rude."

"Because he wasn't a server."

This is what I'm meant to do, I tell myself, sitting down on a stool that faces the wall with my glass of beer. Look at the sticky stains and old promotional flyers and 'drown my sorrows'. The perfect stranger hasn't arrived yet, but he will. The tall, dark, and mysterious figure of fortune-telling cliché. I imagine him first with a cloak, and then sweeping it to the side. Sitting down next to me. Asking, without so much ado, how I'm doing. And I could tell him, *I'm fine. Things have been worse.*

When? he'd ask.

*When I lived at home, things were worse.*

How? he'd ask.

*I couldn't just lie in bed for two days without anyone noticing or caring.*

And that's worse? he'd clarify, his face not revealing much, but his tone kind.

*It's worse when 'noticing' or 'caring' looks the way it does to my parents.*

I see. He'd breathe it out more than say it. Is that all you did? Lie in bed?

*No. I was on my computer. When you're on the computer, you can pretend you're doing things. Actually, it's hard to tell the difference between pretending to do things, and actually doing them. Like when I write, I -*

"There are no differences."

The voice slices through my revery and I bolt upright, twisting my head to find its source, so shocked by its relevance to my thought.

An older man at the bar is leaning in towards someone else, all but hanging off of them. When I say older, I

don't mean it in the sense that he's merely older than me. The man looks 70, maybe more. He is red and orange, drunk and covered in rust stains. He wears a jumpsuit with a cool, mint green color that looks like a medical garment, but for its sturdiness and large zipper, stuck halfway down his hairy chest. Over it, he has a cheap winter coat. I can see some loose tobacco falling out of one pocket. The person he's talking to is portly and brown and seems to be hitting her limit. She says,

"I think there is a difference there, pal, and a mighty big one."

"Okay, well explain it to me. Please."

She sighs. "Look man, I came here for a drink, and that's all, so, can you fuck off?"

"Can you explain me the difference? Please? And then I'll go."

"A single person ain't married."

"So what's the difference?"

"Marriage!"

"What's a marriage?"

"God dang it, I've had enough." The woman unfurls her wallet and motions to the bartender. "Close me out."

"A marriage, a marriage, is just a collection of laws, and what are laws? Rules, enforced by violence and punishment. If not for the violence and the punishment, a rule would be just an idea someone had, or less than that, a collection of words representing an idea someone had. A law would be nothing more than the words I'm saying to you right now-"

"Thanks, Eric, I'll see you," the bartender smacks down the receipt in front of them, cutting off the old man.

"And you, sir, if you keep bothering our patrons, I'm gonna have you removed."

The old man stumbles off his stool backwards, towards me, and the woman closing out catches my eye - sees me looking. She huffs and looks at the floor as she leaves.

The old man spins around and looks at me. A smile crawls across his face. But then he glances over his shoulder at the bartender, still watching us both, and cringes. His look turns sheepish. All of a sudden, I feel kind of bad for him. After all, he just wants someone to talk at. But - why should it have to be me? I turn back towards the wall.

Maybe the old man left, maybe he found another victim.

I don't check. I sit very still. While I sit, I work up the courage to order my next drink. Once I go up, I spend all my energy and have to hurry back before the other drinkers smell my fear. I go back and forth like this for a while. Well, that's not true. I look at my phone a lot too.

--

The third generation since mine is about to begin. Have they shortened the gaps? I swear, I'm not old enough to be two generations behind the most recently born. I'm only 22. Listen -- I do want to be older. And yet the thought that there's me, there's young adults, and there's children, when I used to belong to the middlemost category, makes me want to crawl out of my skin. Babies have always given me the creeps. I never want children. You think I'm immature. You think I'll change my mind when I'm older. But I'm certain that babies strike an unnatural chord in me.

I'm leaving the bar, feeling excited about it. I've never drowned my sorrows before. It's cool. Everything around

me is light, airy. I'm light, airy.

