

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Fogler Library

---

Spring 5-8-2020

## Square Dance

Matthew T. Hammond

University of Maine, [matthew.t.hammond@maine.edu](mailto:matthew.t.hammond@maine.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hammond, Matthew T., "Square Dance" (2020). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 3216.  
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd/3216>

This Open-Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact [um.library.technical.services@maine.edu](mailto:um.library.technical.services@maine.edu).

# **SQUARE DANCE**

By

Matthew Hammond

B.A. English Literature

A THESIS Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts (In English)

The Graduate School

University of Maine

May 2020

Advisory Committee:

Hollie Adams, Thesis Advisor, Assistant Professor of English

Gregory Howard, Associate Professor of English

Ryan Dippre, Associate Professor of English, Director of College Composition

## **SQUARE DANCE**

By Matt Hammond

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Hollie Adams

An Abstract of the Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts (In English)  
May 2020

SQUARE DANCE is a collection of nine short fiction stories. The first eight are connected thematically and the ninth story is intended to simulate a “bonus track” like one would find in a musical album. The collection follows mostly male characters as they each react to the curveballs life throws at them in their twenties, and explore the tests, formation, and bonds of friendship. This project is a commentary on modern society and incorporates elements of dark humor, science fiction, and absurdity as a means of expanding the scope of social commentary. The emphasis on humor and orchestrated arrangement of this project is a conscious rhetorical attempt at creating a lasting impression on the reader the way music and comedy impact its listeners. This project was most heavily influenced by the work of Kurt Vonnegut, Cormac McCarthy, George Saunders, Raymond Carver, and Ernest Hemingway; who as a group taught me how to appreciate minimalism, respect the economy of language, and the importance of style.

## Acknowledgements

Professor Hollie Adams, Professor Greg Howard, Professor David Kress, Professor Steve Evans.

Kurt Vonnegut, George Saunders, Margaret Atwood, Cormac McCarthy, Heinrich Boll.

Raymond Carver, Walter Abish, Stephen King, Thomas Pynchon, Flannery O'Connor.

John Kennedy Toole, David Foster Wallace, Hunter S. Thompson, F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Samuel Beckett, Martin McDonagh, Colin Barrett, Irving Welsh, Sam Shepard, Aaron Sorkin,

Larry David, Robert B. Weide, Jerry Seinfeld, Louis CK, Mitchell Hurwitz, Lorne Michaels.

Quentin Tarentino, Guy Ritchie, Wes Anderson, David Fincher, Coen Brothers, Judd Apatow.

Donald Glover, Tina Fey, Robert Carlock, Bob Odenkirk, David Cross, Rob McElhenney.

Dave Attell, Doug Stanhope, Mitch Hedberg, Dave Chappelle, Steven Wright, Demetri Martin,

Jerrod Carmichael, Bill Burr, Joe Rogan, Pete Holmes, Sarah Silverman, Bo Burnham, Hannibal

Burress, Eddie Izzard, Jimmy Carr, Jim Jefferies, Tim Minchin, Robin Williams, George Carlin.

Mitchell McCarthy, Patric Hamilton, John Brassil, John Emerson.

Mom, Dad, Katie, Chris.

-----**(SQUARE DANCE)**-----

.....  
 (INTRO): **SO IT GOES...A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION** .....[4-24]  
 .....

.....  
**SIDE-A [SQUARE]**.....

(TRACK 1): **MULLIGAN** (2,886).....[25-34]

(TRACK 2): **THE BUDDHIST** (1,496).....[35-38]

(TRACK 3): **OUT OF ELDER** (1,390).....[39-45]

(TRACK 4): **FIGURE IT OUT** (6,245).....[45-66]  
 .....

.....  
**SIDE-B [DANCE] (INTERLUDE)** .....[67]

(TRACK 5): **FOR YOUR SERVICE** (1,979).....[68-76]

(TRACK 6) **WANTED** (3,096).....[77-88]

(TRACK 7) **HANDSOME ROB** (2,461).....[89-98]

(TRACK 8) **WHY MEN?** (2,584).....[99-107]  
 .....

-----**(BONUS TRACKS)**-----

(BONUS TRACK): **FOURTH COURSE** (1,339).....[108-112]

(OUTRO) **BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**.....[113]  
 -----

## SO IT GOES: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO SQUARE DANCE

Lucia DeFelice once told me, “You know, you should be a comedian.” What did she know? She was just another person in my first-grade class, albeit one with enough ambition to write to the sitting president at the time, George W. Bush, and actually get a written response. She brought it to show-and-tell. This was in 2001, and I remember going home to my mother after school and asking her the question, “What’s a comedian?” She told me a comedian’s a person who makes people laugh. That’s the bulk of my memories of 9/11.

Though the nation I grew up in likes to tote they haven’t been in a war “since the big ones,” I fear I’ve been raised in a society that refuses to acknowledge when they’re participating in “Modern Warfare.” The definition appears to become so loose that it has created an uncertainty among me and my peers. We laugh at death because we’re used to it, we make jokes about atrocities because we see them constantly. Peter C. Kunze begins his essay “For the boys: masculinity, gray comedy, and the Vietnam War in *Slaughterhouse-Five*” with the following comment: “A noticeable trend in postwar American literature was black humor fiction, in which war, sexuality, death, and other traditionally serious topics received irreverent treatment as authors attempted to depict the irrationality of modern life” (Kunze 41). There may be truth in this sentiment by Kunze, that black humor provides a sort of comfort in the face of chaos. The sitcom family I befriended in afterschool reruns in these days was in *Malcolm in the Middle*, what I contest to be the first nihilistic-postmodern-post-pre-mid-war-time family. There is an unease in their household that mirrors the financial strain and trickle down-rage-enomics of the uncertain American family.

Writers have long asked similar questions of their own particular predicaments, and among the 9/11 writers, I think of George Saunders, a man who writes either from the perspective of or for the downtrodden. In his essay on Saunders, David P. Rando writes, “George Saunders peoples his stories with the losers of American history—the dispossessed, the oppressed, or merely those whom history’s winners have walked over on their paths to glory, fame, or terrific wealth. Among other forms of marginalization, Saunders’s subject is above all the American working class” (437). When I’m in the greatest of my own pity-parties, I consider myself to be one of those people. I was raised by two hard-working New Englanders: a father who hung drywall in skyscrapers in Boston and a mother who kept books for various insurance agencies and accounting offices in Southern New Hampshire. Protestant work ethic was a must, and it was best displayed with the utmost urgency, while my wheel of fortune ended up landing on funny.

When I was a child I just thought people were funny. I’d listen to them and watch them and study what I thought was so funny about them. What I’d soon learn was that there is no going back once you fall in love with humor. The face the person makes when a person tries to hold back the laugh, like they really don’t want to give it up and concede. That’s my preferred form of domination. If I got any kinks, it’s comedy; it’s an animal impulse for me. It might be the only thing in my life I couldn’t live without. I would have to rewire my brain to avoid cracking the joke, taking the jab, or cutting one’s jib. A quote of Kurt Vonnegut’s from his essay collection *A Man Without a Country* that resonates with me considering this matter reads, “And I urge you to please notice when you are happy, and exclaim or murmur or think at some point, ‘If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is’” (1). That’s how I feel when I tell a joke and see a chuckle,

or a smile, that's what the smile on my own face says to me in big bright letters: "If this isn't nice, I don't know what is."

I made a conscious decision in my adolescence to consume as much television, film, music, and literature as possible so that I could increase my opportunities for jokes. I didn't want to become intelligent or informed, I just wanted more material to make people laugh with. Jerome Klinkowitz cites Vonnegut in his essay *How to Die Laughing*: "Laughs are exactly as honorable as tears. . . . Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion, to the futility of thinking and striving anymore. I prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterwards—and since I can start thinking and striving again that much sooner" (qtd. in Klinkowitz 15). I think I've seen the honor in laughter from an early age, and as I've grown up, it's become more apparent it's the right side of the tracks to be on. There's a laughter that's accessed by sleep deprivation or lack of human contact that exists to exhibit the "exhaustion" and "futility of thinking" that Vonnegut is referring to. I think the right thing to do is lean into it and go for the laughs—"less cleaning up to do."

Writing became appealing pretty quickly from then because I was already preparing for writing. Writing and joking go hand-in-hand because they essentially boil down to leaps of faith. You take a leap of faith when you write something and allow for another person to interact with it. It's a risk. It's scary. Telling a joke is similar, but there is less of an impact, and there's a much more immediate reaction: yes or no. I can understand why that frightens people. There's a joke by stand-up comedian Steven Wright, a comedian notorious for his dry one-liners. He says in his trademark monotone voice, "Curiosity killed the cat but for a while I was a suspect." This is a great example of the comedic leap of faith. Wright takes the idiom of "curiosity killed the



cat” and injects himself into the idiom with absurdity. Wright takes the risk of the audience thinking he is joking about killing cats, but he is joking about being suspected of killing cats. Why would anyone in their right mind do something scary with little impact that has such an immediate satisfaction/dissatisfaction response? The answer is in Wright’s joke: it’s curiosity.

In high school I had a particularly influential English teacher who had beat a bout of cancer before my time. His name was Patric Hamilton; he was in his late thirties and a bit of a curmudgeon and it was rumored he bought weed from some guy on the hockey team. It was in his class that I first interacted with the work of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack Kerouac, and Kurt Vonnegut. While I appreciated the work of the first three, it was Vonnegut’s work that left me interested, curious, and befuddled. Hamilton had us read *Slaughterhouse-5*, and I wrote my final paper on Edgar Derby, the doomed English teacher who would be killed by German soldiers for stealing a teapot. So it goes. I wrote my essay on Derby because I had felt like my path was to become an English teacher, and I already intended to study English Literature at the University of Maine. The next school year I was faced with the decision of taking AP Language with the Head of School or Basic English with one of the writers of the AP Language textbook. I went with the latter, his name was John Brassil and he taught high school English for forty years. He died from cancer in 2016. So it goes.

I believe it was during the uncertainty of the “Oil Wars” when I realized my purpose on this Earth was to make people laugh, and I’ve chased the laugh for my entire life, always looking at it the same way—with curiosity. What works? What doesn’t work? What never gets a laugh? How can you sell a laugh? These are ideas I’ve been wrestling with for eighteen consecutive school years. The questions “what’s funny?” and “how can you sell a laugh?” are probably the

questions that forced my hand into the hand of a writer, and more specifically, a writer of dark fiction. My parents tell me that when I was born, they were watching *Seinfeld* on the TV in the hospital room. Sometimes I wonder if that is the seedling of my origin story. Reruns of *Seinfeld* were watched every night in our house, and as I came into my own adolescence, I realized the comedic impact of the work Larry David did on *Seinfeld*—as well as the work he did in his own show, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, a show that relies on improvisation and comedy amidst chaos.

While pursuing my undergraduate degree in English Literature and Secondary Education, I found myself taking several classes under Professor David Kress. He was an interesting man who exhibited the excellent eccentricities of performance and used them effectively in his class. First, I was in his basic fiction course in which I'd throw up onto the page and turn it into him and be enamored by his lectures. Next, I took a postmodern literature course which really piqued my interest in fiction. He had us read Gayl Jones, Walter Abish, Thomas Pynchon, Phillip K. Dick, Ishmael Reed, Christine Montalbetti, and Vladimir Nabokov (We read *Pale Fire*, not *Lolita*). I think my interest was piqued because of the inherent rebellion within the postmodern cannon as presented by Kress. Kevin Brown says, "Postmodern humor is often characterized as rebelling against the norms of literature and trying to subvert them with no motivation other than pleasure" (47). It's the humor within music, television, comedy, and film that first got me involved with literature, and I believe it was the unadulterated rebellious pleasure in fiction that kept me sticking around.

After finishing Kress's course on postmodernism, I had a presumably unquenchable thirst for more of it. I took it upon myself to throw myself into the work of Kurt Vonnegut. Professor Kress had mentioned that *Cat's Cradle* was the funniest book written by him, and it was by a

long shot; I wanted to verify the validity of the claim. So I read *Cat's Cradle*, *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (again), *Breakfast of Champions*, *Slapstick*, *Galapagos*, *Hocus Pocus*, and then I arrived at *Timequake*. *Timequake* was Vonnegut's last novel and it's a peculiar one. It was first written as a science fiction novel in which there is an event called "the timequake," and everyone on Earth is forced to relive the last ten years. Interestingly enough, Vonnegut sets the date of the timequake in 2001, so everyone is forced to live their lives again from 1991 onward. He became frustrated with the science fiction elements and diluted them and supplemented the other half of the novel with autobiography and lots of emphasis on free-will and how humans make decisions. Anyways, Vonnegut takes considerable time in *Timequake* to thank his peers for keeping him in the routine of writing and maintaining correspondence. Towards the end of the novel, he thanks Robert B. Weide for his prolonged interest in his work and praises him for helping adapt his 1961 novel *Mother Night* into a 1997 film of the same name. Upon reading Weide's name, I wondered where I had seen the name before and why it was so familiar. Vonnegut dedicates a paragraph towards the conclusion to thank Weide for bringing his work to a new audience and a new generation. After doing a little research, I found that Robert B. Weide began working with Larry David in 2000 on his HBO show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. I then realized I had seen Weide's name after just about every episode of *Curb* and that's why it was so familiar. Luckily, I had read *Breakfast of Champions* by then, so my immediate thought was "If this isn't nice, I don't know what is."

I've heard about Masculinity Studies and the male desire to dominate women sexually and socially in the English classes I've taken at the University and I always felt a little guilty on behalf of my gender about that, but that's not exactly what I'm interested in or have ever been

interested in. Some writers suggest it is an inheritance handed down by older, evil men, while others look into how society is shaped by it today, and I've read so much on the subject that I'm not sure what to think. It's not that I'm trying to avoid engagement with colonial male perspectives, toxic masculinity, or identity politics; I'm just curious about the way it's carried out. Emma Young interrogates the topic in her book *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories*, beginning her chapter on masculinity with a quote by Michael Kimmel:

Masculinity studies is not necessarily the reactionary defensive rage of the men's rights groups, the mythic cross-cultural nostalgia of mythopoetry, nor even the theologically informed nostalgia yearning for separate spheres. . . . Rather, masculinity studies can be informed by a feminist project to interrogate different masculinities, whether real (as in corporeal) or imagined (as in representations and texts). (qtd. in Young 92)

Young then writes, "The relationship between masculinity and feminism is undeniably one fueled by anxiety and tension" (92). I think the "anxiety and tension" Young is describing is the palpable uncertainty all humans face. I think men behave foolishly out of their uncertainty about women and vice versa. It might be the same uncertainty between men and women or cats and dogs, that same uncertainty of wondering if you're under attack or if you're worrying too much. The eeriest piece of human uncertainty is wondering if what you're feeling is an underreaction or an overreaction. I think it's the chaos that makes everyone act a little strange or "out of character," as if we can even qualify our own character by ourselves.

To give you a little bit about my masculine background, I come from a family of working-class Scottish descendants. My great-grandfather, Norris Roger Hammond Sr., fought for the U.S. Army in World War I and was wounded in combat in 1918. In 1930 he was elected

Post Commander at his hometown #37 American Legion in Ludlow, Vermont. He died in 1957. So it goes. His son, Norris Roger Hammond Jr. was a Marine cryptologist (a code breaker) in the Korean War and played football for Syracuse and Dartmouth. He coached the Post #37 legion baseball team in Bellows Falls, which featured Carlton Fisk who would go on to become a hall of fame catcher for the Boston Red Sox, and my father's oldest brother Jay who would go on to become a Marine cryptographer and Naval officer. Like his father, Roger Jr. was elected Commander at Post #37 in Ludlow. After the war he was a foreman at a paper mill and sired five children in Vermont; four of his sons had cancer (brain, lung, skin, and esophageal). So it goes.

My grandfather on my mother's side, William (Bill) T. Rusch, was a Georgia boy. He was born in Atlanta and studied at MIT before serving for the U.S. Army in the Korean War. He played on the baseball team at MIT, and was one of the programmers who in 1967 invented the first video game *Pong*. He died in 1993, the year of my brother's birth. So it goes. My mother is estranged from her family after a divorce that resulted in her father's new family receiving all the *Pong* money. My mother's father was reportedly hard to work with; his colleagues called him "very different" and "a colorful character." Like Lieutenant Dan in *Forrest Gump*, I come from a long line of men who served, and one of my greatest curiosities is this: who or what am I meant to serve?

I was born in the hospital in Nashua, New Hampshire in 1996, one year before Norris Roger Hammond Jr. would die there. I knew him as Geep. So it goes. I was the youngest of three and I was raised by my father Norris Roger Hammond III who worked construction (and survived skin cancer) and my mother, the accountant. As the youngest of three closely-timed births (1993, 1994, 1996), I suspect I had no choice but to become an observer. I've always been

around people. Having grown up in a world of “terror” with the possibility of war being the nominal threat, I realize I’m living in a different world than Roger I, Roger II, Roger III, and Bill. I think my war is the one Tyler Durden laid out in *Fight Club*, a magnum opus on masculinity. Durden says, “We’re the middle children of history. No purpose or place. We have no Great War, No Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives. We’ve all been raised on television to believe that one day we’d all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars, but we won’t.” I believe my generation, having been exposed to a world of minimal technology, then being forced to adapt to the social media of the modern world has endured a strained relationship between the self and society. Those younger than us are technologically-reliant and those older than us aren’t. It’s like we’re caught on the sidelines of a generational crossfire and we’re brokering the peace between the two.

I’ve taken classes focused on the constructs of gender in Shakespeare, Chaucer, and the everchanging implications of the body. As a student, I’ve noticed males are typically the minority in English classes and I’ve often wondered why that is. I’ve met many “would be” English majors who are in business programs and Engineering schools who fell into their trades because of economic or parental pressures. While I recognize a patriarchy in place and the impact of our individual economies, I just feel there is room for everybody. According to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, “Women have accounted for two-thirds of the [English] degree recipients at the master’s level since the early 1980s and at the bachelor’s level for as long as these data have been collected” (“Gender Distribution”). Though Humanities Studies were largely dominated by males in the past, I wonder about the uptick in female representation and the potential avoidance to the humanities of male students. Could it be due to the expectant

“provider” mentality society expects men to possess? Are men threatened by the women in the English degree programs? What uncertainty is plaguing young males? I think there’s the man you’re told to be, the man you’re supposed to be, and the man you are. We navigate between the uncertainties of these identities trying to please the people we’re told to please, the people we’re supposed to please, and hopefully ourselves.

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, men die from suicide 3.53 times more often than women. In 2016, white males accounted for seven out of ten suicides. The rate of suicide is “highest in middle age--white men in particular” (“Suicide Statistics”). These are the men who I think should be giving reading and writing a shot. The largest demographic of American suicides are adult white males, the adults men like me look up to. Males account for college student suicides 3:1 compared to women, and that’s why I’m looking to reach these statistics that have become of men.

