

More Mediocre

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No Market

The summer after I graduated from college my parents decided to throw a party for me, their eldest of four and only son, at the home in Orange County where I had very recently moved back. They took it seriously. They rented tables, chairs, an awning, a PA system and a rollaway bar, fully stocked. It was catered. Everyone was invited.

During the party my mom darted between tables, arms full like a seasoned waitress. She replaced plates of empty tamale husks with plates of tacos and enchiladas. She kept the chip bowl bottomless. She'd stop only to survey the backyard and point: More? More? My dad manned the bar with surprising grace and efficiency, rattling the cocktail shaker with one hand while managing the blender with the other, shouting out things I'd never heard him say before like "Margaritas up!" I stayed poolside with my college friends who had come in a caravan from Long Beach when they heard the booze would be bankrolled. We smoked and drank and snapped pictures of each other. We took turns manning the iPod, threw girls into the water. The other tables, my grandparents, my sisters and their teenage friends, old neighbors I hadn't seen since the 90s, the nanny who raised me back when both my parents had to work, they were all watching us. We felt cool given the audience: wily, vulgar, but college graduates.

When the night began to settle down and the fire pit was lit, I waited at the front door as the procession of family members offered their congratulations and handed over envelopes filled with money. I stacked them on the entryway table. They would add up to thousands of dollars, a gesture of good faith and support, money to get me on my feet and make those first loan payments. Only my college had been paid for. The money would

actually be going toward a new computer to replace the one Matt had a week earlier spilled beer all over and then fell asleep on top of. This had been at my other graduation party.

After most of the guests had left and I was counting the envelopes, Yasmine, a sophomore who had recently started writing for the college newspaper we all ran that year, crossed the room, eyeing me as she unwrapped a towel from her body to reveal her bikini. I followed her into the guest bathroom where she too offered her congratulations and changed her clothes in front of me. Back in the hallway my uncle Glenn was leaning against the wall, waiting for me. My uncle Glenn was my dad's twin brother, some parallel but alternate version of my dad, one who worked at a boutique advertising firm, lived in a beach house in Laguna, had a 10-year-old daughter who wore makeup. His white linen shirt was mostly unbuttoned and he held a plastic cup of melted margarita. He smiled at me. Then he placed his hand on my shoulder and held it there for a long time. It is July 2008. "Welcome to the recession," he said.

This is not about learning anything the hard way.

My first job out of college was at a trade publisher for the homebuilding industry in Southern California. It is now September 2008, three months before the Case-Shiller home price index would report its largest drop in U.S. history. This is where I began. Ground Zero.

I did not at the time recognize this first job as a convergence of two industries in an advanced state of public decay. I knew nothing about the homebuilding industry. I

couldn't even lease an apartment without a cosigner. And this was not the sort of publishing I had envisioned getting into when I first started saying "I want to get into publishing." But I had only a vague understanding of editorial, having worked as the senior editor of my university's weekly, which was supported by campus money and not by advertising, so I didn't know what getting into publishing meant. The "Editorial Assistant" post on Craigslist had sounded about right. And the office was in Newport, less than a mile from the beach.

Driving to the office for my interview, I was not worried. I listened to the radio. I thought about what I would do with the rest of my afternoon, where to get lunch now that I was in Newport, or if I should drive up Pacific Coast Highway and catch Liv before her afternoon class. She was the 19-year-old art student I met over the summer who I recently started calling my girlfriend. We were a devastating couple, both just entering that sort of beauty where walking out in public together was a salacious display of youth. And I was about to get the first job I applied for out of college. The last four years had been all momentum and I was just picking up where I left off.

My interview was with the editor-in-chief, a serious blonde woman named Emily. She wasn't too much older than me but had a salty way about her. Her eyes were puffy, her movements quick and deliberate. She asked me a few easy questions about the pace of the office at university paper, which I made sound like a grueling, but ultimately rewarding, Pulitzer-worthy endeavor, even as she looked over my op-edit about the pros and cons of slutty Halloween costumes, the review of *Angels in America* I had lifted from a term paper one week when deadlines were tight. She asked me if I knew what they did there. I lied and said yes. She didn't follow up. Five minutes later she set down my clips

on her incredibly cluttered desk and told me I was hired. I hadn't even gathered my things before she got back on the phone. I went and got tacos. Liv and I had sex on her breakfast nook table. No surprises.

I returned to the office a week later and was informed that Emily had quit. I now had her job. They had downsized significantly and here would be no time to find someone more experience. The understanding was that Emily hadn't been looking to hire an assistant, but a quick and easy replacement. This is why I had been hired without incident. I was to get started immediately.

That is how I met Mark Whelan.

Emily had warned me about the publisher during our interview when she asked me, straight faced, "Do you think you can work under an unrepentant asshole?" That first day he strode into the office as if he had just stepped out of a convertible while it was still moving. Black haired and barrel-chested, he reminded me immediately of Alec Baldwin or Roger Clemens in their later years. He had a hybrid Irish accent that made everything he said sound potentially vulgar, and his vulgarity sound inspired. Before I even had the chance to speak with him, he had already launched into a one-sided argument with Desiree, the office manager. It ended with him dumping a jar of pens onto her desk and shouting "frothy cunt" from down the hall before slamming the door to his office.

Later he called me into the office along with the entire staff, which consisted of Anna, the frail and patient Art Director, and Geoff, the round, middle-aged head salesman who was quick to inform me that he had been with Mark since he launched his first magazine twenty years ago, and that he also had an affection for magic tricks.

Mark didn't bother introducing himself. "Emily had been gathering contacts for months," he said. "She left us with our thumb up our asses." He was sitting in front of a shelf lined with plaques and awards. I remember noticing their dates. His last one, "Excellence in Print Media," from the California Building Industry Association was from 2004. "Things are getting worse out there. Devs think there is such thing as free ink. Fuck them. There is no such thing as free ink. For now, we're all going to have to wear a lot of hats. Can you wear a lot of hats Darren?" I nodded emphatically and ensured him I could wear as many hats as he needed.

My job, I learned, was to gather content across their catalogue of four quarterly magazines, recently cut down from five. Each magazine was geared toward a niche in the business: developers, green homebuilding, luxury homes, and senior living. I was to choose what to print based on two things: the willingness of the business being represented in our editorial- provide a list of their vendors to whom we would sell ads, and the likelihood that the business would purchase reprints of the article we ran. It was pay to play. The magazines were just elaborately crafted advertisement. This back when they still weren't sure how far the market was going to fall. They couldn't even see rock bottom yet. No one in the industry was spending money.

"Your other job," Mark told me that first day, and often thereafter. "Somehow, somewhere find the silver lining in this clusterfuck."

Everyone was pretty excited for me then. On paper it sounded great. I had just turned 23 and was now the senior editor at a nationally distributed trade publisher. But the truth was I could take it or leave it. I had some sort of professional ambition, in that I knew I wanted to make money. I did not want to be the sort of writer who lived out of

someone's closet and ate ramen while scrapping away at pages, trying to become the voice of a generation. That's not how I was raised. I did not romanticize the bohemian life the way Liv and her friends did. But I imagined working at a magazine meant I could come to the office in flannel. That's how it had been in college. Now I was having to tuck in my shirt and write about homebuilding to homebuilders. I decided to approach it as something to do while I looked for other ventures, things "more in line with my interests" I kept saying, even though I had no idea what meant.

My parents really laid it on thick, praising the details of my new job, how quickly I had landed the position. This wasn't beyond normal parent behavior. Why shouldn't they have been proud? But looking back, there was something more purposeful to it all. My family was well enough off, but they never really showed it. This was not out of a sense of modesty, or frugality, but a lack of motivation. My parents didn't do things for themselves. They didn't take trips. They didn't maintain any hobbies or personal causes. Any new additions to their wardrobes were usually gifts from each other on Christmas and birthdays. All of their energies, the fruits of their labor, were directed toward their children. You wouldn't really notice until they were around other adults, especially other adults with means, like my uncle Glenn. That's when they were particularly vocal. They showed off by showing me off. Such was my graduation party. I was the investment, and I was already doing well on the returns.

What I couldn't see then was how this was not good for me. I never once felt the eldest son's pressure of legacy, the fear of not being able to live up to my father's accomplishments. I *was* my father's accomplishment. I didn't get the job because of a

remarkably fortunate sequence of events, because I was in the right place at the right time. I got this job because I could do no wrong.

It is now, of course, a classic arch. My parents sought to give me all the advantages they never had, and in doing so made it unnecessary for me to garner the skills they needed to successfully build a life for themselves and their family. Like the housing market (like any bubble before the burst) I was riding on the success of the boomers, fueled by credit and faith, without any fear, any concept, of how quickly the bottom could drop out.

I soon moved into Emily's office, her papers everywhere, notes still stuck to the corkboard. I didn't have a clue what I was doing but I was good at looking busy. My email account was set up and I began receiving hundreds of press releases and editorial pitches for things ranging from walk-in tubs for the elderly to Craftsman-style timber frame homes. I began googling things I'd never Googled before, like "custom 3-coat stucco." I figured if I just put my head down and focused on a single task a day I would quietly learn the basics of the job. This became increasingly difficult, as Mark was prone to dropping in on me mid-rant, continuing a conversation we never had. He'd enter my office suddenly and say, "If Bob Yoder wants to throw in a few low flush toilets in some single family homes, that's green to me. Fuck LEED certification. You can't turn a battleship into a bath tub overnight." And he was gone. Then I'd Google Bob Yoder.

The first book under my tenure was a magazine for high design and luxurious home accessories. I began putting together a piece of editorial for a new boutique interior design studio outside of San Diego, one of Emily's unfinished leads. I spent days on the

phone with the sweet and attractive-sounding daughter of the studio's owner. She acted as both the receptionist and, given the new press attention, their impromptu media coordinator. I asked her standard interview questions and put together a 500-word article with pull quotes. She excitedly sent me the photographs they had professionally taken, and I passed on everything to Anna. She quickly, I mean within 30-minutes, gave me a proof that looked fantastic: totally professional and not at all threadbare as it had felt in its conception. I sent the proof to the girl and she sounded overjoyed.

"We are going to be in a magazine," she said to herself, into the phone. "That's *so* cool." Then it came time for me to ask if she intended to purchase reprints. I explained to her the process, the pricing options as they were laid in front of me, and her excitement quickly turned. "Oh. You mean we have to pay?"

I walked into Mark's office. He was standing up and pacing with the long-chord receiver pressed against his ear and shoulder. When he saw me, he covered the receiver.

"What should I do if they don't want to buy reprints?" I said.

"Tell them there is no such fucking thing as free ink," he said and returned to his conversation.

I went back to my office and stared at the blinking light on the phone. Anna floated in, her binder of design templates held preciously in front of her chest. She quietly closed the door behind her. "Ask them if they'd like to *invest* in the editorial," she said. So I did. But in the end they did not want to invest in the editorial. We had to scrap the piece and move on. Mark literally crumpled the proofs in his hand and threw them away when I told him during the twice-daily staff meeting.

What we ended up running was a feature sent in by a PR-firm representing a massive developer in South Florida, the kind that built entire neighborhoods of McMansions for which there was no market. Even looking at their pictures felt irresponsible and gluttonous. The way we spun the article was that the developer was continuing to build up to the standards they had always built despite current economic conditions.

That's another thing I learned: any news bit, any piece of editorial can be turned on its head. If a new study showed first time homebuyers were purchasing significantly smaller houses than in years past, we'd print it as "Downsizing a Major Trend in Home Construction." If housing prices rose 2.7 percent in September in New Mexico, we'd just cut out the last part. I'd scour builder sites looking for good news like that to publish and found it surprisingly easy.

It was plain to see, even for a layman, why the industry was in such a state. There had been no lack of projections. No one could feign ignorance or victimization. Now that the threshold had been crossed, what they needed was validation. To scale back would mean to admit, finally, that this had all been finite. Instead of stopping to recalibrate, to find new, viable options that can open up in a changing market, the entire industry was barricading itself in its past success, even if that success was built under false promises, too busy convincing itself of its own resilience, its invulnerable potential, to at least make an attempt to break the fall.

In just over a month I had finished my first book. It was thin, and Mark had to rerun ads from the last issue, "freebies" he venomously called them, but it was in on time.

On the fourth page was my editor's note with a picture. I was clean-shaven and smiling openly in the pressed blue shirt I had bought for the occasion. The first line of my editor's note was, "The kitchen is key in this business."

I didn't know I could look like that or write those things. Turns out I was good at taking scraps of information, stitching them together to make it sound like I knew what I was talking about in a way pleasing to read. It was the same thing I had done in college, staying up with a term paper the night before its due date, frantically flipping through books of criticism I hadn't read, indentifying viable quotes and finding a way to make them fit into whatever I was writing. It was a skill I had garnered living a procrastinator's life. It was a skill that had value.

Holding the magazine in my hand, I was suddenly very proud. I had been thrown into the pool and did not drown. It felt good to work this hard and have something to show for it. But then I panicked. This couldn't possibly be what I was meant to do. Somewhere out there was a job perfectly suited for my every professional and aesthetic desire. I was going to write snappy articles about movies and video games and sex, or something. That's what I had coming to me. I was absolutely unwilling to adjust my expectations. I had no reason to adapt.

I was still living back home at the time but staying most nights at Liv's apartment because she lived closer to the office. When we first met I was basically still a college student, living what I thought was some hyper-stylized montage of a life. I didn't even know if I wanted to be with her at first. I didn't want to limit my options. But she won me over with her manic energy, her limitless passion, her body. That summer we lived in a

bad student film. All we did was drink and fuck and stay up all night talking about Joe Strummer and Iran.

But the summer was over, and now something else was happening. We were splitting. I'd tell her horror stories about my Mark, how he'd often ask me to do things that were literally impossible. Only my problems just weren't as interesting as her problems: the frustration with color photography, her existential crisis from reading *The Tao of Pooh*. One night I walked in on her sitting in bed in her underwear, a tripod between her legs, taking pictures of her face drawn with plastic surgery outlines. Instead of telling her it was 2 in the morning and I needed to sleep, I'd steady the camera for her, all the while worrying about whether or not the Arizona contractor would remember to send photos in 300dpi.

The more time I spent outside of that apartment and in the office, the more her eccentricities began to seem trivial, childish. This, too, terrified me. I was becoming The Man. I was never meant to become The Man. But instead of distancing myself from her in this new, post-college life, I latched onto her. The worst thing in the world would have been to sink into mediocrity. And Liv was anything but mediocre. Being with her, weathering her anxious spells, the fights that turned sexual, kept me feeling young, potent. So I continued to live with the pace I had lived the years previous. I'd go straight to her place from work, take off my business casuals, fold them neatly by her bed and put on slim jeans and some t-shirt. We would go out a lot, or stayed in and drank. We went to shows, went to readings. We talked a lot of bullshit. Most of the money I made was put into to keeping this momentum going. I was straddling two lives, refusing to commit to either, feeling like a fraud in both.

Over the summer, my friend Colin, the former editor-in-chief of the university newspaper, had packed his life into a suitcase and moved to New York. Colin was brash, antagonistic, and restlessly ambitious. He had earned his former position as Editor-in-Chief by persistence of will, by being pained by discontent, forcing people out, and putting in the hours to back up his vision. In New York he lived on couches until talking his way into a job at a golf lifestyle magazine.

