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# The Reminding

## Book One: The Freaks

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Matt wakes up at five. He has to get to class. It's a computer science class, taught by Mr. Arthur Benjamin, and it only has two students: Matt and Jesse. They're both sophomores who are ready for the senior-level computer programming class, but none is offered for them regularly, so they come early to meet Mr. Benjamin for a special class.

Matt hears the alarm. He hits it. Not even snooze, but all the way off. Dangerous. To lie there in that state, with the alarm off, still tired, not wanting to wake. But he gets up, leaves the covers behind and goes into the bathroom, where he takes a full-fledged bath, steaming hot water, and reads *The Catcher in the Rye*, the copy with the old plain red cover, while he sits. Then he lets the water out and stands, takes a five-minute ice-cold shower and dries off. The relative heat of his body almost gives him a hard-on after the cold shower. This is what his cold shower is designed to do: warm up his sexual impulses, make him hotter, make him more ready for Tuesday when he sees her.

Matt dresses, he grabs his school bag, as well as a video camera case that contains a Canon XL2, one he borrowed from the school. He sneaks downstairs, past his sisters' rooms, and eats breakfast in the nook. Cheerios. One banana sliced on top of the bowl. There is magnetic poetry on the refrigerator but he refuses to play with it right now. He has to get to school.

Still dark, Matt goes through the neighborhood, coming out on Salem Avenue, where the occasional car goes by, and he's able to cross in the middle of the street, not at the intersection. He goes into the neighborhood on the other side of Salem Avenue, threads down streets named after types of trees, and by six forty-five, he's at the Colonel White School for the Visual and Performing Arts. Not all the lights are on. The teachers' parking lot has only a few cars. No other students are visible. He goes to the front doors, pulls them open. The metal detectors are there but no one is operating them, no security guards carry the wand. He goes through and there is the comfort of another student, one of the seniors in track gear, running sprints in the main hallway.

Upstairs, the door to the computer science classroom is dark. No lights on inside. Matt sits next to his video case and pulls out a netbook. It's set up with Linux. He can do the same work they do in the programming class right here, in the hallway, with no teacher present. Matt loads a program that he and Jesse are working on for science fair. It's a simulated ecosystem, and it was Matt's idea. The program creates an underwater world with animals and plants. There are decomposers, animals that break down the carcasses of dead animals. There are producers, like algae, and there are consumers, like sharks and other fish. The consumers eat the producers, and other, smaller consumers, and the program tracks the chemical energy passed around through various parts of the system. On the screen you see a display of the ecosystem's terrain, with icons representing the sharks, fish, algae, and other elements of the system. Then there are vital signs indicators, that talk about the number of producers, consumers, etc. in the system, graphed over time. Matt and Jesse have been working on this project since the first week of school, when Matt suggested it. Matt makes a change, via the netbook, and suddenly the initial number of sharks is higher. Let's see how that affects the system run. Over time, will the sharks take over the system? If they kill too many of their prey, then soon a shark apocalypse might follow. Matt runs the program. Puts it in fast-forward mode. Yep. Just as he suspected: pretty soon all the sharks die. For the fair, they wanted a stable system that would run for a long time without any one class of plant or animal dying. But the fair wasn't until spring, so they had plenty of time to play with the initial configuration. By then, they might have many more types of animals in the world, for a more complex simulation.

Jesse's voice comes from the end of the hall. "So, kemosabe, programming without me?"

"Just playing with a few things. How's that genetic unit coming along?"

"Terrific. I've got stuff for you to look at."

"Good. I want to integrate that by the end of the week if we can."

"I think we'll be able to do that. I left your GA book at home, I hope you don't need it."

"No, keep it for as long as you want."

(GA stands for genetic algorithm, and is the type of programming that comes into play when creatures in the simulation mate to produce offspring.)

Jesse sat down next to Matt. "Let me see what you have."

"All the sharks die. I was just playing with upping the number of sharks at the beginning of the simulation. All the sharks die."

"Yeah, I played with that myself."

"Do you think we need more types of organisms?"

“I don’t know. I guess it depends on whether you think diversity of organisms is more important than depth of organism behavior, for the purposes of our project.”

Matt and Jesse have been able to talk like this from their beginning. Mr. Benjamin introduced the two on the first day of their early class, and explained that since both boys showed aptitude or had previously taken advanced classes in computer programming, this class was to be specially given for the two of them, at the start of the school day, and Mr. Benjamin would come in at seven to meet the boys. Mr. Benjamin suggested they combine this class with a science fair effort, and come up with a joint science fair project that was CS related. That was when Matt showed Jesse his ecosystem project.

Jesse is smart; Matt likes that. Jesse showed aptitude in his freshman computer class, and had done programming on his own. Matt came from a different school where they taught computer programming in some form or another since the fifth grade.

“So,” Jesse asks, “what do you think?”

“I think..organism complexity. Depth of organism behavior. Best we have a handful of types of organisms but give them complex intra-species behavior.”

“I agree.”

Just now Mr. Benjamin comes up the stairs. He doesn’t apologize for being a little late. He says hi to the boys and unlocks the computer science classroom. Matt and Jesse go in, Matt lunking his video camera case, and the two of them sit side by side, in the far row of computers, and Mr. Benjamin is walking out of the room (probably to go to the bathroom and then to the teachers’ lounge to grab some coffee). This class is mainly self-taught. Mr. Benjamin is there to answer questions, but the boys have already worked through the textbook that’s supposed to take a year, in only a couple months.

Matt puts away his netbook and leans back in the chair. His fingers go for the keyboard. “So, organism depth, right?”

“Right.”

“I’mma make a few changes to the organism class, to allow generalized mating at the organism level.”

“And that’ll incorporate my genetic module.”

“Right.”

“Ok, I’ll get this working while you get that working. Do you think by Friday we could integrate the two?”

“I was thinking more like..today. How far do you have to go on that GA module?”

“I could finish it by tomorrow.”

“Ok. Tomorrow then. Jesse.”

“What.”

“This is going to be a kick-ass science project.” Matt looks back to see if Mr. Benjamin heard him say this, but the teacher’s desk is still empty.

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There is another student at school early that day. His name is Julian. Normally Julian rides the school bus but today he took the city busses to get here before it crowded up and there were people in all the music private lesson rooms. He has been studying a book called Learn to Play Piano in Six Weeks or Less and he’s on week four of the program. He sat in the back of the city busses poring through the book, and now he’s walking up the main steps toward the metal detectors. He gets there. He tries the door. They’ve already locked them. Julian looks through the window and makes eye contact with the security guard who is standing there talking into a walkie-talkie. The security guard points with his hand, indicating the side doors. This asshole won’t let me in these doors, but he’ll point me in the direction of some doors that are open, without metal detectors. This school is stupid.

Julian takes a hike around the side of the school, to the teachers’ parking lot, and lets himself in the teachers’ door. Hallways empty. Julian immediately takes the stair down a level. He’s in the music hallway. Tries the first private lesson room. Locked. Tries another, and then on the third try gets one that’s open. Each one contains a piano. He goes in and locks the door behind him. Sits at the piano. Drops his black bookbag on the floor and places the piano learning book on the rack above the keys. He brushes his braids out of his face and opens the keyboard covering. Plays a few chords. Then the beginning of a song he’s been working on. Can’t quite play it at full speed. Gets to the point where there is no more song written, after that point, and he has to come to a stop. This one is called “Memory is like Moonlight,” and he thinks he’ll be able to finish it by week six of the book.

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Anna is making her poetry collages. She sits at her desk, in the bedroom at her dad’s house. This has developed as the collage-making house, initially because more magazines are delivered to her dad’s house. Now she goes for a W magazine, for some cloud texture she saw in one of the fashion spreads. Cuts it out, in two big swatches. Grabs the rubber cement. Pastes them down on the heart-shaped card she’s making for Matt. It has some words on it, which start: “Should I write poetry in the

shade of some great writer? And if I wrote a book, do you think that anyone would notice?" The writing is in italics, printed from her dad's printer, and stretches the width of the heart. She tests the fold, now that everything's glued into place. It folds fine. She tries the envelope, a big blue one, and once she's sure it fits she takes it out and unfolds it, letting the rubber cement dry while it's in the open position.

Anna's dad leans into the room. "Time for school."

"Dad, I don't have to be there till eight."

"I don't want you to be late. Have your breakfast."

"I will. Leave me alone. I'm working."

Her dad ducks out of the room. It's 7:43. This house is right around the corner from the school. She just has to walk up one street. She wanted to have time to make one for Verona, but that will have to wait. Anna packs away the one for Matt, the one for Julian. More of these will have to be made soon. Julian doesn't deserve his. But for completeness, everyone gets one. She packs everything up and has her bookbag and coat on and is out the door before her dad has a chance to say anything else to her about breakfast. She's gone.

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The freak table is one of the tables in the Colonel White lunchroom, period 4. It's where the freaks sit. The freaks are Matt, Julian, Nick, Anna, and Tuesday. This table is in the corner of the lunchroom, out of the way of the other tables. In ninth grade, it was just Tuesday and Julian, but in tenth grade Tuesday met Matt in French class, and also this year some of the others happened to have the same lunch period as each other, so it's the five of them.

They weren't all friends in the beginning. The table started out as just a place to store people who had nowhere else to go. Tuesday was too independent from grade school, so she didn't fit into any of the established cliques, and Julian, because of his intelligence, was also a loner. Julian had been skipped two years ahead, but then he was skipped back because he didn't adjust socially. Tuesday and Julian have known each other since the second grade. Julian has a crush on Tuesday, so when Tuesday showed up with Matt on the first day of tenth grade, Julian immediately hated Matt. He was the guy Tuesday met in French class. Julian was in French, too, but a lower level. It would take Julian a few days to see that Tuesday invited Matt to sit with them because he was a genuinely interesting person, and not necessarily only out of some crush that Tuesday had on him.

The freak table isn't there because there's a clique called the freaks. It isn't like the band table and the jock table and the rap table.

The freak table exists because these five high school outcasts have to have somewhere to sit, and since all the other tables are full, they sit here. The whole freak clique thing came later. Only once the outcasts had become cool, was there a freak clique. They hadn't intended it to work that way, and some were so opposed to the idea of a freak clique that they would rather have no friends than be part of another clique. Once, Matt had gone through a period of sitting at an empty table right next to theirs, protesting the idea of the freak table. But mostly it's good for them: they like having friends and sometimes it's the loose ends that, when thrown together, make the strongest bonds.

This is what they wear: Matt wears jeans and a t-shirt with a hand-drawn dinosaur on it. Julian wears all black. He has black jeans with a long-sleeved black shirt, and black sneakers. Julian has silver chains that hang low below his neck and jangle when he walks or sits down. Julian also wears a black trench coat. Nick wears a suit. Anna wears yoga pants and a blouse with frilly sleeves. Tuesday carries a huge army-green backpack and wears a jumper with a white shirt and long white stockings. Her makeup is goth, and her head is partially shaved, leaving long, curling earlocks that fall beside her face.

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“Matt! Wait up.”

Matt is walking down the long hallway on the second floor. It's after school. He looks back. Julian is there.

“I was thinking,” Julian says. “I was thinking we could make something together. A film. Well. A short film. Do you have tapes for that?”

Matt looks down at the XL2 case. “I have tapes.”

“So what do you say?”

“A film about what?”

“Well. Maybe.. I don't know.”

“It's already 3:45.”

“Do you have to be home?”

“Eventually.”

“We could make it right here in this hallway. That's what I'm always saying. Kids here think you have to have some special setup to make a movie. I say you could make a Cannes-worthy film right here in the school. Film the entire thing in the bathrooms.”

“What would it be about?”

“There we're in a bit of a gray area.”

Matt laughs. “How about a fight scene.”

“Ok. A fight scene. I love it. I love it! Can I see the camera?”

“Right now?”

“Well, yeah, I was thinking..”

Matt thinks Julian is cool. He sensed the insecurity around Tuesday right away, but still, Matt thinks he’s cool, he wants to get to know him better. He sets down the XL2 case. Julian comes closer.

“You don’t..like Tuesday..do you?”

“What do you mean, like?”

“I mean do you like her, my friend.”

“I like her.”

“But do you like her?”

“I don’t know, Julian, why do you need to know?”

“See I’ve known Tuesday for a long time. A long time. We used to know each other since around the first grade. But then I was skipped a grade, but then they skipped me back. Two grades, actually. And Tues, she’s like a special friend of mine.”

“That’s great.”

“But do you respect..the..”

“I’m glad she’s your friend.”

“But do you two..?”

“There’s nothing going on between me and Tuesday.”

“Have you seen the way she looks at you though?”

“Do you want to make this movie or not?”

“A fight scene?”

Matt nods.

“Yes, in a minute. I’m just concerned that when a girl, like Tuesday, looks at a guy, like you, there’s some sort of an instant attraction, which you can’t ignore—”

“There’s nothing going on between me and Tuesday.”

“But you do like her?”

“I like her.”

“But do you like her like her?”

“Julian, I’m sorry but it’s none of your business. Do you want to make this thing or not?”

“Yeah, well, yes, let’s make it!”

“Alright!”

“Alright!”

The boys slap hands. This is the first of many conversational macros that they will employ in their time together. The most central would be that one of them would say, “I agree” and the other one would say, “With me?” then the one would say, “Of course!” then the other would say, “Indeed!” Every time one of them said, “I agree,” the would have to go through this macro.

You already know everything you need to know about Matt and

Julian. Julian had a crush on Tuesday from an early age. They grew up together, each one an odd duck, and they kept each other company in an uncomfortable sort of way. Tuesday never liked Julian back, not in that way. But she tolerated him, and liked him in a certain way. He made her laugh. When Matt came along he presented a threat to Julian's imaginary boy-girl relationship with Tuesday, making Julian always feel caught off-guard by Matt, making him always think that Matt is trying to take his woman. So there is an uneasy base for the relationship of Julian and Matt. They learned to like each other, were even best friends for years, but Julian never stops feeling like Matt is trying to debase him, and Matt can never have the enjoyment of a friend who isn't suspicious of him. Still, each likes the company of the other. They are both quick witted. They both have an interest in film. Their fight scene was the day when they solidified their friendship, because they collaborated so well, making a five-minute video of a harmful standoff between two rangers of high school hallways.

This is them in the editing bay:

"Do you think, maybe, if we repeat it, that it'll work better?"

"Repeat it?"

"Make it stutter. Like the part of the video where he hits him, make it play in short succession many times."

"Oh, I know what you're talking about. Like..hold on..like this?"

Matt plays that segment of the video.

"Yeah. Like that except a million times."

"Ok, hold on."

Matt loops the part of the video where he's hitting Julian in the face and Julian goes for a hugely-comic flying fall, into the lockers, knocking them shut, and then falling on the floor of the long hallway.

"So like this?"

Matt plays it. It looks like a comic book, now, the hit happening a bunch of times in a row, before continuing the shot onward, Julian falling to the floor, black trench coat covering his face.

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Nick is calling Michael.

"Can you get it?"

"Can you get twenty dollars?"

"Can you get it?"

"Can you get— Look. I've got forty. We need at least sixty."

"I'm getting a ride from my sister. I'll see you there."

"Nick— We need— Oh fuck it." Michael hangs up the phone.

Nick calls upstairs. "Abby!"



“What?”

“I need to go downtown.”

“Too bad.”

“Mom said for you to take care of me.”

“That doesn’t include taxi.”

“Yes it does. It includes taxi. Listen, Abby, you want some weed?  
I’m getting weed. I’ll give you some if you’ll take me to get it. Abby?”

“Be down in five.”

Nick is sitting in the Volkswagen when Abby comes outside.

“Where are we going?”

“Downtown.”

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“Tell me when we get to the house.”

“It’s down this street.”

“Tell me when we get there.”

“I’ll tell you where to stop.”

“Jesus, Nick, I don’t care where your fucking drug dealer lives.”

“You have to wait at the end of the block.”

“How ‘bout I just drive in circles?”

“Suit yourself. This is the house.”

“Ok. I’ll see you in a second. How long are you gonna be, Nick?”

“Five or ten minutes.”

Nick gets out of the car and walks up to #509. He knocks.

Michael comes to the door. “Come in, bro.”

It’s Cheyenne and Michael, and now him.

Cheyenne is sitting on the recliner, sock feet up in the air. “So it’s  
sixty.”

Michael looks at Nick to see if he got the twenty dollars.

Nick shakes his head.

“Look, Chey, we got forty.”

“You want the coke only?”

“Can we buy twenty..of each?”

“Coke only comes in forty, sixty, one hundred.”

“We got forty.”

Cheyenne shakes his head. “You got expensive habits for people  
who have no money. I give you the coke for forty, the weed I front you,  
you bring me twenty tomorrow. Can you get it?”

“We can get it. Thanks Cheyenne.”

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Nick and Michael are on the street.

“We gotta meet my sister.”

“Where is she?”

“Driving around the block.”

“Why we got to meet her?”

“I promised her weed.”

Michael looks upset.

“For driving me. It was the only way to get down here, man!”

Abby drives up in the Volkswagen. “Hello boys! Get in.”

Nick gets in the front seat. Michael gets in the back.

“Got my weed?”

Nick shakes his head. “I can only give you a little. This is all we have for today and—”

“Don’t worry. A little will do.”

Nick unwraps the plastic bag and portions out a nugget into Abby’s hand.

“Give me more than that!”

He portions out another nugget.

Abby’s hand closes. “Thanks bro. Where can I take you?”

“We can walk.”

“If you need a ride later, call me.”

Nick and Michael get out of the car. Abby drives off.

“Do you tell your sister about the coke?”

“She doesn’t need to know. Don’t tell her.”

“I won’t. Wanna get snacks?”

“If you have more money!”

“I have five dollars. Let’s get some Cheetos.”

—————

Michael’s house. Both boys sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table.

Laying out the coke. Saving the weed for later, for cool down.

“Anna brought these Valentines to school.”

“Valentines?”

“Well they were like Valentines. Like off-season Valentines.”

“Did she make you one?”

“No she didn’t. She made one for Matt, and she made one for Julian..”

“Here, get some of that.”

Nick leans in does a line of the coke through a straw the boys have cut into three-inch sections. They would use a dollar bill but all they have is change. Luckily they have straws left over from before. Michael’s place is shared with just his mom, but she’s working a night shift at the Good

Samaritan hospital.

“Wha’d you think of that?”

“It’s good.”

“They said it was new stuff.”

“It’s not new stuff. That’s the same stuff we’ve been snorting for two months! It’s not new!”

“They said.”

“They is bullshitting you, man. Anyway Anna made these Valentines, and it go me to thinking, like, I want a girlfriend. Not necessarily Anna, but.. Don’t you want a girlfriend?”

“Nope.”

“I want a girlfriend. Someone to be there on a regular basis—”

“To fuck—”

“To fuck, yes, to fuck.”

“You’re a virgin.”

“You know I’m not a virgin, I told you about that girl Linda, well actually she’s a cousin on my mom’s side of the family, but like a second cousin I’m pretty sure. I told you I’m not a virgin.”

“Anyway, continue.”

“Just someone to be there for me, you know, someone to talk to.”

“Talk to me.”

“I know but someone to talk to about stuff you’d only want to tell a girl.”

“What kind of stuff would that be?”

“Like..personal stuff. Private stuff. I’m not going to go around telling guys personal stuff about me. I want a girl to do that with. You know, girls, girls, there’s just certain things you can only do with girls.”

“Do another line.”

“Did you do one?”

“I did one! I did one while you were talking about girls.”

“Is this my straw?”

“That’s yours.”

Nick looks at the setup. If anything happened at Michael’s mom’s work, if they let her out early, she would walk in here and see the two of them snorting cocaine and watching Simpson’s episodes, both of them with their shoes off (it was a custom they had arrived at). And Michael would be in a shit-ton of trouble. Michael’s mom didn’t know Nick’s mom so Nick would just be the friend who got to walk away without getting caught, but it would still suck.

“Do you like Anna?”

“No, I mean yes, I like her, I even like her like her, but the one I’ve really got my eyes on is Tuesday. I’d love to fuck her. She has this very kind of punk goth look and she acts like a total bitch. Well, to some

people. She's calmer at our table. But she's not afraid to fight. I heard she kicked the shit out of some guy in her third period because he asked her if she was gay."

"Is she?"

"She might be bi. I'll ask her."

"Careful."

"She's into someone else, though."

"Fuck that."

"Yeah, well."

"Does she do drugs?"

"I don't think so."

"I was gonna say invite her over."

"No, I don't think she'd be into the coke."

"Too bad."

"We should find girls who are into the coke."

"I don't care if they're into coke or not."

"Do another line."

"Is it my turn?"

"Yes."

Nick does a line of the coke. "Damn, I love this shit."

"Where are we gonna get twenty dollars for tomorrow?"

"I'll ask my sister, don't worry about it."

"Is she gonna have it?"

"Yes."

"Is she gonna give it to you?"

"Maybe, look, we'll find it."

"I need you to find it 'cause I'm all out."

"I'll find it. Don't worry. I'll find it." And Nick makes himself another line, and sniffs it, and he lets his eyes defocus on some thing Lisa Simpson is doing in the background.

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They get to the stone that's a giant cross. Matt helps Tuesday up from below and then she helps pull him up into the crook of the cross. They sit on rough stone. You can kind of wedge yourself inbetween the shapes and make yourself comfortable. They get their arms around each other. It's fall; it's cold. And then their faces are toward each other and they kiss immediately, fingers gripping the other's body, and Matt leaning over and pressing Tuesday back against the cross.

"You're really goin' for it, mister."

"I like what I like."

"See that you keep all hands inside the vehicle."

“I’m keeping my hands right here.” He has them right below her breasts, one on each side, with fingers spanning around her sides.

“That’s a good place for a boy’s hands.”

“I thought so.”

“Well you thought right.”

Matt goes for her neck, he kisses her there, then bites, and she lets him.

“You’re frisky today.”

“It’s the cold.”

“I’ve been taking hot baths,” she says.

