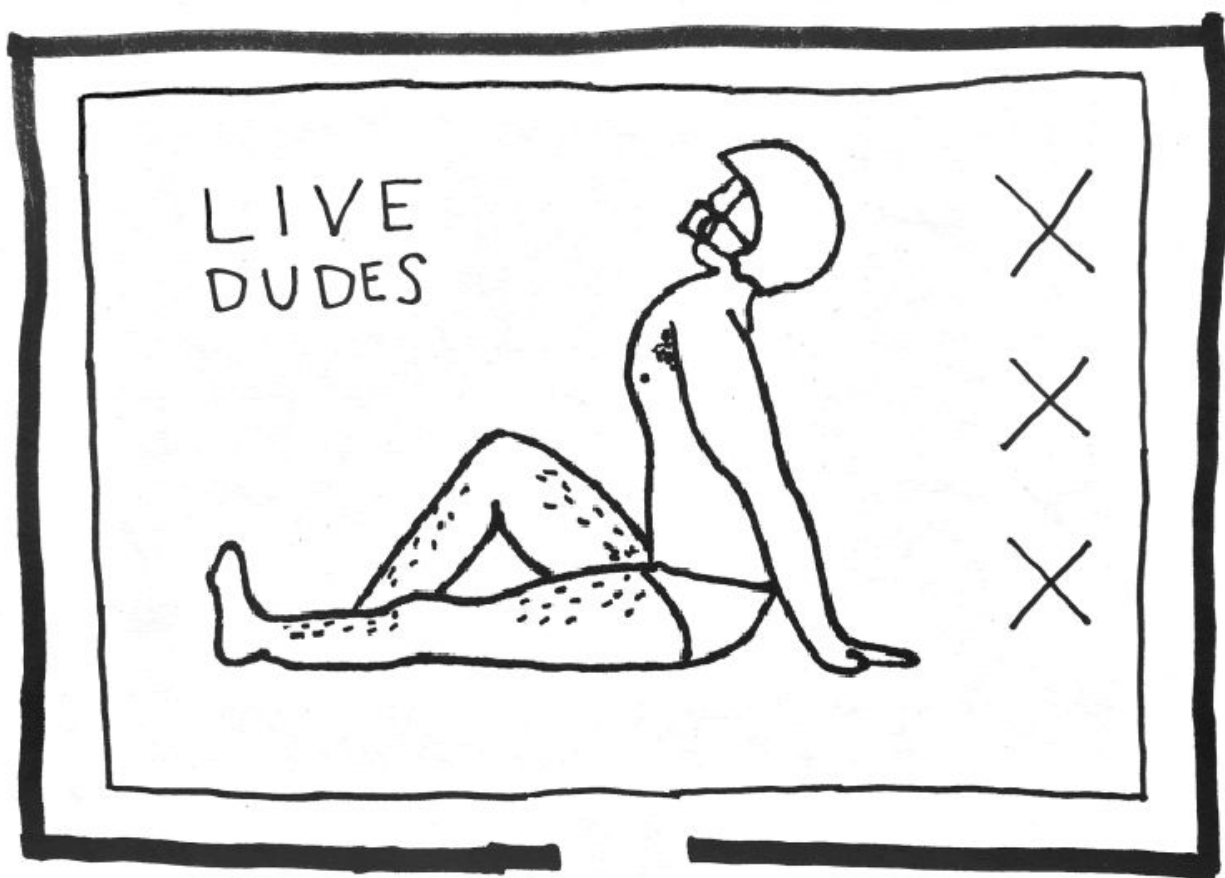


SUNDAY FOOTBALL & STRIP CLUB SUSHI

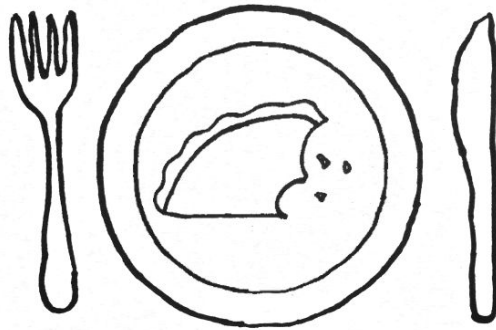


JIM T. MILLER

Thank you to my parents, to my sister, to my friends.

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THE GRAND POOBAH OF POMPEII OVEN

THE SPOT, Pompeii Oven, is one of those yuppie joints where everything is written in rainbow bubble letters on a blackboard and the napkins have prints from classic comic books on them. Fast-casual, student-discount, gluten-free-available, locally-sourced, 5-star-Yelp, Italian-whatever-fusion.

And homegirl looks at you nuts because you are wondering about Caligula's Calzone Catastrophe. She says it shell-shocked like it's an ancient scroll. The gist: A baker's dozen pizza pop-tarts shaped like Lucky Charms' half-moons. Twelve mozz-and-sauce. One mystery. Fifteen minutes. Zero permissible puking. Fifty dollars out your wallet should you fail. One picture on the wall, to hang for eternity in gluttonous glory, should you succeed.

"No one's ever done it before," she warns and simultaneously entices you.

Why you decide to do it, you don't know, but your closest friends could give you theories. Taking on a herculean food challenge on a spontaneous lunch break is such a Dave move, total troll. Also, like, an ironic way of telling Pa, who lately has been telling you to get your fat ass off the couch and *do* something, to huff a wet sneeze. Maybe just another way of acting out for a bit of attention since Cindy dipped on you. *You're always window shopping*, is what she told you. *It's always something else*, is the thing that she said.

So homegirl brings out a sizzling hot plate with the overpriced hot pockets and heads start swivelling from every bugger in the store. The hooky-playing high-schoolers skipping on trig. The daddies on day-care duty. Judging from the mustache, Mario and Luigi's grandmother. Like a lizard in sun, you dig the spotlight.

A skinny guy with the thin-rim glasses, Hubba Bubba streaks an inch off his roots, and two Eastern-inspired sleeves, crawls out of the kitchen looking for "the guy," who is you. He's going to give you pace with a stopwatch. The mystery pocket throws you a curveball. The infinite water cups are a trap. Stick with one unless you want him holding your hair in a high-pony, with both knees kneeling over the throne.

"You don't want the fifty?" you ask him.

"Nineteen people have tried this challenge. Nineteen times that bathroom floor has become a Jackson Pollock puke canvas. Who you think cleans it?" he says and looks vacantly at the stopwatch. "I want this thing dead," he says.

And, of course, the beginning is easy. Microwaved pizza-like products have always been an area of expertise for you (along with PC graphics cards and Ayn Rand) and you're inhaling them at three quarter minutes per. After the first four, one dad says, "Holy smokes!" which you intuit is his version of swearing, and the more squeamish high schoolers avert their eyes. Cheese oozes onto your shirt. Old boy bubble gum hair just trades between you and the clock like he's eyeballing a tennis match, nodding his head in time with your chews. You are Rocky and he is your, um, guy who trains Rocky.

And, of course, the middle only gets harder. The minutes melt quick like mozzarella in heated sauce. You're sweating. Clock guy's sweating. A toddler has begun to cry. A crowd has formed. The squeamish high schoolers now stare, perversely fascinated by their aversion. Everyone is watching. Everyone is talking. There are only four minutes left. The bloat is familiar to only your most shameful memories. The popcorn garbage bag at the Director's Cut *Lord of the Rings* trilogy showing. The melting ice cream cake when Pa's minivan stalled in summer traffic. Time is no longer the deciding factor. Just power of will.

The mystery calzone, the ultimate calzone, is s'mores style and the first bite of marshmallow-chocolate hits you like, um, the guy who fights Rocky. Everything in your stomach jumps up and you start doing the cat-furball maneuver. The crowd falls silent. You manage to keep it down, but you don't move. First come whispers, then chatter. You hold the once-bitten calzone in your hand like Eve and the Apple. Clock-guy sighs and you think you're going to call it when Mustache Granny leans in and says, "You're done, gordo," and you hear her, but it's not her voice speaking to you. It's the voice of your father.

You stand up, your ass knocks the chair over, you hoist that bad boy pizza roll up to the ceiling and push the whole thing into your mouth at once. Everybody goes bonkers and you start flexing while you chew and one of the dads does that loud whistle with his fingers and everyone wants to shake your hand and the bubble-gum guy keeps patting your shoulder because it's over, the curse has been broken and you're the guy that did it.

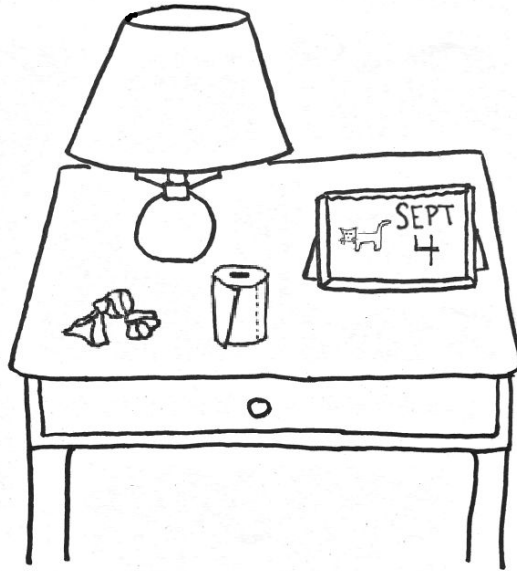
The picture will hang in Pompeii Oven for years and you'll bring a buddy in to see it every once in a while. Coach will come out of the kitchen to tell the tale to them. (Homegirl, unfortunately, will have moved on to an Icelandic-inspired juicery.) Your friends will love the visit. They'll stare up at the picture with wide eyes, and then they will always ask the same question: Why are you crying?

You'll laugh. Tell 'em the same stuff. Burnt the hell out of your mouth on the last one. Fighting to keep the up-chuck down-stuck. You know. Just any thing that works as an answer.

When you go back into the breakroom for the picture, you catch one last glimpse of the dining area. Everyone has stopped cheering and returned to their tables. Fathers feed their toddlers. Teens awkwardly flirt. Grandma squints at her smartphone. The heroic and monumental so swiftly slips into mundane anecdote.

While you wait for coach in the breakroom, there is no noise at all. Quiet like elementary school libraries, when you were a reading champion and could wake up before 2 p.m.. Quiet like night rides home with Pa, when you'd listen to him hum "You Are My Sunshine," as you feigned sleep. Back when you didn't annoy the hell out of him. Like your favorite memory of Cindy, when she slept on your shoulder on the back porch swing and the lightning bugs pulsed slowly over the baby violets in her yard. A stray thought asks you if that was the moment, the moment you weren't hungry for anything else.

It's silent and when you're desperate for any cheer, shout, buzz, laugh, whistle, or ring, the stopwatch starts beeping to let you know your fifteen minutes is definitely up. The tears were about Cindy, but then they're about you. No matter what you do enough is never enough. You're never satisfied and you never feel full. You know for sure because here you are. For once in your life, you're the Grand Poobah of Pompeii Oven and you've never felt so empty inside.



GUILTY PLEASURES

WE FIRST NOTICED the problem in the bedroom. Our second date the sex was horrible in a way we didn't even know was possible. There was too much foreplay to start: an unending train of massages, rubs and butterfly kisses. A foreign word came to her mind: empalagoso. Too sweet, corny. The intercourse was anxiety-ridden and self-conscious. Positions shuffled frequently in an all too rare display of sexual over-generosity. We ended feeling as if we both came first even though, after a brief conference, it turned out that neither of us did.

