

*Thug Love Story*

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Following a housewarming party where I imbibed somewhat of a large amount of the complimentary jungle juice, I moseyed into a strip club downtown and took note of a girl I was almost positive I had a lingering, bordering upon unhealthy, crush on in college—she had an indecipherable aura about her; it appealed to me. The girl dancing insouciantly on the stage at the strip club downtown reminded me of a girl I went to college with—I seriously considered that it could be the girl I went to college with for more than a few seconds. I knew it was an ominous sign I was reminiscing while intoxicated. I sat at the bar, visibly intoxicated, having imbibed somewhat of a large amount of the complimentary jungle juice at the housewarming party, and reminisced about going to college with a petite girl with an indecipherable aura who lived in my building. During a five minute inebriated conversation in an elevator on a brisk Saturday evening I felt as though there was a genuine spark of mutual interest—a spark that would haunt me for years afterward, solely because I was scared to make a strong move, solely because I had no game and, most likely, glancing over at the girl insouciantly dancing on the stage at the strip club downtown, still didn't. In the elevator, we'd made eye contact in a way that I felt was somewhat profound; even in college I was aware I had a tendency of obsessing over impossibilities. By mid-semester she'd started dating some Lebanese kid who I thought looked just like me, granted with larger

and more defined muscles—but very similar to me in a generic sense. It was possible I had a tendency to hold onto fairly negligible bonds and, needless to say, I lived in a silent state of desperation for my last two and a half years at school, defeated and obsessively thinking about how that could've been me, how she just had that type of aura about her, how no one else seemed to have that type of aura about them, how she ended up dating some meathead who looked just like me. The small girl draped in a flannel long sleeve t-shirt, mellifluously swaying back and forth on the stage at the strip club that night, had the same aura about her, no one else had that aura about them; it was an indecipherable aura; she reminded me of my college crush to the extent that, at the time, I thought it could be her—in fact, I wouldn't have been surprised if it was her. Was anyone Lebanese at the bar? Did I see anyone who reminded me of me? I felt euphoric, like I'd been gifted a second chance, a chance for redemption. I knew I had no choice but to try to pursue her and also knew it would all end terribly, that—given my rationale, given my temperament in general—there was absolutely no possible way it could be considered a good idea. It was a terrible idea, I thought, sitting visibly intoxicated in a strip club, having imbibed a considerable amount of the complimentary jungle juice at the housewarming party.

The next day I agreed to go to a party I didn't have an adequate excuse for not attending with my friend Mo. I'd recently found myself acquiring an unusual amount of acquaintances I had next to

nothing in common with—people I didn't dislike but who I didn't enjoy being around; ninety five percent of my acquaintanceships seemed dependent on me feigning in interest in things I had no interest in; it seemed like a recent phenomenon to me, but I couldn't recall if the process had always been essentially the same. Nevertheless, walking into the party all I could think about was the girl from the strip club downtown—my love life was fraught with calamity, hurting people I didn't care about, being hurt by people I cared about, absconding from stability, proposing to promiscuity; it was terrible. In the end, I'd always invite betrayal rather than deal with guilt; I couldn't endure guilt; contrary to popular belief, sociopathic tendencies are one of the greatest blessings anyone can be endowed with—I found solace in indignation and melancholy. Yet I felt like I was being gifted with some sort of second chance, a second chance I couldn't afford to squander; I suddenly had no interest in conversing with anyone; I wanted to be completely alone in my ruminations regarding the girl from the strip club downtown. I'd decided to wear a white tee I got for free from a discount gym inside-out and an old pair of khaki shorts that were mid-thigh high—but the print from the white tee was, unfortunately, still visible even with the shirt inside out and I, unfortunately, dropped a chocolate covered strawberry on the shirt within minutes of entering the home. I embarrassingly exclaimed, “Ohhh, chocolate covered strawberries?!” when I noted a platter of chocolate covered strawberries in the kitchen, and I immediately reached to pick one

up but didn't have a firm grip on it as I lifted it recklessly toward my mouth.

Walking back to the car I continued to obsess over this obsession, this obsession—wondering why I was being tormented by this image of this person (who, by the way, I'd never even conversed with!). Was it nostalgia? Was it a “second chance” I couldn't afford to let pass by? Was it I always felt these types of strong feelings but never pursued them, that I always allowed myself to endure the pain of inertia over and over, the logical endpoint of which was always a type of insanity?—that I always allowed myself to endure the pain of inertia, even as people would comment on how I was so quiet, so in control all of the time, and I'd take the compliments, of course, knowing full well that by agreeing to the compliment I was negating my very nature, that if people knew the real me, the me that was innately obsessive, who played these dangerous games of inertia, they'd enter a state of shock, they'd take strong offense at my deception, how could I seem one way, yet be another?! I seemed like such a nice, quiet guy—until you got to know me! Whenever anyone complimented my perceived stoicism (and I obliged) I immediately knew I would have to cut all ties at some point, that, at some point, I would simply be unable to maintain my stoic facade and have to abscond completely. It was socially taxing. It was morally exhausting. One summer afternoon, while fishing with my uncle, the thought occurred to me as I watched the worm, still living, decapitated on the line, the hook piercing through its body, its decapitated body still flailing in the water, only to be eaten alive after

being decapitated—when the thought occurred to me: all morality must be some kind of rebellion against an autonomous order. I was disgusted! It occurred to me: to become conscious was to say, “This autonomous order of decapitation, mutilation, exploitation (in other words: nature)—is not something I wish to be a part of. It actually disgusts me (albeit autonomously)!” And isn’t that movement against autonomy, in its essence, suicidal?—an autonomous disgust against all that is (presumably) autonomous and irreversible (i.e. nature, in other words: life)? You’re not conscious as much as you just no longer wish to live, otherwise you could just “go with the flow,” unaware of what you’re even doing! That’s the truth of sentience as it occurred to me, fishing with my uncle, disgusted at the mutilation, decapitation—the inhumanity of the bait. (The irony is I was actually really excited to go fishing and still enjoy seafood immensely.)

When I walked into the strip club downtown later that night Mo’s dad was sitting at the bar buying shots. The girl I was now clearly obsessed with was working; she was talking to a bouncer, and I, of course, immediately recognized her and glanced away in a way that was so rushed I thought it made it obvious I was trying to look away. I continued to excoriate myself for feeling this way as I saw her; I was always in the process of ceasing to feel things when something like this would happen—I would always be so close to finally coming to terms with rationality, with courting logic, with marrying consistency when something like this would happen. And I’d treat

my obsessions with pure inertia, treat them as concepts, until the asceticism resulted in a bout of insanity—which I could not let happen again! This is the last straw, I thought to myself. Asceticism is insanity, I thought to myself. This time it is simply a matter of self-preservation that I allow myself to succumb to my own obsessive nature—to deny it any longer, to remain inert in the presence of insatiable thirst, would be the end of me. There was no question of that, I thought, standing in the strip club downtown, occasionally glancing at the girl talking to the bouncer, feeling slightly euphoric, as if I'd hatched some incredibly complicated scheme that was going just as I planned, like I flipped a coin over and over and over until it landed on the side I'd guessed. Glancing over again, I noted her butt protruding upward and outward into the desolate bar space; I felt as though maybe I should have been looking elsewhere? Was I acting like a male chauvinist—gazing at asses with reckless abandon in public? I looked away. Her black hair was gelled curly; she wore large heels that still didn't make her all that tall—there was an intangibility to her eyes that made them seem deep and/or seductive. I considered her physical features morosely—taken aback as I noted her posture was very professional and began brainstorming ways to engage in conversation, began to form the opinion she was too attractive to even speak to; despite the fact I considered myself a pretty good looking guy if you were into body hair. I started nervously chugging the cans of beer Mo's dad continued to graciously buy me at an above average pace; she walked over to the bar, and I held a can of beer in each hand, drinking at an

ill-advised pace. Mo was moping to an absurd degree (at the time he was in the midst of a contentious divorce); he shouldn't have even come out.

Prior to meeting Mo and his dad at the strip club downtown, I'd known with a fair amount of certainty that the logical endpoint of the afternoon would be going to a strip club by myself—which I should never do, no one should ever do, but my love life had been admittedly fraught with misinterpretation, disappointment, passion, complete and utter elation, suicidal thoughts, betrayal; it was all in your imagination. I knew love was an impossibility, a conspiracy that existed on the deep web that could never be proven—that if it ever was empirically verified I'd immediately lose all interest. I started aggregating unrelated anecdotes in my head and began to poorly construct an argument for drowning my sorrows solo—as it seemed like attending a strip club by myself was no longer just an option to benignly consider but rather a burden thrust upon my shoulders. I had no problem drinking by myself but going to a strip club by myself seemed totally out of line—yet was there any other choice? Everyone I know is either relatively happy or utterly miserable, I thought. But what about me, I thought. What's wrong with me, I thought. What is it that's preventing me from being relatively happy or utterly miserable too, I thought. I could be, couldn't I? Of course I could—I could be relatively happy or utterly miserable too—and, if I could, what better place to become relatively happy or utterly miserable than drinking at a strip club by yourself? At the time it made sense: my friend was dying a slow, excruciating death and



hoping to hang out with me soon, so I should go to a strip club by myself to maybe “bump into” a girl that reminded me of a girl I had a crush on in college. Of course, at the same time, I also felt an intense and unrelenting disgust with myself for even contemplating such things, such things were so beneath me, I thought—yet also completely in line with my character.

I told the both of them I was going up to donate one dollar bills to the girl who had just recently mounted the stage at the stage; I nervously said, “She’s hot, right, haha?” and walked over—she swayed unconcerned on the stage; she asked me if she knew me from somewhere, which I actually got a lot—“You Bobby Salami’s older brother by any chance?” “You the assistant manager at LA Fitness by any chance?” “You ever see that movie Aladdin by any chance?” Personally, I thought I had a unique look, but in any case I found it ironic she thought she knew me from somewhere? I contemplated if it was actually the same girl for a moment. She told me her name was Aniah; I replied in English; she was clearly a different person. She smiled and told me I needed a thicker coat; she had no idea I was wearing thigh high shorts six hours earlier. “Yeah, it’s kind of cold out....for this time of year I mean,” I said. She suggested a bubble coat. Not a chance, I thought (I hated bubble coats) and nodded my head agreeably as the conversation continued. I was experiencing the entire conversation at a remove; my consciousness was displaced outside of my body as I watched myself smile stupidly, trying to gesture with my hands, with both of my hands holding cans of beer, trying to extract the last remnants of wittiness out of my

rapidly dwindling sobriety. She asked me if she could stop by after she got off stage, if I wanted?—and I was still at a remove, experiencing vivid flashbacks of standing in an elevator on a Saturday night, similarly inebriated, talking to my college crush, what a similar spark, what a similar aura! Amazing!

In a restrained giddiness, I made my way back over to Mo and his dad and shouted for a round of shots “on me!” I then waved my index finger around in a circular motion while also recoiling slightly; Mo’s dad shouted phrases in pure jubilation, with the spirit of Dionysus resonant in his voice. A few minutes later, while leaning against the bar, I saw her begin a conversation with a customer in a lumberjack flannel and an oppressive sense of unavoidable calamity enveloped every organ in my entire body. Well that’s that, I thought; college all over, I thought; oh well, I thought; honestly, I’m probably better off, I thought; definitely, without a doubt, better off, I thought; that type a situation?! I thought and scoffed to myself in a relieved way, not feeling relieved in the least. Ten minutes later, she approached us and asked us how we were doing? Mo’s dad tilted his head back and shouted, “Whoa, who’s this cutie?” shouted, “Ohhh, I love your eyes!” She shrugged, smiling, and hesitantly admitted they were actually colored contacts. I said, “No offense, and while I can't speak for my colleagues, but I'd prefer to be upfront and just inform you upfront that I'm not interesting in doing any dances tonight.” She said that's ok, and Mo's dad bought her a mixed drink. Half an hour later, he pinched my cheek in a performative fashion, made a kiss-face, and drunkenly said, “Look at this handsome guy,” as he

waddled back and forth on his barstool—as I also waddled back and forth, but I was standing up while waddling. I found myself standing somewhat uncomfortably close to Aniah at different junctures of the night. Thanks to the more gregarious natures of Mo (who had, unsurprisingly, perked up once she asked us if we needed drinks) and his dad (and the fact the bar was completely dead), Aniah was actually hanging out with us. I kept excitedly shouting, “I’m not even drunk yet!” to Mo and his dad, yet I knew on some level that I was thoroughly inebriated.

Yeah, I am a handsome guy, I thought with select reservations as our gazes locked again; I may have pulled away prematurely, possibly rudely, or maybe it was her. At one point she whispered to me, “You’re a nice guy, right?” and I said, “Of course!” only briefly considering the possible motivations behind her, or anyone else, asking me, or anyone else, if I’m/they’re a nice guy. Mo did most of the talking— she was Cambodian; she had a four year old son; she was born in Long Beach but spent some time in Minnesota before moving East; her underwear was riding up her ass. “Ugh, I think I need a new pair of underwear,” she said sincerely. Mo’s dad exclaimed, “Minnesota?!” Aniah exclaimed, “I know, right? It was terrible!” She spoke with more amicability than I’d sensed in her previous statements. Mo, normally amenable to drinking until at least two am, had to meet with his lawyer the next morning (divorce related); his dad rarely stayed out past ten pm on weeknights; they both left. The bar was empty as we sat. Another dancer wandered over; she looked at me quizzically and asked me if I was from

Bracciole, because she was from Bracciole. After a slight pause, I told her I wasn't; she told me I looked like I was from Bracciole, and I took a fake sip of beer. Aniah interjected and said "Girl, have I told you how much I admire you for riding that motorcycle into work?!" The other dancer immediately adopted an excited tone, equally excited as Aniah's, and said, "Girl, that's nothing! You should see when I ride on it with my son!" They both cackled and Aniah told the two of us how she rode a motorcycle a long time ago, when she had a crush on this boy, then her eyes drifted—as if she was experiencing the memory for the first time as she spoke—then she told the both of us that the kid drove like an asshole though! That, after him, she said never again, then she rubbed her hands together like she was wiping away the memory with her hands. The dancer from Bracciole meandered back to the dressing room, and I pensively asked what her real name was, and she pensively replied Sophia, then I pensively—strongly considering the fact she'd spent more or less the entire night with us (save for darting off to do dances here and there), while I remained faithful to my initial, perhaps misguided, assertion that I wouldn't be travelling to the champagne room—asked for her phone number. She said, "Ummm," looking up at me, sitting on the stool adjacent to mine; she said it was, well, you know, kind of frowned upon to give out numbers, and I suggested I could just act like I was typing something in my phone while we pretended to talk, and she could recite the number—she hesitated, and while I was waiting for the reply I unlocked my phone and started drunkenly mashing keys, then she recited a number; she said

if we ever met up maybe I could teach her to pronounce my last name, which I'd recited for her earlier, which she didn't even attempt to repeat. I immediately replied, "Sure!" and she said, "Because we're about to close." When I got back to my car I made sure to immediately text her my number, but after I hit send I noticed I spelled her name Sophie instead of Sophia, so I sent a follow-up text that read \*Sophia.

I'd feel a tremendous amount of anxiety about the whole thing (specifically misspelling her name and being left with no choice but to send an asterisk text) the next morning as I un-ironically played the John Tesh "NBA on NBC Theme Song" on my phone, sitting at a new Bolivian restaurant that was gaining a sterling reputation around the city. I've already gotten further with Sophia than I ever did with my college crush, I thought giddily, still steeped in anxiety, as I greeted Mo, who'd just walked into the restaurant, without lifting my head. His Gucci brand wire-rimmed glasses floated above his bushy black beard; he looked miserable and sat down. The place specialized in breakfast and brunch buffets, so we walked to the buffet area where they had a solid selection of fish, including tilapia, which I thought was an underrated and underrepresented fish that at a later date my uncle would tell me was a "dirty fish." The thing about thinking not everyone realizes is it's not entirely under your control. High school teachers will educate you on Descartes' postulate: "I think, therefore, I am," and that kind of imputes a certain control over thought, like your existence as a sentient being

derives from voluntarily thinking, but that's actually not even how thought works. A lot of people don't know that. You can wait in line at a brunch buffet with absolutely no control of your thoughts. You can explicitly think I do not want to think about this, that it's absurd that I keep thinking about this—while you're actually thinking about that very thing. It's a difficult thing to comprehend, especially when you're trying to comprehend it while thinking about the very thing you're trying not to think about, while thinking about not thinking about the thing you're thinking about as you think about the thing you're thinking about.

The Bolivian restaurant cooked everything on the spot, you just threw whatever you wanted into a bowl. We walked over to the buffet area and Mo sighed, “Ayyyyyyyy,” longingly as he picked up a pair of tongs and started to fish through a container of capicola; we stood at opposite ends of the omelet section. Mo sighed, “Ayyyyyyyy,” longingly as he dropped a modest scoop of the heavily processed meat into his bowl. Why hadn't Sophia texted me back yet? Mo began to exhibit physical tics that led me to believe he was about to start discussing his estranged wife then told me he thought he might actually still be in love her—then paused and turned in my direction and asked what I thought, asked what would I do, if I were him? I dropped three chunks of tilapia into my bowl, didn't make eye contact, and told him confidently he should probably take some time for himself, to assess how he really feels, knowing for a fact he had no intention of doing that—that the last things in the world Mo would be interested in doing were taking time for himself and

assessing how he feels. I kept thinking about Sophia—I couldn't stop; every second my phone didn't vibrate punctured my ego torturously, and when it vibrated and it wasn't her it needled me even more! All sorts of imaginative scenarios were generated in my head; I was repeatedly violating the backbone of Cartesian metaphysics—there was no doubt in my mind, the fraction of my mind that I continued to control, that I was clinically insane. Yet Mo didn't seem to mind—he didn't judge me; he told me, emphatically, that he didn't want to stop seeing his estranged wife. I was perturbed but, admittedly, took a perverse pleasure in indulging said types of questions. Mo was three months younger than I was but was also relatively inexperienced in that he'd been with his wife for nearly ten years (including their time as boyfriend/girlfriend; they'd only been married for eighteen months or so). He entered into a life of monogamy with her at a very young age. He had minimal adult dating experience outside of his time with her—I actually had reason to believe his only extramarital sexual experience was a blowjob he received when he was seventeen, so I made salient, rational points that I personally wouldn't have taken into account when it came to my relationships, and Mo agreed with me. He told me my advice was the right advice—that, as hard as it was to hear, that I was absolutely right. He scrolled through what looked like days of text messages and shouted, “Look at this!” and pointed at his phone, anxiously rotated it into my periphery and asked me to read a particular exchange; his tone was legal—but also desperate and broken. He read the text bubble aloud before I could fully register the text; he

asked me if he should tell his estranged wife he drove by her mom's house the previous afternoon, and I told him probably not. He said he was going to—that he wasn't the type of person to lie about things, although we both knew he was the type of person to lie about things, all sorts of things (as was I), but the state of shock and hurt he was enduring had apparently turned him into a temporary ascetic, which wasn't uncommon, I thought, having endured similar episodes myself. I was actually feeling a little off myself. He hand-plucked a piece of capicola and popped it into his mouth; his desperation was gradually lifting my spirits. He told me if he drove by her mother's house she deserved to know it, that he wasn't gonna lie; he was gonna tell her how he felt because that's who he was, that she needed to know that, and I told him he should tell her how he feels.