He and I spent a lot of time in our respective offices chatting online, talking shop. He admitted that the job wasn't as sexy as he had imagined. He felt just as strange publishing advertorial about golf shoes and country clubs as I did about luxury single-family homes and electronic sommelier equipment. It was all but certain that Obama was about to win the presidency and we felt that we were working against the momentum of his campaign. But Colin had a different perspective on all of this. He had fought for his job. He didn't care what it looked like. He had student loan debt. He had his convictions. He wanted to be on top of a masthead one day. But he knew in order to do that he would first have to put in the hours.

"You just gotta scrap," he once said over the phone while on my lunch break. I had been complaining to him about the job while eating a 7-11 sandwich on a park bench overlooking the ocean. "Get over yourself for one goddamn second and play the long game. We are the lucky ones."

The inevitability of Obama instilled a sort of foreboding in Mark as we began putting together the last book of the year, a magazine for green homebuilding. I got the sense not that he was afraid of what was coming, but that the election would be a

definitive end of an era, one impossible to spin or ignore. When Mark and Geoff were in the middle of one of their many arguments over sales, I heard Geoff say, “This isn’t 2004,” before storming out. Mark’s response to reading the newspaper in his office was “Where’s *my* bailout?” Still, whenever things got desperate, when we absolutely needed to land a full-page ad for the book to even come out, Mark would close his door, finger through his rolodex and pick up the phone. An hour later he would emerge looking exhausted. “GE is in,” he’d say, and escape for lunch.

On the morning of the election, I cast my vote for Obama at the church by Liv’s house and showed up late to work. Mark asked me for whom I had voted and I said McCain. He had me monitor the election results all day while he paced the office and occasionally yelled at someone. Late in the afternoon, when Obama started pulling away, he called me into his office and told me to sit down.

“See that,” he said, pointing to a large framed picture of him and an old editor inside of limousine. They were both in tuxedos and drinking champagne. It was the same photo that was cropped and printed with his publisher’s notes. “That’s the way this business used to be. I know we can get there again.”

I was surprised to find I was beginning to both admire and pity Mark. He was volatile, pigheaded, and exploitative. His reputation in the industry was one of a genuine prick. But there was insatiability about him. His unapologetic will, his stubborn ambition, I could never possess. It was his sort who built the economy, fattened it with ruthless success. He reminded me of Colin in that way. But unlike Colin, Mark was obsessed with looking backward. That’s where Mark and I overlapped. I had started to rely on the past as a security blanket. My lack of conviction, my apathy toward the work, all stemmed

from my refusal to let go of expectations in the face of rampant change. If Mark's stubbornness, if the stubbornness of the whole industry, would ensure the economy's inevitable collapse, the stubbornness of my people would slow it's recovery.

The Homebuilder's Conference was an annual trade show hosted in Long Beach. It was a call to arms for the industry, and as December rolled in preparations took precedent over magazine production. Mark called in a woman named Barbara, an old friend who had been with him through every trade show for the last decade. She was a giant, scary woman with a smoker's voice. She arrived with half a dozen boxes, carrying stacks of them in her three-inch heels, and lined them up in the conference room.

"This is the strategy," she said and slid pins to each of us at the table. The pins each had "Survive N' Thrive," written in a safari font against a zebra-print background. "Everyone there is going to be pretending like the ship isn't sinking. Not us."

"No more pussyfooting," said Mark. "We are going to look the downturn in the face and say 'Fuck you.' We're still standing."

I was surprised by this bold approach and found myself on board. The nights Liv worked at the local cafe I sat in her apartment and memorized the names and faces of contributors and reps I'd be meeting. When I heard her coming up the stairs I'd put away my papers and pick up the copy of *Siddhartha* we found at a garage sale. I had my suit dry cleaned. I had only worn it once, two years earlier, for my cousin's wedding. The night before the trade show I slept at home because I did not want Liv to see me wear it.

The safari motif was very comprehensive. Barbara and Mark rolled up to the office in a retro, tan and green Land Cruiser with a giant "Survive N' Thrive" decal on

both sides. Mark stepped out wearing a three-piece suit with tan tie and matching silk pocket square.

“Where could you possibly have gotten this?” I asked. Mark dusted and straightened the shoulders of my suit jacket

“I’ve got a guy,” he said.

I followed the Land Cruiser down the 405 freeway into Long Beach, all the while reviewing faces to names, checking my business cards, going over talking points. Survive N’ Thrive. We were going to break this cycle of denial and spray some cold, hard reality on those motherfuckers. Thinking about it in those terms allowed me to feel better about the energy I was putting into it.

The conference was much smaller than last year. Both Mark and Barbara looked over the floor and said, “My god.” The convention center was filled with the self-conscious murmur of an under-capacity sporting event, with the occasional shouts from a promo girls wearing skirts and carrying giant signs proclaiming the energy-saving benefits of something called EcoTimber.

Our booth was in a back corner of the convention center, the unfortunate placement Mark called “an inside job.” The Land Cruiser was parked behind our tables with a giant “Survive N’ Thrive” poster board propped on top surrounded by stuffed animals of tigers, giraffes and rhinos. I manned the table along with Anna for the first half of the day. Occasionally a group of tired people in suits walked by, smiled at the set up and took copies of our magazines. I did not see anyone I recognized. Someone talked to me Kenmore’s new line of *ultra* eco-friendly appliances. Another gave me a brochure about a new condo projects in downtown Long Beach set to begin construction in 2014.

Other people said things like, “So you’re Mark’s new boy,” and we exchanged business cards.

Later in the day Mark had me make rounds with him. We stopped by booths for construction rentals, home security systems, appliance dealers and landscape architects.. When we visited the booth of a major tile manufacturer, Mark pulled out the full-page ad we had run for them as a quid-pro-quo for later business once money opened up.

“Made it with me own hands,” I suddenly said. Both Mark and their rep laughed heartily.

This was the biggest moment of self-deception. I think about it all the time. I remember stepping out of myself. I replayed that sequence of events over and over again: their heads bent back, receding hairlines sparkling dimly under the hot lights of the convention floor, my knowing smirk. Further even, to half assed office Christmas Parties, flying to Reno, renting a Camry, convincing a room full of plumbing contractors to invest in editorial. If Liv saw this she’d look to her ex-boyfriend in Maine, their 9 months backpacking together in Europe, living on pennies; the sticky, vulgar poetry he wrote for her on his blog when she left for California.

I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t ready for this reality, or just didn’t buy into it, that I would have to do shit before I could do what I wanted. And that’s only if I were lucky. I wasn’t Coin. I didn’t want to scrap. And that’s exactly what this whole industry was doing: treading water. That’s the best it could offer. If I were going to tread water it wasn’t going to be with Mark Whelan and ultra-echo friendly appliances. It was going to be with Liv, with the old life. Because at least that looked better. Even if I were to fail, worse case scenario, it would just mean living out of someone’s closet and eating ramen

while I scrapped away at pages or whatever. And that wouldn't be so bad because at least she would probably want me more. Besides, something else would fall in my lap. That's how it worked before and that's what would happen again. I had no reason to think otherwise. It was then I decided to quit.

One week later the Case-Shiller home price index took an unprecedented nosedive. Bob Yoder, division President of Shea Homes, whom we had crowned Green Homebuilder of the year in our December issue, informed Mark the company was filing for bankruptcy. Then we broke for the holidays.

2009. Mark looked disheveled and more manic. He announced that he had let Geoff go and crafted a game plan for the coming months. There would be a two-hour meeting at the end of the day to go over all the details.

"It's going to be tough," he said, pacing in my office. "We lost some contracts. We may have to drop another book. But it's all about survive and thrive, like we said. You know those ships that are up in the Arctic? The ones that plow through the ice? That's us. You did right by me. You came through when I needed you to. I'm going to need you on my side this year."

It was Colin who said I was an idiot when I first told him about my plan to quit. "We are the *lucky* ones," he said again. But he didn't understand, I thought. He had student loan debt. I didn't. I had nothing but options. That's what I told myself.

After Mark left for lunch I called Anna into my office and broke the news. She smiled and said, "You sound like Emily."

I drummed nervously on my desk and waited for Mark to return. He strode in as he always did and I met him in his office. I said, “Mark, we need to talk,” and I sat down heavily. I explained to him my leaving, again using phrases like “more in line with my interests,” and “upward mobility.” I made sure to thank him for the opportunity, and turned very serious when I said I would not leave them high-and-dry like Emily did. I would hire a replacement and help finish out the next book by deadline, so he need not worry. Mark stared at his desk the whole time I spoke, and when I was done talking he said, “You gotta do what you gotta do.”

I wasn’t back to work for more than ten minutes when Desiree walked in. “We are cutting you a check,” she said. “Mark wants you out by the end of the day.”

Shortly thereafter Liv flew back home to Maine and slept with her ex-boyfriend. She called me the next morning crying, said she was sorry. When I began yelling at her she told me to fuck off and never speak to her again.

She would keep swapping majors from photography to French and then back again. She found odd jobs nannying, working for a portrait photographer, a telemarketer. She took up cooking. She tried to become an internet personality. She fought often with her bi-polar mom and stopped talking to her. One night she had a breakdown and cut herself on her arms and inner thigh the way she used to in high school. She decided to become a writer and moved back home to Maine on a whim. Her computer fell out of her car during the drive and she didn’t care. She met a new boy. She got her degree in English and took the boy to Portland, Oregon where she left the boy and enrolled in a

sustainable foods graduate program in Cuba. She swears that she is truly happy for the first time.

Colin would work at the golf magazine for another year before quitting under protest over the editor's plagiarized practices. He then sustained himself on freelance photography and graphic design gigs, making just enough to pay rent. He moved into a smaller apartment twice. The money ran out and he began working with his dad selling sales lead equipment for car dealerships. He found that he is a terrific salesman. He rented out an office in Williamsburg and made more money than he had in his life. He didn't enjoy the work. He hated it, in fact, but he saved up enough to quit and take a snowboarding tour around the country. He took a job as the Art Director at a hip New York lifestyle magazine. He complains every day about his boss.

After spending a year unemployed save for the two weeks I did data entry at my dad's office, I found an ad on Craigslist that looked a lot like the ad that landed me an interview with Emily. I sent an email asking if it was indeed the same publishing house. I got an email back from a girl I did not know saying it was, and that I should come in.

I shaved, ironed my clothes and drove to the office. My interview was with the editor who replaced me. She was a quiet girl who looked to be about my age. She asked leading questions that made it clear Mark had not spoken well of me. "What do you think you accomplished when you worked here?" she said. "And why did you leave after just three months? Did you think a year of unemployment has changed your work ethic? If so, how and why?" When it became clear what this was, I just started offering canned

responses. I didn't know what I was thinking coming back. This was why I hadn't called Mark once things got rough.

The editor left without giving her name, and Mark came in soon after. We sat and he talked about the business, how things were still rough but they were staying afloat. He didn't have to cut down another book. In fact they added another, geared toward government contracts and infrastructure.

"That's what America is all about right now. Infrastructure," he said. "Obama is throwing money at all these huge projects to get people to work: rebuilding, restructuring, modernizing, adapting. Out with the old and in with the new. I wish he'd throw some of that money my way. But I'll at least be give this new business somewhere to sell themselves."

I drove home and smoked a few cigarettes. Things were going to be OK. I had a lot of leads out there. And if nothing panned out, it's not like I would be homeless. My parents were happy to support me through all of this. They said it's not my fault. It's the economy. Everyone was struggling. Their biggest concern was that I just stay positive. Sometimes it was hard, though. Sometimes I was convinced of my own worthlessness. But that sort of thinking could get me stuck. There had to be something out there. It was bound to fall in my lap.

This was how I would continue. This is how I would spend another six months unemployed, living at home; how I got a job with good pay at an online marketing firm and stayed for exactly one summer before I got antsy and moved to Seattle; how I went on food stamps and worked at coffee shop. This is how when the coffee shop closed down I moved back to California, back home; how I applied and was admitted to grad

school by submitting a story about a 30-year-old living at his parent's house who begins to obsess over his past decisions.

Because the bubble never burst for me. Not really. I just skimmed along the skin of the bubble, bouncing here to there, testing the surface tension, but never breaking it, never having to completely give something up and start from scratch. Four years after I started working at the publishing house I would return to the security blanket of academia. Now the market is slowly recovering. Builders are building smaller. Mark is writing about infrastructure. And I am about to graduate. Again.

One Year

One year my sisters appear. Brooke comes when I'm four. Eleven months later Morgan and Allison are born in that order, five minutes apart. Mom and Dad bring the twins home wrapped up in double carrier. They are placed on the lime green couch next to Brooke. Someone picks me up so I can have a look at all of them together. The universe changed and no one had asked me. I can't remember anything before this.

* * *

Brooke

One year Brooke moves from our home in Southern California to Tempe, Arizona to work at a Chili's. I am living out of state at the time. Mom calls me the day she leaves and tells me that Dad's heart is now broken. She tells me he had cried. He had said to Mom, "I couldn't give her a life she would want."

I tell Mom that's just ridiculous. I tell her he had given her everything, that he had maybe never made the attempt to hide that she is his favorite. I tell her like I did when Brooke decided not to take any of the softball scholarships, and when she enrolled at the interior design school instead, and when she dropped out of the interior design school six weeks later, and when he continued to pay for her West Hollywood apartment, and when he let her move back home, and when she first announced she was leaving the state, and when he gave her the money she needed to leave. I tell Mom these things she

already knows because I can't tell Dad. I tell her these things even though Dad couldn't give her a life she would want.

I think about the twins and how this is only going to give them more ammunition. There will be an argument. It's not only because Brooke is the oldest daughter. For one month out of the year they are all the same age. It's because Brooke is the only one to take after Dad. And because she is just like him she will never give back to him. That unhinged love is reserved for someone else, as Dad's is for her. She probably waited until she was already on the road to call and say goodbye.

Three months later Mom calls. She is crying this time.

She says, "Your sister is engaged."

I am living back home when Brooke makes the drive to introduce us to her fiancé. I'm looking for jobs on the computer when I see her car pull into the driveway. Brooke of course looks tan and effortlessly gorgeous. But what he is wearing is a pink T-shirt of a band I used to listen to when I was 18. His hair is shaved on one side, almost certainly flat ironed banded flipped in front of tortoiseshell sunglasses. His name is Josh and he's the 28-year-old bartender at the Chili's where she works.

Years ago, when the girls were still in high school, they threw a party while my parents were out of town. Allison called me and told me I needed to drive down because things were getting out of hand. Allison goes harder than any of them, so I knew it was a problem. When I pulled up someone told me Brooke had locked herself in the bathroom and wouldn't see anyone but me. I found her over the toilet and held her hair until she

couldn't throw up anymore. She cried and said she was sorry. I carried her into her room, her arms draped loosely around my neck, and placed her on her side with a trash bin next to the bed. This was the only time she's ever needed me to be anything for her.

The plan is to go to the beach for the day. I take a long bike ride along the coast to avoid getting cornered into a conversation. When I get back the sun is going down and Dad has crafted an expert bonfire. The twins and I sit together in lawn chairs and Josh says, "You guys all look like your mom except for Brooke" He leans over to kiss her, but stretches to far so that he almost falls out of his chair. I say I should be going and take the twins with me. I do this so Mom and Dad can execute their plan to try and convince them to call off the engagement.