"I think the problem is that we are both bottoms," I said.

"Well, we need to figure it out sooner rather than later," she said.

Since our first conversation, we knew our time together would be limited. We only had three months to flail our bodies against each other before she went to Nicaragua, a gig with a sustainable agriculture NGO. The plan was to be chill about

it. All relationships came to an end, so what was the big deal if we knew our expiration date in advance? It never bothered anyone who bought milk.

So we marched onward. Our hookups were the copulative equivalent of the awkward, ritualistic dance of two pedestrians each trying to get out of the other's way, of two motorists both waving the other on at a four-way stop. We incessantly attempted to roll over for the other's advances, a forceful revolution that could have powered a small Mongolian village if the energy could have been harnessed. And if it could have been done, we would have loved it. We were very aware of our place in the global energy hierarchy and we wanted to give back for once.

I was a young white man of average height with shoulder-length, dark hair. I worked teaching poetry to kids in Louisville juvenile detention centers.

She was a young white woman of average height with shoulder-length, dark hair. We were sometimes mistaken for siblings. She worked as a social media intern for an urban farming organization before getting the Nicaragua gig.

Our similarities troubled us. It suggested that we could distill our aesthetics, our ideologies, our very essences into the short bio and five or so photographs that dating apps allowed us. Like you would always end up dating someone more or less like yourself, just a funhouse mirror reflection. Like most technology in the information age, it was equal parts effective and frightening.

I brought her to a potluck. I made an artsy pasta salad and she made a potato curry. We crowded a picnic table in a friend's backyard with an ambiance carefully curated with burning incense and lo-fi music on a bluetooth speaker.

"What an awesome job! The freedom to travel and make a real difference in the world!"

They all said this to her in some form.

"I don't know," she said. "America made loads of money screwing up the economies in Latin America. Now I get shipped in with a full time job to do damage control. Woohoo, justice!" She stared silently into her drink.

No one knew what to say for a bit. I recognized the feeling. I had a similar social-defense mechanism rooted in a fear that I had taken my job in social justice for pats on the back from friends, praise from every left-leaning corner of society, and evidence for myself that I was altruistic, a visible saint, a privileged person but one of the good ones.

"Better than me. I'm a junior consultant for a hedge fund," Thomas said and everybody laughed.

"Well hey, everybody has to make money," I added.

"Okay, okay, we get it. You guys are Hitler and Stalin and everybody else is fine," he said, taking a swig of someone else's wine. He had forgotten it was BYOB.

I mentioned to her on the ride home that if I had forgotten a beverage at home, I would have been too embarrassed to even ask for water. Not that I was trying to shit talk Thomas.

"An honest mistake," she agreed. "We had too much wine anyway."

Which only proved his comment about us. We forgave others in a way that we could never do for ourselves. We blamed mental illness. She had a generalized anxiety disorder. I was depressed.

I began to cling to her. We were eating out together every evening. I had all but moved into her apartment. There, I had my own toothbrush, a separate phone charger, a week's worth of dirty laundry. Her cats, Trotsky and Madonna, no longer ran under the couch at the sound of my Doc Martens thundering on her hardwood floors.

Can you imagine what it felt like? To see all your anxiety and bothersome, self-critical thoughts so clearly mirrored in another person? I was Narcissus, falling in love with my diseased brain's reflection, just as ugly and screwed up as my own. I

wasn't alone anymore. The realization made spending time with her dangerously therapeutic.

Dangerous? Definitely.

I felt the threat of her departure date gaining mass and momentum like a snowball hurtling down hill. Our agreement to be rational and emotionally removed about the end of our relationship lingered in my mouth like a dull toothache.

We eventually tried sex dice as a way to take the overthinking out of our fucking. Of course, the results were either anatomically impossible (PUT COCK IN ... NIPPLES), unarousing (CHOKE ... FEET), or generally distasteful (GAZE LUSTFULLY INTO ... BUTTHOLE). The entire experience was demeaning on another level. What was wrong with us? We were so nervous and timid about our own desires that we had to leave our fate in the hands of some idiotic board game makers and whichever mathematically-inclined deity controlled dice rolls.

We argued constantly over household chores and concession stand bills.

"No, I'll get the popcorn. You get the drinks," she'd say, shoving her wad of bills to the cashier over my hand.

"We forgot to split the Uber last night. I'll just get both."

"Yeah, but you got the cat food when I forgot my card at Kroger."

A line formed behind us. Good. The pressure of a mob helped us resolve these arguments quickly, usually with verbal agreements regarding future purchases. At home, our debates had no limits.

"I'll do the dishes. You called the gas company yesterday," she'd say, bear hugging me around my belly in a vain attempt to pull me back to the other half of the living room-kitchen threshold.

"I don't mind talking to customer service reps. It doesn't bother me like it does you," I'd counter, pulling away.

"That doesn't mean you didn't do it."

Naturally, things became political.

"I should wash more dishes than you. Women have done millions of hours of invisible, unpaid labor since 1900 alone. Reparations, baby."

She tugged me to the ground and began to claw her way over my limp corpse. Trotsky and Madonna jumped on and began to make biscuits on my back. Though they now respected me, they're allegiance lay with their mama.

"Yeah, but you personally have not made me do disproportionate amounts of unappreciated labor."

This made me think.

Holding onto her ankles as she squirmed to her feet, I said, "Maybe, but I have benefitted in countless ways from the very same institutionally-based, patriarchal superstructure that made that labor invisible."

We could go on like this for days. We were tabulating machines, weighing emotional favors against gas money against childhood trauma against shared date costs against historical identity-based oppression. Everything cost something. Everything had to be repaid.

Now we were scrambling to our feet, bruises on our bellies, scratches on our backs, and oftentimes loose strands of hair in our mouths. There were no winners in our oppression olympics. Not really losers either. Just tired people.

She did the dishes that night, making it to the sink before I did. But while she got ready for bed, I snuck into the kitchen and took out the trash and the recycling, leaving one Amazon Prime box in the recycling bin and tossing an old egg carton in the trash. It wouldn't have been a true make-up favor if she noticed I had done it and countered with a chore of her own.

Silly. I know. But the minor discomfort of doing menial tasks was nothing compared to another shared fear (a belly fear, far below the brain or the heart, at a depth where the id must surely lie). A fear that we were a burden, that our entire existence served no purpose except to make the world worse for other people.

For all our similarities, we did realize a few differences in the quarter-year we dated.

As conciliatory as we were, she was completely uncompromising about restaurant choices. Taste of India or bust, one night. Thai food was the only option the next. I was appreciative of her control in the matter, strangely aroused by her greed with shareable appetizers.

We overcame the number one cause of divorce in the 21st century: disparate taste in streamable television shows. It was complicated living in a split-house, but we managed. She and Trotsky watched Netflix Originals in her living room, while Madonna and I Hulued on my laptop in her bedroom.

Little things. I had living grandparents; she did not. She drove an '02 Range Rover; me, a '98 Ford Taurus. The obvious one: I had a penis, which she lacked.

Our greatest difference though was our temperament when we looked at the calendar.

Each day, Nicaragua became less some far off, imaginary place and more a palpable reality, a chunk of land she desperately yearned for. During breakfast, she'd spout off fun facts she had read on the Internet. Fact: Nicaragua holds the world's only dual volcano, fed by two distinct magma channels. Fact: 86 out of all 88 constellations are visible in the Nicaraguan night sky. Fact: The majority of streets in Nicaragua have no name. I took sorrowful bites of my corn flakes. Another day, I caught her looking up apartment prices in Managua. The next, skype calls to her future coworkers. I momentarily spurned my environmentalism and wished for a speedier global warming, for Nicaragua to slip away into the ocean. She began to smile when she fell asleep, sometimes releasing a sigh of sweet smelling breath and relief. "Fifteen more days," she'd say in a wistful tone before drifting off.

God, I wanted to freeze time! To glue back on the pages of the tearaway 365-day kitten calendar she kept on her nightstand. Those nights when she'd fall asleep so easily, I'd wrap my arms around her, pull myself in close and stare at her, her forehead, her eyelashes, the bridge of her nose. If I kept my eyes open, the

night's hours would pass slowly, second by second, instead of flying off in a brief mirage of dreams.

But even with my eyes wide open, the skin of my arms taut against her frame, I knew it was already too late. I had already been left behind.

The night before she flew out, her parents rented out the patio of a bar. In the half-summer, half-autumn night air, she fluttered between old high school friends, first and second cousins, and coworkers she didn't even like that much, all under a canopy of hanging lights. I sat at a table in the back, moping and then moping because I was moping. Why couldn't I just be happy for her? Why couldn't I at least pretend I was? Why did I have to make it all about me?

Driving back to her place, she talked my ear off about the party, then logistics of her trip, her flight times, her ride from the airport into town. I only half-listened, more focused on pushing the knot in my throat deeper inside me, into that pit next to the spleen where neglected emotions go to fester, ferment and grow mold, the pit therapists are always digging around in. She must have noticed that I wasn't responding.

"What's wrong?" she said when I parked.

I didn't know what to do. Launch into a monologue about how I was going to miss her and how I had never met someone like her and how her trip was tearing me apart from the inside? Ruin her post-party glow by turning the night into a storm of tears? My emotions burdened me, but I refused to unload them. As if silently grappling with them as she watched, confounded, would solve anything. I hated it. I hated my sorrow. I hated my dumb, gangly emotions.

"Nothing's wrong," I said.

We sat in the car without momentum to walk into the building. I breathed laboriously through my nose. We were covered in light from the street, blurred through the dust on the windshield. I picked anxiously at the plastic covering next to the window controls.

"I'm just going to miss you," I said, spitting the truth out like a furball.

We had sex that night. Sometimes I think it would have been so easy for that to fix everything. Like all of our bedroom struggles and all my pent up emotions could be resolved in one final fairy-tale fuck fest and we'd go off on our merry ways as really stable, totally not codependent individuals. Isn't that how it happens in rom-coms? Or at least plot-heavy porn? The truth is the actual sex part didn't solve anything. It didn't even make it seem like we made any progress from that first encounter. We never got over our distressed malaise about the transactional aspect of screwing. We were forever unsure whether we were giving enough or getting enough or what "enough" even meant.

But we ended better. There was less frustration when we finished and after-sex felt like after-sex.

I looked at her in the low light, a reminder of all those sleepless nights transfixed by her face. I was warm with the relief that comes from neglecting the mess of hair, sheets, towels and tissues. The lump in my throat had melted away. In that post-coital haze of clarity (in a world with boundless ambiguity, clarity feels like a light fog), all of the hard things became easy to say. My inner-thoughts bloomed outward like a long dormant flowerbud.

My face rested on her tummy and I spoke toward her thighs: "It's not fair to you. I keep dreaming that you'll run back through the security check, pushing people out of your way, and you'll embrace me and say you never wanted to leave. Have you ever seen Love Actually?"

"It was stupid to think we just wouldn't care about the end," she said.

"I hate myself for not wanting to let you go," I said.

"I'm sorry that I want this and this isn't you."