The rest of the day was empirically excruciating for me—what was she doing that she couldn't text me back? What could possibly be so important that superseded texting me back? What was a text in the grand scheme of things, anyway? Not receiving, no—receiving texts is huge in the grand scheme of things and beyond. I'm talking about sending: to send a text? Sending a text is nothing: to type a quick reply? Later that night, a plastic bag holding six cans of beer sat on my passenger seat as I drove to Mo's mom's house—he'd been living with his mom and stepfather since his separation. Despite the fact I never directly discussed my problems with him, he really understood where I was coming from on a plethora of issues. I walked around the side of the house, through the stone patio, and walked in the back door where inside Mo's mom was serving crab cakes—she



offered me a few after I cracked open a beer. Initially, I told her I'd already had dinner, which was true, but ate two or three at her insistence; they were good. I was still waiting for a text from Sophia, silently vacillating between rational thoughts about how different people text at different intervals and apocalyptic thoughts about how she'd never text me back, cursing her name and indicting her character before thinking things like: then again, maybe she's just enjoying a day with her son.

Mo fiddled nervously with his white wine glass, a quarter full, and leaned forward against the seven foot long island in the kitchen; his ass stuck up in the air—he began to finger an open wine bottle and asked me if I heard about that idiot Enzo? I shook my head no. I began to lean into the island too, sticking my ass out too. His mom asked me if I wanted a glass of wine, and I declined, telling her I had these beers, holding up my plastic bag of beers. Mo moaned, “He’s taking that girl to Italy!” then stood up straight and said, “You believe that?!” I repeated the word Italy with a somewhat forced incredulity—I didn’t find it that surprising. Enzo was from Italy and was the type to fall in love on a whim, so even though taking this girl to a foreign country this early was excessive—it was a terrible idea—it wasn’t as excessive as it would be for anyone other than Enzo. I was nibbling on my second crab cake when Sophia texted me; it’d been about eighteen hours since my text, and for the majority of the day I’d been silently vacillating between rational thoughts about how different people text at different intervals and apocalyptic thoughts about how she’d never text me back, cursing

her name and indicting her character before thinking things like: then again, maybe she's just enjoying a day with her son. The text read, "so wen r u gonna teach me 2 pronounce ur name." I told Mo's mom the crab cakes were delicious! Mo asked what kinda message does that send? Taking a girl to Italy that early? ...Was Enzo kidding him? You know how much a ticket costs to get over there? And he's buying two! And I thought if someone texts me—I text back. Immediately. That's just the type of person I am. I sent a reply text that read, "lol this weekend if u want." Mo said, "Ayyyyyyyyyy." Mo's mom said she couldn't listen to anymore of his shit! Mo said, "I know. I'm a pathetic little bitch right now!" He shook his head, stuck his ass back out, and grabbed a piece of sliced cheese and popped it in his mouth; he continued to sip his wine with an urgency that was somewhere between his normal pace and one imbued with genuine stress. His mom asked me if I needed anything before she went to bed. Mo received a phone call; he told the person on the other line we were "on our way," hung up the phone and chugged his glass of red wine. He filled up the glass again. We were still standing around the island in his mom's kitchen when he asked me if I'd be ready after this next glass and held up his wine glass; I looked down at my glass and nodded. We discussed the phone number I'd received from Sophia, and he told me, "No offense," paused then said, "but I'd let that girl play eight rounds of tennis then sit on my face," and I was completely unoffended; I didn't care. I shook my head in a way that said, "I'm not offended." I'd, personally, let her play nine rounds of tennis then sit on my face! We were in agreement about the letting

her sit on our faces—we simply disagreed on how many rounds of tennis we'd let her play before sitting on our faces. I asked him to fill me up a little, noticing my glass contained just one last gulp of wine, noticing there was just a glass and a half left in the bottle. He asked me how much money I thought she made a night as he filled the glass; he chugged his glass again; he dumped the rest of the bottle into his glass, and I rocked my head back, completely speculating, and found myself revisiting the wen contained in her text message, thinking about how even though most people—myself included—seemed to stretch the rules of grammar in text messages, you rarely ever saw anyone drop the h in when. Mo suggested she made at least fifty thousand dollars a year, and I agreed; it seemed reasonable—his stomach protruded just slightly over his pant line.

Prior to meeting Sophia, I'd met some Italian girl at a bar and made out with her at the bar; it was an impressive kiss, very passionate, but we went quite some time without talking to one another. When we started talking again the style of her interactions consisted primarily of being effusive, incessantly texting me for days, then dropping off the planet, then resurfacing to tell me she really liked me, then blowing me off whenever we made plans. It was obvious she had a boyfriend. Following a particularly arduous text exchange, she told me she was moving to Florida, which didn't particularly surprise me because I'd already scrolled through her social media and found an attractive looking guy with a bio noting he lived in Florida. It seemed so depressing but, at the same time, I didn't know

why I cared—it felt like I should care less. I'd recently gone on a date with another girl, before the Italian girl told me about Florida, and after I heard about Florida we went out for sushi, me and the Italian girl, and she wore sandals, and I noticed for the first time she had abnormally large toes, which made me feel better about her moving away. The other girl had a kid, which didn't bother me; I could see where people would say she was attractive; she was objectively attractive, and I should have kissed her probably the second time we went out but didn't. I regretted not kissing her—specifically because my cousin's friend had set us up, so I knew I would be thoroughly lambasted in the presence of people I knew and respected, my heterosexuality would no doubt be called into question as a swift revenge for my refusal to copulate with the friend of my cousin's friend. I could already hear the refrain. We'd mutually avoid one another for the next few weeks, putting in the minimal acceptable amounts of effort vis-a-vis texting and, to be honest, I didn't really care, but I wasn't sure why I didn't care more—it felt like I should care more. Yet none of this was an example of some kind of bad month, some horrible aberration, some unexpected drought—no, it was actually indicative of pure normalcy: liking people who didn't like me, disregarding people who held me in high regard, feeling as though your soul mate was decapitated into a dating pool—their traits perpetually scattered across three partners, never to be recombined! Around the same time I'd decided to start drinking vodka in place of beer. I had about a quarter of a bottle of vodka in my apartment, and I stared at it—the Celsius breeze of the freezer

gently wafting in my face. I figured I'd bring the quarter full bottle of vodka over to my parents' house that afternoon for my sister's college graduation party. Optimistic thoughts meandered through my body as I held the ice cold bottle of vodka in my right hand—as my right hand began to endure sharp pains holding the ice cold bottle.

I jubilantly considered the benefits of not having to stop to pick up beer as I strolled into my parents' house wearing an oversized t-shirt my sister bought me the previous Christmas; I said, "You know who got me this shirt?!" to my sister in an overly enthusiastic, borderline mocking tone. I was the first one to the party. My sister and I had a similar "look," although neither of us resembled our mother or father; we were close. Logistically speaking, what hindered my transition to from beer to vodka was pace. I drank vodka at the same pace I drank beer. So despite the fact that vodka was an overall healthier choice of drink in terms of carbohydrates entering my body, it was less healthy in terms potential long-term damage done to my liver and kidneys due to the high levels of inebriation I reached while drinking. My sister's boyfriend and her friends trickled in over the next half hour, extended relatives too, and I felt an intense urge to indulge in nothing but silence, to be in the company of nothing but a complete lack of sound, as various iterations of small talk began to generate organically, like bacteria or mitochondria or other things scientific. I'd had an intensely regrettable one night stand with one of my sister's friends and she stopped by too. The vodka crept assassin-like as I sipped out of my heavily iced glass; I was

drinking it with just a splash of seltzer, which on some level I recognized was most likely ill-advised. I began to confirm it as ill-advised as my dad glared at me—as he manned the grill I’d volunteered to grill earlier in the week but was now visibly too intoxicated to grill. Yet it was too late to turn back. I couldn’t undo my drunkenness. In fact, I felt as though at that point my only real option was to embrace said drunkenness, to run toward it with abandon, to unapologetically carry this drunkenness to its logical conclusion. At the same time, I loved my sister dearly, and I didn’t want to ruin her college graduation party, but being in the company of people I had no interest in speaking with was more than I could bear. I began to realize small talk with extended relatives is one of the most acute forms of torture in America—mandatory get-togethers with people you never explicitly expressed affection for, not because you need to celebrate some event everyone is equally unenthusiastic about, but because you fear being alone. Fear of solitude is the primary cause behind all first world torture—small talk is the primary mode of said torture.

My dad said, “Slow down,” to me sternly under his breath; I could barely speak English. He lowered the arm he held his spatula slowly. I nodded and said something agreeable then walked off the deck and onto the grass. I found my awareness with regard to my physical location rapidly decreasing. I found myself having a conversation about a garden hose but felt like I was slurring my words (and leaning backward involuntarily), so I extricated myself quickly and stumbled over to talk to my sister and her friends. I ate some of the

buffalo chicken dip her friend brought over; I thought it was incredibly delicious and started making small talk, asking my sister's friend for the recipe for the dip, telling her she should come over more often, but with the dip, as my sister sat in a lawn chair with sunglasses on. I scooped up one of the last crackers on the plate and moved it liberally through the dip; I asked my sister if she wanted to go out later, which she immediately expressed no interest in; she told me my mom would never let me leave; she said it incredulously, as if she couldn't even believe what I was saying, as if she thought I was saying something else, as if leaving the graduation party was absurd, as if it was a physical impossibility. I was still chewing the cracker when I replied, "Really?" in a genuinely curious register.

The possibility of teaching Sophia how to pronounce my name occurred to me acutely, and I became flushed with anxiety, feeling as though time was running out, that if I didn't meet up with Sophia soon, as soon as possible, then the moment would be irretrievably squandered. Will this spark be irretrievably lost, I thought and thought about the Italian girl and the girl with a kid—girls I liked exponentially less than Sophia—how sparks were so fickle, how they came and went with no regard for social norms then shook my head incredulously. My sister avoided eye contact and said, "Yeah." "You really think so?" She repeated herself before leaning in gingerly and grabbing the last cracker on the plate. After a brief pause, I placed my drink on the see-through glass table with the umbrella hole in the middle and walked a few strides backward then sprinted toward the four foot high wooden fence that traced the backyard. I leapt

upward. The crowd of my extended relatives and my sister's immediate social circle all presumably looked on—probably around the time I reached full sprint—and witnessed my flailing body nearly clear the gated wooden fence. I reflected briefly back to my high school years, when I proudly qualified for All State in the triple jump as well as the long jump, as the tip of my right foot got caught on the top link of the fence, and I descended rapidly, face first, into the rocks aesthetically scattered at the entrance of the gate.

The next morning I woke up fully nude, face down, on top of a dollar burrito. The dollar burrito was tightly woven in its original packaging, and I unwrapped it and took a bite—it wasn't bad. On my phone, I had a somber voicemail from my sister, a few perturbed text messages from my dad, and a note that read, “u owe Sophia 50\$”. The last edit was recorded just prior to two am. I considered absconding—maybe starting a new life in a nondescript foreign territory with a more accommodating climate? Then I thought about my sizeable student loan balances, the United States government's expansive database of its citizens, its legal right to garnish wages, and my unwavering unilingualism. I took a shower, threw some pants on, and went to a restaurant called Chilango's on the west end; it had some of the best Mexican food in the city, and it was cheap too; it was the first place I'd ever had a “beer-rita,” which was a margarita with an upside down Corona placed in the glass, which I actually found to be a pretty asinine idea in concept as well as execution—I hardly ever ordered it. My head and stomach both felt



equally terrible. As I opened the door to the restaurant a very pasty prostitute—a prostitute most likely of Northern European ancestry—shouted something in Spanish, angrily, across the street; I hesitantly glanced in the direction of the shouts before walking inside.

Three young Caucasians with mustaches sat in the far right corner, and the mustaches were possibly ironic. I sat at the table closest to the entrance and ordered the taco appetizer, pointing to the taco appetizer listed on the menu as I ordered the taco appetizer. The waitress, of Mexican extraction with a tenuous grasp on the English language, jotted down the order and flashed me a sad smile, and I contemplated if it was possible she was staring into the depths of my soul as she stared at me, smiling sadly, before she walked away. Sitting alone at the table, I began to question my ability to rationally interpret the social cues of others. I ate four sizeable tacos for five dollars and drank two beers; I didn't feel any better about anything; I may have actually felt worse—I headed to a dive bar located on the city river. I sat on its sparsely populated deck, sitting at a cocktail table by myself, and looked over the river into the three large cylindrical, industrial constructions spewing out dark grey gas. I figured I'd just keep ordering beers—how could things get any worse? It was fairly clear that they couldn't—they definitely could, but the probability of things materially deteriorating seemed slim; it was no time to begin concerning myself with the possibility of things getting worse. The venue had a cocktail waitress on the deck that day, so I didn't have to continually get up; she had tan skin

juxtaposed with Norwegian white teeth—her thighs were exposed, and they were, like, pretty much painted tan. She might have been Portuguese—twenty two or twenty three?

I sat satiated in silence for two to three hours until the sun started to set—genuinely enjoying being drunk in the sun by myself, genuinely concerned my father, mother, and sister all now despised me due to my deplorable behavior at my sister’s college graduation party, genuinely concerned about the note on my phone that implied I’d seen Sophia the night before. How could I “owe her 50\$”? Clearly, I knew the answer. There was only one answer. Yet I had barely thought about it all day, at least not specifically—instead I disingenuously occupied a general malaise. Yet I was genuinely concerned; I’d spend the next day at work—from two pm through five pm—repeatedly, without pause, changing the shades of a block of three Excel cells from dark gray to light blue then light blue to dark gray, obsessing over the note, contemplating what it could mean, knowing exactly what it meant, brainstorming scenarios where it could mean something other than what I knew it meant.

I continued to contemplate the note until—following a handful of restless nights, following a plodding, incremental mustering of courage—I walked through the double doors of the strip club downtown already decently drunk. I found myself surrounded by the octagonal walls of the club, eighty five percent of them mirrors. I faced myself from all angles; it didn’t suit my mood. I walked up to the bar and nauseously ordered a beer, thinking I could have just let

this be, considering that fifty bucks isn't the end of the world, thinking she'd live either way. I could easily avoid this one venue for the rest of my life—I excelled at avoiding things; it wouldn't be a problem for me; I ordered a shot; I felt butterflies in my stomach in a portentous manner. The bartender asked me what kind of shot; I replied vodka; she asked me if I wanted it chilled; I said no. I thought, retroactively, that I definitely should have ordered the shot chilled, and while shaking off the aftertaste of the shot I unintentionally made eye contact with Sophia. It's incredibly difficult to get comfortable when you're standing in a strip club by yourself. There's no limit to the potentially judgmental things people may be thinking as they walk by you, as you stand there unsuccessfully trying to be casual, perhaps perusing nonsense on your phone, nonsense you aren't paying attention to in the least, because you're preoccupied thinking about what people are thinking about you as they walk by you, as they glance in your direction. My heart dipped down into my large intestine then rose up, Christ-like, with a little gut on its tip as I reluctantly, maybe autonomously, waved her over, waved her over with my head down, and she peeled herself off the gut of an older man and strutted slowly into my vicinity and asked, "How are you?" softly.

I greeted her nervously, said good, cleared my throat violently, said good again then said, "So I woke up the other day...with, um, a note on my phone that...said I owe you fifty dollars?" "Oh, really," she replied coyly; she said she didn't know if it was fifty, and I asked if it was more, and she said, "Ummmm..." I let out a nervous laugh

and put my hands flat on the bar; I put my head down for a second; she leaned on the same bar and faced my direction; I faced the bar. My embarrassment, my shame, my discomfort, my self-loathing, my discontent—I assumed they were all fairly palpable. She told me she didn't think it was as bad as I was making it out to be, that people came in the bar embarrassingly drunk all the time; it happens to the best of us, you know? She shook her head agreeably. "You just came in here at like eight o'clock really drunk. You had your shirt unbuttoned like...all of the way down." "Was my face bleeding at all?" She stepped back and tilted her head and squinted her eyes—I thought the blue contacts complimented her complexion. I asked her what happened then, then I stopped talking mid-sentence as she glanced across the room. It seemed like she was losing interest in the conversation; maybe there was something more interesting occurring in a different part of the bar? I asked her if she wanted a drink. Of course it was foolish thing to ask. Did she want a drink? Who was I kidding? With me? The Shirt Unbuttoned, Like, All Of The Way Down Guy? The Guy With His Face Bleeding? Yet it was at times like those—times of utter calamity and maximum embarrassment—that I'd find myself most at home, most in my element, most confident.

She smiled in a way that temporarily made me believe maybe it wasn't that bad, that maybe I'd been rotating my mind into knots for a week for no reason. But my shirt unbuttoned, like, all of the way down?! My face bleeding?! No, I felt at home; I felt in my element; I was totally confident. On the right side of her right calf she had an

intricate tattoo of a sign that looked familiar, maybe from other tattoos I'd seen? Was it a stock symbol? Something a respectable tattoo artist would give a twenty percent discount on? It looked like a name was printed in cursive letters across it—she told me it was her son's name; it was the only man's name she had tattooed on her body, the only man's name she'd ever get tattoo on her body. She looked around quickly, like there may have been some event she was scheduled to attend, that she was running late for, and I began to conclude the interaction was objectively going terribly, that this idea was objectively as poor of an idea as I had instinctively known it be all along, that my life had objectively taken some dark, irreversible turn somewhere. The bar always put two shots of vodka in their vodka sodas, Sophia ordered an energy drink with vodka—the bartender didn't seem surprised in the least. I apologized, apologized again; she told me it was ok, don't worry about the fifty; she giggled; I asked her why she was laughing, giggling. She glanced at the ATM, fifteen feet to our left, and asked me if she could tell me something, still giggling, then asked me if I saw that machine over there. "Of course I see it. It's an ATM machine. Probably charges a ridiculous transaction fee. In fact, I know it does," I said. She told me when I came in I repeatedly shoved my debit card into said ATM, because I needed to pay her tab (the club was cash only), and the ATM repeatedly denied my requests—she told me I began yelling, "I'm an accountant! I got money!" as the receipts piled up—that I threw said receipts into the air as I yelled this barbaric statement repeatedly, that I caused a total scene in the bar, throwing ATM receipts,

receipts that repeatedly stated my current checking account balance was thirty six dollars and two cents into the air, yelling barbaric accusations at the currency dispenser, wholly outraged that the ATM machine refused to deduct monies from my checking account, which had a current balance of thirty six dollars and two cents. She mimicked me by lowering her voice into a baritone register when she repeated, "I'm an accountant; I got money!" She told me, honestly, Tommy was about to throw me out—she said it in a serious but good-natured tone and patted me on the shoulder sympathetically. She told me she bought me a bottle of water as I sat on a stool by myself before I stumbled out; I told her, to be honest, I keep most of my money in my savings account, then she asked me if I was really an accountant.

Sitting on the stool watching her giggle, I thought she's giggling, started to think that—through self-deprecation, through booze—perhaps the encounter was taking a turn for the better? "Well," I began, trailing off, attempting to rapidly construct my disgust with myself into some sort of moral narrative. I noted a moving object and tried to guide her forward with my right hand as a drunk patron volatily rounded the corner, with no regard for where the bar stools were placed. I told her I was a little taken aback that she would buy me a bottle of water, considering how I'd acted, that I felt like most of my friends wouldn't even do that for me; she said, "What kind of friends do you have?" We continued to drink; I switched to liquor too—I liked vodka too. She didn't care about the fifty dollars, so I took her to the champagne room where we made

out in a way that was no doubt incredibly profound for a strip club setting. I didn't even get to see her fully nude.

In the beginning, Sophia could be elusive—which was actually preferable to me because, as I've made clear, the last thing I needed was to spend extended periods of time with someone who made me feel real feelings; the onset of real feelings would always portend terrible things for me—but I also found her to be emotionally mature and fiscally prudent, at least more than I was. I slowly began to reconcile feeling like a total jadrool going to a bar by myself. Sometimes she'd text, "wanna get white girl wasted w me," wait thirty seconds then text, "so i guess not..." She'd call me a young guy, even though we were both twenty seven, and I was technically three months older than she was. She'd tell me, in marveling type of way, that I was mature for my age, even though I was belligerently drunk nearly every time we hung out. She'd kiss the back of my neck, wearing her bright red lipstick, to see if I had another girl at home, and I'd tell her that, you know, I could just wipe it off, you know, if I wanted to, then nervously corroborate that I didn't have any other girls, why would I? I didn't have any reason to, you know? She said she didn't care about looks; she didn't care about money; she didn't care about dick—or she cared about all three to such a degree she said she didn't care to see if asserting something could make it true. On occasion she'd get upset if her son was too busy to hang out with her; she'd tell me proudly he could do math at a fourth grade level, even though he was only five!—then ignore my next five texts.