“I have too! I’ve been doing a hot bath followed by a cold shower.”

“No wonder you’re so frisky.”

“Yeah, because cold baths are supposed to—”

“I know what cold baths do. I’ve read about it in my Victorian novels.”

“Yeah, it has like a reverse effect.”

“They make you horny. But I think you’re already horny.”

“I am.”

“Do you want to go to my house?”

“No, I like sitting here. It makes me moody.”

“Again. As if you needed more of the aforementioned.”

“Fall is my favorite season.”

“Mine too.”

“Spring is my second.”

“You get me tired of saying this, but, mine too.”

“They’re both the seasons of change. Getting warmer, getting colder, going into winter, going into summer. They’re not the extremes.”

“They’re the middle ground.”

“Thank you for showing me this place.”

“It’s where I always come when I need time to myself.”

“Especially, then, thanks for bringing me here.”

“Being with you isn’t like being with another person, it isn’t. I’m just lucky I found you before one of those band girls picked you up.”

“They wouldn’t have picked me up.”

“Oh yes. You don’t know. These girls: like dogs. Like hungry dogs.”

“Tuesday?”

“Mmm?”

“Have you ever had sex?”

“Look who’s being very forward today. I don’t remember you this forward. When you ask a question, you should look into the eye of the person you are asking it to.”

“Have you had sex?”

“Well that depends on what you define as sex, I suppose. All things oral, all things penetrative but with fingers, some things slightly anal, so you could say that in some ways I have had sex, but in some ways I haven’t.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Well, in that case, then..no! I guess I haven’t.”

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Nick eyes the coffee table. There’s nothing left. There aren’t any chunks. There aren’t any lines. He wishes he could will it there, will them another \$40 worth of coke. This late in the afternoon, there’s nothing left to do but switch to pot and try to come down satisfactorily.

“Break out the pot. Break out the pot. Do you think your mom has vikes?”

“Ixnay on the icodin-vay. I checked. There’s some in a small bottle but it’s too few to take from. She’ll notice.”

“Fuck. Break out the pot.”

“Breaking out the pot!”

“Why are you in such a good mood?”

“I’m always happy once I’ve had my daily dose of vitamin C.”

“Where are we gonna get sixty dollars for tomorrow?”

“It’s not sixty. It’s eighty. And I have no idea.”

“Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. I’ve become really attuned to this ritual we have here.”

“I have too. We’ll get it. Maybe we sell our bodies on the streets.”

“You sell your body on the street. One time. See how you like it.”

“Spoken like someone who knows.”

“You don’t know what I know. As far as you know maybe I have. You know, I really need to get down Tuesday’s pants. I really need that, like Thor needs his hammer.”

“Who is Thor?”

“A Greek god. He has this hammer. Do you think if I just call her up, and say, look Tuesday, dump this Matt guy, I can make you cum faster and harder than he ever will. Something like that?”

“What does he need the hammer for?”

“Look forget about Thor. We’re talking about Tuesday Fokker here and her glorious pussy.”

“It might not be glorious.”

“What are you talking about, sure it’s glorious. You can tell by looking at her face. Girls’ pussy always follows the same pattern as their face. Sloppy face, sloppy puss. Cute face, round face, goth face, all these faces have different kinds of pussy.”

“And hers is? Goth?”

“Goth. And sweet, so sweet man. I’m telling you. Her pussy has to be magic. Just judging by the face. And it’s all devoted to him. Face, pussy, all her magic is devoted to him. I need to get myself a new crush.”

“What about Anna?”

“Anna’s nice. But Anna and me. I don’t know about that. Anna’s so political. She cares about issues. Not sure if Anna and I could get along in that way.”

“But she’s hot.”

“Of course she’s hot. She’s definitely hot. Do you think Anna would do cocaine?”

“Mmm..yes. Are you thinking about her for one of our coke girls?”

“Now we just have to get you hooked up with one. A nice, hardened, tempered, coke girl.”

“I’ll find one.”

“Place a personal. SWM ISO hardened, tempered coke girl. Must love coke. Fuck. Pass me that.”

Michael passes the pot pipe to Nick. Smoke comes out of Nick’s nose.

“Fuck it, why am I into Tuesday? The whole fucking school’s into Tuesday. There’s this girl in my photography class, she’s hot. She isn’t hot like that typical, buff, I know you’re into me and I own the whole world hot, but she has this thing about her. She seems like the kind of girl that’s had sex but doesn’t want to talk about it. Like she doesn’t need to make that a topic of conversation, it’s beneath her. But she’s a sex girl, you know, she’s a sex girl. And the way she dresses. She looks like she’s in a Sunday school dress, like these oversized, giant, dresses. I even caught a glimpse of her panties one day because I was sitting in a desk that faced hers, and we were reading about Man Ray, and right there was this little white swatch of underwear.”

“What’s her name?”

“Christina of all things. I know like six Christinas.”

“You should fuck her.”

“I know I should fuck her, why do you think I’m telling you this story? This is a story about a girl named Christina who ends up fucking me, because she’s home alone with me and after I finger her she just has to have the cock.”

“Invite her over.”

“I will invite her over. Just wait. She doesn’t look like she’d turn out to be a coke girl, but she looks like a girl with a sweet pussy.”

“What’s her face like?”

“This face..this face is like slim and soft, with just the right amount of cheek. No. This face definitely has a nice pussy to go with it.

Definitely.”

“Are you chilling out?”

“Yeah. That coke today had me going. I’d like to have sex on coke, I mean I know it makes your dick small and everything but if I could just get a girl to suck me off on coke, I would know I had really found something. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, that coke really had me going, too. I think I know a girl who would suck you off on coke.”

“Is she a crack whore?”

“Of course she’s a crack whore, what did you expect?”

“You don’t know no crack whores.”

“I’m referring to my sister.”

“Your sister’s gonna suck me off?”

“Yeah.”

“Is she really that strung out?”

“Yeah.”

“Ask her for the money. She’s got to have eighty dollars floating around somewhere.”

“I’ll ask her.”

“You will?”

“I’ll ask her, but..don’t expect the answer will be yes. I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“I won’t get my hopes up. But that’s great, man, call me when you ask her, tell me how it goes.”

“I can tell you how it’s gonna go.”

“How?”

“Just don’t get your hopes up.”

Nick hits the pipe again, passes it to Michael.

“I swear to you that I’m going to get laid this year, by a fine fox, or I’m going to cut off my little finger.”

Michael looks at Nick. “Which hand?”

“My left hand, fool, what do you think I’m stupid?”

-----

“Have you?” Tuesday asks Matt.

“No, I haven’t.” He puts his hand up Tuesday’s jumper, feeling ‘round the leg holes of her panties.

“I thought you were asking for it in the art room the other day. I think you’re asking for it now.”

Matt is silent. His fingers play on Tuesday’s legs.

“Well, were you?”

“I just don’t want to get anybody pregnant.”



Tuesday laughs. “You won’t. Just be careful. Silly boy.”

“Do you want it?”

“Soon, I think.”

Matt stops playing with Tuesday’s leg.

She takes his hand and re-places it on the pit of her crotch. “Ask me,” she says, “for what you want.”

Matt takes Tuesday’s hand and places it on his crotch.

She massages him, playing with the zipper. “Come to my house,” she says.

“Is your mom home?”

Tuesday shrugs. She turns her back to Matt and leans back on him. Matt’s hands go around Tuesday and he runs his fingers inside the leg holes. Matt’s dick gets hard, and presses into Tuesday’s back. She lays her head on his shoulder.

The cemetery is quiet except for the sound of leaves. Wind in the trees, the fallen leaves rubbing against each other. The light fades. Soon they will have to leave, or they’ll get stuck in the dark.

“I wish this could last forever,” she says.

“I wish it too.”

“Copier.”

“I love touching you.”

“Put your fingers inside me. Go all the way.”

Matt adjusts so that his arm can reach further, and he does what she says, he puts first one, then two fingers inside her. She is hot and his fingers cold from the autumn air. She squeezes herself tight around him, and she has her eyes closed to focus on the feeling between her legs. She grabs his other hand and the fingers weave. He fucks her with his fingers, slowly, going deep as he can, holding her strongly with a sturdy hand.

“Soon we’re going to have to go home.”

“I wish we didn’t have to.”

“We can do more in my bedroom.”

“Will your mom let me be up there?”

“Yeah, she’ll just require that the door stay open.”

“Right.”

“So we make out with the door open, you got a problem with that?”

“Anything where I’m with you I don’t got a problem with.”

“Watch your grammar, boy. Nobody gets to finger me ain’t got good grammar.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Say you love me. Isn’t that what we’ve got?”

“Love?”

“I think it is. You don’t have to say it. It’s corny and old-fashioned anyway but I just thought to myself, ‘is this love?’ and then I came around

to thinking, 'yes it is,' but if it isn't to you then I will shut up and—"

"It is."

"Yes?"

"It is. It's love for me."

"I think I loved you since the first day, in French, when you had those marbles, and you put one on my desk for me to play with."

"Was that the moment?"

"Didn't you love me then, on the first day?"

"I did. I loved you as soon as I saw you, I could tell before you even opened your mouth."

"Tell me more about it."

"Then you did open your mouth, and whispered some silly thing to me."

"I always whisper silly things, you should know that."

"I know that now. But then I was just getting used to you."

"How long did it take for you to get used to me?"

"About a day."

"Really? That long?"

"About half a day, from French class to the lunchroom."

"We have to go now. You know that. We have to leave."

"I don't want to ever leave. I want to stay here with you in this cemetery forever, right here in our seat on the cross, and touch you with my fingers and kiss you."

"Kiss me."

She turns back to face him and they grab each other's faces and kiss for a long time. It is almost dark when they separate.

-----

Coming into homeroom. Matt has his bag on him, and it's one of those fall days that feels like spring. No need for coats. Won't get too many more of these days before it's cold cold, for the whole winter.

Tuesday, seated backward in her desk, facing the one that Matt sits in. He goes to it and gets in, looks at Tuesday. She's got an evil look on her face.

"What are you planning?"

"Excuse me?"

"I take it back. You're plotting. You're plotting something."

"Oh am I?"

"Yes. You are. Aren't you?"

"Am I? Am I? What would I plot?"

"I don't know. But it's something evil. I saw the evil look on your face."

“I had no such look. What you saw..if you saw anything..was the look of a studious girl who has done all her homework.”

“You couldn’t even say it without laughing.”

“Oh alright I admit! I had an evil look.”

“What did it mean?”

“It means..do you want to cut..with me and Julian today.”

“Which period?”

“All of them.”

“See I knew that was an evil look.”

“What else do you expect from me? Go ahead: smirk! I know how to get your attention, mister.”

“And how is that?”

Tuesday spreads her legs and shows Matt her shaved vulva.

“You’re not wearing any panties,” he says.

Tuesday puts her finger over her mouth. “Shh.”

“You’re a bad, bad girl. You need to be punished.”

“Are you going to punish me?”

Matt nods.

Tuesday closes her legs and smooths her skirt. “So do you wanna come?”

“Do I wanna come?”

“Yes, that’s what I asked you. Do you want to come?”

“In what sense?”

“Don’t be scientific. Just say you’ll come.”

“I’ll come.”

“Good. We’re meeting Julian downstairs out front after the bell.

And I suggest..you both take off your underwear, as this has been officially declared no underwear day..by me, before you ask.”

“I’ll get Julian.”

“Good boy.”

-----

Julian’s homeroom. Right downstairs.

“Mr. Shutt, I need Julian in the main office.”

“What? Why?”

“Attendance issues.”

“Ok. Go ahead. Julian, better take your things.”

Matt and Julian step into the hallway.

“So?” Julian says. “Are you coming?”

“Coming where?”

“Out with me and Tuesday.”

“Yes, oh yes. But we have to do something first.”

“Ok, what?”

“It might be kind of surprising.”

“What is it?”

“Well.”

“My friend, do tell. What is this you have to say?”

“It’s a message from Tuesday.”

“Spit it out!”

“Today has been declared national no underwear day. According to her. So, we are to..remove our underwear before..meeting back up with Tuesday.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

“You don’t think that’s weird?”

“I think it’s beautiful!”

“Ok.”

“Did Tuesday take hers off?”

“Yes. Don’t ask—”

“How do you know?”

“Don’t ask how I know, that’s what I was going to say. Don’t ask how I know, but I can confirm that she is panty-less. Little freak.”

“And so are you,” Julian says, patting Matt on the shoulder. “And that’s why we love you.”

—————

“Did you two change?”

“Yes, dear, we are dangling in the wind, we are free-ballin’, we are going commando.”

“Great, I get it.”

It’s just the three of them, crossing the teachers’ parking lot, when Mr. Willis comes out. “Hall sweep! Hall sweep! I want you three inside and in the lunchroom right away.”

“Uh, no, Mr. Willis,” Julian begins.

Mr. Willis is on top of us now.

“See,” Julian says, “we’re working on an art project.”

Tuesday shows her camera bag.

“For Mrs. Falconi. We’re shooting a film around the school and we’re scouting locations for the shoot. This is just a routine scouting expedition and we’ll have that film shot and developed before the end of first period. Ok, so we better get going—”

“Wait. You’re all in Mrs. Falconi’s class?”

“Well, in different sections, but yes.”

“And Mrs. Falconi knows about this?”

“She’s the one who sent us out here!”

“Julian, I find out you’re bullshitting me I’ll suspend your ass.”

“Not a problem,” Julian mutters.

“What was that?”

“I said not a problem, uh, Mr. Willis.”

“Alright you three, get out of here. Take good pictures!”

And Julian and Tuesday and Matt head down the hill, towards the nearest public bus stop.

-----

“Mr. Willis is gonna suspend your ass.”

“Yeah, Julian, how much class do you cut?”

“I’m learning the piano.”

“I don’t think Mr. Willis agrees with spending all day in the private lesson rooms.”

“I have a new song now, actually I have three new songs. Matt, I’d like to play them for you sometime if you don’t mind.”

“Sounds good.”

Tuesday looks out the window. “Julian. Do you have a piano at home?”

“Well, you see, not reeally, because, you see, what we have is a keyboard that can only play one note. Just one note at a time. So it’s hard to practice with.”

“What did you tell him? There isn’t even a photo class first period! Mr. Willis is dumb.”

“He doesn’t care if you tell him you’re doing an art project. That’s the trick. It’s a school for the arts: how are they gonna tell you not to do an art project?”

“Will your mom be mad?”

“Mine’s never going to find out.”

“Should we get off here?”

“Let’s go to the park.”

“Which park?” Matt says.

“We’ll show you,” Julian says. “You’ll like this.”

-----

The park is a one-block square in the Oregon District, one of the historic districts in town. The three of them set their things at the base of a flying car, then climb up into it.

“Did you really take your underwear off?”

“Hell yeah. You really did.”

“I want proof. Proof, boys.”

So Julian and Matt both unzip their pants. Julian takes his dick all the way out.

“Thank you, I didn’t need that level of proof.”

“Earlier,” Matt says, “when I was in the bathroom, I reached down and startled myself.”

Tuesday laughs. Matt pulls his dick out too. Tuesday reaches over and grabs it.

“Matt,” Julian says, “I never really know but I can see that you really do have a cock, not just a penis.”

“Julian, that tells me just how blind you are without your glasses.”

“Not a cock?”

“Not even hardly.”

“Well. Delightful.”

Tuesday takes her hand off it and both Matt and Julian zip up.

“Why did you decide for it to be no underwear day?” Matt hears this perfectly but due to Julian’s mumbling, Tuesday didn’t.

“What? Speak up Julian.”

“I said when did you decide for this to be no underwear day?”

“Oh. When I was getting up. At first I forgot to put my underwear on. And then I was like, I need to get some underwear. And then I was like: no I don’t. That was pretty much how it went.”

“Well thanks for letting us go along with you on your trip.”

“What?? Speak up, Julian. For a theatre person you sure do a lot of mumbling.”

“I said. Thanks for letting us go along with you on your trip.”

“Do you know what he’s saying?”

“No.”

“Ahh well. It’s a picnic, boys. What else could you ask for?”

“A cup of coffee,” Julian says.

“Well go up to the coffeehouse and get yourself one.”

“I’m— I’m afraid— That you and Matt wouldn’t be here when I returned.”

“Julian, go get yourself a cup of coffee! We ain’t gonna leave you!”

“Do I have your word?”

“Julian, go. We’ll be here.”

“You won’t get distracted and forget about me?”

“How could we forget about you? Besides, you’ll be gone, like, twenty minutes tops, where can we go?”

“You’ll really be here?”

“Yes!”

“I’m trusting you. And Matt, I don’t know you as well but I’m trusting you, not to run away with..miss no panties over there. Am I putting my trust in the right person?”

“Yes. Not going anywhere. Nothing to worry about. Get your coffee.”

“Ok, I was wondering, do either of you have fifty cents I can borrow, I have some but I can get a larger cup with fifty more cents.”

Tuesday shrugs.

Matt gets out some coins.

“I’ll be right— Right back.”

“Go!” Tuesday yells.

Then Matt and Tuesday lie back in the car.

“You shouldn’t belittle your cock.”

“No?”

“No, you have a nice cock.”

“You like it?”

“Obviously.”

“Would you like it inside you?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll do that someday.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Get it out again I want to suck on you before Julian gets back.”

She still has it in her mouth when Matt sees Julian returning.

“Here comes Julian.”

“Damn. Damn it.” She gives it one last slurp. “Better pack up.”

Matt gets it inside his pants but it’s sticking way up.

“Ahoy,” Julian shouts.

“Ahoy is for ships.”

Julian comes up the ladder. Sets his coffee down.

“Well, we didn’t leave ya. What do you make of that?”

“I can see by looking at my friend’s groin area that you had fun without me.”

“Don’t be lookin’ at his groin area!”

Julian and Tuesday have a stare-off.

“Mind your own business.”

“But—”

“Mind your own business! Don’t make yourself a nuisance, Jules!”

“She calls me Jules sometimes.”

“When I’m angry.”

“Other times, too.” Julian takes a sip of coffee. “I was just saying—”

“Are we done?”

“I was just about to say—”

“Are we done!?!?”

“Sure. So Matt, I want to play you my new songs and I was

wondering if tomorrow before homeroom would be a good time.”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

“I was thinking that time would be best, if you were available, because—”

“He said yes, ok? He said yes. You can leave it alone.”

“We’ve known each other for a long time,” Julian says.

“Too long,” Tuesday says.

“So you can’t mind our quirks,” Julian says.

Tuesday throws a stick at Julian. “Go away!” She throws another stick. “Why are you here?”

-----

Julian is walking in the front. Tuesday and Matt are walking in the back. They come to a house that’s for sale. Tuesday and Matt stop, and Julian is singing to himself so it takes him a second to notice.

“Look at this,” Matt says, pulling one of the flyers from a box.

“Reduced price.”

Tuesday looks up at the house. It’s two stories, and has a mini balcony on the second floor. “We could have breakfast out there.”

“I can see that. We could have fresh OJ every morning.”

“Two little chairs.”

“What about me?” Julian says. “I thought you said you and I were going to get a house and start Sidereal Studios.”

“What’s Sidereal Studios?”

“It’s this thing we’re planning.”

“Is it top secret?”

“It is secret..for the moment. Tell her, Matt.”

“I want to do everything,” Matt says. “I want to be everywhere and I want to be everyone and I want to think everything that’s possible.”

“Did you tell Julian you’d move in with him?”

“We discussed getting a house.”

“I thought you were going to move in with me!”

“I am. I am. I’m going to do it all.”

“But how are you going to move in with her..if you’re moving in with me.”

“Trust me, I’ll find a way. See this? Price reduced—”

“On this mansion—”

“It is a mansion, isn’t it? Do you think we could live in a mansion?”

“I think we would have to.”

“I think you’re right.”

“You could have an office. For your programming.”



“Ok but I prefer not to call it an office.”

“What do you want to call it?”

“A studio?”

“A studio.”

“And you could have one for your photography.”

“Oh, you.”

Then Julian pipes in. “You two wanna include me in your little planning session?”

“No, Julian, that’s where I draw the line. You are not living with us. You can have your own house, down the street.”

“Ok, well, I guess, if your highness decrees it, then that will have to be acceptable.”

Matt turns the flyer over. There are details on the back, a chart showing the number of bedrooms, bathrooms, the total square footage of the house, the fact that there’s a basement, and the realtor’s phone number in case of questions.

“Call it.”

“I kind of want to.”

“Call and see how much it is.”

“I might.”

“Let’s go downtown.”

“What’s downtown?”

“Just need to move.”

“I’m game. If you can get your boy to go.”

“Downtown?”

“Sure.” Matt is still engrossed in the flyer. What would he have to create to have enough money to buy that house? It would have to be something spectacular, something people loved.

“Let’s go.”

“Ok.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m thinking. Just thinking.”

“Think while we walk.”

“Ok.” Matt is folding the flyer and putting it in his bookbag.

Julian puts his arm around Matt. “Don’t worry about it. When Sidereal Studios takes off we’ll have plenty of money. You’ll be able to buy that house.”

Matt says nothing.

“Cheer up, my friend. Things will get better.”

Matt turns to Julian. “I agree.”

“With me?”

“Of course.”

“Indeed.”

Matt puts his arm around Julian for a second.

“You boys are weird.” Tuesday walks ahead.

They all go until they’re in another park, this one in the center of downtown Dayton. There are benches and a small creek that runs through the middle of it.

Tuesday sits on a bench. Puts down her impossibly heavy bookbag. Julian joins her. Matt wanders off toward the creek.

“You know, I don’t appreciate you going behind my back and setting up a place to live with Matt when he and I had plans to create Sidereal Studios.”

“Shut up, Julian.”

“It’s not very nice of you. I mean— It doesn’t seem like the kind of thing a girl like you would do.”

“You should know me, Julian. I’m not your nice girl.”

“But you like to give off the nice girl vibe.”

“I do not.”

“Well, ok, half of you is nice girl and half of you is..”