What I’ve enjoyed the most about working with Professor Adams on this thesis is her willingness to meet me in the middle. Any crackpot, half-baked, barely breathing idea I had to write about, she was willing to interact with it. We bonded quickly over our mutual admiration of Kurt Vonnegut and I appreciate her helping me climb out of the Vonnegut-vortex and look at the work of other writers. She paired me with George Saunders early on and his works to me symbolize the Olympic torch handed down from Vonnegut. As a fella who has been characterized as “a pig rolling around in the mud while everyone’s got their ballroom shoes,” Professor Adams gave me a writer capable of equally grimy material. Then she lent me Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son* and I found it was the fix I was looking to score since I ran out of Raymond Carver short stories in high school. If I learned performance and exhibition strategies

from Professor Kress, I learned patience and self-inquiry from Professor Adams. As a writer, I find myself asking myself the convenient questions, because they result in convenient answers. Professor Adams has a knack for asking productive questions that force me to forget about convenience and go that extra mile. She shared a quote of Saunders' with me recently from his essay on Vonnegut, "Mr. Vonnegut in Sumatra": "humor is what happens when we're told the truth quicker and more directly than we're used to." The quote to me again highlights the uncertainty that humorists are forced into bed with. If there is any truth to certainty, it's a truth we must accept seeing rarely. It also speaks to my focus on brevity, an inheritance I received from Mr. Hamilton, Mr. Hemingway, Mr. Saunders, and Professor Adams.

The short story collection I've arranged for this thesis is "Square Dance," a title not without its reasons. I think the name "Square Dance" implies the sort of counterintuitive and paradoxical nature of humor, a true representative of uncertainty. Part one, "Square," refers to mathematics, expectations, and geometry, or otherwise order. The other part, "Dance," refers to art and improvisation, otherwise classified as chaos. I think the equation for humor could be the calculated improvisation of effort in the face of chaos. I think "Square Dance" accounts for this duality that humans face in their everyday life, and their response is to either fall rigidly into the equation or break free into a musical number, which was my second choice title for this project. Now are you a dancer or a square? If you're like me, you're probably a bit of both.

I've assembled this book in the format of a rap album because I think it speaks more to the people in my intended and expected audience. I expect my audience to be people who don't like to read, haven't read a book since high school, and think reading is above them. I say "rap album" because in my quest for humor as a youth I realized there are more words I could learn in



a rap song than any other genre because of the pace. Rappers use accessible language but they use it in devious ways that thwart expectations, and I think writing is very similar. I'm a huge fan of OutKast and OutKast represents a duality itself, the yin-yang of Andre 3000 and Big Boi. My favorite album of theirs, *Aquemini*, is their third album, but it's the one they embraced their differences on. Andre 3000 represents the experimental and artistic approach to rapping and that was reflected in his appearance and wardrobe. Big Boi represented the more-low brow and gangster approach to rap that was in its origins. The manifestation of high-brow and low-brow hip hop was able to afford them underground celebrity and then later commercial success. "Square Dance" is largely inspired by these risks taken by OutKast and their commitment to their own uncompromised individual motivations—mine just happens to be humor.

I think women are more inclined to read nowadays, and while I'm also trying to reach them, I can't help but notice the resistance of men to literature. I'm trying to reach a male audience in particular because I think now more than ever they NEED to be reached. I can identify an at-risk male in a group of dudes like a Tibetan monk finding the next Dalai Lama. I know what they look like: they look like people who need laughs. I think the common misconception is you don't go to books for laughs, you go to movies or watch television. I hope to reach this kind of audience and show them with my work that literature can be funny and there are lots of ways to go about it. That's why many of the characters in these stories come with baggage in the form of ex-girlfriends, and these stories are centered mostly on single men. I remember a time when I was hanging out with several guys, and we were all bonding over our past-romantic traumas. If we were observed from outside the restaurant we were at, the spectator could have assumed we were bragging about the size of our penises, one-upping each other's

best drunk story, or arguing over who was going to win the Super Bowl that season. Instead, we were going around one by one discussing our most painful romantic hang-up or breakup. I think that's what's important to consider when talking about men; they get comfortable with losing.

I begin "Square Dance" with "Mulligan" because it breaks a rule. My undergraduate fiction Professor Dave Kress told us to never under any circumstances start a story with a line of dialogue. To which I said, "But what if they're already talking when the story begins?" It was a silly question, but what I meant was that some of the best stories start before you're there; it's like walking into a bar and you hear the tail end of the joke but you missed all the razzmatazz in the introduction. Sometimes you show up to the movie and it's already under way, and that's what I wanted to simulate in my fiction, that nitty gritty of life. Sometimes it just does start off with a bang. "Mulligan" means a lot to me because it's a conversation I've been on both sides of, and it's an ongoing conversation in the heads of a lot of people. I guess I just wanted to show that the guy down in the dumps and the guy perceived to be big man on campus both have the same fears.

I think the ideal number of words to tell one of my stories is in 1,500 words and here's why. Technology today has changed many things for the better, but it most definitely has decreased our attention span. I have read pieces in workshop in undergrad that were thousands and thousands of words and they made me feel nothing; I just wanted to cut it all away and streamline the humor. Don't give the reader too many words or they'll spit it out. Give the reader a small but whole story and make them extend the word count themselves. My stories should be read twice, just like films should be watched twice, and albums should be heard twice. I didn't want my reader to re-read a bunch of fluff. Instead, I wanted to give them little but make sure it's

quality. Even if my work is shit I'm pleased and thrilled to let you know first-hand that it's 100% pure shit.

Back to the arrangement of "Square Dance." As a born and bred New Englander, I didn't want to write another New England text. Instead I wanted to write with an environmental distance and attempt to put observations of people in one region and see if they translate universally. I chose Georgia as a regional centerpiece because of its connections to the rap game, its connections to the players, and the connections to Bill Rusch: an architect on the first video game. I arranged these stories in the fashion of a rap album because I think albums do a great job of exercising range. You've got the club banger, the car banger, the studio hit single, the posse cut, and the deep cuts. I love the concept of deep cuts because some deep cuts should have been bangers. The range in these designated terms that I'm trying to use as examples implies a trajectory of feelings. While an album of eight consecutive club tracks would be neat, I don't think it'd reach as many people.

In order to make the most people laugh, or a large variety of people laugh, you've got to think about range. One aspect of my writing I was always mindful of was pigeonholing myself. Yes, I wanted my stories to all be funny, but I don't want them to generate the same feeling every time—I don't want eight club tracks. The order of these stories is curated and orchestrated to explore a range of emotions. In "Mulligan," I introduce the reader to myself and first show them a minimalist approach. I use two characters, simple enough dialogue, and I try to incorporate mystery to get the reader more invested in the two characters. Since "Mulligan" is so minimalist, it relies a lot on dialogue, which is why I follow it up with "The Buddhist," a story that has one line of dialogue.

I wrote “The Buddhist” as an exercise to see if I could make a story funny without just having people say funny things. I had to zero-in on space and the wordless interactions of people to propel the story forward. Another thing about my work, there is always one joke that I think of that inspires the story. I’ll think of a line of dialogue or a description that cracks me up and I will write that one part down and work away from that joke to fill out an entire narrative. It’s a great exercise because it’s not enslaved to a particular character or plot idea; it’s a slave to the joke—the cross I’m more than willing to bear.

“Out of Elder” was another kind of exercise for me because I wanted to get outside the head of a man for a bit. That story was also heavily inspired by the readings I came across in my undergraduate postmodern literature course. I’ll paraphrase a line from Vonnegut’s last novel *Timequake*. He said he loves science fiction because when you explain the plot of a science fiction novel, it sounds like a joke because the science fiction-y twist becomes the punchline: “...and then the robots established THEIR democracy.” “Out of Elder” is probably the closest thing I’ve written to science fiction, but it’s more surreal than anything. I wanted to capture the monotony of working in a grocery store but make it felt by a person shopping. I spent two years of undergrad working at a grocery store and I always thought, “It’s not such a bad place if you’re just shopping.” I wanted the protagonist to see how the sausage was made and become aware of supermarket monotony over the course of her buying groceries. The cherry on top was doing the Vonnegut-like science fiction turn into absurdity, disrupting the repetition of the store.

As a fan of humor and comedy, I’ve watched a lot of sketch humor. Influences include: *Saturday Night Live*, *Mad TV*, *Mr. Show with Bob and David*, MTV’s *The State*, *The Lonely Island*, *Human Giant*, and the *Dana Carvey Show*. Skits are historically low-budget and I think

“Mulligan,” “The Buddhist,” and “Out of Elder” operate on a skit continuum in that they’re lower stakes, low-budget, and minimalist. For the last track of the A-side of Square Dance, the album, I wanted the high-budget finale. I think “Figure It Out” reads as a mini-series-length story; it strikes me as a one-off limited season series that might air on HBO in my wildest dreams. Since I was dealing with a Pynchonian number of characters, I felt the trickiest part was balancing all the personalities while somehow giving them each an individual edge. Dialogue is the most natural for me to write so having observed colorful characters in the past made the story feel like it wrote itself.

I chose to include an interlude to separate the first part of “Square Dance” from the second. To hammer in the importance of music on the project, I decided to include a litany of songs that inspired me in some way during my writing of the collection. If this thesis was a research thesis, these musical artists would be in the references. In my youth I spent a lot of brainpower on what made The Beatles so catchy, and I’ve spent my twenties wondering the same thing about OutKast. The best I can come up with is that they create recognizable feelings in music that transcend time as if those feelings are always going to be applicable. The Beatles were forward-thinking in their recordings and their playability today is a testament of that, and there might be aliens in outer space listening to OutKast right now. I’ve tried to incorporate those kinds of “recognizable feelings” in my writing, as I expect these topics to be written about again, and again, and again—like a song you can’t get out of your head. I think part of this “mood setting” that I’m doing is repackaging fiction for a consumer who wouldn’t otherwise engage with fiction. Hip-hop and pop account for 40% of album consumption and the way I look at it, more of those consumers could be writing and reading fiction for a similar source of pleasure.

The story “For Your Service” kicks off the B-Side of “Square Dance.” It was my first attempt at writing a first-person narrative and I felt I may have gotten carried away with the experimentation. Thinking of the first few stories of “Square Dance” as skits with “Handsome Rob” being the blockbuster, “For Your Service” is like my big-budget war film—and there’s no *Apocalypse Now* without a *Heart of Darkness*. The military presence in my family has been established, but over the years I’ve befriended many veterans because of a similar interest in booze. One of my roommates in undergrad was a hard-drinking airman. He lived in our basement under the stairs and we used to call him the “X-Factor.” I was intrigued by his stories of working on a boring airforce base, and he was an inspiration for the protagonist. The first friend I made in Maine went on to become a Marine who would take his own life. So it goes. At his burial, following a 21-gun salute that painfully reminded me of his cause of death, a man in uniform said to the attendees, “This concludes our services.” I couldn’t get the sentence out of my head, it consumed me and became the title of my undergraduate poetry chapbook.

“Wanted” returns to the form of low-budget fiction that I introduced in Side-A. I write my stories with the expectation of adapting them into skits at a later date or hopefully a short film. Apparently, Quentin Tarentino, one of my favorite filmmakers, writes novel-esque drafts of his stories before he turns them into screenplays. I think this is beneficial for producing quality work where you can account for more minor details. It seems akin to Hemingway’s “Iceberg Philosophy”: give the reader an eighth of your story but make sure you’ve thought through the other seven eighths. What I was hoping to accomplish in this story was establish an impressionable male character who finds himself clashing with his father, himself, and a potential employer.

Though “Handsome Rob” is a relatively short story, I think of it as a big-budget action flick. While it’s a story with themes of absurdity, I don’t take violence seriously so I wanted to look at violence and how it’s internalized. This story was intentionally cinematic, complete with a heart throb and heightened fears and lives at stake. What I wanted to accomplish with “Handsome Rob” was a big budget caper with the unthinkable task of making an armed bank robber likable. While humor is still operating in that story, I think there is a particular darkness to it, darker than “Mulligan” because of the raised stakes. The underbelly of “Handsome Rob” is the privilege of beauty, but I made sure there was a price. I think the beautiful have a lightened load so to speak; I think people go out of their way to please beautiful people—I’m guilty of it sometimes. There is a compulsion to submit to beauty I think, or at least that’s how it feels to me. Some are threatened by beauty and want it to burn, but I’d rather make it laugh, but I’ll make anyone laugh.

“Why Men?” concludes the collection, and I think it’s my most interesting story. I conceived this piece as a “diss track” against myself, a tactic I’ve seen rappers do with great effect. Usually one writes a diss track to take down another rapper, but some rappers release self-inflicted diss tracks almost as a way to beat the competition to it. I felt myself writing myself into a pigeonhole of fiction featuring misanthropic young males and while I do a bit of critiquing and exposing them in “Square Dance,” I wanted to make sure to exhibit a cross-examination so my work wouldn’t come across as having one note or being one-sided. This story was my second foray into first-person narrative, and I think the strength of first-person is how many more thoughts you’re able to share with the reader. I also wanted to have a continuation piece because I’m fond of it when it’s done well. My inspiration for the continuation of “Figure It Out” in

“Why Men?” came from the Guy Ritchie film *Snatch*. Ritchie uses a montage in the film to show various characters existing in the same bizarre moment and the moment is what forces the characters to clash together.

I included a bonus track to the collection because I think that’s something the best albums have. “Fourth Course” is my first piece of fiction written at university. I think it’s got flaws and they’re worth changing but I wanted to preserve its innocence for what it is. There are ideas at play in “Fourth Course” that resonate heavily with “Why Men?” and I think having the two arranged back-to-back shows a bookend of my fiction at the university. I don’t think I would have had the confidence to take chances on writing dialogue without taking the risk on “Fourth Course” when I initially wrote it. It’s a testament of my interest in absurdity, the postmodern, and the day-to-day romance we find ourselves engaged in.

“Square Dance” means a lot of things to me, but my chief desire is that it means something to other people someday. Whether readers interact with it as it’s written, or they watch it as a filmed skit someday, I just want it to reach who it needs to reach. My work has intimate encapsulations of the young troubled mind and I hope to leave this troubled mind behind soon. It now serves me as an outlet for frustration, confusion, and curiosity, but it will someday serve me as a reminder of how I felt as a young man in my time and place. This collection is my hysterical laughter in response to an unsettling and uncertain world. If it was curiosity that was my goal, my drive, or my mission, I say to you reader, Mission Accomplished.



## Works Cited

- Brown, Kevin. "A Launching Pad of Belief: Kurt Vonnegut and Postmodern Humor." *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 3, no. 14, 2006, pp. 47-54.
- "Gender Distribution of Degrees in English Language and Literature." *Humanities Indicator*, American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2020.  
<https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/gender-distribution-degrees-english-language-and-literature#31646>
- Klinkowitz, Jerome. "How to Die Laughing: Kurt Vonnegut's Lessons for Humor." *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 3, no. 26, 2012, pp. 15-19.
- Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. Norton, 2005.
- Peter C. Kunze. "For the Boys: Masculinity, Gray Comedy, and the Vietnam War in *Slaughterhouse-Five*." *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 3, no. 26, 2012, pp. 41-57.
- Rando, David P. "George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2012, pp. 437-60.
- "Suicide Statistics." American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2020.  
<https://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/>
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *A Man Without a Country*. Random House, 2007.
- Young, Emma. *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories*. Edinburgh UP, 2018.

**[MULLIGAN]**

“I’m thinking about killing myself,” Tyler said.

“Just a little longer, it’s in here somewhere, I know it’s hot,” said Harold after a moment of thought.

Tyler followed Harold, who ducked his way through tree branches, mindfully keeping his bare legs from getting punctured by the pricker bushes.

“I didn’t mean *this*. I mean--all of this,” said Tyler waving his sweat glistened arms towards the blue sky, hitting several tree branches beside him in the process. He wiped the dusty twigs off of himself with his white gloved hand and looked at Harold who was attempting to block the sun with his hat.

“I don’t mean right now, or today. I mean, most of the time man,” said Tyler to Harold.

“You think that’s a good use of your time?”

Tyler took a step from under the trees onto a rock and stretched his arms, his back, and his arms once more before crossing them.

“I figure it’s a pretty good use of time. It’s an act to end it all.”

Harold joined him on top of the rock.

“No, I meant the act of thinking,” said Harold.

“What do you mean?”

Harold took his bag off of his shoulders and leaned it on the rock below. He looked around the area and hocked a loogie onto the dusty earth. Something caught his eye and he hopped to the ground, took several steps and smirked. After finding a leaf to place his knee on, he removed several twigs covering a white object. The item revealed itself to be larger than he

desired and he said, “Damn it, just a napkin.” Tyler, now next to Harold, looked upon him--waiting for an answer.

Harold stood up and straightened his back till he was above Tyler’s eye level, wiped the freshly fractured leaf from his knee to the ground, and spoke.

“I meant ‘do you think that thinking about killing yourself is a good use of time?’”

Tyler looked as puzzled as any post-pubescent thinking about killing himself would in the situation. He wiped the sweat from his forehead that featured cameos of acne and freckles in equally surprising places. He elected to use his sweaty arm in favor of his dusty arm. The sun was hot and the heat found its way through the shade of the trees. The Georgia fall arrives like a Trojan Horse with the spoils of the cruelest summer’s humidity lumped inside. Tyler wiped the back of his hand on his shorts before dabbing at his reddening forehead, and exhaled hoarsely. His partner Harold spoke again.

“Look, all I meant is that you must have thought about killing yourself a lot if you felt compelled to tell me. I ain’t the most trustworthy fella, and you’re smart and know that, so clearly you ain’t worried about folks at school knowing how you feel.”

“Hmmm, I guess I didn’t think about it that much.”

“You didn’t think about killing yourself that much?”

“No, Harold, I didn’t think about the social repercussions that followed me telling you I wanted to kill myself.”

Tyler walked back to the rock and grabbed Harold’s bag and threaded his arm through the strap and flung the bag over his shoulder. By the time Tyler turned around to look at Harold, he was busy marching his way through little trees and shrubs leading to a path Tyler had not seen

before. He followed Harold down the dirt path, each of them observing the ground beside them. Harold paused, snapped his fingers, and picked up his pace up a hill covered by ferns and prickly bushes. Tyler leapt up the hill and walked into the brighter fringe of the woods into the light. Tyler took off his hat to block out the sun and saw a large sprawling clearing inhabited by row after row of peach trees. Harold stood next to the peach tree closest to the woodline, thumbing a peach open before taking a massive bite out of it. With juice dripping from his clean shaven chin onto his white polo he said,

“You know, Jimmy Wilson didn’t think about it man, he just did it.”

“Jesus. Harold, what the fuck?”

“Fuck what? I’m just saying that it takes a sack of massive nuts to jump off the water tower after prom, any person with a pulse can *think* about killing themselves.”

“And I’m saying it takes some nuts to tell a prick like you I want to kill myself.”

Harold thought for a moment, grabbed another peach, and handed it to Tyler.

“Well what’ll it be Chickadee? Why would you want to kill yourself? Why waste your mulligan now? We’re so young,” he said and took a bite into his peach.

“I just don’t think I fit in, I hate work, and no girl likes me,” said Tyler, as he took a small bite out of the peach.

“Hah, you’re like everyone else,” said Harold through a mouth half-full of peach. He chewed, swallowed, and cleared his throat with a chuckle. Harold had unintentionally perfected the fuckable charm reminiscent of a young Robert Redford, a twinkle in the eye that cannot be taught. He walked closer to Tyler and grabbed a bottle of water from the bag and took a sip.

“How does that make me like everyone else?” Tyler asked. Harold returned the water to the bag on Tyler’s shoulder, swallowed, and shrugged.

“I don’t think I fit in, I hate work, and no girl likes me either,” said Harold.

“You get with girls all the time, what are you talking about?”