“Take this,” I barked one night as I opened my wallet. She said, “What is this?” as she looked at my credit card, which I’d just placed in her palm. She wanted to know why I handed it to her, and I said I didn’t know but take it for the week. The next time she saw me she immediately scampered to the dressing room and grabbed the credit card; she said, “Here,” bluntly as she handed me the card. I stared at my credit card, which displayed my first and last name, like a foreign object; she asked me why I would think she would charge anything, “Like, you know who I am,” and I meekly placed the card back in my wallet. I wasn’t overly concerned with monogamy as she sighed, “I need a prince charming,” her face bobbed over her shoulder, back toward me, as she leaned back into my body, and I cupped her body awkwardly, struggling to hear what she was saying while considering the fact she didn’t seem completely turned off by watching me throw receipts in the air in the middle of the bar with my face bleeding, screaming barbaric insults at an ATM machine was a positive that I still hadn’t fully comprehended—that it seemed possible it could mean something. It could definitely mean something, I thought, leaning into her body at the bar awkwardly. I can’t just flippantly disregard this event because she’s a stripper and I’m selfish—that’s ignorant, I thought. I can’t hold preconceived notions about people based on who they are and how I’m selfish—monogamy is fascism, I thought, leaning into her body awkwardly at the bar, struggling to hear what she was telling me over her shoulder. I asked her where she lived, and she paused like I thought people—myself included—usually paused before they said something false. She gave



me a location, and I paused then told her I didn't think I believed her; she said, "You knowwww meee," and clapped her hands together, kept them together for a few seconds and gave another location, one that was closer to the bar. Her smile widened as I noted that things seemed to be going well; it was the fifth time I'd seen her: the first time I was drunk off jungle juice, hypnotized by her resemblance to a college crush who dated a guy who looked just like me; the second time I got her number; the third time I was blackout drunk with my face bleeding; the fourth time I was apologetic and we made out passionately for almost twenty minutes straight. When I asked her to go out with me the next night she told me she was usually against dating people who came in the bar—that, actually, the only person she ever met outside the strip club that she met inside the strip club was the father of her son.

"Oh, you don't play around then?" I said. "I'm too old for games," she sighed dramatically, and with that I became determined to convince her to meet me outside of the club, which very well may have been her exact intent in relaying the previous statement. She told me her son's father's name was Nick, too—that it was bugging her out a little. I thought about it for a second then quizzically said, "Really?" She told me she was gonna get busy soon; she shifted around on her seat; she stood up and placed her small hands on my kneecaps then tilted her head almost absurdly far back and looked up into my face and said, "Thanks for coming in to see me." I smiled sincerely and felt like a genuine bond was forming between us, like this was a good thing even though, on some level, I felt like dating

strippers was considered a faux pas in many corners of the world—a quote-unquote fool’s errand. At the very least it was a major faux pas in American bourgeois society. Yes, the bourgeois society that holds everything not bourgeois in contempt; the bourgeois society that is, in turn, comically held as a standard—something that needs to be upheld, something that’s actually desirable! What a comedy of errors, I thought in a somewhat euphoric mood as I gazed at her walking away, staring at her ass and thighs, as I continued to confirm to myself that I didn’t care about societal faux pas. What a comedy of errors, I thought—wondering if I should stay for another drink, feeling as though I definitely should leave but wanting just one more drink—a world, the majority of which is certainly not bourgeois, campaigning together for the right to be bourgeois; the blood sweat and tears of the proletariat, of the underrepresented and the disenfranchised, the misunderstood and the systematically oppressed, all spent for the right to be bourgeois; the bourgeois that’s never held anything but contempt for the proletariat, for the underrepresented and the disenfranchised, the misunderstood and the systematically oppressed! The bourgeois that is itself the most contemptible; this is what we’ve deified as our standard; this is what we fight, not only to uphold, but to distribute?! We all must be bourgeois?! This monotony, this inanity—these are our rights?! We all deserve small talk?! No, I agree: the contemporary state of humanity is, beyond a reasonable doubt, wholly contemptible, in need of major overhauls but—actually, no, I thought, my eyes

squinting in rumination, my head tilted to its side just slightly, self-consciously sitting alone at the bar—no. Enough.

“Is that crazy? Would I be crazy to ask this stripper out to dinner? Is that crazy? She's really attractive, in my opinion, she's really attractive, but is that crazy?” I asked, abutting rhetorically, to my friend Andrew and his now ex-girlfriend at Lola's on the water, chugging a Michelob Ultra nervously. “You know,” Andrew's now ex-girlfriend began, “it's not that crazy...sometimes you need crazy!” Somewhat aware she was simply telling me what she knew I wanted to hear, somewhat concerned she was simply telling me what she knew I wanted to hear, I immediately agreed, saying “It's not ... that crazy—right? I mean, what's the worst that can happen? She's possibly psychotic? Big deal! I've been with girls who are completely psychotic! I'm psychotic!” “Exactly!” Andrew's now ex-girlfriend agreed, laughing lightly, Andrew silently allowing our conversation to germinate of its own ill-advised accord. I know for a fact Andrew believes this is a terrible idea, I thought, as I also, somewhere inside of me, know for a fact, beyond a reasonable doubt, this is a terrible idea, and I'm embarrassed, completely humiliated in even mentioning this thought in front of him, this is what my love life has digressed to, asking out exotic dancers? The only silver lining here is Ashley agrees it's not that crazy, but even her consensus is ultimately insincere, as she probably wants nothing more than to experience the entertainment of watching me, or hearing about me, in a completely ridiculous manner, ask a stripper out to dinner! And it

was ridiculous, yet we all know, deep down, exotic dancers are people, too—but none of us can admit that; none of us can even go about befriending an exotic dancer without appearing wholly absurd among our friends and family. “You know what?” I said to Andrew’s now ex-girlfriend. “I think I’m gonna do it. Tonight. I’m gonna go to her club and ask her out to dinner, why not? That’s not crazy, right?” and Andrew’s now ex-girlfriend agreed with me, it wasn’t that crazy—

Despite her elusiveness, or maybe it was a byproduct of her elusiveness, but one thing I appreciated about Sophia was how she never spoke of herself in a way that lazily baited people into asking about her. Her general reticence, in a way, was an aphrodisiac to me. This thought occurred to me specifically as the bartender, smoking a cigarette behind the bar where Mo and I sat the next night, said, “Yeahhhh, like, if it wasn’t for alcohol I’d probably be successful like my two sisters buuutttt...” as she stared blankly ahead, surrounded by a few benign clouds of cigar smoke. Mo replied eagerly, asking what her sisters did for a living as I sat sipping my beer, forcing myself, with all of my strength, to be polite and pay some modicum of attention to the ensuing conversation. “Well, one of them is an anesthesiologist and...” She was a tall blond that had a boyfriend, a legitimate boyfriend that she lived with—Mo was interested, apparently despite the boyfriend, because I’d said something like, “It could get messy...” in a critical tone imbued with my own experience, that trailed off with the intent of not seeming overly critical, and he

said something about how he technically was single and the limited liability he believed that entailed. “But yeah, back when I lived in Virginia this girl...we were out and she called me that. A pig,” the bartender continued; she squinted her eyes and glanced at empty space, as if she was imagining the girl was behind the bar standing in front of her, then said, “That’s liiike the one thing you do not call me. So I was like. Actuahl-lee. You’re a trough! You’re what pigs eat out of!” And it seemed to me she may have been unintentionally implying she ate out the girl that insulted her?—that if she was a pig, and the other girl was a trough, and pigs eat out of troughs... Mo said, “Oh, there you go!” enthusiastically. The merit of this type of describing and confessing was definitely on the rise; it was indisputable—everyone had a confession to relay, a real life anecdote to describe in vivid detail; it was a movement that would, I thought, in all likelihood, define this generation. A generation that inhales and exhales on describing and confessing, that knows only tracing and regurgitation, that denigrates critical thinking in favor of developing “technologically advanced” methods of voyeurism. Amazing! Describing, confessing, relishing your status as victim, inventing your status as victim, as opposed to analyzing concepts? Disrupting without ruminating—that’s what will define this generation. Screaming about dismantling the oligarchy on the canvas the oligarchy provides it and calling it revolution. Diversify the oligarchy, only then will we be satisfied! This is just ridiculous, I thought, sitting uncomfortably at the bar next to Mo and across from the bartender.

They both took a shot; she'd poured two shots without asking me if I wanted one. She lit a cigarette behind the bar and there was loud jazz playing. Very loud jazz. "What is that?!" I asked, sincerely and urgently inquisitive, covering both of my ears with my palms, the jazz assaulting my eardrums, and an old man in the corner murmured, "Dat's my high school jazz band." He was leaning over a glass of red wine on the end of the bar and, amazingly, heard what I said—despite the insanely loud music, despite being at least fifty years my senior. His hair was white, and he wore an equally white half-zip pullover sweatshirt. Mo replied, "Oh really?" then told the old man he played the skin flute in high school! The bartender cackled in the register of a person attempting to curry favor; Mo imbibed the cackling then turned to me and told the old man that I played the rusty trombone! It quickly became apparent the old man was serious, that it actually was his high school jazz band, that somehow the recordings were not only preserved, but the old man was narcissistic enough to ask the bartender to play the recordings in the bar at an unreasonably high decibel. Mo apologized for making the lewd comments when he realized the old man was serious, that he actually wanted to discuss jazz, and they discussed jazz and the local music scene, and I realized there had yet to be a discussion I was even moderately interested in participating in the entire night and began to consider that maybe it wasn't everyone else—maybe it was me. Eventually, one of the old man's acquaintances, a middle-aged man who I'd noticed professing his love of college basketball earlier, who wore a nondescript baseball cap, said the

name “Tricia.” “Yeah. Tricia’s son plays the clarinet, I think...” he said or something to that effect, and the old jazz man said “Tricia?” in a portentous tone then repeated “Tricia?!” angrily then took a step back and screamed, “Tricia fucked me up the ass! Why you’d bring her up?!” The loud jazz continued to play as old man continued to yell, “Tricia fucked me up the ass!” like a sort of mantra, robotically at a certain point.

Again, Sophia told me that she didn’t care about looks; she didn’t care about money; she didn’t care about dick—that stuff just didn’t matter to her. The nature of our physical relationship was based almost entirely on foreplay. It was something rare. (Or she was just unapologetically playing me.) I liked that. The night before she’d asked me how I liked her hair, and I told her straight, and she said she’d wear it that way at work the next night if I’d stop by, so I agreed then made a sincere compliment about her butt, which she seemed to accept sincerely. To be honest, for quite some time I’d seemed to shamelessly gravitate toward girls with “fat asses,” to the extent that I made a silent mandate to myself to only try to date girls with “fat asses,” if for no other reason than to ensure that I maintained physical interest, which I thought was an important part of sustaining a healthy relationship, which I didn’t feel that badly about because I felt like everyone had certain physical preferences in potential partners and to deny that immutable fact of human nature was disingenuous and, ultimately, probably an exercise in futility—but maybe I was superficial. I’d had a debate with Sophia

the night before about the color of grape soda—she thought it was blue—so when she texted me to come by that night I decided to text like she texted and wait a manufactured amount of time to reply. I waited maybe half an hour then typed, “i’ll come by if u admit grape soda is the color purple,” and she immediately texted back, “yes its freakin purple! Lol now come by,” and I found it interesting that her response time seemed to contract as mine expanded. I strutted into the bar nonchalant and buzzed off about eight beers and a shot as she rounded a bend right by the entrance, and we made eye contact; she blew me a kiss, putting her palm over her mouth, kissing her hand, then blowing the hand back down to her torso. “Nick, don’t leave!” she shouted urgently before being hastily pulled into a room. Is it possible I’ve become too cynical on life and love, I thought as I stood in the middle of the strip club by myself, approaching the bar, noting a drink card promotion displayed next to a container of lemons. I confirmed with the bartender that if I bought one of their cards, then I got twenty five dollars of bar credit for twenty dollars cash? Mo called me; he wanted to have “one more beer.” I told him I was at the strip club downtown; he said, “Ayy,” that he wanted to have one at his mom’s house. He was trying to save some cash; I told him I’d buy him a beer. He said he didn’t want me to pay for him; he didn’t want me to do that—I insisted. Sophia wanted me to stay for a little bit, if possible. “Can you stay for a little bit?” she asked softly as I leaned in intimately toward her, just to make sure I could hear what she was saying. I looked down at the top half of her head and maintained a muted facial expression as I gently placed the gray bar



card into my wallet. I told her my friend Mo was stopping by, that it wouldn't be a problem.

Earlier that night, Mo and I had been with Enzo ordering shots at a bar—the bartender poured us shots the size of juice boxes. We took them in a tightly enclosed circle where Enzo told Mo, “Ugh, your breath stinks,” and I agreed; I’d smelt it earlier and was relieved Enzo brought it up rather than having to broach the topic myself (I, most likely, would have never told Mo; I would have, most likely, made a pejorative comment regarding his breath to Enzo privately). When Mo arrived we sat at the bar, leaning onto the bar with our forearms, and I said something conciliatory but nonsensical about his estranged wife, and he immediately replied, “Mannn.” He moved his hand back and forth in front of his nose, wafting air; he told me I needed to check my breath too. I paused, recoiled slightly, and tried to comprehend the comment, feeling almost as if Mo was speaking Spanish, or a similar language where I understood select phrases but was unable to speak proficiently, as I looked at him intently as he looked across the bar unassumingly. I cupped my hand over my mouth and nose and exhaled and sniffed simultaneously. I said, “What is this? What is this, like, payback?” He shrugged his shoulders and his eyes darted back and forth, his attention seesawing between the various parts of the bar and my gaze. “Is this like payback...because I agreed with Enzo that you’re breath stunk earlier?” I said. He pulled his head back; his Gucci glasses shifted slightly, and he said, “What...you think...I’m still—no, man! I don’t care. I’m just saying...” No, Mo wasn’t out for vengeance—how could

I be so cynical?! He simply wanted to reinforce that we both had terrible breath, that's all. At the time I found him to be an utter crumb, completely contemptible; I told him maybe my breath did stink, but what could anyone expect after drinking all the beer we drank?! "That's what I'm saying! My breath stinks too!" he said. When Sophia came back to the bar she held two breath mints in her right palm—one for her and one for me, like she had made a habit of doing (I'd told her I really liked how the bar's breath mints tasted; they were almost like candy). I, thoughtfully I thought, cracked my mint apart and split it with Mo. He popped the half mint in his mouth. Sophia sat next to me, and I introduced her. Mo said it was nice to meet her jovially—he shook her hand in a motion that made it seem like he might kiss her hand. I was petrified at the possibility my breath stunk and immediately tried to broach the topic of leaving, but Sophia seemed disappointed when I said, "Uh, I think we might take off," so I agreed to stay for another beer, but spoke into my palm for the rest of the night.

Mo and I had parked next to one another in the parking lot, and he leaned his lower back against his driver's side door handle and sighed sincerely as I placed my ass against the end of my passengers' doors, one buttock on each, and ran my fingers sensually over the lining of the window. Mo nodded at the silence and leaned against his car drunkenly. He had his hands buried in his jacket pockets; he was hunched over and his expression conveyed thirst—the way his thick glasses sat above his bushy beard made him look hand drawn.

He said he wanted to be over his estranged wife and wasn't. I looked at the cement noncommittally and told him I'd heard divorce is tough. He told me he thought having sex with other girls would have helped more than it did. I told him it was a start, "You gotta get back out there, you know?" "How did you go about it?" he asked, "Or how is it going in there....with her?" I took a second; I hesitantly told him it was good so far, and he told me that it "seemed it," that "she was all over you!" which I appreciated him saying, regardless of whether it was true. His expression was both congratulatory and disapproving. I felt a strong urge to never discuss my romantic involvements again—to layer my feelings with various modes of deafening silence. I said, "Sure, I guess," that I didn't know, that she had a kid, that stuff, you know; he said, "Ayyy," He cocked his head; he told me as long as I was happy man—he adjusted his glasses; he told me, "Fuck money, that's for sure!" I told him I tried to take things day by day, and he said he didn't do that at all; I said, "Yeah, you've been jumping in head first!" I checked my phone—it was half past midnight. I said fuck then said I should probably leave to, you know, go get a burrito in an overly concerned tone. Mo checked his phone too but seemed unconcerned. I told him the place had a great steak and cheese, we both knew that, but that a lot of people had no idea how good their burritos were too. We were both waddling drunkenly in between our cars.

"But I don't know man..." I said, not thinking as the words left my mouth, words that I hadn't consciously approved to exit my mouth, still anxious about the burrito but also feeling a fluid need to

continue to speak. "It's like, I don't know..." I didn't know why I was speaking, and Mo's eyes perked up as he lifted his head from a despondent position into an intrigued position, an intrigued position that made me reconsider broaching the topic in the first place, and he said, "Oh, about what?" with his head slowly moving toward me. "I mean, she has a kid," I moaned like a child, not particularly thrilled Mo's head was slowly moving toward me. I said there was other stuff, too—I felt like there was...I didn't know...and his tone shifted into an uncharacteristic baritone as he said, "Personally," he paused, "do you wanna know what I think?" I said, "Go head," feeling strongly that I knew exactly what he was about to say. "I think you're fuckin crazy!" he said, "She could be sucking cock in there right now!" his voice rapidly approaching crescendo. I nodded agreeably—not that I necessarily agreed, but I felt like disagreeing would be shortsighted, and it seemed like a reasonable enough statement to make; it was a statement that I could see myself making if I was Mo. He told me I'd figure it out, and the conciliatory—but ultimately superficial tone—of the comment felt familiar, and it occurred to me that perhaps the tables had turned, that maybe I had suddenly transformed into Mo, that I was now, actually, speaking with myself, receiving superficial life advice from myself. I contemplated which amalgam was more contemptible: myself as Mo, Mo as myself, myself as myself, or Mo as Mo—then I said, "Maybe I'm crazy!" and Mo said, "Ayyyyy," and we left the discussion there.

We both needed a break from the discussion—the girls Mo fucked that failed to get his mind off his estranged wife, my “girl” who still refused to meet me outside of the strip club...we needed a break from discussing all of that. We wouldn’t even recap the discussion the next day, when I found myself wearing brand name sneakers while grilling hot dogs and hamburgers on Mo’s mom’s patio, when I found myself looking down at the brand name sneakers and began to feel strongly they really weren’t my style, when I started to seriously question why I even wore them and glanced down at the sneakers again, because the skin on my heels was getting scraped to the point it was painful to take a step and, finally, under my breath, cursed the anonymous manufacturers that knitted them so crudely around the heels—then thought they were probably knitted by underpaid Chinese child labor and retracted the previous thought, considering the possibility my heels deserved to suffer. Mo’s dad strutted in wearing a leather jacket, his characteristically blank expression, with a skullet of linguine-shaped gray curls. He said it was great to see me; did I wanna cigar? He held out a medium sized stogie. I grabbed it politely and said thanks. It was pre-cut, and I became concerned that, for potentially the second night in a row, my breath might stink as I lit it with the grill lighter. I thought extensively about how I didn’t want to have a reputation for bad breath, how I’d have to make sure I cleaned my teeth thoroughly after dinner. Even then, cigars linger, I thought anxiously—aware that things like bad breath can have dire consequences early into seeing someone, before you’re on close enough terms to tell them to go brush their teeth, when it’s

still acceptable, even expected, for communication to just cease with no explanation. I guzzled a can of beer and continued to flip meat with a black plastic spatula. Mo's uncle came over too. He walked in by himself with a solid head of black hair, wearing a black button-up with acid wash jeans and tan loafers—he said it was great to see me; where'd I get the cigar? I told him ask Mo's dad. Mo's uncle was Mo's mom's brother. I turned to Mo, who was also chugging a can of beer, and told him the food was done. After Mo's dad divorced Mo's mom, he married Mo's uncle's ex-wife, or Mo's uncle married Mo's dad's second ex-wife after Mo's dad divorced her—I wasn't entirely sure. The point is: they were eskimo brothers. Eskimo brothers, but they both married the girl that made them eskimo brothers (at separate times). Eventually they became best friends because of it. “You see Mary Lucia lately?” Mo's dad asked Mo's uncle. The family in the canoe was still struggling. “Mom, where do you want this shit?!” Mo yelled to his mom. “Not lookin gud,” Mo's dad replied to Mo's uncle, in reference to Mary Lucia.