The sound of the city is a car driving on a road. In a vacuum, the sound might make you think of the countryside, or a track, but never are you as close to a car driving at all times than in the city. You could be in a thirtieth story window and they might have put a highway right next to it. In this part of town, though, nearby the college, there isn't too much traffic. It's still and quiet, as if everyone agreed to go to bed early tonight.

How early? I check my phone. It's 12:34 AM. Connor texted me asking where I went. The spindly hook I sent out by leaving my door open has finally sunk into his flesh. I just have to reel him in. I don't respond, and it feels good -- letting him worry.

Which one is Connor again? Keith is the other one. No. Neil.

I stop on the sidewalk, panicking. I can't recall Connor's face, nor what distinguishes it from Neil's. How long is



his hair? What's his chin like? Is he tall? What's he wear?  
What about Neil?

Something smashes in the distance.

I look down at my shoes in a dead stop. I can't remember  
Neil either.

We've lived together for an eternity, almost nine months.

Didn't we agree we weren't going to get too close to each  
other?

They're both white. They're both taller than me. They're  
both fair-haired.

"There are no differences."

I whirl around and come face-to-face with a curly nose  
and a head of patchy white hair. Dread drops into my  
stomach, and the sound of it plunking into the lake of  
acid echoes through my chest. It's the same man from the  
bar. Was he lingering outside all this time?

I take a step back. "Sorry?"

He shakes his head. "Look at you, son." He roughly scrubs his forearm beneath his nose to wipe away some dried snot. "I nearly can't believe you're me."

"What?" A chill crawls up my spine and I feel myself leaning back, but my feet are stuck, frozen. Surely I can't just run away. That would be rude. Even if I am concerned that this man doesn't know me from him.

"You and me, son. We're the same. Just like you and every other person." He waves his hands angrily in front of his face, but his tone is deadpan. "Name a difference between us."

My eyes go to the other side of the street for help. Maybe another pedestrian with whom to exchange a meaningful glance? A taxi? I've never taken a taxi, but I could start now. Except they're expensive, and I spent my whole allowance getting drunk alone. The point is moot. The sidewalk is empty. No one else has left the bar and come

this way. I bite back my first impulse at risk of sounding rude, and instead I say, "You're over there, and I'm over here."

The old man's intent expression parts into a big, enthusiastic grin. "So it seems! But how can you tell?"

My sympathy for the woman at the bar grows as I repress an impatient sigh. "If someone told us both to 'go right', we'd go separate ways."

"Yes!" He claps his hands together and leers in close.

"So, you have cleverly honed in on the relative nature of individual positions. But!" He's so near I can smell his breath -- celery and booze.

"What if I told you that any *material* differences are negligible?"

I blink. "I don't really know what that means."

"Mm! So it seems! But there is no difference between knowing and not knowing, so you have nothing to fear!"

He looks at me so plaintively, so expectantly. And I'm drunk. And I feel bad for him.

"Yeah, okay," I say, "thanks."

The old man beams at me. "What's your name, son?"

"Kevin."

"They call me Idle"

"Idle."

"I-del. Though it makes no difference to me!" Roger starts giggling. It's around the same time my passive acceptance of his nonsense finally hits its end. Giving him my name felt a little like giving over my phone.

"I've gotta catch my train," I tell him, and turn a quarter to the side, before his hand shoots out and grabs my forearm. He stops giggling and looks up into my eyes.

"There's nothing special or interesting about you, Kevin. You are in no way remarkable. There are no differences.

You are me and I am you and we, we're everyone."

I kick out at his stomach with my beaten-up tennis shoes and feel his gut cave in beneath my heel. He makes an awful sound, wheezing out one raspy, choking breath and doubling over, and his hand pops off of my arm to hold where I made contact. The sight of him bent over the pavement with his arms wrapped around his stomach makes my abdomen contract violently around my organs, and before I can really think about whether or not that was justified, I turn and run.

"Remember about that one, one who was in Stewing Hens?"

"Yeah, Maritza, uh, Maritza Dicoco. Crazy life she had. Grew up in Chicago, and yeah, her mom was Lilly Reston--"

"From Bare Soul."