The twins say, "She just does what she wants,"

The twins say, "She's had an easy life."

Then they find a reason to argue.

My parents do not convince them to call off the engagement. Brooke and Josh return to Arizona. The wedding plans begin and soon get out of hand. Every night Mom comes home from work, makes dinner, then sits in front of the computer and looks through venues, photographers, linens. On her lunches she goes and tests out caterers. Our fridge begins to fill with Styrofoam containers of baked brie, braised salmon, spring salad with wild rice and vinaigrette, scallion mashed potatoes. Allison and I pick at them all day instead of making food. Mom fires a florist. She tries not to yell at Brooke over the phone. She says, "I just I wish she knew what she wanted." She puts her foot down. She demands Brooke cut the invite list by a third. She demands Brooke settle on the

number of bridesmaids. I walk by her on the computer and she is listening to something with electric guitar and intermittent screaming. She looks up at me with empty eyes. She says, "It's the song he wants to walk out to after the ceremony."

Dad sits with his elbows on the table, head in hands, listening to Mom list off the new price estimates. He says, "He just doesn't know anything about life, about being an adult." He looks punch drunk every day. He walks back into it every day. His glasses of wine turn to martinis. He starts yelling at the news on the TV. My friends can't help but shake their heads and laugh, and I understand. My dad is mowing the lawn at night in his shirt and tie.

I want to say these aren't high school sweethearts. He's a high school drop out. He's been a bartender at Chili's since his fiancé was 14-years-old. This should be a church ceremony with a backyard reception: rented tables, a tent that shakes in the wind, white Christmas lights strung from trees, chaffing dishes, iPod playlists. I can't even use the argument that whatever they give Brooke they'll have to repeat two more times. Because Brooke got the new Camry, Morgan got a hand-me-down, and Allison didn't get a car.

One night I call Brooke to tell her it is her responsibility to get control of this situation, that Dad can't help himself so she needs to spare him. But I don't know what I'd be asking her to do. Not marry this man? Mom has already asked her many times. Say she wants a smaller wedding? She had never asked for a large one, and changing things

now would just be more work. In the end I just ask her how she is holding up. I say that she should call Dad just to say hi.

Brooke takes another server from Chili's dress shopping because she needs someone to try on bridesmaid's dresses. The friend looks at herself in the mirror and says, "I can't wait to be up there with you." Brooke doesn't have the heart to correct her, so I am now in the wedding.

I drive to Men's Warehouse, where Josh's vision for his groomsmen is splayed out before me. They put me in a purple marble print vest. They ask how the white pointy-toed shoes fit. I say they feel OK even though they are a bit small. I wonder how far Josh got into his Prohibition era motif before Brooke made him compromise. I would not have worn a Fedora.

Dad has been writing his speech for weeks. I pass his office in the middle of the night. He is in front of his computer, sitting back in the leather chair, legs crossed, empty martini glass. He doesn't see me, and I don't often get to see myself in him. I do hope at least this plays out how he's planned it.

Morgan

One year Morgan gets pregnant. The father is her 19 year-old-boyfriend. Allison calls me and I know what she is going to say by the way she is crying. I leave the bar to go pick her up. From the street I can see Mom, Dad, Morgan and Travis talking in the

living room. This is only the third time I've seen Travis. They face each other on the two couches and I can't even look. Allison runs out the front door before they can say anything to her. We pick up beers and sit in the park. I ask if she called Brooke. Allison says, "She's freaking out because the baby will be due a week after her wedding."

When we get back home Mom says, "We are going to support your sister. We are going to be happy for her." Morgan rubs her red eyes and Mom rubs her back. Dad looks at the reflection in the sliding glass door.

We are all thinking that if it was going to be one of the twins, it wasn't going to be Morgan. The force of her personality has never been irresponsible. She demands a lot of attention, but not from boys, not like Allison. She is stocky, ill tempered, and loud. She snorts when she laughs. When she gets dressed up she teases her hair until its huge and shiny. Mom adores her because she's the only one of us who can sit on the couch and talk for hours. Her dream is to grow old and be a Red Lady, the senior woman social club in my home town. She wants to walk around all chatty in feathered boa and strawberry sun hat, cackling at brunch and organizing grandmother/grandson dances.

Travis has a lot of tattoos and drives a raised truck. Once a month he goes to the river with his family and they all get drunk. He's been doing this since he was 13- years old. I've only spoken to him a handful of times. Most of the time it is when he is smoking in our driveway when I pull up.

I tell Morgan I need Travis and I to talk, just the two of us, man-to-man. I tell her to arrange it. I am relieved when she says no. But we still fight about it.

Dad sits with his elbows on the table, head in hands, listening to Mom list off the new price estimates. He says, “He just doesn’t know anything about life, about being an adult.”

Allison says, “I don’t want to make the speech. I’m the most awkward person alive.”

Mom says, “You’re the Maid of Honor.”

Allison says, “So is Morgan.”

Morgan says, “Shut up. I’m not getting up there all fat in that dress.”

Dad says, “You’re doing it, Allison. And that’s final.”

Allison says, “Why are you yelling at me?”

I call Brooke to tell her it is her responsibility to get control of this situation, but end up asking her how she is holding up. I say that she should call Dad just to say hi.

Morgan is hormonal and fights with everyone. Her energy changes to dedicated aggression and then back. She hates everything on the TV. When Allison suggests Grey’s Anatomy, Morgan yells, “So I can only watch hospital dramas now that I’m pregnant?” She storms out. She comes back holding her stomach and says, “Man. I am topsy turvy.” When I laugh she starts yelling at me this time.

Mom is cooking dinner so she can get back on the wedding plans. Morgan is shouting about something. And I can’t do it anymore. I follow her around the house. I say

tell her no more walking on eggshells just because you got knocked up. Mom storms out the door and drives away. I go into the kitchen and follow the recipe. I put the meatloaf in the baking dish, mix the cream and melted cheese for the casserole, powder breadcrumbs on top. I broil the asparagus. Allison opens the fridge and takes out some samples from the catering company. I tell her to wait for dinner. She says OK but Morgan says, “You’re not our Dad,” from a different room.

I say, “Fuck you” to her for the first time.

Years ago Morgan was pitching during a Varsity softball game and took a line drive straight to the eye. It came at her so fast she didn’t even have a chance to blink. In the hospital her eye swelled to the size of a fist. The doctors were afraid it would burst and cause irreparable damage to her brain. The family each took turns sleeping in the room with her. It eventually became less critical and friends were allowed to visit. She had many, many friends. Her hospital room was filled with flowers and cards, so many that my parents had to bring some home. This is when they told me she was going to be OK. I never visited once during her week in the hospital. I was the only one who didn’t. At the time I told myself it was because she had enough visitors. Over the years, when the story got retold, I’d say it was because I couldn’t handle seeing her like that. But now I know it was because I was in the middle of finals week, and just didn’t have time.

Morgan is in her room spooning a body pillow, negotiating her stomach, trying to find any comfortable position. She says, “Do you know how this thing feels?” I tell her I am sorry and mean it.

The door to Brooke's old room opens and Travis comes in. He is dressed up as much as I've ever seen him: black button shirt, sleeves not rolled up, and jeans. It is afternoon and I wish I wasn't still in my PJs. He sits down on my bed and pulls out a box. He says, "I'm going to tell you what I told your dad." He says he wants to ask Morgan to marry him. He knows he has a lot to prove to the family. He wants to take care of her. I am relieved to at least hear that, and tell him. We hug for the first time. That night Morgan comes back with a bag of restaurant leftovers and a ring on her finger. I take a picture of them together in the living room.

Travis and Morgan get married three months before Brooke. Only the parents are invited. They all go to the courthouse and then drive the newlyweds to a hotel in Newport Beach. Mom and Dad come home and we order pizza. He says, "Where's Allison?" but I don't know. He undoes his tie and asks me how the job search is going. I lie and say I had a phone interview for a web marketing firm. Mom says, "Morgan Carmody. Morgan. Carmody. Sounds so weird. You know she's really turned into a graceful mother-to-be." We all watch TV.

Dad has been writing his speech for weeks. I pass his office in the middle of the night. He is in front of his computer, sitting back in the leather chair, legs crossed, empty martini glass. I do hope at least this plays out how he's planned it.

Brooke makes the drives down the weekend of her bachelorette party. She keeps squeezing Morgan's stomach and says, "Oh the babay!" They go shopping together, for

themselves and for the little one. She is going to be a girl. Her name is going to be Taya. Morgan has her legs over Brooke's lap on the couch. They gossip with Mom. They ask Allison to get her camera. Allison goes in her room to get it but doesn't come back. The night of the party the three of them come home crying for three different reasons. In the morning they drink coffee at the table and laugh about it. They try and wake Allison up so she can laugh about it too.

The entrees are taken away and Dad takes the microphone. He thanks everyone for being here to celebrate. He tells a story about watching Brooke pitch in the CIF championship game. He says, "She was stone cold. I was just amazed that she was my daughter." He breaks down when he says how she is such a beautiful bride.

Josh's parents have to be broken up soon after. Josh's mom brought her new boyfriend despite Josh's refusal. Uncle Glenn knocks over a chair and rushes out of the courtyard holding his neck. Dad gives tries to give him the Heimlich. Turns out it is an allergic reaction to pine nuts. A bus boy brings over some Benadryl. Glenn returns to his seat, a little embarrassed.

Morgan says, "Well that was almost really bad."

Allison

One year Allison gets a DUI after a party on a houseboat. She is brought home from an overnight in jail wearing a shiny dress and heels. I can't even believe it. I told her

before that she had only one job: no controversy. After Mom and Dad are done with her I find her sitting in the backyard.

I say, “How do you get a DUI without a car?”

She says, “Brooke is engaged. Morgan is knocked up. And I’m the one getting yelled at.”

Allison has to quit her job at Petsmart and find one that is closer so the family can take turns shuttling her back and forth. I spend a month out of the summer driving her around to drop off resumes. She has an interview at a Walgreen’s and I read at a park nearby. When she walks back over she looks sad and unhealthy in the sun. I remind her that I am unemployed too and also living at home.

She says, “At least you left.”

I say, “And I failed.”

We smoke a cigarette together. We go home to eat some of the catering samples.

Dad sits with his elbows on the table, head in hands, listening to Mom list off the new price estimates.

Allison says, “I don’t want to make the speech. I’m the most awkward person alive.”

Dad says, “You’re doing it and that’s final.”

Allison says, “Why are you yelling at me?”

When Allison got caught selling her anxiety pills Freshman year, my parents asked me to talk to her. We were the most alike. We went for a walk and I reminded her about my own anxiety, how I had flunked out of high school, how I didn't do anything for a year, just hung out at home, how Mom and Dad accommodated me, gave me space to figure things out. I said, "Do you know what changed?" I was struck with conviction. I had taken advantage of everything they had given me, and the only way I could repay them was by turning into an adult. And the only way I could realize that was by getting out of that house.

Travis and Morgan get married three months before Brooke. Mom and Dad come home and we order pizza. He asks, "Where's Allison?" but I don't know. He undoes his tie and asks me how the job search is going. I lie and say I had a phone interview for a web marketing firm. We all watch TV.

Brooke makes the drives down the weekend of her bachelorette party. She keeps squeezing Morgan's stomach and says, "Oh the babay!" They gossip with Mom. They ask Allison to get her camera. She goes in her room to get it but doesn't come back

Allison is accepted into Sacramento State. She tells Mom and Dad that she will leave after the wedding and after the baby is born. She will be able to drive again by then. Mom and Dad say that is great. They are happy that she is going to study photography. Dad mostly keeps quiet because he feels self conscious that he doesn't know anything about a subject. He needs to feel like he always has a handle on things.

Dad has been writing his speech for weeks. I don't often get to see myself in him. I do hope at least this plays out how he's planned it.

The entrees are taken away and Dad takes the microphone. He thanks everyone for being here to celebrate. He tells a story about watching Brooke pitch in the CIF championship game. He breaks down when he says how she is such a beautiful bride.

It's Allison's turn. She is shaking. She starts off with, "Brooke you were always the princess of the family. You were always the favorite." There's an awkward silence. She stumbles, says sorry, flattens her bangs, keeps checking the paper in her hand. Then Morgan stands up from the crowd. She slowly waddles over to her sister, guiding her stomach between the tables. Everyone is cheering. Allison looks so grateful. She hands over the microphone. Morgan says, "For those who don't know me, I'm the other twin. And I'm super pregnant." She goes on to a story about how Brooke used to pin them both down and kiss them until they screamed. Allison is almost doubled over at the memory. She takes the microphone back to say I love you and congrats. The three of them hug.

Josh's parents have to be broken up soon after. Travis is at a table nearby. He tells me what Josh said to them was, "If you ruin this for Brooke and her family I'll never speak to you again." A bus boy brings over some Benadryl. Glenn returns to his seat, a little embarrassed.

Morgan says, "Well that was almost really bad."

Brooke and Josh are just back from their honeymoon and staying at the house when Morgan goes into labor. It is the middle of the night. I wake up Allison and we get into Brooke's car. Josh says, "I guess we are going to have to wait to break the news." I tell them to stop the car but he assures me Brooke isn't pregnant.

She says, "We are moving back home to be closer to the family." She reaches across and rubs the back of Josh's hair.

It is light out when Allison gets a text in the hospital waiting room. She looks at it and says, "Baby! Baby!" She shows me the picture of a pink bundle. Then everyone's phones start going off. There are shouts. The new grandmothers start crying immediately. I hug Dad. I hug Travis's older brothers and sister-in-laws. I shake Mr. Carmody's hand. I high-five Josh. Someone says, "Add another one to the family."

For the next week Taya is passed from arm to arm. Whenever someone hands her to me I am put immediately into repose. I am still and quiet. Something instinctual kicks in. Time passes and I just stare at her. I say, "Everyone says newborns are perfect, but come one. Look at her."

Josh slaps Travis on the back and says, "Who would have thought someone with a mug as ugly as yours could make something so ga' damn adorable."

Allison takes her to the rocking chair and kisses her nose. She says, "Taya Rae. Taya Rae open your eyes. I'm your Auntie and I'm leaving soon, so you have to remember me. I am going to miss you baby girl. I love you so much."

When Allison leaves Mom does not cry. She hugs her for a long time in the driveway while Dad and I check that her new car is securely packed. Mom grabs her face by both sides and stares at her, determined. She pulls her back into a hug. She says, “Oh sweetheart. Please be careful. And make good decisions.”

Allison squirms. Morgan is crying so hard Travis has to take the baby from her. She cries into Allison shirt and leaves a wet spot on the shoulder. Allison laughs and says, “Come on. Chill.” She kisses Taya over and over again. She gives Brooke a side hug. She gives everyone else side hugs, even me. She gets in the car and leaves.

Mom watches me watch the car drive away.

She says, “Don’t worry. You’ll be on your feet soon.”

* * *

The house is empty. Brooke and Josh are at their apartment. Morgan, Travis and Taya are having dinner at the Carmody’s. Allison is in college. I’m visiting from graduate school. I’m eating dinner with Mom and Dad. We are outside because it’s a warm evening. There is boysenberry pie and a game on the TV. It’s just the three of us. They ask me about my writing. I ask about their vacation. They start to clear the plates. I tell them to sit back down, don’t be silly. Let me do this for you.