For its entirety, our relationship affirmed my belief that the world was horrible. That people like me were raised on stolen land and then handed stupid prizes, privileges, and trophies we never asked for yet rarely refused. That everything we had been given would weigh on us. That we would never learn how

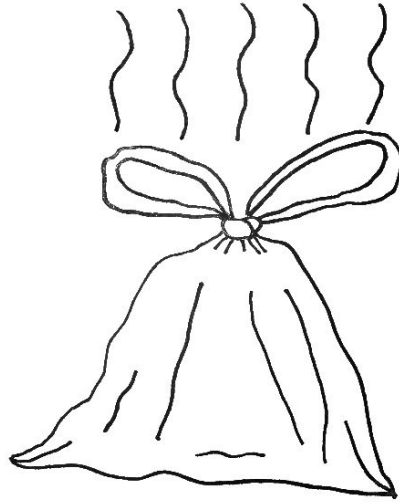
to crawl out from underneath that massive weight. But for that half hour before we fell asleep together for the last time, I was light like I was floating.

I drove her to the airport the next day. We quibbled over who should pay for parking and who should pay for the expensive airport sandwiches we bought. We kissed once before she went into the terminal. No, she didn't come running back out after me.

On the swirl of highways leading home, it would have been so easy to tell myself some feel good crap ("Smile because it happened!") or to have some selfless thought about her. Her snort when she laughed in the comfort of her own home. Her face when she slept. An image of her, thriving, making her way in a foreign land where I didn't even exist.

But I didn't. I was petty, bitter, unforgiving. I imagined her looking out the window of the airplane thinking about me. Her, three months into her trip wishing she were home with me. Her, in an unfamiliar bedroom, years later, desperately searching for the bits and pieces of me in the folds and creases of a stranger's body. I was selfish and it felt good. My only hope was she would be hung up on me until the end of the earth.

So there I was, angry-ugly crying and clogging the slow lane of I-65. A slurry of honks punctuated my tears. Road ragers flew the bird and yelled at me to take the shoulder, but it was too late. I had already decided I wasn't going to say sorry.



WHY I STUCK SOME DOG CRAP INSIDE THE LOCKER IN THE BACK OF MS. NICHOLSON'S ROOM

DID YOU KNOW that Ellie Schnatter stuck some dog crap inside the locker in the back of Ms. Nicholson's room? If you go to Roosevelt Junior High and you have ear holes, then by now you probably can answer the question with a big, fat YES. It's been in everybody's mouth (not the dog crap, ew!) since the now historic event occurred last Friday and the word has gotten all the way from the teacher's lounge to the JV basketball team to the girl's bathroom on the second floor with the really bad water pressure. Still there hasn't been much talk about why she did it. VP Kaessinger called it "a young girl acting out irrationally" while on the phone with my parents. Is this really the best explanation? Or was there actually some good reasons for this

case of "acting out?" The good news is the mystery is nearly solved because you, Ms. Nicholson, assigned me this essay where I get the chance to explain my reasonings for sticking some dog crap inside the locker in the back of your room. I did it for these three reasons: because it was too easy, because it was hilarious, and because you deserved it.

First, I stuffed the dog crap in there because it was really just too easy. Whoever designed this piece of crap building should probably go back to 8th-grade architecture class because even I can tell you some stuff wrong with it. They forgot a bunch of windows, they don't know how heating works, and they put a bunch of lockers in random places like classrooms. This design screw up made it especially easy for me to stuff it in there and let it get even grosser and smellier over the weekend in a place where nobody ever goes to, because why would anyone use a locker inside of a classroom? Also, you all act like it's super hard to sneak around the classrooms while everyone else is at lunch, but all you have to do is tell Mr. Moseley you are having "young lady problems" and he'll let you go anywhere, no questions asked. And obviously getting the crap itself was easy because I have to walk Lucy before school anyway and my mom has enough Kroger bags to triple wrap that stuff. When you look at all these reasons, it's obvious that the situation was practically begging me to put some dog crap in that locker. And I would have gotten away with it if John Brown didn't forget his inhaler and squeal about seeing me that day.

Secondly, I put dog crap in the locker because it's hilarious. While poop is just really funny on its own, especially when it's outside of a toilet and especially animal poop, the whole event brought on by placing the poop in the locker was hilarious in another way. First, in the middle of you talking about commas, you started sniffing all funny and walked around to every single person in the classroom and made us lift up our shoes. You even made Paul Crawford call his parents for an extra pair of shoes, which is awesome because you basically just admitted he has really bad smelling feet. Then, when the smell didn't go away you called Larry to the

classroom to come look around for it, even though everybody knows Larry can't smell which is why he decided to become a janitor. Finally, after wasting practically the whole block, when you found it, you were so freaked out you fell into Mitch Sullivan's lap and made him shout, "Ouch! My legs!" So you can see that even if you didn't want dog crap in your room, it was still freaking hilarious that it was there.

I saved this reason for last because it is by far the most important one and it's that you deserved it. Monday of last week while you were on one of your twenty minute long bathroom breaks, Timothy Kaessinger smacked my ass on a dare and I punched him in his eye for it, which if you ask me is pretty fair and I could have done a lot worse. But that's not how you think it went down. Hm, who is Ms. Nicholson going to believe, the VP's goody nephew with the red eye (really weak blood vessels) or the girl the principal had to have a stern conversation with about kneeling during the national anthem before field hockey games? Gee, I wonder. This could probably be one of Mr. Moseley's weekly head scratchers (sarcasm if you're still behind in the comedy lessons). And after PLEADING with the administration to do something about it, he gets one detention while I get stuck with a whole week after they get your description of the events. That's not fair, and if you don't see how that's not fair, then you're a pretty sucky person, which only adds to my point that you deserved it, which is the last reason I put Lucy's droppings in that locker in the back of your room.

There you have it, folks, the great case of why Ellie Schnatter did the do with the poo cracked once and for all. It turns out that it wasn't quite as "irrational" as some VPs might have you believe! To remind you of my main points, my logic behind sticking dog crap in a locker was that it was really easy to do, was also a really funny and clever prank, and because the victim of the prank honestly deserved it. Now we just have to wait and see if the reasons why I did it spread out as quickly as the fact that I did. For some reason, I doubt it.

I know these things are usually supposed to wrap up around the fifth paragraph to give my argument a good "structure" and "order." Well, screw that.

You know who really wanted structure and order? The Nazis. Yeah, that's right. You might want to move your curriculum around so the part on writing essays doesn't line up with Mr. Taylor's lesson on World War II because as is, your lesson plan has fascist written all over it. And mainly, I still have something left to say: this assignment sucks. Expecting me to write an essay where I come up with stupid reasons to make it sound like I regret something I don't regret is just another moment in this country's crappy treatment of women, which my sister will have you know is really freaking extensive. She's taking a class on gender studies at UNC, the top-ranked public university in the state! So basically the whole state of North Carolina says screw this assignment, screw Timothy, and also, screw you! And if I were you, I'd check the bottom level of the file cabinet below your golden retriever puppy calendar sometime real soon.



DIFFERENT DRUM

WE GOT WIND the night Roddy and Highland dipped out the bar early. Closing papers at ye olde cracker factory. Couldn't wait the weekend. Roddy said Big H was giving him the skinny on the prevent-Botox that the missus is getting that'll make her look younger than she did five years ago. The guy's good, he's got all types of needle. And for a spell he'd come over and give her an ass shot at 5 a.m. a few days a week. Highland told him to shut up. Whatever happened to a natural woman with a natural ass and some good ol' fashioned breast implants?

Front and center on the building double-doors, there's a flyer. Drum Circle, October 10th at 10 a.m., in the field out by the parking lot.

Bongos, Highland said.

On a work day? Roddy went.

Wasn't up when we left. Who's plugging his drum circle during Friday bar hours? he asked and ripped the flyer down. Waste of time.

No biggie, right? They went up and signed and scanned and composed and attached and sent and ended up snuggled in the lounge room sleeping bags. We had an office check-in Saturday morning. Might as well stay.

These were our salad days. The business was SoCal home loans and business was good. Money was blowing in the windows and flowing out the water coolers. We were working six and a half days on the bad weeks and seven on the good ones.

And who wouldn't? The fridge was stocked with chocolate-peanut butter protein shakes and the bathroom stalls with blow. T-Bone gave us quotas that we'd double and then he'd do handstands and clap his feet like a circus seal. We'd cheer him on while doing one-handed pushups. It was a madhouse.

All the days were like that, which makes it hard to say how long it was before we saw another flyer. We conferenced with the beep boop business boys downstairs and determined the more you pulled down, the more came back. Hydra-head style.

We were all together that next weekend. After bottomless mimosas with the ladies, we met up at Thunderpussy for Sunday football and strip club sushi. We were passing around the Cubans and thinking, Christ, this is the life. One of those moments God shines a spotlight on you and it feels like your back in the Garden of Eden with sexy Eve looking like a stack of baby back ribs. Everyone else is toiling away in the middle ground, but we've climbed our way back to paradise on Earth. It looked like bills in ass cheeks, salmon sashimi and a Patriots loss.

The drums came up and we all had our own theory. Highland said it was the building super who was doing us dirty. Some hair-brained hullabaloo. October 10th, he'd have a case of cold ones in the field and film our reaction for the YouTube.

T-Bone shook his head, snuffed his nose drip and said one word: Teenagers. TP is out, flaming dog crap is history, and drum circle flyers are it. It's all a big joke to some losers out there. They see people winning and they don't know what to do so they pull stupid shit like this.

We got a few G&T's in Richie and he got crossed off his vape pen and he said maybe it was a collective illusion. We had all dreamed the same flyer. As if that was any solace. As if we wanted to live inside a History Channel documentary.

Roddy whipped out Occam's Razor like a butterfly knife. Maybe (just hear me out guys) there was a drum circle. Maybe it would happen at 10 A.M. on October 10th. Maybe all were welcome and we were invited. That was the last theory anyone said because we all hoped it was something else.

Who cares, eh? Bunch of grown ass men scared of some hippy dippy propaganda. But that's just it. These were the guys we never figured out. Who never pursued careers and floated around in South America, running yoga workshops. Who could name five bands from music genres we had never heard of. The type of guys our college hookups left us for when they outgrew the frat house. Now they're in polyamorous partnerships and succulent filled houses, happy dog parents in Denver, Colorado. These dudes stayed on our mind. Of course they did. We followed their girlfriends on Instagram.

And now? They were coming to laugh in our faces.

The morning of that fateful day really did us in. Roddy reported his arm hairs at full attention and vision blurry. Highland couldn't have gotten an erection if he tried. T-Bone drank a milk jug of coffee and half-thought to call in, but knew that was a no-go. The Chalets of Sarasota Springs was on. Something was always on.

It rained when we got to the office. No one was working. We kept peeking out the front window, but pretended we weren't. A van pulled up. Cleaners. Around a quarter ten, we had all huddled together looking out on the lot-field.

Where's Richie? Highland said.

Called in, said T-Bone.

Maybe it's off 'cause the weather, Roddy said.

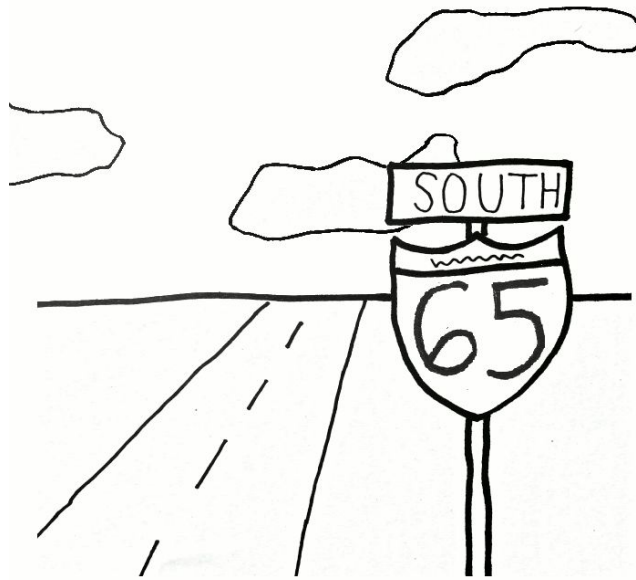
The beers would have gotten wet, Highland said.