“Is what?”

“Is not nice.”

“More of me than half is not nice, Jules. Learn that.”

“I just don’t think it’s polite of you to make plans behind my back.”

“You think Matt is going to move in with you to create Sidereal Studios? Think again.”

“Matt,” Julian shouts. “Aren’t we going to move in to create Sidereal Studios.”

Matt turns and listens to this. Then he comes back to the bench. “I have to pee,” he says.

“Hold it,” Tuesday says.

“There must be a restaurant— That would let you go.”

Matt scratches his nose. “I was thinking of going in the creek.”

“The Spag’ House must be open,” Julian says. Spag’ House is short for the Spaghetti Warehouse, a restaurant about a block away.

“I think I’m going in the creek.”

Tuesday says, “Don’t look at me. At least you don’t have any underwear to pull down.”

“Yes, thanks for that,” Matt says, and he goes back to the creek.

Tuesday and Julian see him unzip his pants and go in the artificial creek, just hanging out there for anyone in one of the surrounding buildings to see.

“Do you think he’s losing it?” Tuesday asks.

“No, I think that’s just the way he is.”

Tuesday likes that about Matt: that he will just do what he wants to regardless of the rules. Julian envies the same, but it makes him

uncomfortable, because he doesn't want the three of them to get arrested.

"Do either of you have to go? I highly recommend the creek."

"Just be careful you don't get a dribble down the side of your jeans."

"I shook! I knocked off the drip! There's no dribble running down the side of my jeans."

"Ok, calm, calm."

"I don't believe you did that."

"I'm glad you did. It's just as much your right to pee in that creek as it is those kids to play in it."

"There's kids here?"

"You didn't see that whole family down the way, when you decided to whip your dick out and piss in the river??"

"Oh well."

"I don't think they saw."

"You guys wanna go to the Spag' House?"

"That's fine except I don't have any money. And weren't you the one borrowing quarters to go to the coffeehouse?"

"I was hoping Matt had some money."

"I don't. Not enough for Spag' House."

"Matt. Have a seat. You're driving me crazy."

"With what?"

"You're pacing! Do you see you're pacing?"

"I'm excited. I like pissing in creeks. It makes my primal whatever come out. Do you mind?"

"Primal whatever sounds like it's going to benefit me," Tuesday says. "But do sit down. You're walking like a crazy man."

"So now you're on his side?"

"I just want to feel you between my thighs. Come sit with me."

Matt sits between Tuesday's legs, on the edge of the bench. He's tapping his hands on her legs. Tuesday runs her hands over his, soothing him. Julian sits perched on the back of the bench, watching traffic.

"Why can't you pee in that stream? No one drinks out of it. It's just people afraid of bathroom stuff. That's all it is," Matt says. "Same reason you can't wear a skirt to church, if you're a guy. It's just people are uncomfortable with it because they've never seen it before. I'm tired of these stupid rules. People have never thought these things through."

"Do you still have the skirt I gave you?"

"Yeah, I wear it all the time at home."

"You should wear it to school."

"Yes, you should."

"If I feel like it, I will. I already wore it to church. It's very comfortable. I like how my dick just hangs. Nothing under it."

“Like today. You’re my no underwear boys. Julian, how’s your testicles hanging? You feeling free? You feeling relaxed?”

Julian does a military salute toward Tuesday.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Private Freeball, reporting.”

“You need to get your head checked.”

Julian cuts his eyes toward Matt by way of asking Tuesday if it isn’t actually her river-pissing companion who needs a head check.

Tuesday looks away.

Julian is thinking that you can never hang out with lovers. It neuters the male. Probably neuters the female, too, but in this case it was Matt he was concerned with. Julian didn’t want his plans with Matt to get messed up by a girl. And that was always the way plans got messed up, someone like Tuesday would come along and steal your best friend right from under you. Julian needed to get back to a piano asap. No way to go back to school after cutting: some teacher would see you and make a stink. Tonight it was going to have to be the keyboard, the one that only plays one note at a time. He could practice his finger positions, he knew what they were supposed to sound like.

Tuesday brings her hands toward Matt’s crotch, and she rubs him. He’s lying back on her, looking up at the trees. She gives him a full hard on, which she then rubs. Matt moves her hands up to his nipples, and she plays with them under the shirt. It makes his dick even harder, and it’s only a matter of time before the two of them are going to fuck. Matt can feel Tuesday’s crotch hot on his back, and he knows she is excited. He puts his hands behind his back and rubs her thighs.

This is what they have, instead of class. Their own little classroom out in the world, where they can dream about buying houses, get a little flirty, and be free of the eternal ruling of school, forcing them to go from this class to that, never giving them quite enough time for art, and keeping them inside that gray school. For today, this is better.

—————

Matt finds Tuesday in the auditorium, sitting in the back, while the theatre kids practice for *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She’s doing her homework.

“Hey, Tues.”

She looks up to see him behind her, over her. She can tell by his face that something is wrong.

Matt sits down next to her. His head is low. He’s almost crying.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I’m just..sad. I’ve been this way since I woke up.”

Tuesday closes a textbook. She looks at Matt. His entire affect is changed. Some of the teachers have suggested Tuesday is bipolar, but she thinks Matt is a much more likely target. Matt is just staring at the floor. Tuesday puts her hand on him. Matt looks over, and his eyes are welling up.

“Aww.” She puts her arms around him. “What is wrong? What is broken in my little Matthew, which part isn’t working?”

“I don’t know!”

“It’s ok. Calm your little head about it. You’ll be back with us soon enough. Why aren’t you in class?”

“Why aren’t you in class?” he laughs.

“I’m trying to help you, you might have a polite attitude about it.”

“Sorry.”

“Are you gonna be ok when you go home?”

“I don’t think I can go home. It would make things worse.”

“You wanna come to my house?”

Matt nods.

“Ok. We’ll take you in today. You wanna go now?”

Matt nods again. He is fully crying now, making no sound, holding it in. It’s a hero’s effort.

Tuesday takes his hand and puts it on her leg. She packs up her books, buckling them inside her bag. “Let’s go.”

-----

They walk to a city bus stop a few blocks from the school. There is nowhere to sit, so they take turns sitting on each other, first Tuesday sits on the ground leaning against the bus stop sign and Matt sits on top of her, then they reverse and it is Tuesday sitting on top of Matt.

When the bus comes, they sit in the very back, Matt against the window and Tuesday right next to him, with one of her legs draped over one of his, so that their legs are every other, every other.

They sit in silence. Tuesday thinks about her brother and sister who will be home when they get there. Matt thinks all things dark, about dying someday, how it’s inevitable. Tuesday thinks about her friend, and hopes he will be ok, and she thinks about some Heinlein she’s reading. Matt thinks about Tuesday, and wonders why today he doesn’t think of her sexually, but as some kind of mother or friend. Tuesday thinks of changing busses downtown, and how it will involve standing across the street from the bus stop where all the black people wait, and how they’ll probably make comments about what she’s wearing.

Tuesday leans her head onto Matt's shoulder, even though it's she who is supposed to take care of him. When Matt gets sad like this it opens up something in Tuesday. She really empathizes.

By the time they get to Tuesday's house Matt is cried out, and he slides into a languid mode, most sensitive to others' needs, listening carefully to Tuesday's siblings when they talk, as if what they are saying is the most important thing in the world. Tuesday's brother and sister go to school around the corner, and they let themselves in with a key. Tuesday watches them from the time she gets home to the time her mother gets off of work. Today we're making mashed potatoes. Tuesday puts them in a large bowl, adds water, and mashes them with her feet. It's a kind of eccentric move she makes when something isn't right, like today, with Matt being sad—her way to acknowledge that the world is fucked up, and in such a world, you don't always have to follow the rules.

The kids play Dr. Mario on a Nintendo emulator. Tuesday is in the kitchen making dinner and Matthew is there watching her, offering to help but she doesn't need any.

"Once I get dinner ready we can go downstairs."

"What's downstairs?"

"My basement."

Matt laughs.

"There we go..there's a little laugh from my sad, sad companion! String a couple of those together and we'd have a regular party. Seriously, you were scaring me a little back there, I'm glad to see you have some life in you."

"Sorry to scare you."

"Don't be sorry! I'm banning that word from your vocabulary."

"Ok—"

"Don't say it!"

"Ok," he chuckles, "I won't."

Tuesday sits there with her stockings off, freshly-washed feet mashing a large bowl of potatoes, and she looks motherly to Matt, working, taking care of her siblings.

"We're having this and steaks."

Steaks turn out to be these thin little steaks, not what Matt had come to expect when the word "steak" was mentioned. They're pre-cooked and Tuesday microwaves them.

"Come on in now! Come and get it!"

Matt and Tuesday play footsie while they eat dinner. Tuesday has set them across from each other at the kitchen table, and her brother and her sister sit next to them. Everyone eats extremely fast, and Matt is out of place here, too, savoring his food.

"Y'all should learn a thing or two from Matt, you're not supposed

to eat so fast, it's bad for you. You'll have time for Dr. Mario."

"Can we go back to Dr. Mario?"

"Finish your potatoes first."

"Tues'y!"

"Finish your potatoes! I worked real hard on those and I want you to eat 'em!"

They finish their potatoes and go back to the living room.

Tuesday stacks the dishes in the sink. She comes to Matt and extends a hand. Matt takes it. He stands. Tuesday leads him downstairs, into a crowded basement. But there's a couch, and Tuesday takes Matt to it and sits him down. She kneels on top of him. She undoes her top. She takes off her bra, and takes Matt's hand and cups it around her breast. He is feeling the nipple and he puts his other hand up. She has large nipples, and this is the first time he's feeling them. They're textured, with bumps on the areolae, and he likes to touch those bumps. His dick gets hard. Tuesday is feeling it through his jeans. They're kissing. Matt pulls away.

"Do you know—? Do you know what it's like when everything's wrong, when just the weight of everything is so..heavy. And it's not just my parents and it's not just school and it's not just my own crazy mind but it's just like the sum total of everything is wrong? I got stuck the other day. I stopped walking. This is downtown. In courthouse square. I stopped walking and I didn't stop until Julian came along about forty minutes later. I just couldn't take another step. Until I figured out something. I wanted to make something right. I'm lucky Julian came along or I might have been standing there a lot longer. He dislodged me, as it were. But I'm just at this point where I can't, do, anything. Does this all sound crazy to you?"

"No."

"I have to make something, or I have to do something, to make things right. There's something I'm supposed to do, and until I do it, I won't be right. I try to write books but I can't get very far, so I'm not sure that's it. I'm programming something, for science fair, and that's pretty good, but it's not quite it. It's like I can see a little bit into the future, and I can see far enough to know that I do this thing, create this thing, in the future, but I don't know what it is and I don't know how to get there."

"Maybe you'll figure it out along the way."

"Maybe."

"Maybe you're bipolar."

"Yeah."

"No I'm serious. I thought I was for a while but I don't think I am."

"I don't think I am."

"But you display so many of the characteristics of it. I really think

you might be.”

“So..what? I’m bipolar, what do I do about it. I mean people just are the way they are.”

“You’d take medicine.”

“I don’t believe in first world medicine. It’s all there to fix a problem that already exists. None of it is for preventing things before they come into existence. You know?”

“It’s just an idea.”

“Yes, and thanks for suggesting it. I’ll think about it. I’m glad you suggested it.”

“You don’t have to thank me.” Tuesday un-kneels herself from Matt’s lap and lies down on the couch next to him.

Matt wants to touch her but he’s too messed up. He’s too much in his head. Thinking that the world is ending and he’s suddenly not going to be in it, etc. How do you have desire for sex when you’re thinking too much? His brain is full, sex won’t keep his interest. Tuesday is lying there, topless, and he manages to get his hand on her crotch, but then he pulls back, and sinks deeper into the sadness hole.

Tuesday sits up. “You don’t have to.” She puts her hand on his, covering it. “I think too much of sex. It’s how I’m wired.”

“You think about sex just the right amount.”

“Is it too much for you?”

“No, it’s great, I’m just too much of a mess today.”

“Maybe it’ll cheer you up!”

“I’m sorry, Tuesday. You deserve somebody who’s going to be with you when they’re with you, not off in thought land.”

“But I want you.”

“I will. When I get myself together.” Matt sticks his hand down her pants and brushes just above her vagina.

A voice comes down from the kitchen. “Tuesday? You down there? Matt’s mom called.”

They can see her mom’s shadow, and her legs from the shin down.

“Is Matt with you?”

“Yes.”

“Come on upstairs. Matt, your mom is worried about you. I think you should call her and tell her where you are.”

Tuesday’s mom stands a moment longer at the top of the stairs, then recedes.

Tuesday is re-doing her bra and Matt licks her through the material before she gets her shirt on. Tuesday stands. Matt grabs the front of her jeans and pulls down on them.

Tuesday says, “You should have asked for that earlier.”



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So Thanksgiving rolls around, and Julian invites Matt to spend it with Julian's family, and Matt accepts. He'll go out with Julian's family on Thanksgiving day.

Julian's mom drives. Her name is Vivica. Julian's two brothers and one sister sit in the back seat. Julian sits in the front. They pull up in front of Matt's house.

"Oooh, this is a nice house," Vivica says. "Go on. Go get your friend."

Julian unlocks the car door and steps out. He is wearing his trenchcoat, and the fall air justifies it. He walks up the steps, then up another set of steps, and knocks on the door.

Matt answers.

"You ready?"

"I'm ready."

"Do I need to come in? Can we just go?"

"We can just go. Bye Mom!"

Julian hears Matt's mom, from inside the house, say bye to him.

"Your mom sounds very cheerful."

"Yeah."

"That must be nice, to have a cheerful mother."

"I guess it is."

"Well you could see that from the point of view of someone who's mother isn't often cheerful, that it might attract one, a cheerful mother."

"Mine isn't always cheerful," Matt says. "And my dad is often not cheerful."

"At least you have a dad."

"Touché."

"Well. Are you ready to have fun, Ender-style?"

"Yeah! Thanks for inviting me."

"No problem. Happy Thanksgiving, friend."

"Happy Thanksgiving."

They're at the car. Julian opens the door and gets in. He slides to the middle of the seat. Matt gets in, snug against his friend, and closes the door.

"Hi Mrs. Ender."

"Hi dear. Glad you decided to come with us. Andre, Adrian, say hi to Julian's friend Matthew."

"Matt."

"Well Matt then. Aisha, say hi to Matt."

"We know him."

"How do you know him?"

“He’s been over!”

“Now Julian, I don’t remember you asking me to have a friend over. Matt, you been over to the house?”

“Yes Mrs. Ender.”

“It’s Vivica, you know that. I got enough people at your school calling me ‘Mrs. Ender,’ I don’t need you doing the same thing.” (Vivica works at Colonel White.) “You been over our house?”

“Yes, once.”

“Julian, don’t be having people over the house when you know it’s messy as all get out. We need to clean before people come over. So you saw the place. Was it bad?”

“No, it was fine.”

“Julian, you’ve got some polite friends. Anyway, we’re gonna take you up to Old Country Buffet, show you how we do Thanksgiving our style.”

“Great, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Let’s go!” Aisha squeals. She’s the youngest of the four. She’s eight.

“Ok, ok, we’re going,” Vivica says, and she pulls the car up to the next intersection. She takes a right. They’re headed for Salem Avenue.

-----

“So how did your Thanksgiving with your family go?”

Vivica is driving. Julian and Matt talk quietly in the front seat.

“It went fine.”

“Did you save room for our dinner?”

“I saved room.”

“How was your father? Any outbursts?”

“No, he was relatively tame today.”

“Did you tell Suzanne I said hi?”

“Yes.”

“What did she say?”

“She said, ‘Well, tell him I said hi back.’”

“I think you know I like your sister.”

“I know.”

“Does it make you feel uncomfortable?”

“It will if you flirt with her while she’s not flirting with you.”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about, my friend. Man, I’m hungry.”

“I agree.”

Julian looks over at Matt. “With me?”

“Of course.”

“Indeed!”

The boys slap hands. Vivica is just turning into the strip mall that contains Old Country Buffet.

-----

The restaurant is almost empty. It's eight o'clock and dark outside. They find a table against a wall and take their coats off. Matt and Julian separate as they head toward the serving stations. When they're back together Matt speaks first.

"See you went for the pork."

"See you went for the mac 'n' cheese."

"Fiend."

"Freak."

"I am! I am a freak! Julian, this is great. Thanks for inviting me."

"You're welcome. I hope you try some of this pork. It's amaaaaazing."

"Can I have some off of your plate?"

"Of course."

"Indeed." Matt takes his fork into Julian's plate and serves himself a bite. "Mmm. That is good."

"It's a good motherfucker."

"Julian!"

"Sorry mom. It's just..good."

"You boys better stop chatting and start eating."

"We can have a decent conversation over dinner, mother."

"As long as you manage to eat while you do it."

"We're eating, Mom. Are you eating?"

Matt holds up his fork; his mouth is full.

"He's eating, Mom!"

"Quiet down."

"He's eating, Mom."

"You two are the strangest pair I have ever seen. Matt with your short hair and Julian, you, with your braids. But y'all seem to be close."

"We're twins, Mom."

"Yeah," Matt adds.

"You two is twins, alright. Alright Julian, whatever you say."

"Who's ready for a second plate?" That's Julian, standing and addressing the entire table.

Aisha holds her plate above her head.

"That's the spirit! Come with me, let's leave these talking fools and once again rejoin the fray of serving trays and ladles and napkins. Come on Aish." Julian pats the girl on the back as she goes toward the serving area.

Matt feels somewhat uncomfortable being out with Julian's whole family, especially Julian's mom. Usually it's just him and Julian.

"Go on, get yourself some more food." Vivica says this almost before Matt has finished his first plate, but he obeys, leaving his empty plate and getting up from the table.

Andre and Adrian seem to have their own private conversation going on, voices low, and they might occasionally rap some of their talk to each other. Aisha is the extrovert, talking freely with Matt about his food.

"You got mac 'n' cheese again?"

"I like mac 'n' cheese. You got cheesecake?!"

"My friend," Julian says, "have you thought about what I mentioned yesterday?"

Matt chews.

"About the studio?"

The studio is an apartment in the Oregon District. Julian wants he and Matt to get jobs and move in together. Vivica is not at the table when Julian brings this up to Matt.

Matt says, "Let's talk about it later."

"Ok, but do I have your word that we'll talk about it?"

"You have my word."

Julian gets up to get another plate. Matt stays at the table and tries to maintain a decent connection with the others.

Vivica comes back. "Get yourself another plate!"

"I'm not hungry."

"You filled yourself up with food earlier?"

"Not really. I've just had enough."

"These kids know good food when they see it."

Matt gets up, goes toward the serving area. He picks up another plate. Julian is at the steak station, getting a fat steak cooked up to his specification.

"Hey."

"Hey. You ok?"

"I'm just not hungry and your mom is like forcing me to get another plate."

Julian looks down at Matt's plate. It has a couple cookies on it. Julian says, "Well, at our place, sometimes food is hard to come by."

-----

Julian's house. Julian at his mother's door. It's morning. His mom has already gone to work. Julian is late for school. He pushes the door open. He goes in. On her shelves, under the bed, on the bedside tables, are cans and cans of food. Beef stew, macaroni and cheese, cans of beans. There's

even an area where she's stashed salt and pepper, other spices nearby. You could eat off the food in this room for three weeks. The cabinets in the kitchen are bare..some cake mix, no milk, all the cabinet doors open, a roach trap in the middle of the floor. No kitchen table. Fluorescent lighting bleaching out the walls. When you've grown up with someone who hoards food, giving you nothing, and she's your mother, and you have to sneak into her room to steal food to eat, you tend to get more than two plates of food at Old Country Buffet. You don't understand your friend who only has cookies on his plate, this early in the meal. You feel a separation between the two of you, as close as you are, in this difference. You start to feel self-conscious with every plate you amass, over two, but you keep going back to the stands because you know when you get home it's going to be nothing until you're alone at the house and can steal from your mother's bedroom to make something proper for breakfast. Julian lies on the floor, his head upside-down, looking at the stores underneath his mother's bed. Hunt's Ketchup, a jar of kimchi, two eggs, probably rotten from being outside the refrigerator. Julian settles for a can of tomato soup and a package of ramen, because these are two items kept here in bulk and it's less likely she'll notice something missing. He carries the items to the kitchen and has music in his head while he heats first the ramen, then the tomato soup, eating out of the pot he cooked them in. He sits on the counter, cross-legged, his braids dangling in his face, eating. And when he's done, he washes the pot, then places it under the stove, exactly where he found it. He takes the can, the ramen wrapper, and the foil flavor packet and puts them in his bookbag. He'll get rid of those downtown, where he changes busses. He can picture the trash can he'll use, unzipping his bag and surreptitiously dumping the containers.

And Julian hoists his bag, and starts the trek to school.

-----

There is an apartment called Multimedia. It has a sticker on its white door that says that. This is the house of Zane, who used to go to Colonel White but now has a job and a place to live and the kids of Colonel White like to hang out there and smoke pot and cigarettes and cut school.

Julian drags Matt there one day when Tuesday was nowhere to be found. Nick was already there. Anna was supposed to be coming. Matt had never been there before. Julian knocks on the door.

"Come in!" Zane, sitting in his recliner, all the way back, with his legs spread and the remote control in his hand.

They boys go inside the apartment. It has a porch which is wide enough to set chairs on, but there are no chairs. It's the downstairs apartment of a two-story house. Zane motions to the couch. He's

watching a show where robots destroy each other in a ring, using crushing techniques and fire and water and electric shock.

“This is my favorite part. Watch. Dune Buggy catapults himself over Wave Ranger and gets him from behind. This is great.”

Truly, the robot named Dune Buggy extends a rod which he bangs against the ground to catapult himself over Wave Ranger and then he begins to attack wave ranger from behind. The camera cuts to a shot of the guy who’s controlling the losing robot. He’s wearing virtual reality articulators on his hands and face. He raises a hand and brings it down violently, but the robot has nothing to crush. The controller executes a turning motion to try to get Wave Ranger to turn and face his enemy, but the robot is taking heavy fire from his opponent.