Darren Davis

For most of my life I liked my name. I lucked out, even. I was the only Darren at my elementary school. No other Darrens were around to be better than me at anything. There was no mistaking to whom people were referring when they'd say things like, "Darren has been looking really good lately." I was the best-looking Darren. The standard-bearer.

The Internet ruined everything, of course. Now that I have bitten I bit the apple of Googling myself, I've seen not only the degree to which I am not unique in my name, but how most of the other Darren Davis's in the world are categorically more outstanding, more useful, or at least more noteworthy.

The Darren Davis population, seem split between two camps: athletes and criminals. Most athlete Darren Davises are former athletes. Football players. Apparently, the Gen x produced a crop of physical specimens named Darren Davis who were just not good enough to make it in the pros, but able to take coaching and teaching jobs at their alma maters. In current pictures, their older, fatter faces are smiling politely in offices or against marble-gray backdrops. Then there are the action shots of their younger selves, arms and thighs bulging out of their uniforms, absolutely demolishing some poor soul unlucky enough to have been handed the football at that moment. In those action shots they are all but certainly younger than I am now, probably by half a decade or more. Looking at the younger and older pictures of these Darren Davises makes me many different kinds of anxious. Am I still a former something if I never really did anything in my early 20s?

A quick image search reveals the inevitable convicts, a row of mugshots, a police lineup. One Darren Davis with blonde spiky hair and a neck tattoo was arrested in Arizona for failing to appear at a case management conference. Another Darren Davis, 34 years old, world-weary, wearing an unsettling moustache and camo jacket, violated his probation in Georgia. One Darren Davis has had a bit more trouble than the others. This Darren Davis, from Ohio, has four mugshots taken over the course of as many years. Each of his arrests for breaking and entering, and possession of “criminal tools.” I can only imagine what constitutes a “criminal tool,” and if I have ever unknowingly possessed one. I myself have never been arrested. My most serious offense, the only time I’ve had to appear before a judge, was for littering. I was 16-years-old and a cop had pulled up behind my parked 1984 Ford Tempo at the precise moment I tossed a hamburger wrapper out my window. My mom and I went to the court and the judge made me write an essay entitled, “Why The World is Not My Trashcan.” I came back a month later with a 5-page, handwritten draft. The judge gave it a once over then threw it away and pronounced the case closed. I dropped out of high school my junior year and had to take once-a-week-classes at a continuation school for troubled youth. I couldn’t commit to attending class on a regular basis, but not because I was committed to something else, like a life of crime. I wasn’t a vagrant or a street kid or anything. The other students at the school scared me.

Since I began Googling myself, Darren Davis, comic book publisher, has always been held the top two searches. The first is his website. The second, unfairly, is his Wikipedia page. No middle initial. No refined search like “Darren Davis, comics.” He is *the* Darren Davis. The real standard-bearer, the one I’d have to overcome. I’ve spent a

good amount of time reading up on this Darren Davis. Time set aside for Craigslist job searching turned hard Darren Davis research. He is from Vancouver, Washington, two hours away from my little studio in Seattle. One book is called *Lost Raven* and has on its cover a muscular shirtless man wearing jean shorts and swinging from a rope over a backdrop of red, skeletal faces. The reviews on Amazon are OK. I showed pictures of him to anyone who would humor me. Darren Davis, the skinny, white guy in a Hawaiian shirt, male-pattern baldness, standing proudly at a convention or something behind his table of unremarkable comic books. Good enough to make him first in line. I thought he looked like a pederast. Then I read an interview where I learned Darren Davis was HIV-positive, and has used his platform as a publisher to spread awareness abroad and in the USA. Zack Raven, from *Lost Raven*, is one of the first HIV-positive protagonists in the genre. I felt bad for my private campaign of hatred, sure. But mostly I was envious of him for finding a niche, for being one of the many Darren Davis yet still the first to do something.

One summer I wrote copy at an internet advertising firm and learned a good deal about Search Engine Optimization., which I could explain to you over coffee. I was also blogging at the time about slumming in a post-college life, my manic girlfriend, living back with my parents, my useless cynicism in working an office job, working for the man. I got my hands in the code of the blog platform and constructed an optimized list of keywords like “Darren,” “Davis,” “Darren Davis,” “Darren Davis blog,” “Darren Davis California,” “Darren Davis Long Beach State.” Quickly, within weeks, I began to rise through Google ranks. Every day I’d conduct refined searches to see where I stood in the world. I became the top hit for “Darren Davis, blog.” At my peak, I made it to the second

page of the unrefined “Darren Davis,” search, the major leagues. Even though I hated my job, hated living at home, those few months felt good. I blogged more frequently thinking now that I was registering on the barometer of Darren Davises, I was doing something of use.

When the variables in my life turned for the worse, after I left the job and the girl left me, after I threw myself into a sudden and poorly planned move, I stopped blogging and plummeted down into Darren Davis obscurity.

Eventually I began playing around with pennames. This started after I enrolled in graduate school and began writing more seriously. A mentor of mine, a novelist and former graduate of my masters program, was the first to suggest the idea. He thought Darren Davis was forgettable. He didn’t like the way it looked on the page. It was round, open, extremely white. He suggested I choose a surname that was less recurrent and also capitalized on my Mexican heritage. I am one quarter Mexican.

I started going by Darren Curtis Davis instead. But then I remembered, growing up in an Evangelical household, the contemporary Christian singer/songwriter Stephen Curtis Chapman. So that wasn’t happening.

Abbreviating Darren C. Davis seemed too easy and self-serious. So did by DC Davis, which a lot of people suggested. I got closest to DC Davis. But I found if I were going to change my name, on paper at least, it would have to happen all at once. And I didn’t know what would be the right time in someone’s life to do that.

So I’ve been sticking with my name. I’ve resigned to it. I now too hate the way it looks. I see the endless Google list: Darren Davis, Darren Davis, Darren Davis. It’s like when you repeat a word so many times the sound of it becomes foreign. My name is

becoming less and less the name for the space I inhabit. It is an unflattering external feature I share with other people. I see Darren Davis on the paper and it just looks so bulbous, so chipper and harmless. People mishear me when I say it. They think I'm saying "Derrick," "Garrett" or, with inexplicable frequency, "Brian." I started accentuating my name in different ways. I pronounced it "*Da-run* Davis" when shaking hands, like someone with an unforgivable French accent. My girlfriend told me I needed to stop doing that, so I did.

I even committed further by registering an email under it. But as soon as I did, something started happening. I began receiving emails meant for other Darren Davises. The first was a mailing list for Fort Hays Women's Soccer. The email, from Coach Craig Shaw, began "Hi Darren, Only 10 spots left!! Summer Residential College ID camp." I imagined a dad named Darren Davis registering on behalf of her daughter, probably an incoming freshman. She wasn't going to be getting into the Summer Residential College ID camp, not with only 10 spots left and the updates being sent to me instead. I unsubscribed from the mailing list and maybe ruined a young girl's chances at a career in soccer, a happy life. She could be enrolled in a cosmetology program by now, giving free haircuts to stay-at-home moms just looking to have a conversation.

There were many receipts for online purchases. Cutlery set, replacement slider track for desk drawers, home speakers, headlamp with adjustable Velcro strap, an oil drip pan. It seemed there was a pocket of Darren Davises somewhere out there catching up on honey-do lists, fixing desks, crawling in the attic, working on the car and mastering their stir fry on the weekend. I tried to click through these emails to see what else they were purchasing, what kind of interesting, comfortable lives they were living. But you can't

access that kind of information without a password, probably a date of birth, maybe a security question like the make and model of a first car. Mine was that Ford Tempo.

Once I got updates about a package being sent to another Darren Davis on the East Coast. Every day for a week I would receive tracking info: “Darren, your package is 2 days away.” “Darren your package will arrive tomorrow.” “Darren, look for your package at 1:00pm.” This left me with a feeling of impending doom. What unknowable thing was headed for me, closer and closer each day? Still, I was disappointed when nothing arrived that afternoon.

Another time I received an email that read,

“Dear Mr. Darren Davis,
Thank you for your email.
The flight computer is covered in Volume 5 in segment 20 under Planning and Computations (teaches how to use it to plan cross-countries, but does not teach each and every function of the E6b).
Performance charts are in Volume 7 in segment 5.
You can also check with your flight instructor as well if you need further assistance.”

There was a Darren Davis in the sky, or at least trying to get there. There could be a future Captain Darren Davis, cross country pilot for American Airlines, confident and slightly bored as he leans against the cockpit door, thanking passengers for putting their lives in his hands as they exit the plane. Or was it wealthy recreationalist Darren Davis? Maybe fresh off a divorce and looking for a new hobby. She wasn't worth it, Darren. She was trouble. Don't get mad. Don't worry about getting even. Forget about her. Buy a plan. Learn to fly.

The strangest mistaken email I ever received was from a print shop in Alabama. It was the proof of a custom banner, the kind you make for church car washes and union barbeques. The banner was a simple one. Just large, black letters against white:

Welcome
to the
Fling Boys!

I saw the type-o. I knew there should have been a comma after “Fling,” as to read “Welcome to the Fling, Boys.” But I wanted to think someone was throwing an event called Fling Boys. This became my favorite email. I showed all my friends. We debated whether Fling Boys would be the name of a local improv show or a speed dating for gay men held in the convention space of a Best Western.

Soon after Fling Boys I began receiving regular emails from a woman named Denise, whose signature listed the same website as the print shop. The emails were the “FWD: FWD: FWD:” type mother’s send their friends and family. My email was included in a list with six others. The women had different last names. All the men were Davises. I deduced that the Fling Boys email had been for one of her sons. And since I didn’t correct her on her mistake, I was included in the family email list.

They kept coming in. Sometimes twice, three times a day. First there was anti-Obama chain. Emails with a lot of exclamation points in the subject line, text written in big, multi colored fonts.

Finally a classmate of Obama speaks out!,

Obama has turned Air Force One into a campaign slogan carrier.

Liberal logic 101: Want to know why the country is so screwed up? Look at these lessons.

Then there was the mom panic. The warnings about the inherent dangers of walking out your front door, the maniacs sticking HIV-infected needles to the handles of gas pumps and on movie theater seats, crazy internet scams where some poor working mom opened an email from an address she did not recognize and immediately had her social security number stolen. This went on for weeks.

I received small, thoughtful emails: reminders about birthdays (at least once a week), videos of animals doing cute things. One read, “Just a reminder: I love you all.” Another: “Be sure to use a double dose of anti-stink today. It’s going to be a hot one. Love, Mom.” To which Lee later responded, “Thanks Mom. Almost forgot.”

I was even sent a family picture: two older couples and third woman who looked like she could be the sister of one of the wives, all standing in front of a brick wall with a high school field barely visible in one corner. Denise with the aunts and uncles, I thought. I chose which one was Denise. She was the round, pleasant one, smiling in a fairly hideous floral dress. Her face was wrinkled, but did not sag like the others, and her hair was still chestnut colored. She was a beer-in-a-can kind of woman. I liked her.

I still had not thought to correct the mistake, to tell her I was not her son. I would never think to *pose* as her son, but I really enjoyed being let in on the superfluous little dialogues between an empty nest mother and her adult children. My own mother was almost an empty nester, and she too occasionally sent “just thinking of you” love notes and credit card fraud warnings. I just liked being a different Darren Davis, getting a very specific and intimate slice of his life, this person with whom I share my very name, a complete stranger.

This went on for months. Until one day in July I received an email with the subject line, "Daddy's Update." It read,

Good and Bad

Results from MRI and Pet Scan is as follows:

No cancer in Brain or Bones.
Nothing shows on Lymph Nodes or Liver
The Lung cancer is active and back up a little larger than 6.

He will do Radiation on Lung once a day for 5 - 6 weeks,
with that he will have Chemo (Smaller Dose) once a week.

Love each of you,
Mom, Niece & Denise

I read the email many times. Then I didn't check my inbox for days. I felt sick, but also titillated. This was not the mom email children lovingly delete before reading. This was real stuff. This was candid and unsolicited. It was happening to someone else but also happening to me.

Still, I knew I would now have to email her back. Every day my friends asked me if I had done it yet. They insisted I should contact her ASAP if I felt myself at all a decent person. Each time I'd tell them I just forgot. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I wasn't just telling this woman she had the wrong Darren Davis. I was telling her she'd had the wrong Darren Davis all along. She may not ask the question. But she would certainly think it: "Why didn't you tell me sooner? When I was sending you photos of me and my family?" I could not say it was because I was having problems with my name, problems with my life. I could not tell her I liked being part of another Darren Davis's family, just to see what it felt like, to maybe see my name under a different lens. Then it hit me, hard.

I remember the moment. I was on the bus to campus and my gut dropped. If I was receiving the emails, the other Darren Davis was not receiving them. Somehow this hadn't occurred to me. I had replaced him. I had actually become a different Darren Davis.

Still, I waited. I needed more time to pass, for the Daddy's Update email to linger less. Ideally, I'd wait for another birthday update and reply to that instead. It would seem gentler, if not totally harmless.

But the birthday reminders never came. Weeks of silence. Until I woke up one morning to find an email with the subject, "Daddy."

Dear Boys,
Thought you needed to know.
We think Daddy had a stroke Sunday.
Had an MRI on Tuesday.
Will be 4 or 5 days before we get results back. Love both of you so very much.
Mom

I immediately hit reply and wrote the following:

Hello,

I believe I've been receiving your emails by mistake. This is a different Darren Davis. Most of the emails redirect to my spam folder but occasionally some get through. Just wanted to let you know that you may have mistyped an email address.

Best,
Darren

The spam folder was a lie, but I hoped a gracious one. For the sign off I had first written "Best to you and your family," but deleted it. The line would have made it even more obvious that I had stolen these moments from someone else with my name. And what did I know of it? My family was blessed with good health, which I took for granted

every day. This was the other Darren Davis's life. They had their own lives, all the other Darren Davises. Each of them a whole universe I couldn't possibly comprehend simply by Googling them. And they would know me. Even if they stumbled upon my stupid blog. They'd never see the regret and failure behind every word.

I hit refresh on my browser for a while, waiting for a response. Then it came.

“Thank you. And I'm sorry.”

That was all. Its curtness and sincerity was devastating. I could see her pouring through old sent messages, each tiny, harmless note now a world of fresh embarrassment, revisiting the darker moments before she was ready. She would call the other Darren Davis to explain. Maybe he would comfort her like a good son. Or maybe they didn't talk on the phone. Maybe that's why there were so many emails.

That night I decided to call my own dad. It had been a while since we spoke, but not too long. I could tell he was working in his office, what used to be my room. He had almost named me Nathan, but chose Darren, because he liked the alliteration, and because it sounded like a writer's name. Darren Curtis, after his father, the WWII vet in who was in Jiro Jima. We talked about the things we always talked about: baseball, my car, finances. He had to get back to work and I had to get back to work. He said “Bye, Darren.

Convergence Zone

The Puget Sound Convergence Zone is a weather phenomenon that occurs when cold, unstable northwest winds collide with the Olympic Mountains and are split in two.

In the *Milindapañha*, the Theravada Buddhists attempt an illustration of the composite nature of the human being through a series of conversations between the Guru Nagasena and King Milinda.

On occasion it does rain over consecutive days in Southern California. But it is rarely a cleansing thing. It is rarely the rain that arrives as the third act: the reward for having pushed through, for having maintained the land and the health of family, for having forgiven debts during the drought.