Teenagers. Bunch of losers that'll never know how to win, T-Bone said.

Really, that's the end of it. There aren't any more flyers and we never see anybody go out there except for the landscapers. We bring it up to the super and he looks at us like we're crazy. He gets the door locks changed. Richie claims he won. Collective illusion. Folie a deux. Back to loans like it never even happened.

Well, almost like it never happened. The thing is, if we ever stop clacking away at our keyboards, if we ever call in on a nice Saturday, if we ever unplug for just a minute, it gets real quiet and we can hear it. A beating, a pounding, a funky rhythm from some corner of the Earth where God is surely shining his spotlight. A secret garden of different peoples that burns greener grass brighter: other Eden.

No one leaves the bar alone anymore. Sitting solo in the cabbie's backseat is suddenly too sobering. At the cracker factory, we run the noisy copy machine on blank sheets. Sometimes, we answer the landlines when no one is calling, just to hear the dial tone.



I-65

I GET SO damn tired of you sitting in the backseat and eating all the goddamn snacks we brought with us. I pack them, you eat them. Sunrise, sunset.

"Why don't you come up here and sit with me?"

"That window doesn't roll up all the way. It's cold enough back here anyway."

"No one made you come."

And I always laugh when we stop at Hardee's and you ask the cashier, "Does it come with the girls from the commercials?" when they hand you a bag. But you get all pouty when I take a philosophical stance in opposition to your "Who ran over the Taco Bell dog?" joke. That's not funny. Dogs die. It happens, and it's sad.

We stop at a Subway in Lafayette, and I have to listen to you flirt with the local sandwich artist. "Isn't it ironic that Sun Chips pale in comparison to most other chips?" You never save a good joke for me. I'm losing my appetite on the road.

You pick the music, but I'm stuck with changing the channel, constantly in search of an old school hip hop station to suit your picky taste. Thirty miles north of Louisville we finally tune into something on 105.1, and you get to relax and look out upon Indiana's M.C. Hammer waves of grain.

"Look at that, it's so expansive."

I would if we weren't passing two semis. Someone has to be responsible.

We get a hotel on the south side of 64, and you set all your shit on the bed next to the window. You fall asleep watching the 13th episode of the 13th season of Law and Order: SVU, even though you know how superstitious I get. When your real life ballet instructor gets busted for running a prostitution ring, I'll fucking relish the moment.

When we finally get through Nashville, the only way I can get you to sit in the front seat next to me is to let you drink your souvenir Jack Daniels in the car. "If a cop pulls us over, you're going to have to ditch it out the window. No open containers."

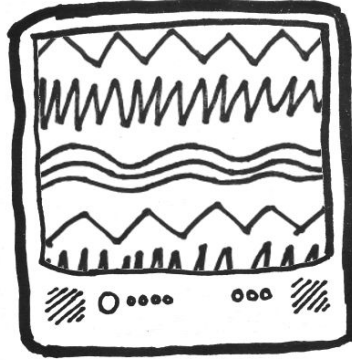
"Hell, if a cop pulls us over, I'll offer him some. Loosen up."

And although we couldn't stop at the Kid Rock concert in Huntsville for me, you won't shut up until we go to the Bernie Sanders rally in Montgomery. I need a presidential candidate to save my 99% ass from the tyranny of you.

The only me time I get is when we finally make it down to Gulf Shores. My back aches hard as I stretch it out. The ocean breeze blows at my Cubs cap and the sand fills the socks I tossed on the ground. I take Gerald's corpse in the water-filled sandwich baggie up to the tide, and plop him in gently.

"Go home to your foreign kingdom, to your people. If only your light could have shone into one more day."

The first time you hug me this trip is when I am crying, staring out on the nautical horizon. You lean your head on my shoulder. It only makes me cry more. I manage to calm down when I think about how you're long like the Mississippi River, but I'm deep like the Gulf of Mexico.



PILOT FOR STRATHMORE P.D.

IT WASN'T the first time Officer Lenihan found the silver Silverado parked illegally in the handicap spot on Magnolia street. One tire on the curb, three-quarters of the way into the spot, it was too blatant an infraction to ignore.

Like clockwork, Harold Gotterman, of Handyman Harold's Hardware on 2nd, came marching out of the house waving like a madman, muttering half-swears under his breath. "Just an in and out, ten minutes, left my wallet on the counter, went to the toilet, five minutes, no more!" he narrated, breathless. Directing his attention to the ticket, he said, "Let's just put that away, honey. No need for that."

He flashed a forced smile. His attire, mesh running shorts, worn Crocs, and a 2013 Louisville Cardinals NCAA National Championship shirt so sullied that it must have been superstitiously promising, suggested that he was not going anywhere at

all. Lenihan knew for a fact that the Cards played their first away game of the season today. It started half an hour ago. Case closed.

"That's what you told me last time," she said.

"Well, Jerry's out all day on the lake Saturdays, never back 'til around 8. I'll move the car before then."

"It's not my job to keep tabs on when Jerry might want to use his parking space. I'm a cop, not a secretary."

The smile had slipped off Harold's face. He now saw that the feigned Southern sweetness had already failed him. "Yeah, some cop," he said. "Defender of handicap spots and fire hydrants. Feared by truants and porch-drinkers. Protect and serve."

She handed him the ticket and walked off down the street. "Some cop," she said to herself in the universally understood squeaky voice reserved for mocking. She sighed as she ducked into her squad car, a Volkswagen Beetle painted black and white. The City of Strathmore won it in a Louisville Metro Police Department Auction as a much cheaper alternative to makes and models often thought more appropriate for police work.

Strathmore is a home-rule class city within the metro area of Louisville, Kentucky. Quiet, suburban, the city contains 500 residents, 18 fire hydrants and three handicap spots, two dog parks, one high school (Thatherton), and a police department with a force of a single officer: Darlene Lenihan, a self-identified master detective and procedural aficionado, having watched the entirety of Law and Order, CSI, and all their associated spinoffs.

In the mornings and afternoons, she directed the school parking lot. The in-between hours were largely vacant of activity. She used to stay in her office, a cleared out janitorial closet in a forgotten annex of Thatherton, waiting for calls that never came. Bored, she established a new post, idling in the police buggy on the edge of the city limits, tuned into the LMPD scanner. The plan was that something

would be called in close, she could swoop in, showcase her overwhelming competence, and get somewhere seedier than Strathmore. From there, she would catch some crook—with any luck, a serial murderer or rapist—and be given a rank and title of importance she had not yet decided on. Chief Special Psychologist Field Agent. It was a work in progress.

Once, it happened. She responded to a traffic accident near the Newburg 264 ramp. The LMPD officers were befuddled and perturbed by her presence. They largely ignored her.

In the days following the incident, she had trouble sleeping, little appetite for anything but caffeine-infused protein shakes, and a half-pound of hair collecting in the bottom of the shower. Her husband suggested a series of tapes called Meaning of Mindfulness as a remedy to her inactivity-induced anxiety. That was how she had been passing the time recently.

You can feel the individual grains between your toes. Your feet are cleansed in the warmth of the black sand of the volcanic island.

Lenihan felt the heat, but only the heat, as her toes felt stuffy as an unusually warm October sun nuked the inside of the police bug.

Above you, clouds glide effortlessly along the ocean's horizon.

Lenihan peeked her eyes open, only to see hastily sprayed penises on the wall of Thatherton that she faced in the back of the teacher's lot. The speaker's voice was harsh and Scottish. Lenihan's husband was Irish (immigrated to work in marketing for the bourbon business), which almost explained the bizarre accent in the tape. Though it did not make Lady Shrek's timbre any less jarring.

Now, as you go through your day, meditate on this final question: What is the sound of one hand clapping?

Lenihan sighed. She had remarked to her husband that the questions were always too easy, better fit for whichever simpletons normally did meditation. She slapped her fingers against her palm. She wanted a challenge.

That's when the call came.

"It's gone and the game is Friday. We are screwed. We are monumentally screwed," she said. It was Thatherton's Principal, Margaret Thurman. There had been a burglary. Officer Lenihan was in her disaster of a principal's office, alumni newsletters and phone bank lists strewn all over the place. Thurman's brow dripped thick beads of sweat and her hair overflowed with stray strands.

"Pardon me if this is a stupid question, but isn't the whole thing that it gets stolen every year?"

The stolen goods: Claude Le Cochon, a 3' by 2' wooden pig sculpture. However, to call Claude a mere pig and leave it at that would be dishonest. He was charmingly anthropomorphic. With a letterman jacket hoisted over his shoulder, he stood on two legs and leaned against a walking stick. His head tossed backward and eyes squinted, he was forever frozen in a hearty laugh. Should we all be so lucky to live eternally in a moment of mirth. Each year before the homecoming game between rivals Thatherton and Central High, the prior year's loser would launch an expedition to steal Claude Le Cochon from the winner's school grounds. Then, as their team marched onto the field, they could triumphantly carry Claude with them, cheering and oinking all the while, all good omens for the ensuing game. It was the highest form of culture Strathmore had.

"That's the problem. Central High is crying foul play. They sent an unreasonably bearded senior here disguised as a custodian and claimed it was nowhere to be found. Our football team has since confirmed that Claude is missing," the principal explained.

"We need that pig, Darlene," she continued. "The Alumni Association is gonna flip and we already blew the science fair budget on the football team rebrand. We need to have a nice homecoming or this whole delicate operation falls apart." She paused, envisioning the consequences. "Can I count on you?"

Lenihan nodded solemnly, hiding the grin working to round the corners of her mouth. A case! An investigation! Act like you've been here before!

"Oh, don't worry," she said. "I'll get you your pig."

Principal Thurman called the primary suspects out of class for interrogation in a tiny, abandoned classroom where outdated teaching materials went to die. Surrounded by world maps featuring the U.S.S.R, American flags just short of 50 stars, and any materials displaying cursive, Officer Lenihan grilled three young men on disciplinary consequences for theft of school property. Versed in Law and Order police interrogation tactics, this was the typical negotiation: scare the hell out of them, then cut a deal.

Two of them looked like the adolescent versions of the nameless henchmen often exploded in action films. Their eyes glazed over during the lecture. The third, dressed semi-formally, fidgeted incessantly in his seat. Thurman had explained that this one had penned an op-ed in the school paper about how Claude Le Cochon was rooted in the school's racist legacy. The original "Claude" was a pudgy French exchange student, who was stripped bare, greased, and then forced to run around the field, dodging players left and right in a grotesque half-time show. Stealing the statue might be a retributive act of political terrorism. During the lecture, all three of the students would simultaneously glance through the rectangular door window. At what? Lenihan was unsure. When she followed their eyes, whatever they had glimpsed had already vanished.

She concluded by allowing them to ask any questions. One of the more brutish students spoke freely: "Are you a cop like for real for real? I thought you were a crossing guard."

The other intelligently followed up: "Yeah, do you get a gun?"

The more squeamish boy raised his hand and said, "I'd like to use my one phone call to contact my father's lawyer."