"Yeah, from Bare Soul, so she was already *in* the scene, but I don't think it's really nepotism since Hens is a totally different project and--"

"I mean it's metallic hardcore, I'm not sure nepotism really applies--"

"Well, nepotism is nepotism, I'm not saying *all* nepotism is necessarily bad--"

"Well, I am!"

"Well, that's wrong."

"I don't think so!"

"Maritza Dicoco is a bad example, then, because I was about to say she left home at like, twelve, to go live with her grandparents because, y'know, Lilly Reston just snapped one day. She didn't get any help, not like she got hired as a supervisor at the fucking, y'know, metalcore factory, by her mom."

I listen to the conversation on the train intently. I'm sitting behind them while they talk, three of them. Only one is facing me. He peers between the heads of his friends and occasionally catches my eye. I keep looking away out the window at the darkness rushing by to avoid it. I think I'm swaying.

"Hey, why do you think all nepotism is bad?"

"It's definitionally unfair. No one should get a better opportunity than anybody else for an arbitrary reason."

"You think the world can really work like that? Like we

can all just decide on a metric and stick to it?"

"For work? For money? Yes? Of course."

"Man, I mean, you and I differ on a few subjects, so, I'm not really surprised, but..."

I imagine myself going and sitting with them. I'd say 'hi'.  
They'd say 'what are you doing?'. I'd say 'sitting here'.  
They'd say 'okay?' and look at each other and laugh.

"You guys do this every fucking time. Can you just agree to disagree?"

"I mean, my dad got me a gig doing video work for his company. You think I'm some privileged asshole now?"

"That's so obviously not what I'm saying."

"If it's so obvious, then why did I misunderstand?"

There is a pregnant pause.

"You don't want me to answer that, right? I mean... I guess... because you're dumb?"

"I guess that's it."

"Elio..."

"No, I mean, I guess that's it, I'm just fucking stupid."

"You're being really loud right now."

"Who fucking cares?!"

"*Look.*"

Suddenly, all three of them are looking at me. I'm still looking at the tunnel but I can feel their eyes on my cheek. They turn back, hushed. I can still hear them.

"You *wanted* her to say that. Come on. Can we just cool down?"

It's clear they don't want me listening, but my stop isn't here. I don't feel like wearing my headphones. And what does it matter, anyways? I'm not judging.

"I didn't want--"

"You *asked* me how you could misunderstand, you teed me up for it, man--"

"You could try not saying every thing that enters your head."

Whether I'd listened or not, they all go quiet now. Seems the conflict has bubbled up and receded, but nothing has



resolved. Many such cases.

I take out my phone and text Connor back. I say, I went out, my cousin was randomly in town lol. Sorry I didn't say anything, I'll be back soon.

As I step up to the doors for my stop, I hear one of the other passengers pipe up again --

"So, what, you read the Maritza Dicoco autobiography instead of getting socialized as a child?"

I run. I can't take listening anymore. I fill my ears with the sound of my own harsh breath as I jog home, wobbling from side to side, until I'm exhausted and have to switch to an unsteady stroll.

I take out my keys to put in the doorway, but as soon as I've jingled them down from my palm into my fingers, the door opens anyway. There stands a white, tall, fair-haired young man by the name of Neil or possibly Connor. "Hey, Kev. Can we talk to you?"

My jaw clenches. "Yeah?"

--

Inside the apartment, there is a pile of shoes by the door. I can hear murmuring and whispering from the living room, and my clenched jaw threatens to grind my molars into dust. I'm a little drunk, and trying to stay upright as Connor-Neil leads me into the living room. What I see sobers me up almost instantly.

The dead dog, impossibly, is on the table.

It's frozen. But it's been in the cold so long that decomposition has still progressed. Its fur is matted with frost. It stinks. Its eyes are closed, thank god. Its eyes weren't always closed. One of my roommates must have pushed its eyelids down.