Later that night, the bar was busier than I'd expected, and I felt my patience with constantly meeting Sophia at work waning severely. Is she playing me? I thought anxiously, but it didn't seem make all that much sense financially speaking, which would be the only sense she could really be playing me, I thought, beyond being purely psychotic, which made me feel like my impatience was possibly ill-founded—which tried my patience. I stood on the fringe of a plethora of local politicians that ranged in age from early to mid-twenties to, statistically speaking, people most likely to be dead

within five or so years. I recognized a pudgy Spanish kid with yellow teeth from a local social club that, with no sense of irony, called itself The Millennial Professional Group of Rhode Island. It was a group I despised in concept as well as in practice—I felt borderline insulted by its existence: a group created to perpetuate the word millennial and to market the idea of networking. Networking: the single best argument against capitalism I’d heard to date. I’d rather be an indentured bureaucrat in the former Soviet Union than discuss job prospects over drinks. I shuddered to myself at the bar, preparing to order a drink. Sophia was wearing a midriff top with a little belly protruding out, not necessarily indicative of any serious weight gain, probably just a heavy meal, as I sat at the bar and drank a beer and silently fumed, silently aware that, relatively speaking, I didn’t have all that much to be upset about. Not thinking, I told her she looked good in a monotone register as I registered her presence standing next to me, playfully not speaking, which made me feel better—that she was playfully not speaking despite the level of irritation evident in my voice. She tilted her head and said “Thank you,” then handed me a mint and I wondered if it was just a gesture or... She looked around and asked me if I wanted to go out to the patio.

On the patio she excitedly said, “See? That’s the test,” as her knee knocked my knee; she was scrolling through my phone, going through the music I had on my phone, and found my selection of Tupac, my selection of Bone Thugs N Harmony. “If you didn’t like Tupac...I don’t know if this could work,” she said and the sentiment—that she viewed our relationship as something that could

work, which was complimentary in a vacuum—irritated me in the context of constantly meeting at the strip club. The strip club, I thought. Could it work—between us? How could it work, confined exclusively to this strip club? In all honesty, the truth was: not only did I have a rudimentary selection of Tupac on my phone, I actually knew Shakur’s oeuvre down to the Teddy Riley vocoder outro at the end of “California Love (Remix),” the version that appeared on the retail version of *All Eyez On Me*. But I didn’t brag about it—even though Mo and I used to sing it drunk, back when we put gel in our hair and lived with our parents and/or weren’t separated from our wives, when we went to the casino in his generic mid-size sedan with the tinted windows screaming, “Puter, putah, puuuteehh!” in synchrony with Teddy Riley, screaming out the windows at four am. I said, “Love is love,” softly as she typed a Bone Thugs song into my phone, a song she said she and her younger brother always used to listen to when they were growing up (apparently they still repped Long Beach fairly thoroughly). I placed the phone’s speaker against my ear and struggled to listen; I could barely hear it but told her it sounded pretty good. “I looooveeee that song,” she said and took her hand off my knee, put it next to her ear like she had a headphone in her hand and began bobbing her head with impressive rhythm. “Ooh!” she cackled, leaning into me, and told me that it sounded like they said my name! I grabbed the phone from her with both hands and anxiously rewound the song a few seconds. I continued to listen and, with a quizzical expression etched onto my face, said, “Ummmm,” then told her the lyrics sounded like gibberish to me,



and she said, “I know,” and winked, smiled, then began to laugh and slap her knee, and my shoulders inched up toward my ears and my lips became slightly puckered, and I said, “You know, my actual...” but mid-sentence, unamused but also entering into a state of revelation, I realized I didn’t even know her last name!

I suddenly felt as though my lack of knowledge was absurd—that I should almost be offended that I didn’t know her last name. How could I not know her last name? You know who wouldn’t tell you their last name, I thought—someone who’s playing you. I asked her, “What’s your last name?” and she stopped laughing abruptly—as if I said something that ruined the moment. Her face went blank. I briefly considered saying something, anything, to break the awkward silence that ensued but instead just looked down at my sneakers, wondering why she had the reaction she had and again regretting wearing the pair of sneakers I wore; I felt so absurd wearing brand name sneakers. She reluctantly told me her last name then specified the pronunciation as well as a common mispronunciation. After she wrapped up emphasizing her hesitancy in telling me (or anyone else) her last name—which I won’t repeat here—in a direly serious manner, wrapped up emphasizing how she never told anyone her last name in a direly serious manner, I said, “I mean...it’s uh...nice...name...” where the pitch of my voice rose just slightly as I uttered the i in nice, and I noticed that her eyes widened a little as I said nice, and I took it to mean she was possibly receptive of my hesitant compliment? That I should probably strongly consider changing the subject?

As I strongly considered changing the subject, the song playing on the patio concluded—a longer than normal pause ensued before the next song started. I stared at her, considering changing the subject but unsure of what else to discuss (I was actually really enjoying our Tupac discussion), as she stared in the direction of a goofy blond man in a long black pea coat as he sat down at the patio bar. She told me she should go say hi, said he came in a lot, said she'd be just a minute and left her drink at our table. I glanced in the direction of the patio bar and felt nearly positive the young bartender had ass implants as she smiled innocuously at me. A minute went by—then a few more minutes went by. Then a few more minutes went by. Then I glanced over, which I had been arduously trying to avoid doing for the past few minutes, and witnessed a new drink laid out in front of her, and—as I witnessed the new drink—I felt, perhaps foolishly, like I took an uppercut to the gut, multiple uppercuts to the gut, then began to mutter angry non sequiturs to myself under my breath. I considered just leaving but thought that could escalate things unnecessarily? I tried to avoid looking visibly upset and eventually began to angrily unlock my phone, then realize I didn't have anything I wanted to do on my phone, then lock the phone and put it back in my pocket then whip it back out again, angrily, until I said fuck it to myself and stood up and stormed back inside but, when inside, found the same static cluster of local politicians. I looked around, unwilling to maneuver through the entire constituency of The Millennial Professional Group; I shook my head disgusted then thought could it have been the cigar?! An ominous revelation: I

turned back around and stormed back outside, silently cursing myself for so capriciously accepting the cigar from Mo's dad. How could I have been so short-sighted?! I thought apocalyptically, blowing my breath into my hand, my hand pressed against my sizeable nose as I walked back out to the patio where the first thing I saw was Sophia sitting across from my abandoned drink—looking angelic and conciliatory, like she'd somehow inferred my irritation from fifty feet away (or just glanced over at me angrily locking and unlocking my phone before I stormed away). She had two drinks in front of her and said, "Hiii." She spoke in a tone that was more gregarious than necessary. I asked her for a taste of her drink, pointing in the direction of her drinks as I plopped my ass back down on the futon, smiling slightly, unable to wholly contain my excitement she was sitting beside me, and she said, "Sure, which one?" I clarified, "The new one." I'd already tasted the other. She handed it to me; I tasted it—it was ok. Our gazes met as I put the drink down and she apologized for taking so long, "You know how it—" "No worries!" I interrupted, swatting my hand violently through the increasingly chilly air. She fidgeted her hips back and forth and sculpted her ass into the cushion of the futon. I sat back down and sipped my drink—I told her I'd just went to the bathroom, you know? That I really had to pee, that peeing regularly is important for bladder health, that, sure, maybe I peed more often than normal, maybe even more often than necessary, but it was better than holding it in all the time, right?

The procurement of Sophia's surname meant one thing: that I'd search her full name on the internet at the first instance of boredom at work. Upon procuring a handful of personal details, I spent the rest of the afternoon mumbling incoherently to myself—it was sad. I knew something like that would happen, and the worst part was I only had myself to blame. A few nights later, after strongly considering never speaking with her again, strongly debating whether cutting things off at that point would be the most prudent course of action (it would be), I instead went to the strip club downtown, where Sophia wore designer glasses with ocean blue colored rims; they pointed up at the corners and made her look like a different person, to the extent that I had to look over numerous times just to ensure it was her. She approached benignly, and I waited for her to greet me then said, “I gave you a napkin with my full name on it.” It wasn't my planned intro. She asked me what I was talking about in a tone she'd never employed with me before—she took half a step back with a posture that, to me, suggested she may have been considering an animated dash for the exit. Her neck was angled; she was looking up at me. I told her I needed her to burn that, the note—undeterred by her shift in mood, by her absconding posture, then she squinted her eyes angrily as I told her, “You know, do what you wanna do with your life,” but that I couldn't have people knowing my name. I started punctuating select syllables with my right index finger then asked her, “You know what comes up you when you search my name on the internet?” I paused. “...My mother!” I slammed my index finger down through the air as I

angrily uttered the first syllable of the word “mother.” “Her address, I mean!” I clarified as a few ounces of life seemed to exhale from her body. She asked me what was I talking about— “I fuckin googled you!” I shouted, and her countenance shifted in a drastic manner. “Well, if that’s what you want me to do, then ok. I’ll burn your napkin for you. No problem!” she retorted irritably, knowing full well where my irritation sprang from—and, even in my flummoxed state, I specifically noted it as the first time she’d been irritable with me, noted it as possibly the first time I witnessed her genuinely react to something I said.

I felt vindicated in a way; I found myself valuing authentic anger over manufactured congeniality; I found myself marrying sincerity to irritability, divorcing congeniality from authenticity. I replied in a retracting tone; I felt like I was sweating profusely as I exclaimed, “Maybe I don’t care that much about the napkin, but you couldn’t tell me?!” She closed her eyes, fatigued, as I was in the midst of finishing my sentence then grabbed the top of my hand and nodded toward the corner of the bar; she asked me if she could explain. She grabbed my hand, and we walked in the direction of a quieter corner of the bar. I grabbed her lifeless forearms from her lap; she didn’t seem to care, or at least she didn’t resist—I started examining them intensely, up and down. When she asked me what I was doing I replied, rabidly, refusing to look up from the petite forearms I was thoroughly examining, and she shouted, “Shhhh!!” She placed the index finger of the arm I wasn’t holding over her mouth and blew out air urgently. Her breath was mint scented, and I looked up eagerly.

She hushed me with both of her hands. I looked over her exposed thighs, up and down her petite, almost child-like, arms. “What did it say?” she whispered curiously. “...What?” “When you searched for me.” “Nothing fucking good!” “Oh, god...” She placed her face in her hands, and I told her, “You know...I knew you were hiding something. I’ve got a good nose for this stuff. I couldn’t sleep last night.” She put her index finger over her mouth again, side-eyeing the bartender fifteen feet to our left as I whispered, “Killed a guy?!” at a high decibel, a decibel that was the apex of what a whisper could logically encapsulate. She didn’t immediately reply. “I mean, you’re...” I lowered my voice and whispered, and after a brief pause she said, “Technically,” and I shouted, “You have some balls!” She overlapped my shouting, shouting she was sorry in a series of desperate tones; she looked southwest and told me she couldn’t look at me. “I can’t even look at you right now,” she said. She looked at me. She asked me if she could try to explain?—after she explained, if she could explain, “you can leave if you want,” saying she understood if I wanted to. My heart was pounding, but my sweat glands were slowly drying up.

I again found myself contemplating her version of when (wen) in her first response to me via text—I thought about when she informed me she didn’t graduate high school, how she wanted to go back for her GED, thought about how the socioeconomic state of this country was nearly at a caste system level, wasn’t it?—how growing up in destitute communities seemed to radically alter a person’s probable life outcomes but that middle class communities, like the one I grew

up in, also saw a similar, finite set, of probable life outcomes, that it was possible Sophia and I were simply two nonessential inputs in a larger probability distribution, that our entire conversation was emotionally resonant but systemically inconsequential. She exhaled and looked away, looked back at me and sighed, “My life is so fucked up,” dramatically but sincerely—told me it was funny, that before I came in she thought the glasses would hide her, make her a different person, but it was like... She trailed off. My beer was getting warm; she scrunched up her face—I didn't know what to do. She told me she understood if I never wanted to see her again, but I didn't feel that way; I told her, “Nah, it's not like that,” sitting in the quiet corner of the bar, no longer sweating profusely. Immediately, I was drawn to a binary interpretation of her predicament: she could have genuinely stumbled into a terrible situation and was now faced with the impossible task of extricating herself (i.e. she was a victim; how could I penalize her for being a victim?); or perhaps she was complicit in some way, perhaps she sought this type of situation, went in with “her eyes wide open,” and had no one to blame but herself. Obviously, binary interpretations are rarely accurate and/or appropriate, but we seem to be almost genetically predisposed to constructing them, like, all the time. At the same time, was I going to stop seeing her because I was scared? I was exceptionally frightened, but I could never admit that. Saying goodbye would be admitting that—that I was scared. Was I some kind of pussy? You kidding me? I was exceptionally frightened, yet I couldn't live with myself if I knew that she knew that—that I was exceptionally frightened.

The next night I noticed my phone vibrating beside my butt, but by the time I'd turned myself around to pick up the phone the call went to voicemail, and I muttered to myself with a tired expression—feeling fully reconciled with falling asleep within five minutes, no longer concerned about answering phones and speaking English. Then the phone started ringing again; the caller ID was blocked—I picked it up and forcefully said hello. A brief pause ensued, then a meek voice said, “Hiii.” “Who’s this?” “Your favorite little person.” “...Sophia?” (She was under five feet.) She was wondering if I was interested in grabbing a drink with her—my voice immediately elevated into an embarrassing falsetto as I said, “Like, tonight? ...Like, outside the bar?” Her vocal tone seemed pensive, possibly a little inebriated? Nervous? I gazed at my smoothie and asked her where she wanted to go? She didn’t know. I started throwing out landmarks. “Zucchini Park?” I repeated after she said, “Zucchini Park?” after she rejected the previous five locales I’d suggested. “They have places open this late there?” I asked skeptically, and she told me we’d figure it out. I giddily agreed. Zucchini Park was possibly a neighborhood but also a shopping plaza? To be honest, I had no idea what people were referring to when they said Zucchini Park, but I knew how to drive to a shopping plaza that I personally identified as Zucchini Park, so I drove there recalling the last time I’d been—when I was in a rapidly deteriorating relationship with a plus-sized Greek girl from Cyprus, when we’d gone to visit her friend, a manager at an outlet on the least busy strip



of the mall, and it was awkward, mostly due to my anxious avoidance of normal small talk. Later that night, after going out to a bar where I could only hear, at maximum, fifteen percent of what she said to me, after grinding on the dance floor and feeling equally embarrassed and libidinal about it, we fooled around for over an hour in my tan Oldsmobile; we briefly tried to have vaginal intercourse after I told her, “It’s ok, I’ll pull out,” after she said, “Did you know pre-cum can get you pregnant?” as I played the Def Squad CD I got for my birthday in eighth grade on repeat. The car ran the entire time. The CD started again from the intro, and it was a little jarring, because I was pretty sure the CD was on track two when I started feeling her breasts, and it was at least an hour long album (like so many rap albums of that era). On my way home, I distinctly remembered wondering if we could have died from carbon monoxide poisoning from spending that amount of time in a running but immobile vehicle—if we should have died from carbon monoxide poisoning for spending that amount of time in a running car. The car’s alternator died a month later.

Prior to Sophia arriving, when I initially took a left into the plaza, I noticed a stand-alone store that sold a rare type of frozen steak. My great aunt used to order me special bundles of said frozen steaks for like forty bucks a pop; the steaks were fairly delicious, but I’d never seen a stand-alone store. I found it curious—I was intrigued. I sat in my car and did nothing. As I waited I thought is it possible that I’m really the only guy outside of her son’s father that she’s ever met outside the bar? I began to lightly rummage through the coins I’d

tossed in my cup holder. It seemed like some type of accomplishment, but also possibly false—probably false? But also possibly false, but also probably false, but also definitely false? But also possibly true? At a later date I'd go into the frozen steak store and discover the deals my great aunt used to get were only available online. Now, from one to ten, how good of a father figure would I be? I thought, sitting in my car, doing nothing, as Sophia's white SUV pulled into the lot. She was on the phone, on a cell phone the size of her head, and flashed me a smile, apologetically motioned for me to wait a second as I continued to rummage through the change in my cup holders—I nonsensically began to separate the pennies from the nickels, dimes, and quarters. She wore ripped jeans and a tan-cream loose-fit blouse when she plopped out of the large vehicle and walked in a slow strut around her car into my car. Her head barely made it above the bottom of my passenger side windows as she walked. "This door's so heavy," she gasped as she swung it open and sat her ass in my car. I told her it was a luxury vehicle then told her she looked nice, very nice. She did; honestly, I felt my penis expanding in size as it relaxed against my left thigh. She leaned forward and placed her large phone in her large pocketbook as I leaned back and noticed she wasn't wearing underwear—as I witnessed the cellulite of her upper butt stretch until the skin turned lighter and lighter, watched intently as the pigment gently pulled itself apart, the top sixth of her butt crack becoming visible for three-fourths of a second. Before I left, I'd queried the general vicinity of where we met and still found no resolution as to what logically defined "Zucchini Park" but did

find a Vietnamese restaurant that was open late down the street. I fidgeted awkwardly with my steering wheel as the engine hummed and asked her if she was hungry? She was a little hungry. I continually reminded myself of the alleged significance of the situation, continually reminded myself of the skepticism I held regarding the empirical veracity of the significance of the situation as she sat in the car, visibly pensive, with sparse eye contact occurring between us—admittedly, it made a little more sense why she was so paranoid about meeting people period, never mind people she met in a strip club. I told her there was a Vietnamese restaurant down the street that should be open. Yeah, she was interested in that. I knew she would be. I thought her sentences seemed truncated as I nodded and shifted the car in reverse. She complimented the reverse camera, flashed three-fourths of a smile, told me she had one too. I shrugged my shoulders, told her it came in handy, you know? She glanced at herself in the visor mirror as I drove down the street. I glanced over as she hand-sculpted her hair and audited her make-up. “Hey...” she said, with considerably more spirit than she’d exhibited to that point, and closed the mirror and turned to me and asked me if I really thought she looked good? That she knows I said she looked good, but did I really think that? I’d never seen her outside the bar, so she was just a little curious. I said it was a little dark out, but yeah—she looked the same to me. She liked that; she seemed genuinely surprised and even more spirited than when she said hey thirty seconds previous. Having said that, she was still relatively muted—I would have felt better if she was a tad more animated. I nodded and

smiled, and she seemed more reticent than I'd expected in returning my smile.