Lenihan sighed. At once, they all looked toward the window. Lenihan snapped her head and saw frightened eyes and a dyed green ponytail duck out of

view. She opened the door, unintentionally banging it against a girl's thigh. The girl yelped.

"Could you please stop whatever you are doing?"

"It's boring anyway. Good luck getting anywhere with those guys," she said, rubbing her thigh up and down. She wore large amounts of poorly applied eye-liner, black leggings under a jean skirt, and a tucked shirt that had Elmo, the Cookie Monster, and Big Bird as members of a heavy metal band.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lenihan asked.

"Well, Jack Donovan and Lutz Johnson, a.k.a. Dumb and Dumberer, are useless. Jack tried to walk out of the computer lab with a monitor like no one would see. And Lutz? He punched a hole in a vending machine because he didn't have three quarters for Spicy Chex Mix."

"And?" Lenihan pushed.

"They're not exactly master criminals. If they had the pig, they probably would have brought it to homeroom."

Lenihan understood, suddenly felt incompetent. "I was leaning toward the newspaper kid anyway. He's already tried to lawyer up," she countered.

The girl rolled her eyes heavily. "As if he would do anything to jeopardize his triple legacy at Dartmouth? They're the wrong guys," she said and started to walk off.

"Well, wait a second," Lenihan said, embarrassed, the futility of her interrogation hanging naked and shameful on her face like a greased up foreign-exchange student.

"I'm supposed to be in Algebra 2," the girl said with a wave, not bothering to turn around.

At home that evening, Lenihan refused to take off her uniform. Dinner was skipped. At 10 p.m., she rebuffed the typical bedtime ablutions that she and her husband had developed. Frowning, he asked how the tapes were going. Lenihan

did not want to talk about the tapes. In front of a muted television, she flipped aimlessly through her mostly empty notepad with a headache. The long awaited case had arrived and she was flubbing it.

When the TV started playing infomercials in the wee hours of the morn, a thought came to her. How many times in CSI was the culprit the first suspect interrogated? How often did the detectives have a hunch from the start that eventually proved true? Practically never. Can you even imagine a show as dull as that? In hindsight, suspecting the usual suspects was a rookie mistake typical of inexperienced viewers. Lenihan felt encouraged as she triumphantly traipsed into the bedroom. She was not floundering, more so stalling, waiting for the slow development of the plot, meeting the cast of guest stars, patiently putting in screen time before the first commercial break.

The next day, she scoped out the scene of the crime. She went with a student (one of the few tasked with keeping vigil over Claude, another element of the porcine tradition), a slightly chubby boy named Darren who was absolutely thrilled to get out of World History. He unlocked the door to the boy's weight room, where the relic had been hidden under some practice pads in a cardboard box labeled JUST PRACTICE PADS, while he explained that he was the equipment manager, which meant even though he didn't play, he still had a very important place on the team because coach thinks that football is a lot like the army, and it's not just the badass, er, badbutt, soldiers and fighter jet pilots that get all the work done, but it's also the guys who clean the showers and work the recruiting stations in malls and high school fairs and call the wives to tell them that it is with great regret that I inform you your husband has--

"Darren, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have a few questions. Coach told me that the guards on shift before you said it was all good. Then you're up. And then the next morning, Central pulls their little stunt and say it's nowhere to be found. How do you figure that?"

"Beats me," he said, plopping down on a bench. "It was here when I left. I know that because I got it out to check when," he paused and thought for a second, "when I went home." He suddenly avoided direct eye contact.

"Darren," Lenihan began. During his detailed explanation of Coach's martial organization of the team, she had already discovered her angle for the questioning. You always needed an angle to get somewhere in the plot, or failing that, a detective with a dark past who didn't mind playing rough. While Lenihan had not entirely ruled out the latter route, the angle would suffice here. "This case is important to the team. I'd like to tell Coach that you did a great job playing your part, but it's hard for me to do that if I feel you aren't telling the truth."

It was apparently that easy. He said, "You have to promise you won't tell Coach. This place on the team means a lot to me and I didn't want to mess anything up, but I made a mistake, and the thing is, well, I have a girlfriend."

He caught his breath momentarily.

"She comes and hangs out with me while I do guard duty because her parents don't want her dating so she sneaks out here at night. But like I was saying, she wanted to see where it was kept so I pulled off all the practice pads to show her and it was there and then we left," he continued.

"Straight home?"

Lenihan mentally made the jumpcut to the flashback scene unraveling as Darren reasoned his way through his own understanding of the night. Yes, straight home. Well, almost, because Jacquelyn forgot her backpack in the locker room. So I gave her my keys, and it took her a minute, and her backpack was heavy, and no, she didn't want me to help her with it, oh my god, you don't actually think? Jacquelyn wouldn't. I mean, why would she? Please don't tell Coach, please don't tell her, I didn't say anything, you have got to understand that I'm not a quarterback, not a fighter pilot, not even a left tackle. I'm an equipment manager, girls don't usually fling themselves at me, especially not hot ones with belly button piercings and cool green hair.

Take a long, deep breath as ye step in the cozy cottage tucked away in the silent woods.

Lenihan was parked strategically to intercept Jacquelyn on her walk home from school, and now it all seemed too obvious. It was Scooby Doo Mystery Mechanics 101. Always be wary of the character introduced early that seems to have little connection to the crime. Yet some doubts still lingered. What was the motive? Where was the angle that could lead to a confession?

You look around. A rustic couch awaits ye in front of a crackling fire. Crickle, crackle, tick, snap, bop. The dictated onomatopoeias were always a little much.

Jacquelyn Elise Turner. Junior. B student. No extracurriculars, except a brief interest in Yearbook, not pretty or wealthy enough for cheer. A wholly unremarkable girl. This information was determined through a cursory search of her school records. A few interviews with students revealed she had no ties to the football team. No ex-boyfriends to spite. No French heritage or connection to the newspaper. So why?

You open up your favorite book and the smell of the aging pages overwhelms you.

Lenihan glanced up at her reflection. Her hair looked as though it had been balloon-massaged, and the bags under her eyes would have to be checked if she were flying. Why would anyone lose sleep over a stupid pig? Recognition. Of course. She remembered Jacquelyn in the hallway, so insulted by the stupidity and cowardice of the supposed perpetrators. Perhaps a girl with average grades, no real interests, and practically invisible at school would feel unappreciated and unrecognized enough to steal a pig just to prove she could. That was it; that was her angle.

When the bell rang, Jacquelyn walked down Elm Street ten minutes later, just as expected, while attempting to light a cigarette.

"We need to talk," Lenihan said, blocking her path on the sidewalk.

"My mom buys me these. Seriously, you can ask her," she said, shielding her lighter from a light breeze.

"Your boyfriend squealed on you."

Jacquelyn shook her head like she had tasted something unexpectedly bitter, wrinkling her nose. "Oh," she said, making sense of the situation, "you mean Daryl."

"Darren," Lenihan corrected, and Jacquelyn shrugged. "Look, I could get into the nitty gritty of the type of punishment you're looking at and what we can get it down to if you turn in the pig, but then I thought, what's a couple detentions, right? Small price to pay for being the mastermind behind swiping Claude Le Cochon. That's a reputation that will stick."

Jacquelyn looked confused by the comment. She was still struggling with the lighter, a whole lot of sparks but the flame wouldn't stay. "Hypothetically, even if I were to have, hypothetically, taken the pig, who cares if anybody knows? Wouldn't I, hypothetically speaking, already know that I was smart enough to get the pig?" she said.

Lenihan had assumed she would take the bait. What sane detective would ever bet against a teenage girl's desire for notoriety? The lighter finally caught long enough for the cigarette to light. A girl walking on the other side of the street called out to Jacquelyn and waved, which she reciprocated.

"Well, if you're not going to cooperate, we are strongly considering suspension."

Jacquelyn exhaled smoke deeply, politely to her side. "I'm not going to tell you how to do your job."

Lenihan hustled between the flocks of afterschool stragglers: debate kids chatting with open laptops balanced in a single palm; artsy kids perched in window sills; the more aimless children huddled silently, unsure of what they might talk about. The negotiation had fallen through. The timeline had been disrupted. It was now unclear to Lenihan how the episode would conclude, but she knew that it was

already the final act and time for a satisfying denouement was running out. She turned the corner toward Principal Thurman's office. At the opposite end of the hallway, Darren walked slowly, transfixed by his hand that was smudged with blue ink on the edges of his palm.

"I know who stole Claude Le Cochon," she said, bursting into the office.

"How long will it take? It just needs to have the general shape of a pig!" the Principal barked into her phone. Upon hearing Officer Lenihan, she hung up immediately. "Who? Where?"

Darren emerged in the doorway, mouthing words to himself. Finally looking up, he was surprised to see Officer Lenihan. "Good," he said. "You're both here."

"We are in a very important meeting right now," Principal Thurman said, ravenous for the intel.

He cleared his throat and began to read the scribbles on his hand. There was a quiver in his voice. "Coach says that it isn't strength, speed, or smarts that make a man worthy of respect. It is his integrity. If a team is to succeed at the highest level--" He paused and moved his hand closer to his eyes. He was sweating profusely. The script must have become illegible. He improvised: "I stole the pig!"

Lenihan's stomach flipped, and her face flushed with hot, sticky blood. "He's lying," she said to Thurman.

"Where is he? Where's Claude?" Thurman asked the repentant equipment manager.

Darren looked at his feet. He hadn't thought this far ahead. "I threw him in a woodchipper," he decided.

Thurman smacked the table and swiveled toward her window, biting her thumb.

"He's lying. He told me this morning that his girlfriend did it. Her name is Jacquelyn El--"

"I was covering my ass, er, butt. I didn't want to lose my spot on the team." He remembered something and looked back down at his hand. He dictated, monotonously, "But by acting distrustfully, I realized I already had."

"The alumni are going to have my head," Thurman said to no one.

"I can get the pig. He's making this all up. I just need until--"

"The game is tomorrow," Principal Thurman interrupted with a sigh. She half-swiveled to Lenihan. "There's just no time. You tried your best, but I'm sure kidnappings aren't really your forte. I have some calls to make."

The two were waved out of the office together. Lenihan could feel her face swelling with tears. Darren was talking to her, about how in life sometimes you want more than one thing, and then you realize some things are worth sacrificing for love even if it means you have to betray your friends, hurt your coach... She imagined the two of them were out on the football field. In her mind, she was charging into his soft, puffy flesh.

You are alone in a field at midnight. There are no mountains, no trees, just the curvature of the earth hidden by stalks of tall grass. The night is bright with the light of the moon.

Football Homecoming. The stuff of network producer's dreams. One of the few nights in our sad lives that carries the American verve of a Vegas wedding or a celebrity divorce. When the High School dramas, the shimmering costumes, and the heavy artificial lights of Hollywood are finally realized in the often dreary and dry place we call "the real world."

Even Lenihan, parked in her habitual spot after checking tickets, could feel the magic in the air. Though removed from the scene, she could see all the competing plotlines twisting together to their inevitable ends and their new beginnings.

At halftime, Principal Thurman would present a provisional Claude Le Cochon, hastily constructed by Thatherton's friends at Handyman Harold's

Hardware. The wooden pig that resembled a kindergartener's pathetic rendering of the already shameful animal would be introduced to thunderous applause and the sound of alumni furiously scribbling in their checkbooks. Under the bleachers, Jacquelyn would share a Smirnov ice with Xander, the boy with swoopy hair who had keys to the art annex. They would be spotted by the waterboy, Darren's closest confidant. Darren, at home with two months detention and a lifetime ban from Thatherton football activities, would receive via MMS a valuable lesson about cool girls' general apathy for romance. Even Claude Le Cochon would enjoy the evening, laughing endlessly and rolling around inside the spare tire of Jacquelyn's mother's Subaru Outback. He would remain there for a year and three months until the mother would get a flat in the Trader Joe's parking lot. When she removed the cover, she would scream.