These dual fronts run parallel along the east and west side of the Olympics, then again come crashing together north of Seattle

The work is often referred to as The Questions of King Milinda.

It is California dumping its mop bucket.

“Reverend Nagasena,” said the King, “when a man is born does he remain the same being or become another?”

But when it stops, the sun burns through and resets the Southland. It is a place that will never allow for a winter in one’s life.

The convergence of the two forces can cause updrafts and convection, resulting in extreme precipitation and other, potentially violent meteorological behavior

“He neither remains the same nor becomes another.”

* * *

A few weeks after I had moved, I woke to the mad tattoo of a jackhammer. The volume suggested distance, but the sound was sharp. It was as though someone was going to town on the sidewalk below my bedroom, but had as a courtesy made sure to enclose himself in cement.

I parted my blinds. I surveyed the rain-slicked street; the mounds and veins of brown leaf mush, the Seattle winter sun, groggy and shamelessly late. I thought, “What is this place?”

* * *

“What do you think, your Majesty? You were once a baby lying on your back, tender and small and weak. Was that baby you, who are now grown up?”

* * *

I got a job out of college at a trade magazine for professional homebuilders in Southern California. As per the publisher’s daily reminders, my job was to find the silver lining in this unmitigated clusterfuck of two dying industries. The only article I wrote under my own byline was to award a major developer “Green Homebuilder of the Year” because they put a low flush toilet in one of their Malibu mansions.

“You can’t turn a battleship into a bathtub overnight,” my publisher said.

* * *

The hammering always started around 7 in the morning. It was the Northwest’s housewarming gift, my inexplicable alarm clock. I swung at the air. I twitched until the sound stopped. Then it was all about pushing through till noon.

I saw visions of men in rain shells, backlit by the steaming headlights of white government trucks, standing around a hulking piece of industrial age machinery. Or other men, further away, exchanging Gatlin gun fire. Or the blue and white sparks of a collapsed transformer.

Then the terror of my hangover materialized like a blood blister. I hide under my sheets and pray for swift unconsciousness.

* * *

“No, your reverence. The baby was one being and I am another.”

* * *

I told the publisher I’m quitting because, as a freshly-minted writer, I wanted look into more creative endeavors. He cocked his head at me as I spoke. It was ridiculous, I knew as much. But I couldn’t very well tell him why I was really leaving.

* * *

Many arm amputees feel phantom pains specific to a clenching of the fist and a digging of the nails into their departed palm. A theory suggests the phantoms feel paralyzed in this state because there is no sensory feedback, no feeling of control to inform the brain otherwise.

* * *

I always woke up around 7 in the morning. I’d shower, put on my shirt and tie, and look at her, sleeping there. I’d stand over her and revel: her head pressed sideways against the pillow, her eruption of yellow hair, lips pursed, bare shoulders swelling as she breaths. She’d be in repose. She’d look so beautiful and harmless. But I knew that she would wake up.

How could I say that the more I need her, the worse she got? How could I explain that by the time I left the office, got in my leased VW, sat in the hot traffic for an hour listening to NPR, picked up some take out, and opened the door to the apartment we shared, it always seemed a miracle that she has found her way back to me at all? How do I explain that, even to her?

* * *

“Is the boy who goes to school one being and the other man who has finished his education another? Does one person commit a crime and another suffer mutilation for it?”

“Of course not, your reverence!”

* * *

It is when the hammering began to move alongside my end of the duplex, jumping from the back yard to the front in spastic intervals, that I began to suspect.

I waited cross-legged on my bed until it fell into predictable rhythm. I crept across my bedroom and put my ear to the wall, waiting head sideways and appendages out like a pinned insect. I tried and listen under the branches whipping against my window. Then the sound erupted inches from my ear.

I ran out to the backyard porch. I grabbed the railing and stretched out into the wet wind, peering, just barely, alongside the house. There, latched upright, its right eye frozen on me, was a flutter of red, brown and white: a woodpecker, in the flesh.

* * *

I had nothing but time. I asked if she'd take me to campus with her to show me the dark room.

She showed me how to wind the film back into the camera. She showed me how to enlarge the image onto the paper and expose it. She showed me the chemicals: the stop

bath, the fix. She showed me how you have to agitate the fix constantly when the paper is in it otherwise it splotches. "Otherwise it rots," she said.

She attempted dozens of the same print. She agitated it, held it close to her face, tore it in two or crumpled it in her fist. She asked what I was still doing there.

* * *

Said the Elder, "For through the continuity of the body all stages of life are included in pragmatic unity."

* * *

"You carry your baggage with you," is a thing that people say.

* * *

The morning rain spilled into the afternoon rain and settled into a low roar. I sat at my breakfast nook, bare feet on the blue linoleum, and tried to knead the remnant hammering from my temples. A real life woodpecker. It may as well have been an ostrich.

I hadn't yet the chance to consult my roommate. I was always opening doors as he was leaving the room. That was the thing about the city: everyone was too preoccupied for one another. A wandering lot of twenty somethings; self-contained little units under their winter coats; Staring at cups of coffee behind headphones; sitting on the bus and concentrating on their novels, just reading the shit out of them; groups of friends dug into their booths, an impenetrable wall of mutual familiarity between them and the rest of the bar.

* * *

The neuroscientist Vilayanur S. Ramachandran believed that if the brain received visual feedback that a limb had moved, then the phantom limb would become un-paralyzed and the pain would stop.

* * *

“Suppose a man were to light a lamp, would it burn all through the night?”

“Yes it might.”

* * *

I started a spreadsheet called “Debt Machine,” and began filling it with the numbers my parents give me. The first one is labeled “Rent, June.”

I got the call. Her car had been towed for parking in a red zone in a part of the city we’d never been. I dropped everything. When I got there she was sitting on the curb, hugging her knees, fingernails red and scratches on her neck.

We drove in silence to the tow company in Compton. The sun was refracting off the pavement in visible plumes. I stepped away from her to make the call to home. That night I put a new number into the spreadsheet under “Miscellaneous.”

* * *

I found the film negatives of her self-portraits unnerving. Her inversed smiles looked like shards of charcoal against the splotchy gray scale of her face. Her hair looked like smoke and ash. Her eyes were white hot and possessed.

* * *

The new routine went like this: Every morning around 7 I'd wake up, put on my robe, walk out to the porch and throw a wine cork, a stone from the potted mint, a lighter, one of my shoes, at the woodpecker. It would fly away and watch me from a tree. I'd crawl back into bed and wait for the bastard to have at it again. Then repeat. I'd do this until it started on the other side of the house, far enough away so that I could barely hear it.

Some mornings I'd stay out on the porch, soaking under the curtain of rain, and just stare at it in the tree. "I can do this all day," I'd say, but I couldn't

* * *

"Now, is the flame which burns in the middle watch the same as that which burned in the first?"

"No your Reverence."

* * *

My first time on a plane was when I was eleven. My mother and I flew from California to Nashville to join my father on a business trip and to visit the city where he grew up (Paris, Tennessee). When we took off I watched Los Angeles fall from under us and become toys. I was excited by how the landscape simplified and formed a logic I could take in at once. But when we were above the cloud cover I lost interest. I fidgeted until we landed.

The atrium inside the Grand Ol Opry hotel looked like any mall in California, except there was nowhere to just buy a bag of chips. That night my mother and father made me wait in the bathroom while they scrolled through channels on the TV. They didn't want me catching any glances of soft-core porn. I was hungry and restless from time change. I

remember watching from the mirror the text screensaver scroll across my dad's laptop as it sat on the vanity in the hallway. It said, "Wherever I go, there I am."

* * *

She'd been gone all day and I couldn't imagine where. She had left before I woke up. She smoked many cigarettes, drank two percolators of coffee, and was off. A fire had descended from the canyon. I could faintly hear the sirens. The fans were facing our open windows to keep smoke out.

There was still nothing in the classifieds. I started looking through her internet history instead. I stopped myself by cleaning our apartment. I piled old dishes into the sink, scraped a layer of dust and dried beer from the coffee table, vacuumed cigarette ash from the carpet, every other pass against the grain, so that our living room is laid out in the light and dark stripes of a reaped cornfield.

* * *

For this Ramachandran developed the "mirror box," a small enclosure with mirrors facing both the good limb and the amputated one. As a patient clenches and unclenches the good limb while watching its reflection on the amputated side, the brain can be tricked into thinking it is moving the phantom, thus releasing it from paralysis.

* * *

I sat at Golden Gardens Park and looked out across the Sound. All around me Seagulls were pulling earthworms from the grass and mud. When it started raining again I ducked into a coffee shop. I went through the online classifieds: publishing openings, then paid internships, then unpaid internships. I started browsing through the missed connections.

You: Spectacled silver fox reading your Kindle on the airport light rail. Me: Pink haired pixie with a septum piercing crossing and uncrossing my legs in your direction. Coffee?

The brunette sitting next to me asked if she could plug her computer into the outlet under my chair. I did it for her and asked if she knew anything about woodpeckers. She laughed, but the silence afterwards was terrifying. I put on my headphones and Googled it instead.

* * *

“Or is that which burns in the last watch the same as that which burned in the middle?”

“No your Reverence.”

* * *

There was an experiment conducted where a man walked through the streets of Manhattan, occasionally stopping complete strangers to ask them, very sincerely, “Are you OK?” Apparently many of them began crying on the spot.

* * *

John Stewart announced we’ve elected our first black president. She leapt from my lap and spilled beer all over it. We started dancing with everyone else in the room. I pantomimed throwing her a line. She looked up and into my eyes as I slowly reeled her in. Her hips came into my hands. I grabbed the coldest bottle of Andre as we dodged out the back door. We drank and walked back to the apartment. I pressed the wet bottle on my forehead, then along the back of her neck. She went for my belt. I insisted that she wait. She pushed away from me and walked far ahead. She ignored me calling after her.

When I got to our apartment it was locked and she had my key. I pushed out the screen and climbed through the window. She'd blocked our bedroom door with something heavy, probably the dresser. I kept knocking. I rubbed my temples with my thumb and index finger. "Come on, not tonight," I say. "Obama's president."

* * *

But the question remains: why does the brain interpret a lack of movement as pain?

* * *

"Wherever I go, there I am," is also a thing people say.

* * *

Through the eye slit of my rain shell hood I stared up at the wall outside my bedroom. What is it in there that you want so badly? A man at the market told me that it helped to hang something large and colorful, like beach ball. But that also sounded like it could be a joke locals pull on transplants, a bright sign on my home that said I am not from here and I have no idea how to deal with the problems in my life.

* * *

She needed space to think and to take some inventory. I took my computer down to the coffee shop where I worked during college. One of the girls behind the counter recognized me. They weren't hiring. It was the first thing I asked.

When I got back home, the windows were open and all the lights are on. The osculating fan buzzed and there was an LP skipping. The place was completely spotless and smelled of bleach. Even the teapot had been scrubbed and polished. Her car is gone from the driveway in the alley.

* * *

“So is there one lamp in the first watch, another in the middle, and yet another in the last?”

“No. The same lamp gives light all through the night.”

* * *

Woman for man: Your initials are B L M. We met over Craigslist. You got arrested because you smoked me out in your car when I was 17. I’m just wondering where you’re at now. If you see this, get back to me.

* * *

My roommate stepped into the kitchen. He poured a cup of coffee and sat across from me. Because he had never done this, I closed my laptop.

“I’m wondering if you could maybe let the woodpecker be for a while,” he said. He had finals that week and when I’d harass the bird it would go and wake him up instead. I agreed that it made the most sense.

* * *

I hadn’t been to the dentist in years. I didn’t go when the tooth started hurting. I didn’t go when I had to stop drinking anything too hot or too cold. I didn’t go when I’d moan all night until she’d tear out of the bedroom and onto the couch. I did go when I started to get dizzy.

The dentist told me I’d need a root canal procedure, and that if I had waited even days longer I would have needed root end surgery.

They removed the nerve tissue of my tooth to cut off from my mouth. They filled the tooth up with something called gutta percha and entombed it in a crown to prevent further damage. First they had to numb my gums. They had to give me three doses until the whole left side of my face was all but paralyzed.

* * *

Except who else would consider these real problems?

* * *

Every so often the bird took day off from chipping away, from slowly breaking through to my room. It had to tend to its own family, to excavate a new nest, to sample the splintery tissue of other homes.

* * *

She'd never been dishonest. She tried to explain, tear stained and tearing at her shirt, that when you walk with your eyes at your feet, every step is certain until it is not, until there is a wall, or a curb, or someone new.

* * *

I woke in the morning, got dressed in a heavy coat and started walking south. The air was still sharp. I let it into my lungs a little at a time. I made it to the park with the famous view of downtown. There was a woman sitting with her jacket pulled tight around her. Her breath shot from mouth and nostrils like compressed steam. There was a ferry entering port and she's looking at it like she could sink it.

* * *

“Similarly, your Majesty, the continuity of phenomena is kept up. One person comes into existence, another passes away and the sequence runs continuously without self-conscious existence, neither the same nor yet another.”

* * *

I read about the Puget Sound Convergence Zone. I thought that if I had a home there, my life would be amphibious. From the inside looking out, the surrounding city would be spotted and faint, just light blinking through crusted sleep. From the outside looking in there would be nothing, just a gray murmur, the possibility of my home inside. I would be a polarization: the negative image of her mania.

* * *

Wherever I go, there I am.

* * *

The woman did not see me snap her photo against the skyline. A caravan of planes was descending into SeaTac airport, separated by perfect, calculated distances.

I thought I'd finish the roll then go to the market. I thought about a fennel and snap pea salad with lemon and olive oil. I thought I'd try and make some prints in the makeshift darkroom I bought for the bathroom.

The One Waiting

I've worked at a lot of coffee shops. Currently on my eighth. The barista job has been, for me, increasingly easy to obtain and keep. In some of the dimmer periods of my life I have conceded to the coffee shop like I've conceded to a late night grilled cheese. But now, living in Seattle, having returned to the source, I've learned how to make latte art. I'd also like to think I've learned something about people.

I think of the blind dates.

Coffee shops are ideal for blind dates because they do not by default lead to a second location. It is just as graceful to drink coffee, talk for an hour, suggest drinks, then have sex as it is to drink coffee, talk for an hour, part ways, then resign to die alone.

I've never been on a blind date myself, but from what I've seen I can't say I'd jump at the chance. Look for them next time you're picking up something decaffeinated on your way home from work, or when you're taking the kids in for treats on a Saturday afternoon. It's easy enough to spot any early, pre-coital date, sure. They are generally the people sitting across from each other not drinking what's in front of them, looking bodily prepared for the other to at any moment reach across the table and attempt an eye gouge. With the blind date, though, it's all about catching their first moment of recognition.

When I say blind date I'm talking about Internet dates. Dating site dates. More often than not these people go in knowing what each other look like, if only through a few carefully chosen photos. They show this when they first meet. There is something about seeing someone in motion after first seeing them static, after you've already imagined how they move. It's almost always disappointing. Watch for the recalibrating of

expectations. That's how you know. The blind date begins when two people stand at the entrance of the coffee shop, facing each other with arms at their sides, coming again to the realization that no, *this* is real life.

My role will usually begin and end when they order drinks. But eight coffee shops worth of dates have taught me to embrace the power in this transaction. The barista – the server, the teller, the valet too – is granted a moment to subliminally dictate the tone of the date. It takes time to identify the patterns, these windows of influence. But once identified it's hard not to take advantage.