Julian and Matt are sitting on the couch. They have their bags with them from school.

“Do you mind if I have a word with my friend here, on the porch?”

Zane looks over like Julian’s crazy. “Do whatever you want.”

Julian asks Matt, “Do you mind if I have a word?”

“Does it have to be outside?”

“It’s something I want to discuss in private.”

“Ok.” Matt gets up.

The two boys make their way outside and Julian shuts the door behind them.

“So?”

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“I said it’s a beautiful day.”

“Yeah, nice view.” The porch is right on the river that runs through the center of Dayton. They can see across the river to the center of the city, with its five or so skyscrapers and other buildings.

Matt sits on the balcony railing, his back against a post.

Julian walks to the steps, then comes back, with a heavy look on his face.

“What is it?”

“This is hard to say, my friend.”

“Well, say it, you’re scaring me.”

“It’s nothing to be scared about. But it’s something you may not be very happy about.”

“Jesus Christ, Julian, what is it?”

“It’s about Tuesday.”

“Is she ok?”

“She’s fine.”

“So?”

“So she’s seeing someone else, my friend. There’s no other way to

put it. She's seeing someone else, a senior, someone from her neighborhood. You know Josh Feltz?"

"No."

"He's the guy. He's the guy she's seeing. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but I thought you should know, before you see her around with him, and..well..she might be here today."

"With him?"

"Probably."

"How do you know she's seeing him?"

"I've seen her around with him."

"Are you sure they're not just friends?"

"This was not friend behavior I saw."

Matt is silent.

Julian says, "I'm sorry, friend."

"Well," Matt says, "if she wants to see someone that's her business. I don't own her. I don't have any hold over her. What can I do?"

"Not a thing, my friend. Not a thing."

-----

Back inside Multimedia, the boys look nervously at Zane's pot paraphernalia and Julian says, "Zane, I'd like you to meet my friend Matt."

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Anna's coming over, is that ok?"

"s all good, Jules. As long as no one shits in my toilet."

"I don't think Anna's going to shit in your toilet."

"I had this guy, he comes over, he fills up the bathroom with this nasty smell, I don't know what this guy had to eat but it was terrible. That's what I tell people: don't shit in my toilet. You can come over all you want."

Pretty soon Anna comes over. "Hello, gentlemen."

"Come in. This is Zane."

"I know Zane."

"What's up Annakiss?"

"Nothing, just hanging out with these guys. How's your cat, did she get better?"

"Which one? Oh, Luda? She's fine. It's Angelface I have a problem with. She throws up these nasty tube-looking things that's like her digestive track was just shoveled out of her. Fucking nasty. Sit down, Anna."

She does. She sits on the arm of the couch.

The door opens again. It's Nick.

"Hey Anna, I saw you walking and I tried to catch up with you but I couldn't. You're like a hell-a-fast walker. Zane, what's up?" Nick slaps hands with Zane.

Zane says, "You guys really should watch this part. It's very educational. HorsePound uses liquid nitrogen on this wimpy little robot, it's hilarious. I love this show."

Nick sits on the floor across the coffee table from Matt and Julian. He goes in his pocket and brings out a little plastic bag with pot in it. "Do you mind if I use your bowl?"

"Oh, shit, do you have some. I'll be your best friend if you give me some of that."

"Well—"

"Seriously, I'll pay you for a nugget. How much do you want? Five dollars?"

"Hold on, Zane. You can have some. You don't need to pay me. Chill the fuck out, brother."

"Oh, man, you're a lifesaver."

So Nick packs the bowl and he and Zane smoke weed while Matt and Julian and Anna make smalltalk. When Nick offers the bowl to Anna, she says, "No, thanks."

"What about the twins?"

"Not for me, my friend."

"No."

"Suit yourselves. But there's plenty here if you change your mind. Zane, you look like you need another hit." Nick walks the pipe over to Zane, in his chair, and Zane puts down the remote long enough to hit the pipe.

The front door opens. It's Tuesday, and behind her is Josh Feltz.

"Hey!" Nick says. "I'd say that makes this a party."

Everyone says hellos. Matt makes his a generic "Hi" in their general direction. He tries not to make eye contact with Josh, but it's inevitable. He looks at Tuesday, but Tuesday doesn't look at him. She and Josh slide in on the couch in the space that's left. Josh puts his hand on Tuesday's leg and she immediately puts her hand on top of his. Nick offers them pot and Josh accepts. When Josh hands the pipe over to Tuesday she takes it, and almost looks like she's going to smoke it, then she looks up awkwardly and says, "What am I supposed to do with this? Here." And she hands it to Nick.

"So that's what y'all are doin' in here, getting high?"

"No all of us are getting high," Julian says.

"You're high enough as it is."

"What have you two been doing?"



“Getting into trouble,” Tuesday grins.

Josh laughs at this.

This whole time Matt hasn’t said a word. He’s looking at Tuesday, his face red. She’s looking at everyone in the room but him. Every time her eyes move, they light somewhere that is not Matt.

Tuesday leans back on Josh’s chest. She feels good; she just had sex. The delight of it is burning within her. She finally looks at Matt. She quints and makes a smile at him. She reaches across Julian and grabs Matt’s hand. “Be a monster with me,” she whispers.

Matt makes a monster face but immediately feels bad about it, like he shouldn’t be playing along with Tuesday’s games when she just skipped him for Josh.

“Zane, what is that room?” Matt points.

“My roommate’s bedroom.”

“Can I use it?”

“Sure.”

Matt stands up from the couch, goes to Anna, takes her hand. He drags her into the roommate’s bedroom and closes the door. There’s a giant white futon. He grabs Anna and kisses her, then pushes her down on the futon. He’s on top of her, undressing her, and she is sitting up to kiss him. They undress to their underwear, and are lying on each other making out, making fucking noises and grinding against each other.

Matt imagines Tuesday, out there, listening to this. Because he knows she did like him, and she knows she still does. He wants her to hear this, because she can’t have it both ways. She’s either going to be with Josh or him, and she’s chosen Josh. So that means no loyalty from Matt’s end. Tuesday thinks she can have it all. But she can’t. She can’t.

Anna looks up into Matt’s eyes and she pulls him down to kiss again. She’s a rough kisser, forcing her tongue into his mouth, and he likes that the style of kissing is different from Tuesday’s. Anna reaches down and feels Matt’s dick, and she says, “Is that all you got?” But she keeps making out with him and they’re both wondering if they’re going all the way but they don’t, they eventually quiet down and stop making their noises to impress the others in the next room. Anna has to go to a painting class. They get dressed and keep kissing and feeling on each other and Anna says, “Maybe there can be a next time,” and Matt agrees.

They go out into the main room. Nick and Julian are still there, and Zane, but Tuesday and Josh are nowhere to be seen.

-----

There are two rooms. One for Anna and one for Anna’s sisters. They share a wall. In the middle of that wall is an opening, covered with cloth

on both sides, big enough for a child to crawl through.

This is at Anna's mom's house. Anna and Matt are in Anna's room. Anna's sisters are in their room. The cloth hangs down over both sides of the opening.

"I was thinking, in my piano class, that there are certain types of art which are considered serious, and there are certain types of art that are not, and there's not a lot of difference between them sometimes." Anna says this. "For example, there's this soundtrack to *The Piano*, which I'm learning, and which I love, which is not considered serious music. And then you have the piano stylings of say Mozart, which are."

"Or it's the same thing in films," Matt says. "You've got Terrence Malick, and then you've got Adam Sandler, but those really are different so I guess that's not what you're talking about."

"It is," she says. "It is. Well maybe not with those two directors and I'm not really sure who Terrence Malick is, but I'm guessing he's some super-serious filmmaker that you're in love with because of his super-seriousness. But like with *The Piano*. It's beautiful music. I mean it's beautiful. But I guess it doesn't have the syncopation that makes Mozart Mozart. It just shocks me that music like this *Piano* soundtrack to which I keep referring aren't taken seriously, when to me, they're at the very least seriously beautiful."

"Right."

"I mean this is singular, emotional music."

"And why isn't that.."

"Why isn't that serious art for some reason."

"People, when they say 'serious art,' they're really talking about how serious they are about it."

"Exactly. I'm not even sure you know how on-point what you just said is."

"I'm getting you, Anna."

"I think you are. See these shoes? These are new running shoes of mine. My mom got them for me because I didn't have any decent running shoes but the problem with these is I haven't been doing any real running, so." She laughs. "There's that." And again her expression is super-serious.

Matt has been sitting cross-legged on the floor and he gets up now, and comes to Anna, who is sitting on the bed, and he kisses her. He does this by standing between her legs and putting his hands on her face, and he kisses her. She puts hands on him and kisses back, with the forceful tongue thing, and she pulls him inward, close to her.

Both of them are still thinking about the serious-art thing.

Anna pulls away. "Because the thing is, to some people *The Piano* is serious. It's just that we're in the minority. So it's just a

majority/minority thing, which is nothing. I mean it doesn't matter. Anything that's just a minority/majority thing is just a matter of timing. Like one minute one thing is popular and the next minute something completely different is popular. So that's the basis on which we're judging—I mean we're categorizing—art?”

“It makes no sense. I know what you mean about the majority/minority thing. I have this algorithm for voting, which adds in a coefficient for wisdom, and it fits in with this because of the same thing you're just talking about, where over time certain things become popular and other times they become unpopular.”

“You're lucky you're talking to someone who knows what an algorithm is. Well I think I do. It's something with the computer, right. That's too vague.”

“It's a plan.”

“Ok.”

“It's the routine a computer follows to get something done. It's a set of instructions in a program.”

“Ok. I get that. How did we get on algorithms? Oh yeah, you have a voting one. I think this is very important, because we can't be basing our judgments of art on what is popular or unpopular at any given time.”

“I agree.”

“But that's exactly what we're doing. Right now, Mozart is popular, because a whole bunch of people—the majority of people—thinks Mozart is some serious shit. And only a few people—the minority—thinks The Piano is serious shit. I happen to fall in that last minority, and of course I think I'm well-justified in my decision but it turns out that the majority of people disagree and think I'm some kind of intellectual lightweight because I get off on The Piano.”

Just then there is a squealing from the next room, and Anna's youngest sister, Roslyn, is coming through the cloth doors covering the opening joining the rooms, and onto Anna's bed, which is smack up against the opening.

“What are you doing in here, kissing?” Roslyn squeals.

“Actually we're talking about minority/majority preferences in art criticism,” Anna says. “And you're not invited.”

“Did you guys do the kissing earlier?”

“Were you watching?”

Roslyn squeals. Byrd, the middle sister, has her head through the opening now.

“Byrd, would you take care of Roslyn please, I don't want you guys in here right now. So. Stay on your side of the..uh..”

Roslyn is jumping on Anna's bed.

“Stop, Roslyn!”

“Roslyn get in here!” Byrd pulls on Roslyn’s dress and pulls her down on the bed, then starts dragging her by the foot toward the opening.

“Get, off, me!”

“Then come over.”

Roslyn begrudgingly crawls through the opening, turns around, and puts her head through, so now both girls have their heads sticking through the opening.

“I SAID GET OUT!”

Startled, both girls retreat. The cloth doors fall.

“I’m sorry about that. They can be LITTLE PESTS!”

“It’s no problem.”

“Now where were we?” Anna pulls Matt close and they continue their kissing.

This time it is Matt who pulls away. “It’s almost like you want to be in the minority, because you want to be liking the art that hasn’t been ruined by everyone liking it. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure I agree with that hipster mentality where to like it, you have to be in the minority. Where, once something’s popular, it’s no longer cool.”

“Yeah.”

“But I have to admit that I do think like that. It really does take the fun out of it when something you and your friends have been privately admiring, becomes all the rage and everyone’s looking at it and ruining it with their mediocrity and blandness.”

“It does, doesn’t it. I mean I know what you mean about not wanting to fall into that hipster mindset too extremely, but part of the fun of it is that you’ve discovered something that not everyone knows about and you’re enjoying it in spite of other people not thinking much of the art you’re into.”

“I guess with someone like Mozart it’s kind of the best of both worlds, him being so great that it doesn’t really ruin his music to know that everyone likes him.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Do you have conversations like this with other people?”

“Rarely.”

“It’s rare for me, too.”

“I think I want to kiss you again.”

“I think you should.”

“If it won’t be disturbing your sisters.”

“Tell me they’re not in the window.”

“They’re not in the window.”

“I don’t want to look. Are they really not in the window?”

“They’re really not in the window.”

“Then I think you had something you wanted to do to me?”

Matt pushes Anna gently down on her bed, so that she’s lying down but her calves are dangling. He gets on top of her and slides his hand up her leg and to her crotch. He presses upward there. He kisses her face and neck and lips and tongue and then kisses her ear and sticks his tongue inside it while rubbing on her crotch. Anna grabs him by the back and waist and pulls him down on her. They’re kissing, deep kissing, with tongue, all the way in. And Matt gets hard, and he presses his dick up and around her vulva, through two sets of jeans and a couple pairs of underwear. He rubs her like that, and his hands are going underneath her shirt, all the while kissing. She presses up into him with her hips.

Then she says, “It’s too bad you and I aren’t college professors or something. We could probably give a hell of a lecture on the perils of art criticism. Don’t listen to me. I’m just blabbing. Do what you’re doing, yeah. Like that. Do that..” She trails off.

They dry-hump for a while.

He’s thinking he could probably get off just humping her like this.

She’s thinking this is an acceptable enough person to have sex with the first time.

“What are you doing?” Little voice through the window.

“Roslyn! Ugh! Close that!”

“Sorry!”

“Roslyn, you stay on your side of the curtain! Byrd, am I going to have to call mom on you? Can I get some private time? I don’t interrupt you when you’re playing with your friends. Can you not interrupt me while I’m playing with my friend?”

“You’re playing?”

“Yes. We’re playing.”

“That’s a funny kind of playing.”

“Roslyn, back! Back! Close the curtain. Go downstairs. Help mom with dinner. Do something! Byrd, can you help? Please. We only have a few minutes till we go to our movie and we’d like to spend some time together, ok?”

Roslyn goes back through the window.

“I’m sorry about all this.”

“It’s fine.”

The light goes out in the girls’ room and there’s the sound of little feet stamping downstairs.

Matt and Anna lie still.

In a minute, Anna’s step-dad comes up and knocks on the door.

“Anna?”

“Yes?”

“If you guys are going to make the 7:40 showing we need to leave

now. Do you still want to go?"

Anna whispers to Matt. "Do you want to?"

Matt thinks. "Let's go see it." He figures they can always do this

later.

"Ok, we're going!"

"I'll meet you in the car."

Anna and Matt both get up and go for their shoes.

-----

"And what would lead to the three of us being abandoned here on the very same day? I'm quoting Paul Simon if you didn't get that."

"Ah, Graceland," Julian says.

"Actually," Matt says, "it's just a matter of coincidence."

What has led them to be stranded downtown on the very same day is 1) Anna having gone to her painting class and them having been closed, with no explanation, 2) Julian being on the way home from his piano lesson and having decided to stop by Matt's mom's church, and 3) Matt having agreed to come to his mom's church being that his dad and sisters were all off at various dance lessons. It's a Saturday, and Anna and Julian run into each other downtown, near courthouse square, and walk to Matt's mom's church, where they find not only that someone is there but that the person who answers the door is Matt.

"Well hello!"

"Howdy partner." That's Anna.

"Can we come in?"

"Of course you can come in, what are you doing here?"

"Well, you see, it's quite simple— Anna was passing this way and I was passing that— And— Here we are!"

"Come in, come in!"

Matt's mom is in her office. Matt leads his two friends to the sanctuary, where he had been hanging out before they got there. Anna is bagless. Julian carries his guitar. Towards the front of the sanctuary, Matt has one of the school's still cameras and his notebooks open.

"What is all this?" Julian asks.

"Plans."

"Plans for what?"

"For a computer program—"

"That does what?"

"I was going to tell you."

Anna sits cross-legged near the paperwork. Julian remains standing.

"It's plans..for a computer program..that rewrites itself."

“Oh.”

“It can take itself into memory, consider itself, modify itself, and rewrite itself, then run itself again—”

“It’s artificial intelligence.”

“It’s the ultimate artificial intelligence.”

“A program that rewrites itself.” Now Julian is putting down the guitar and situating himself next to the other two.

Anna says, “I don’t think I understand what you’re talking about. I mean, I understand in general, but I don’t think I grasp the specifics.”

“It’s a program,” Julian says, “that modifies itself, then continues running, so theoretically—”

“Theoretically it can do anything that any program could ever do.”

“I don’t understand why that’s so exciting.”

“It allows you to write a program that is like a primer for an artificial intelligence, so that you don’t have to write an artificially intelligent program, you just have to write a program that could itself write an artificially intelligent program. Actually, you can remove the ‘artificial’ part altogether. There’s nothing artificial about it.”

“That’s debatable,” Julian says.

“I think I see why what you’re saying is important,” Anna says.

“But it doesn’t work.”

“What?”

“It technically rewrites itself. But there’s no guiding principle by which it can imagine the future state of itself and see how that future self would be better or worse than its current self. To do that, in a simple way, well I just don’t know how to do it.”

“So it’s useless.”

“Basically. It rewrites itself the same way it was already written. I don’t know how to make it do the next thing.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah, keep trying.”

“I’ll keep trying but I’m lost. I have no idea how to proceed. You have to make these things as generalized as possible. I don’t know how to be that general.”

“You sound discouraged.”

“I am discouraged.”

“Don’t be. Take a break.”

“Yeah. Play with us.”

“Ok. What are we gonna play?”

“We’re gonna play stranded students on a Saturday stuck downtown because none of us have rides and the busses aren’t running till like five o’clock.”

“I see. So what do you have to say for yourself, Julian?” That’s

something Matt's mom says, what do you have to say for yourself.

"What do I have to say for myself? Well, I have new songs. Actually," Julian motions to the grand piano right next to them. "Do you mind?"

"Go right ahead."

"See you have songs," Anna says. "I'm a little jealous of that. I play songs. But they're not mine. You have like this unique output."

Julian takes the cover off the piano. He sits at the bench. "Come on over."

"I can hear fine from here," Matt says, and this angers Julian. He wants to be the center of attention.

"Anna?"

"I can hear fine from here. Thank you."

Julian sweeps his braids out of his face. He has no sheet music. He just begins. And wherever you're sitting, it's beautiful. He doesn't talk while he plays; he is intent on the keyboard. He sways from one end of it to the other as his music rises and swells, then becomes tiny notes. Then becomes banging, then settles to the original theme. Then finishes. And Julian very quietly says, "That's The Day of the Daffodils." Some of his other song titles are, "Memory is like Moonlight," "Living the Dream," and "Up Against the Sky."

When he's done playing Anna and Matt clap. Julian closes the piano, recovers it, and sits some distance from them on the first pew.

"Those are all new since.." Julian trails off.

"What?"

He speaks up. "Those are all new since the last time you listened."

"You're coming along!"

"Thank you." He has this look in his face like: are you saying that sincerely? I think you're saying that sincerely.

"Mind if I take some pictures?"

Matt hands Anna the school camera.

She unzips the case and pulls out a Canon EOS Rebel T3. Matt has a wide-angle lens on it, and other lenses in the case. She takes pictures of Matt, leaning down to do close-ups of his notebooks, then gets up and turns her focus to the pipe organ at the front of the sanctuary.

Matt gets up and goes to Julian.

"How are you and Anna?" Julian asks.

"What do you mean, me and Anna?"

Julian frowns. "I'm not asking for details. Unless you want to provide them."

The two boys laugh.

"No, there's nothing to say. We've been hanging out some. Like..more than before."



“Anna is really into you.”

“What?”

“I said Anna is really into you.”

“Well, I’m into her too.”

“I guess you don’t want to hear updates on Tuesday and Josh.”

“Not really.”

“Wise choice.”

“What does that mean? Does that mean they’re doing all kinds of crazy stuff to each other?”

“Do you really want me to tell you?”

“No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to get in Tuesday’s business.”

“That’s very grown-up of you.”

“Well, what am I going to do, I mean I love that girl, I definitely want to be with her, but if she doesn’t want to be with me.. I’m willing to just be her friend, whatever that means. Tuesday is special to me.”

“I know.”

Matt and Julian lock eyes.

“I’m sorry she hurt you.”

“Thanks.”

But now Anna approaches, and the boys stop talking. She is stalking them, walking foot and then foot, leaning back and every few seconds taking a picture.

“I think,” she says, “that you should get up there.” She uses her head to point to the altar.

“Ok.”

“Who? Me?”

“Both of you.”

Matt jumps up, heads for the altar. Julian hangs behind. Matt sits on top of the altar.

“Face the other direction.”

Matt faces toward the organ pipes at the very front of the sanctuary.

“Now take off your shirt,” Anna says.

“Hey..”

“What kind of photo shoot is this?” But he does it. Shuffles off his jacket and then takes off the shirt underneath. His mom is the pastor of this church, but it’s his girlfriend asking him to do it, so why not? Just take the pictures quick before his mom decides to wander out of her office and into the sanctuary.

“Like that..no..wrap your jacket around your waist so it looks like you’re naked. Yeah, that’s it. Now jerk off.”

This is Anna’s idea of edgy photography, and with his mother in the next room, Matt certainly considers it so. But, again, it’s Anna asking

him to do this.

He cocks his right arm way out so it'll be visible, then makes the jerking off motion to his crotch, looking at the stained glass above the pipe organ and Anna and Julian are whooping and encouraging him, and Anna snaps the pictures.

“Did you get it?”

“Yeah. Got it.”

“Just make sure Mrs. Kessler doesn't see those.”

“I will. I'll take them off at home.”

“You might not want any copies of these getting out, your mom being the minister of this church and all.”

“Understood.”

“And put your shirt back on. Not that I mind you having your shirt off but you should probably put your shirt back on before your mom walks in. Just guessing.”