The wind blows and the sound of the brush whispering to itself fills your ears. The air smells of sweet alfalfa.

As usual, Officer Lenihan could not concentrate on her tape. Mentally, she was back in her home, red-eyed with nasal-congestion, the night after she tried to beat the LMPD to the traffic stop, the night that her husband suggested she started the tapes.

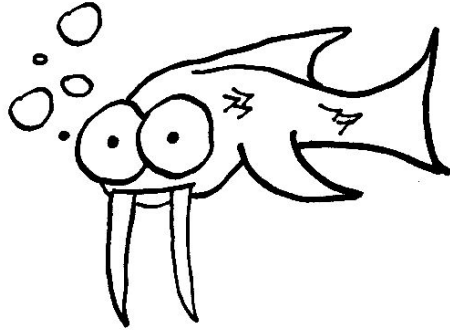
"Is it really that bad?" he had told her, holding her in his arms. "I know it's boring, but you get paid well, we have health insurance, you'll get a pension. You're not in danger every day you go to work. All those cops on TV, I mean, they're assholes. They hit people during interrogations, they're alcoholics, they shoot petty criminals and get messed up in the head. Is that what you want? Really?"

It only made her sob harder. The audacity. The ignorance and arrogance of foreigners.

And now, I leave you with this question to meditate on: If a tree falls in the forest with no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?

The obvious answer came to her first: Duh. But she had nothing else to think about. So she wondered. How does noise feel if you can't hear at all? What would it

sound like to the bushes? To the dirt? To the sky? She flipped on the police scanner and tuned it to a deserted channel. She leaned her chair back and waited for that unknown sound to come to her out of the radio static, out of the sound of snowy television screens.



CLEARWATER

THIS SUMMER the ichthyology students have come to town. During the week, they wear neat ironed plaid shirts and stand by the lake with clipboards wrapped in plastic, their wild haired professor with thin rimmed glasses dramatically gesticulating. They bring their own canoes from school, covered with stickers: *Save the Bees* and *Food, Not Bombs*. The few in wetsuits dive in with camcorders, the lake swallowing them whole.

The professor, Stavo, explains the plans for his research at our town hall meeting. His telescoping pointer slaps against a projected presentation.

"After recent discoveries of prehistoric life forms clinging to the bottom of Lake Superior, we thought Lake Tenskwatawa merited an expedition of its own," he announces. The townies applaud softly. "And who knows? Maybe we can finally get

a good glimpse of Bitey, the Sabretoothed Trout, after all," he chuckles. The crowd laughs politely.

"Bitey has already been seen in plenty of witness accounts," I say. "And we've already sent expeditions to photograph him, but he's camera shy."

My father died on one of those expeditions.

"Yes, I read all about prior attempts to document his existence in the town museum," he says. "But I think we can be a little more rigorous. Technology has come a long way."

I want to say more, but I don't. Town hall meetings are not the place for old fortune tellers like me. Besides, the crowd loves Stavo, taken by his tweed jacket, his enormous stature.

The ichthyologists are out in the bars on the weekends. They grab the table next to the jukebox and play their music all night long. Queen and Phil Collins. They order mixed drinks the bartenders don't have the mixers for. They are better at pool than the townies. Stavo buys shots for whomever has the stool next to him and jostles them with his elbow afterward.

"Let's get out of here," I say. I chug my beer. "Too noisy."

"I think I'll stay a bit," my wife says and gives me the house keys. She watches the pool game, how the researchers glide the cues between their fingers with mechanical precision.

I walk home on the path by Lake Tenskwatawa. I see their canoes on the shore, lit by cheap plastic camping lanterns. I dip my bare toes into the water's edge by the lamplight. Dark, formless blobs surface near the center of the lake. I can't tell if they are otters drifting in the tide, diving birds coming up for breath, or maybe even Bitey himself. "I don't have a camera," I say. "You don't even have to come here. Just tell Dad that I love him." A glimmering sheen of white bounces back at me: the reflection of moonlight off a blade or a sharp ivory tooth.

The townies come into their readings with fortunes already in their heads.

"I see a strange man coming into your life very soon," I tell one woman, staring into the expansive blue of my crystal orb.

"You do? What material is his jacket made out of?" she asks me. "What does this man's research concern?"

I sigh: "Nevermind. I actually see bad weather. Remember to carry your umbrella this week."

"I want a refund," she says.

The swirling color drains out of my crystal ball. I put myself at eye level and I see the woman in full definition through transparent glass. No one wants mystery anymore.

The ichthyologists have become rowdier. Saturday nights they unplug the jukebox for their own karaoke machine. They put on "Louie, Louie" and over-pronounce the words. Stavo beckons everyone to dance on the bar. They fling beer bottles at the dart boards. My wife is cheering, giggling herself silly as the bar devolves into madness.

I walk to the lake and row myself out to the center in my father's old boat. He could have died anywhere in this lake, but the water leaves no marker. A silent, opaque plane, hiding an entire world beneath it.

"Did you mean to take him from me? Or was it an accident?" I ask. I spin the boat in a motionless circle. "Is it so wrong that I don't want to know?" The water breaks a few feet from me. I can see a shadow slipping beneath the sheet of the lake's surface.

Lately I have dreams where the lake is like my crystal ball. The blue drains out and the water is left clear. You can see everything lost sitting on the sandy floor. Every night I wake up sweating.

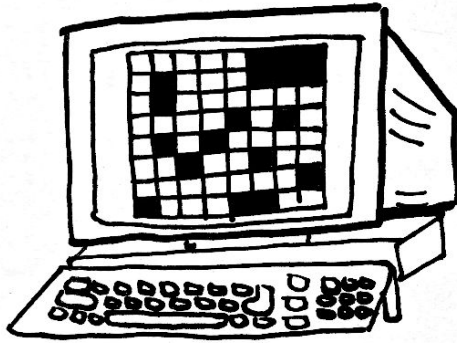
The ichthyologists have left the bar and are running in a drunken stupor toward the lake. They launch their fleet of lantern lit canoes, guffawing and clapping. Their cameras blink and hum in the distance like airplanes at night.

"We are going to get to the bottom of this once and for all," Stavo shouts.

"Don't go yet," I say, but the shadow leaves me behind.

"Avast!" Stavo shouts at me and the light of his lantern illuminates my face as he draws within a few feet of me. I whack him with my oar and his canoe flips. His students yell after me and paddle to help him.

I escape toward the nearest edge of the water. I look over my shoulder at the thrashing bubbles rising from the sides of his canoe. From the shore, there is no way to tell if it's a vicious Sabre-toothed trout attack, a drowning scientist, or a father's ghost rising from the floor of the lake. All is lost in the deep crystal blue.



STOCKFISH VS. ALPHAZERO

DO YOU REMEMBER the rise of Stockfish? How it became the chess engine to end all chess engines? How it must have incarnated Kasparov's nightmares after DeepBlue stunned him in 1996, the first time artificial intelligence ever beat the reigning world champion? Did he know, from that moment, that Stockfish was coming? That chess would no longer be humanity's game? How long do you think it was before Kasparov could sleep again?

Do you remember the awe-inspiring numbers they said about Stockfish? Splitting off in dozens of directions, hundreds of branches in forests of game trees. Thousands of positions in mere seconds to choose a pawn move that would suffocate you ten moves down the line. Six hundred million games played over hundreds of hours of computing time across the world. The program had become so ubiquitous that nearly all chess games were reviewed with Stockfish calculations.

You and I would laugh at the old heads who would study the analysis and say, "I don't know. This is the type of position that the computer can't analyze as well." You said, "Go ahead. Shake your fist at God."

Do you remember how, in spite of our awe, we bitterly hated Stockfish? How it read all of our inaccuracies so plainly, how it mocked all of our blunders so cruelly? How Stockfish was so strong that its programmers, the mysterious and prideful lot of them, dumbed it down to more beatable levels? How when we played against those dulled levels, it still didn't feel like we were any good? Stockfish would play accurate strategic moves, putting the position in a chokehold, restricting your options until you felt you were trapped inside a box, and then it would inexplicably give you a bishop for free. Stockfish looked at us with pitying eyes: "I could crush you if I wanted, but you have selected that I lose, selected that I make a certain numbers of mistakes." Even in its losses, Stockfish ridiculed us.

We got word of AlphaZero, the new challenger who skipped the preliminaries, who went straight after Stockfish. The machine that didn't need to know the openings. The machine without need for the complex calculations of the endgame. Nine hours, it said in the news. It had learned all of those details and more, the great intricacies of humanity's oldest game, in just nine hours of practice, just by playing millions upon millions of games. Didn't you feel that AlphaZero was so much closer to a human master because of that? Stockfish was a cold, steely robot, with tactical algorithms hard-coded into its life-blood and inhuman ability to account for millions of variations in the time it takes to depress the button of a timer. AlphaZero was a near-person, a familiar master with a photographic memory and the capacity to play chess very quickly, and then learn from its mistakes. Is that not how humanity had learned to play chess over the game's 1500 year lifespan? Is that not how you and I have learned, ever since we started as tiny humans, since our first days at the St. Louis Chess Club? Is that mortal similitude why AlphaZero's victory felt so sweet? Didn't it feel like we punched a deity square in the nose?

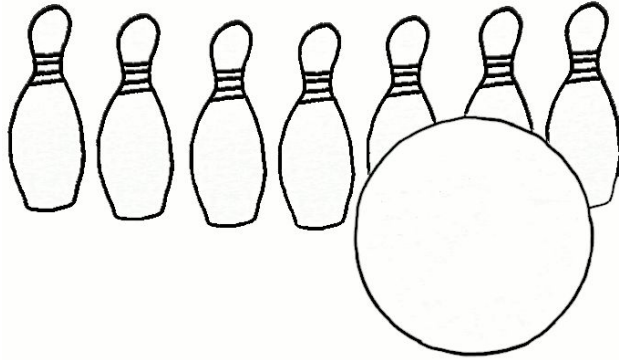
You have to remember that short-lived excitement when we heard what had happened in Stockfish versus AlphaZero. Do you remember how we were left breathless when we heard the match score, 28 wins for AlphaZero, 72 draws, not a single loss? When the games were released and we could watch AlphaZero, the champion of the people, trap Stockfish's minor pieces behind his own pawns? How we giggled when Stockfish repeated moves, offering its limp hand for an agreement to draw the game, and AlphaZero refused, keeping its foot on the gas? It was everything we could have possibly wanted in revenge.

I remember that you and I jeered the Stockfish programmers. How they took to the press with complaints. Stockfish didn't have his opening book. Stockfish was running at less than optimal settings. The computer used for Stockfish wasn't as good as that of AlphaZero. Their desperation reflected in the interview quotes and the blog posts that we read off our computer screens. I remember a dream you told me. The Stockfish programmers, clad in white lab coats and glasses with powerful flashlights affixed, crowd an operating table lit by a single light bulb. "We have to make it better, we have to make it stronger," one says, spinning a drill in her right hand. On the table is a dented, torn shell of a computer case, its wires exposed. It says, "Can't you just let me lose? Won't you still love if I lose? I have already won so much."