The pressure in these opening moments always seems to be on the guy (It is important to note the vast majority of blind dates I've witnessed have been between men and women). I can dig into this pressure by asking him for his order first. If he passes the order to the girl, he wins. If not, whatever he orders risks looking bad compared to her order. He orders a decaf, nonfat mocha with all the fixings. Then she orders an Americano.

That one is a time bomb. It usually doesn't hit until she's watching him audibly slurp the leftover whipped cream at the bottom of his glass. But asking them "Are you paying together or separate?" will immediately cause the guy to undergo a small crisis. For a split second he weighs whether he should be the one paying or if it would be presumptuous. As he does this, as the fallout of every possible paying scenario rolls out before him, the girl begins looking through her purse. He almost always makes the decision to pay just in time. He hands his cash or card with this demonstrative arm swing, wanting to say, "I wasn't raised in a barn. It is of course my sincerest pleasure." The

girl's pantomime then becomes one of overreaching gratitude, always with by a surprised "Oh, you didn't have to do that!" I'm telling you. This is the way it happens every time.

I once witnessed a blind that got off to a bad start in this way. This was at my first coffee shop, a big California chain inside a mall near Disneyland. Two employees of two different department stores were meeting per suggestion of a mutual friend (This was an old fashioned, analog blind date. It was years ago). He ordered some frou-frou drink and she asked for a pot of black afternoon tea. He didn't hear me when I asked "together or separate." But she did. She started looking through her purse. She looked for a long time, as if her purse contained all of her possessions. It wasn't until she started taking out her limp balm, her compact mirror, her little notebook, placing each on the counter and saying things like, "Wow, I know it's in here somewhere," when he realized what was happening and handed me cash. She said, "Oh, you didn't have to."

It's hard not to think the guy has the raw end of the deal here. It's not like he's afforded any default courtesies just for showing up. I've never really minded paying for things, even if I didn't have the money because I was working at a coffee shop. But from the outside perspective, seeing how consistently this plays out, how there's never once been a girl who shouldered her way in there, gave a goofy, confident smile and said, "You know what? I got this," I can't help but feel they deserve this moment of shared awkwardness.

After the introduction/recalibrating of expectations, after the drink orders, his paying and her vocal gratitude, when the blind date has secured a seat, usually after too much deliberation, they launch into the bullet point portion of the conversation. They know concrete facts about each other. They selected each other based on these concrete

facts. They must hit the majority of them before descending into the freestyle portion of the conversation.

I once witnessed a blind date at a coffee shop in Long Beach, back in college, when I was getting really good at spotting these things. The guy was long and uncomfortable. He wore this sweater with a collared shirt and tie. They all looked new, like he had seen the ensemble on a mannequin. She showed up late, hurried, in yoga pants, cross trainers, and a sweatshirt tied around her waste. They seemed doomed from the outset. I pointed them out to my coworker. She told me to stop eavesdropping. But she was in a relationship and couldn't appreciate the strange, sad exchanges between two people who are deciding whether or not they are willing to be naked in front of the other.

The velocity of the couple's conversation was pretty impressive. It was arranged in small stanzas. She would say, "So you work in environmental engineering?" and he would go on for a minute about his job, punctuating it with a return serve: "What about you?" Then she would go on about her job. I'd listen from behind the espresso machine, go into the back room for more cups, and in doing so miss entire chapters of their life stories. They'd be talking about his trip to Mexico, and when I'd return 30 seconds later he was asking, "So what's a Bavarian squat?"

She seemed uncomfortable for most of the date, but settled into a groove when she started talking about herself. I figured this one to be a dud, but at some point he started turning things around. He said some things that made her laugh, sincerely. Then they were making plans for dinner. They walked out all chummy and warm. He threw a couple bills into the tip jar and said, "For you, chief."

I told all of this to my coworker, but all she said was, “Maybe you don’t know anything about women.”

You could say I was seeing a girl at the time. I mostly came over after I had closed up at the shop, long after midnight. My hands were always burnt and stained brown, everything about me smelled like espresso. She loved the smell. After we were finished and were lying in bed together, she’d place her face on my neck and breath in deep. “Like it’s in your *skin*,” she’d say. She’d keep her head on my chest and ask me to tell her all about my day. I’d talk about whatever until her breathing steadied, until her body twitched against mine.

I really didn’t like sleeping in her bed. Most of the time I’d leave after she dozed off. It wasn’t just indifference toward her body that flipped on like a light as soon as I’d come. It was how much she liked the smell, how much she liked me, how she was OK with me coming over like that.

I was plowing through college, writing a lot, drinking as much, working at a hip coffee shop. I was also tired and self-negligent. I wanted to turn the women in my life into suffering mothers. I wanted to feel dangerous but momentarily contained. That only worked if they indulged themselves in me despite some strong reservation. They needed to see I was incorrigible, that I was trouble, but maybe they could be the one to save me. When I’d hurt them too many times they’d all but beg me to leave, because they couldn’t do it themselves. When things turned boring with the next guy they’d miss me. I was fast and careless, but I gave them the best orgasms. I needed to be that guy. If I was with someone for too long I started to reveal another guy, and I didn’t know who he was.

This one, though, she was not scared. When she'd knead my temples and tell me to hush there was nothing in her face but patient concern. She thought hard about our conversations and talked about them with her friends. My presence filled her with incandescent symptoms. Something about me, something underneath the usual act, was doing this to her. She never stopped me when I'd get out of bed at night. All those mornings alone. She just wanted me to be happy. Or maybe she actually believed. That is why I couldn't respect her. Now I think about her all the time.

I once witnessed a blind date where I was sure the girl didn't stand a chance. Only she didn't seem to realize it, and so the advantage eventually reversed. It was amazing to watch. This was later, at a different coffee shop in Long Beach near the downtown business district. He arrived first (as the guy always does) in an expensive suit, clearly just off work. The young professionals were a big part of the clientele at this coffee shop and I generally wanted to poison them all. But this guy was cool. He didn't seem inconvenienced by everyday interaction with other people. He asked me about the music I was playing. We talked a bit about shows. He tipped well and sat at the table with his black coffee, typing into his phone, no visible nerves.

He was a sleeper. I in no way figured him to be on a blind date until the girl showed up. She was in a jean skirt and big heels that made her clomp like a Clydesdale. Her platinum blond hair was flat ironed against her skull, makeup all sorts of unfortunate colors. She smelled like cigarettes. None of these things would have mattered if she had seemed like a person even occasionally capable of being pleasant. But she sucked the air out of the room.

I busied the surrounding tables many times. I wanted to see how long the guy would wait to abandon the evening. Only it didn't go that way. He was at first a gentleman about it. He didn't talk much and instead asked specific questions, then follow-up questions to show that he was listening. But she wasn't giving him much to work with. She was clearly bored, acting out her boredom even. She gazed out the window and twirled her hair while he talked. She kept checking her phone.

At some point the guy started feeling the pressure. He switched the topic to himself. He went on about his skydiving, his business ventures to China, the marathon he was training for. This woman totally defeated her date through ambivalence. He stopped being who he was and became some caricature of what he thought she wanted him to be. This is a common dynamic, but it was crazy to see it happen so suddenly. How clear it is that a large part of getting to know someone is performance. When the material you brought isn't landing, you can either play to the audience or tell the audience to fuck off. I guess it depends on how much he thinks is at stake, which is actually about how he really feels about himself.

They say a person is only as faithful as their options. What that really means is know your own value. He started talking about skydiving. He was trying too hard, revealing that he was banking on the night. He was going to feel bad if it didn't happen because, just maybe, he was crippled with self-loathing. When they hugged and went separate ways, he lingered out in front of the coffee shop for one devastating moment. He was checking his phone, but really he was watching her. Maybe he would go home wanting her (and hating himself) that much more because she wouldn't even look back.

I tried to tell my then girlfriend about this, but it turned into an argument about gender roles. Like many of our arguments, it ended with her throwing something at me. This time it was a wine glass. She locked the door and I threatened to kick it down. It's harder than it looks. I kicked until she opened it. She had torn her shirt. We had great sex. I held her and told her how much I loved her until she fell asleep. She was 19-years-old. When we first met I thought she was out of her mind. But college was over and I needed her to keep me feeling virile. I was afraid this time. I didn't know what she was capable of. But that excited me like nothing else could. All of my energy went to making sure she kept wanting me. When she became still that's when I felt like I could actually love her. But she always woke up. This time she told me how she had just dreamt of fucking other men. I drove to the corner store to get us something to eat. It was well after midnight. When I was checking out she called me and told me not to come back, so I slept in the car.

Years later, I witnessed a blind date that went about as poorly as a blind date could go. This was at my last coffee shop in California. I had taken it after a long period of unemployment. The coffee shop was a 40-minute drive from my parent's house, where I was living. A lot of high school kids liked to hang out at this coffee shop during the afternoon. I was known there for always being in a terrible mood.

A short, chubby teenager walked in alone with a rose made out of red Hershey's Kisses he had probably bought from the pharmacy next door. He was wearing one of those black t-shirts with an indecipherable band name. He sat down at the bar next to the espresso machine and pulled out a hand-held video game. I'd come over every few

minutes to ask if he wanted anything, but each time he affirmed that he was waiting for someone. I really wasn't in the mood for him.

Finally, a tall girl, literally in a cheerleader uniform, walked in while on her phone. His back was to her, so I saw her before he did. She looked around the shop, spotted him, closed her phone without saying goodbye, deliberated for a moment, and sat down. They both looked terrified. They didn't order anything. I busied myself by arranging boxes of pastry dough in the walk-in freezer. I did not want to overhear any part of their conversation.

When I came back out he was alone, drumming his fingers on the bar. She hadn't left, though. She was sitting on the arm of one of the couches talking to a fidgety group of boys. A few agonizing minutes later she returned and said, "I ran into some friends over there and I think I'm going to hang out with them." As she turned to leave he made some unfortunate noise, like clearing his throat, and attempted to hand her the Hershey's rose. She told him he could keep it.

He sat there for a while, slowly unwrapping each of the Kisses and eating them. We both could hear her talking and laughing from across the room. I wanted to offer him a drink on the house, as if I were a bartender. But more than that I wanted him to leave. I felt it was almost my duty to tell him to leave, to gather his remaining dignity and walk out. Don't let her see you like this. He eventually did leave, but I knew things weren't going to be the same for him.

I once witnessed a blind date that didn't even make it that far. I watched a guy walk in, order coffee, wait for half an hour, then go from table to table asking, "Are you Sam?" Even if Sam was there, she wasn't answering. Not at that point. So he left. This

was at my first coffee shop in Seattle, the one I applied to three months into the big move after the big breakup; the one I applied to as a temporary fix, as damage control. The place closed down before I could leave. Now it's a tanning salon.

After eight coffee shops, I know definitively that there is no advantage to showing up first. I should just tell him, as soon as he walks through the door, that no, she isn't here yet. She is never here yet. Because she is going to be 20-minutes late. She is 20 minutes late because she is smarter than you. She wants to avoid this precise predicament. She will walk in knowing for a fact you're waiting. She's already made a lap around the building, scouting you out through the street-side window, sizing you up as you sit there with your coffee. She wants to be considered a decent person. She will usually at least have the courtesy to show up. But she's already called her friend, instructing them to call back in 15 minutes and fake an emergency.

There's nothing safe in being the one waiting. All you can do is sit there and catalogue every reason things will go horribly wrong. All you can do is hate yourself. You know your nose does this weird thing when you smile openly. You know you talk too fast and dominate the conversation when you're nervous. You know you're a bad listener, just like your dad. You drink too much. You've lost count of how many people you've slept with. You abuse women or you worship them. Either way, you need them to take care of you. Your anxiety is only adorable at first. Then you start manifesting problems because you're certain of your own unworthiness and it's been like that for a long time. It's going to push her away. She'll see that you're weak. She'll drop you on your ass. You've already lost and you just don't know it yet. You should leave now, while leaving is as easy as getting back in your car.

I once witnessed a blind date between two lonely old people.

I once witnessed a blind date next to an engaged couple and their wedding planner.

I once witnessed a blind date where she and I realized around the same time that he was most likely autistic.

I once witnessed a blind date that ended with them knocking over the table and taking each other right there on the floor.

I have a friend who did everything right after high school. He has a very lucrative sales job that allows him to travel the world. He lives by himself in an enormous loft in the Mission District of San Francisco. He was a devout Muslim for most his life and nearly married his long term Muslim girlfriend, Shar, before he broke it off. "I started enjoying my life too much," he explained.

He was one of the first people I knew who really started singing the praises of online dating. "It's just more convenient for my lifestyle," he'd say. "I've been very, very successful, if you know what I mean."

I visited him on over the New Year and he took me to all his favorite spots. "This is where I bring them first," he said while we were smoking outside of a tequila bar. He told they pour drinks strong there, and that it's loud enough to distill the conversation. If they don't end up hooking up by that point, there's place down the block that plays Salsa music. "Dancing really loosens things up," he said. Then it's just two blocks back to his apartment.

He threw a huge New Year's Eve party on his roof. At midnight I kissed a girl who was a good head taller than me. Later, I tried and failed to kiss her roommate. As things were winding down, I spotted my friend on the other side of the roof. He was sitting on a couch, a champagne bottle in one hand, a girl under the other arm. He raised his bottle to me. I gave him thumbs up.

Even later in the night, as I was swaying in line for the bathroom, my friend and the girl descended down the stairs from the roof. They walked passed me and into his bedroom. I opened the door for them, bowed and said "good evening." He slapped me on the back and handed me his empty bottle.

The next morning we went to his favorite coffee shop. I had met the owner the night before. He had been full of cocaine and was going at it with an acoustic guitar. Behind the counter he looked like death. He asked me again where I worked in Seattle. I told him the name of the coffee shop and he said he had heard of it. "You must be a real professional barista," he said.

I asked my friend about the girl. He said they met off the dating site, and that last night was their first time hanging out.

"After midnight on New Year's Eve?" I said. "She knew what she was doing."

He laughed, but then stopped. "I don't know. Maybe this year should be the year of moderation." He watched his coffee. He said, "I miss Shar."

There's no way out, see? And if there is, at this point, the body will find a way to refuse it. Because you've allowed yourself to think that this is the way it's always been, this is in your chemistry, this is what you're meant to do: make coffee, be alone.

Friends will ask me why I don't put myself out there like all the people I've witnessed over the years. Because that's all their doing, right? Taking a chance. Being proactive about their own happiness. My answer is simple. What I say is I don't mind waiting. What I mean is I can't seem to change.

Salad

Last week a friend had me come over for a salad. She was excited about it over the phone. She made up two plates before I arrived. It had red leaf lettuce, raw green beans, capers, tuna, and a boiled potato. We sat at her breakfast nook and talked about how she and her new boyfriend had spent the evening getting stoned and baking brownies. They had done this in matching shirts for some reason. She had sent me a picture that night, but showed it to me again anyway.

This friend had the nicest apartment out of anyone I knew, only she didn't own much else. The place had a view of Lake Union that was mostly obstructed by a massive tree. She wouldn't have been able to afford the rent otherwise. Standing on the right corner of her bathtub-sized deck you could just make out the green arrowhead of Gasworks Park. It was enough to get excited over.