He pulls the shirt over his head, gets off the altar. Approaches the two of them.

Julian says, “You are insane, my friend.”

“Shut up,” Anna says. “Next time you go too.”

“Let me see.” And Anna shows Matt the pictures.

“Oh my god.” He laughs. “That looks pretty realistic.”

“They definitely get the message across.”

“Do you think your mom can give us a ride home?”

“Let's go check with her.”

“Can I—? Are we—? Leaving our stuff here?”

“Yeah. We'll come back. Let's go find my mom.”

Anna keeps the camera on her as they go out of the sanctuary, snaking through church hallways, and finally to Matt's mom's office.

I would like to say that the pictures become a problem, that they get out and cause a scandal and Matt's mom loses her job over it, but they don't. Matt keeps them for about ten years, just as a memory of that day, and then he deletes them.

-----

Tuesday likes House of Pain, so she wants to make sure there's plenty of them on the playlist for her birthday party. Josh is setting up the playlist.

“Make sure there's House of Pain in there. Is there House of Pain in there?”

“It's in there.”

“It better be! If there's one thing about this party we're going to get right it's going to be the House of Pain.”

She gently kicks Josh in the side. They're in the warehouse. It's a

space her dad owns, out on Third Street in west Dayton, with an upstairs and a downstairs, and some furniture, like a couch, several couches actually, the downstairs is furnished like a living room. Upstairs is more stark, and upstairs is where the bathroom is. It's pretty rough—it looks like a warehouse bathroom. But Tuesday thinks that gives the place character. It fits with her industrial image.

The party starts in one hour. Her parents aren't going to be here during the party. They agreed that Tuesday could have four hours to herself, and that they would come by and clear out the rooms at midnight, if need be, and take Tuesday home.

Tuesday has brought her dress with her, she's not wearing it yet. Still in her work clothes: some more preparations to be done, lights to be hung, etc. She's working on the living room, hanging photo lights from the ceiling so the place will have atmosphere. She wanted to get a fog machine, but it didn't fit within the budget her parents had laid out. She's going for sort of a Crow: City of Angels look.

"Josh! You forgot to kiss me!"

"Huh?"

"I said: kiss me when I get here, because I'll probably need a kiss by then! You didn't kiss me!"

"I was too busy getting the playlist ready! Where are you?"

"The big room."

"Coming!" Josh bounds over a crate and comes into the large room. He rushes up to Tuesday, who is on a ladder.

Tuesday turns around so she's facing him, and climbs down the wrong way so she's on the first step.

Josh stretches up and Tuesday leans down and the two of them are kissing, and it is sweet, to kiss the guy she first had sex with. Josh had been with other people, before, but she didn't care. It was nice to be with someone who could show you the ropes, who had been there before. She wanted to fuck him now.

"How much time do we have until eight o'clock?"

"Not enough."

"Mmm. Wouldn't you like to be fucking me when the first guest arrives? We could go upstairs.."

"Ok. Let's go."

"I have to do these lights."

"Then do the lights!"

"Are you mad at me? Did I detect a hint of madness in your voice?"

"I have to finish this playlist. It doesn't have enough House of Pain in it yet."

"Asshole. Asshole. Make sure it has tons of House of Pain!"

Josh is leaving the room, Tuesday stuck on the ladder.

“If there isn’t enough House of Pain I’m withholding services!”

She turns around and re-climbs the ladder, getting to the top of the room and hanging her final light. It looks good. The place is industrial, just by its nature. Not much decorating necessary, but just a few lights to give it that crime scene look. They had borrowed speakers and an amp from Josh’s cousin; the music played on a MacBook Pro that Tuesday had borrowed from Matt.

“Josh! I’m getting dressed!”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Add more House of Pain.”

“I’m on it.”

“Good. I’ll be down in a little. If anybody comes, show them in, yes?”

“I got it.”

“Momma’s got to get all sexy.” She said this more for herself.

But Josh heard it and said, “I like sexy momma. Get sexy, sexy momma!”

“Shut up.” Tuesday goes upstairs. She has exactly forty-eight minutes before eight o’clock.

-----

By nine the party is in full swing.

Nick and Michael are upstairs, doing god knows what. Matt and Julian are hanging out in one of the side rooms downstairs, chatting about Sidereal Studios. Anna just arrives, and Tuesday lets her in herself.

“If you’re looking for Matthew, try over there.”

“Why would I be looking for Matt?”

“I’m not in the mood to argue, Anna. Just if you are.” Tuesday is disgusted, and turns her back on Anna and goes back to the dance area.

“Jesus,” Anna says nasally, and she takes a left and goes into a side room.

Tuesday finds Josh and puts her arms around him. They dance.

Anna sees Chris, who she gives a what’s-up to. She goes past him, though to where Julian and Matt are sitting, and she sits on the arm of Matt’s chair.

They boys are silent.

“Well don’t let me interrupt.”

“Hi, Anna.”

“Hi.”

“Seriously, continue, if whatever you were discussing is more interesting than a female companion having arrived. I’m sensing Tuesday

has set the hospitality tone for this party already. And that is, straight up coldness. I don't see how you were ever with her."

"Was she cold to you?"

"Very."

"I'm sorry."

"She's probably just stressing 'cause it's her birthday."

"But what's there to stress about, I mean..it's your birthday, so what? I'm not that uptight on my birthdays."

"Maybe it's her time of month."

"I don't think so. Our periods synced quite some time ago, I think since last year. I don't think she's on her period. Do you know her period well enough to know if she's on it?"

"No," Matt says.

"Well then it sounds like, between the three of us, that my possibly-outdated information that Tuesday's and my period are synced, is the best information we have about whether or not Tuesday's stone-cold bitchiness is because she's on her period or if it's just her normal personality as it has been since about the second grade."

"Anna's right," Julian says. "She's been like that for a long time."

"She was never bitchy to me," Matt says.

"That's because she wants something from you," Anna says. "Why you never gave it to her, I'll never understand. Is there a bathroom in here? I'm almost afraid to ask.."

"There is upstairs," Matt says.

And Anna gets up and goes. She has to pass through the dance room to get to the back of the warehouse, where the stairs are. She looks at Tuesday but Tuesday is lost in Josh-cuddly-ness so Anna keeps going and finds the stairway, which is battered, which is broken, which is barely held together with nails, but she braces herself against the walls and starts up it.

-----

"Do you really think Tuesday was bitchy to Anna?"

"Tuesday," Julian says, "is often bitchy to many people."

"I guess I'm not one of them."

"Don't you think it was kind of bitchy the way she never said a word to you but then started going out with Josh?"

"That was hard, but I don't think I'd exactly classify that as bitchy."

"Do you want to dance?"

"With you?"

"I agree."

"With me?"

“Of course. What?”

“Indeed.”

They both laugh.

“Not together, I meant, do you prefer if we partake in the dancing festivities?”

“Do I prefer if we partake..? Why not, let’s dance for a minute.”

“I’ll keep you away from Tuesday.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Let’s go, my friend.”

—————

When Anna comes out of the bathroom she notices them. Michael and Nick, at the very back of the warehouse on the second floor. They’re passing smoke between them, as she can see from a blue light outside the window.

“Look who it is,” Nick’s voice bellows. “Anna, you know Michael.”

“Yeah, we’ve met.”

There is a long pause, during which Anna watches as Nick passes the pipe to Michael, and Michael takes a toke, then passes the pipe back to Nick.

Nick holds it out to Anna. “Would you like some of this?”

“I would,” she says confidently.

Nick hands her the pipe. Anna takes a hit. She holds it in. She lets it out. Then she passes the pipe back to Nick. Both Nick and Michael watch Anna this whole time. She has obviously smoked before.

“I smoke with my parents,” Anna says.

“Oh, well that explains it,” Nick says, “the way you were so expert with that pipe.

“Yeah,” Anna says. “So what else you got going on back here in your own little party?”

“What else do we have going on?”

“Yes, what else? What other substances are you packing?—to use the parlance of our times.”

“The parlance of our times. What makes you think we have anything else going on?”

“Come on, Nick. I’m not stupid. Will you grant me that, that I’m not stupid?”

“I’ll grant you that, but that doesn’t mean we are packing any other substances.”

“Fine.” Anna starts to leave.

“Wait. Anna, wait. You’re right, we are packing other substances. But we need you to take an oath of silence if we are to reveal these other

substances to you, as I don't want this getting all over the party."

Anna comes back. "I swear," she says.

-----

Matt and Julian dance near each other for a second, then Matt pushes himself deeper into the people. Kristi Kettering is here. Jessica. Matt dances up next to Jessica and she grabs him and bites his neck. Matt thinks about doing something similar to her but she's already gone, danced back into the chaos and kissing some girl. Maurine dances up to Matt, and for a minute it's Matt and Maurine and Julian and Kristi, and Tuesday and Josh, not far from each other. It's House of Pain playing, and the dancing gets wild. The whole field of them jump as one, and Tuesday looks over her party like a proud mother.

-----

Tuesday dancing with Josh. He holds her in just the right way. She is reminded of their recent sex, on her bed in the upstairs of her house. Just the fucking, the animal fucking, getting hot with him and they both let themselves go to the desire to move against the other person. She wants to have sex with other people now, lots of other people. To know them in that way. She wants to see Matt move with that passion, which she knows he has in him, if he would just do it.

Josh takes her in his hands, molds her while they dance. She adjusts one of his hands closer to her crotch. This is her party. She's going to have Josh's hand on her crotch if she wants. Put it closer. Put it there. She is sweating a little, and it feels good. To be wet. Maybe they could have sex in the warehouse after everybody leaves. But probably not, probably Tuesday's dad will show up before everybody leaves, and he'll be staring skeptically at Josh. He knows we're doing it.

Dancing is pretty nice. Usually Tuesday doesn't think of herself as a dancer. But this is nice. Free the ole mind once in a while, yes? She is too mental, hasn't been enjoying the physical side of things until now. Freeing herself to have sex. Instead of pure masturbation, which she was an expert at. So not completely mental. But still too much on the mental side. She is more balanced now, with Josh, and with dancing. This is the new Tuesday, all new on her birthday.

And if it could last forever, this room, this song, this dance with Josh, if it could last forever she would wish that it would. If this room full of people could stay just as they are, with their current crushes and current conversations and current poses, she would have them do that, and she would live forever in this room. Except in her version of this

room she would be able to have sex with everyone she wanted, with no consequences whatsoever, everyone bowing to her whim.

-----

“I wanna talk to her.”

“I don’t think she wants to talk to you.”

“Why wouldn’t she want to?”

“She looks like she’s busy with Josh.”

“You don’t think she has a second to spend with me? Just to say hi.”

“It’s your call, my friend, but she looks quite..occupied.”

“Oh fuck it,” Matt says, and he goes over to Tuesday.

She’s sitting on Josh’s lap.

“Hi.”

“Hi. Are you having a good time?”

“Yes, very much. Hi Josh.”

“Hey.”

“So, are you and Julian making big plans?”

“Yeah, we’re making big plans.”

“Well have fun.”

“Ok.”

“See you Monday.”

“See you.”

“Bye.”

Matt goes back to the side room.

“So did you talk to her?”

“Yeah.”

“And what did she say?”

“She said ‘are you and Julian making big plans?’”

“And what did you say?”

“I said yes, we are.”

“Pshff. Did Josh speak to you?”

“I think he said, ‘hey.’”

“Asshole.”

“Why?”

“Cause he took your girl, that’s why.”

“Julian. Tuesday is a big girl. She can make whatever choices she wants.”

“Aren’t you mad?”

“I’m more..sad. Not really mad.”

“I’m mad. I’m mad. Josh doesn’t even really like her. They’ll be broken up in a month, trust me.”



“I hope not.”

“Why?”

“Because I want her to be happy.”

“You don’t think I want her to be happy? I’ve known her since the second grade, I care if she’s happy. That’s why I can’t get down with this her-and-Josh thing. I’m telling you: broken up in a month.”

Matt shakes his head.

“A month.”

-----

Anna hanging out with Nick and Michael, upstairs, doing lines of coke off the bathroom sink, and having to stop every time someone comes upstairs to use the bathroom.

“This is premium shit,” Nick is saying. “Straight from Columbia. This shit’ll have you taking a shit in twelve seconds flat. That’s how you can tell good shit. It’s that first good high, there’s nothing more pure than that when judging the quality of your shit. And this..is good shit.”

“Sounds like a lot of shit,” Anna says.

Michael laughs.

“Is she fucking with me or is she fucking with me?” Nick asks.

“I was just noticing your affinity for the word ‘shit.’”

“Are you fucking with me? I can’t tell.”

“It’s not so much fucking with you as it is a simple observation,”

Anna says.

“I still can’t tell if she’s fucking with me. Guys, I’m..like..mega high here—no, like..ultra high. Do you guys want to do any more?”

“I’m good.”

“Nah.”

“Well it’s been an interesting evening.”

“Yes.”

“I have to say that I don’t think I would have enjoyed this party nearly as much if you two hadn’t been here.”

“Likewise.”

“Wanna go downstairs?”

But Michael says, “Coke hug.”

“Coke hug!”

“What the fuck is coke hug.”

“Oh, Anna, you’ll like this. It’s just something me and Michael like to do when we’re high.”

“And what is that?”

“We give each other a big hug for being high. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Come on, try it!”

“Alright.”

So the three of them entangle themselves in a big, messy coke hug.

“Coke hug!” Nick shouts.

“Coke hug!” Michael says.

And Anna chimes in, “Coke hug!”

-----

Downstairs, Anna sees Matt and Julian. They all meet up.

“What have you been up to?”

“Doing cocaine upstairs.”

“That’s nice. Really. What have you been doing?”

“Doing cocaine upstairs.”

“Not just cocaine.”

“Pot, too.”

“Matt, if you ever want to try some, I got ya.”

“Thanks.”

“Looks like this party is almost over.”

“Where’s Tuesday?”

“She’s in there chair dancing with Josh.”

“That sounds like Tuesday. Happy birthday Tuesday!”

Tuesday shouts, “Thank you Nick!”

“It is dead down here. Where did everyone go?”

“They left.”

“What?”

“They left! You know, they got tired and went home.”

“Oh. Mike, you wanna get out of here?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

“See you guys Monday.”

“See ya.”

-----

It’s Julian and Matt outside.

“When is your mom getting here?”

“She should be here by now,” Matt says.

“Very monumental evening,” Julian says.

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“No, it’s the beginning of the end, for the freaks. It’s the fall.”

“Because Tuesday’s going out with Josh?”

“Don’t you see, this introduces a rift in our little crew. Tuesday’s

off with Josh, she'll be spending less time with the freaks. If she was with you, it would be ok, because you're inside the group. But Josh could never—pardon me for putting it this way, but—Josh could never be a freak.”

“Yeah, so what. Things fall apart.”

“You can't approach this like you approach your science fair project.”

“Why not? It's a good analogy. You have a group of organisms swimming around together. For a while they have a family, a grouping. Then they fall apart. It's bound to happen, with an group.”

“Don't you want to hold onto it for as long as you can?”

“I think I have.”

“You know, I blame you, in a way.”

“Why?”

“For not holding on to Tuesday. Isn't there something you could have done to keep her? Why is she running off to Josh to begin with?”

“I don't know,” Matt says—and he doesn't.

Julian puts his hand on Matt's knee. As if to say: I forgive you. Whatever you did wrong with Tuesday, I forgive it. Matt hates the implications of the hand, and he hates that the hand is on him, but he leaves it there because he doesn't want to disturb things further. Julian finally takes it off.

“So when is your mom getting here?”

“She should be here now,” Matt says. “I don't know where she is.”

Just now the front door to the warehouse opens and Tuesday and Josh come out, Josh practically carrying Tuesday. So now it's just Matt and Julian and Tuesday and Josh on the sidewalk of Third Street, pitch dark out, hardly any cars on the street. Everyone takes a deep breath, and everyone can feel the situation: Tuesday used to be with Matt, now she's with Josh.

“So. Happy birthday,” Julian says.

“Thank you Julian, that's very nice of you and I know how difficult it is for you to be nice to me, so.”

“You're welcome,” Julian says, and smiles.

Matt is the next one to speak. “It's a beautiful night.”

Julian hates that Matt says this; it's such a Matt thing to say.

But Tuesday says, “Yes it is.” She thinks of the times she and Matt have gone to the cemetery, especially when they stayed till dark. She still wants those times, actually, but it seems too much to ask from Matthew.

They all look up at the stars, past the streetlights, and it's cold. Josh hugs Tuesday tightly and she loves the feel of his arms. Julian gives Matt a sideways glance and Matt tries to remain neutral, as always. He never wants to get in the middle of a situation, even one that involves him,

and Julian can't stand this. Matt can't stand how completely invested Julian is in certain outcomes. He's like a selfish child; he has to have his way.

Matt walks to the middle of the street, stands there. No traffic is coming. Julian joins him, and then Josh and Tuesday, and soon they're all screaming primal screams, jumping around and holding hands and dancing in the street, calling out to the space above them to celebrate Tuesday's birthday with them, inviting the spirits to join them.

Then a car comes, and slows down to a stop, and the four of them don't move right at first. They continue their dancing and screaming, and the driver of the car rolls down his window and says, "Right on."

So they let him by, and go back to their screaming.

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Anna is standing in the entry room at her mother's house. The piano is also in this room. She wears a dress, black with silver accents, and she thinks about the music from *The Piano* while she waits.

After about twenty minutes there is the sound of a car in the driveway. Then footsteps in the gravel walkway. The doorbell rings. Then a knock, furtive, exploratory.

Anna goes to the door. She unlocks it. It's exactly who she knew it would be: Matt. Holding a corsage and standing awkwardly in a suit.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi," he says. "I think I'm supposed to pin this on you."

"And I think I'm supposed to pin this on you." She shows him the boutonniere. "Is that your mom?"

"It's my dad, but I made him promise he would behave."

Anna laughs. "As if there were any other option."

Matt fiddles with the box his corsage came in. "Let's pin these on in the car."

"Good idea."

And they go for the car.

"Hello Mr. Temple."

"Hi, uh, Anna."

"So, you two looking forward to a nice dance this evening?"

"Yeah Dad."

Anna has the boutonniere out. "This came with a pen. Um. Well. Maybe if you'd hold your collar out."

"Like this?"

"That's fine. Yeah. There. I think I got you. No guarantees that that isn't going to fall off."

Then Matt puts on Anna's corsage. He can see her breasts through

the sides of her dress and they look delicious. Only food metaphors will come to him. He wants to bite her.

“So what are you doing tonight, Mr. Temple?”

“Well. I’m going to go back to the house after I drop you off and watch a movie. Got some popcorn ready to put in the microwave. Until Matt calls, and I can come and pick you up.”

“What movie?”

“Well, it’s this movie I had never heard anything about, but then someone recommended it to me the other day at the YMCA. It’s called: Reservoir Dogs. Have you heard of it?”

“Of course, yeah, that’s an excellent movie. Quentin Tarantino’s first. I remember when I first saw that.”

“Well I’ll be sure and give you a full report.”

“I’ll expect that.”

“Uh, what time do you think this dance is going to be over?”

“I don’t know, eleven, twelve.”

“Am I getting you there on time?”

“Yes, anytime after eight is fine. We don’t want to be the first to arrive.”

“Well, you two sure make a cute couple.”

“Thank you,” Anna says.

Matt blushes.

And Anna grabs his hand, and presses it to her chest.

Matt leans over to her and gives her a quick kiss on the lips.

“Don’t,” she says. “You’ll get lipstick.”

But Matt doesn’t care.

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“Well, we’re here!”

“Thank you Mr. Temple.”

“Yeah, thanks Dad.”

Anna and Matt get out of the car. They hold hands briefly, then detach.

“You’ve got your cell phone?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it Dad.”

“Ok, we’ll..see you later.”

“Bye.”

“Bye-bye now.”

Matt’s dad drives away, and Matt and Anna are in the student parking lot of Colonel White high school, right outside the gym. As they go to the doors, they make smalltalk.

“Your dad seems like he’s really into his movies.”

“I guess.”

“I like the corsage you got me.”

“I’m glad. Thanks for coming with me, I’m glad to be here with you.”

“I’m glad you asked. I mean I thought you were going to, but I didn’t know.”

“You look pretty. You look, actually, beautiful.”

“You think so? Mmm.” Anna rubs against Matt.

They’re at the entrance to the school. Sarah Hollister is there, working the admissions desk. “Hey guys, welcome to Homecoming!”

“Sarah, do you get to dance or do you just sit here all night.”

“I get to dance. Go on in, things are just getting started.”

So they go in. They cross through a side hallway and into the gym. It’s dark. There are decorations hanging from the ceiling. The place is about half-full. They each scan the room for people they know. There’s Lindsay Bradshaw, dancing with Kevin Michaelson. There’s Adrian Taylor and some girls standing away from the center. Where is? Ah. Julian and Michael up against a wall. Tuesday and Josh, dancing. Nick dancing with some senior neither of them knows the name to.

“She’s got a pretty dress.”

“I guess so.”

“Wanna dance?”

“Yeah, let’s start it out with some dancing. I’m into that.”

“You’re trying too hard,” Anna says. “I’m the same me, just ‘cause we’re at a dance and dressed up like we’re adults and there’s all this pressure about whether you’re going to kiss me at the end of the night..just relax..you never needed any help getting along with me before.”

“Am I trying too hard?”

“I think so.”

“Sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. Can you believe this? This is our Homecoming.”

“You’re a good dancer.”

“Haven’t we danced before? I guess not.”

Anna’s hair is curled at the ends and Matt thinks it looks beautiful.

“I like your hair.”

“You like my hair?”

“Yeah, it looks nice. Am I being awkward?”

“A little, but I’m used to it. You’re fine. Am I being awkward?”

“No, typically, as the girl, you’re perfectly composed and free-flowing.”

“Am I free-flowing? I’d like to think I am.”

“You are. You definitely are.”