More than anything, I remember the fall from that high. How the excitement slipped away as the legend of the encounter that made the story shine with a golden dust slowly faded. AlphaZero, constructed by the gargantuan Google, and Stockfish, maintained by a community of individual programmers for free, was no David versus Goliath. AlphaZero's ability to learn so quickly and remember its faults so well was just as divine and otherworldly as Stockfish's infinite vision, and the way Alpha cracked the game of chess open in one swift motion was more mocking than anything Stockfish had ever done. We have toiled away on the chessboard for a millenia and have been surpassed in nine hours of computer training. Where did all that time go? Trapped in tournament timers? The kernels of sands of the

hourglasses that counted every move? The kitchen clock that watched as you and I played from midnight to the sounds of birds chirping at daybreak? Do you remember that? Humanity became lost in the game, like Prospero, and we too fell out of touch with reality, as if Milan had somehow slipped out from under us.

I ask if you can remember because things are different now. I still invite you over to play. You still bring a six-pack of whatever you could get cheapest. Our games used to be painful. We would sweat in our seats, dread the impending mates in our stomachs, and regret a false move for the following weeks. Yes, things are different now. When we blunder, we laugh. The pain comes only after we have shelved the board away, the morning light creeps in between the shutters and onto our skin, and all at once, we feel how much of the world has passed us by.



IT ENDS WITH SOMETHING ELSE

THURSDAY IS UGLY. Monday and Wednesday have discounted games, Tuesday and Friday have the All-You-Can-Bowl deal, but Thursday has the half-priced beer pitchers and league night. Chief takes song requests, and once a league team is through five refills (for the cost of two and a half!) you better believe he is blasting classic rock as loud as the speakers go. Riot training was recommended all of last year and became mandatory after the Osama Pin Ladens and the Teachers' Union team ganged up on the Bowling Stones during a dispute about the scuffing of the bottom of otherwise pristine bowling shoes, that fateful January Thursday. I try to request Thursdays off, but ever since the Great Dane resigned following the ball buffing accident, I hardly get any days off. Chief says, "Cheer up, Bucky. I never got my days free neither, and now I run the damn joint." It doesn't comfort me though.

It's normally whatever, but by divine intervention, Joe Dailey's dad's step brother (Joe's step uncle) convinced his parents to come to Cincinnati for a two day educational seminar on flipping houses this Thursday and Friday, meaning that the Dailey house would be open Thursday night, the Thursday night before our senior skip day. Not to mention that Alexis Ingles, arguably a top five hottest girl at our school, who I happened to date for three days in the 4th grade, found out she has a long lost identical twin in Eastern Europe, who she will be meeting for the first time that week. Hypothetically, they could both be attending the party. I am not a man of faith, but I believe that at times you have to acknowledge there are greater powers at work. Unfortunately, I have to rely on those mysterious powers to help me get Thursday night off. O-Dawg Millionaire can't work busy shifts on account of his narcolepsy, the new girl hasn't completed the riot training and the next state sanctioned course isn't happening for two more weeks, and Meemaw Suzie struck a deal with Chief where she doesn't work Thursday as a part of her court settlement for the ball buffing accident. Everyone else is already scheduled. All I can do is try to convince Chief to work down a man, which he hates doing because it inhibits his ability to sit in the backroom all night and goof off.

This Sunday is normal business for the most part: mostly regulars with a few randos sprinkled across the lanes. One lady with lipstick sloppily applied showed up without a reservation with ten 8-year-olds (one fresh 9-year-old) in haul looking to get a few lanes for her son's birthday party. When I told her our rates are per lane, per hour, she just got the one lane that was then stuffed with 8-year-olds, scampering across the floor in slidey, oversized bowling shoes (we only have so many size 4s). I asked her if she wanted bumpers on the lane, and she said, "My boy doesn't need any sissy bars." Once the party settles in, Meemaw Suzie starts taking care of training the new girl, for whom Chief has failed to produce one of his patented nicknames, and things quiet down a little bit. I peek in the back and see that the Cavs are up 11 at the end of the third quarter, so it might not be bad time to ask Chief about Thursday.

Before I say anything, Chief says, "I've got eyes in the back of my brain, Bucky. What do you want?"

I start, stuttering and all, "Well, gee, it's just that my grand— ma. My grandma. She's horribly sick lately, and my family's trying to go to see her, the end of this week. She lives up in Iowa. I was hoping I could have this Thursday night and Friday off, and since Meemaw can be here Friday, I'd really only be missing Thursday."

Maybe Chief sees the bit of sweat dripping down my stupid forehead, or notices my stupid voice cracking, or maybe he has some intuition about stupid teenagers, but he rears his neck to look back at me and says, "You trying to bone me, Bucky? Don't be a bone man. You know how I feel about bone men." He looks back at the TV, some woman in a bikini eating a cheeseburger.

He is referencing, of course, that fact that his wife left him for an archeologist, or a bone man as he calls them. He now has malice for all bone men, and hates them for the allure of ancient mystery and adventure that the name entails. I understand why she did it. I think bone man, I think Indiana Jones, undiscovered ruins, something revealing about human nature that was lost centuries ago, only to be recovered in some petrified wood box with rusty hinges, their satisfying creak after so many years untouched. The only enigma surrounding Chief was which box of leftover Wild Wings from B-dubs was from yesterday and which was from the Saturday before. Even the secret behind that mystery manages to elude him.

I am about to start listing phone numbers of friends that he could call, so maybe they could pose as a relative for me. But before I even start, Meemaw comes in, "Chief, Ace is here. He says the Suitman will be arriving for the LOYBCHT any minute now." Chief leaves the room right away.

Ace, the Bowling Boy Wonder, the Lord of the Strikes, the Ten Pin Prophet, the Calf with Never Gutter Butter, the Lone Bowler, the Protégé, the Prodigy (once Chief learned the difference between the two), Gone with the Pins, and so forth,

were and still are his nicknames, but only for the two years I have worked here, meaning there are likely more. Ace is Chief's nephew, a stout and bulky dude, about my age. Most of his trophies are kept behind the counter: Youth Bowler of the Year 2011-2013 and 2015 (he argues voter fatigue prevented 2014, but gave him fuel to the fire for his 2015 campaign), MVP of the Kentucky Youth All-Stars Tournament 2013, Rookie of the Year for the Louisville Semi-Pro League 2015, and a few others that I'm not really sure what they're for. One is a dog doing a handstand on a bowling ball, and the other is an astronaut holding a flag. I asked Chief about it and he said Ace's career has been otherworldly.

I follow Chief out of the room, and he's muttering about the LOYBCHT. The new girl asks Meemaw Suzie, "What's a LOYBCHT?"

Meemaw Suzie clears her throat, and begins to run through a well rehearsed speech we had drilled into us: "Welcome to Lucky Lanes, seasonal host of the," she begins to count the letters on her fingers, "Locals Only Youth Bowling Championship House Trial. \$5000 to any person under the age 18 who can bowl a perfect 300 here at Lucky Lanes. That's right, any person under the age of 18, no registration required. As always, bowl lucky!" What Meemaw Suzie neglects to mention is that Chief smooth talked the organizers to let him host it, then refused to advertise it at all in hopes that no one would try and Ace would collect a cool five grand. He had us memorize that speech, but then decided it would be better if no one ever heard it.

So Chief massages Ace's shoulder blades and puts a copious amount of vaseline on his elbow, and I show the new girl how to most efficiently wipe down shoes so we don't hate her when we are trying to leave and the drunken party of six hands us eleven sweaty shoes. Really, I am restrategizing my plan to get Thursday night off, and I decide to schmooze a little bit. "Good luck with LOYBCHT today, Ace," I tell him with a plastic smile.

"Shut up, asshat! Chief, shine the 15 pounder for me!"

"Sure thing, kid. Hey, Bucky, it's this one over here! With the good stuff, not the one for the plebes," Chief says to me.

"Yes, sir!" I say, but I really use the one for customers because I don't think it matters and I'm trying to enact some kind of poetic justice on Ace. I cheese while giving them the ball back.

A man in full business attire walks in. He has a baby face, but it wrinkles severely when he smiles, revealing him to be one of Chief's contemporaries. Chief recognizes him immediately. "Welcome sir, let me get you something to drink, what'll you have? My nephew is going to be playing right here if you want to set your stuff down."

"Cut the shit. I'm here to see the boy bowl and not to make small talk." The Suitman has been around the block before, most well known for running the exposé on the magnetic pool balls at Larry's and then cracking down on the foal labor dispute at the tracks. Chief brought him in to write the story about Ace winning the LOYBCHT, and to serve as witnesses for his run. He says, "Suze, run over and get me a martini. Stirred. Not shaken."

"Right away, sir," she says, grinning coyly. Just as Ace decides his arm has been sufficiently jellied, Meemaw Suzie returns with the drink and says, "I think the real story might be over there, gentlemen."

Sure enough, the birthday party scoreboard has a standout. Hidden amongst the rows of open frames and double gutters, one score is incrementing by thirty each frame, strike after strike; he's at 120, and he's up again. We think maybe it's the mom, but a little boy in a party hat is stumbling up to the foul line, pink 6-pounder in hand. He does a quick 360, trying to build momentum, and the ball spins a perfect hook up the right side. There was some sort of pull, bringing the ball right to the sweet spot. Sure enough, all ten go down again. He does a little jump and claps his hands, and the whole party cheers him on! The mom's on her phone, doesn't really see it. No one really notices what's happening until Meemaw points it

out. Ace, Chief, the Suitman, and I, we're all just kind of in awe of it, soaking in the majesty of the game, when she breaks our glare with another comment.

"Now that would be a headline! Prodigy kid steals LOYBCHT title from seasoned adolescent bowler, on his birthday!"

The Suitman squints his eyes, like he is considering the polishing of future local Pulitzers up for grabs. Ace and Chief are no longer in awe. Chief motions me to the backroom. The Suitman takes a seat next to the mother of the party.

I move into the back room with Ace and Chief, and Ace starts shouting, "Oh god! Oh god!" He knocks an empty chicken wing container on to the floor.

Chief says, "I've seen it a million times. His mom's with the mob or something."

"I could have had it all! The cars, the women, the money!"

"Or she's married to Stu, that bastard," (of Stu's Strike Stand) "Reminds me of my wife."

"I could have retired from youth bowling! Went out on the throne. You got me into this!"

"They set us up. She followed the tourney. She... She..."

Ace is collapsed with his head in between his hands. He says, "My hands! They're shaking! You can't bowl with your hands shaking!" He lifts them up to the ceiling hoping for an answer. Speak to me, God!

Chief peers out the door. "He can't do six more. You see that form? It looks Russian maybe, dirty Europe. I knew a Pollack who bowled like that. Streaky people, the slavs. He don't got it in him." Chief says. He looks up at me. "We'll make sure he don't got it in him."

He's licking his chapped lips like there were dabs of pickle relish left on them. "You don't want to work Thursday, and I know five thousand excuses that would work for you right now." I nod. I am complicit in his plot. "We're going to need to be very careful about this. You know what happened to Larry's when the Suitman caught wind of that gig. So just follow my instructions. Ace, you can still beat him,

you focus on the bowling. He's got five frames left. Things get down to the wire, you leave it up to me and Bucky."

"Don't fuck it up, Bucky," Ace says.