Harold took another bite from the peach, spit it on the ground, and threw it into the woods they came from.

“Yeah, but I’m what’s considered a ‘permanent rebound’. They don’t like me. They just get with me to get over guys they actually liked,” said Harold.

“Are you kidding me?”

“I’m afraid I ain’t. And if you’re going to live your life expecting chicks to actually like you, you should’ve killed yourself yesterday. And I’d give a girl the same advice. The issue here ain’t boys or girls, men or women--it’s people,” said Harold with a laugh. Tyler threw his peach onto the ground and stormed for the woodline.

“Tyler!” Harold yelled, and ran to catch him at the fringe of the woods.

“I can carry my clubs, don’t worry about it Ty,” said Harold.

“I’m fine with it, it keeps my back straight,” said Tyler. He shifted his weight towards the woods to point and found himself tobogganing on the bag down the dusty hill to the bottom.

“Tyler!” Harold yelled, and ran down the hill with weblike footwork. Tyler held his hand in the air and Harold pulled him up to his feet and slapped the dust and dirt from the bag back to the ground.

“Tyler, you shouldn’t kill yourself. Sure you’re a little awkward, and clumsy but come on,” said Harold.

“Alright, just drop it.”

Tyler attempted to walk away but Harold grabbed the side strap of the bag.

“No way, not till we get your little head straight,”

“Harold this isn’t funny, I’m being serious.”

“I’m being serious too! Tyler, I’m simply trying to enlighten you about the true facts of life before you go off and kill yourself,” said Harold.

Tyler shoved Harold and walked further into the woods, karate-chopping the dry branches and ducking under ferns. Harold followed. Tyler ceased looking at the ground and kept his head forward. His sweat-drenched hat was knocked to the dusty ground on several occasions which Harold would respond by picking up, slapping it clean off of his leg, and wordlessly returning it to his head. Harold followed Tyler for several silent minutes until Tyler stopped walking, paused and turned around.

“Is this everybody’s experience or just your experience?” asked Tyler.

Harold scrunched his lips as if there was an intriguing odor, and shrugged before saying,

“I expect it’s universal and I think it’s pretty simple. So everybody meets somebody who makes them believe love is real right? People love talking about that part. But folks don’t like to talk about what really happens when the love fades away, after the thrill is gone--even though that part happens more often. There is the ‘burner’ and there is the ‘burnt.’ Boy or girl, it doesn’t matter--everybody plays each role at some point. A person who has just been burnt is much more likely--”

“To be the burner,” interrupted Tyler.

“Exactly,” said Harold.

He took the lead and Tyler followed along, still carrying Harold's bag. Harold turned over rocks, leaves, twigs, and soggy logs that had been stepped on by other visitors. Harold marched until they were back at the rock they had stood on before. He resumed his place on top, and waited for Tyler to follow. Tyler walked up to the base of the rock and looked at Harold's face, which was conveniently blocking the sun until he started rolling his head around to crack his neck.

"So that's your whole unifying theory of life? Dog eat dog world? Everybody just fucks everybody over?" asked Tyler, using his hat to block the sun from his eyes.

"Yeah pretty much. I think everyone's a villain at some point," said Harold. After one last neck crack, Harold said,

"If you try to be the hero every time, it'll wear you down. I think it's a safety and vulnerability sorta thing. People don't like being cheated so when they inevitably are they--"

"Jump off the water tower?" interrupted Tyler.

"Jesus, Tyler, no, not what I was going for," said Harold.

"Right, they start cheating?"

"Exactly. People respond to romantic catastrophe differently, like they pick up new hobbies to replace their relationship or something. But knitting and swimming can only get you so far. You don't feel an urge for hobbies the way you do for love, so it's silly to try and replace love," said Harold. He jumped off the rock to join Tyler on the ground.

"A hobby won't fix heartbreak, so you won't feel retribution for being burnt until--,"

"Until you burn someone," interrupted Tyler.

Something caught Harold's eye in the woods and he ripped the bag off of Tyler's shoulder and ran away from the rock. Tyler followed within ear shot and watched Harold bend to the ground.

"Damn it, it's a Miller Lite can. This is like finding a nickel when I need a quarter," hollered Harold.

"It's gotta be around here somewhere," Harold said as he surveyed the area again. He spent a few moments picking the grass and mud out of his shoes. When they were clean to his satisfaction he tiptoed with the bag back to Tyler, who was sitting on the ground with his arms crossed. Harold started to speak but was interrupted by Tyler.

"Harold, I wake up every morning and I'm terrified. If I think forward, I can't do anything about it. If I think backwards, I can't change a thing. And that--that's all my 'now' is."

"That's very human Tyler, a lot of folks feel that way."

"That doesn't make me feel better. How could it? I know I'm not alone, I'm painfully aware of how 'not alone' I am. I just don't see anyone else feeling like this, people just seem to be in a better spot."

Harold dropped the bag on the ground without a second thought and lowered himself to Tyler's level.

"That's the thing Tyler, you don't see it. Like Jimmy Wilson, who could've seen that coming? I realize it's hard to talk about with other folks, but anyone else you'd share this with would just tell you 'hang in there,' 'it gets better,' 'you'll find your person,'" scoffed Harold.

"I agree with all of those things, but hearing it over and over ain't gonna help you Tyler--it's just gonna piss you off. I know where you're at, I've been there, hell brother--some days I'm still there. I'm a work in progress, we're all...works in progress."



“Come on, let’s get a move on, drop it,” said Tyler.

Harold jumped up and shook his head.

“Not until I find it, and I am going to find it, it’s my last one,” said Harold with determination.

“You sound determined,” said Tyler looking at Harold’s feet.

“I am determined, you could stand to be more determined,” said Harold. He extended his hand and lifted Tyler to his feet.

“Hah, maybe if I was determined I would’ve already killed myself,” said Tyler with a laugh. He hadn’t laughed all day. All day he was thinking about killing himself.

“That’s the spirit,” said Harold.

“How’s that?” asked Tyler.

Harold had begun walking and Tyler picked up the bag and returned it to his shoulder.

“Humor is the spirit, better than anything in my book--humor is the greatest thing we got in this life,” said Harold.

“How is any of this funny?” asked Tyler. He wasn’t smiling now, but at least he had laughed that day.

“Well it didn’t start out funny, but from a lack of options people had to make it funny. As a means of getting by. You either laugh or cry, and I choose laughter every time,” said Harold.

“I think you’re being a little callous,” said Tyler.

“Look--all I’m saying is that relationships are work, and when you lose a job you don’t sit around moping at home looking at photos from your old job, you get another job. And relationships don’t even give you two weeks notice! I don’t think enough people look at romance

as a business, they see it how they do magic or art--with wonder. We deserve to know the illusions if we're part of the show, right?" asked Harold. He laughed.

"Tyler, it's a cutthroat market of buying and selling emotions and experiences. Some better than others, some artificial--some genuine, but none of them last forever. Everything dies baby and that's a fact. Like work, friendships, soft drinks, or parking spots--they're temporary."

Harold's eye caught a white object in a patch of mud.

"Where did you learn all of this?" asked Tyler.

Harold kept his eyes on the mud.

"Learn," laughed Harold. "Man, I've seen it. You know why middle aged men break the bank for a sports car after a divorce?"

"Why?"

Harold stood up and returned to eye level with Tyler.

"Because it takes a man forty years to figure out a Porsche can't fuck their neighbor and hate their mother. And more often than not, that neighbor of theirs is a Porsche guy."

Tyler laughed.

Harold took a step forward and threw his arms around Tyler and the bag.

"People have the freedom to do anything and it ain't always the right thing. Which is why you gotta' be prepared for that," said Harold, wrapping up the hug with a pat on the back, then grabbing the water bottle from the bag. He took a step back, opened the bottle and said with his Robert Redford smile,

"I'd tell you to be good all the time but that might be what kills you. I guess just live free--"

“Or die,” interrupted Tyler.

“Exactly.”

“Thanks Harold, for being so--”

“Callous?” interrupted Harold, before taking a sip of the water. Tyler laughed.

“You know what I meant,” said Tyler.

“Call it a night? Get out of here?” asked Harold, handing the water to Tyler.

“No way, you’ll find it. It’s got to be around here somewhere, I believe in that,” said

Tyler before taking a sip of water. He turned around and took several steps before feeling the familiar squishy sensation of mud. Tyler looked down at his feet.

“Eureka!” he exclaimed, nearly dropping the water. Harold smirked and turned around.

“You found my ball,” said Harold.

“No mulligans, man,” said Tyler.

“No mulligans,” said Harold. Tyler turned around and allowed Harold to grab the 9-iron from the bag on his shoulder. He took a few steps back and gave his friend the proper space for a backswing. Harold whistled and whacked the ball out of the woods and watched it sail over the trees onto the fairway beneath the Georgia peach of a setting sun.

**[THE BUDDHIST]**

*“If you think you’re free, there’s no escape possible” ~ Ram Dass*

It was another morning spent hungover in a coffeehouse waiting to be fed. All three roommates were quiet. Paul had drunk the most the night before, therefore he was speaking the least. John was sober as a child and in a rush to get to work--so he kept about the business of checking his watch, his phone, and his reflection in the metal napkin dispenser tucked below the street facing window with just enough free space above the napkin holster that he could grab one without the slightest consternation of bashing his wrist into the wooden window sill. George was just right, still drunk from the night before and not even the thought of a hangover had cruised onto the horizon of his mind.

With Paul’s head hung low, and John’s eyes on his phone, George watched an old man outside the coffeehouse staring up into the void. The old man held his hands behind his back and with sandaled feet he kicked around the vicinity of his being the way a toddler would a dandelion. His smile had a purity that seemed of a kind more natural than the ebb and flow of the sun and moon. Cars whizzed by and the puddles cuddling the curb felt the consistent squeaking and scrubbing of rubber tires in its wet nest of water and cigarette butts. The old man paid no mind--perhaps he owned all mind.

The roommates were agitated in anticipation of their simple breakfast order--three breakfast-burritos. Paul had brought his iced coffee into the shop with him and it towered over the dixie cup sized house blend the coffeehouse tricked John into ordering from a hurriedly drawn chalkboard. George was on a budget, so he only ordered the breakfast burrito and the coffeehouse didn’t offer water--so he resorted to stealing sips from Paul’s iced coffee because

the sips would be more observable if taken from John's. By the time Paul stood up to go throw up in the restroom, the old man had re-entered the coffeehouse. He was tall, rail thin, and wore robes of a domineering red with yellow sash tightened around his gut. The moment the old man walked by the boy's table, his number was called, and he glided across the coffeehouse floor to the counter and nodded to the breakfast dispatcher. George looked at John looking at his phone, the restroom door, and then at the old man before taking a sip of Paul's Dunkin Donuts iced coffee.

There were open seats, but the old man elected to rest in the lotus position next to the cleared table by the bathroom. Paul passed him without a glance and returned to sit with his back to the old man. John had noticed the old man when looking at his reflection in the napkin dispenser, and downed the rest of his teeny cup of coffee. George could not keep his eyes off the old man. He saw an aura surrounding him that suggested a state of tranquility that could not be obtained without utter sacrifice of self. There was the sound of receipts printing at the register, the squeaking of chair legs against dirt on the floor, as well as the hum of voices chattering away--but George found himself transfixed by the old man. Paul looked up to see George staring beyond him and turned to see what George saw; George took the opportunity to steal another sip of Paul's iced coffee.

The old man ate his own breakfast burrito, and wrapped the tin foil, salsa packets, and napkins into a ball resembling a whiskey stone. John had torn up the tin foil his burrito was wrapped in so he could roll the pieces into balls small enough to require choking labels if they were to be packaged and sold to consumers. One by one he dropped each ball into his empty cup until the tin pieces piled high like DVD's in a bin at Wal-Mart. Paul took several sips of his iced

coffee and two bites from his burrito before returning to the “restroom” to engage in an activity that could not be a further departure from rest. George was halfway through his burrito and refused to lose sight of the old man. He felt his own insecurities amplified as the old man appeared to have none. George thought about his own work ethic, his recent social encounters, and mostly about things he wished he hadn’t said to girls he liked when he was in middle school. The old man rose, turned to the front of the coffeehouse, and flung the tin foil ball across the room. Over their heads it flew like a cannonball fired from a shoreline to a ship too far away in the ocean and like a cannonball plunging into dark water it landed in the trash-can without incident. He then returned to the lotus position on the floor. George smiled, looked at John who was now looking at his watch, then looked at the restroom door before taking another sip of Paul’s iced coffee.

George had drunk about half of the iced coffee and was rotating the cup with his wrist while dangling the liquid remnants that had melted into a silky swirl of water, ice, coffee, and cream that raced around the confines of the cup like eggs being mixed in a bowl. After his twelfth revolution of water, ice, coffee, and cream, George put the cup back on the table. Paul shook his head, stood up, handed the iced coffee to George and took off for the restroom again. George chuckled and finished his burrito and wrapped the tin foil into a ball the way the old man had wrapped his. He washed his breakfast down with the rest of Paul’s iced coffee. When George looked up he saw the old man standing, smiling, and nodding at him. George returned the smile and pointed his elbow toward the trash bin across the coffee shop. The old man closed his eyes and nodded his head. George looked at John who was still staring at his phone and threw the tin foil ball across the room and hit an old woman square in the face. George cocked his head

to see the old man smiling and bobbing his head. George looked at the old woman staring at him, and out of his own befuddlement he threw his arms up and shrugged. The old woman smiled, laughed, and returned to her yogurt. George looked back to see the old man smiling and then smiled himself.

George didn't know why but the absurdity of his fascination with the old man made him laugh uncontrollably. His roommates failed to notice his laughing which made him laugh even harder. John was looking at his phone and Paul was still in the bathroom. Everyone in the coffeeshop was peacefully eating their meals and George couldn't help but notice he was alone.

The old man started walking toward the boys' table and tears of laughter began streaming down George's aching cheeks, like beads of condensation rolling down the side of a Dunkin Donuts iced coffee in a hot car. John looked up from his phone and then turned to see the old man standing beside him and his red-faced roommate ugly-giggle crying during a brunch rush in a coffee shop. The old man opened his mouth to speak and George, with eyes nearly shut, leaned forward laughing through his sobs in anticipation of some message.

The old man said, "Could you sell me a loosie for a dollar?"

George's eyes opened wide and he began laughing harder and crying harder as heads began turning to look at George, John, and the old man. John shook his head and the old man bowed at him and turned around. Paul exited the restroom and took steps toward his roommates at a pace that resembled a crawl much more than a walk. John and George stared at the old man walking toward Paul, and watched Paul projectile vomit up on the cleared table next to the old man. The old man smiled in response, picked at a wedgie in his robes, and then returned to the lotus position next to the restroom.

**[OUT OF ELDER]**

*“Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave” ~ Cormac McCarthy*

In the evenings, the Jones Family Supermarket was stocked and cleaned by drug addicts. In the mornings, the same market was maintained and operated by drug addicts in recovery. This supermarket (like the rest of them) was a melting pot of laborers who'd like to be elsewhere, assisting customers who'd also like to be elsewhere. Molly Lawler, the sunkissed florist, did not want to be there.

She wandered the aisles with a basket because she wouldn't get paid till Friday. Molly intended on a vegetable based dinner but found herself awestruck by the rotating chickens behind the heavy deli-boy working the counter. Her life had afforded her the luxury of getting absolutely lost in peaceful moments. Whether it be the pinwheels blowing in the wind at her garden, the records spinning on her turntable, or watching her soapy clothes tumble in the washer at the laundromat.

“Care for a suitcase chicken?” asked the heavy deli-boy.

“A what?”

“A suitcase chicken. You've been staring at the rotisserie birdies.”

“I sorta zoned out there. I'm all set though, thanks.”

As Molly walked to the vegetables, she could hear the heavy deli-boy asking “Care for a suitcase chicken?” to a different customer. Molly added tomatoes, avocados, onions, and peppers to her red basket. Then she sauntered to the seafood department and gawked at the incomprehensible concept of “market price.”



“How are you today?” asked the man at the counter.

“I’m fine thanks, how are you?”

“You know, another day in paradise.”

Molly smiled and moseyed over to the meat department, and inspected the pork and beef.

She was comparing prices when she heard the phrase again,

“You know, another day in paradise.”

She turned and saw the fish-slinger speaking with another customer.

“Paradise sure is crowded,” she said to her veggies. Molly walked along the meat cooler for milk and coffee-creamer in the neighboring dairy case. She hesitated about buying a full gallon of milk and instead elected to grab the half-gallon of skim.

“Find everything you’re looking for?” asked a sweaty-pit employee dragging a pallet of ice cream behind him.

“Yes, thank you.”

“No, prob-lem.”

Molly walked past the milk racks to get eggs and cheese.

“Find everything you’re looking for?”

Molly paused and looked to her left and saw the sweaty-fella’ talking with an older fella’. She then did a cost-estimate of the items in her basket, hoping it was below \$30. With her basket full she walked to the check-out lane.

Being the third person in line, Molly thought she had a good chance of being rung up before hearing another Michael McDonald tune. She studied a mother of three in line before her

(baby in hand, daughter pulling at her shirt, and a son looking at toys and magazines). Molly and the mother both grimaced when the digital receipt reached \$100.

Molly looked beyond the mountainous early evening drunk behind the family to see the bagger, a slim elderly man north of seventy. His veiny arms shook like a mid-cough piss-stream at his plastic stuffing station. He'd let out a wheeze when thicker watermelons arrived on the conveyor belt. The mother exchanged words with the bagger which made him smile, Molly's lips too shifted into a smile at the sight of this interaction. She thought about the times she'd gone to the supermarket with her mother. She thought about all the times she'd made little forts out of the bulk-pack toilet paper stacks.

Her slender frame mirrored the DVD rack she was staring at in lane-four. After scanning each case on the rack, she began to wonder who Steven Seagal was. She also wondered why his entire filmography was available at the Jones Family Supermarket. It wasn't long before Molly was in a Steven Seagal rabbit hole of hypotheticals and found herself transfixed with a similar curiosity she had with the rotisserie chickens. She was staring at Seagal's hairline when a manager with a chopped haircut said,

"I know there's a lot of Seagal flicks, but I'm sure there's a copy of Top Gun tucked away somewhere."

Molly wasn't able to engineer a response fast enough but the manager was already engaging in a similar one-sentence conversation with a shopper in register lane five. The searing customer service smile looked like it was stained on the woman's face, like a Steven Segal still.

When the young family exited the Jones Family Supermarket, the log-armed drunk stepped forward. He placed two plastic bottles of Rubinoff on the conveyor belt along with a

massive jug of Papi Tino's organic orange juice. The high schooler operating the register said to the drunk,

"That'll be \$24.20."

"Bottom shelf liquor, top shelf mixer," mumbled the drunk.

"Sir, your total is \$24.20."

The drunk reached into his pocket and grabbed his wallet, packed with banknotes. Molly decided to peruse the magazines next to the rows of mints and gums, it seemed like a good time for her to become informed on celebrity divorce speculation and unflattering photos of people at the beach.

"Bottom shelf liquor, top shelf mixer," said the drunk with more charm than slur to no one in particular.

The elderly bagger looked up at the man.

"Would you like paper or plastic...plastic...plastic...plastic...plas...plas...plastic?" asked the bagger. His lips (like eyelids) were blinking the body into oblivion. His eyes rolled behind the frames of his glasses into the back of his head while his lips quivered in idiosyncratic sequences. The check-out girl abandoned her post and strutted till she was behind the old coot.