Then they dance for a while without talking. Their eyes are on all the people around them. It's a slow song, and Anna presses her chest into him and he grabs her tight along the back. Then the song is over, and it's a fast song, and they both decide to hang toward the sidelines and say hi to their friends.

"What's up, Matt?" Nick says, coming off the dance floor.

"What's up?"

"You're looking spiffy."

"So are you, motherfucker, so are you."

"I got called a motherfucker, this must be a special night."

"It is, it's Homecoming, motherfucker. So get your motherfuckin' swerve on."

"Get my swerve on, you are in rare form, motherfucker."

"Motherfucker, don't get me started."

"Motherfucker, I already did!" Nick moves along to say hi to some other people.

Anna compliments Tuesday on her dress.

"Why thank you. You're looking lovely yourself."

Josh leans in and kisses Anna's cheek.

"Hey! Hey!" Tuesday says. "Keep your kisses on me!"

"Hey Josh."

"Hey Matt."

There's tension there, and nobody knows what to say next.

"Alright! Alright!" Julian sings. "How are my sidereal friends? Matt?"

"Jules?"

"Would you agree that this is going to be a beautiful night?"

"I would agree."

"With me?"

"Of course!"

"Indeed!"

Matt and Julian slap hands.

"Well," Tuesday says, "I'm glad the Bobbsey Twins could make it tonight. Josh, take me dancing."

Tuesday and Josh go back to the floor.

Jessica comes up. She's wearing this black dress that is just sinful. She catches all the boys' eyes, and Anna is caught with her date looking at Jessica.

Jessica goes straight for Matt. "I didn't know you would look so..sophisticated in a suit. You here with Anna tonight?"

"Yes I am."

"Do you mind, Anna, if I steal your date for a dance?"

"I don't mind if he doesn't mind."

“Just one dance,” Matt says, and he knows right then it isn’t true.  
“Just one dance,” Jessica says.

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It’s a hot dance, a slow dance, and it happens mostly up against the wall of the gym, with Jessica between Matt and the wall. Jessica pulls him over there, spreads her legs, and lets Matt dance up on her. He nails her to the wall, and she’s got her fingers on his cock, through his dad’s suit pants, and she gets him hard. Matt doesn’t look away to see if Anna is watching, he just does it. Jessica looks so good and she’s so forceful. It’s nice to have someone do some of the work sometimes. Jessica does that. First of all, she’s dressed like a whore. Her dress is so slim, so short, and Jessica’s body so fine that you can’t not want to fuck her. Straight up fuck her. If fucking was allowed in the gym Matt would be fucking her. He presses her against the wall with his cock. And Jessica’s arms are around him. She’s speaking in his ear and raking her fingernails along his neck and back. She bites him, hard, placing her mark on him, and he is lost in the dance.

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“So how was that?”

“It was fine.”

“Yeah, did you get your little freak on with Jessica?”

Matt looks at Anna frankly. “I guess I did.”

“Uh-huh. It looked like it. I’m going to be right back.” And Anna goes to the bathroom.

“I saw you out there with Jessica, my friend.”

“I don’t know what I just did. I think I just messed things up with Anna. I know you’re supposed to dance with the one who brung you, but. Did you see Jessica in that dress??”

“Yes.”

“Do you think she looks fine?”

“Yes.”

“How could I not dance with her, right?”

“Right, except Anna.”

“Did I make her mad?”

“You’ll have to ask her.”

“I should. I should go and find her, right? I should find her.”

“I’ll wait right here.”

“Julian, damn, I didn’t mean to hurt Anna’s feelings but I just could not not dance with Jessica. She looks like a little minx.”



“My friend, you weren’t just dancing with her. You were fucking her up against the side of the gym. If she wasn’t wearing panties she’s pregnant by now.”

“I was fucking her, wasn’t I?”

“Very much so.”

“Anna’s gonna be pissed.”

“Are you and Anna a thing?”

“I don’t know! That’s the thing with all this shit! One minute Tuesday and I are going out..I think..and now Anna and I sort of have a thing but it’s never been really discussed and now Jessica is biting my fucking neck!”

“Go find Anna.”

“I’m going to. I’ll meet you back?”

“Meet you right here.”

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“It’s fine.”

“It is?”

“Yeah, I mean..yeah, Matt, yeah.”

“I don’t even know what I was doing.”

“I do. You’re being a horny boy. And Jessica’s dress says: ‘fuck me now.’ My dress says: ‘take me home, fuck me later’ but her dress says ‘fuck me now.’ So you’re just doing what horny boys do! That’s all.”

“If you wanna go out there and dance—”

“It’s not even about dancing. I’ve been to Homecomings before and I’ll go to Homecomings again. Dancing’s not the issue. I just thought we had something..well, yes, special. You can’t think you’re going to get the kind of conversations from Jessica that you get from me.”

“No.”

“She’s a sexy girl. She is.”

“I do want to dance with you. I’ve been wanting to since I asked you.”

“I believe you have. I don’t exactly feel like dancing right now but that’s ok. Maybe before the end of the night we can catch one dance. I mean, what are we doing? Are you still coming over, to my house, to talk about art criticism? And lie on top of me and dry hump me through my clothes? I thought we had something special but you’re just exploring your options. I can’t expect more, I suppose. We’re in the tenth grade. I’m wanting to have some kind of adult relationship, and it’s always the guy who’s less mature during growing up years.”

“I don’t know what to say but I guess you’re calling me immature.”

“No, it’s a fact. Men develop slower than women, emotionally. It’ll

be a few years before you desire the emotional attachment that women want already, at our age. It's not your fault. I'm not blaming you. I'm not mad at you, Matt, I'm really not. I just need to reassess my own expectations in light of who we both really are."

"I don't even really know Jessica."

"I know you don't! That's why it was so surprising to see you with her tonight. Something in you just took over."

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings."

"Ha! What are feelings? I don't even know if I have any."

"I think you do."

"Yeah, so fuck you, ok. I'll just say it once. But fuck you for messing up my Homecoming. Now can we be friends again I really want that."

"Of course we can be."

"And you'll still come over?"

"I want to!"

"And you'll dry hump me when I ask?"

"I'll dry hump you anytime."

"Be careful, you might not want to commit. You never know what Jessica's..expectations are. She might not be into polyamory. Are you? Don't answer that."

"I don't know what I'm into, Anna. I like you. I like kissing you. I want to take our dry humping to the next level, if you do."

"I don't know if that's the best idea."

"Well I just wanted to tell you. I've been thinking about it. And if you ever did, I would want to, even now. It's not like I'm into Jessica."

"You sure know how to put on a show, boy, you do. No, I don't think that us having sex is a good idea, because to me it would be like the start of a relationship and to you it would probably be just for fun."

"Don't tell me what I would probably think. Don't make up ideas for me."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. You're right. I don't know what it would be like for you. What would it be like?"

"Honestly, I don't know."

"Thank you for your honesty. I don't mean to put you on the spot."

"It's ok. Can't we still dance, we'll say we're friends if it makes you more comfortable. But I brought you to this dance and I want to dance with you."

"Well, I can't refuse an offer like that. Let's go dance."

And Matt and Anna go together, arm in arm, down the yellowed side hallway towards the gym.

At the end of the night, it's Anna, Matt and Julian, sitting by the Colonel White sign that is in front of the student parking lot. Nick has driven home. Josh has driven Tuesday, and it's just the three of them, watching the final cars leave.

"Isn't your dad like six blocks from here?"

"I called him."

"I know you did, but couldn't we just walk to your house?"

"He still has to take you home."

"And me," Julian says. His mom didn't want to come pick him up, and had encouraged Julian to find another ride.

"And you," Anna says. "Though how you ended up on our date I have no idea." Anna goes to the sign and turns to Matt. "Help me up."

Matt lets Anna stand on his folded hands so she can get on top of the sign. Then Anna pulls Matt up and Matt pulls Julian up and they're all standing on the top of this not-very-large sign.

"Can you believe it? This is our high school. Pathetic little Colonel White..School for the Creative and Performing Arts."

"Why do you say it's pathetic."

"Because it is. There's nothing grand about it. We're in Ohio. This isn't an affluent area. The richest it gets isn't very rich, as rich goes. No, we're just a pathetic little school in Ohio of all places and we're going through the paces that will let us say we got a degree..er, diploma. The classes aren't even real. They have a class for ROTC. ROTC of all things. That's a class? It shouldn't even be allowed on school grounds, it's a cliquy terroristy fucking shame of a shame. Don't even get me started on ROTC. My little sisters wanted in that. Nuh-uh. We wouldn't have it. I had to get my step-dad to re-brainwash them to hate color guard. Julian, you were in ROTC last year, weren't you?"

"I'm ashamed to say I was."

"But you got out, that's the thing. You knew it was brainwashing, and you left. Right?"

"Absolutely."

"How did you even get into ROTC to begin with?"

"A scheduling conflict."

"Oh. Laugh. A scheduling conflict? That's a pretty unfortuate scheduling conflict."

"But they fixed it."

"And that's when you were in theatre instead. I remember you were a couple days late."

"Fortunately, yes."

"Matt, what do you think about all this? Do you think color guard's a scam?"

“Color what? I’m sorry, I’m thinking about my program.”

“Your science fair project. That program?”

“Yes.” Matt resumes his distant thought.

“You’re too cerebral for Jessica.”

“She’s right, you know.”

“I’m not even with Jessica, that was a one-dance thing I think.”

“Well you’re too cerebral for me, almost. You’re the only person besides Julian who can keep up with me in conversation. Which is saying something, because I’m not an easy person to keep up with. Am I?”

“Very difficult. Your digressions put mine to shame. Anna, why didn’t you and I ever hook up?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re in the same classes, we’ve been in plays together. Why didn’t we ever hook up?”

“We didn’t hook up because I don’t like you, that’s why. Julian, seriously, what kind of a question is that? Did you ever think I liked you?”

“There were moments..”

“No. What moments?”

“..certain..glimpses.”

“There were never glimpses. Never. If there were glimpses you were making them up inside your mind.”

“Ok.”

“Matt, stop..thinking about your program and help me out here. Julian’s going crazy on me.”

“I’m not..” Julian trails off.

“What?”

“I’m not crazy,” Julian says quietly.

“I think we all do crazy things in like and love,” Matthew says.

“And I’m not just trying to excuse my behavior tonight. We’re animals who can talk. What are we supposed to do? The best we can. And all these social rules about when to stick your dick into a person and when not to. It’s too much, I think..it’s too much to ask of the human animal to keep it all straight.”

“It’s too much to ask of the human male.”

“Maybe it’s too much to ask of the human female, too, Anna. I’m serious. I can’t exactly describe all of your behavior or Tuesday’s as rational, can I? It’s like the program: individuals are following their own nature and desires, and this complex pattern emerges from it. Maybe I’ll be..stuck on Tuesday the rest of my life, just because I liked her once. And thought she liked me. Now that’s my own very specific longing that can never be fulfilled—”

“Tuesday likes you.”

“But she’s with Josh.”

“Tuesday’s always liked you, since the first day. Matthew. When I sat down at that lunch table and saw you two together, you know what I thought?” Julian asks.

“What?”

“There goes my chance with Tuesday. That I would never get to be with her, because she found you. She found you in French class and turned you on and brought you to the lunchroom to rub in my face.”

“She didn’t do it to rub me in your face.”

“Maybe not. But I wouldn’t put it past her. She’s a tricky one, Matt. She always gets her way.”

“I think that’s part of why she liked me.”

“Why?”

“Because she didn’t always get her way with me.”

“You think she found that attractive?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe,” Julian says. “But you can bet that Josh is nothing else but wrapped around Tuesday’s finger. Her calling the shots. Whatever they’re doing is what she wanted.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Matt says.

Anna says, “You really like Tuesday, don’t you?”

Matt is quiet, looking at the sky.

“When is your dad getting here? I’m cold.”

Matt looks at his watch. “I’ll call him.”

—————

“Do you know my friend Verona?”

“Verona? No.”

“You haven’t met Verona?”

“No!”

“She’s a spark, my friend. She’ll be here tonight. I don’t believe you haven’t met her. You know Adrian Taylor?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s Verona’s sister! Verona is just like Adrian but taller, and whereas Adrian isn’t a spark (no offense but she isn’t)..Verona is. She’s very magickal, you’ll see.”

“Great.”

“But no flirting with her. Verona has had a crush on me since about the fourth grade. It’s meant to be with me and her.”

“Yeah no problem I won’t mack on your girl.”

“So you accept that she’s my girl?”

“Julian, I’m not trying to get involved in any relationships you have so if you’re with Verona, be with Verona.”

"I'm not exactly with her. But.. Thank you."

"Sure thing. When are you going on?"

"Supposed to be six o'clock."

"Are you doing guitar or piano?"

"Some of both."

"Looking forward to it, man."

"I really wish you would do a whistling piece with me."

"Maybe another time. I don't really feel like getting up on stage, ok?"

"I could give you a microphone, you could sit right here."

"I can't tonight. Should I let you go?"

"Let me go check on a few things. I still want to continue the Sidereal dialogue, you know?"

"Go check on your things. I'll be around here somewhere."

And Julian gets up and leaves Matt sitting at a round table in the middle of Plan B coffeehouse. There are few people in attendance for Julian's show, but he expects a handful of friends to be there. It's the first time he'll play out, and he's nervous, so it's better if it's a small crowd. But never underestimate the fear of playing for friends, especially close ones. One wants to impress the ones one is close to. Julian goes behind the counter to talk with Seth, the owner, about the length of his set.

Matt gets up and goes to the back of the coffeehouse. He pushes open the door and stares at a parking lot. Matt isn't much for coffeehouses; the mass of directionless, ambitionless guck that lives there turns him off to no end. A bunch of conversations about what we're going to do someday..that we never do. It turns him off. So he lets the door close and leans up against the side of the building, whistling, not even knowing that he does it.

Anna pulls up in her father's car. She is short, and her head barely sticks up above the windows. The steering wheel looks massive in her arms. Anna gets out. "Hey."

"Hey."

"Is Julian here?"

"Yeah, he's inside."

"Is anyone else here?"

"You're the first."

"Don't forget you."

"Yeah."

"You going in?" Anna asks.

"I think I'll stay here for a minute. I'll be in."

"Ok, I'll buy you a latte."

"Great," Matt laughs.

And Anna goes inside.

Matt is thinking about the sky, how it portends, or seems to. And the mysterious Verona. Matt wants to meet her. He has no inkling that he might be attracted to her, except that she is a spark, and he wonders how deep Julian's psychosis about girls having crushes on him goes.

A van pulls up. It waits a while and then Jessica gets out. She's wearing black stretch pants and a white top, delicate, ruffled.

"Hey Matt."

"Hey Jessica."

"I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad you're here too."

"I haven't seen you around at school," she says. "Why is that?" She cocks her head.

"Jessica, are you gonna give me trouble all night?"

"Depends on what you mean by trouble."

"Like—" Matt starts.

Jessica interrupts. "Is this trouble?" She comes in close and bites Matt's neck, hard.

His fingers tighten.

"Yes," he says seriously. "That is exactly the kind of thing I meant."

"I'll do whatever I damn please," she says.

"I guess I like that about you. You're forward."

"Am I too forward?"

"No."

"Good." She comes close and whispers in his ear. "I wouldn't want to frighten ya." She starts to walk away.

Matt grabs her by the wrist. "I like to be frightened."

"We'll see," she says, and she goes inside the coffeehouse.

Matt decides to wait outside and see who else comes by. He thinks about Jessica and Anna, and it's a hard choice. He's physically more attracted to Jessica, if he admits the truth, but Anna is right, there's no way to have a conversation with Jessica like the one you could have with Anna. Matt has heard most of Julian's songs and isn't really happy to be here. He'd rather be at home with his computer, writing code, working on the project. He looks at his watch. It doesn't look like Tuesday is coming. And Nick? Who knows. He goes inside.

He sees Julian on stage, setting up. There's a small room to the right, with three chairs in it. Anna and Jessica are in there, talking, Jessica sitting in the middle chair. Julian is motioning for Matt to come up front but Matt goes into the small room instead. And instead of sitting in the empty chair he sits on Jessica's lap. She puts her arm around him, then they're sitting next to each other, then Jessica is sitting on top of him, her hands on his knees. He can feel Jessica's ass in his lap. He's

paying no attention to what the girls are saying.

Julian shows up at the door. "Show's about to start."

"What happened to Nick and Tuesday?"

Julian shrugs.

"We'll be there in a minute," Matt says.

"Yeah Julian," Anna says, "chill. What happens if your show doesn't start right on time?"

Julian is flustered.

Jessica says, "You might want to wait to give people more time to show. I'm sure Tuesday was coming."

Julian says, deadly serious, "The show is starting in five minutes."

"We'll be there," Matt says. "Looking forward to hearing you play."

And Julian leaves.

"What is his problem?" Jessica says.

Anna says, "He's gotten very un-Dude lately. You're very un-Dude, Julian."

"What's that from?" Matt asks.

And both Anna and Jessica shout, "You've never seen The Big Lebowski??"

Matt pinches Jessica's leg. "The big what?"

Jessica blurts out a scream at the leg pinch.

They all get up, get in line at the counter, and Anna buys herself and Matt drinks, then Jessica buys hers. Anna leaves a good tip in the jar. They all sit right up front, and the very center table, with Matt in the middle and a girl on either side. They sip their drinks and look around at the almost-empty coffeehouse. A couple of people up front who don't even know Julian. A man in the back reading Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories.

Julian messes around with the piano, then sets his guitar in a stand before the microphone. He walks to the microphone, picks it up. Braids are in front of his face. He says, "Welcome, friends and strangers. Tonight I'll be singing some original songs and performing a number of piano pieces for your enjoyment. Please patronize Seth's business and be generous at the tip jar."

A smattering of applause, then Julian picks up the guitar.

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The show is basically great, Julian being, among whatever other undesirable qualities, a genius who has taught himself two instruments in the space of less than a year. His lyrics are impossible to decipher, and he sings like an old white man (Julian is black). But his guitar playing is



authentic and his piano works inspired, with qualities of Beethoven shining through. He is 100% committed to the performance, sweating after certain of the piano numbers, and visibly moved by his own guitar playing. The pained expression on his face tells you that he really believes in what he is singing, and he keeps his eyes closed most of the time. There is no doubt that they are watching the beginnings of something great: a performer who could go places, inspire people, take on the world.

Nick and Michael do show up, late, and sit right behind Anna and crew.

Jessica even calls Tuesday but Tuesday won't answer her phone. She and Josh never make it.

Afterwards, Julian sits with them and they make kind of a circle of chairs.

Julian leans in to Matt. "So did you like it?"

"You were great. I'm very impressed."

"I'm glad you liked it, my friend."

"Anna, what did you think?"

Anna answers skeptically. "I thought it had potential. Some of the piano pieces are a little muddy, you have to admit, and I can't understand a damn thing you're saying when you sing."

Julian nods.

"I thought you sounded fucking great," Nick says.

Jessica says, "You did a great job, Julian." She puts two arms around him and kisses him on the cheek.

"Has Verona been here?" Julian asks.

"Verona Taylor? No, she hasn't been here. Were you expecting her?"

"Vaguely. Damn, I wanted you to meet her. Like I told you, she's a spark."

"Oh yeah," Anna says sarcastically, "a total spark. If you haven't met Verona Taylor, you haven't met anyone. What is it with your total obsession with Verona? She doesn't like you, Julian, you know that. You do know that, right? Tell me at least you know that."

Julian ignores her. "I'm going to get a red eye. Matt, would you meet me in the side room for a discussion on Sidereal Studios?"

"I'll meet you there in a minute, I'm going to hang out here for a while."

"Suit yourself."

"What?"

"I said suit yourself."

"Julian has the biggest boy crush on you, you know that, right?"

"They have a little bromance going on!"

"He's so selfish. Isn't he selfish?"

“What do you say, Matt, are you as in love with Julian as he is with you?”

“Yeah, Matt, what do you say?”

Matt adjusts in his chair. He looks around at all their faces.

“Julian is good conversation for me. For all his eccentricities—”

“You mean annoyances.”

Matt re-starts. “For all his annoyances,” he says, “Julian is great for me.”

-----

Anna starts dating Chris over winter break. They meet in painting class with Mr. Shutt, and Anna likes Chris’s beard, and his curly hair, and the fact that he’s so big, and his general demeanor as a fuzzy bear.

Chris is well over six feet tall, and he’s wide, too. He wears overalls and doesn’t seem to care about popularity and the rest of the social games high schoolers play. Anna likes that. He’s above it, or outside of it, like something about his upbringing makes him just not care.

They can talk about politics. Chris is up on all the wars and he cares about the people here and everywhere else who are being oppressed by their governments. He has a Che Guevara t-shirt. And it’s not about the t-shirt. Anna knows that a Che Guevara t-shirt doesn’t make you cool, but that doesn’t get around the fact that Chris has a Che Guevara t-shirt and Chris is cool. You have to wear it with the right intention.

When Chris kisses Anna she can taste cinnamon and oatmeal and other homey scents. He wears patchouli; Anna wears patchouli. Chris has a reputation at school for being a hippie but he’s not, really, any more than Anna is a hippie. All those terms are just shorthand, and not very loving shorthand at that. Anna could get used to being with a hippie.

Anna’s parents like Chris, but they like anyone who Anna brings home. Just like the first time she had Matt over, and they had tofu tacos, Anna’s parents were engaging with Matt in conversation and making him feel welcome. They do the same thing with Chris. Well, Anna’s mom and stepdad do. Anna’s dad is mostly uninvolved.

Anna and Chris don’t have sex. They kiss and Chris cops a feel every once in a while, but it’s nice. Anna likes what they have.

“Chris.”

“Mm?”

“What are you thinking? I lost you.”

“I’m just thinking of this paper I have to write for Mrs. Briggs by tomorrow.”

“What’s it on?”

“A history of the underground railroad.”

“And you have to have this by tomorrow? Do you want me to let you go?”