We crept in the side door of the Vietnamese restaurant, and she asked me if I was gonna be a gentleman and pull out her chair for her? I wafted myself, similar to a littered fast food wrapper in an autumn breeze, and landed on her side of the table then begrudgingly pulled out the chair. "Don't get too used to this," I said in jest and smiled slightly. She asked me if I could give her a minute, did I mind, as she grabbed her large bag and walked into the bathroom. I thought, if she had to go to the bathroom, it would have been nice to go before I pulled out the chair. Was I a butler? Was that the expectation here? I was opening doors, pulling out chairs, driving cars? Was I expected to pull out the chair again when she came out of the bathroom? I sat alone at the small wobbly table. An older, presumably Vietnamese, lady greeted us at the small wobbly table—it was just the three of us; there were no other patrons. I felt bad; how could this establishment possibly stay in business long-term with this kind of traffic? Sharing a building with a Jiffy Lube probably didn't help. She asked us what we wanted to drink, dropped two rectangular black menus on the table, two rectangular black menus with the restaurant's name printed in muted yellow font. I asked for a water with a lemon; Sophia asked for water, no lemon—please. I glanced at the menu, perused it, estimated the bill. "We doing apps?" I asked in a tone that was as reticent as it was inquisitive. When the waters came, the lady gave me an extra lemon and I appreciated it, thought I may need to reflect that in the gratuity

and began to revise my estimate. Sophia looked into her glass of water, looked around the place, turned around toward a painting on the wall of poorly drawn people dancing—she told me it reminded her of the Vietnamese dances she performed growing up then hit the home button on her phone. I contorted my neck and noted a seductive selfie with the caption “I Love My Life” printed in cursive over her forehead; that was her home screen. I sat there, attempting to give off an appearance of glancing at the portrait, feigning interest in the traditions of Eastern dance, thinking that’s ridiculous—that people who have to outwardly promote that they love their lives probably hate their lives to the extent of being on the brink of no longer being able to even endure their lives! I mashed the lemon at the bottom of the glass with my straw. I glanced at the painting again—was this going well? I couldn’t tell... Should I act more interested? Less interested? More of a dick? Give off a little bit of that dickhead vibe? That good-natured prick vibe? That “I’m an asshole, but I’m not really an asshole, you know what I mean” vibe?

I considered delving further into the nuances of traditional Eastern dancing, but I doubted my ability to feign any further interest (I’d always felt a strong disdain toward dancing)—I asked her what she was gonna order; was there anything in particular I should be aware of? The menu seemed to deviate drastically from Chinese? Was there any chow mein I was missing? Was that ignorant—to be looking for chow mein in a place like this? Conflating Chinese with Vietnamese? Was it ignorant to assume she would know if that was ignorant? She suggested the pho. She pronounced it

fuh. My eyes wandered up and down the menu and I said, “Now, where would that....” trailing off as my eyes continued to meander. She took her index finger (it was painted turquoise; it was a ridiculously skinny finger—even given her height and frame) and tapped the line item that read “Pho - \$11.99 [add \$1 for shrimp].” “Beef or chicken?” She usually did the beef. In my head, I screamed she ordered the Kobe beef like Shaquille O’Neaaaaal! Whenever I was in the presence of a female who chose beef I’d involuntarily scream the statement in my head.

As we prepared to eat, unwrapping our chopsticks, arranging our plates and bowls, she spoke softly, like someone could be listening in, and told me that it was good that I liked to try stuff like this. She was always telling me that it was good that X was the case—implying that if X wasn’t the case that maybe that would be some type of problem? (Would it be?) And it was almost always in reference to something completely asinine. Oh, if I didn’t like Tupac, this could never work? If we couldn’t sing Shorty Wanna Be A Thug together our relationship would irreparably dissolve? Oh, if I didn’t know how to use chopsticks....then this wouldn’t work? That’s the breaking point here? What about your search results on Google, let’s talk about that—let’s leave my above average chopstick skills out of this, I felt like saying as she held her chopsticks over the bowl. She asked me if I knew how to use them, smirking slightly, and I said, “You fucking kidding me? I’m a pro!” The tab came to thirty something. I waved a hand she hadn’t raised away then shoved a credit card into the jacket and asked if she had to head back in an overly friendly

tone, a tone that I regretted as the words left my mouth. She hit the home button on her phone again and said, “Ummm...” I twirled my thoroughly chomped on straw around my almost empty water glass and asked if I could ask her a question. Did she mind? She stared at me gregariously; I asked her if she was talking to her sister in the bathroom? She’d told me the first time she went out with her son’s father she asked her sister to wait by her phone, so she could call her and let her know she was safe—I was wondering if she did the same with me. She said, “Maybe,” then made a scrunched up, kind of playful face. I relinquished my grip on the straw and dropped my shoulders a few inches dramatically—she took a glance around the place; I reflected on her personal history via the internet, thought I needed to stop dwelling on her personal history, especially via the internet, that it was lame to dwell on things, then I shrugged my shoulders two times, furrowed my brow faux-contentiously. It was possible I was slightly offended. I told her I had no room in my studio apartment for anyone else—that I wouldn’t steal her, and her facial expression shifted as I began to intensely regret making the statement; I began to nervously wonder if it was too soon to make “jokes,” then I smiled wide-eyed, severely doubting what I said was amusing in the least but hoping the self-deprecating elements of my comment superseded the offensive elements. “You’re funny,” she said, stoically for a moment, then we both smiled, then I drove her back to Zucchini Park, completely ambivalent as to whether or not things were going well.

After we said goodbye, after talking for a few minutes in my parked car, she pushed open my passenger door and moaned ughhh as she heaved hard with both arms. I think that may have gone well! I thought optimistically. I hit reverse and a muffled voice exclaimed “Hey!” I hit the brake and rolled down my window and looked back—she was still in the elongated process of slowly strutting around my car, standing in the middle of the parking lot asking me if I was trying to run her over?! She smiled slightly and shook her head. I apologized with my head awkwardly sticking out of the car window—I placed my palm around the level of her head and smiled back. On my way home she called me; I was barely on the highway when she called—she told me she had a really good time; I was equally elated and relieved. I agreed and tried to think of other compliments to say before she asked me again if I really thought she looked the same as she did the other times I’d seen her—in the bar, you know? I reiterated she was extremely attractive, inside or outside of a bar atmosphere, that she was one of the most attractive girls I’d ever met, and I wasn’t even trying to gas her head up; I’d actually rather not say something like that to her—I definitely did not wanna gas her head up but, at the same time, if she kept asking me I might be tempted to tell her no. “Just making sure,” she said softly then asked me if I’d heard a song on the radio I’d heard but I didn’t like—yet rather than judging her taste in music (we actually had similar tastes in music for the most part) I instead considered how calling someone immediately after you went out with them was



an indicator of being seriously interested in them romantically and felt good.

After meeting with Sophia and eating Beef Pho in a quaint Cambodian restaurant in Zucchini Park things were good. Things were obviously incredibly contentious at times—I felt like I was losing my mind, but they were steady, relatively speaking. Mentally, egotistically, I was surprisingly satiated by seeing her outside the bar, continuing to see her; it felt like things were legitimized, like the stochastic interaction of events that led us meeting one another possibly meant something—like discovering she had an incredibly complicated personal history that may or may not place my safety in jeopardy was the best thing that could have happened to us. Fate is a difficult thing to gauge when you feel as though, ostensibly, you have the option to make your own decisions—when you feel like the world is real manifestation composed of things that are separate from other things, where you're an actual individual (separate from other actual individuals and things), with a functioning set of motor skills that allow you to make conscious decisions, but fatalism can be a convenient way of interpreting the world. “I said to myself, if he's ok with this? Then maybe this was meant to be,” Sophia said, disclosing that she clearly had a fatalist bent to her thinking as well. I got the impression her fatalism was possibly a byproduct of inertia? (We had so much in common.) That she was hoping that fate would happen—maybe in a way that could save her from having to make difficult decisions, decisions like leaving a husband? That I could

somehow google her way out of her marriage for her, and we could call it fate? “He’s told me he’ll murder me if I ever leave him and I believe him,” she said, and I replied that I didn’t “give a fuck!” in a sort of automatic, heat of the moment retort, and she shot me a disapproving, embarrassed glance, and I told her you know what I mean, that I was speaking metaphorically, which was, of course, completely untrue.

She said, at a point, initially, she’d tried to lose all contact with a previous ex—at least she tried to after visiting him in prison a few times, realizing he was changing for the worse, and also apparently gaining considerable muscle, and had no idea about the terms of his incarceration, and I said the website I visited stated he was up for parole relatively soon and felt fairly emasculated while saying, “Well, the website I visited,” and also noted the website gave visitors the option of becoming pen pals with him, but he was serving a life sentence, so it seemed unlikely that he would be released at his earliest possible parole date, but it was concerning either way, and she agreed. She also informed me the phone number she initially supplied me was her sister’s. Interesting. She also told me her sister’s phone was thrown in the toilet over the weekend, so she had a new number. Who would throw her sister’s phone in the toilet? Her sister’s kids’ father threw it in the toilet. Oh, why would he do something like that? Some dude kept texting her... Oh, some dude? Yeah. (Obviously!) She kept telling him it was no big deal, but he wasn’t buying it. So it was some dude that kept texting her sister’s phone? Her sister’s phone—the number that Sophia initially gave

me? Yeah, that was the one. So her sister's kids' father got so mad that some dude—some dude (who was me) kept texting her....he got so mad he threw the phone in the toilet? Now, she needed a new phone. Ugh, it was so annoying. Phone stores?! They're always trying to, like, upsell you and stuff? Those installment plans can be so misleading! How they sell you on lower monthly payments, but you, like, pay more for the phone over the long run?! Ugh! So that night she gave you her sister's phone number?! I thought in disbelief. Is her sister's kids' father currently attempting to track me down because he believes I'm trying to pursue, or is already involved with, or was previously involved with, the mother of his children?! I thought in disbelief. I mean, he threw her phone in the toilet, right?! I thought in disbelief. But would he remember the number if he threw the phone in the toilet? I thought, slightly optimistically. And was he technologically savvy enough to track me down by a phone number alone? I thought, slightly optimistically. She told me she told her manager, Wu, that I knew her background then again noted her relief that I knew.

“Looking back, it was tough...” she said, seemingly relieved. She was wearing a nineteen fifties style dress with a large bow as a belt around her torso, her hands politely placed around her glass, her eyes directed down to the floor. She didn't know how to tell me; she felt like when it came down to it...that that was gonna be the breaking point...one way or the other, you know? Once I found out... She spoke with an apparent optimism that caused a mild euphoria in my lower gut region as her eyes approached mine—as I continued

imagining being viciously hunted down by her sister's son's father and perhaps various other males from her past. Dying an agonizing death when I least expected it. This meant something. I understood what she meant. It made sense. It totally made sense. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that I could perish sooner than later. "Like...now—we can move on," she said, and I smiled genuinely, although I felt slightly anxious about the phrase move on, then looked to my left. "That's him, right? Wu?" He was the only one at work that knew; she didn't even show people her license—actually, she could get "real ghetto" if anyone tried to even look at her license. I nodded perfunctorily. Having said all of that, she noted her husband and his mother taught her how to be polite (she apparently used to "be real ghetto"), and she had to admit that she felt indebted to him as well as his mother for helping her hone those bourgeois social skills, and I set aside any feasible jealousy for a moment and genuinely appreciated the anecdote—felt a form of vicarious indebtedness to her husband and his mother as well. The bourgeois was ultimately the standard we all aspired to achieve—behaviorally and economically. We all need to acculturate ourselves to middle class Anglo Saxon values as soon as possible.

"Round and round and round and round," Wu made a twirling motion with his index finger in the air as he spoke to me later that night, "I've been seeing the same shit for twenty seven years," he said. Oh nice, I thought despondently as he wiped an unspecified fluid from the bar counter. His hair was slicked back but wavy, pompadour style; short and slender, he always wore an oversized

button up t-shirt over slacks and dress shoes. I thought he might be, like, some kind of Made Guy in the mafia—if those guys still existed—before Sophia told me he was half-Chinese, which immediately laid that notion to rest, because according to mafia movies I'd seen you could only become a Made Guy in the mafia if you were one hundred percent Italian. Enzo would, technically, be eligible to become a Made Guy in the mafia. Wu, however, would find his career forever halted as an associate—which meant a Made Guy (potentially Enzo?) could, technically, put a hit out on Wu without approval from one of the bosses of the five families. He could just do it. Enzo, if he was a Made Guy, could literally kill Wu, if he was an associate, with no repercussions whatsoever. Those were the rules of the American mafia, according to movies I'd seen. Overall, he seemed like a pretty nice guy. However, at the same time, I was still hesitant to get into too deep of a conversation with any of the staff—up to and including Wu. The fact of the matter was I didn't even trust Sophia to keep my best interests in mind if things somehow went south (which seemed to be the most likely outcome), never mind trusting Wu, never mind trusting some kid getting paid eight bucks an hour to mop piss off the floor in the bar bathroom.

The next morning, considerably hungover, I was heating up a cup of coffee for the fourth time that morning when an old lady from the logistics department walked into the kitchen. When she saw me she muttered a comment in a deadpan tone that, frankly, isn't worth repeating. I genuinely attempted to avoid eye contact. Pasty-skinned,

she wore unnecessarily dressy slacks and had really long fingers—she was in her mid-to-late sixties, possibly older? Does it matter? We'd already found ourselves in the kitchen at the same time a few times that morning. I pretended to check something on my phone as the microwave hummed in the background; the refrigerator made an exaggerated wailing noise, and I think we both wondered why it wailed in the tone that it wailed—it was an orgasmic type of wail. I'd put my cup of coffee in for fifty seconds, inspired by the thought that I didn't wanna come back to the kitchen again before lunch, then thought, in retrospect, maybe I should've just added ice and made an iced coffee? I definitely should have. Technically, I still could. The only question was: were there ice cubes in the refrigerator? The old lady hunched over the kitchen sink and began to rinse her coffee cup. The last time we rendezvoused she shared her thoughts with me about the expired quarts of milk; frankly, she couldn't believe nobody threw out the expired quarts but her! Who are these animals, these pigs?! Would they do that at their home?! She doubted it! Who were they—because there was a goddamned quart of milk that expired three weeks ago in here! Chunks and everything! She started sniffing the open containers; you know sometimes they go bad before the friggin expiration date, right? (Is it really an expiration date if it expires before the date?) I opened my camera phone, turned the lens in my direction, and began to monitor how my hair looked with little to no intent of taking a picture. She opened the freezer door; she scooped out an ice cube (inadvertently confirming I could make an iced coffee if I

chose)—she dropped it immediately; it shattered on the linoleum floor, and she cried out, “How does one ice cube break into all these big pieces?!” There were eight or so small pieces of ice cube scattered on the linoleum floor. She shuffled over and arduously picked up one piece—a fair amount of unappealing grunting was involved in the retrieval of the piece of cube. The microwave went ding! behind me. She continued to shuffle around, trying to pick up the stray pieces of ice cube that, I estimated, would most likely melt before she could retrieve them all. I crept quietly around her and walked back to my desk; I wasn’t really in the mood for iced coffee anymore. I pulled out a crumpled up napkin from the side pocket of my laptop case, brought it up to my eye level, and glanced at it inquisitively. “Thank u for being awesome,” read one line she wrote in exemplary cursive. “I think your [sic] amazing,” read another, and on the back we both signed our names, which, admittedly, even at the time, seemed embarrassingly sentimental—but also seemed touching, even if we were both pretty inebriated, borderline obliterated, when we penned the signatures.

It could’ve been worse, I thought, standing with my back against Mo’s mom’s front door, standing on her porch drinking a glass of white wine with Mo—who was wobbling over me—asking, “Isn’t it possible she could change?” My glass of wine was wobbling up and down, the wine swishing back and forth at the bottom of the glass like a pendulum, and I told him I wasn’t sure; I paused to consider how to phrase my—for the most part, acutely negative—feelings on

the matter. I told him every time he talked to me about it he told me a different set of circumstances, that every time he told me a different set of circumstances he told me that set of circumstances was the truth. Mo walked down the porch to urinate and said, “No, keep talking,” as he pulled out his penis and began to urinate on the lawn. I continued to speak; I felt a social obligation to continue sharing improvised views on the matter. I looked out onto the opposite side of the deck, looking away from Mo urinating as he spoke loudly from the grass, “So, you think there’s no chance this girl...” he paused as he placed his penis back into his sweatpants and jogged up his mother’s porch stairs, “So, you think there’s no chance this girl has just been misguided her entire life—and now that she’s been called out on it...now that I called her out on all of her shit...that there’s no chance that she could turn her life around? With me...” I told him I thought anything was possible, love was love, but also reiterated she was thirty two years old.

Ultimately, I had to let matters such as Mo’s go—they were only my concern to an extent. I left to meet with Sophia, and the nonchalance of her speech juxtaposed against the relative scorn of her content as she relayed her skepticism with regard to guys who went to the gym frequently, guys who were overly concerned with aesthetics. “Fuck that,” she said, “why do you have to put on a fitted to go to CVS? To fuck with some other bitch?” Following a two second pause, I nodded my head sagely. I was slightly afraid of her but also silently flexing what I hoped would eventually turn into a six pack under my thermal. Sitting at the bar Sophia said she “just didn’t



know,” and I asked what about?—hoping she was reconsidering her feelings on wearing a hat to CVS, that maybe she’d recognized the sentiment as slightly overbearing, and she told me that sometimes, her eyes meandered solemnly, sometimes she just wanted to move somewhere where nobody could find her, in the woods somewhere, you know? I glanced over the bar, noting the venue had a limited selection of beer. Personally, I’d always slept better in urban locales. Rather than verbally replying, I touched the side of her hand and smiled; she smiled back in a more muted way than I smiled. An older Asian man walked in the door, and Sophia noted him; she continued to orchestrate her talking points with her right hand, the size of a green apple, and told me, “It’s like every Asian dude that comes in the bar always looks at me with the most shame...like, ‘The fuck happened to you?’” She laughed a little, and I raised my hands a few inches from my lap and asked, more or less tautologically, “Why? Because you’re Asian? And you’re a stripper?” “You know what I mean!” She took a slurp of her tequila and said, “Like, I was supposed be better at math or something...”

Sophia tilted her head and shouted loudly, excitedly greeting her friend, who had just come downstairs. At that point, I noted Sophia’s jet black hair was straightened, and the straight-thin hair follicles juxtaposed against the cushioning of her ass cheeks. I was objectifying her body without her permission, there was no doubt about that. Her friend said hello almost as loudly as Sophia as they embraced. “Girl, sit down!” Sophia instructed then noted she had to pee. She asked me did I mind? I motioned hastily toward the

bathroom and said, “Don't fuckin pee your pants!” I introduced myself to her friend, Emily. She squinted at me in a scientific manner then asked if I was Portuguese? I clarified my ethnic background then nodded my head unenthusiastically and asked her about her ethnicity; clearly, it was a more or less mandatory question. Oh, what are you? Oh, I'm this—what are you? It would have been rude not to ask. She told me she was Puerto Rican, went on to tell me how she lived close to Sophia, told me a little bit about her and Sophia's friendship, how it extended across multiple clubs, how they sometimes went clothes shopping together. “She really likes you,” she said, trailing off with a muted importance. I found the really she included before likes struck me acutely—I ominously thought about how it was possible that the really implicated that Sophia was capable of giving off the impression that she liked people when she really didn't (of course, I was guilty of doing essentially the same thing with a potpourri of acquaintances over the entirety of my sentient life), and it suddenly seemed possible (likely?) that Sophia was only giving off an impression of liking me, that maybe that impression was actually false, that maybe I was involving myself in a shell game of likes, a shell game that perhaps her friend was intimately involved in? After all, they did work together at a venue that was nothing if not a shell game of likes—so was it that paranoid to think that they could still be in collusion? In a shell game of likes? I ordered her a mixed drink and told her I really liked Sophia too.