"HMMMMM," the girl said--observing the bagger's hunched posture. She slapped the slope of his spine several times. Finding no success with the slaps, she kicked his shin like one would harm a disobedient vending machine. The geezer stared blankly and the lip remained quivering. The check-out girl left him and walked to the microphone nestled next to the cash register. The high schooler tapped into an artificial customer service voice that emanated from the store's loudspeaker,

“Brian, we need another Leonard at reg 4, Brian, reg 4, thank you.”

Before the checkout girl could begin assisting Molly, a balding stock-crew manager emerged from the utility closet.

“Sorry about this folks, gimme a moment,” Brian said as he approached register four. Brian placed both of his meaty hands on Leonard’s shoulders and tilted him back like the geezer was a hand truck. Molly’s eyes widened and her jaw dropped. The drunk paid no mind and made his exit from the Jones Family Supermarket.

The checkout girl, indifferent to the whole situation, started ringing up Molly’s purchases. Brian turned Leonard and began to push him. Like the balls of Leonard’s feet were wheels, he was rolled away from lane four. Brian wheeled Leonard with ease to the middle door right of the utility closet. He tilted Leonard till he was standing as straight as old folks could stand, complete with forward bending spine.

The stock-crew manager opened the middle door and propped it ajar with his left foot while Molly observed in horror. The rest of the customers remained complacent in their respective lines, standing in silence united by the droning of beeping & printing of receipts at the check-out registers.

With a thrust of his long arm, Brian launched Leonard into the shoot. The shoot rumbled for several seconds until Leonard reached the bottom of the dumpster like a quarter hitting the inside of a glass. Brian closed the door, situated himself before the third door and cracked his interlocked fingers. He opened a door to a narrow room with a line of uniformed geezers of varying proportions. Each of them moaned at their exposure to the light. Not all the geezers had glasses, but they all possessed a quivering lower lip. Every one of them had shirts with

“Leonard-2000” stitched above the breast. Brian slapped the breast of the first “Leonard” in line until the eyes lit up.

“Paper or plastic?” wheezed the new Leonard.

“Shhhhhh, not yet old-timer,” said Brian.

Brian held the “new” and much shorter Leonard by the hand and walked him to lane-four. The new Leonard’s free hand moved to the small of his arched back after several steps. When the new Leonard was in position, he looked up at Brian. Brian nodded.

“Paper or plastic?” the new Leonard wheezed to Molly.

Brian gave the new Leonard a thumbs-up before leaving lane-four.

“I brought my own bag, thank you,” said Molly.

The new Leonard was faster than the last one; he managed to bag Molly’s items before she had to pay; despite arriving after all of her items were scanned. Molly gathered her food and walked away. The checkout girl called after her,

“Have a great day.”

Molly turned around to return the niceties, but before she could, the new Leonard spoke up, “Have a nice day...nice day...nice day...nice day...nice...nice...” Molly whipped around to make a beeline out of the Jones Family supermarket. *Minute by Minute* began playing on the store’s speakers as she got to the exit. She walked to her car, started crying, and called her father.

**[FIGURE IT OUT]*****9:27AM (Opening)***

I woke up three minutes before my alarm which really pissed me off because it meant I would still be late for work. But being late to work doesn't mean much if you're a cook, let alone the opener who lives across the street. I've worked in and out of kitchens since I was thirteen and my relationship with them is like an addict with drugs, I've done them all. Prep kitchens, pastry kitchens, pizza kitchens, high-end kitchens, seasonal kitchens, and high-end seasonal kitchens. And in every one of those kitchens I have been yelled at by a man much larger and sweatier than me until the vein in his forehead reveals itself like a slick-witting pimple. I'm twenty-six years old and the amount of time I've spent cooking with sweaty fat men might be what keeps me up at night.

It's a Saturday and I work in a Jewish deli so it's a logical exercise in itself wondering if we're open on the Sabbath. The answer? Well it's a question: How Jewish is Mr. Abelman? He's a regular attendant of temple, he plays golf with Rabbi Finkel, but he sells bacon at his deli--not latkes. No judgment on my end, I'm not Chosen, matter of fact...I'm not even close. By the way I'm Arman, Arman Tutelian, and yes that "i-a-n" makes me Armenian. If you're not familiar with Armenians beyond the Kardashians don't worry, we're everywhere, we're in kitchens, politics, and in movies playing the racially ambiguous bad guys.

I've been told before by shirt-tucking men that I have "bitch hair" and I was arranging my "bitch hair" into a "man bun" with my ex-girl's elastic when my tracfone began ringing on the edge of the bathroom sink. It was an unfamiliar number so I thought about avoiding the call but then it occurred to me it might be the results of the STD test I was anticipating like a drama

kid waiting for a cast list. It was neither the clinic nor a director but instead it was the poor bastard I was expected to train today.

“Yello,” I said as pleasantly as I could in the morning.

“Hi, uh, I don’t know who you are but my new boss gave me this number,” said the voice.

“I hope you’re talking about Green Joe, Green Joe Boutot?” I said.

“Yeah, at Abelman’s Deli. I’m supposed to start today,” said the voice.

“Yessir, I’m Arman. I’m opening the shop today,” I said.

“Well I’m at the deli and it’s not open,” said the voice.

“I’ll be right there, I live across the street, I’m just putting my hair up,” I said.

“You’re a chick?” said the voice.

“Yeah and I’m horny, we can kiss when I get there,” and I hung up the tracfone to let it marinate.

I locked the door to my apartment with one of my two keys and walked across the street to Abelman’s Deli and selected the other one. Each footstep stuck to the pavement because the bottoms of my shoes are caked in grease and my legs were still sore from standing on the line all day yesterday and dancing with my crew at the bar all night. What I love about my crew is that you don’t make plans with them, you just show up to the bar and they’re there. People think we organize it, we’re not that lame, we’re just thirsty. One night I went to the Tap Horse, the brewery across from Abelman’s and eight members of the staff were there on their own intentions. By the end of the night we were huddled up together along the bar like birds on a

powerline, eating the slices of pizza that didn't sell. When I got to the door of Abelman's Deli to meet my trainee we both laughed.

"Chick with a beard, huh?" he said.

"Yessir, Arman Tutelian. Pretty much everyone here calls me...Arm," I said, extending my hand to be shook.

"Marshall Wilkes," he said, accepting the shake.

"I gotta be straight with you, Marshall. You didn't sound black over the phone," I said.

"Yeah, I always use my white voice on the phone. How'd you think I got this interview...at Abelman's Deli?" said Marshall.

"That's genius, I love that. Does Joe know you're black? It's not a concern, I'm just wondering if we can get some mileage with this," I said.

"Yeah, I interviewed with him and uh, mustache guy," said Marshall.

"Tanner, we call him T-Ski. He's the assistant manager," I said.

"Right, with the lazy eye," said Marshall.

"Don't mention the eye," I said.

"Don't mention the eye, gotcha," said Marshall.

"Alright, shall we?" I said. Marshall nodded and I opened the door to Abelman's Deli.

We walked together through the dining area and while Marshall was looking at the walls and the ceiling I was looking at the tabletops and the trash cans. The days in the kitchen blend together, especially if you've been in the same one for four years. I couldn't remember if I had emptied the trashes last night or if I was just replaying a memory of the last time I had emptied them, it



was like that shitty French book the University made me read when I was pre-dropout and still impressionable.

The interior of Abelman's Deli is pleasing from a marketing perspective but not my own. It's strategically sound, it's a narrow dining room with one row of tables and chairs on the far left side, one row for a line to form at the counter, another row of high-top tables and tall chairs, and another row that's open enough for you to walk a beeline to the one-loo shithouse. The walls are orange and yellow and on them hang paintings done by the students at the University I dropped out of, the University Green Joe dropped out of, and the University T-Ski dropped out of. The bulk of our staff are college students but everyone who works here was a college student.

Behind the counter it's an open kitchen which means it can be seen by customers. The line is a row of refrigerators on wheels on the right side with cutting boards for heads, that's where the sandwiches are made. The left side is the sandwich press, soup station, cut table, and prep table. At the end of the kitchen is the dishpit and sink, and to the right of that out of view of the customers is another prep table and an oven. There are two large trash bins and four small trash bins in the kitchen. At the end of the kitchen is a hallway with dry storage on the left, Green Joe's office was on the right and had a pull-up bar attached to the door frame that made it look like a crown on a king. Behind the office, out of view from customers is drink storage and the walk-in cooler which doesn't have a sign but has a large photo of Christopher Walken's face on it, courtesy of Dirk.

Marshall was at the register as I was checking my last trashcan and I scurried over to show him how to clock in. It was 9:45AM and we open at 10:00AM, and I had nothing to worry about. It only takes ten minutes to get everything set up but Green Joe schedules us all an hour

early in case he or T-Ski decide to tie one on the night before and be able to open the deli on the off chance they have incurred the nastiest of hangovers.

It's always a spectacle on Saturday. It's our busiest day and it's always a guessing game as to who is gonna be throwing up out back from overexerting their liver on any given Friday. I can say for certain it's not gonna be me, I saved my shift sandwich from yesterday for bedtime last night, or that's what the breadcrumbs in my bed told me this morning. If I had to guess who was going to be hurling in the alley at this moment though, I'd be putting my money on Kenny.

At 10:00AM T-Ski walked into the deli with a large gas station coffee cup that was likely harboring a few miniatures of Baileys Irish Coffee. He was wearing aviators with blue lenses to cover his lazy and non-lazy eye, and his crayon-red short shorts rippled with each stride like a flag whipping against its pole. On my first day at Abelman's he told me his eye was so lazy that it collected unemployment. T-Ski's real name is Tanner Kowalski and before dropping out of school he was studying to be a history teacher. He went to university on a track scholarship after finishing runner-up at states to some guy named Devin Dolliver. That "some guy" would go on to marry Tanner's "first girlfriend." T-Ski then developed an interest in music and narcotics. Devin Dolliver went to the Olympics.

"Whats up, baby boy?" T-Ski said to me as he set a coffee down on the counter. I gave him a fist bump when his hand was free. Marshall exited the bathroom and returned to the kitchen entrance. T-Ski turned around.

"And what's up baby black boy?" T-Ski said to Marshall. Marshall shook his head while laughing and gave T-Ski a fistbump.

"You can call me Marshall," said Marshall.

“Nope. Too many syllables, how about Rook?” said T-Ski.

“Like the chess piece?” asked Marshall.

“No more like go grab me the potato bag, Rookie!” said T-Ski.

“Oh, I get it,” said Marshall, but he didn’t move. T-Ski took a step closer to Marshall and grinned, his mustache was close enough to cling onto some earwax. Marshall backed his head away slightly and turned towards T-Ski.

“Do, do you want me to grab the potato bag?” asked Marshall.

“Figure it out, Rook!” said T-Ski in a falsetto reminiscent of a pornographic actress.

“I’ll show you where they are,” I said to Marshall.

I walked with Marshall to the walk-in and explained the storage procedures just as I did when I trained Kenny, Dirk, Lit, Whip, Jenn Cal, and Grace. When Kenny got hired Green Joe and T-Ski were so hungover that they shanghaied me into training him when I had only been at the deli for a year. They were pleased with my handling of him and told me he’s already better than Ike, who got hired when I did. In reality, Green Joe and T-Ski didn’t train anyone. They relied on hiring people with experience like me and they didn’t know what the fuck to do with Ike. All I had to do was show Kenny where the cheeses were, and he figured it out. Green Joe and T-Ski then decided I would be the lead trainer. They gave me an extra dollar an hour and the meaningless title of “Immersion Administrator.”

When we walked back toward the kitchen and I saw Marshall’s jaw drop, I knew Jenn must have been clocking in. Jenn Cal or Jenny Calloway is the belle of Abelman’s Deli. She’s graduating with a degree in social work, has a heart of gold, and happens to possess the kind of buttocks that rappers pay big money to show off in their music videos. One time, Green Joe

was bringing her a new spool of receipt paper for the register and he gently placed the roll on the top of her ass and she clenched and held the spool between the small of her back and the top of her buttcheek. She didn't even turn her head around, she just reached her hand back and snatched it, and fed it into the machine. Me, Green Joe, T-Ski, and Kenny were speechless and Ike broke the silence by saying, "Woah, Rumpasaurus Rex over here."

***12:30PM (Rush)***

"Legs!" I yelled from my position on the line, I was on *Cut*.

"Arm!" said Grace, averting eye contact with me as she before took the sandwich and brought it out into the dining room.

What I like about the lunch rushes at Abelman's is the positions. Jenn Cal and Dirk were on the registers taking orders from the line of customers that extended to the door. T-Ski was on Make One, which would make him first chair if he were playing an instrument in a school band. He was assembling the breads, cheese, meats, and condiments. T-Ski may have been the second fastest person in the state in his time and place, but he is easily the fastest sandwich maker in the state at any time. When Grace returned from bringing the sandwich out, T-Ski spoke.

"Grace, could you grab some turkey?" asked T-Ski.

"Heard," said Grace.

"Who's closing tonight?" asked Jenn Cal.

"Arm is, right?" asked T-Ski.

"Arm opened," said Kenny.

"Yeah, Arm opened," I said.

"I'll make sure to get you out, Joe should be coming in," said T-Ski.

“No way he’s closing,” said Jenn Cal.

On Make Two (second chair) was Kenny Moon just trying to keep up with T-Ski, his job was to throw the vegetables on and add bacon when needed. Kenny was also expected to make salads when the tickets required it. Kenny would then turn to place the sandwich on the press if it was a hot one, or place it on the cutting board if it was supposed to be cold. My job on cut was to cook the sandwiches on the press, make sure they have the right color and temperature and then cut the sandwiches on the cutting board. Then I would wrap them, label them, and yell “legs!” After yelling “legs!” my runner approaches so they can bring the sandwich to the customer, my runner today is Grace, my ex-girl, the one whose hair elastic was holding my man bun together.

“Legs!” I yelled.

“Arm!” said Grace as she snatched the sandwich and walked out to the dining area.

I loved Grace, I still might, I’m not sure, it’s really hard to stay mad at a person named Grace. She’s three inches shorter than me but she doesn’t wear heels, ever. She’s in the sustainable agriculture program at the University which is where we met when I was enrolled. We would work on homework every day in the greenhouse and while I was getting an A in sustainable ag, I began failing all the other classes because all I wanted to do was hang around with her and listen to her talk about plants. It was one of those relationships that’s doomed in the way a dog is doomed from the start. I was more than willing to get involved but I didn’t want to think about how it’d end.

“Grace, I need provolone and swiss,” said T-Ski.

“Heard,” she said, and walked to the back.

One of the sandwiches under my surveillance burned on the press when I was lost in thought about Grace. I used my knife to shave off the top layer of char, packaged the sandwich, and swept the crumbs into the trash can below me with my towel. The door to Abelman's opened and in walked Whip fresh off a delivery with Marshall in tow. When they got to the entrance of the kitchen Whip had to squeeze in his gut to get past Jenn Cal's rear end.

"Sup Arm, sorry I didn't make it last night," said Whip, sandwiched between Jenn Cal and the large trash can.

"Ain't no thang, you showing Marshall the ropes?" I said.

"Yeah, bring sandwich, take money, not a lot to figure out," said Marshall scooting by Jenn Cal like he was moving in a movie theater.

"Shut up, Rook, don't downplay my role here, bro," said Whip, slapping T-Ski's ass.

T-Ski didn't look up, he was focused on the sandwich he was assembling, but he spoke.

"Whip, get on dishes. Rook, could I get a sweep?"

"Alley dishes bro?" asked Whip with a smile.

"No, while it is the place for it, this is not the time," said T-Ski.

"Heard," said Whip.

"What the fuck are alley dishes?" asked Marshall.

"Figure it out," said T-Ski.

"And where's the broom?" asked Marshall.

"Figure it out," said Jenn Cal, Dirk, Kenny, and Whip in harmony. T-Ski smiled.

I hated when Whip did dishes, he wasn't the heaviest employee at Abelman's but he was easily the most dense. Getting by him at the dish pit was like getting by Jenn Cal at the counter,

or a bouncer at a bar...T-Ski was pretty much the only one who could thread the needle. The dish pit is typically reserved for the newest person on staff, pretty much anyone can do dishes, even Ike. Whip was one of the student employees we had and like Jenn Cal, he was in his last year of school. His real name is Richard Whitney but we call him Whip because he's the best delivery driver we got. The other driver, Lit, is Henry Little and he's the yin to Whip's yang. Whip is short, dense, and heavy and Lit is tall, skinny, and lanky and they're best friends. They're in the same fraternity as Kenny Moon and Kenny got their feet in the door of Abelman's Deli. They're good enough workers when they're not completely stoned but they're very rarely not completely stoned.

"Legs!" I yelled.

"Arm!" said Grace, taking the sandwich away.

"Okay, okay, we have switched the rewards system bear with me a moment, I'm having a hard time remembering how we do the new cards. Okay, okay, no not there, stupid machine, not, okay, alright there you go that'll be \$9.27," said Dirk at the second register.

I could tell Dirk was near the end of his rope based on the tone he was taking with an old woman, so I asked him if he wanted to take a cigarette break, which he obliged by way of playing air guitar and moving his tongue suggestively. He elbowed my elbow as a substitution for a fist bump and I nearly cut my finger instead of the sandwich.

"Dirk, not cool. That was a close one," I said.

"Oh man, I know, I've cut my digits thou-saaaaands of times, fucking sucks. Sorry, brother man," said Dirk.

"Ain't no thang, go have a smoke, and get a coffee next door if you want," I said.

Marshall was standing by the delivery tickets, fumbling around with the stapler. He looked like he was trying to stay out of the way, and the floor didn't need sweeping.

"Marshall, you think you could handle the register? Dirk will be back in ten or fifteen. Little gametime action? Don't tell me you're gonna be Ike 2.0," I said.

"Yeah, uh, I hear ya?" said Marshall.

"Heard?" I said.

"Yeah, that one," said Marshall taking a step forward to get on the register.

I heard the door to the alley slam and I smiled at the thought of Dirk dancing his way behind the shop to smoke a cigarette. Dirk is perhaps the most colorful character in our kitchen. A casualty of the war on drugs, Dirk has been on the move since his adolescence, and running from an even tougher childhood. He's one of those guys who looks like he'd time traveled from the drugs he took. Dirk and I are the same age but he could pass for forty without question. He rode the rails east from Michigan and got tangled up with Green Joe at some music festival he was cooking at in Tennessee. When Green Joe came across him, he was homeless. Which is actually funny because Dirk's given name is Dirk Neinhaus, which happens to translate as "no house" in German.

"Grace, could you get me some tomatoes?" asked Kenny.

"Heard," said Grace.

Dirk's past drug charges make him a different kind of lifer in that he is likely to be only employed by kitchens for the rest of it. I've seen guys like Dirk before and they're largely all the same. Talented, hard working, probably seen more hours in a kitchen than the rest of us combined, but a temper that forbids him to stay put. A man subject to the rules of the road and



under the thumb of whoever decides to take a chance on him next. He's what I call a "boom or bust" performer. He could be the most valuable member of the staff on any given day but a hangover or a bout of withdrawal could make him as useless as Ike. I'd rather have a consistent performer, even if they're operating on a lower level. But a guy like Dirk can make tickets disappear when he's on his game.