“No, I’ll do it later. I want you to stay for dinner.”

“I’ll call my dad. He might have to pick me up earlier. But we’ll see. Do you want to work on the paper together? I’d be happy to help.”

“I’ll do it later. I want you to sit here and tell me about yourself.”

“I think you already know all there is to know.”

“No. I don’t know much about your piano playing.”

“What’s to know?”

“When did you start?”

“The fourth grade. I was a late starter. I’m still catching up in a lot of ways. My peers are much more developed than me. Or: than I. I think it’s I.”

“Will you play me something when I come over your mom’s house sometime?”

“I don’t usually play things on demand.”

“Please!”

“Ok. I’ll play something. But one song. Just one. And I get to pick the song. I want to pick something I can reasonably make it all the way through without too many mistakes. I’m not very good, really I’m not. Now let me ask you something. What’s up with your parents? Are they married, or separated, or what?”

“They’re married. They just don’t live together. I think they still have sex sometimes. Even though they both have boyfriends and girlfriends. I don’t know what the deal is with them. They just like to live separately. It’s been like this since I was about..five? But your parents are divorced.”

“Yeah but they’re legitimately divorced. They do not still have sex with each other. My mom’s remarried. It’s a little bit more of a clear-cut situation. Yours still have sex?”

“Yeah, I think so. They’re very covert about it. Yeah, they do.”

“They must be covert if they’re doing it in the same house as you and you’re still not sure they’re doing it.”

“I’m telling you, they’re covert.”

“I guess. You have just one sister, right?”

“Kate.”

“And she’s obviously younger.”

“You have two sisters?”

“Yes,” Anna says. “And they’re from Mom and Dad, they’re not stepsisters. If my mom and step-dad decided to have children, well, I think my mom’s too old to have children, not sure about that but anyway it wouldn’t make sense at her age, they’d be like seventy when the kid graduated from high school, or sixty anyway, no..well maybe sixty five.

I'm not sure of the math but you get the idea."

"Wanna make out?"

"Yes."

And Chris gets on top of Anna and kisses her. She loves the feel of his beard. She is instantly turned on and thinking about what sex would be like with him. Would she be on bottom, the full weight of him on top of her? Or would she be on top, impaling herself, riding the big bear? She will never find out, because, in actuality, the two of them will never have sex. But it's fun to imagine, anyway.

-----

Matt is frustrated. He's thinking about making a call. But debating it. Not sure. To call, or not to call? That is the question.

He picks up the phone. Selects a name.

"Hello?"

"Hi Jessica?"

"Matt?"

"Yeah, hi. Listen. I want to come over and do you like you want to be done."

The Prince lyric is lost on Jessica. It's a stupid thing to say.

"You want to do what?"

"I want to come over and do you like you want to be done."

"Are you feeling horny?"

"Yes."

"I think you better come over so we can discuss this further. Can you get here by yourself?"

"Yeah, I can walk. It'll take me about half an hour."

"Well don't lose any of that passion on the way," she says, and disconnects.

The walk over is cold, and Matt regrets having used the Prince lyric. It's one of the stupidest things he's ever said, but he's new at this, and he's muddling through. He wants to have sex and get it over with. It seems like everyone is doing it except him. Jessica is rumored to have done it with Marcus, so maybe she'll be willing to go all the way with him. Matt doesn't know. He just knows he wants to do it.

When he gets to Jessica's house the door is open a tiny bit. He pushes it. "Hello?"

Jessica comes to the door. She's wearing tight-fitting black exercise or dance clothes. "Come in."

Matt looks to the left, to her dad's video production area. "Is your dad here?"

"Nope," she says, and she kisses him.

His hands are all over her and they move to the couch. They make out, and soon Jessica is moved down so that her chest is on Matt's crotch, and she's cradling his dick between her breasts—through clothes of course.

She stops for a second and says, "When did things get so hot and heavy?"

"I don't know."

"Do you wanna come upstairs?"

"Yes."

So they go, Jessica leading Matt, holding his hand, the two of them walk up a curved staircase to Jessica's bedroom. She pushes him down on the bed. She stands in the corner by her dresser and dirty clothes basket.

"Now what did you say to me on the phone? I couldn't quite hear you."

"I said: I want to come over and do you like you want to be done."

"Ahh. I see. That's why you came over?"

"Yes."

Jessica is undressing, but without showing him anything. She puts one shirt on before taking off the one underneath it, etc. Puts a skirt on over her yoga pants and then takes off the yoga pants. She goes into her top drawer, and pulls out a pair of panties, white with floral decorations, and puts those on underneath the skirt she is now wearing. She turns so that her back is facing him and she bends over, messing with something in the dirty clothes basket. The skirt comes up, and Matt can see her panties, her bare legs, a beautiful sight. She's showing him on purpose.

He needs to be decisive, forward, as she is being. He takes her hand and pulls her onto the bed. Then gets on top of her and rubs against her with his dick.

She pushes him off, grabs him by the wrists and holds him to the bed. She comes in to his neck and bites him, a vampire bite.

Matt returns the bite, holding her breast, and takes one hand and puts it under her skirt and rubs her vulva, massaging her pussy lips.

She lies back, her head on the pillow and her face facing away from him, and lets him touch her.

He starts to pull down her panties and she stops him.

"What?"

"Just..not now."

"Ok. Can I touch you?"

"Yes."

He starts down her panties to rub her directly but she stops him.

"Maybe..a little too fast, ok?"

"Ok. Sorry."

“You don’t have to be sorry.”

Matt leans down and kisses her, and bites her neck.

She coos and reaches out for his dick. “Are you gonna be ok, if we don’t do this?”

“Jessica, I would never pressure you.”

“I know. You’re too sweet. I like that about you, Matthew. Don’t ever lose your sweetness.”

Matt kisses her again, and rubs her over her panties. She’s wet, and he doesn’t know: why is she not having sex with him? He keeps rubbing her.

She says, “I think..I think you should go now.”

He sits up. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

Matt stands.

“Don’t think this means I don’t like you, ok?”

“But you want me to go?”

“Yeah.”

So Matt goes downstairs, and out the front door. His erection wears off, and he walks the ten blocks home.

-----

They have the magazine. Fresh from the printer in the Oregon District. Julian carries one pile, wrapped in string. Matt carries the other. They’re in the side chapel of Matt’s mom’s church. No one else is around. Jackie, in her office—one of the other pastors.

Julian slams down his pile of magazines. “Well.”

“Well.”

“We got this far.”

“We did it, Julian, we did it.”

“Whoo-ooo!”

“Woooo!”

The boys slap hands. In one month, they went from concept to 16-page magazine, printed on gray cardstock in black and white, containing their and their friends’ poetry, prose, and photography. The magazine is called “Word.” and they hope this is to be the first of many issues.

“It looks good.”

“It looks great.”

“It looks great, my friend.”

“I agree!”

“With me?”

“Of course!”

“Indeed!!”

They slap hands again.

“Wanna get made up?”

“Yeah. Let’s do it.”

Matt brings out the mime makeup, which he had his mother buy. Julian and Matt go to the men’s restroom, leaving their magazines in the chapel, and they put on mime makeup. It’s New Year’s Eve, and Dayton has a festival downtown on that night, with fireworks, music, food, and soon-to-arrive two boys selling their magazine for \$1 a copy.

Julian looks in the mirror. He’s not sure how far down his neck to do the makeup—the underside of the chin..should he do it?

“Is this good?”

“Looks great!”

“Should I do under here?”

“I don’t think so. Just the face.”

Julian has the slightest bit of chin hair that sticks up through the makeup. Matt has shaved.

“Let’s go down to Fifth Avenue first, I think most people will be down there.”

“Good idea, my friend.”

“Should we take all the magazines with us? It’s a lot to carry.”

“Let’s leave the bulk of our issues here and just take what we can easily carry. We’ll come back to get more when we run out.”

“Ok. How do I look?”

“Great, my friend!” Julian looks at Matt. Matt’s teeth are yellow in contrast to the mime paint, but Julian decides not to say anything. He looks in the mirror and bares his teeth. Not as yellow as Matt’s, but next to the mime paint, not as white as he usually thought of his teeth.

“I think we’re going to have a great night.”

“Yeah.”

“I said I think we’re going to have a great night!”

“I agree,” Matt says reluctantly, tired of the ritual.

“With me?”

“Of course.”

“Indeed.”

---

Walking from the church to Fifth Avenue, Matt felt the pinch of an ingrown toenail on his left foot. It made walking hard, but he kept up with Julian’s dancing gait. They each had twenty or so issues of the magazine, with hundreds more waiting back in the chapel.

“Maybe we’ll see Tuesday,” Julian says. “I hear she and Josh are

gonna be down here.”

“Great.”

“You don’t sound too excited, my friend.”

“I’m always excited to see Tuesday. I’m just not too jazzed about seeing Josh with her.”

“I think you’re going to have to accept that Josh is in her life.”

“I know! I know. That doesn’t mean I have to like him.”

“Tuesday made her choice—”

“That doesn’t mean I have to like the guy. I don’t have to be everyone’s friend!”

“You seem pretty excited. I don’t want this to get in the way of our selling magazines tonight.”

“It’s not going to.”

“I think we should maintain a positive attitude while selling the magazine. We need to do this with the right intentions.”

“I am doing it with the right intentions.”

“Are you sure?”

“Julian, what kind of question is that? I already said I am.”

“How’s your toe?”

“It hurts.”

“Do you think this is mostly about your toe and not about Sidereal Studios?”

“Oh, fuck you Julian. Yes, my toe hurts. That doesn’t mean I can’t separate a little toe pain from the broader issues. Which way? This way or that way.”

“I think..towards St. Claire.”

“Ok.”

The boys begin hiking in that direction.

They are quiet for a while, then Julian starts. “I just think—”

Matt interrupts. “If this is about intentions or nodules or auras just shove it, ok? I’m selling the magazine. We’re selling the magazine. What else is there? Is the person I’m selling it to going to be able to see into the deepest reaches of my soul while I’m taking their dollar?”

“I think they will—”

“No. No. Good for you that your toe doesn’t hurt like a motherfucker right now. Have some effing sympathy for me because mine is, ok?”

“Ok. But—”

“Julian. Sell your magazines the way you want to. Don’t tell me how to sell mine.”

“I just think if we want to sell the maximum number possible that we should watch our energy as we go into the selling.”

“Am I not spiritual enough for you? I don’t necessarily announce



my spirituality to everyone I know, even you. I am spiritual, though.”

“I believe you.”

“Good. Good for you.”

Now they’re at a reasonable crowd of people, at Fifth and St. Claire, the entrance to the Oregon District.

“What about here?”

“Let’s do it.”

The mimed-up boys find a street light to stand by and they hold their magazines at their chest. Julian immediately shouts out, “Word magazine! Get your copies! Poetry! Prose! Photography of local artists! Made in Dayton by real Daytonians for your reading and viewing pleasure! Get your copies right here! One dollar.”

Several people turn briefly, then go back to crossing the street.

“Julian.”

“Yeah?”

“I thought the whole purpose of being mimes is that we don’t speak.”

“Oh. Yeah. I forgot.” Julian makes the lip-zipping pantomime, and throws away the key.

A woman comes up to them.

Julian pantomimes a “1”, and then indicates the magazine.

The woman smiles. She gets a dollar out of her purse. She and Julian make a trade. The woman smiles and walks off. And that’s how they sell their first magazine.

-----

Hours later, they’ve just sold their first forty copies. They’re inside the Dayton Convention Center riding up and down escalators where they’ve been selling to people as they get off after their ride, one of them at the top, one of them at the bottom.

Julian and Matt pass each other in the middle.

“Say there,” Julian says, and he turns around on the down escalator and walks up the steps so he can stay in sync with Matt. “What do you say we trade in some of this dough we’ve earned for some chili cheese fries and then go back and get more issues.”

“I thought we were going to save the profits for our next issues’ expenses.”

“Come on, just a few bucks,” Julian says comically.

“Julian.”

“Come on.”

“Ok, fine. Buy chili cheese fries.”

They’re almost at the top of both escalators.

“Aren’t you having any?”

“I’m probably not going to turn down chili cheese fries, but I think in general we should save the money to pay for the next issue. This issue wasn’t free. I put up the money for this one, remember? Paper, printing, time at Kinko’s. The business should feed into itself.”

“Pleeeeeease,” Julian says ridiculously, “can we pleeeeeease have some chili cheese fries?”

“Don’t ask me. I mean this is us together, in this. You have just as much say in it as I do.”

Just then, Anna and Tuesday come up behind Julian and reach out and tickle him.

“Bwoooooough!” he shrieks.

And Tuesday says, “I thought mime’s weren’t supposed to speak.”

Julian mimes some sort of “I’m sorry”-cradling motion.

Anna says, “What are you guys doing?”

“Selling our magazine.”

“Oh, I’ve been wanting to see it.”

“We have more copies back at the church.”

“What are you two doing?”

“Just wandering around. They’re about to do the fireworks.”

“Is Josh here?” Matt asks.

“He’s around here somewhere,” Tuesday says.

“And before you ask,” Anna says, “I am here with Chris. The two of them went off toward the Diner. Wanna come watch the fireworks with us?” Anna is referring to the Diner on St. Claire, the place where Matt and Julian plan to get their chili cheese fries—but not with Chris and Josh around.

“We’d love to.” That was Julian.

“Well let’s go! We only have..three minutes before they start!”

Anna and Tuesday run off and Matt and Julian follow.

-----

The place they go to watch the fireworks is on the next-to-top level of the parking garage that’s down by the convention center. The fireworks are being shot off from the top level, and the levels are terraced so there’s a place on the next-to-top level that juts out below the top level. Perfect for viewing the fireworks being shot off from just above.

It has snowed, but this part of the parking lot hasn’t been shoveled or salted, and so the snow is in its original form from after the fall. To watch the fireworks they step into the snow.

Anna throws the first snowball. Matt returns one to her, and then everyone’s throwing them, laughing and breathing in the cold air.

Then the fireworks start, and it is the best fireworks show any of them see in their lifetime, because the fireworks are directly overhead, so they fill the field of vision. Embers from the explosions fall in the snow beside them. Oranges, greens, reds, and whites. Those twinkly white ones. As they look up, all they can see is light against the sky, and the pops and bangs the bombs make are crisp and synchronized with the blast.

Matt grabs Tuesday and Anna grabs Julian and the four of them fall into the snow.

Julian says, "You know, they say that whatever you're doing right at the stroke of midnight, on New Year's Eve, is what you'll be doing for the rest of the year."

They can only hope it's so.

-----

Christina is a break. She's not connected to Matt's friends. She's in ROTC. She has a different lunch period but she would never sit at the freak table even if she had. Or maybe it's that they wouldn't let her sit there.

Matt rides home with her on a Thursday. They have seen each other around, and are physically attracted, but it isn't until the career fair in the gym that they finally get to talk. When they do talk, Matt hears her as a simple person, simpler than say an Anna. He likes how she looks, and he imagines having sex with her. The day that Matt rides Christina's bus home with her, Christina's mother is coming home late. Christina is supposed to be reading *The Great Gatsby* but instead she has checked out the DVD of the movie from the library.

"Do you wanna watch it with me?"

"Sure."

It's the one with Robert Redford as *Gatsby*, and they fast forward through the slow parts while sitting on Christina's bed. The blue light lights Christina's face, and they both have their shoes off, and the air conditioning blasts through Christina's basement bedroom.

Her dog is waiting outside, chained to some plumbing. Christina has many pets. A ferret, two geckos, her dog of course, and some other spiders and reptiles. She has cats, and Matt is scared of how Christina treats them. She pets them when they don't want to be pet, holds them when they don't want to be held, and it seems like cruelty to him.

He looks over at Christina in the blue light. Her shirt is unbuttoned at the top and he can see her breasts bubbling up from inside. She has the most perfect breasts. C-cup. Totally round at the top, ideal cleavage. He wants to touch them.

“Look at the way they dance! And did you see the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg?”

“Yeah, I saw them.”

“They look so sad. Do you want me to go upstairs and make some popcorn?”

“No, stay here.”

“But I really want some popcorn.”

“I can come with you.”

“No, stay here and watch the movie, and tell me what I missed. Is Orville Redenbacher ok?”

“It’s fine.”

“Good, ‘cause that’s all we have.” Christina gets off the bed, goes around where Matt is sitting and waits at the door. “You gonna be ok without me?”

“Yeah.”

She goes.

Matt is left looking around Christina’s room. He lies back at first, touches himself. He has a partial hard on just from sitting in bed with Christina. He adjusts his penis. He has to make out with her today, he just has to. When he hears the microwave start, he gets out of bed and walks around the room. He looks at the enclosure where Christina stores her turtles. There are four of them, and they all have the same coloration. There’s a heat lamp clamped to the top of the terrarium.

He hears the popcorn start to pop. He is tempted to find her underwear drawer, but doesn’t. Instead he goes out and talks to the dog.

“Hey Winston. How you doin’?”

Winston stands up and licks Matt’s hand.

“Hey buddy. Does Christina think about me when I’m not around, do you know? Has she mentioned me? No? Aw crap Winston.”

Christina is coming down the stairs. She holds a bowl full of popcorn. “Were you just talking with Winston?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he answer you back?”

“No. Does he know English?”

“Sadly no. Have some popcorn.”

“Mmm. It’s good.”

“You were supposed to be watching the movie and telling me if I missed anything!”

“Sorry! I got distracted by your pets. I was looking at your turtles. They’re beautiful.”

“Sit down. I’ll feed you popcorn,” she says.

Matt complies.

Christina does in fact feed him popcorn, a few pieces with her

fingers and then she offers one with her mouth. Matt removes the popcorn with his hand and they kiss. It's a gentler kiss than Anna's, Christina has very full lips. Matt bites them, raking his teeth along her.

"Mmm," Christina says. "I like the way you kiss."

Matt puts his hand on her stomach and moves it up to her breast, full in its bra cup. He touches her breast, finds the nipple. Christina's hands grip Matt's legs, her fingernails digging into him. They kiss more.

"You're not watching the movie," she says.

"Neither are you."

"We're gonna have to rewind it."

"When does your mom get home?"

"When does my mom get home?"

"I want to know how long I have with you."

"You want to know how long you can have me?"

"You know what I meant."

"She gets home..around..five-thirty. But it doesn't matter because my mom isn't going to interrupt us."

"She doesn't mind you having me down here?"

"She doesn't mind me..having you..down here?"

"Do you want to have me?"

"Do you?"

"I don't want you to fail your class on *The Great Gatsby* just cause I was over here. Don't you need to watch the movie?"

"I can watch it later." She kisses him. "Do you want me to turn it off?"

"No, leave it on."

They kiss again, and Matt climbs on top of her, laying her back on the bed. He mouths her breast through the shirt, leaving a wet spot right on her nipple. She puts her hands on his back and pulls him in. He kisses her neck. Puts a tongue in her ear. Her hands are moving all over him. His dick is hard and she is getting wet. Her clothes are so tight, both her pants and shirt barely stretch to cover her body.

The front door opens, upstairs. A voice comes down to them:

"Stina! Stina!"

Christina yells, right by Matt's ear. "What?"

"Did you have Matthew over?"

"Yes, Matthew's here."

"Hi Matthew!"

"Hi!"

"Mom we're busy watching *Gatsby*!"

"Do y'all want dinner?"

"Mom, we're busy!!"

"Calm down, all I asked was do you want some dinner."

Christina whispers to Matt, “She always does this.” Then Christina yells up at her mom. “We’ll be upstairs in a minute Mom! We’ve got to finish the movie!”

“Ok, I’m making chicken wings and green beans! I’ll tell you when it’s ready!”

“Ok, Mom!”

“Does Matt like chicken wings?”

“Mom! Leave us alone, please.”

“Matt do you like chicken wings?”

“Mom! Shut. Up.”

“Alright. How you doing, Matt?”

“Mom!! Please!”

Then it’s quiet upstairs.

Christina shakes her head. “I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s no problem.”

“She’s crazy, she can’t help it. I’m really sorry.”

“No problem.”

Christina touches Matt’s lip with her finger. “Where were we?”

Matt kisses her. “Right here I believe.”

Christina whispers, “We have to be quiet. You can hear everything from upstairs.”

“Ok,” Matt whispers.

“Oh, fuck,” Christina says.

Matt says, “What?”

“The movie. I really have to watch this. Do you mind if I take it back a little. Will you watch the movie with me or will you hate me?”

“I’ll watch the movie with you.”

Christina takes the movie back about ten minutes. “Is this ok?”

“Fine.”

“If you wanted to, you could give me a backrub while we watch.”

“Ok.”

Christina sits in front of Matt and unbuttons her shirt one more button. They watch *The Great Gatsby* and Matt rubs Christina’s back. He does it hard, and she exhales sensually to show what she likes.

“Lie down. Lie on your stomach.”

She does.

Matt kneels over her butt and then just sits down on her, getting a better angle from which to press her hard, and he works up the side/top of her back, near the shoulder blades. He watches the movie, and likes it. It’s one of his favorite books, and he’s never seen the movie, so it’s fun to see how the filmmakers imagined various elements of Fitzgerald’s text. Matt rubs the lower part of her back, and isn’t shy about rubbing her waist and the top of her butt. Christina turns her head sideways, not looking

the movie, and relaxes. Her eyes are closed, and she's thinking this is one of the best moments she's experienced in a long time. Matt is pressing just the right amount, not too gentle, not too rough. Matt is thinking the same. His dick is hard, just from sitting on top of Christina. He's getting to touch her, to control her body in small ways, and he's giving her pleasure. It isn't the pressure-of-sex situation, but something more relaxed. He likes Christina's mom. And he does like chicken wings.