Sophia came back from the bathroom, and she and Emily talked benignly as I stared blankly into the distance of the smallish

downstairs. I was imagining a rail thin middle aged guy, sitting in a booth wearing a sad face, going back to his apartment every night and weeping while masturbating, feeling legitimately somber for him and the fate I was imagining for him when I overheard Emily say, “Yeah, I thought he was Portuguese,” then saw Sophia surreptitiously glance in my direction before she said, “I think he’s got that 7-Eleven look,” and giggled. I hunched over as I held my beer between my pectorals. Unsolicited, I began to lean further into their conversation then asked, “What’s that supposed to mean?” in a tone that was intended to be equally inquisitive and confrontational to Sophia. She turned from her friend and into me and looked up and told me I had a ...handsome... “7-Eleven look” as she gazed around my Adam’s Apple and looked up into my eyes. She smiled and touched my torso as she moved around me to sit back down. “Oh cool,” I said, noting for a moment the word “handsome” was uttered in a tone that was more interrogative than assertive. Yet I was placated—more so by her touch than her words, and I sat down next to her, between her and Emily.

“You licked her asshole?!” Mo asked as he shot the basketball poorly. He wasn’t any good. He was totally out of practice. “Yeah, so?” I retorted. I didn’t care in the least and didn’t see anything particularly objectionable about the act as long as the area was clean. He told me this was a new low for me. I asked him what all that “I’d let her sit on my face after playing eight rounds of tennis” talk was about? Was he just saying that to say it? It was so typical of Mo to be disingenuous

like that. I jumped up and grabbed his miss before it hit the concrete and asked him why she couldn't have a great overall genital region, asked him how he could confirm the cleanliness of a comprehensive genital region without first-hand experience of said genital region? Licking ass was, in my opinion, a progressive act. It wasn't something that should be denigrated with little to no contemplation with regard to why someone would be denigrating it. He asked me if I was gonna shoot. I bricked a midrange jumper and watched the ball bounce onto the grass as we both stood there. I told him it wasn't like I was marrying the girl—and by saying the words it's not like I'm marrying this girl immediately reminisced about thinking man, I should marry this girl after Sophia told me she bought me a bottle of water on the night my face was bleeding. It seemed so nice at the time, and, even though I had serious reservations about the institution of marriage as a whole, I felt like I was being peer pressured into disingenuous statements regarding who I would or wouldn't marry. Maybe I would marry Sophia, and what was so wrong with that if I did? The unmitigated sunlight made the blacktop oven-esque, even if you were wearing sneakers, and I asked Mo if I was persecuted now, because I ate ass? Was that it? One day, he too would do it. He'd lick ass. He knew it. He agreed. He told me he was actually looking forward to the day it happened—now that he was separated, he wanted to open himself up to those types of new experiences. Maybe he'd lived a sexually repressed life? What did it taste like anyway? He dribbled, all right-handed on the left side of the court (which, for the record, was generally considered a faux pas

to the majority of the basketball community), to the basket and made a lay-up. He told me as long as I was happy, man... then made a statement that poorly mitigated his previous statements, probably feeling bad for denigrating a girl that, given my butthurt comments (no pun intended), I genuinely seemed to like. What Mo may or may not have been aware of is that the vagina hole is a lot closer to the asshole than a ballsack is. Girls don't even really have grundles, and it can be hard to thoroughly clean those areas.

"No, you need to be careful," Sophia said playfully after I made a teasing, sexually motivated, comment then told me this pussy's crack! It wasn't the first time she'd made the comment—this pussy's crack!—at least partially in jest, in a way that moved us both to chuckle genuinely, but, in fairness, her vagina was incredibly well maintained. Which is something I doubted Mo fully understood—that maybe he lacked experience in genital cleanliness, maybe he lacked a sophisticated appreciation of symmetry, hue, scent, etc. when it came to the female private areas. After Sophia told me her pussy was crack at least partially in jest, I made a sarcastic comment, and she said some of the girls she worked with stunk. "Some of these girls here stink!" she said in a disgusted tone. I nodded. She told me her head hurt; her head sat on my shoulder. I asked her if it was from the accident she got in the previous weekend? She sniffled and said, "Ugh, I think I need a tissue." I looked down at her face, resting on my shoulder, and said, "Wanna get your nose off my thermal then?" On some level we both knew

everything was wrong and immoral, which neither of us addressed except abstractly, and I thought that on some level sexual interaction (libidinal urges) were a sort of biological function that were maybe only tangentially related to genuine bonds between persons? You become more philosophical about infidelity as you age; the weight of any given fuck decreases gradually as you approach your natural expiration. That's probably why large age gaps in relationships (as well as pedophilia) are so frowned upon. As a society, we feel as though the weight of the fucks are morally, sometimes legally, out of balance. All sovereign territories necessitate balance. All extremities eventually lead to anarchy.

“The doctor said I had a slight concussion,” she told me, finally lifting her still running nose off my deltoid. She held her head in her right palm; the hand covered her temple. I told her that, honestly, she should keep an eye on it. She smiled in acknowledgement. I didn't find the smile sufficient—I said, “Seriously, that stuff with the NFL? You kidding? You can end up mentally retarded.” She told me she was going to see her lawyer on Tuesday and said, “Soooo...if you wanna hang out after...?” “With you?” I sarcastically replied. She pushed the arm I held my drink in and told me to shut up—a little vodka spilt from my glass onto the dark counter. She reiterated to me she didn't have any social media, “but I'm always taking pictures,” she beamed proudly. I asked her why she didn't post them anywhere, although I understood why she wouldn't; I found social media more or less deplorable—in fact, I assumed most people found social media deplorable, but most people did nothing but peruse and

engage social media all the time, so they could say things like, “Oh my god, did you see what (s)he posted?” screenshot it and send it to their friends in group texts, where they’d skewer people on social media privately, discuss their disgust with social media privately, engage with social media privately, and of course this was all what Zuckerberg expected—these were the strings he pulled, to harvest this hatred, to indulge in the human need to hate in a way it had never been indulged before; the new Page Six but with your second cousin talking shit to your ex-girlfriend on the front page—equipped with poor grammar, of course. This innate human need to loathe, extrapolated to its logical extreme! And once that hatred is harvested, once that hatred becomes like a heroin in the veins of people who simply can’t bear to not receive the latest updates of the people they loathe, then you pump the fuckers with ads, and then every click clicked leads to leads—you wipe your ass with a bath towel (because you assumed your significant other bought the toilet paper; because your significant other assumed you bought the toilet paper), and a promoted ad for discount toilet paper immediately pops up on your iPad, which, of course, you brought to the toilet with you, and Zuckerberg makes billions off of it all, and he donates it all to charity, but of course it’s not a charity—it’s a tax free discretionary fund: a fund that disperses at his discretion, so he creates a small government! You’re spending your Tuesday night looking at album after album of people you despise, while Zuckerberg is running what’s, functionally speaking, a shadow government the size of a small country in Africa.

She said she didn't even like showing people, that she kept her photos in a box under her bed, just so she could look at them whenever she wanted. She let me know she actually supported the guy she dated in her late teens—that perhaps that relationship informed her current mode of thinking? “His studio, the reclining chair, three-quarters of the Tupperware...motherfucker was living off me!” she said, and I told her I thought that sucked and nervously contemplated if I came off as sarcastic; I didn't think I was being sarcastic. “After that...after that, I said never again,” she said. She brushed her palms together, back and forth, dusting them off. I cleared my throat and told her that, “Yeah, my student loan debt is, well, somewhat concerning, but, with income based repayment options, it's manageable,” then nodded my head agreeably.

“You know my friend, right? Emily? The one from the other night?” she asked while sitting on top of me, her legs straddling my torso, our faces really close together. She was assiduous with her dental hygiene; it was nice—I wasn't comfortable. I remembered her, yeah. “She seems nice.” I said, and she told me she asked her about me and she thought I was cute, and I told her that was cool, I was flattered. She said, “Yeah.” I said, “Yeah,” and felt sincerely flattered but was unsure how to reply. She said that sometimes they fool around, and I said, “That's cool,” and she said, “Yeah.” I asked if I burped in her face; I said, “Sorry, did I just burp in your face?” and she said I did not, and I told her that was good, that I'd felt a little gas bubble and wasn't sure and just wanted to make sure. She said, “Well, I mean,



she's gone down on me, I've never gone down on her," and I said, "Oh, I don't blame her." "I've never gone down on anybody," she said. Oh, yeah? "Yeah, but I don't go down on her though." Right. Right. "But yeah, she thinks you're, like, really cute. She told me. Because I asked her about you," she said and shifted her ass on my thighs in a surprisingly asexual manner. "That's cool," I said. "She said we should all—" "Oh—" "hang out again—" "yeah?" "But you're not like. ...One of those guys. Who would wanna..." Wanna-uh...? Because she's selfish. She doesn't like to share. So if I wanna fuck with her then go right ahead. Because there's other guys; she doesn't care. She doesn't share. It's all the same to her. I considered the situation, my present state, for a moment—I tried to hurriedly trace the evolution of the conversation, thought about methods to reign in the intense feelings of aggravation currently streaming throughout my entire body. I brushed Sophia softly off my lap and expressed my displeasure in an aggrieved, indignant tone, and she replied quizzically, in a tone that I thought betrayed the fact that she knew exactly what I meant, and I replied by accusing her of "baiting me," and she replied by repeating the word "baiting" in another unconvincingly quizzical tone.

I asked her why she would suggest a threesome, or at least allude to a threesome, then bait and switch like that? To see if I was a "pig" who liked threesomes?! I was genuinely hurt as she looked down at me from her flat-on-her-side horizontal position and unsuccessfully began to try and sit up vertically as she rebuked my accusation, as if I'd horribly misinterpreted or misconstrued her statements, even

though she said, “I’m just saying, it’s all the same to me,” less than two minutes ago, and I leaned over her and said, “You can admit it!” No, she didn’t mean it like that! She was just saying— “Of course I like the idea of a threesome,” I interrupted, “Who doesn’t? How could you not? FFM? At least in theory. I just don’t understand how you could penalize me for liking the idea of a theoretical threesome! I didn’t know you were like that.” She recoiled, still tangled with my torso, struggling with my torso via her left leg, and argued that she wasn’t like that! She was just selfish! Like that. And she thought I should know! I told her there were better ways to bring it up; she agreed. For example, she could have said, “Hey, I’m selfish with men, and I just thought you should know.” And then that would have been all I needed, that would have been totally sufficient for me. Just, “Hey, I’m selfish with men and wouldn’t be interested in a threesome with my friend, even if she, theoretically, was interested in having a threesome with us. Just in case you were wondering.” That’s all I needed; I wasn’t secretly fiending for some kind of no holds barred threesome with her friend; it wasn’t a deal breaker if she wasn’t into inviting third parties into the bedroom. Would I have been amenable to a threesome proposition with her friend Emily? Sure, it was definitely possible I would have been amenable to something like that, but it wasn’t a deal breaker by any means. “Well, she did say that,” she said, “that she thought you were nice looking, I mean. So I thought it would be a nice thing to bring up!” “Well...” I thought for a moment, processing the compliment and silently admitting to myself that it was a flattering comment. “Well, I am

flattered,” I replied, and I was being sincere about that. I trailed off and she paused, probably waiting to see if I was going to finish my thought, then said, “I’m serious!” Sophia hugged my torso, clung to my torso genuinely later that night, and the next morning I sent her a wordy text clarifying that I would never engage in a threesome on immoral grounds.

In any case, looking back, there was no way she couldn’t have known—I’d been sending effusive texts to her on a semi-regular basis in the weeks that passed between me getting her number (technically her sister’s), finding everything out, and then hanging out. She said she wasn’t sure it was me, but it was her sister’s phone, and her sister’s kid’s dad had to have been monitoring the phone—because he threw it in the toilet. What were the odds her sister was fielding multiple texts from multiple dudes on a phone that her kid’s dad was monitoring? No sibling could possibly be that courteous. That was absurd. So if she only gave her sister’s number to one guy, or even two or three, the idea that she wouldn’t know who was texting her seemed...unlikely? Was it possible I was higher on the pedestal than I felt I was? That she was understating her interest level? Was it possible that she had been embarrassingly thinking about me, just like I’d been embarrassingly thinking about her? Was she attending parties, solely because she lacked an excuse to not attend them, wearing inside out t-shirts and thigh high shorts, and manically considering her obsession? With me? Or was I misconstruing the entire situation—much of which (the phone numbers, the people

owning the numbers, and the people monitoring the people who owned the numbers) admittedly seemed inherently unknowable to me. I guess the main problem I saw with caring about dishonesty was that it required you to relinquish all self-awareness—as soon as you began to think about all of the lies you told people (constantly, every day) it was harder to justify caring about the lies people told to you. People did it all of the time, don't get me wrong, but, personally, I tried to avoid hypocrisy whenever possible. I was drinking vodka by myself, anonymously looking up the online profiles of people I used to know in various capacities, thinking what's the point, existentially, as I browsed through tab after tab of online identities that I found to be, for the most part, completely incongruous with reality, that I found to be logically sound when repurposed as arguments for a large scale extinction event. Of anything? I asked myself in my thoughts. Of anything, I confirmed in my thoughts. Maybe I should give her a call, I thought, then thought but...wouldn't it be better...just left latent and...unexpressed?

Hours later, I sat on a stool considerably more drunk than she seemed; she was drinking an energy drink with no liquor; I'd just shown up to the bar; she looked at me innocently, her eyelids decorated congruently—it was the beginning of her shift. I told her I'd thought about it, I'd given it a lot of thought, and I thought that she should be with me, and the intensity of her gaze immediately increased at a concerning pace; at first with what seemed like a mix of shock and anger, then maybe with just annoyance, as she exclaimed, "What are you—crazy?!" I shook my head so vigorously

my coarse hair nearly blew in the breeze generated by my violently seesawing cranium. I asked her to, “just—hear me out.” She maintained a serious, intensely unflinching expression and asked me if I knew how crazy that’d get?! Her tone seemed to contain an undercurrent of fear, and I let my hands drop to my thighs and opened my eyes wide, wider than normal, wider than they’d ever been, looked away and told her that was fair—then paused and said, “But still.” She was apoplectic, but she didn’t explicitly shut it down. I prodded, telling her it wasn’t impossible, that anything’s possible. “It would never work,” she said, but then her face shifted contemplative, as if she wanted to retract the it would never work and consider the proposition isolated from the conditions currently surrounding it. “Keep an open mind,” I said, now unapologetically spewing platitudes I didn’t believe, then muttered three to five non sequiturs and trailed off as she sighed deeply—in an almost performative way, I thought, almost as if she’d been waiting for me to propose this arrangement and was equally apoplectic at how long it took for me to propose it as she was with the actual conditions surrounding the proposition. Now her hands were on her thighs too. We both had our hands on our thighs facing each other. She told me we’d figure it out—I ordered another round of drinks; we continued to drink liquor until we were both completely and utterly inebriated, until her friend Emily came around and, noticing I was completely and utterly inebriated, offered me a ride home, which I politely declined, because I had to go to work in the morning, but to this day remember as an incredibly generous offer.

She'd told me she liked this purple lipstick but couldn't find it anywhere. I asked her if it was the one I kind of stole from her (around the time we first met I, somehow or another, found one of her lipstick containers in my pocket and ended up holding onto it for a week). She paused in a contemplative fashion, probably trying to recall the instance herself, then nodded her head affirmatively, and while looking into her eyes I became skeptical as to whether she actually remembered; I wondered if she was just humoring me by saying she recalled I was in possession of her lipstick for a week or so. Later that night, Mo and I decided to go to a strip club called Balloons—it was unanimously known as the grimmest in the city. We'd been driving around aimlessly at eleven pm before he shouted ecstatically that he wanted to get grimy! I agreed, replied, "Me too!" He suggested we go to Balloons. I asked him, "Isn't that the grimmest club in the city?!" and he replied, "Easily the grimmest!" In the passenger seat, I pushed the purple lipstick, which she'd given back to me after I'd promised to try and find it online, out of my pocket and into my right palm surreptitiously. I could just barely make out the item number printed on the bottom in the dark backseat; she clearly never typed the number into an internet search engine, because as soon as I typed it into my phone more than a few websites popped up selling that exact lipstick. I clicked one as we parked; I kept my phone out of Mo's general line of vision as we walked in the entrance, which was surrounded by a dirt parking lot where I was taken aback by the number of decrepit men alone, sleeping in their

cars, to the extent I seriously contemplated whether I was enduring some type of hallucination for a few moments, wondering who these people could possibly be as I walked by the decrepit, zombie-like, elder male strip bar patrons. It struck me as a cliché dystopian wasteland—all of these older men, literally zombie-like, sitting in their cars, outside of the grimmest strip club in the city. It seemed like there had to be a better way to go about paying for sex. Maybe if I was of the more innately entrepreneurial type I would have attempted to flip my disgust into a serious business plan—a startup, but for whorehouses (“disrupting” the brothel market), where I’d inevitably alienate a plethora of venture capital firms in the process. But, honestly, I’d grown weary of the narrative surrounding entrepreneurship to the extent the thought only faintly crossed my mind. It was mostly Mark Cuban—I found him so disingenuous; it totally turned me off. The idea that entrepreneurship was some kind of societal panacea was laughable to me—as if we, as a society, needed to encourage our youth to indulge in greed?! While I don’t oppose entrepreneurship in concept, the idea that we must promote it seems, to me, to arise out of crucial misunderstanding of human proclivity.

A guy wearing an army jacket with his entire face and shaved scalp covered in tattoos sat in a bulletproof glass booth; we slid the cover through the slit in the bulletproof glass and walked in. It was practically pitch black, half the light in the place emanated from open phones. Balloons didn’t have a liquor license, so it never had to close, but it also didn’t have a bar, so you couldn’t buy a beer. It did,

however, have a vending machine, and on top of the vending machine sat an eighteen inch TV, which sat on top of a light gray VHS player, which played gonzo pornography (anal gaping) on the eighteen inch TV, which I noted as we took a few seats against a wall. A few dancers meandered around aimlessly among the dozen or so patrons sitting in the dark. The lack of a bar or formal stage made the seating unavoidably incongruous, like a dream where the scene is clearly nonsensical, but everyone is acting normally. I glanced again at the gonzo pornography playing on the eighteen inch TV. I opened my phone again and started perusing the website for the purple lipstick. Eight bucks? Not bad, I thought while perusing the page for the lipstick, flicking my fingers apart on the screen to zoom in, thinking I probably shouldn't have bothered, that it seemed almost like a lame thing to do, buying girls who were married lipstick; it seemed totally lame, but I had reward points from my credit card, so I ordered the lipstick; it only took one click—it was wasn't that big of a deal, right? Not at all, I thought; it was probably fine. As I was consummating the purchase, a skinny Spanish kid with an absurdly thin mustache and full goatee, wearing a plain black fitted hat and plain black t-shirt, nudged me and said, "Sup bro?" I turned around, flummoxed, and said nothing. Unphased, he asked me if I wanted some beer, told me he could get some if I wanted, and I stared at him blankly, suddenly extremely self-conscious about the website for purple lipstick that was still displayed on my phone (it was also one of the few sources of light available in the immediate vicinity). It was as if the Spanish kid with the skinny mustache instinctively knew



who I was buying the lipstick for, and I sat in silence, anxiously waiting for him to accuse me of buying purple lipstick for a married woman, to judge me, to excoriate me, tell me my life went off the rails somewhere.