"Grace, could you cut up some green peppers?" asked T-Ski.

"Heard," said Grace.

"And cucumbers," said Kenny.

"Heard," said Grace.

"And lettuce," said T-Ski.

"Heard, heard, heard," said Grace.

"Grace, could you grab some receipt paper?" asked Jenn Cal.

"Where do you want it?" asked Grace.

"Don't get any ideas," said Jenn Cal.

"Heard," said Grace.

Kenny took a step back and gulped. He read the ticket over again to make sure it was accurate. He took off his gloves and threw them in the small trash can next to him.

"Egg salad...with olives," said Kenny between burps.

"It's the one with extra mayo," said T-Ski without breaking concentration.

"Extra mayo..." said Kenny looking at the mayonnaise lathered bread.

Kenny put his hands over his mouth and turned left to run to the back room but he was stopped in his tracks by Whip's dense frame.

“Whip, move,” said Kenny.

“Figure it out, I’m almost done bro,” said Whip. Kenny pushed Whip to the ground and pushed his way out the back door which swung-knocked the cigarette out of Dirk’s hand.

“Fuck you, Ken,” yelled Dirk before lighting another.

I looked at T-Ski who had four sandwiches stacked at the Make 2 position, it hadn’t occurred to him that Kenny left him hanging on the line. I improvised and hopped onto Make 2. I hollered at Grace to get on Cut, and yelled at Whip to get on Register 2. The door to Abelman’s opened and in walked Green Joe Boutotw with his huge backpack and an air of day-off confidence. He got to the kitchen’s entrance and said,

“Jenn, behind.”

“Heard,” she said. She turned to her left and her rear hit Whip in the left knee, he chuckled and took a step further to the right.

“How we doing crew?” asked Green Joe.

“Been a madhouse today,” said T-Ski.

“That’s what I like to hear,” said Green Joe. He checked on the soups, counted the tickets hanging, and sized up the family that had just joined the already long line.

“Where’s Dirk?” asked Green Joe.

“Smoking,” I said.

“And Kenny?” said Green Joe.

“Puking,” I said.

“Grace?”

“Cutting veggies,” I said.

“Was Kenny with y’all last night?” asked Green Joe.

“Sort of,” said T-Ski.

“Whip, what kind of strange did you get into last night?” asked Green Joe, throwing a hand onto his shoulder.

“Me and Lit got pretty cooked, didn’t make it out,” said Whip.

“Oh I’m sure you guys did some making out,” said Green Joe with a cheeky smile.

“Yeah bro, you got us, nothing like making out with your fraternity brothers,” said Whip.

“I bet they tied their dicks together and pretended to be the letter H,” said Grace walking by with a container of cut cucumbers.

“Speaking of the letter H, where is Henry? What’s his ETA? He’s not doing alley dishes is he? Any ideas, Whip?” asked Green Joe, giving Whip a nudge.

“He brought the catering order to campus, he should be back soon,” said Whip.

And just like that Henry Little walked into Abelman’s Deli with what must have been the largest bottle of Gatorade. His head nearly touched the ceiling and he had to duck under every other light fixture. Lit is the brains of Abelman’s Deli. He wasn’t the best cook, or the fastest at prep, but he could use his wit to get more tips than anyone. He’s an English major at the University and he’s convinced he’s going to write the last American novel. Not the best, not the next, but the last. Lit used to make money writing papers for people on his dorm floor and he’s even got a few of his own stories published. When he got to the entrance of the kitchen he ducked and climbed aboard, scooted behind Jenn Cal, and put a long receipt paper into the jar with the rest of them.

“\$600 order, no tip,” said Lit defeated.

“Empty your pockets,” said Green Joe.

After placing the Gatorade on the counter, Lit put his hands into his pockets and pulled out two closed fists.

“Empty your fists,” said Green Joe.

Lit unclenched his fists and two twenty-dollar bills fell, one of them landed on Jenn Cal’s rear end and the other on the floor.

“Oh yeah, they tipped forty-dollars,” said Lit with a wry smile.

“You idiots really keep me on my toes,” said Green Joe, picking up the fallen bill and putting it in the tip jar.

“May I?” Green Joe asked Jenn Cal. She looked over her shoulder at the twenty on her butt.

“If you touch the cheek, I get to keep it,” said Jenn Cal. Green Joe thought for a moment, reached slowly for the bill with his left hand, and quickly slapped her buttcheek with his right hand.

“Joe!” yelled Jenn Cal. Whip’s jaw dropped, Lit scoffed, T-Ski finally looked up from his station.

“Not cool Joe,” said Grace.

“You heard the lady,” said Green Joe and he handed Jenn Cal the bill, to which Jenn Call shrugged her shoulders, smiled, and put the twenty in the tip jar.

“That was better than the time when she was the paper holder,” said T-Ski.

Kenny appeared in the hallway next to Green Joe’s office with his head hung low.

“Ken-nee Mooooooon, looks like the cat dragged in a dead kitty, meow,” said Green Joe, licking the back of his hand.

“Hi Joseph,” said Kenny.

“How you feeling big boy?” asked Green Joe with a grin. Kenny put his hand up and waved it gently. Lit grabbed the Gatorade from the counter and tossed it underhand down the line past me, T-Ski, Grace, Whip and hit Kenny square in the gut.

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuuah,” groaned Kenny. He turned to walk back to the alley.

“Ooh Henry, good aim!” said Green Joe as he picked up the Gatorade and followed Kenny out.

Green Joe has the build of a soccer player, he’s dense like Whip but he can move when he needs to. The rise of Green Joe is one of my favorite rags to riches stories. He grew up in a rural farming community, one of those towns where the kids are put to work sooner than I was. His older brother taught him how to grow weed before he got killed in the city. Joe was still in high school. He quickly turned that passion into a viable career. He became one of the areas premier marijuana producers and rode the bus everyday selling his weed. Green Joe told me you could either make money by selling a lot of weed for a little or selling a little bit of weed for a lot. He went with the latter. Green Joe is currently in his “going straight” portion of his criminal narrative, he’s made enough money to never have to grow again but his work is still in demand. He’s a horticultural visionary and has extracted the THC from his grass and put it into candies, creams, barbecue sauces, lollipops, and even lemonade. He’s generous with his gift and lets the staff sample his product before he moves it.

“Legs!” I yell.

“Arm!” said Lit as she took the sandwich out to the dining area. Dirk, Kenny, and Green Joe returned from the alley. The line of customers had disappeared by now, and there were just two tables of people finishing their lunch. Lit, Grace, and Marshall began cleaning the tables and emptying the trash cans. The rush was over, the floor was swept, I realized I could finally go take the piss I was holding in. When I got back from the restroom the customers were gone and the entire staff was at the back end of the kitchen grouped around Green Joe’s office. He was leaning in the doorway beneath the pull up bar and he was fishing something out of his pocket.

“Anybody want to do some alley dishes?” asked Green Joe holding a pre rolled joint in the palm of his hand.

“Heard,” said T-Ski.

“Heard,” said Grace.

“Heard,” said Dirk.

“Heard,” said Kenny.

“Heard,” said Whip.

“Heard,” said Lit.

“Heard,” said Marshall.

“Heard,” said Jenn Cal.

“Why not?” I said struggling to get past Jenn Cal standing at the dish pit.

#### ***4:00PM (Lull)***

Kenny Moon is what I’d call a “local heartthrob.” He’s a talented guitar picker who spends every one of his Tuesday nights playing the open mic at the Tap Horse absolutely shitfaced on high percent IPA’s. We all encourage it. He and his equally dreamy friend Cody

have even unofficially formed a modern Loggins & Messina-esque duo. Kenny and Cody play guitar and harmonize with their matching Carhartt beanies and we the deli people drink the Tap Horse's beer and watch the girls ogle at them. "Casual Ken" as we call him is known to put them back, jam to Phish, and exude a dreamy John Mayer quality that interested most of the women in our town but the fact of the matter is Kenny's falling asleep at the Tap Horse is usually what created his aura of unavailability. He was originally a "lacrosse boy" and hockey player and wound up at the University and got involved with T-Ski and needed a summer gig and started working at the deli with me and brought on Lit and Whip.

At 4:00PM on the dot Ike walked into Abelman's Deli and breezed by the empty tables and entered the kitchen and moved his hand to the monitor to clock in.

"Ike, what are you doing?" asked Jenn Cal.

"Pun-ching in, I'm work-ing till close, beep boop," said Ike imitating a robot.

"No, you're not, Kenny was supposed to but Joe sent him home because he was useless hungover earlier, so Arm's gonna cover it. I'm the driver till 7:00PM. You're on at 4:00PM tomorrow closing with T-Ski," said Jenn Cal.

"Aw bummer, could I have a sandwich?" said Ike.

"Yeah my man, we had a fuck-up earlier, take this one, and remember to bring your car tomorrow," I said pointing out the window.

"Sweet, score! Heard!" said Ike snatching the sandwich from my hand, I blinked and he was out the door, back on his bike. I was still a little stoned from the toke sesh with Green Joe. He pretty much sent everyone home after the onion incident. When we came back in from doing alley dishes with Joe he thought it'd be a good time for us to knock out some prep. Dirk got on

the slicer to do onions and the way the fans were going gave everyone a big whiff of cutting onion eyes. Combined with the already squinty eyes we all had from hitting Green Joe's joint, we just looked like a mess. He sent Kenny, Lit, and Whip over to Kenny's house because it's walking distance. Grace had to leave anyways because she volunteers at the green house. Green Joe took Dirk to go get some pizza. T-Ski was out at 3:30PM to coach track at the local high school. Somehow he was able to finish prep by himself, even with the cutting onion eyes. Marshall said he wanted the hours and I figured I knew when to cut him loose since I was the "Immersion Administrator." So in for the long haul was Jenn Cal, Marshall, and myself.

"So how are you doing with the Grace situation?" asked Jenn Cal.

"Um, I'm alright. I thought it'd be more of a thing here but, it hasn't been," I said.

"You and Grace? Awww man," said Marshall.

"Yeah man, for a while. Got a lil messy," I said. I walked over and checked out the soup station. Jenn Cal was standing at her perch on the first register.

"Was it...cream of mushroom messy?" said Jenn Cal, showing off her tongue piercing.

"Oh yuh, it was tomato feta chunky," I said dipping the ladle into the soup canal.

"Damn Arm, you and Jenn Cal?" said Marshall fake fainting into the pickle box.

"I'm a big player Marsh, beeeeeeg playa," I said.

"Marsh, I like the sound of that, way better than Marshall," said Jenn Cal.

"Yeah I can dig Marsh, Marshall's a pretty white name," said Marsh.

"Marsh, do your white voice," I said.

"Figure it out, mustache, I like running," said Marsh doing his very best T-Ski impression.



“Oh, my, goooooooooood,” said Jenn Cal tearing up with laughter. She had one of those laughs where it sounded like she was losing her breath, and left the tea kettle on too long.

“Marsh, could you get the cardboard outside? I’m just realizing it probably hasn’t been done,” I said.

“Yeah, so y’all can talk about Grace,” said Marshall, doing his white voice as he skipped to the back room.

“He’s funny,” said Jenn Cal.

“I know, right?” I said.

“So Grace,” said Jenn Cal.

### ***6:50PM (Closing)***

Deliveries at Abelman’s Deli end at 7:00PM. Occasionally there will be the pestilence of the buzzer beater order, the infamous 6:59PM ticket. Jenn Cal was out on a delivery with a 6:44PM ticket. It was just Marsh and me in the shop, he was watching the clock and hadn’t said a word but I knew he was wondering about a buzzer-beater ticket.

I saw Jenn Cal walk into the deli at 6:59PM on the dot and the phone rang.

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” said Jenn Cal, her voice getting louder as she got closer to the counter. Marsh picked up the phone.

“Abelman’s Deli?” said Marsh.

“No, no, no,” said Jenn Cal in a whisper I didn’t know she was capable of.

“Yes, we’re still open,” said Marsh, looking at me for approval. I nodded in approval.

“No, no, no,” said Jenn Cal, still whispering.

“Okay, a Reuben, would you like that on rye?” asked Marsh.

“No, no, no,” said Jenn Cal.

“Alright. For pickup?” asked Marsh. There was a pause. Marsh looked at Jenn Cal, and turned to look at me again.

“Yeah we could have that ready for you in ten minutes, see you soon,” said Marsh, placing the phone back on the receiver.

“It’s a pickup,” said Marsh. Jenn Cal gave Marsh a hug, then she came over and hugged me.

“Thank god, I almost shit my pants there,” said Jenn Cal.

“I hear ya!” I said.

Marsh made the sandwich and when I heard the thousand island dressing popping on the panini press I knew it was ready. Reubens are a particularly difficult cut, especially on rye so I made sure to stay in the Cut position. Jenn Cal waited until 7:03PM to clock out and that’s when I threw the sandwich onto the cutting board. She turned around and looked at me with her doe eyes.

“I’m all set here, see you at the Tap Horse when you get out, I could use one?” said Jenn Cal.

“I could use several, I’ll see you at close,” I said. I started to cut the sandwich and I couldn’t get all the way through with the first slice. When I went for the second attempt Jenn Cal’s buttcheek hit my left elbow, sending my arm over the sandwich and under the blade that cut clean to a thud of a stop.

“Oh sorry, Arm,” said Jenn Cal.

I blinked several times and felt my head getting light and I looked at the still intact Reuben and the lower part of my arm. I saw my blood staining the cutting board and dropped the knife on the floor and started shaking.

“Arm?” said Marsh.

“Legs,” I said.

“Arm what the fuck!” said Marsh, looking at my lower arm and the Reuben. I backed up and leaned on the refrigerated line. Jenn Cal was walking back from Green Joe’s office with her coat on and immediately saw what had happened.

“Marsh, call 911, now,” yelled Jenn Cal.

“Figure it out,” I said. I closed my eyes and felt my legs shaking. I spit on the ground into one of the puddles of my blood forming. Marshall picked up the phone from the receiver.

“I need an ambulance now, Abelman’s Deli, it’s an emergency,” said Marsh.

“Marsh, white voice, might come sooner,” I said, spitting through a laugh. He held the receiver.

“You motherfucker,” said Marsh.

“My friend, he’s cut his arm, his name’s Arm, get over here, Abelman’s Deli,” yelled Marsh.

“Grace,” I said. I felt Jenn Cal hold her hand in mine and I fainted into her, and onto the ground.

---

(INTERLUDE)

---

[**Alanis Morissette**: All I Really Want, Ironic, Uninvited *Live MTV Unplugged*][**Allman Brothers Band**: Blue Sky, Jessica, Melissa, Midnight Rider, One Way Out *Fillmore East '71*, Statesboro Blues *Fillmore East '71*, Whipping Post *Fillmore East '71*][**The Band**: Atlantic City, Ophelia, The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down, When I Paint My Masterpiece][**The Beatles**: Anna (Go To Him), Baby, You're A Rich Man, Maxwell's Silver Hammer, Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown), Taxman, You've Got To Hide Your Love Away][**The Cranberries**: Dreams, Linger, Zombie][**D'Angelo**: Brown Sugar, Devil's Pie, Feel Like Makin' Love, Me and Those Dreamin Eyes of Mine, Untitled (How Does It Feel)][**Dave Van Ronk**: Mack the Knife *Live*, 'Hang Me, Oh Hang Me,' Tell Old Bill][**Edie Brickell**: Air of December, Circle, Little Miss S., What I Am, The Wheel][**Erykah Badu**: Appletree, Bag Lady, Certainly, On & On][**Father John Misty**: Ballad of the Dying Man, Everyman Needs A Companion, Funtimes in Babylon, God's Favorite Customer, Hangout at the Gallows, I'm Writing a Novel, The Ideal Husband, Just Dumb Enough to Try, Mr. Tillman, Nothing Good Ever Happens At The Goddamn Thirsty Crow, Only Son of the Ladiesman, Pure Comedy][**Grateful Dead**: Althea *Alpine '89*, Bertha *Fillmore East '71*, Box of Rain *Studio*, China Cat Sunflower *Paris '72*, Dealk, Eyes of the World *Capitol '77*, Franklin's Tower *Great American '75*, Friend of the Devil *Studio*, Shakedown Street *Studio*, Sugaree *Hartford '77*][**Joe Walsh**: Life's Been Good, Life of Illusion, Rocky Mountain Way][**Joni Mitchell**: All I Want, California, 'You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio']][**Leon Russell**: Magic Mirror, Manhattan Island Serenade, Tight Rope][**Loudon Wainwright III**: Hollywood Hopeful][**Marcy Playground**: Ancient Walls of Flowers, Gone Crazy, Sex & Candy, Sherry Fraser][**Marvin Gaye**: Distant Lover, Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler), Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology), Your Precious Love][**Mos Def**: Fear Not Of Man, Hip Hop, Love, Mathematics, Ms. Fat Booty][**Neil Diamond**: Brother Love's Travelling Salvation Show, Cracklin' Rosie, You're So Sweet Horseflies Keep Hangin' Around][**OutKast**: Ain't No Thang, Aquemini, Da Art of Storytelling' (Pt. 1), Elevators (Me & You), Hootie Hoo, Funky Ride, Mainstream, Player's Ball, Prototype, Rosa Parks, Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik, SpottieOttieDopaliscious][**Paul Simon**: 50 Ways to Leave Your Lover, Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes, Graceland, I Know What I Know, Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard][**Pure Prairie League**: Amie, Falling In and Out Of Love, Jazzman][**Redman**: Green Island, Time 4 Sum Aksion, Tonight's Da Night][**Rick James**: Mary Jane][**The Rolling Stones**: Let it Loose][**Sheryl Crow**: All I Wanna Do, If It Makes You Happy, Everyday Is A Winding Road, Leaving Las Vegas, Soak Up The Sun][**Steely Dan**: Bad Sneakers, Dirty Work, Reelin' In The Years][**Stevie Wonder**: I Wish][**Sun Kill Moon**: Ben's My Friend][**Talking Heads**: Burning Down the House, Once in a Lifetime, and This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)][**Townes Van Zandt**: Dead Flowers][**The Velvet Underground**: Candy Says, Oh! Sweet Nuthin', Pale Blue Eyes, Sunday Morning, Sweet Jane, Who Loves the Sun][**Wilco**: Heavy Metal Drummer, I am Trying to Break Your Heart, I'm the Man Who Loves You, She's a Jar, War on War][**Wyclef Jean**: Gone Till November)

---

-----**(SIDE-B)**-----

**[FOR YOUR SERVICE]**

So when I got out of the service my girlfriend at the time wanted me to get out of the house more. She said I was “*cooped up*” and needed to change my habits--well I didn’t change my habits and she left me *so* I picked up some bad ones. Since I was claiming 1 on my W-4 and thirty pounds above my preferred breakup-weight-class, I found it time to find myself a hobby. To be honest I wasn’t quite sure what to do with myself when I made it back to the states on account of me no longer having the pleasure of sweating my nuts off staring at the same stretch of sand everyday. I don’t know if it was the UAE heat, the isolation, or the advanced erotic imagination I happen to possess but I swear there were days when that sand looked more enticing than the other days. Like it had a little extra time in the morning to do the eyebrows *just* how I like ‘em--anyways I’m getting sidetracked here. I needed to get up, get out, and get something when I came across a paintball tournament ad in a Craigslist post. I had used the site before *many* times, mostly for feet stuff and connecting with the occasional trucker for explorative physical adventures. Other than that, I used the site to lowball a few dummies on George Foreman grills and flip em’ till I had the cash to buy me a China-made Co2-paintball hand cannon. I got a good price on it and low-balled that sap for his Foreman as well. Anyways--the Craigslist post was written by one Jackson Hughes. The listing read as follows.