Her old studio had roaches. She had seen them in the cupboards when she first went to check the place but signed the lease anyway. It wasn't until after she had moved in and began seeing the roaches darting around her food when she began to cry over the phone and at tables in restaurants. She had moved into the apartment after her live-in boyfriend, also a writer (and a great one, she insisted) dumped her and moved back to New York. The studio was the first place she looked.

All of her friends were men, and she liked to feed us. She was known to show up at bars with peanut butter fold-overs and carrot sticks. I'd wake up some mornings and find emails with links to stir-fry recipes. Once a month she'd make an elaborate thing and then text us one by one until someone agreed to join her. Occasionally we, the men,

would be out together when the invitations started coming in. If there were no volunteers we'd end up drawing straws. Because if no one showed up she'd lose something of herself. We'd see it the next day when she wouldn't talk to us, when she'd yell at her students. Something eclipsed her face: a terrifying self-doubt. We knew this and felt a responsibility. Other times we were just hungry.

Still in the old apartment, she began dating a kindergarten teacher off OK Cupid. He was quiet, sweet, determined. He was apparently a very capable lover. He gave my friend multiple orgasms, she told us. Still, he was just so accommodating and uncontroversial we all would have preferred if there were just another chair in the room.

A month later, homeless men began camping in the alley underneath the largest window of her studio. My friend stopped seeing the Kindergarten teacher and found the lake-view apartment. She enlisted all the men to help her move. There were ten of us. We did it with three cars and one trip. The hardest part was the bed, which we wrapped in its original plastic sheath from IKEA and placed it on top of one of the sedans. Four grad students held it there with their arms out each window for the 10-block drive to the new apartment. She gave us all pizza and beer, much more than we could eat. We went out to a bar afterward while she stayed home and began unpacking. Together we made fun of her.

She then began dating a 31-year-old painter. He was so earnest that it was immediately clear the consistency with which all of us friends communicated with unbridled, demonstrative sarcasm. He was much more handsome than the Kindergarten teacher and had about him, despite his quiet innocence, a physical confidence. We didn't mind him being around. We grew to like him, even, the way you feel affection for a

young athlete in his rookie season. He seemed to love her immediately. He told her so. They went car camping together. They lounged around his large house in the nice part of town. He mowed the lawn out in front while she read inside by the open window and they would watch each other. She told me about all these things. They'd get stoned and bake brownies in matching shirts. We stopped hearing from her. So I was excited when she invited me over for salad.

It looked delicious, displayed elegantly on the plate. She was proud of it, and happy to have someone to show it to. We ate and she talked more about the new boyfriend. I responded to her stories with my own about my variety show of women, and how I was starting to be concerned over the patterns emerging in my life. She said "yeah" to everything I said. I felt good after eating. It was the appropriate amount of starch, protein and greens to fuel a human the way food was meant to fuel a human.

It is a responsible time to begin thinking about what to do for lunch. I have a bag of Sun Chips in the pantry and a plastic tub of hummus in the fridge. Together, the two are less pitiful than they are separate. But their returns are diminishing. Also my food stamp balance was just rounded back to \$200.

I decide to get up and go to the grocery store. I should probably buy all the food I'll need for the week. A fully stocked fridge will inspire me to cook. I make a list on a post-it note. The list begins with "red leaf lettuce, green beans, capers, tuna, and a potato." I go to the store and grab other various vegetables I think I'll want to cook. I grab un-ripened fruit so it will sit in my fruit basket for a while without rotting. I lose focus and buy some dry stuff before checking out. I don't want to make the salad until my

kitchen is fully cleaned. I do all the dishes and wipe down the counters with a vinegar/water mixture. I boil the potato first then chop all the veggies to make the salad. I try to arrange it in a nice way, but it doesn't look nearly as good. I sit on my futon, holding the plate, and eat quickly. Food tastes better when someone else has made it for you. People need each other in these ways, even when it's unhealthy. So I finish the Sun Chips and Hummus.

Protons, Neutrons

The world's largest high-energy particle accelerator is 27 kilometers in circumference, beating the world's second largest high-energy particle accelerator by 21 kilometers. The world's second largest high-energy particle accelerator is somewhere in Illinois and called Tevatron, which sounds like a robot butler. The world's largest high-energy particle accelerator is located on the Franco-Swiss border and called the Large Hadron Collider, which sounds like it was hauled in from some distant, crazy galaxy for the express purpose of killing The Avengers.

Listening to the physicists talk about the Higgs Bosom particle, I understand every sixth word. I get protons. I can roll with protons for a while, all positive charged, not like neutrons. Neutrons have no charge. I remember that. But Brian Cox doesn't spend much time on protons in his TED Talk, where he explains why it is totally badass and necessary to build this batshit machine and recreate the conditions present less than a billionth of a second after the Big Bang, where he explains I was wrong in thinking Leptons and Quarks are names of alien races from a canceled sci-fi pilot, but the particles of matter that make up our universe, where he explains that certain elements are "very strong candidates for the dark matter," as if becoming dark matter is like some sort of promotion, where I drink my beer in front of my computer and nod and pretend that I now know all about dark matter.

They call Brian Cox the rock star physicist because he wears a tailored black blazer and has a Beatles haircut that is totally working for him, because he is 44 but looks 25, perhaps the secret side effect of prolonged exposure to super magnets, and because he can explain these things to people like they're five without sounding anything but boyishly enthusiastic. He shows me the maniacal formulas in the Higgs Papers. They look as though if uttered could summon Cthulhu. He points to them and says, "See? It's the unknown but necessary variable for these formulas to work. There *has* to be something there that gives all existence mass." And I say, "Sounds good."

See the physicist talking to the BBC reporter, the wrathful physicist god to Brian Cox's benevolence. The physicist who looks like some future person: bald and olive skinned, ambiguous accent, the eventual culmination of races. He takes a moment after every tedious question the reporter must ask for our sake, stopping himself from saying, "Did I stutter? Exactly what part of the term 'God Particle' fails to resonate with you?" He tosses supersymmetry theories into the air and lets them scatter like chump change. He waves away the rumors that the LHC, once switched on, could inadvertently create a black hole, eradicating life in an instant. But notice the smirk, as if to say, "But isn't it cool that maybe we could?" He then drinks a vial of glowing elixir and partakes in human flight.

I like to imagine the army of PhDs, 10,000 strong, from 85 countries, all in alpha state, buried deep with their machine. On September 30, 2009, just before the LHC shot off its protons, I see the men unshaven, shirt sleeves rolled up, chain smoking and

sleeping in shifts, the women scrambling to find the pens that have been resting behind their ears, pens used to mark checklists and also puncture second holes on the top of Diet Coke cans to increase air flow, the same way they taught their children to do during school lunches. I see papers being handed off in hallways, people pointing at screens, red phones ringing. And when the LHC circulated energy at 1.18 TeV per beam, which is apparently a lot more TeV per beam than Tevatron's previous record of 0.98, everyone calls their wives and husbands and tells them not to wait up.

I do not understand the science of the thing. What turns me on, what I envy in them all, is the charge: the insatiable curiosity, the specificity of vision, the ability to simultaneously discover and create. Millions of years ago, man cut open a mammal and held its heart, placing his other hand over the beating in his chest. Then, one morning before primary school, Brian Cox crept down the stairs into his kitchen to see if the red dye had, in fact, made its way up the veins of the celery stick. Later still, I crept down the stairs to finish off the bag of Cheetos. Now physicists are colliding particles at the speed of light in order to isolate the variable they believe gives meaning and context to literally everything ever, a variable they themselves created. Then they proved it had been there all along. The hypothesis was correct. The math: sound. We exist as we thought.

Can't

I own an acoustic guitar. My dad taught me to play it. There were brief lessons in my living room. I was impatient throughout them. I learned four chords and can play them well. I was in a metal band in high school, but that was different I can't read tabs. I can't jam with anyone because I can't improvise. I lost it. I don't know the logic of notes or counts or progression. I can't see them on the fret board anymore. I now play four chords. My dad taught me how to tune my guitar, to change the strings, but I can't do this without using the tuner on my iPhone or Googling how long to stretch the strings. I have played four chords in different sequence for over 10 years.

One day I bought a \$150 wok. I know one recipe.

My journal will have gaps of 4 months or more and all I write about is how I don't write.

Sometimes at night when I can't sleep I go to a website where you can watch other people play video games.

I don't know which Elizabeth ruled when.

I can't drive stick or tie a meaningful knot.

I often have to Google the cooking time for chicken, Google how many ounces to a pound, Google dates for holidays, Google how to shave my neck line, Google how long to steep green tea, Google the French names of Godard films, Google what French New Wave actually means, Google my half spelling of words in order to get the correct spelling, Google how long you should wait to get an STD test after having unprotected sex, Google how short guys are wearing their shorts these days, Google how to do at-

home core workouts, Google the correct and incorrect ways to use the word curate, even though I've been using it a lot, Google how to jump a car, Google how to grow a mint plant, Google what APR means.

My dad studied history in college but got a job in computers after he got married.

I don't know which vitamins to take and for what.

I can't tell which plants are which when they are in the ground.

I've been saying that a blue whale's veins are big enough for a cat to swim through because I think I may have read that somewhere but I have no idea if it is true.

I was supposedly very good at baseball. But when Dad put me in a league with the big kids I got scared and quit and started playing roller hockey. I haven't played roller hockey in 10 years. Dad sometimes says putting me in the league ahead is a big regret in his life.

I like to call my dad with financial questions because it is something he understands and it makes him feel involved in my life. Sometimes I will make up problems to ask him.

Luggage

My cab driver was listening to one of those language lessons on-tape. Rather, it was a lesson uploaded to an older model iPod. He showed me the whole set up when I asked him what language we were listening to. It was Chinese.

“This is the appropriate response to a woman’s show of gratitude after you’ve gifted her a box of chocolates,” said the man in the recording.

The driver looked at me through the rear-view. “Figure I spend 10 hours a day in here I could use the time better,” he said. I agreed in principle, and wondered about the scenarios he had imaged himself speaking conversational Chinese.

As we got closer to Westlake Station, where I would then take the light rail to SeaTac airport, I waited for him to ask me where I was headed. I would say back home to Los Angeles. When he asked why, I would tell him three of my friends were getting married within a week of each other. The fact that I didn’t yet have a suit was such a point of significant personal controversy I could see myself going right on and telling him all about it: how the last one I bought was five years ago for my cousin’s wedding, but that one had three buttons and I knew enough to know that was out of style. Also, my dad had paid for it; how I was planning on buying a suit the next day at Macy’s or something, but I was upset about it because when your friends start getting married, and you’re asked to be in these weddings, buying a suit should not be a part of the process, not at this age, especially when the pageantry of travel is involved. The way it is supposed to work is two days before departure you open your closet and slide the clothes over to reveal the suit bag hanging in the back. You take the suit to the dry cleaner, *your* guy, and then you spend the next day making sure your affairs in order, things like getting enough work

done so your desk is clear when you return, arranging someone to pick up your mail, reminding your students of their assignments, finding a dog sitter. You retrieve your suit, and from there begins a graceful, sentimental montage where cabs are taken, planes are boarded, old friends enter into rooms with their arms wide going “Oh!” and exchange respectful sentiments, strong hugs, remember whens. Going to Macy’s and buying a suit on the cheap is just not part of it.

But the driver didn’t ask where I was going. He turned down the iPod to issue a warning. “There’s no loading zone on the street, see? And the busses get impatient.”

I nodded and said, “When you pull up why don’t you just pop the trunk and I’ll handle it. And let’s get the money taken care of now. That way it’ll be quick.” I gave him a ten, and told him to keep the change.

The cab pulled up to the curb and the trunk was popped. I ran around and pulled out my enormous, pea green suitcase. It was a truly hideous thing. The surface was scuffed and dented, the chrome lining rusted, right latch loose, clanging with every move, tape keeping the whole thing together. I had bought the suitcase years earlier while slumming it with my girlfriend in Long Beach. We had passed the yard sale of a dedicated hoarder who had opened her garage and let the contents spill onto the street. We couldn’t pay rent, but we both decided I needed the suitcase for when we traveled to Morocco and when we traveled to Peru and when we worked the land in the Deep South and when we took that road trip down the California coast and into Mexico. None of those things came close to happening, but I kept the suitcase.

Modern design has made the act of physically lifting and carrying your luggage a definitive and uncontroversial thing of the past. But my suitcase and I were again making

some sort of stand. When it came to luggage, I in no way believed, as I did about other things in my life, that the old ways maintained some sort of integrity. I clearly wasn't trying to show-off. It's just that I owned a suitcase. And I was in a place in my life where so long as I owned a suitcase I didn't need to buy another suitcase.

Only at that moment I wished I owned another suitcase. It was a Friday and the platform was packed and sweaty. The train pulled up and I bottlenecked in with everyone else. Seats were quickly being taken up, and I immediately panicked. Like a pack mule I negotiated my luggage through the crowd in the standing area to the rows of forward-facing seats separated by a narrow aisle. The panic grew. This was the worst possible place for me to sit. My suitcase would not fit with me in the seat and I had to keep it in the middle of the aisle. If I took the window seat, someone might be compelled to sit in the visibly open aisle seat. They would have to step over my luggage, separating me from it. I decided the best course of action was to take the aisle seat and leave the window seat open. I scooted the suitcase as close to the seat as possible and put my arm over it, in case there was any doubt these mistakes were my own. As the car continued to fill, the people left standing began to stare at the open seat, then back at my suitcase and me. I wanted to die.

After the first stop I conceded to the fact that this configuration was totally unsustainable. I needed to move else I continue ruin lives. There was a young professional sitting behind me with the aisle seat open next to him. I quickly stood up and began to over-explain my situation and why I needed to sit next to him and if he would at all mind. He waited many sentences before even looking up from his phone, regarding me with the smallest possible effort, but enough to convey his flat disdain for me and

everything I brought crashing into the start of his weekend. I sat down, stuffed my messenger back between my knees and pulled my suitcase down the aisle so it was next to me. At least now I wouldn't be taking up two seats.

For the next few stops I sat completely still, my left leg draped over my suitcase, right knee touching the knee of this stranger, who continued to swipe his thumb across the screen of his phone. Maybe if I didn't move he would forget I was there. But I needed to check my phone. Pulling it out of my coat pocket, I elbowed him straight in the ribs. Without daring to look over I mouthed "sorry" and put the phone back in my pocket. I did not touch it when it began to vibrate. Probably Kyle calling, or the other litany of my friends getting hitched. Out of the corner of my eye I watched his reflection in the window as he glared at me. Just a guy trying to get home from work. I was sorry. I was sorry I couldn't get my shit together.

Halfway to the airport it occurred to me that my partner here would most likely be getting off the light rail before me. This filled me with a profound sense of dread. Not to mention the fact that my suitcase was positioned directly in front of the light rail operator's door, and if it were at any point to open there would be absolute chaos.

I began to plan my strategy. The most obvious move was to stand up and hold the suitcase over my head, allowing him to pass. But I could see that going very wrong very easily. There was a little aisle space and an empty seat diagonal from me. I could feasibly push the suitcase forward and up onto the seat, then hug it lean forward. I played through the scenario in my head, visualizing the geometry of the space like math geniuses do in math genius movies. There just wasn't enough room.