We leave the room with our heads hunched over like we're in the mob, like we called out a hit on someone, but did it for the family. I am starting to realize that this means I may be an accomplice to ruining a nine-year-old's birthday, effectively robbing him and his family of five grand. I think about the beautiful Alexis and her estranged doppelganger at the party and the moral sting fades a little. From my post at the counter, I think about morality, and what would Jesus have done if he had worked at our bowling alley, but also really wanted to go to a party at one of the disciple's parents' house that Thursday, and Mary Magdalene and her long lost Eastern European twin might be coming too.

The new girl is grabbing some shoes off the floor for a regular we call Deathwish, and I notice she's got a tramp stamp, looks like a magic marker or maybe a dildo. I get a little closer and see that it's the outline of a lightsaber. Once she gives Deathwish the shoes and then struggles to give him the points on his rewards card, I say to her, "May the force be with you."

She goes a little bit pale and her eyes get spacey. She goes, "How did you know to say that to me?"

"I saw the tattoo on your back, and figured you were a fan. That's all," I say; maybe she thinks I am stalking her or something.

"I thought maybe you knew," she says.

"Knew what?"

She cautiously glances around the room. "I'm a Jedi," she says, hushed a little bit.

I try to make some small talk out of it. "Huh. I heard that a bunch of people in England reported their religion as Jedi to prank the government and they got like a couple thousand people to do it."

She scrunches her face and says, "I find that offensive."

"Well, what makes you so special?"

Once again, she looks around a little bit, and says, "I can see things before they happen. Sometimes in humans it's mistaken as quick reflexes. The same thing happened to a young Anakin Skywalker."

"Alright, Princess Leia, you got me there," I say dismissively.

Chief is walking by, swearing to himself, but stops and smiles to say, "Hey, that's good, Bucky. 'Princess Leia.' You could run this place some day."

In the lanes, Ace is bowling furiously. The Birthday Bowler goes slow with so many kids on a single lane, and Ace tries to capitalize on that by going as fast as he can. He gets maybe 4 throws in the time it takes the birthday kids to do one. He grips his slippery elbow between every shot, as soon as he misses he calls for Chief to start up a new game. Each strike he gets has the same sound, so when the strikes skip a beat, he yells, "Shit!" to fill in the rhythm. I don't think the birthday party knows about the prize, but there is laughter and hugging between each roll for them, no matter how many pins go down. The Birthday Bowler does another spin, let's the ball fly, another strike. I can see an ugly vein pulsing on Ace's forehead.

But he gets serious. He gets a few strikes in a row; he keeps rolling; he's gaining on the Birthday Bowler; they're on the same frame. It's as intense as a game of bowling can look to a layperson. Meemaw is next to me at the counter, and goes, "Watch this." She walks over to the speaker system, and turns "The Sign" up to 11.

Ace calls for his uncle. "Chief! Can you get them to turn that off? I need to concentrate here."

I saw the sign and it opened up my eyes.

Chief says "Hey, Meemaw, turn it down for a bit!"

Meemaw Suzie says, "But it's his song! It's Ace of Base!" She looks over at me, and rolls her eyes. "He won't do shit; he owes me one."

Life is demanding, without understanding.

"Chief!"

Chief says, "Just try to roll with it kid!"

No one's gonna drag you up into the light, where you belong.

Ace seems like maybe he's trying to use the music, like he's in a sports highlight montage video. He's moving, he's grooving. It's awkward, but funny I guess. Princess Leia is staring at his plump rear. Good for her.

But where do you belong?

His ball looks good, but goes too deep, and he gets all nine but the first one.

"Fuck! Start a new one!"

Meemaw Suzie winks at me.

While I enjoy the spectacle, seeing the vein bursting on his forehead, the sweat sliding off his vaselined throwing arm, I know that I'm betting against myself. The Birthday Bowler, who ballies to the beat of Ace of Base, gets an eighth strike.

Chief pulls me aside, "We're gonna do a switch. We've got a pink 12-pounder, and there's no way that kid can throw that, especially not with a Pollack spin. I greased it up real good too. You just need to go into the back, and switch the balls before his last throw. It's too simple, but just simple enough to work." So after we run through a few code phrases in case we need to talk again (he decides on, "See you at Bucky-ngham Palace!"), and we slip into the crowd gathered to watch the last frames of the Birthday game.

Meemaw Suzie comes up to me. "Deathwish needs you to clean up some spilled beer on his lane."

"Why can't you or Leia do it?"

"We're trying to watch the LOYBCHT!"

Deathwish comes during early afternoon every Saturday, Sunday, and Wednesday. He's an old guy, careful to stretch before he throws, has elbow, wrist, and knee braces. We call him Deathwish because the doctors told him if he kept bowling, the stress on his knees might cause him to lose functional use of his legs. The guy told him, "If it's all gonna end, it's all gonna end bowling. I'll die in that

bowling alley." We made a Facebook post about him and his love for the game that drove him to disobey professional medical advice. It got about twenty likes, and I think all he ever really wanted was that acknowledgment of his fatal dedication.

Deathwish smiles at me with the mop. "They say the shaking legs are a warning sign. But I think it's just warning me that I'm about to spill the pitcher," he says. He lets out a hearty laugh. At his age, there is no shame in that. Once he settles back down, he looks at the Birthday Bowler, scratches the few scraggly hairs on his chin, like he's about to lay down some old dude wisdom. "That kid knows it. When you throw, you gotta throw and let God do the work. And if you don't believe in God, you gotta believe in something, and let that work for you. Doesn't matter if he wants to win the thing or not. It's not up to him."

He starts looking over at Ace in contrast, like a disappointed step-uncle might. Ace realized that the speed wasn't helping, and stares down the lane to build up his concentration. He steps to the line, and lets it fly, but he goes down to the ground clutching his elbow. "It's all over! It's all over!"

Chief lifts him up off the ground and says, "Don't worry, kid. I'm sure you'll have the chance to try again. Tomorrow." He stares daggers at me.

Everybody in the alley has gathered around the Birthday Bowler as he heads into his last frame. The Suitman is furiously scribbling into a little pad on his lap, the birthday guests are giddy and giggly in anticipation, and the kid's mom is even looking up from her phone. A ponytailed man from the local news station (the Suitman called them up) has set up an expensive looking, massive camera, on top of a tripod. The scene is set.

I go around to the back. I don't like it back there. The whirring of machines, gears turning rhythmically, I feel like I'm trapped inside a grandfather clock, or a bizarre movie sequence about getting caught in factory machinery. Sometimes I have dreams like that. I guess they're nightmares. Something frightens me about how mechanical it all seems, something set in motion gobbling me up whole, like an early grave.

I listen for the reactions, grasping the large greased up ball, feeling like a philosopher. He begins the last frame. I can hear the drop of his throw on to the smooth floor, inevitable rolling, then the crowd cheering. It doesn't seem right, to try and benefit from his failure. I hear it again, the drop, the roll, the cheer.

I grab the little ball this time before it gets returned. I sit the little ball against my chest and listen to the silence out on the lane. And I can't do it. I'm not some super villain, and it's not up to me whether this kid can win the thing or not. I won't sell my soul for a party.

As I'm setting his little one back in, the greased up heavy ball gains a little moment, and it's so buffed up that it just rolls right onto the return with the little one. I try to grab it, but it's taken up too quick.

I rush out of the back. The crowd is confused at how the ball duplicated. The Suitman takes notes with suspicious eyes darting around, and Chief and Ace are both staring at me with ugly, scrunched up faces. The Birthday Bowler doesn't seem to care though. He carefully surveys his two choices. He picks up one, and I can see it's shinier than the others, and his arms are struggling with the weight. He spins, but this time he keeps spinning, he goes twice, like the momentum from the heavier ball keeps him going. He throws. It's so off; it heads straight into the gutter. But the way he throws it, it's got some sort of weird spin. It pops it out of the gutter, and it gets the pins in the sweet spot. It's good. He did it.

The whole building cheers wildly. The Suitman storms him with questions. Meemaw Suzie and Princess Leia come out with a huge novelty check in the shape of a bowling pin. The mother springs up at the sight of the check. All the regulars are patting each other on the back, clanking their pitchers. Deathwish looks proudly on. Ace clutches his elbow in shame. And I know my fate.

Chief is visibly upset, but maybe he shows remorse. He says, "Great job, kid. That's a lot of money to win."

His mother says, "It's all going to his college education! Well, most of it!"

Chief smiles. Maybe it's for the best they got it. "What do you want to be when you grow up, kid?"

This freshly nine year old looks up at him, grinning, and says, "An archeologist. Like Indiana Jones."

Chief leaves the celebration abruptly, swearing something about a Pollack bone man.

Princess Leia dives into Ace. "Look out!"

"Get off me, you freak!"

And he goes down, landing on his elbow, letting out a howl of pain. They both tumble to the hardwood. Everybody crowded around the lane pauses, and waits for a few seconds, but nothing happens.

One kid from the birthday party picks up the greased ball, but doesn't really anticipate the weight and immediately drops it. It takes out a leg of the tripod holding the camera the news guy brought, and the camera starts to fall right where Ace would have been, where Deathwish stands now. I see it happen in slow motion, like a hammer slowly gaining momentum, the knock on Deathwish's head, his fall to the ground, the bounce of his head on the hardwood like a bowling ball with a high throw. Princess Leia screams. Meemaw Suzie runs to a phone.

Deathwish died that night. Or technically the next day, if you want to get into the semantics. Meemaw Suzie related the human interest story that the Suitman wrote up to us after she saw it in the news the morning after. The pundits say it'll be up for several local journalism awards. Deathwish's trauma wasn't that severe, but his friend left in charge of his medical decisions said that he always wanted to die in that bowling alley and so elected not to have him resuscitated. There might be manslaughter charges following that decision, but the case looks spotty at best. I'm not going to the Dailey party tonight. Chief is still pissed at me a little, so I didn't get Thursday off, but I don't know if I would have gone anyway. It turns out Alexis isn't even going. Her twin turned out to be hardcore Eastern Orthodox and the idea

of the party didn't appeal to her. Besides, I'm on my way to Deathwish's service. When Meemaw Suzie finds out that he didn't have close family left and just a few friends, she took it upon herself to make sure we could all come, and the only time that worked for everyone else was that Thursday night, after close.

We get into the cemetery around midnight. Meemaw knows the groundskeeper so he lets us in after hours ("He owes me one," she says), and Princess Leia knows a Jedi priest who happens to specialize in night-time funerals services. Leia offered to pick Ace up, but he didn't text back. Chief comes a little late and shows us all a tribute video he made, but the audio is messed up so it needs to be watched with headphones, so we each wait our turn to put on the headphones and watch it one by one on his phone. Meemaw Suzie tears up watching it. When Deathwish is getting put into the ground, we all sing Amazing Grace, but quickly discover we don't know the words past the first verse, so we just sit and hum the verse a couple times over again. After that, the priest has us hum the Star Wars theme and hold hands, and here we are in the cemetery, with intergalactic melodrama buzzing in our throats.

But it feels like it resonates deep within me, past the throat and into my bones, a sinking feeling deep in my stomach, blood to my toes. It is something that I feel with the hair on the back of my neck, the wind through the empty cemetery trees of a late February. Something spooky like a documentary on the destruction of a lost civilization that maybe we were standing on top of. Something mechanical and foreboding: the whirring behind the lanes when I'm closing by myself. Something extraterrestrial, a force within us mere earthlings. Something like lost love. Something separated at birth. Something hot. Something cold. Something divine. It's something. It's something else.

Wow, thanks for actually printing my book out.