M, 42. LOOKING TO FILL LAST SPOT FOR A 5-MAN TEAM IN A PAINTBALL TOURNEY. IT’S ME AND A FEW VETS AND WE’D LOVE TO HAVE ANOTHER. ALSO LOOKING TO SELL A 2006 GEORGE FOREMAN/\$80 OBO.

There was a cash prize of \$200 but I got to level with you friend, I wasn’t in it for the money. I responded to Hughes via email and told him I was in the market for a Foreman and also

happened to be a veteran with some spare time. I used a burner account for my Craigslist profile because I had intentions of putting my history as the username bigrig84 behind me--let sleeping dogs lie sorta thing. I was drawn to the advertisement partly because I was becoming jaded with the rat race of anonymous trucker fucking, but saw it more as an excellent opportunity to become acquainted with some fellow veterans. I hate referring to myself as a “veteran,” it makes it sound like I actually did something, *actually* defended something. I was just a plane mechanic on a dusty airstrip that was too windy for a plane like this one here to land. In reasonable proximity there was an airstrip with better booze *and* more visibility which I’m aware is a *lovely* contradiction--long story short everyone would land there instead.

Hughes was thrilled to have me as the fifth man for the paint-job and he was even keen enough to knock twenty dollars off the Foreman grill for my service. I was a kid in a candy shop--felt like I found the last golden ticket and finally had something to look forward to. I wanted to get in shape for the tournament *so* I took to running stadium stairs four days a week and next thing I knew I had the revenge body needed to impress my ex-girlfriend if need be--or at least turn some familiar heads on I-75. To be honest--I sorta got carried away with the whole thing. I spent a chunk of my Foreman savings on the Air Force sleeve tattoos I never thought I wanted. I started eating better and abiding by a diet regimen involving various fruits and vegetable based proteins. I was volunteering regularly at the YMCA and moving the chains on the sidelines of high school football games. I didn’t feel any better for doing those duties than I did just lounging at home but I kept doing them in hope that some goodness or warmth would someday reveal itself to me. I even made some donations to Wounded Warrior under the name of George Foreman.

With restored pride in my former laborious enterprise I *was* ready for battle. I woke up early that Saturday at my place in Decatur and drove south for the tournament. I can't recall a time feeling more at peace than I did on the road to Macon that morning. I remember seeing a field covered by a thin fog and just smiling like an idiot at the cattle lying down in it. I felt compelled to smile at every car that passed me on the left. Usually I'm *bothered* by the domination but it didn't faze me one-bit that day. I got caught up in a little traffic around 9:00AM but was lucky enough to have a string of hits play for me without commercial interruption. I arrived at the venue two hours early with a sleeve of Wild Turkey 101 airport miniatures<sup>1</sup> to alleviate my pre-registration nerves. After some convenient intoxicated time traveling: we were in the *shit*.

\*

Before I even opened my eyes, my ears told me everything I needed to know--there was the faint hissing of Co2 tanks and paintballs cracking against trees in the distance. I leaned back on the log I was resting my head on and looked to either side and saw Poughkeepsie messing around with his canteen.

"Boy Kips, am I glad to see you. Have you seen Mr. Clean?" I asked.

"Negative, haven't seen him since registration," said Poughkeepsie.

"Chrissakes, that's not good--what about Denver?" I asked.

"I think Nurse Jackie got a hold of him. They should be just over that ridge," said Poughkeepsie.

"What the hell happened back there?" I asked.

"It's hard to explain, you were *really* drunk," said Poughkeepsie.

---

1

“I hear ya, we got to find the others,” I said.

“Roger that, Candyman.”

So Kips and I trekked through the field of tall grass over the ridge and we could just hear the sound of paintfire getting louder and louder. We would advance and find a tree for cover and continued this process until we heard a sound. It sounded something odd like an owl trapped in a well. Kips and I held our position until the next shot was fired. Out from the grass a small man with an orange bandana rose from lying prone and charged at us--screeching and pointing the barrel of his paintball gun at the sky. As we backed away the owlish sound was getting closer and closer and broke the pauses of the Orangeman's screeches. Kips pointed his weapon at the insurgent and every round he fired hissed over the shoulders of the charging bull. I was horrified and hadn't handled a weapon since basic--I fumbled for the trigger and could finally make out the owlish sounds as English. Mr. Clean, sprinting upward from the bottom of the hill tagged Orange four times in the back with blue paint-bullets. When finally on top of the hill Mr. Clean said “*Hoo-tie-hoo, hootie-hoo, hootiehoo*” with long spaced breaths.

“Have you seen Nurse Jackie?” asked Poughkeepsie.

“Neg-a-tive, Pough-kip-see,” said Mr. Clean.

“Come on just say Kips,” I said.

“Fuck-you-Candy-Man,” said Mr. Clean.

In the distance from the bottom of the hill that Mr. Clean had emerged from there was another “*hootie hooooo*” and a tall, thin man with a beard. He waved his arms like a runway engineer.

“Den-ver, we'll be-right-down,” yelled Mr. Clean.



I grabbed Mr. Clean by the shoulders and then rubbed his shiny head while Poughkeepsie shared some water from his canteen. When we got to the bottom of the hill to see Denver he was already shushing us.

“Follow me,” said Denver.

So we followed Denver into the woods and I can't remember if it was Mr. Clean or Poughkeepsie, or both who asked about the liquor on my breath and if I had some more. I just remember checking my pockets and finding three miniatures left. I must have made them share one of them and drank the other two solo because the elusive record that is time skipped once again.

\*

“Oh my fucking god get your head down!” yelled Nurse Jackie.

“Jackie! Where's Denver?” I hollered.

“He got fucking marked in the woods, where were you?” asked Nurse Jackie.

“I don't remember,” I said.

“Would-you-two-shut-the-fuck-up,” wheezed Mr. Clean.

“Not now Clean, we're taking heavy god damn fire,” said Nurse Jackie.

“Jack, I'm nearly out of rounds,” said Poughkeepsie.

“Take some from Candyman, I bet he ain't even fired that fancy gun yet,” said Nurse Jackie.

I handed my prized hand cannon to Poughkeepsie. At that moment I was thinking of how many more Foreman grills I could have bought instead of the weapon of mass paintstruction. I looked at my brothers lined up together on the wall like puppies nestled next to a lactating

mother, and I too was one of those puppies. I thought about the sands in the UAE and wished more than anything for that moment that I was back on deployment. Then I thought about the truckers and my truckstop hi-jinks. How they made me feel loved when I wanted to be loved--and how they made me feel like a whore when I wanted to be a *whore*. I thought about how every one of them talked about "the road" post coital--as if it were some beautiful breathing painting they were allowed to roam every day. They talked about tranquility and how it's found somewhere between chaos and solitude and how those places are everywhere--it just looks better from *the road*. It reminded me of my desert sands and the strange places my mind would wander to in those dusty winds. My brothers and I were sitting silently until I spoke.

"Those guys are fucking animals," I said.

"Heh-it'd be a lot easier if they were," said Nurse Jackie.

"Say-on-Jackie," I said.

"Don't tell me I'm the only guy who brought his tranquilizers?" said Nurse Jackie.

"Yeah what kind of vet leaves the house without his tranquilizers?" said Poughkeepsie.

"Kips, what?" I asked.

"Candyman, don't tell me you left your tranquilizers at home?" asked Nurse Jackie.

"Oh my god. You're veterinarians. All of you," I said.

They looked ashamed like the dogs they'd put down when they'd shit on their owners' carpets. The only sounds were the paintballs whizzing over Mr. Clean's head. Nurse Jackie explained how he thought that my military experience would make me a perfect candidate as their yearly ringer for the paintball team--a *Dinner for Schmucks* sort of thing. They were shocked to find out I was just a mechanic, and each of them showed different gestures of surprise

as they arrived at the realization that I, me, *Candyman*--the sole military veteran--was the least experienced in combat of the *vets* present. Poughkeepsie was the first to actually speak to me.

“Thank you for your service,” said Poughkeepsie.

“Thank you for your service,” said Nurse Jackie.

“Thank-you-for-your-service,” said Mr. Clean.

Prior to that moment, I had largely kept my identity as a military veteran a secret. Hell, the only times I was thanked for my service was at the I-75 truck stops--and they didn't even *know* I served. But it meant nothing to me, an empty statement. I felt like I was duped, and it occurred to me that you really cannot trust Craigslist for anything other than gigs and Foreman grill acquisitions. I regret what I said to them but I felt like I was outnumbered, I'll never forget what happened next.

“This is an unconventional war, this requires unconventional actions.”

\*

Poughkeepsie was the first to tear into the breach. He slipped the tranquilizer needle into the thigh of the orange-decorated opponent. He covered his mouth and dragged him to Nurse Jackie's feet. Nurse Jackie gave him a secondary dose of tranquilizer until the insurgent looked like me after seven minis of Wild Turkey. Mr. Clean took out a paint pistol and popped the passed-out man in the chest with a blue bullet. I saw Nurse Jackie next hurdle over the wall and in the expediency of fear I was relegated to staring at the orange man who was in the process of losing consciousness. Moments later Nurse Jackie returned with another Orange Team member and Mr. Clean repeated his pistol ritual. I intentionally neglected to lend a hand, and found myself clinging to Nurse Jackie for he was now my puppy-mother.

The veterinarians had rounded up all five unconscious orange team members and spread them out in various forced positions around the vicinity and the players looked like the still life wooden dolls you'd find in an art class. Nurse Jackie whistled and Mr. Clean retrieved a white box from his pack. Poughkipsee returned to the group and took his sacrificial smelling salts capsule from Nurse Jackie. Mr. Clean and Poughkipsee walked around and held the smelling salts a fistlength away from every nose of the Orange Team and introduced them to where they were shot. I remember the referee came by after we were crowned tournament winners to inquire if any players had used drugs during the match. He specifically asked if anyone on our team had used horse tranquilizers, and Mr. Clean being so slick said "*neigh*." The ref was beside himself laughing about it because he was looking to score and that's apparently a joke among tranquilizer enthusiasts--and paintball referees. Nurse Jackie assured him we were all veterinarians and that any of us would be happy to write him a script, and nudged me and winked at me like *I* was one of *them*--I'll never be one of them. I got my own people.

\*

My plane landed at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport around noon, but it's *really* hard to say. Years ago, everyone in my unit got loaded before the flight to the UAE and all I remember from that was being shocked when I found out how far away it really was. Drinking (or even talking to someone) on a flight always calmed my nerves, considering it's kinda scary to be on a bus in the sky that could crash at any moment--even if the pilot drank fewer miniatures than you. I think that's why man is drawn to the sea and sands and not the sky. The sky is scary and it's the ground that carries us. Then man built roads so we can see more sands and more seas, I can see why the truckers found beauty in that. I don't think I'll have another drink on a plane, I don't see

myself flying any time soon either. I won't have to after all, seeing how I used a portion of my Foreman fortune to get settled in an apartment. Thanks to Craigslist, I even found myself a steady job.

\*

*“Hello there good buddy--you got your ears on? This is Candyman heading westward for the Big A, over, do you read me? Over.”*

**[WANTED]**

Mr. Pfister flipped the brown lever of his Lincoln Town car and looked at the blinking green turn signal on the dash. He turned right, cruised over an archipelago of potholes, and pulled up to the curb of the Anheuser Busch production facility in Cartersville. In his passenger seat was his son Duane, staring out the window into the blue sky--dreaming of a sunnier day in a sunnier place.

“You nervous?” asked Mr. Pfister.

Duane took his head off his hand and his elbow off the door and looked at his father.

“No sir,” said Duane.

“That’s good. Confidence will get you anywhere boyo, remember that. Your mom wanted you to get that haircut and look at you, you look sharp. You’re gonna knock em’ dead,” said Mr. Pfister.

“I don’t even care if I get the gig, I’m not gonna let it get to me if I don’t. Braves are still gonna play tonight, job or no job,” said Duane.

“Don’t talk like that, you’re going to get the job,” said Mr. Pfister.

“Dad, it’s Sunday,” said Duane.

Mr. Pfister open-hand slapped the top of the steering wheel in three consecutive raps.

“Mr. Davis was kind enough to interview you today because he knows you’re busy with school all week. He’s a reasonable man. You know he’s got a Sunday too right?”

Duane leaned toward the door and returned his elbow to its place next to the lock and resumed looking into the sky. Mr. Pfister slammed his hand onto the steering wheel again.

“Right!” he yelled.

“Yes sir,” said Duane.

“Be a good boy. Okay?” said Mr. Pfister.

Duane looked at his father.

“Dad, I just don’t want to work yet. I got another year left of high school after this, and it already feels like enough, you know? I like my weekends, and basketball season’s not even over yet. School, practice, work, that’s a lot,” said Duane.

Mr. Pfister took a moment to collect himself, and another moment to close his eyes and breathe. When he opened them, he looked into the rearview mirror at the cars going by and said in a calm voice, “You think you have it bad?”

“Dad, I didn’t mean,” said Duane.

“You think you have it bad?” yelled Mr. Pfister.

“Come on. Dad, you know--”

“You think you have it bad?” yelled Mr. Pfister, rapping the steering wheel with three rhythmic hits. Duane exhaled hopelessly and cracked the knuckles in his hands.

“You know your mother hates it when you do that,” said Mr. Pfister.

“And she loves it when you take your anger out on your car,” said Duane.

“Because she won’t let me take the anger out on you,” said Mr. Pfister with a smile.

“She’d tell you to pick on somebody your own size,” said Duane with a cackle. He opened his hand and mimicked hitting the steering wheel, slapping the dashboard with his hand.

“Watch it boyo, just because you’re taller than me doesn’t mean you’re stronger than me. I got old man strength--from years of hauling your big ass. When you turn eighteen, I might have

the mind to throw you out of the house” said Mr. Pfister. He unbuckled his seatbelt and put his arm around Duane.

“Go in there, meet with Mr. Davis, tell him you’ve been working for me, for what, the last three summers? You’d be going to the same stores we were putting bread up in, so tell him you want it, and you’re familiar with the supermarket environment and merchandising. You never know, you might even be able to get more money, okay?” said Mr. Pfister. He tightened his hold on Duane playfully.

“Okay?” he said again.

“Yes sir,” said Duane.

“Alright, you’re ten minutes early. Go in right now, show him you want it. You don’t need me to hold your hand in there, you’re self-sufficient. I’m gonna head to Lowes and pick up a few things, I’ll pick you up after,” said Mr. Pfister.

“Yes sir,” said Duane.

The shadow tinted door to the facility opened and Mr. Davis walked outside and waved his hand at the Pfister’s car. Mr. Pfister pressed the button for the automatic window, opening the window on Duane’s side of the car. He leaned across the car and yelled out the window.

“Hey Harley! He’ll be right in!”

Mr. Davis gave a thumbs up, turned around, and walked back into the facility.

\*

The interior of the Anheuser Busch production plant in Cartersville looked like a museum. Mr. Davis walked Duane through the offices like a curator and showed off antique beer signs and spoke with enthusiasm about products that have yet to be released to the public. The



floors were marble white and the walls were lined with trophy cases displaying retro cans and old novelty items like Bud Light frontier wagons and Budweiser holiday steins. The farther Duane and Mr. Davis walked down the hall, the further in time they moved in the chronological order of Anheuser Busch regalia. When they got to the Bud Light basketball hoops and Budweiser alarm clocks, Mr. Davis waved to the lone receptionist in the main office.

“That’s Charlotte, she’s a peach. Sundays around here are usually pretty quiet, it’s a good day to get things done,” said Mr. Davis.

“Any days off around here?” asked Duane.

“Hah-not exactly. There’s always someone here. Somebody’s got to receive deliveries, check invoices, contact advertisers. There’s a lot of work to be done here,” said Mr. Davis

Duane didn’t respond, and Mr. Davis looked him up and down, mouth agape in curiosity.

“You’re a lot taller than I was expecting,” said Mr. Davis.

“How tall did you expect me to be?” asked Duane.

“Around your dad’s height, I knew you played ball but I didn’t think I’d have to worry about the height of our door frames. You can take a seat in there, I’ll be with you in a moment, and watch your head,” said Mr. Davis amused with his advice.

“Yes sir, thank you,” said Duane.

Duane walked into the empty board room and first noticed the silence. There were twenty or so chairs distributed evenly around a long table. There were blinds on the windows facing the office and the chairs were all maroon. Duane had expected to be interviewed in a small office with two chairs and a desk separating them, like he had seen in the movies. He grabbed a chair in the middle of the table and it rolled toward him with ease. Then he put his hand on the cushion

which made him think of the texture of last Thanksgiving's tablecloth. He sat down with his back to the board room door and began hypothesizing about what sort of posture he should assume for the interview.

\*

Mr. Davis walked into the boardroom and sat across from Duane. He was shorter than Mr. Pfister, and had a much more aggressively receding hairline. He had a bushy black mustache that looked like it could have been purchased in a bundle deal with his thick rimmed glasses. Mr. Davis took off the glasses, fogged them up with his breath, and wiped them clean with his blue Bud Light polo shirt.

"Alright, let's begin," said Mr. Davis. Duane nodded.

"We need weekend coverage desperately, someone reliable. At a max--I think it'd be twenty hours a week," said Mr. Davis.

"You mean twenty hours a *weekend*, right?" asked Duane.

"Right...and reliable," said Mr. Davis.

Duane looked into Mr. Davis' eyes, but didn't respond.

"I think your height could be an advantage. You could reach the hard to reach shelves, our last guy had to bring a step ladder with him," said Mr. Davis.

"I've worked for my dad the last three summers, and I broke a lot of shelves trying to stock them. I'm quite clumsy, I think it's because of my height," said Duane.

"Around here we'd call that a cost of doing business, happens all the time," said Mr. Davis.

“I know I’m tall, but I have these really small hands. I’m absolutely awful at carrying things, and holding them,” said Duane.

“Like bad hand-eye coordination?” asked Mr. Davis.

“Yeah exactly,” said Duane.

Mr. Davis scoffed with amusement.

“You’re being so modest Duane. Your father was just telling me the other day how you’re leading the conference in rebounds. He says you practice all the time.”

“Mr. Davis, I think that’s just my father inflating things. Trying to give me a leg up,” said Duane.

“Feel free to call me Harley,” said Mr. Davis.

“I just think he’s trying to give me a leg up, Harley,” said Duane.

“You know what I like about you Duane?” asked Mr. Davis gleefully.

“What?” asked Duane.

“You’re so direct, so transparent. I think that honesty is going to get you really far. I think your integrity could be a major asset to our operation here,” said Mr. Davis.

Duane thought for a moment, and instinctively tried to push his hair back and like a phantom limb, it had not occurred to him that it was gone. He looked around at the walls and chairs and was reminded of the boardroom’s silence.

“Are there any low shelves?” asked Duane.

“There’s a good number of them. We put the thirty-racks on dry shelves in the Wal Marts and Krogers,” said Mr. Davis. Duane instinctively wiped his hands on his pants. Nine moments out of ten, Duane’s palms were sweating from nerves but they were dry as a new dish.