"Kev," someone says. I don't look to see who. I don't hear their voice. I stare at the body of the dog, and then look at the pile of shoes by the door. Why did I leave that beautifully anonymous train? Whatever happened to Elio

and his friends who think he's an idiot? Why did I kick that old man in the stomach? Why did I drink alone? Why did I hide? Why didn't I do something about the dog? Why, why, why? The floor at my feet is spiraling into a fractal. The nubs of fuzz that make up the carpet swell before my eyes.

It's as real as the room. I know without looking. "What happened?" I ask numbly, interrupting someone. For once, I didn't hear them.

"It - this was in your bed," Dawn says quietly. "When we didn't know where you went, we looked inside, and..."

I look around at their faces, expecting to see horror. It's worse. They have their faces set, determined and courageous, ready to confront me about whatever *this* means. Even though I'm standing and they're on the couches, they seem to tower above me, and I feel my eyes watering. "Guys, I - I don't know where this came from."

Oh, but I do. And my heart knows I'm lying, even if my

brain can't explain it to them. I made this thing appear. It comes to me clearly, starkly, and without psychic interference. It's the first lucid thought I've ever had. I created this. It's me, it was never them. "It's my dog," I say, and realize as the words blubber out that I'm crying. "It's Buggy," as if they would know who that is, or what that means to me. I can tell you, at least. Buggy was my dog when I was a little kid. I was obsessed with him. I followed him around all the time. We had an agreement that he would show me how to be a dog, and I'd show him how to be a human, and we would trade places. But before we could go through with it, Buggy ran away. It was wintertime, near Christmas. A white Christmas.

I take a step forward and slip on the floor. Now I'm on my back, heaving for air and crying, remembering all at once the chill of the frosty windows I stared through to see if Buggy would come back, letting my fingers and nose go numb.

And I snap back into the present, my face still without feeling, to hear them talk.

-- should probably even though none of us want to, when he's feeling better and he can explain?" It's Neil. Neil with the wide, off-set features, his face flat and large, his voice sort of middle-low, his fair hair without a part, draped over his ears like curtains.

"I'm glad we moved it, I guess. Are his sheets done in the wash?" Dawn, definitely, with her rich, lovely, sometimes-southwestern voice. I sit upright to see her ombre-dyed hair and the hefty piercing between her eyes and can finally breathe. She looks at me and the pinched parts of her face relax. "Hey!"

Parker, her eyelashes always chunky, is at my side and she holds the back of her hand to my forehead. "I'm so sorry, you must be really scared, it's okay. You don't have to talk right now."

"I'll move the sheets to the dryer," Connor, narrow-nosed and dressed in orange, declares heroically.

I am moved to the couch by these people, my friends, whom I finally recognize. I'm given water, hot tea, and

pats on the head, and everyone speaks to me in soto voices. They tell me, and I slowly come to understand, that they were merely worried.

"I'm not saying this to be homophobic," Dawn says, "but it's dangerous to meet up with anonymous people... I should know, hah."

"Yeah, no, there's no - I mean, the problem here is the psycho who put that dog in your room."

"Yeah, no, that's *really* scary. We were saying you should probably call the police. At least the campus police."

"We're not on campus."

"We're in college."

"That's, no, that doesn't make a difference. We should tell the actual police. It's like, a stalker."

"Hey, give him some room."

"Did any of the guys you met up with recently freak you out? Or seem like, way too into you?"

Just the opposite. I sit stiffly, my hands under my thighs, and shrug my shoulders. Thank God this is what they think. Thank God. Thank God. I can't let them believe something else.

"This guy Samuel was kind of weird," I eventually give out. I was mad at him anyways. "But I don't know, I don't - I mean, I don't think he could do this."

"Did he pick you up here?"

"Yeah."

Everyone's faces pinch. Only Parker admits, "I don't know too much about this... maybe you could start by telling your parents?"

"Good idea," everyone agrees. Now it's my turn to pinch.

"It'll scare them," I say.

"Maybe it should."

I go to bed that night at 5:53, staring at the clock until 5:55, without knowing what that one means. I don't feel the same cosmic significance. As far as I know, I decide my own fate.