I decided to make it a game time decision. Every time we approached a stop I watched his hands, his posture, for the smallest indication that he was prepping to leave. The tension grew every time we pulled away, the two of us stuck together for a little longer. When we entered a tunnel and I took in our two reflections: his pressed blue trousers, my skinny jeans, his late afternoon stubble, my laziness beard, his watch, my lack of watch, his leather tote, my green fucking suitcase. I wished I could tell him it's not as bad as it looks, I swear. I was useful. I was a grad student. Before that I had real jobs. I too wore pressed pants. I was miserable back then, but I cleaned up well.

As we approached the last stop before the airport, he picked up his tote and wordlessly signaled he was getting off. Game time. Without thinking I stepped over my suitcase and rotated it on a pivot, opening a passage out of the seat like a barn door. To give him extra room I bent my right leg up at a weird angle, so that for a moment I looked like a still shot of someone running away from an explosion. In a swift motion he stepped out without looking at me or touching anything I owned.

I stood like that for too long and watched him walk away, wanting to see, for some reason, if he would look back at me and laugh. Then I heard a polite cough. There was another guy sitting to my right, waiting patiently for me to move so he too could leave. This guy had gotten on at the same station as me. He was a little overweight, with a greasy ponytail, clutching a hardcover science fiction novel. I hadn't given him any thought whatsoever. When I began to apologize he said, "Hey no problem. You're fine, man," then exited just before the doors shut.

Now with all the room in the world, I sat back down and slid my suitcase into the empty row of seats where the ponytail guy had been. The pleasant, slightly mechanical recording of a woman's voice came on over the speakers.

“Next stop: SeatTac Airport. This is the last stop.”

I needed to buy a suit. I needed to get it tailored. But I probably wouldn't be able to afford both. I needed to make a financial spreadsheet. I needed to remember family birthdays and actually send gifts. I needed to figure out what I was going to do after graduate school. Maybe my parent's would have an extra rolling suitcase lying around somewhere.

Epilogue

I went to the graduate library to try and find the letters of Flaubert and Sand, but they didn't have what I needed. I heard there was a moment in their correspondence where Flaubert, having not received a return letter from Sand in time, sends another letter complaining about this. Somewhere in there, though, Flaubert essentially reveals the only reason he writes to Sand is because he wants to show off. He wants to experiment. Journaling is useless because Flaubert is not enough of an audience for himself. The only way to get at something is to get at it in front of someone else. To perform intimacy. To seduce. At least that's what my friend told me. He is also a writer. A poet. Still, we find things to talk about. Sometimes it's our work. I've been having trouble with my work. Other times it's the women.

The first girl I *really* wanted after my move to Seattle was also a poet. The Poet. This was almost two years ago now. We met at a reading for a nonfiction writer I really admired and feared because one of her books made me hate the very marrow of my own writing. This was my first quarter as a grad student and I was just trying to figure out how my brain worked. It was an extremely frustrating thing.

The girl, though, she looked like the Northwest. She was precisely what I had imagined while driving from Los Angeles to Seattle, all of my possessions in the SAAB, along that stretch of the I-5 north of San Francisco and before Oregon, the real Northern California where there is nothing but the five blank hours before you're out of the state and into something new. I thought a lot about the girls I would meet and she was

definitely one of them. She was The Poet: sharp, cold face. Curly hair. Just a lot of negative space. She was very patient and graceful when she moved, like she was underwater. She was the opposite of the girl in California, the girl who was California.

During the reading I sat there and seethed. I felt incapable. I was very far away from the sort of work I suddenly wanted to be doing. I would look over at The Poet as she nodded and wrote things down in a worn poet's notebook. I should have been nodding and writing things down too but I was too busy feeling sorry for myself.

The Poet knew one of my other poet friends. We were introduced and the three of us went to a bar. The Poet said she saw the reading I had just done the week before, my first ever. I had written something about the girl in California and my prolonged battle with a woodpecker and how they were the same thing. It was a very early draft and I was embarrassed. But The Poet said she'd dated manic people too. She recognized a lot of what I was trying to do. She talked about things in the piece I didn't even know were there. I nodded and felt grateful. I really wanted her very badly.

She was still dating manic people. She had a boyfriend and was suffering through it. I got to know this, and other things, during an email correspondence that started when she included me in a mass invitation to her 30th birthday party. This went on for the month leading up to the party. It was the best writing I'd done in a long while.

The difference was how I pictured myself when writing. Back then when I wrote "for the page" – when I'd attempt to write "literature," it was a very stiff thing. I'd get up early, take a shower, eat oatmeal. I'd place my computer symmetrical on the table in the coffee shop, surround it with my notes on the left, whatever book I was reading on the right. I'd square up my work like a stuffy conductor before an unprepared orchestra. I

was a child in an oversized suit. When I spoke it was with a deep, stern adult voice. There was work to get done. I had to do the work of creating something from the ground up.

But the emails, well I knew how to talk to girls. And with this I was always better in writing. When I decided to respond to The Poet's mass invite with a quick, witty RSVP, mild flirtation in the form of a punny joke in the postscript, I knew this was my wheelhouse. I wrote in my boxers. There was no micromanaging of sentence structure. I did not pick up a thesaurus. The sentences were lean. I was funny. I had great timing. When I'd breath it felt hot. I was in complete control and it was only a matter of time.

A little while after the pizza party, after she had broken up with the boyfriend, on the night we would cross that line for the first time, she told me it was the emails, not my reading, where she saw I could really write.

I'm almost done with the collection. The pages have been written. They have beginnings, middles and ends. But it's the revisions where I'm struggling the most. I have to know what I'm feeling. Most of what I write about is the struggle of emerging adulthood over the three-years between graduating from college and my first year of grad school. At least that how it comes out when I start to formalize it. Really, it's all about failure. How do you successfully write about failure? I'm putting this stuff down for the first time. Sometimes I didn't have more to go on than the gut feeling I got when thinking about my dad. The first pass is boilerplate. It's work. I have to crack it open like a crème-brûlée. I have to sweep around like an archeologist. I have to translate it like a son immigrant parents. So that somehow I can undo the work I did when I decided to put on

my literature suit and try to get back at kernel of the thing. If this sounds like the pill, like bullshit, it is. I am having zero fun.

That's why I went sniffing around Flaubert and Sand. I want to read more private writing. Letters, diaries, notes. I have this idea that if I can see a difference in persona with the titans of the canon, if I can track how they translate themselves from their personal world into public language, how they deal with audience, how they render the experience of their own emotions with specificity and clarity, it will loosen something in me. I want everything I write to be a flirtatious email with a woman. I want to breath, sweat and gesticulate all over the page the way I know I can when I am pulsing with confidence. It's tough when all I write about is the lack thereof.

I refer to the second girl I tried to date in Seattle as The Catholic. She worked at a restaurant near the coffee shop where I was a barista throughout grad school. The first thing I thought when I saw her walk across the street was she looked exactly like Taylor Swift. I prayed to the service industry gods that she would walk in, and she did. Then she stayed for a while. We met up after our shifts that night.

She was young and flawless. Just your bombshell, 5'11 blonde. A traffic stopper. What really drove me crazy was she had only recently grown into herself. She did not yet have the jaded glaze of a woman with nothing but options. She was in the exploratory phase many people go through when they grow up in the church. She was beginning to step out and find that she liked it very much. A freshly minted beauty. She had the energy of someone who was done wasting time.

For a month I was a ravenous teenager. We spent every weeknight making out in my car. And I mean making out. Motely-Crue-on-the-radio making out. Swollen lips making out. The kind of making out where afterward you're a housecat stumbling out of the clothes dryer. I'd actually watch myself make out with her in the rear-view mirror. Her hair was so long, so curly, so blonde. I knew then she would eventually cut it, but on those nights I was hooking up with the Varsity quarterback's girlfriend. I was getting back at every girl who ever made me feel shitty about myself. I was sticking it to the girl in California.

At the time I was writing about blind dates. I saw them all the time working at the coffee shop and they made me lonely. I felt inactive, sterile. I mourned the fact that I was working at a coffee shop. I wanted to be out doing. Doing what? Something else. Writing about it kept me in this place of self-loathing. But The Catholic, she was convinced I was the smartest, most handsome person who had ever touched her. She would say as much when we were making out. She'd pull back and whisper, "You're *so* good looking." It was almost mournful, like she knew something bad was going to happen to her but she couldn't help herself. It felt fucking awesome.

I did end up hurting her. I could only dodge invites to meet her family so many times before she came to her senses. She was beautiful, but not interesting. I wasn't interested in doing anything but objectifying her. I was constantly in my head, obsessed with what I was thinking and feeling: a chaotic universe where so much was always at stake. I couldn't be bothered to get to know someone beyond what I needed from them. I needed The Catholic to make me feel like a man because what I was writing made me feel like I was falling short. .

I've been talking a lot about my plan to read private writing, but I actually haven't picked up a book. Mostly I talk about it with my girlfriend. She says I spend too much time in meta-cognition. I'm always thinking about thinking. She's not a writer. I don't talk to her about this stuff to get writer's feedback. She's a different kind of intelligence. She's a therapist. Her mind goes straight to my motives. I reveal things to her by the way I say them. She knows all about my struggles with revision. She knows my whole story. She knows everything about me.

I started going to therapy because of her. She thinks everyone should go if they can afford it. And when she said it would be good for us I knew she didn't mean it would be good for her. Still, come on. When I agreed I didn't intend on going. Worst-case scenario, I would lie about going for a few months and then I'd say it didn't work out. I was an anxious person and it was OK to be an anxious person. Anxiety was what drove my creative energies. I wouldn't know who I was without anxiety.

Then a strange thing happened. I made an appointment with a therapist. Then I drove to the appointment, sat down, and started talking. All of a sudden I had this checklist of things I had to say out loud. I had to say them out loud or they would dissolve together and become this thick smog in my head.

What she didn't know, my therapist, was during those first 50 minutes I basically hit every subject of every essay in my thesis, one by one, in chronological order. I started with the girl in California, the jobs, my family, masculinity, self-doubt, money, women, failure. I talked the entire time. She stopped me when my time was up and told me she'd like to work with me. So I went back the same time next week.

There are things I've known about myself: I am anxious. I feel intense guilt or I feel zero guilt. I am filled with regret. These were the colors of my face. These were my limbs. I woke with them every day. I arranged them in the mirror. I went out in public with them. I used them to do things. Some days I couldn't look at myself. Some days I'd stay home. Some days my hands wouldn't do what I ask of them. That was my adult life. But then these things that were a part of me, they coalesced. They started feeling bigger than me, less discernable. They became a nameless weight. This happened when I started writing about them. I've been seeing my therapist for half a year now.

The third girl in Seattle was The Architect. I also knew her from the coffee shop. She'd come in during every my shifts to finish her thesis. She already had a job at some firm. Her thesis was a labor of love, she told me. She had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali and was designing an orphanage for her old village. I thought she was impressive. It felt invigorating to be around someone my age as they were beginning to establish the components of adulthood. I also thought she had an incredible ass.

We were both moving into new apartments. I was upgrading from a studio the size of a cargo elevator to a more standard shitty grad student studio. She was renting a beautiful apartment with hardwood floors, a fireplace and a claw-foot bathtub. On our first date I came over to help her unpack and ended up fixing a wobbly leg on her butcher's block. This was strange because I usually couldn't fix things. I felt very useful, which took away some of the dread of knowing she would eventually have to see my apartment.

For two weeks I stayed over every night. I was there so often I hadn't even started unpacking my own apartment. We'd take a shower together before bed, have sex, go to sleep early and wake up before the sun. She'd make us both oatmeal with sliced walnuts and dried berries. We'd walk together in the crisp, sanitizing April air, then part ways so she could continue downtown to her job and I could go write at a café until class. By noon I'd already been working for five hours. It was all very new to me.

We were playing house. She needed a man around and I needed to be an adult. It felt healthy. This was the way I should be living. This was how my parents were living when they were my age. Too bad she'd lose her shit if I didn't make her bed correctly. Bla bla bla bla.

An old friend gave me the selected letters of Ginsberg and Snyder because he heard about my project. Everything I read struck me as two people writing letters as if one day they'd be published.

Carver wrote to Lish with real desperation. He just couldn't allow Lish to chop up his stories anymore. Carver could scarcely recognize his own work.

Writers write their thoughts in journals.

I've spent a lot of time in these three years of my life. There were things that happened where I knew, at the time, I was going to write about, where everything was vulnerable for metaphor. I just wish I had written more in a journal. I was so unhappy at times I couldn't even face a blank page.

There were things that happened where the weight comes in retrospect. We talk about that in therapy. I keep on wanting to take us back the girl in California, to the jobs I

left, to the year I moved back home. I think that's where it all stems from. All that failure. I think that's where I was born. But she wants to go back further. She wants to talk about how I was raised. She wants to talk about things that happened to me that decided who I would become before I had any say in the matter. I tell her I know my parents coddled me. I know this left me unprepared to fend for myself. Hadn't we talked about that essay I wrote? She says no. She wants to go back further. So we go further. I become confused. I'm getting at things for the first time, in front of her. She leads me to the connections. She helps me build the narrative. Sometimes she feels like my mom. Sometimes she feels like a lover. When I tell her these things she says that all makes complete sense. Of course I had to see a woman, she says, given everything. That's how things go in the room.

Then there was the Pastry Chef. She lived above the coffee shop. We went on one date. Vietnamese food. Sometime afterward we decided to be friends. That's the story.

How can I connect this theoretical pouring over the private writing of authors with my menagerie of women in Seattle? There is something between trying to find the voice, my struggles with revision, and who I was with each of them. We can only get at something when we get at it in front of someone else. With these women I decided to perform in certain ways. The fact that I have titles for them suggests I was also trying to find a title for myself too, right?

I've been having problems with my work. It's the revisions where I'm struggling the most. Everything I write is about failure. Writing about it keeps me in this place of self-loathing. I've been seeing my therapist for half a year now.

I used to say this about my generation: we live in a house that our parents bought, but the investment went sour. Now the property is worthless. The foundations are falling apart. We spend our days inside, looking for jobs on Craigslist. Every afternoon a man from the bank pulls up in a car. He makes some notes. He is coming back tomorrow to foreclose. Every night someone we don't see pays the man off, just enough to do this all over again tomorrow.

Now I think the greatest tragedy of the Great Recession, the Millennials, or whatever, isn't that the hardest economic times in a century fell upon the generation least prepared, least willing to shoulder it and push through. It's that it allowed everyone to continue making excuses for us.

I'm tired of writing about mediocrity. I'm tired of rendering myself through mistakes. Fuck I'm tired of writing about women. They have become my only reflective surface. I can't even get at the journals of dead authors without making it about how I hurt her or her and what I learned about myself from it. I had to get some things down to make sense of them. I got them down. But writing about failure has become a bad habit. Not every conclusion needs to come from how I somehow fell short. There are other things I can write about. We'll probably send a man to Mars in the next 30 years. There is serious stuff going down in Syria. I can go with something like that. For now, at least.

It's not like I'm ascending to the clouds, waving down on the life that was. Becoming an adult isn't as easy as finding a girl who will feed you oatmeal every morning, and turning a page doesn't just happen because you love someone and you finish grad school and you find a writing job and you start going to therapy. That sort of tidiness isn't even in the television we grew up on. But it's a start.

I want out of this space. I want to think about something else.

People keep on telling me I need to find room for a victory in this thing. Well, this thing is my victory. Roll your eyes and roll credits.