“Well then wouldn’t that make me inept for stocking low shelves? I could hurt my back or waste time stretching out after,” said Duane.

“I assure you Duane, we have excellent benefits. This guy from warehouse lost three fingers in a forklift prank last summer and he got complete coverage. He works in the office now, we take care of our folks here,” said Mr. Davis.

“Did my dad tell you I’m really lazy?” asked Duane. Mr. Davis laughed.

“He didn’t mention it. Are you lazy?” asked Mr. Davis.

“I’m like authentic lazy. Sometimes I’ll have to pee really bad, and I’ll just sit there, and not move until it hurts. I’m that kind of lazy,” said Duane.

“Well, Duane, I think at another job,--that’s the last thing an employer wants to hear--” said Mr. Davis. Duane’s lips curled into a soft smile.

“But I have this particular outlook about lazy people. I think they’re the best employees, so you could say I’m very interested in ‘your kind of lazy,’” said Mr. Davis.

Duane didn’t respond but his rounded jawline dropped.

“You see, the thing about lazy people is that they’ll find the easiest way to do a task. It’s quite a phenomenon. I think it takes a rather...creative mind to be productively lazy,” said Mr. Davis.

Mr. Davis’ phone vibrated in his pocket and he placed it in on the table. Duane studied the contact photo of ‘Maggie’--a thirty-something woman who appeared to inherit nothing but her father’s genetics, and in her equally hairy arms she held a pug mix that also looked like the canine incarnation of Harley Davis. He swiped one of his andouille sausage-esque fingers across the screen and spoke quietly and quickly.

“Margaret, I’m interviewing the Pfister boy, your mother will be home soon...No, she’s got that spin class on Sundays now...Yes, Charlotte’s here at the office...Well I’m sorry no one was there to cook your breakfast today...No, I don’t want you to go hungry...” Mr. Davis looked at Duane and rolled his eyes.

“Okay...Okay...I hear ya...Did you check your jacket?” Mr. Davis asked the phone. He held his hand over the bottom of his phone and said to Duane under his breath.

“Fucking car keys.” Duane cracked a smile.

“Oh they were in your jacket, okay...Alright, Maggie...Okay...I hear ya...She’s at spin...Right...Okay...Buh bye,” said Mr. Davis. He hung up and placed the phone on the table with the screen pointing to the ceiling.

“Sorry about that Duane, you know uh, daughters,” said Mr. Davis.

Duane nodded, and pondered, and nodded again, wiped his dry hands on the legs of his pants, and chose his next words carefully, as well as his posture.

“Is your daughter seeing anybody?” asked Duane, straightening his back up against the chair.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Mr. Davis.

“Is Maggie single?” asked Duane.

Mr. Davis, taken aback, searched for words to return to Duane.

“Yeah uh, I suppose she’s single. She’s been staying with us since Lester called off the engagement...a few years ago, never really thought about it like that,” said Mr. Davis.

“Well I just wanted you to know, Harley, that I...thought...think...your daughter...is beautiful,” said Duane.

\*

Mr. Davis leaned back in his seat and started to slouch. Duane scooted in closer to the table and folded his arms so he could lean on them.

“Phew...I feel a lot better now...Getting that off my chest...It does no good to hold the heart back and keep the truth locked up...I didn’t want it to come out like this...at a job interview...pretty embarrassing stuff,” said Duane.

Mr. Davis looked at Duane but not in his eyes.

“I’m glad you feel better Duane, but I just don’t know if...this...was the right place to “unleash the truth,” said Mr. Davis.

“I know, transparency is all fine and dandy until you get into the nitty gritty of it, like sausage production or socialism,” said Duane.

“Are you a socialist Duane?” asked Mr. Davis.

“No sir, but I love me a pow-wow,” said Duane.

Mr. Davis nodded but said nothing. There was an awkward silence that gave Duane enough time to count the number of chairs in the room again. Mr. Davis’ phone began vibrating again, it was another call from ‘Maggie.’ Mr. Davis looked up from his phone to see Duane smiling and staring at the screen. He looked away from Duane and flipped the phone over with his meaty paw and Duane returned it to screen side up with athletic efficiency. The pair sat in silence until the phone stopped buzzing. Duane returned his focus to the phone and the screen read ‘Maggie’ next to (1) Missed Call, and showed the photo of her with the dog. Mr. Davis looked at Duane and then at the phone again and begrudgingly returned it to his pocket.

“Harley...You’re a reasonable man, you wanted my honesty earlier. I hope you can still appreciate my transparency,” said Duane, sporting a shit eating grin.

“I’d appreciate if you called me Mr. Davis again if you wouldn’t mind,” said Mr. Davis, averting his eye contact.

“I gotta say...Mr. Davis...I appreciate...your transparency,” said Duane, retaining his sneer.

“You know, Duane...If I could be frank.”

“Feel free to be frank...Mr. Davis,” said Duane.

“Nothing gets my rocks off more than a man who doesn’t dick around. Beat around the bush, you know what I’m saying?” asked Mr. Davis.

“I hear ya,” said Duane, slapping his hand onto the table.

“Now that...former...potential son in law of mine...Lester...is a no doubt sneakthief.”

“A lying cur dog,” suggested Duane.

“I hear ya,” said Mr. Davis, slapping his hand onto the table.

“Say on, brother,” said Duane, calling his slap on the table with one of his own.

“I just felt like he was such a mixed bag with Maggie, never know what you’re gonna get. Like trying to read into tea leaves. And she’s such a smart girl, she deserves somebody thoughtful, thorough...and lazy,” said Mr. Davis.

The door opened behind Duane and Charlotte walked to the right of him and placed a flesh-colored tray at the head of the table.

“Anybody want water?” said Charlotte. The waters weren’t in bottles, glasses or a pitcher but instead they were in the cans that Anheuser Busch would send to Haiti in the event of an

earthquake. They looked like beverages featured in a science fiction movie with a totalitarian society that had limited the marketing potential of the producer to advertising the product for what it was, water. Like there was no incentive to make the beverage wanted by their consumer, it just...said..."water"... Mr. Davis waved his hand at Charlotte and Duane took that as a hint to shake his head. She quietly exited the boardroom with the flesh colored tray.

"Duane, he just...threw her for a loop. I know you're what...eighteen years old?"

"Seventeen, sir," said Duane.

"You're seventeen?" asked Mr. Davis.

"Yessir, not even on the back-nine of it," said Duane.

"Well, we got this rule that you gotta be eighteen to be an alcohol merchandiser. State wants you be an adult sort of thing," said Mr. Davis.

"You don't say," said Duane. Mr. Davis thought for a moment, and twirled the hairs of his mustache.

"I made it pretty clear to your father I was looking for someone of proper age, he didn't mention that?" said Mr. Davis.

"This is news to me," said Duane.

"When's your birthday?" asked Mr. Davis.

"Not till the fall," said Duane.

"Not till the fall, hmmm. I suppose we could wait till then and touch base then. This might be for the best, Maggie shouldn't be running around with a...seventeen year old," said Mr. Davis looking Duane up and down.

"Father's know what's best for their kids," said Duane.



“That they do Duane, that they do,” said Mr. Davis.

“Well thanks for meeting me today, sir. I’m gonna take off, dad’s probably back. You be careful on your way out now, there are some potholes,” said Duane, shaking Mr. Davis’ hand.

**[HANDSOME ROB]**

At 3:44PM, Clark parked the silver 2006 Chevy Impala in the Central United Bank lot and looked over at Handsome Rob in the passenger seat. Rob really was handsome. He possessed a seasoned ruggedness of an older man despite being just north of thirty. He was built like a tight end and wore sleeve tattoos in alternating patches of green and blue on his long arms. He had wispy blonde hair and a neatly trimmed blonde beard. Handsome Rob squinted whenever he laughed or smiled. It was an infectious laugh and smile. Clark, the bagman, was handsome too but not handsome enough for his looks to alter his name.

“You ready?” asked Clark.

“Let’s do this,” said Handsome Rob as he ashed his cigarette into a styrofoam coffee cup.

“Rock.”

“Paper.”

“Scissors.”

“Shoot,” said the duo. Handsome Rob won by covering Clark’s rock with paper.

“You’re a better lead anyways,” said Clark.

The duo exited the Impala and walked to its trunk, opened it, and grabbed their respective Hello Kitty backpacks.

After opening the double doors of the Central United Bank, Clark reached into Handsome Rob’s Hello Kitty backpack. He pulled out a handgun and poked the tip of its suppressor into the temple of the heavysset security guard seated next to the doors.

“Easy there, baby doll,” said Clark to the guard.

The young man, the old man, the old Korean lady, and the guy with the hat in line did not notice Clark and Handsome Rob's arrival. The bank teller didn't notice either because she was assisting a teeny bopper at the counter. Everyone in the bank already averted eye contact with the security guard because his heavy breathing was louder than the soft jazz playing on the lobby speakers. They did not want to make him feel bad by looking at him, so they collectively elected to make him feel worse by not looking at him.

The security guard held his hands high and Handsome Rob grabbed the guard's gun by the holster. Handsome Rob attached the holster to his own hip before trading Clark the guard's gun for the suppressed one. Clark held the guard's gun to the guard's head.

Handsome Rob cleared his throat and spoke to the crowd, "Listen up folks, this is a robbery. This is a gun. Keep your hands where they can be seen. I'm going to shoot the cameras before we proceed. Please remain calm." Handsome Rob popped off six shots to black out the four cameras.

"Sorry everybody, but that's as bad as it's going to get here today. How is everyone feeling?" asked Handsome Rob. He holstered his weapon.

The five customers, guard, and teller were silent.

"Now I know it's Friday, and this bank closes at 4:00PM, but I promise I won't keep y'all too long. I'll make it worth your while. I'm Rob, and this is my accompanist, Charming Clark."

Clark chuckled.

"He doesn't say too much anyways. Now I just want everyone to know I'm here for the bank's money, not yours. You folks have nothing to fear. I'm afraid I can't let anyone leave

because that would risk my and Ole Clark's gig here today, and we want this to go as smoothly as y'all would, understand?"

The customers all nodded. Handsome Rob made his way to the teller's window.

"I suppose y'all got a silent alarm, yeah?"

"No, they actually don't exist. That's a Hollywood thing," said the teller with a giggle.

"Talk about silent, huh?"

The bank erupted with laughter, Clark chuckled.

The guy with the backwards hat turned to the old man next to him.

"Dude, I'm not gay but this guy is gorgeous," he said with a whisper.

"Yeah, you took the words right out of my mouth," said the old man.

"It's like effortless too, like he's not trying that hard either. I bet that guy could just roll out of bed and look like that good."

"Absolutely, I'm sure he does a lot of rolling around in bed as well."

"Yeah, that guy totally fucks."

The two men high-fived.

Handsome Rob whipped around and the guy with the hat blushed. Handsome Rob walked closer to address the crowd.

"Okay, before we proceed, I'd like all of you to relax and make a circle around Mr. Security Guard here. Mr. Security Guard, may I have your name?"

"Jim, it's Jim," said the guard frantically.

“Alright Jim, I need you to relax. Cool as a cucumber, baby doll. Since you’re the closest thing to law here, I’m gonna have to keep an eye on you, right?” He circled the guard and inspected him for weapons or anything that could complicate the operation.

“I know this sounds a little silly but I need you to lie face down on the floor, I don’t want a speed demon like you getting away.”

The customers smiled and laughed.

The guy with the hat whispered to the old man next to him again.

“Do you think he moisturizes?”

“I’m not sure.”

Handsome Rob buried his face into his arm and coughed a phlegmy cough, then paced around the customers.

“I’ve never seen better skin on a smoker. How old do you think he is?” whispered the guy with the hat to the man.

“I don’t know. He looks twenty-five but I wouldn’t be surprised if he was thirty-five.”

“Right? God, I hope I age that well.”

“Good luck,” said the old man.

Handsome Rob checked his watch, it was 3:48PM.

“Okay, so everyone make a circle around Jim here. Criss-cross applesauce, you hear? I want everyone to feel comfortable, alright?” said Handsome Rob to the customers. They respected the gunman’s wishes and silently surrounded the portly security guard. When they were seated they looked up at the gunman outside their circle like a kindergarten class awaiting an activity from their teacher.

Handsome Rob scanned his audience.

“Congratulations everybody, welcome to your first bank robbery. This is no minor feat. Let’s have a round of applause for you brave folks.”

He started clapping and soon the crowd was inspired to join him. Clark took a fanciful bow and walked with confidence to the teller window with his Hello Kitty backpack. He dropped it on the marble counter and looked at Sharon.

“Would you mind filling this? I’d make a withdrawal but I’m afraid I don’t have an account,” said Clark.

“That bag’s not gonna fit through the window when it’s full of money so I’ll have to give you the cash through the window. Is that okay?” asked Sharon with customer service sincerity.

“That’d be great, darling. Thank you so much.”

Sharon stood up and pulled her roolly-chair away with her. Clark checked his watch, it was 3:51PM. Clark turned his back to the window, leaned on the counter, and kept his eyes on the crowd as well as the bank’s entrance.

The gunman looked for the shortest person in the circle and stepped over the old Korean lady’s shoulder so he, and the portly security guard, were surrounded by the customers.

“Okay everyone, listen up. This is one of the most important moments of your lives. For the rest of your lives, people will ask you how you survived a bank robbery. You can tell them whatever you want, and they’ll have to believe you. They will not pry because they will assume it was traumatic, and the last thing I want for any of you to experience is trauma. Is that understood?” asked Handsome Rob eyeing the customers for approval.

The customers nodded.

“With that being said, would anyone like me to point my gun at you so you could say you had a gun pulled on you in a bank robbery?” asked Handsome Rob with a smile.

The customers sat in silence and pondered the question. Not long after, the young man next to the Korean woman raised his hand. The old man, the guy with the hat, and the teeny bopper stared at him in silence. Handsome Rob pulled his handgun out of the holster and pointed it at him.

“See how easy that was? You’ve now had a gun pulled on you in a bank robbery,” said Handsome Rob. The young man’s lips curled into a strange smile.

“I’ll ask again, in case anyone has changed their minds. Would anyone like a gun pointed at them?”

The customers looked at each other and in an act of quiet cooperation, they all raised their hands. Handsome Rob spun around holding his gun, aiming it at each customer.

“That wasn’t so bad was it?”

The customers smiled. Their expressions had a tinge of naughtiness to them.

“Now, would anyone like a gun in their mouth?”

The customers looked puzzled, and then looked at each other.

“I’m asking this because if you’d like a gun in your mouth...you’ll be able to say you had a gun put in your mouth in a bank robbery. Isn’t that something worth saying? You could tell that as a truth. You could say it was all a blur and all you knew was your life was in danger. They’ll believe it and they won’t question a single thing. Who could one up that story at a party? A plane crash survivor?”

“You can put a gun in my mouth, Rob” said the old Korean lady with a coy smile.

“That’s the spirit!” He turned, crouched, grabbed his gun and deposited the tip of the suppressor in her open mouth. The rest of the customers studied the Korean woman and like the wave at a sports event, the mouths of the customers dropped open waiting for a bite of the barrel. Handsome Rob did a lap around the security guard as he shoved the gun into each open mouth.

“They don’t taste how you think, do they?” Handsome Rob asked the group before returning the gun to his holster. The customers giggled. Handsome Rob left the circle and walked to the bank’s entrance and looked into the parking lot.

The guy with the hat leaned over to the old man.

“Do you think he works out?”

“I dunno, it could be genetics,” said the old man.

“He looks ripped, but not ripped like some gym douche. I bet he’s worked construction or something, it looks like a natural strength,” whispered the guy with the hat.

“Definitely some sort of labor, or maybe genetics and cardio. And you know, just eating right.”

“Do you think he reads? I bet he reads. He just looks like one of those muscly guys with a brain up his sleeve.”

“You pitching a tent over there?,” asked the old Korean lady from across the circle.

The old man laughed and the guy with the hat blushed again.

Sharon, the teller, returned to view from the bowels of the bank vault with the roly-chair covered in cash in stacks like jenga blocks totaling a tower of \$200,000. She had set the chair to the lowest position so if the money fell it wouldn’t take so long to put it back on. She elevated it



to the highest position so she could transfer it to Clark quicker. Clark counted each \$10,000 stack before shoveling them into his Hello Kitty backpack.

“Thank you so much,” said Clark with a smile.

“It’s 3:56, you fellas might want to get out of here. We close at 4:00 and we’ll have to call the police,” said Sharon.

“Right-o,” said Handsome Rob. “You’ve been an amazing audience. Are you guys sure you haven’t been hostages before?” he asked.

The customers laughed, smiled and even Sharon grinned.

Handsome Rob cleared his throat and shuffled his step before speaking again.

“I don’t like the word ‘hostage’ though, it seems so negative. I really enjoyed the connection we had today. I have desires and I don’t want a soul to be damaged by my desires. That’s why I do this the way I do, without trauma. Violence doesn’t appeal to me but the truth certainly does. I call you guys ‘hostages’ now because I’d like to consider myself a pretty good host.”

The customers blushed and chuckled, but the young man next to the Korean woman didn’t.

“Now is there anything I could’ve done differently today? I like to think I was kind and cordial to y’all but if there was something I missed, please let me know because I’d hate to rub anyone the wrong way.”

There was a silence for a moment as the hostages looked at each other. The young man next to the Korean hostage spoke up.

“I was sort of hoping someone would get shot,” he said dismissively.

“Seriously? Why?” asked a bewildered Handsome Rob.

The hostage thought for a moment.

“It’s a bank robbery. Usually someone gets shot. I was sort of hoping someone would get shot. You know, so I could say ‘I saw a guy get shot in a bank robbery.’”

“Oh geez, wow. Did anybody else want that to happen?” Handsome Rob asked the hostages.

First they looked at each other sheepishly, then they looked at the ground. Like the wave of mouths opening for the gun to greet their gums, the hostages one by one raised their hands in the air, averting eye contact with Handsome Rob.

“Chrissakes. Well we’re really running out of time, who is the saddest person here?” asked Handsome Rob.

The hostages looked up and at each other before looking at the portly security guard at Handsome Rob’s feet.

The security guard wiggled in front of him.

“You could shoot me, Rob. It’s cool,” said the guard eager to please the gunman.

“Jim, you don’t have to...really.”

“It’s 3:59, clock’s ticking,” said Sharon with shrill intonation.

Handsome Rob exhaled in disappointment, pulled the gun from his hip, and fired a round into Jim’s head. The blood splattered on the pants of the Korean hostage and the young man next to her. The rest of the hostages looked at Jim’s lifeless body with awe.

“Alright Sharon, call the police. Thank you for your cooperation,” said Handsome Rob.

The hostages stood up and applauded Handsome Rob. They stomped their feet in the pool of blood forming at their feet and whistled in approval. Handsome Rob and Clark looked away from their fans and walked to the double doors.

“Thank you for the story!,” yelled Sharon with a smile. The duo nodded politely and left the bank.

Handsome Rob and Clark got in the 2006 Impala and wordlessly drove away from the bank. Three songs played on the radio before Handsome Rob broke the silence,

“I don’t know why they always make me kill the guard, Clark. I’ll never know.”