“Yeah,” Mo replied, leaning into our conversation unsolicited. The Spanish kid with the skinny mustache told us he could get twenty bottles of Coronas for forty bucks. “Can you get Corona Lights?” Mo inquired eagerly. The Spanish kid said it would depend on what they had in stock. I wasn’t particularly interested in buying bootleg Coronas at Balloons or even staying at Balloons; I didn’t want to stay at Balloons—a longer than normal pause ensued. Balloons was either grimmer than I’d expected or equally grimy but just a different type of grimy than I’d expected—like I’d expected upscale public orgy grimy when it was actually five dollar handjob grimy. I shifted my gaze out into the general population and noted a stick figure blond dancer with the skin tone of a blank canvas meandering around our vicinity; I noted a morbidly obese black woman with the skin tone of a triple creamed coffee doing the same. She had a jheri curled ponytail; they both wore ill-fitting bikinis—to my point, the blond had been walking around blatantly offering handjobs to visibly reticent patrons since we first walked in. I straightened my arm and extended it in front of Mo’s head as he bartered for the Coronas. I turned to the Spanish kid and asked him if he could give us a second, then Mo and I turned around and formed a two man huddle. “I don’t really wanna stay here,” I confessed, staring at Mo point blankly, then Mo dug his head deeper in the huddle and whispered, “Well, we already

paid the cover...” trailing off to insinuate that it was worthwhile to stay and get our “money’s worth.” I dug my head deeper in the huddle, until our foreheads were about half an inch apart, and whispered, “Yeah, but I’m already losing my buzz...” and Mo nodded agreeably, like he always did when he didn’t agree with you, then paused for a moment, recognizing he couldn’t dig his head any deeper into the huddle, and asked me if I wanted to get those Coronas, and I paused, glancing again at the gonzo pornography on the small TV screen again (noting the anus was gaped to the extent that the scene could hardly even be considered erotic), then told him not really, but if he wanted stay that was fine with me, I didn’t care, and shrugged my shoulders. It was pointless to argue with Mo, especially after he and I drank more than one beer each. You could never go out for a drink with Mo. It had to be excessive. Not that I was any different. Countless times I’d told him, “Yeah, I’ll meet out for, like, one or two,” and ended up drinking excessively; for probably three years straight, every time I met up with Mo I’d tell him, “Yeah, I’ll meet out for, like, one or two,” then drank excessively—it was actually a material appeal of our friendship.

Having said that, I’d regret the nonchalance I displayed about staying at Balloons by mid-afternoon the next day, when I was sitting in my car with Sophia, considerably hungover, seriously considering vomiting, saying, “I mean I used to steal Playstation 3s. I used to, like, steal Italian-made men’s dress shoes when I was in my early twenties...” nodding perfunctorily then magnanimously informing

her I wasn't perfect either, congratulating myself for doing relatively risky things in my youth (granted there was a sliding scale of risk that may have wholly undermined my congratulatory tone), then turning around and congratulating myself for turning out well adjusted, benevolently working a job I didn't particularly enjoy, mired in debt. The American dream, at that point, was all about building debt—insurmountable debt, and who had better debt than me? I had so much debt! I dug in my pocket and told her, “Before I forget...I got this for you.” I handed her the purple lipstick; she looked at it with a puzzled expression and said, “You got this,” she stared down at the lipstick, “for me?” She looked up in a puzzled register, as if she thought it an impossible task, me finding said lipstick online, and shouted, “Thank you!” clapped her hands together one time, kept the hands together, leaned over her seat and embraced me enthusiastically. I recoiled slightly, but only out of surprise, as she shouted, “You found it! This is so nice of you!” I was playing a Cam'Ron song that noted something about being mature, handsome, mixed with a lotta ignorance, about sticking your dick in her intestines, bout to poke her chitlins, and Sophia scoffed at the lyrics, saying, “Ew, those boys are ignorant,” as she peeled her body off my body. I'd taken the day off work to hang out. Ten minutes earlier, I was in a coffee shop where I'd made eye contact with a Spain-Spanish brunette wearing white capris, or maybe she glanced at me as I glanced at her; I took particular note of the glance as I held a tray with two iced coffees on it and wondered what she did for a living. She had an upper class look about her, but I also considered

it possible she worked in a service industry but just dressed traditionally proper, or was in business school, or just had rich parents. I felt a decently strong attraction to her physically, and as I carried the tray of iced coffees I wondered how long Sophia and I would continue talking—how things would end, if and when they ended for good, thinking specifically about socioeconomics, how Sophia had, again, recently told me she was pursuing her GED; I thought about articles I'd read that mentioned that America was increasingly a dual income economy; it was the American dream, you know—two parents working, with the cost of daycare usurping the vast majority of the supplementary income; I was thinking specifically about my sizeable student loan balance (who had more insurmountable debt than me?), the average salary of workers with a high school or equivalent level of education, my salary in relation to my debt. I thought about supporting a family with a small child, myself as a father figure and a role model, as I walked out of the coffee shop, now despondently holding a tray of iced coffees. “Wanna get some oysters?” I asked in the car; I took a sip of coffee then winced and noted, “This coffee is like eighty five percent milk,” as my phone vibrated. I reluctantly checked the phone. The amount of vibrations human beings were receiving on a daily basis seemed concerning; it seemed unhealthy, narcissistic even. Whatever happened to not communicating with people? I immediately checked my phone.

We ended up staying at Balloons the night before and, after we accepted the twenty Coronas for thirty five dollars (Mo talked five

dollars off the kid's initial price), a guy with red hair and a thick chin beard interrupted our conversation, which had shifted to oysters, and said, "Excuse me, I don't mean to interrupt, but," that he'd managed oyster bars for the past seven years, and the oysters they served at his former job were some of the best in the state. "I know this place—they have some of the best oysters in the state!" I said enthusiastically. She shifted her head toward her lap, and I noticed her eyelashes drooping down; they practically kissed her eye sockets. She said she didn't know; it wasn't a busy place, was it? I told her it was three o'clock, happy hour just started so... She asked me if it was nice, and I said sure, it was pretty nice, and she said she didn't wanna go anywhere nice, and I pressed the home button on my phone; I looked at the time and irrationally toggled the child lock for the windows on and off. "Actually, it's kind of a dump...to be honest." She asked me if it was far away, her limbs were pulled close to her body, and I said, "Ummmm...couple minutes?" She asked if there was anywhere closer. My lower lip protruded as I nodded my head up and down violently; I asked her if she wanted to eat at the coffee shop—I was pretty sure they sold sandwiches, probably even pizza! She replied, "What's that?" turning her body around in the seat, her mood now improving by the syllable. I turned my head and looked back—it looked like a Red Lobster, one of the worst possible places to order seafood. I trailed off despondently as she sat with her knees on the seat, her ass pressed against the dash, and she held her hands around the head-rest intently as she looked out the back window. "Aren't they in like Chapter Eleven or something..." "Oooh,

have you ever been?” “What about Yen Ching?” Her eyes were fixated on the lobster logo above the double doors; she asked how far it was to Yen Ching. We drank the iced coffees and called it a day.

Sophia whispered, “Look over there,” as she glanced at a hefty, Hispanic dancer wearing a short beige t-shirt with the word “PINK” printed on it in green, as I glanced at a guy I felt reasonably certain sold fairly large quantities of cocaine as he enjoyed a relaxing mixed drink at the bar. “You know who wore that first?” she flashed me a disapproving screw face and glanced back at the dancer. “They’re all biting my style...” Given her stature, there was an incongruity to her when she talked shit, but—in her defense—I definitely remembered her wearing a t-shirt like that, yet I wasn’t sure if she wore it before the hefty dancer. To be honest, I didn’t know enough about the dancer to say for sure. A raspy-voiced female bartender in her mid-forties with closely cropped hair, wearing a Harley Davidson silver studded belt, shouted enthusiastically that she thought we should be on that reality TV show—you know, the one about the people dating naked! I replied we weren’t naked and she said, “Huh?” and I made believe I didn’t hear her response. I’d bumped into that same raspy-voiced bartender at a dive bar the previous summer; she was making out with a guy wearing jean shorts—in the geometric center of the deck of the dive bar—and I made a disgusted face to my sister, who was sitting next to me, also (already) making a disgusted face. It was almost eight pm. The sun was still up. Sophia fiddled with her outfit, and I contemplated the awkward pause as I

made eye contact with Todd Cilantro. I asked Sophia if she wanted to go out to the patio. Todd was a childhood friend of an ex-girlfriend, about six feet tall with crew cut styled bright blond hair—he was smiling in the middle of the bar like an asshole. My ex-girlfriend said he was the first guy she ever did more than make out with; she said she whacked him off at her parents' house when they were both in middle school, that it didn't take that long, that he was terrible in bed, that he took the fall for her when they got caught with beer on a local beach, when they were still underage, one summer (the summer they were engaging in intercourse). She felt indebted to him for that.

The patio was a tiki bar huddled under the highway's overpass; the sun was sunk halfway behind the freeway, its glare firmly late summer as we sat on the sand-colored futons the club was attempting to pass off as couches. Sophia held her drink with both hands and told me her son was eating way too much peanut butter of late. She stuck her flat stomach out as she sat on the sand-colored futon and stretched her lower back. I asked her what was in her drink; she said, "Um, vodka and—" I asked her for a sip and went, "Mmmm," while puckering my lips as I tasted it, letting the liquid massage my taste buds. I told her it was good, "really sweet though," still puckering my lips, then challenged her comment about the peanut butter. I told her I brought peanut butter and jelly to work sometimes; it wasn't that bad for you, right? "Noooo," she moaned in a tone that suggested I was making a grave mistake by incorporating peanut butter into my regular diet, "it's not good for you at all!" I

scratched my inner thigh by rubbing the denim against the skin and said, "What about the protein?" "Nooo, there's a lot of fat. And not the good type of fat either!" I shrugged nonplussed and looked around the patio blankly, disinterested in having my lunch choices denigrated any further. About half a dozen people stood outside—two dancers on their breaks smoked cigarettes and discussed their car insurance payments; their quoted rates sounded surprisingly reasonable. Her knees knocked together as she rhetorically asked me if I liked the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Obviously I did. She said, "We saw the new movie last weekend." I glanced at her bare legs; for a second I noted they were kind of shaped like very thin triangles—I thought about shapes: the both of us as richly detailed, yet two dimensional, figures made wholly of interrelated shapes. Wouldn't life be improved immeasurably if everyone was two dimensional? Richly detailed—but two dimensional. I thought our tans were comparable, but she insisted she was darker. "Was it any good?" I asked as my glance shifted back up, appropriately. I told her I was generally skeptical of remakes, and she said, "It was good," in an abnormal tone of voice, told me, "It was family day." Family day, I thought while sitting on the sand-colored futon on the patio, listening to Sophia speak in what seemed to be an abnormal tone of voice. "We went and saw it at the mall...the one by the arcade..." she trailed off. At the time, I was genuinely unsure of the name of the mall's arcade. She opted out of eye contact as she pensively said, "That's near you, right? You ever go to that one?" and a minor pause ensued, and I told her, yeah, of



course—I spent my days off there riding up and down the escalators all day, you know, just waiting to bump into people I know. “Maybe you?” and she punched me in the shoulder, after a decent wind up, with her right fist.

“I think I wanna be a phlebotomist.” Her entire face was engulfed by a wide-eyed look that resembled hope. She wore the same one piece turquoise dress she wore the night she told me about the ATM machine—about the face bleeding, about the shirt unbuttoned, like, all of the way down. I asked her what a phlebotomist was, thinking reflexively about lobotomies. “It’s like a nurse...but you just take blood.” It was midnight—the place was slow, and I’d unintentionally drank the entire night away; she sat on the stool next to me, also having unintentionally drank the entire night away. I looked at her; she wasn’t wearing underwear. I was immediately aroused but also hesitant to address it—she shushed softly, placing her index finger over her lips sensually, drunkenly. I thought about how I usually wasn’t that excited at the sight of an isolated vagina, how I was arguably overly excited at the sight of her isolated vagina. Earlier in the night, I met a guy named Tony and his two friends—one of whom was an erudite, slightly overweight blonde, the other a slender, slightly effeminate younger guy, and they both told me, somewhat despondently, they worked for Bank of America. “Oh, cool,” I replied unenthusiastically. All three were still in the vicinity as Sophia asked me if I knew phlebotomists could make like seventy thousand dollars a year? She pulled down her dress a little, still sitting on the stool,

and I said, “Oh yeah?” as I ripped the stem off a beer can I finished half an hour earlier. I started chewing on the vodka tinged ice at the bottom of my glass. I was pretty sure Tony was either a drug dealer or a low level professional criminal or both—after about ten minutes of being around him, I remembered I used to see him at a neighborhood bar with what I thought was a mafia looking older guy about five years ago. “You look familiar....I know you?” he asked me while we were in the bathroom, while we were standing in front of urinals, while we were urinating side by side, while we were staring at the bathroom ceiling, while we were attempting to avoid looking at each other’s penis, while we were casually conversing. Tony had a square jaw and slicked back black hair—his eyes were dark and beady, and he had a tendency to dart his eyes from one side of the room to the other, as if important events were continuously, spontaneously occurring (or he was concerned with the potential presence of law enforcement?). He wore a silk, baby blue button up shirt with open toe sandals and boot cut jeans and seemed to know everyone in the bar. “Wendyyy. Great to see you, hun! Can we get a couple a shots over eah?!” he said before turning to me and asking if I enjoyed a particular light beer and saying, “Take dat,” placing a can of the light beer on the bar in front of me, where I sat by myself. Later, Tony’s slender male friend walked up to Sophia and said, “Oh...my...god...you are...so...cute!” He petted her wavy black hair; he told me not to get offended, but I kind of reminded him of Drake, and I wasn’t offended but also didn’t take it as a compliment, and Sophia exclaimed, “Oohh,” like a mother reacting to a compliment

given to her first born son as he said the word “Drake.” She walked over to a table then back to us; the slender guy and I made small talk—she whispered softly in my ear, “Don’t let him steal you from me,” then gazed at me sensually, and I said, “What am I? Gay?” with no regard for the slender guy’s feelings (in retrospect, he may have been homosexual) and reflected briefly back to a homoerotic experience I endured as a preteen. I realized, on some level, it was irrational jealousy, psychotic envy that inspired her comment—which, of course, was disconcerting in its own way—but I let it go and continued to make asinine small talk with the slender guy. After Sophia walked away again, the blonde girl asked me if I knew her—in reference to Sophia—and I didn’t know how to answer. I felt socially awkward; I was also, at that point, incredibly drunk. Before I replied, the blonde continued, saying, “She was all over you,” in a pejorative and/or reticent tone, which I probably should have taken as a compliment, but I didn’t take it as a compliment; it made me deeply uncomfortable, and I replied, “Oh.”

Later, Sophia would tell me, “You can’t have everything you want,” with a fair amount of playfulness, but also with an undercurrent of sincerity, as I stood with my back against a wall feeling increasingly tired. It was twenty of two, and the bar closed at two. Her body was pressed up against my body from my chest down; her face occupied the space between my nipples; her nipples book-ended my belly button; her hair gel greased my light grey thermal just slightly. I made a mental note to throw it in the hamper when I got home. She told me she should’ve never told me her last name, that she slipped

up, then she dramatically sighed, her playfulness subsiding slowly, and I took offense, thinking about the “don’t let him steal you from me” comment an hour earlier, and accused her of being capricious in my head. I thought about a couple things at the same time—I gazed out at nothing in the bar with her forehead resting between my breasts; I thought about various catastrophic events from my life, amorally, in a totally nonjudgmental state, as we sat back down. Sophia remained more or less motionless with her arms crossed. Her eyes only fleetingly met mine as I stood back up; I tilted my head back exhaustedly then put my hand on her thigh and leaned over. She cocked her head, and I stretched my arms Jesus-on-the-cross like. I asked her if she wanted another one, and she told me, “I need to relax.” She said it with a negative connotation in her voice, perhaps a little accusatory? I considered going home; I noticed Wu glance over at us but couldn’t decipher the connotation of the glance. I wiped some perspiration from the tops of my eyebrows and said, “Honestly,” I massaged the stickiness of my temple, “Honestly, I could use, like, I don’t know. A fucking bath or something... I’m so tired.” I paused then told her I’d heard baths were actually filthy to take, that they were apparently like a cesspool of germs.

We cracked open a couple cans of beer on our way downtown. Mo drove with one hand on the wheel, one hand on the rim of his beer; his large friend was squished into the backseat and asked me if I was aware he used to bounce down here? “Oh, yeah?” I said—although I was more than well aware Mo’s friend used to bounce, because I

knew his friend when he was a bouncer, because his friend brought up his prior history of bouncing more or less incessantly. He told us, if we wanted, he could get us into Coconut Joe's for free. "Coconut Joe's?!" I repeated, raising the pitch of my voice to an absurdly sarcastic falsetto and made an exaggerated jerking off motion to Mo—forgetting for a moment that his friend sat in the middle seat in the back and, by doing so, could easily see my hand moving up and down by my crotch. He replied in a tone that made it apparent he witnessed the exaggerated jerking off motion. Sitting at a nondescript bar counter, Mo perused a menu and asked me if I was gonna eat anything. I told him I had a couple fried eggs before we came, although at the time I was perusing a menu myself. Taken aback somewhat, he told me he thought we were gonna eat out, that we had an agreement to eat out; I told him I'd probably get a burrito later or something—I didn't look up at him. I felt more satiated from the eggs than I'd expected. Mo's friend raised his head as if he was getting a whiff of something and with his index finger grabbed the bartender's attention to ask, "What's the deal with the cheesy fries?" Mo grabbed my attention to point to a line on the menu that read, "Shots - Buy One, Get One Free!" and asked, "You wanna get a shot a tequila?" Mo's friend grabbed the bartender's attention to point to a line on the menu above the bar that read, "Jumbo Cheesy Fries - \$7.99!" and said, "Let me get an order a those?" Mo ordered tequila shots—the bartender poured too much and clumsily apologized, offering us the excess. I nervously inquired if those were double shots as the bartender handed us three rocks glasses three-fourths

filled with tequila. I drank the excessively large shot of tequila in two and a half gulps, and my phone began to ring—the caller ID was blocked. I stared at the screen, a little startled and also a little afraid, as I walked outside; I hit the answer button and said “Hello.” I spoke staccato as I stumbled out the door; I was swallowing my saliva violently—repeatedly. “Are you drunk?” Sophia asked on the phone, and I told her no, pensively scratching the tip of my nose, looking down at the cement—a group of Swedish tourists walked by. “No, not really, why?” Did I sound different? I was just out with a couple friends, nothing big. “Oh,” she paused; she was just calling to see if, “maybe I had time to stop by tonight,” to grab a drink after, or— The night before Sophia gave me a blowjob. “Oh really?” I said, “Well, I’m downtown right now, but when I actually drove with Mo, so—” “Oh.” “Do you want me to text you when I—” “No, that’s fine.” “Are you sure?” Yeah, she’s sure. I’ll text her either way, but that’s not necessary. She was at work anyway—she’d probably be busy later.

I had a vision, quite vivid, of her standing in the dressing room on the hardwood benches next to her locker, her big ass phone pressed against her face. The word blowjob echoed in my brain, alongside a looped, fragmented recollection of her giving me the blowjob the night before (she claimed she rarely gave blowjobs; it was a big deal). It was almost as if I’d completely forgot she gave me a blowjob the night before, almost as if I’d found myself in the middle of a terrible dream where I’d completely forgotten the one thing I should have remembered, only remembering the one thing immediately after I’d downed a large shot of tequila and found myself on the precipice of

vomiting on a moderately trafficked sidewalk. I said, “Oh, ok,” nervously thinking of things to say, and she repeated, “It’s fine,” and I repeated the words, “Oh, ok”—nervously thinking of things to say. She asked me if I needed to get back to my friends. I said, “Nah.” She told me she felt bad—about what? She didn’t wanna keep me from my friends! “Fuck that; how’re you feeling?” She was fine; was she mad? No, why would she be mad? I didn’t know, I just wanted to make sure she wasn’t mad. She said, “You’re cute,” and I was surprised and relieved. I told her thank you; she said, “Mhmm,” I clarified that I was a grown man though, and that was good because she needed a man. “I’m fully grown,” I said, “I’m like completely done growing.” In retrospect, maybe I should’ve hung around post-blowjob and waited for a call. I felt uneasy, but it didn’t seem healthy to just wait around like that; it seemed desperate—but also possibly heartwarming. Mo leaned into me anxiously as I rubbed my hands together back in the bar and asked me, “Was-that-the-stripper?”

The following evening I’d find myself eating two artichokes at a pace where pulling apart and eating both artichokes would take upwards of forty to fifty minutes. I was enjoying the journey. I daydrank with my sister and her boyfriend earlier in the day, but we didn’t do much other than drink Mai Tais at a renovated Chinese restaurant across the street and go to a bar that wasn’t open yet. The artichokes made my hands exceptionally slimy, and I could feel the skin around my mouth was grotesquely slick as well. When I was with my sister and

her boyfriend, who I didn't usually drink with, I'd felt a little awkward at first but increasingly euphoric as the day progressed, which I supposed was par for the course for daydrinking. Later, when eating artichokes by myself, I felt blasé, elated when I got a good chunk of artichoke, and abutting depressed and lonely. After I ate, I showered and went to visit Sophia before she got busy, which I hadn't planned to do; I was unsure of what I would do after. I walked in and waited maybe twenty minutes until I saw her, and she approached me and said, "How are you?" in a disaffected tone, like she barely knew me, or didn't want to know me to the extent that she did, or didn't want to see me all that much, or I was reading too much into her tone. I asked her if everything was ok, and she said, "Yeah," in a tone similarly disaffected to the one she said, "How are you?" in—then we sat awkwardly for more moments than conversational silences should normally extend, then I said something aggressive, and she asked me why I was being so aggressive in a tone that was—paradoxically, I thought—more friendly than her previous tones. I should just let it go, I thought, sitting at the bar. Maybe just say, "Have a good night," and go home—just recognize it isn't a good night for either of us and cut both of our losses. Instead I confessed my feelings—or confessed my feelings to an extent—feelings I'd mostly expressed indirectly, but that I reiterated more directly, to which she didn't really confess to the same degree, or at least to the degree I'd have liked, which was probably, at the time, an impossible degree. She told me she was gonna get busy soon; we both stood against a wall in the back trying



to keep our voices down, but I had a disconcerting feeling certain people were overhearing our conversation and tried to reconcile myself to that fact as I continued to speak and listen. “I know it’s probably not the right time, but I don’t know....I just wanted to, uh, make sure we’re on the same page?” She turned toward the middle of the bar and started to speak, trailed off, peered into the heart of the bar, which was getting pretty busy, then turned to me and said, “Go with your gut.”

She’d call me two times in a row at ten thirty the next night to tell me that she was feeling sick, that she’d taken a ride to talk for a little bit. The breeze was brisk, but it was still pretty nice out, and I sat inside a Nuevo Italian restaurant when she called me twice at about eleven pm—the kitchen closed at eleven pm. Mo was wearing sweatpants; we’d just ordered seventy dollars of food. Our waiter was fair skinned with red hair; he’d been homicidally pacing around since we sat down. I mouthed, “Yeah, I’ll have another,” inaudibly to him as he walked by; I held up my beer bottle and pointed to it with my index finger, raising my eyebrows inquisitively. Outside, a male teen ran full speed from a sandwich shop across the street into a hookah bar without stopping or slowing down. A few days later I’d gaze out into nothing yearning for vodka, walking with Sophia. She wore all black with the sky blue eyeshadow; she was telling me she could pimp me out in a tone that seemed pleasing to me, and I squinted and said, “Like?” with the i slightly extended. She looked like a Halloween costume. I had my shirt tucked in like an asshole. I looked at my reflection in the store window, and all I saw were

eyebrows. “I don’t know...to old ladies. Maybe some younger ones too,” she said, somewhat proudly I thought, and I told her I’m not interested in that, and she told me that girls pay too, you know. I told her that’s good to know, that it was nice she had connections, but no—I don’t support sex trafficking. She grabbed my hand as we descended a set of stairs, and I went on; I shifted my gaze down toward her, accepting her small hand, a little rough in the palms, into mine. She giggled, and I acted as if I was serious for another few seconds; I looked at her stone-faced and said, “I’m not for sale,” then giggled in a high register. “Neither am I,” she replied, serious but still smiling. We walked down the stone steps, and she took each one carefully, gingerly, still holding my hand as we reached the bottom. I asked her, “You wanna go here?” as I turned my palm upward and extended my hand in a voila motion toward a small, grey-bricked Mediterranean restaurant. “I don’t know...is it fancy?” Across the parking lot sat a large Staples, and I made the observation, “You never see Staples anymore,” and opened the door. The only people in the grey-bricked Mediterranean restaurant were the wait staff. I turned to her and said, “Too fancy?” She nodded and said, “You knowww meee,” then apologized and said, “Sometimes I just get nervous.” We ascended the stairs we’d just descended—it was fine. No worries! I thought. We just sat in my car for a few minutes, cooled down and rerouted elsewhere.

Maybe somewhat intentionally, a few nights later I told Sophia, “You know, when I first saw you, I thought you were this girl I had a major

crush on in college? She dated some Lebanese guy I thought looked a lot like me—"You were better looking though, right?" she replied, not interrupting as much as taking shrewd advantage of a natural pause in the anecdote, smiling and leaning into me in a way that displayed earnest interest in my story. "Obviously," I replied confidently, drunkenly. "Well, I don't wanna be a rebound!" she said, laughing but also genuinely concerned. I shook my head and pedantically informed her that: A) she was the one involved in things, so wouldn't I be the rebound? And B) I never dated the girl from college, so I was pretty sure that, technically, she couldn't be a "rebound" on a girl I never had sex with or dated. "Whatever. You know what I mean," she said. "Yeah, whatevuh!" I said and nudged her shoulder with my shoulder, then she nudged my shoulder harder than I nudged her shoulder. She was telling me she watched the same VHS porno every time she masturbated—that it was a double penetration old school tape, and from the way she described it it sounded eighties-era, possibly late-nineties, Jenna Jameson-era but that would be at the latest, I thought. "But the girl looked like she really enjoyed it," she said, "It wasn't fake like some others I've seen." "You whack off to a videotape? The same one? Over and over?" I said. "Well, I have to be careful! I can only do it at specific times. And I have to be quick..." she said, and I pulled out my phone, went on the internet, and started scrolling through pornographic pictures and GIFs posted hourly—sometimes even more frequently than that—and displayed the phone over my shoulder. "Where do you find that stuff?" she asked as she hesitantly touched the screen

and expanded one of the images. “The internet,” I replied, “It’s like eighty five percent porn.” She looked at me wide-eyed then looked back at the phone as a run-of-the-mill double blowjob GIF repeatedly itself infinitely. “No, seriously,” I continued, “they’ve done studies. It is.”

I gave her a few sites to check out, but she started watching full scenes, talking to me about how she only had time to watch one video—sometimes not even. “What do you mean it was like half an hour?” I’d scold, inquiring why she didn’t just skim to the good parts—the cumshots, the nutlicks, junctures of that nature—perplexed, almost in disbelief. Who doesn’t fast forward porn; is this some kind of joke? I thought and found myself making assumptions about her character, excoriating myself for making these unjust assumptions with regard to her character—but, then again, some of the things perhaps I had a legitimate basis for said assumptions, lending possible merit to my skepticism? Perhaps the most tragic mistake we ever made was engaging in sexual acts people should only engage in with people they view as objects—it was possible you should only engage in deviant behavior with people you’re intent on objectifying. She told me she preferred to get emotionally invested in the scenes, and I thought about nothing for a few seconds then asked her how she did it, if she didn’t mind me asking... “I mean,” I shrugged once meekly, “I think we’re on close enough terms now, right?” She tilted her head at an angle skeptically and told me she had a vibrator, and I said cool. She told me she also had a small dildo, that if she did it right she could squirt, well....yeah,

she could squirt. I told her sometimes I used Vaseline. She wore one of the three necklaces she normally wore to cover up a scar on her chest. I nodded and took a sip of my drink. I felt dainty sipping out of the straw for some reason; I missed my mouth with the straw on the my first attempt. Her eyelashes flickered up and down like a lightbulb on its last legs as she glared at me—I thought about dying, imagined a gunshot to my gut, me keeled over and dying a slow, painful death on a linoleum floor somewhere, thinking, keeled over, thinking was it worth it? then thinking eh, it had its moments, then collapsing on the floor to die a slow, agonizing death.

“Things don’t always go in straight lines,” I said as I pulled up a chart of a stock on my phone. I didn’t personally invest in its shares or follow its stock price but went on to tell her, “It’s like...things zig,” I pointed to a line on the chart with my index finger, “and...zag,” then pointed to another line. The metaphor was, of course, that our relationship was a stock chart—that it had its occasionally volatile ups and downs but over the course of time would ostensibly appreciate seven percent annually. And the eventual, inevitable, systemic stock market crash was, of course, when her husband found my address and murdered me in cold blood. She definitely wasn’t impressed but seemed as though she may have appreciated the effort, the thought. She gazed out—up on top of the plaza, above the laser hair removal locale. “It would probably be really cool to live in one of those apartments up there, huh?” she said. I leaned into her and gazed up as she asked me if I thought those were condos? I said it was definitely possible, squinting, my outer elbow on top of her

inner elbow. “Yeah, they definitely are, I think. I don’t know, maybe someday...” “But I’m a mother first,” she clarified as she opened the car door, “I’m not some bougie chick. So if that’s what you want...”

We had planned to meet up later that afternoon, and I felt slightly worried—more worried than I normally felt—that she would bail on the rendezvous. She called her husband her “ex” by accident the other night; she lamented not being able to hang out a few nights before that—but there was a subsequent, increasingly volatile, ebb and flow due to the increased intensity of the relationship; we were apparently feeling increasingly strong about one another. Actually, it was a lot like the stock chart I’d shown off, except the zigging and zagging seemed to bother me more than it bothered her—which bothered me. But it clearly bothered us both deeply, and it seemed likely that, at some point, one or both of us would bow out of the whole thing unless things broke one way or the other soon. I’d been feeling increasingly bothered, it may have been gnawing at me incessantly, by her son’s father—more specifically, Sophia’s reluctance (or my suspicion of her reluctance) to reconcile how she felt about him as a father figure with his real life actions—or maybe just her ambivalence with regard to what to do, what her options were exactly. Obviously, it wasn’t my place; I had no business even thinking about such things, but I genuinely felt like, regardless of what happened between us, the situation was subpar for an adolescent child. Was that wrong of me? Was it possible to disentangle my intense self-interest from any genuine concern for

the welfare of a young child? I'd told her, consciously overstepping my bounds—well aware the answer to the first question was “most likely” and the answer to the second was “highly unlikely”—that the inherent risk of staying with a person who was involved in these types of “things,” who seemed intent on repeating the same destructive cycles *ad infinitum*, was, to me, slightly ill-advised; I gave an extended speech about it and, somewhat to my surprise, she told me I was “right,” that, “I mean, I can't say you're wrong,” but, realistically, at that point—even though I appreciated the reply—it was a neutered consensus, and we were both aware that it was a neutered consensus; any catharsis was truncated, as it was a neutered consensus. I was totally out of line.

Later that night, on a completely unrelated note, I shook my head disdainfully and said, “Yeah, I have a friend like that, Enzo, kid puckers his lips and checks his reflection in his phone every half hour whenever we go out.” I put my phone in front of my face, made eye contact with my reflection, then puckered my lips in an exaggerated fashion. “Ughh. I ha-a-a-a-te that,” she said, joyously agreeing with me that Enzo's narcissism was off-putting. I shook my head at the conversation somewhat condescendingly; she handed me a vodka soda and politely excused herself to the bathroom. Emily turned to me and told me Sophia mentioned me a lot on their rides home from work (they carpooled fairly often). She mentioned it in a tone that was kind-hearted but also suggested she was sick of hearing about me. “About me?” I shrugged in a manufactured falsetto; I told her if Sophia felt that way, why was it like pulling

teeth to get a text from her sometimes? I felt unusually open to having a conversation about where Sophia and I were “at” while Sophia was peeing—normally, I never felt open to having a conversation about where I was “at” with anyone. As I waited for a response I thought, given her situation, having someone murdered in front of you, maybe even having the gun pointed at you after a person was murdered in front of you by a person who were intimately involved with, could reasonably cause you to be irrationally cautious when it came to love later in life—yet still found myself somewhat agitated that I was consistently more expedient in our correspondence than she. The remainder of my mind that wasn’t consumed with agitation was ashamed I still found myself somewhat agitated; what was wrong with me—how could I possibly be so unjustly agitated like that? Timeliness was a pet peeve of mine I found hard to control at times. Emily’s disdain for me as a concept seemed to wane slightly as we continued to speak—in place of the disdain was a type of sincerity, the level of which I was unsure of, as she said, “That’s just how she is, she’s not easy....but she’s one of the realest people I’ve ever met.”

The next night I was a few vodkas deep; I felt like I was on drugs—it was euphoric. My senses seemed enhanced; I loved it. I smiled deviously, jotted down a note in my phone that seemed both sincere and profound—that I would read the next morning in utter disgust. I asked her, “So you’ve never shoved anything up your nose?” She scrunched up her face and said, “Ew.” She told me she’d told me that



before. We'd barely discussed my extended comments about her situation, and I found that portentous and unnerving but was also hesitant to bring it up, because I knew it would put a damper on both of our moods. I told her, full disclosure, I'd snorted prescription codeine my senior year in college and tried cocaine maybe, like, twice? Two or three times? I went through a brief period of nostril-centric curiosity. "Ew." She made a sincerely disgusted face as I went on to tell her that it didn't do much for me—especially the codeine—that, to be honest, I was too fucked up to even tell with the cocaine. "That's because codeine's supposed to put you to sleep, dumbass," she said. Our arms brushed against one another; she excoriated me for still not believing her, that she really was a good girl—did I know she was the only dancer invited to the employee-only Christmas party last year? I nodded my head, flummoxed—feeling as though I would perpetually occupy a state of being thoroughly unconvinced, possibly about everything, possibly frozen in a state of intellectual suspense about the veracity of my own existence for eternity. She was right; I told her she was right. I sat on mute, smiling slightly. Sometimes there's not a lot to say. When I was twenty one, Brad Rosovsky accused me of stealing his iPod, months after I'd vaguely "threatened" his roommate in an unrelated dispute—a dispute where I felt strongly that I was ultimately the aggrieved party. To her point, I knew what it was like to be misunderstood. Sophia's large heels clanked together as her feet dangled unencumbered, her high heels dangled with the wobbling free spirit of a young child, and she told me about a book

she was reading she found interesting but lost it in her room and was still trying to find. I told her yeah, I didn't read all that much anymore. Used to though. "You're so smaht!" she said and nudged me playfully. I furrowed my brow pretentiously and said, "Actually, I used to even read the dictionary. Used to write down six words a day. With their definitions and everything." I smiled gregariously, and her eyes lit up; I imagined how my eyes lit up when she told me she could squirt—I compared the two faces in my head and said, "Even wrote an example sentence with the word in it for each word too." "See, that's what I should've done," she said. I touched her elbow gently. "I don't wanna be forty years old up shaking my ass between tables. I can already feel my ass starting to sag!" She giggled, and I glanced at her ass—it looked great but, to be fair, I didn't know what it looked like years ago. I put my hand on my forehead and made a tired expression—rivers of jealousy nonsensically streamed through my veins. I pressed my lips together tightly and froze my eyebrows halfway up; she stuck her ass out while sitting, or maybe it was the natural pop. I said, "But anyway, yeah...I only got like halfway through the dictionary, then I quit."

I found myself musing about reading Wikipedia articles referencing eras of human history where love ripping people to shreds had a certain cache to it as Sophia sat on my lap and told me, "You don't want my problems." She said it in a tone that was, as always, convincingly fatalistic. I had my head turned down and to the right as tears accumulated at the edges of her eyelids; she told me she

needed time, “like maybe like a year and a half,” that she didn’t know what to do, that, despite everything, she knew she needed time, for herself and for her son, that that was more important than how she felt, however she felt, and I said nothing, and she shouted, “Sometimes I wish I’d just get hit by a bus!” and wiped a tear from her eye, and I felt more taken aback by the tears, the visible display of emotion, the emotion I felt like I’d been waiting for months to verify first hand—the emotion that could never be empirically verified—than the fact that things were ostensibly ending. “Can you look at me?!” she asked eagerly and grabbed my face, but I didn’t. She held my jaw in her left palm. “What do you have to say?!” She was anxious as I turned my head and said, “Give me a minute, ok?!” I felt tears accumulating in my lower eyeballs but, having had a decent amount of experience in weeping by that point in my life, managed to hold them in place. I told her this probably happens to her all the time, and she told me, “No—this is different.” I immediately thought she pretty much had to say that, that it was probably ill-advised for me to even say, “This probably happens to you all the time,” but also felt relieved as the syllables emerged from her mouth. She said, “We’ll figure it out,” as we sat down, and I felt oddly euphoric; I felt like, for the first time, I knew she cared. She cares, I thought, and I felt at one with nature in a very nihilistic way. I felt empirically validated yet emotionally drained. I told her she didn’t know everything I’d been through, that just because I didn’t discuss it didn’t mean it didn’t happen, and she agreed and told me she wanted to know more about me—that she felt like I didn’t tell her

stuff, and I struggled to think of anything to share about myself, as if the things I wanted to share were superglued to my esophagus, like my secrets were action figures wholly melted into the pavement of my childhood driveway, like I was pointing them out to her, stuttering, saying, “See that there? That’s, uhh, my first sexual experience...” at a blob of HeMan-stained pavement. I started to believe maybe I’d developed some sort of undiagnosed mental illness; I recalled “mental breakdowns” I was barely adroit enough to keep concealed from family and friends, that latent for years maybe were even equal to the traumatic events she’d endured—but just in different ways? Equally opposite trauma? What did it matter—we had so much in common. I thought vaguely but acutely of suicide, not out of depression necessarily but just fatigue—maybe laziness.

She knew she needed time and wished she’d get hit by a bus; I was elated she actually cared and wanted to end my life. It was healthy to think of suicide every now and again, you know? There was no answer—there were never any answers and, if there were, I’d always be there to obfuscate skillfully until I became too fatigued to care. I told her it didn’t particularly matter to me, the time we shared had been great but, at the same time, if anyone has to suffer it should probably be me (shouldn’t it be me?), with the underlying point being that maybe I didn’t mind suffering—that maybe I preferred it, and she didn’t say anything. Finally, it was clear it didn’t matter how I reacted to these obsessions; they were all impossibilities, they actually had nothing to do with me—that this entire reality had to be some kind of elaborate system where my consciousness was

collateral damage. It simply didn't matter whether I reacted with inertia, whether I allowed my inertia to hurl me into an insanity of infinite possibilities, or if I submerged myself into the obsession until I reached one reality—one reality that hurled me into the same insanity! It simply didn't matter. Knowledge changed nothing. It was incommunicable—once it was communicated it mutated essentially. Sophia walked to the back and didn't come back out, and I realized I was too drunk to remember whether or not we'd said goodbye. I began to strenuously consider if I should wait for her and, if so, for how long? Should I smash my head against a large rock until it no longer generated these thoughts? Should I write down my feelings before I did—my manifesto? What good was a cranium anyway? What was it—the only items that confirmed its existence were the sense organs it allegedly controlled! What good was a manifesto? What was thought, at its “highest levels,” beyond a convoluted form of masturbation? What did it produce other than dead capital and increased convolutions—it would never stop producing coils! I asked the bartender if she remembered if I tipped her the previous Saturday, because I had this lingering memory of not tipping her and I felt bad; I actually felt bad just by virtue of the uncertainty, and she smiled meekly and told me she had too many customers to remember those types of things, then I left—