### [WHY MEN?]

I got to the Tap Horse early on the off-chance I'd feel my maternal instinct for flight the moment I set my eyes on the jabronie I conned into buying my drinks in the chat box on one of those sex apps. Some people believe in love at first sight but I don't think anyone in my generation has the capacity to believe in a truth that pure after they've been cheated on by their last three boyfriends, and wronged by all the "I'm not sure what I want" guys who quickly became "I'm sure I don't want to be with you" guys. Oh, the joys of label-less romance! One of these dick lickers said it wasn't even cheating because we hadn't "put a label on it." Men can play dumb the whole time you're fucking them and become rhetorically inclined lawyers the moment they put their pecker where they shouldn't.

Sometimes I yearn for the days of the past where women like myself were marginalized and suppressed and dehumanized because at least those men were direct when they disappointed you, there was honesty with the douchebaggery back then, and it had a price! They couldn't dodge me with the excuses social media allow for. They wouldn't have the weaponry to talk to the girls they were "really" banging when I was in the bathroom. The scumbags I've let enter me would have to get a hotel, or an apartment in the city if they wanted to dip their hands in the proverbial cookie jar that is other women's pussies. With my track record I doubt any of the men I've taken a chance on could even afford a hotel room, let alone have the ambition to place a reservation and make a commitment of that magnitude!

I felt bad having these thoughts of insecurity before a date, because that's not giving "guy who holds fish" in his profile pictures a very fair shake. My parents taught me not to judge a book by its cover and I'm afraid that open mind might be the reason I spent the first few years of

my undergrad repeatedly checking out titles like “skater boy” and “nature boy” and expecting them to end well. I don’t know much about the boy I’ve agreed to meet for a beer, but I do know he made a conscious decision to stagger the photos in his profile of him holding dogs. I suspect I may be dealing with an “artsy boy.” I buy a heavy beer from the bartender so “guy who holds fish” doesn’t have to Rico Suave my first one. This way I can sip on it slowly because IPA’s taste like shit and if I make it through the IPA I’ll reward myself by letting him buy me a drink.

I placed my ID that I just had to show the bartender because I haven’t been to this hippy place before. I don’t do this for fear of being drugged, I do it because it’s my fucking beer and hippies tend to be loose with their definition of possessions. I retired to the bar’s bathroom so I can check my phone without looking like a weenie to the guys with beards who spend a whole lot of time talking about the government but not a lot of time taking care of themselves. I live in the moment as infrequently as anyone but I sure love maintaining the appearance of presence!

It’s a unisex single bathroom so I figure I have two to three minutes before anyone who saw me enter the bathroom thinks I’m unleashing a dump. I hit the sex app on my phone and refresh my memory so I can positively identify the man I might *Runaway Bride* in a moment if I feel my proclivity for flight. First Photo: Boy with labrador retriever. Horrible lighting! Second Photo: Boy holding fish! Come on! Third Photo: Boy with golden retriever. Eyes completely closed. Fourth Photo: Boy in overalls. At least he’s smiling! Fourth Photo: Boy holding tiny dog. I swear only women can take good photos.

When I think I can make a positive ID based on the two photos I can see his face in, I flush the toilet to maintain the illusion I was using the bathroom as intended, and wash my hands. I looked in the mirror but I didn’t really care how my looks transmitted to “guy who holds

fish,” because I knew in my heart I’d be doing him a favor and probably end up overpaying for it. It feels wrong in the core of my being to gauge a man based on the actions of other men, but if you were a business owner and every client of yours stole from you and lied through their teeth, you wouldn’t want to be in business for long. I ran my fingers through my hair, felt my tits ‘cuz I got ‘em, and hocked a loogie into the sink.

When I opened the bathroom door to step back into the vacuum of nonsense that is the bar, the door to the Tap Horse opened and in walked “guy who holds fish.” He didn’t need to duck in the doorway but he did. I scurried to my seat and wondered why my impulse was so dainty. He waved to a few people sitting by the window, and a couple others sitting at the bar, saw me, and addressed the bartender by name and shook his hand.

“What’s up Clapp?” said “guy who holds fish.”

“Not much Lit, how was work today?” said Clapp.

“Pretty dandy, Kenny was a wreck, so casual, could I get a Rough Horse in a little bit?” said “guy who holds fish.”

“Gotchu,” said Clapp.

“Guy who holds fish” finally made his way over to me and plopped himself down. His head was big, like really fucking big, and he was wearing a total dad hat that he must have got at some national park because it was worn out and dusty looking which told me it might be something he’d want to talk about and would probably be even more thrilled if I brought it up.

“Hey I’m Henry,” said “guy who holds fish.”

“I’m Kelly,” I said.

“Aw fuck that’s my Mom’s name,” said “guy who holds fish.”

“Really?” I said.

“No, it’s Margaret. But if your name was Margaret I’d be out-of-here,” he said, his eyes were blue, I’ll give him that one.

“If I was named Margaret, I probably wouldn’t leave the fucking house,” I said, and sipped my beer.

“Oh you don’t like my Mom’s name? Carly?” he said with a grin.

“I won’t acknowledge that kind of petty and I won’t respond to it,” I said. He clinked my glass.

“I hear ya,” said “guy who holds fish.”

“What’d the bartender call you anyway? Lit?” I said.

“Yeah, I know you wouldn’t believe it but I’m Henry Little,” he said.

“Why wouldn’t I believe that?” I asked, playing dumb, making him say it.

“Because I ain’t exactly little,” he said.

“That’s a bit forward,” I said. I put on a relatively disgusted face, to sell it.

“Uh, oh, no I didn’t mean,” he looked at his crotch, “Like, oh jeez,” he said, floundering.

“Oh sure, what did you mean?” I asked, cornering him.

“I-uh-just meant...I’m pretty tall, wow this sounds dumb now,” said “guy who holds fish.”

“It does sound dumb, maybe you should go to the bathroom and regroup,” I said, taking another sip. His face started to get red, and that’s what turned me on, his nervousness.

“I’m gonna grab my beer,” he said, placing his hat on the table, and sheepishly walked to the bar.

I took another sip from my beer and watched him. He was the largest person in the bar but I could see he's got some nerves about him, why? Why, boy? He slouches and fidgets a bit with his hands. He doesn't scream "douche-y lacrosse boy" as much as he evokes "artsy sad boy" which does make me want to answer the question, what makes you so sad, artsy sad boy? When the bartender gave him his beer he didn't immediately take a sip, which tells me he's not stressed he's just rattled. He checked his phone, either for the time or a text. I did notice him look at the few steps needed to return to me and he looked at the beer and took several sips and started walking. Clever artsy sad boy, very clever!

When he sat down he took a deep breath and put his beer down.

"What's the hardest you've ever laughed?" he asked. I wasn't expecting as good a question.

"Hmmmmmmm, lemme think," I said. I thought about the first time I saw *Superbad*, I thought about losing my virginity freshman year, I thought about the time my older brother threw a fish at my younger brother and it got stuck in the rubber straps of his swimming goggles, I thought about boys who choose to put photos of them holding fish on sex apps, I thought about that bitch Shauna Watson falling down at graduation in the ultimate come uppance.

"I can't think of anything," I lied.

"I hate when girls say that," said "boy who holds fish."

"You see a lot of girls?" I asked.

"I've seen enough girls, and I hate when they say 'I don't know.' It kills me because they do know. They don't want to be weird, or they don't want to be weird around me, and I'm weird anyways so like...meet me halfway," he said before taking a sip of his beer.



“I think it’s funny you got pictures holding fish on your profile,” I said and giggled.

“I like fishing, and that was such a great day! Also, you have this entire lifetime of experiences without me, there’s got to be some funny in there. Not just in my photos,” said Henry.

“I know, I know. I’m just busting your balls,” I said.

“And I want to know the hardest you’ve ever laughed, I wanna know what makes you laugh...So I can make you laugh,” he said, taking another sip of his beer.

“Hardest time I’ve ever laughed, okay, so I’m not a bitch right?” I said.

“I like where this is going,” he said.

“I played field hockey with this girl in high school, Shauna Watson,” I said.

“Sounds like a bitch,” he said.

“She was a real Margaret, she was in my friend group but like her and I would never hang out,” I said.

“Like a fringe guy,” he said.

“Exactly, like a fringe guy, but we were both fringe guys with each other, but she’d always talk shit about me,” I said.

“Don’t love that,” he said, taking a sip of his beer.

“Me neither, so at graduation...” I said.

“You farted on her?” he asked.

“No, better. She went up for her diploma, ‘Shauna Marie Watson’ is called, and she goes up and faceplants on the stage,” I said.

“Noooooooooooo,” he said.

“Yeaaaaaaaah,” I said.

“Did that make you believe in God?” he asked.

“I thought about it honestly, but then I remembered what my birthday wish was that year,” I said before taking a sip of my beer.

“Oh you are evil,” he said, and clinked my glass. I heard the sound of an ambulance and saw the lights flashing in the window near the people he waved to. He turned to rubberneck at the commotion and the lights were flashing and I heard the brakes squealing to a halt. He turned his to face me again and took another sip.

“It’s probably the guy who lives above the Deli, he’s always falling down,” said “boy who holds fish.”

“You work at Abelman’s?” I asked.

“Yeah I’m the delivery driver. It’s really laid back there,” he said. He finished his beer.

“I gotta take a piss, regroup so to speak,” he said with a smile, and walked over to the bathroom. I thought about him, “he,” “boy who holds fish,” “Henry,” “Lit.” He intrigued me because he didn’t seem interested in me, he seemed curious. I like curious people, they never want to be bored. I liked how he didn’t just want to drone on about himself, a lot of the guys I’ve gone out with act like dick-salesmen trying to make a pitch. The really thirsty ones came across as nothing more than that, shitty car salesman looking to meet some sort of body-quota and ultimately make their sale. They’re like Ken Dolls in bed, not a whole lot going on down there and they’re just as likely to melt under pressure or a little heat. I don’t know what kind of man I want but I don’t want one I can figure out in the first forty-eight.

He came out of the bathroom five minutes later, I figured he'd either taken a dump or fell into some sports statistics rabbit hole and lost track of time. By the time he got to the bar the door to the Tap Horse flung open and a girl with an ass so fat you could see it from the front walked in.

"Henry! It's Arm, he's going to the hospital. Marsh is riding in the ambulance with him," she said.

"You got your car?" he said.

"Yeah it's running, we'll grab Kenny on the way, close up," she said.

"What happened?" said Henry.

"I bumped into him, I'm so stupid, he cut his arm, bad, like off," she said.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" said Henry.

"Paramedic is hopeful, he passed out but he's breathing. People lose limbs, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, civil war people. Get in the car, I'll be right out," said Henry. He threw some money on the bar and ran to me.

"Hey, I'm sure you heard that," he said.

"Your friend, Arm, cut his arm off..." I said.

"You don't believe me?" he asked.

"It's hard to believe, I mean, there are other ways to get out of a bad date," I said, taking a sip from my beer.

"Jenn Cal, you saw her," he said pointing to the door.

"And you went to the bathroom, could have texted her," I said, taking another sip.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. Then he reached into his back pocket, grabbed his wallet and took out his ID and handed it to me.

“I’m not gonna bullshit you with some wait three days and text you crap, I’m Henry. I like to read, I like to fish, and I like to drink. I’ll need this so I can buy booze again at some point this week, consider this a rain check coupon to be redeemed later. Now I’m gonna go to the hospital, alright? And we can talk about this when I see you again and you get to feel like a real Shauna Wallace,” said Henry.

“It’s Watson,” I said, finishing my beer.

“Whatever,” he said, and threw a few dollars onto the table. “And buy another fucking beer, I’m sorry I’m cutting this short,” said Henry.

“Whatever you say fishboy, go check on the Arm guy,” I said.

I brought the money to the bartender and ordered a light beer with a soft sounding name.

“You know he wouldn’t lie to you? He’s a stand up guy, Henry,” said the bartender.

“I hear ya, I just wanted to see what he was made of,” I said, eyeing the bathroom.

**FOURTH COURSE**  
*(Bonus Track)*

“Avi, so what’s that short for?” Kathy asked him.

Avi took a sip of water and placed his glass back on the table into a plump ring of condensation that had pooled into a receptacle.

“Hmmm” he said, considering the action with mild pleasure.

The notion of placing water trapped by a glass on water that had formed outside of the glass was liberating to Avi. To see confinement incarnate so well received by borderless water made him smile. Kathy waited for a response to her question.

Avi adjusted his thick black-rimmed glasses before answering, “It’s not short for anything, it’s just Avi.”

“Avi Cadi, that’s kind of a funny name,” Kathy said.

“How did you know my last name?” asked Avi.

“Facebook,” Kathy said.

She sipped her water, and wondered whether it was more weird that she looked Avi up, or that she told him she looked him up. She set her glass on the table next to the ring it came from, making another ring. The additional ring created a rage in Avi. He wasn’t disturbed by her aquatic negligence, he was more disgusted that the Woodland Hills Mall Olive Garden didn’t have coasters for their “guests.”

Kathy took a sip of her water before saying with pride, “I drink 300 ounces of water a day. I read an article online that said if you drink that much water each day, you also have to brag about it. If you don’t brag about it, there’s actually no nutritional value.”

She questioned her honesty once again, but remained satisfied with her candor.

She scanned the restaurant with her blue eyes, catching multiple men staring at her. Each of the men returned their wandering eyes back to their families.

“I wish we were sitting closer to the bathroom. That commute is going to kill me,” Kathy said with a smile.

“Why?” Avi said with pure wonder.

“Because of all the water I drink?” said Kathy with confusion. Avi looked down at Kathy’s glass.

“Huh? You’ve only had a sip tonight?” said an astonished Avi. Kathy bit the inside of her soft lip, disappointed in Avi’s divided attention.

The waiter, the fat fat waiter, shuffled across the shag-carpeted floor and started speaking with Kathy. Avi, smiling, looked at them talking but listened to none of their conversation. He was instead deep in thought about how impractical a shag carpet is in an Italian restaurant. Their waiter was making motions with his massive arms that resulted in Kathy laughing carelessly.

She slapped the table with her hand and said, “Oh, ain’t that strange! You guys are both named Avi!” Avi was wondering how often soups, sauces, and wines could make their way into the carpet when he was addressed.

Avi looked up but before he could speak, the waiter interrupted, “Javy, my name is Javy.” He was relieved he escaped a near-shared experience with another person. Avi preferred when people didn’t speak at all.

The fat waiter looked over the odd couple before asking, “What could I get you guys this evening?” Kathy swept her blonde hair over her strong shoulders and looked up at Javy’s large doughy face.

“I’ll have the chicken and gnocchi, with salad and breadsticks,” Kathy said with a smile.

Avi gulped and looked sheepishly at the ground next to their booth, visualizing food staining the carpet and how tedious it must be to clean the floors. He wondered whether the floors were cleaned often, or if it was possible that there had never been a spill. Avi wondered if there was a machine capable of cleaning a spaghetti-stained shag carpet, and whether the Woodland Hills Mall Olive Garden would cart out that device during a busy dinner rush.

Avi’s eyes scanned the shag carpet for loose noodles or tomatoes that have escaped their hypothetical “fate” from the hypothetical “device.” Any deviation from being eaten would be terrifying for the food to endure, Avi considered this sentiment alongside his own mortality.

“I’ll have the same,” Avi said without looking at the waiter.

Avi then thought about how often people order the same thing as a means of maintaining convenience. He wondered how many man hours were saved by people ordering the same meal. Once, while visiting colleges in Ohio, Avi had ordered a chicken Caesar salad. He’d never forget the pure shock he saw in the waitress’ face. Visibly shaken, the Ohio waitress said, “I’ve worked here for six years, and every customer has ordered a Reuben. W-why would you do this to me?” Avi thought about her tears often, and kept his orders simple after that. Avi adjusted his glasses again.

Kathy crossed her legs and interlocked her fingers. She wondered if Avi was actively trying to be distant. She spread her legs apart and stomped both feet on the floor before asking with a smile, “So, do you like it here?”

“The Olive Garden?” he said staring at the frames of his glasses in his hands.

“No, Tulsa,” Kathy said as she craned her neck to check the clock above the bathroom.

“Tulsa’s okay. It’s no Michigan. I’m from Saginaw,” said Avi while biting a fingernail.

He spit the nail into the carpet, effectively contributing a needle to the shag haystack. Avi often felt inclined to do things like that. The nail did not demand biting, but he did it anyways. Sometimes Avi would rub his hands together, scratch the back of his head, or even crack his fingers.

“Michigan seems like a dream to me now,” said Kathy coldly.

Avi rubbed his perpetually sweaty palms on his pants, one of the greatest hits of human expression. Though he felt like the sweat never left the hand, the practice calmed Avi. The stimulation of hands on his thighs relaxed him.

The waiter, Heavy Javy, approached with Avi’s and Kathy’s meals. Avi kept his eyes shut until he heard the bowls reach the table. He opened one eye and looked at the bowls, and then with the other eye he looked at the carpet. Avi’s glasses slid to the tip of his nose. When he saw their meals made it safely to the table, he sighed with relief.

Less nervous now, Avi began to eat. He started with the salad. With his little fingers he plucked a crouton from the salad and popped it into his mouth. Then with a fork, he penetrated a tomato and raised it from the bowl. The tomato slipped off of the piercing prong. He used his fingers to separate layers of lettuce from onions. He liked the wetness of onion slices on his fingers. Kathy ran her fingers through Avi’s curly hair. When he finished the salad, Javy arrived with the breadsticks. Javy scurried away as fast as his figure would allow. The soup remained untouched.



Avi grabbed a breadstick and stuck it in Kathy's mouth. She closed her eyes during insertion. Avi's mouth made an "O" and his tight lips hid his teeth. He brushed her hair over her shoulders with his trembling fingers in idiosyncratic strokes.

Kathy plucked a breadstick from the basket and took a bite. Avi's eyes widened. She then dunked the breadstick into her soup before taking another bite. Avi moaned. Kathy placed her bowl of soup in front of Avi, filling his glasses with fog. He gasped and she giggled before coyly covering her mouth for the next bite. Kathy dropped her other hand, limply slapping the table, giving voice to the cutlery in a rattle of metallic approval. She took her hand away from her mouth, exposing a smile from the nourishment. A face plastered with pure pleasure. Avi's heart rate picked up.

"Oh fuck," he muttered under his breath. Kathy scooped up soup with her spoon and stuffed it into her mouth. Avi's right hand launched carelessly into his bowl of soup, crashing it to the carpet. The creamy broth flooded the carpet in streams of white. Avi rolled over and fell asleep while Kathy, dissatisfied, called a cab to bring her home.

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Matt Hammond was born in Nashua, New Hampshire in 1996. He was raised nearby in the small town of Wilton, New Hampshire. Following the 2008 Financial Crisis, Matt's family moved to Maine seeking better employment opportunities. Matt attended the Reeds Brook school in Hampden, Maine and Holbrook Middle School in Holden, Maine. Hammond graduated from John Bapst Memorial High School in 2014. That fall he enrolled at the University of Maine and studied English Literature and Secondary Education with a concentration in English. In the Spring of 2015 he joined the Kappa Sigma Fraternity. Hammond was elected Grand Scribe of the Psi chapter as a sophomore and served on their Executive Board for two semesters. From 2017-2019 he was employed by the Advanced Structures and Composites Center and worked as a research assistant in the thermoplastic engineering division. In his senior year he worked for *The Maine Campus* as a sportswriter. That spring he was admitted to the Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society. Hammond graduated from the University of Maine in the spring of 2018 with a B.A. in English Literature and a minor in Secondary Education. He is a candidate for the Master's degree in English from the University of Maine in 2021.