Matt has never learned to force his will on a situation, or else he would have had sex earlier. But it's two things. One is an ingrained version of his parents' dictate To Not Have Children. Don't get someone pregnant too early. Worry about AIDS. He never learned about using protection except in health class, and that never sunk in. Two is not forcing his will in a situation. He's more of a laid-back, let's-see-what-you-want-to-do kind of person. Not good at initiating. He would be much older when he learned to initiate. So this night at Christina's house they didn't have sex, and before dinner all they did was making out and this lying-down backrub thing. Still, it was a perfect moment, one of those moments that couldn't have been orchestrated better if any one person was planning it. Christina lying on the bed, and Matt kneeled above her, molding her, shaping her, with a hard cock and bathed in the blue light of *The Great Gatsby*, they have a perfect connection, a perfect bond. Pretending to be adults, and treating each other better than two adult versions of themselves probably would have, they are playing out a scene that neither of them will ever forget.

-----

Nick meets Jenny through his mom. She is his mom's age, in her late forties, and Nick has always had a sexual feeling about her. Jenny comes over to the house, and she stands by Nick and asks him about his photographs, which are framed on the walls. It's something about the way she pays attention to just him, in these moments of looking at photographs, and she'll put her arm out to point at the pictures, and Nick can smell her perfume.

Nick wonders what it would be like to be with an older woman, if her pussy would be shriveled, and loose, since she's had babies. He sometimes thinks about that when he and Jenny are talking. She's admiring some aspect of his photographs and all he can think about is her pussy, whether she's gone through menopause, and if not, what type of tampons she uses.

One day when Nick comes home from school Jenny is there with his mom. They're moving a set of gladiolus stems from being in one vase to being in two. Mom is wearing a black sleeveless dress. Jenny is

wearing an orange sleeveless dress. Nick looks at Jenny's armpits. They are perfectly shaven. Jenny has tossed her shoes off, and he notices a bottle of wine.

"Oh hi Nick."

"Hey Nick."

"Hi Mom. Hi Jenny. What are you two doing?"

"Oh I just loved these gladiolas so we're splitting them up so I can take this one to the house."

"Nice. Looks like you two have been hitting the wine."

"It's a shame, Nick, because I owe your mom a necklace, one she loaned me, and I can't drive."

"Would you be willing to drive Miss Nickle to her house and back here—"

"While I sober up."

"While she sobers up and brings my necklace. Because I want to wear it tonight. You know, the Frank party we go to once a year?"

"Of course. I'd be happy to drive you Miss Nickle." Nick emphasized the "Miss Nickle" part.

"Then go."

"We can take my car," Jenny says, and she's walking outside without shoes.

"How many bottles have you had?"

Nick's mom considers whether to tell him. "Three," she says.

"Well I hope you're going to be ready to go to your party. I'll be right back with her." Nick comes back. "Does she even know what necklace you loaned her? In this state?"

"She'll know, I hope."

"I hope so too."

-----

The car is a 5-speed manual gloss-black Lotus Elise, and Nick has always wanted to drive it. Miss Nickle seats herself in the passenger seat and her dress is running up her legs. Nick sits in the driver's seat and closes his door.

"You wanna buckle yourself in there Miss Nickle?"

"It's always Jenny to you, Nick, you know that."

Nick starts the car. He revs it a little. It roars.

"Feels nice, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I tried to talk your mother into getting one, back in the day, but they like their Audis. What can I do, I'm stylish, tell me I'm not."

"You are, Miss Nickle, you are."



“Call me that one more time and I’ll..I’ll do something to you, mister.”

“Are you ready to go?”

“If you’re ready to take me.”

“If I’m ready to take you..ok.” And Nick puts the car in reverse and roars it out of the driveway, and takes a left on Hammond Road, going to Jenny’s place.

On the way, they talk.

“Nick, do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Why not, is there no one suitable?”

“There’s no one willing. I haven’t even gotten into suitable.”

“High school is rough. I hated high school.”

“That’s about right.”

“Just hold your breath. It’ll be done soon enough. Are you going to college?”

“I don’t know, Miss Nickle.”

“I’m serious, stop it.”

“Jenny I have no idea if I’m going to college. I mean I know I’m supposed to. I’m supposed to want it. But I don’t want to go there just on a knee-jerk reaction, you know? Like everyone else does. I’d like to have some type of business, so I can make some money.”

“You’re smart. Forget school, get into business for yourself. What kind of business would you think about?”

“I’d sort of like to start a real hip printer, like a print shop? But we’d do old-school photography, film prints from thirty-five millimeter, and I’ve got these ideas for these real cool transparent business cards. Actually, I have some with me. You want to see?”

Nick starts going for his pocket but Jenny stops him.

“Hands on the wheel.”

Nick puts his hand back on the wheel and Jenny reaches into his pocket and fumbles around for what seems to Nick like an inordinately long time, then she finally comes out with his wallet. Feeling her hands against the thin pocket material, touching his leg, gets him excited a little bit.

“It should be toward the back, there’s a paper envelope and inside that—”

“I got it. These are beautiful, Nick. Really innovative. I’ve never seen anything like it, actually. Would you do mine?” She stuffs the cards back in the envelope and the wallet back in Nick’s pocket.

“Sure I would. That’s just the tip of the iceberg into what’s possible. We could draw up some prototypes and then I could print you some samples.”

“Where do you do your printing?”

“Thompson Graphics. It’s better than Kinkos. In fact, I can’t think of anything I’d even do at Kinkos anymore.”

“The turn’s right up here.”

“I remember where you live.”

“I wasn’t sure you would. It’s been a while since you’ve been to my house.”

“I remember coming here as kids. We used to play by your pool while the grow-ups drank.”

“You kids drank, too, as I remember.”

“Well, you know, with my parents..”

“I’d like to invite you in, Nick, but I wouldn’t want it getting back to your parents.”

“Invite me in.”

“Ok, would you like to come in?”

“Jenny, you’re drunk.”

“Say yes anyway. I’m not that drunk.”

“Ok, if you promise you’re not that drunk, then I guess I can come in.”

Nick turns off the Elise’s engine. They both head toward Jenny’s front door.

As soon as they’re inside, Jenny says, “Do you want to come up with me to the bedroom? I think that’s where her necklace is.”

“Do I want to go with you to the bedroom?”

“Don’t make me blush, Nick.”

“After you.”

So they saunter upstairs, Nick walking behind, watching Jenny’s dress ride up her leg as she goes and thinking what the hell is he getting himself into.

Jenny pushes open the bedroom door.

Nick follows her in.

There are giant dildos on the headboard. The sheets are crumpled, and there are clothes and underwear all over the floor.

Jenny easily grabs the necklace and puts it on. “Now,” she says, “I want you to fuck me.”

—————

Nick likes her pussy. It isn’t worn out from age or having babies. In fact, it’s tight and wet just like the young pussies Nick has been with. She makes him cum, and he even shouts, “Jenny! Jenny!” when he does it. Jenny keeps on his mother’s necklace while they fuck, which Nick finds a bit naughty. Her dress on the floor, Nick’s pants falling beside it, she sits

up in bed and grabs one of the dildos. She hands it to Nick.

“Now make me come.”

Nick switches on the dildo. It’s huge and purple. He sticks it inside Jenny.

She says, “Yes. Now fuck me with it.”

So he does. He fucks her, holding the thing with his whole hand, twisting it and jamming it inside her. He reaches up with his other hand and plays with her nipple.

Jenny grabs the top of the mattress and braces herself.

Nick can see it on her face that she’s about to come.

He fucks her harder with the dildo.

She comes, screaming, “Yes Nick! Yes! Oh Nick!”

When it’s over she offers him some pot. “Like I should be offering you pot, on top of everything.”

“It’s ok, I—”

“Smoke pot? Yeah, I know. So does your mother, by the way.”

They share a bowl then put their clothes on.

—————

On the way home, Nick wonders if this is a one-time thing.

Jenny is staring out the open window.

“Jenny?”

“Yes?”

Nick doesn’t say anything.

“Yes Nick? Are you upset about what just happened?”

“No.”

“Are you wondering if I’m going to tell your mother?”

“Are you?”

“No. You’re an adult. Or close enough. It’s your business to do whatever you want to do, and if pound my pussy is what you want, then..”

“What if she asks what took us so long?”

“I’ll say I couldn’t find the necklace. Had you searching the backyard for it.”

Nick drives some more. He’s mulling everything over. Then he says, “How long have you been planning this?”

“Since you were about twelve.” Jenny puts her hand on Nick’s, on the steering wheel. “Adults aren’t bound to be good any more than children are. We have temptations, pleasures we seek. We’re just as sexual as kids. Yes, I’ve been wanting a good fuck from you for a long time. I hope I wanted long enough and didn’t corrupt you.”

“You didn’t corrupt me.”

“Yeah I didn’t think so. You seemed like you had probably gotten

your first awkward fucks out of the way. I didn't want to corrupt you that much."

"Yeah I have..gotten them out of the way."

"I can tell you like women, Nick. You're a woman-killer. Your height, your looks, your voice. You're going to get laid many times in your life. Just don't forget me, that we got to fuck one day. Add me to your treasure chest of women you got off with. And if you ever want to go again, I'm willing, and remember..you know where to find me."

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The Front Street Coffeehouse. This is different than the Plan B coffeehouse, where Julian had his show, and it's different than the Oregon Emporium, which is where they all go when they're in the Oregon District. Front Street is where Matt had a photography show and Anna reads in poetry slams. You can get an excellent sandwich and before it was illegal to smoke inside, it used to be the smokiest coffeehouse around.

It's Julian, Anna, and Matt at a table.

"So what does she want?"

"She just wants to yell at me," Julian says.

Anna looks skeptical.

"Some food went missing," Julian says. "She thinks I stole it."

"She thinks you stole some food?"

"Yes."

"Well isn't it your food too if you live in the house?"

"It would seem that way to a normal person."

"But in this case it's not that way..?"

"Some mashed potatoes went missing either Tuesday or Wednesday and ever since then we haven't heard the last of it."

"Did you steal her potatoes?"

"No. Andre may have eaten them. I don't know. I don't keep track of every item in the cupboard like a goddamn Nazi. I say if you get hungry for some potatoes, then eat some potatoes."

"Were they even real potatoes?"

"No, that's the thing. They were instant. He steals a box of instant potatoes and we have the freaking Inquisition over it."

"So why is she calling you?"

"To yell about it. You want me to put her on?"

"No thanks."

Just now the door opens and Nick comes in. "Compadres," he says. "What the hell is going on?"

"Potatoes," they all say.

"Potatoes. Now what strain of freakishness has led you all to

answer me the same way, with ‘potatoes?’”

“Julian’s mom got mad at him because he stole some potatoes—”

“I didn’t steal them.”

“Because his brother Andre stole a box of instant potatoes, now Julian’s mom is on the warpath.”

“Matt,” Nick says. “I have some photographs that I would like to show you. I found this old bicycle, behind the Arby’s on Fifth Street, it’s all rusted and shit, I got some great photos, do you want to see ‘em?”

“Sure. Do you have them with you?”

Nick goes in his bag and gets out a tablet. He’s scrolling through images, getting to the right place. Here come the bicycle pictures.

“Oooh. Nice. I like this one. Did you filter these?”

“No. No Photofuck. That’s just how it looked!”

“These are amazing. This one’s nice. When did you take these?”

“Just before I got here. I was walking around downtown, because I knew we were going to meet here, and I come across this bicycle. I’m telling you. You might want to go over there and shoot some pictures yourself before that bike disappears. I’ll even go with you, and we can take some together.”

“Nick, these are really nice. You didn’t filter this?”

“No. That’s completely natural. The light just did that!”

“Wow.”

“Anna, you want to take a look at these?”

“Sure.”

“I’d like to take a look as well,” Julian says.

“Of course. You guys hold onto that, I’m gonna go get some coffee..because this is, like, a coffeehouse.”

“Can I see?” Julian asks Anna.

“Come closer—I won’t bite.”

Julian scoots his chair closer to Anna. Anna flips through the photographs. Julian’s phone rings again. He picks it up and looks at it.

“That her again?”

Julian nods.

“Let me talk to her,” Anna says, and at first Julian thinks this is a terrible idea but then he comes around to thinking ‘why not,’ and he hands Anna the phone.

“Hello? Mrs. Ender?”

Julian makes a motion to Anna to give the phone back but Anna holds up one finger: she’s got this.

“This is Anna. We’ve met. Yes, I’m the one with the pretty collages. Thank you! That’s so sweet of you! Yes, Julian is here but I wanted to talk to you, so. Well I don’t know exactly. There seems to be some sort of problem between you and Julian right now. He didn’t tell me

anything. No, I don't know anything about that, Mrs. Ender. Really? Well Julian says—. Uh-huh. Ok. Yes, Mrs. Ender. I'll pass that message along to him. Yes, you've made yourself exceedingly clear. Ok. Bye."

Anna looks confused. She ends the call and puts the phone on the table.

"Well?"

"She says she can't pick you up but you have to be home by ten."

"How am I supposed to get home?"

"She said to take the bus or get a ride."

"Is that all?"

"She sounded very angry."

"Thank you, Anna."

"You're welcome. I didn't know how to bring up the mashed potato thing."

"It's no problem."

"But I would get home by ten because she sounds hella mad, Julian. I mean she sounds like you better get home before ten or else."

"You'd think if she cared so much about getting me home that she would be willing to give me a ride."

"But you can ride the bus, can't you? I mean busses run up that way."

"I can take the bus, it's just that on principle I think she should offer me a ride."

"Maybe she's tired. Maybe she doesn't want to get out anymore. I can think of lots of reasons she wouldn't give you a ride."

"Are you taking her side?"

"I'm not taking her side, I'm just saying I can think of a lot of reasons why a person wouldn't want to get out of the house again just to pick up someone who could otherwise take the bus home."

"Let me ask you something. Would your parents refuse you a ride if you asked for one? Your actual parents..what would they do?"

"They have to give me a ride 'cause no bus runs out by where we live, unless you mean my dad, but his house is right by the school, as you know..so it's not really an apples-to-apples comparison."

"Matt, would your parents deny you a ride if you asked for one?"

"My dad would give me a ride," Matt says, "but he would be like three hours late to pick me up."

"But at least they'd give you the ride."

"Julian, I'm not saying what your mom is doing is right, but I would make sure I got out of here before the busses stop running."

"When do they stop running?" Matt asks.

"The last line up is at midnight. If you miss that, you're waiting till morning. Do you think I could come over your house?"

"I don't think so. My dad wouldn't like it."

“I don’t think your dad likes me.”

“I don’t think he dislikes you, he’s just very strict about people who come over.”

“I think he doesn’t like me because I’m black.”

“Whoah! You do realize you just called his dad a racist.”

“It’s not because you’re black, Julian. I just can’t have people over at the last minute.”

“Especially to stay over, Julian. I mean, you’re asking a lot.”

“I know what I’m asking.”

“I’m going out for a smoke,” Anna says.

“I’ll come,” Matt says.

“Would I be interrupting?” Julian asks.

“You won’t be interrupting. You can go wherever you like,” Anna says.

So the three of them go outside. It’s a cold night. Their breaths show in the air. Anna sits on the steps and pulls out a pack of Kamel Reds.

“Can I have one?” Julian asks.

“If you’re going to smoke, you should have your own fucking cigarettes.” But she gives him the smoke.

“Do you want one?”

Matt says no.

Anna lights Julian’s smoke with a giant Zippo that has the anarchy symbol emblazoned on its side.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she says, and lights her own. “You know, you’re going to have to settle this problem with your mom in order to have any peace tonight. Can you talk to her?”

“She won’t fucking listen.”

“Call her again, Julian.” Anna ashes. “You can’t have this over your head.”

Julian exhales. He stares at Anna.

Matt doesn’t know what to suggest, and he doesn’t want to become involved deeper. He doesn’t want to go through the hassle of seeing if Julian can stay at his place. How many nights would that last for? More than one?

“Call her,” Anna says.

Julian takes out his phone. He looks up at the sky, then dials.

-----

Anna and Matt come in after Anna finishes her smoke. Julian is still pacing, talking to his mother. The door closes them inside the

coffeehouse.

Nick says, "Where'd you go?"

"Smoke," Anna says.

"What's wrong with Julian? He looks like he's about to blow."

"Fight with his mom."

"I've met his mom," Nick says.

"So have I."

"She doesn't seem like the most rational person," Nick says. "I mean I don't think she has it all together."

"I don't think Julian has it all together."

"I think you're right about that. I mean I feel for Julian, don't get me wrong, but sometimes he's just not all there. I feel sorry for him."

"I don't," Anna says. "He's annoying as fuck. But you seem to like him."

"I do," Matt says. "We have good conversations."

"But you know he's unreliable, right?"

"I know that. There are things he does that get on my nerve, like when he tries to insert himself into a situation that doesn't require him, or like this one time he spent some of our Sidereal Studios money to buy cigarettes. I went off the time he did that. But he's smart. I like that."

"I'm not sure he's all that smart," Anna says, "as smart goes."

"They skipped him two grades."

"But they skipped him back."

Julian walks in. He strolls to the table, sits down, adjusts his braids, smiles at everyone.

"Well?"

"Well, I'm homeless."

"What happened?"

"I told her I wasn't coming home by ten."

"What did she say?"

"She said don't come home at all. So if I don't come home by ten, I'm homeless."

"Julian, why don't you get on a bus?" Nick says.

"Because I'm not bowing to her whims. Because I'm my own person. And if that means I'm homeless, then I'm homeless. I'll make it without her. I'm going to have to do that anyway. Might as well be now. I'm up against the sky, without wings and free of those who would hold me back. I'm three chords shy of invincible. I'm on my own. So," he says, looking at Matt, "I ask you again: can I stay at your place tonight?"

---

"Matthew. Are you there?"



“I’m here. I realized I talk only on the left hand, left ear, with you.”

“Do you? Well, that’s something to remember. I think you might remember this conversation.”

“Why?”

“Because of its content. I broke up with Josh. Or, actually, he broke up with me. I don’t know how to express it. He took the moment on the phone to say that he was done with me, and now here I am calling you, but, it doesn’t have to be a pressure thing.”

“It doesn’t have to be a pressure thing?”

“I don’t mean to imply that just because Josh and I broke up that you and I would be reactivated. Of course that could happen—”

“That could happen—?”

“It could. If I was..if I had anything to offer, it would be to you. You have been there for me throughout the days, and so I’m here with you. If I was missing for any part of you, I am here..”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying if I wasn’t here for you before that I’m here for you now. We could smoke a cigarette at a restaurant, if you wanted. Or go to heaven, if you did..”

“I think I want to go to heaven.”

“Then you shall.”

“For what it means with all your body parts and mine—”

“You shall. You shall go to heaven, for what it means for your body parts and mine—”

“I shall—?”

“You shall.”

“Well I like this conversation. I do. I like the part where you promise your body parts, and I like—”

“You like that part, do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And is there a part of this conversation where you promise me your body parts?”

“Yes, there is.”

“There is?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, good. Let me hear it.”

“I promise you my body parts in place of yours, Tuesday, I promise you a promise in response to your promise, totally.”

“That’s good enough.”

“Is it?”

“It is.”

“Is it really? Because I mean to promise you—”

“You promised me all you need to. Every promise you need to

make. I am here to receive. Promises. From you, boy. You have the promise of a full order. I am the checkout girl, you cash out with me. I swear you promises from interscope and right-on.”

“What?”

“Don’t interrupt me, boy. This is part of my new languaging. Now, as I was saying, I am your ultimate check-out girl, promising you panties and underwear from underneath my wear and goddesses from innerspace mangling. Got me?”

“Yes.”

“I further promise a meditation on me and meditations on my kind for more than a day, more than a day we survive your explosion. Josh broke up with me. I am sorry to tell you like this, P-boy, pony-boy, extravagant muse. But it has happened, that Josh who I called lover has cast me out, cast me beyond a casting, broken his promise with me. So I am no longer with him, and while this doesn’t necessarily mean that you and I will be lovers, I fear it will mean. Fear it will mean that, and you will have to be exposed to the lovely me. As I am now, all loved out. Loved as I have been. Rag doll. And I ask if you are ready for this one. If you can stand my worldliness, my evolution. If it will be too much for you. Because I now like to be fucked, too-fucked in the graduation, fucked in my pussy tight, fucked in goodness from a hard cock. You knew I must have liked it that way, even in your innocence. You knew I must have liked it. Can you give it to me that way? Can you give it up? I think you can. I think you’re ready, ready to give it to me all the way. Ready to give it to me real. I think that; am I wrong?”

“You’re not wrong.”

“No, you don’t say so?”

“No, you’re not. I appreciate where you’re coming from, and I honor that. I liked you from the beginning, from before you became you, even, and I liked that seminal you before you ever claimed ‘Tuesday,’ liked that you all the way to the back, before time, before we started to play this game between you and I, on the first day of tenth grade, I liked you then, before all that. Before the muffins hit the hand.”

“Yes, that’s it!”

“Yes. Before we started to play this game. I liked you then, in my purity, and I had a hand for you before there were hands, had a hand for you before there were hands to be played. I liked you then, before all that, and that is my evidence for liking you, you were prom queen in my eyes, before they ever voted for that position. Your tights and your panties were pure before I ever had a vision to you, whites covering your private parts in fine form before I ever tried to touch you. And that touch is what is sealed between us, forever, when I attempted to touch you on your vagina below the clothes and you rejected me. Rejected me, trying, rejected my

touch with your clothes and layers thereof. And invited me further, with your clothing, invited me to explore your layers, and when I did you smiled, smiled that exasperated smile that lovers smile when they are touched finally by hands under cloth.. Hands inbetween the mantra, remembering where I come from..”

“Yes!”

“..and fairytale, between us, the mother of the remembering, the go-between..”

“Yes, Matthew!”

“..the haphazard clique of the frontage, me and mine, thrown over a shoulder, ravished in terrible front-angle in meek venison of nine-stride motherfuckers of time, forgot, forever.”

“Is that your speech?”

“Indeed.”

“Well I have to say that I miss Josh, in this moment, in this n’aery-well. It is true, he is lost to me and like any lost lover forgotten but reminded and I miss him, miss his scent and his touch and his motion, you don’t fault me that, do you, to miss his motion?”

“I don’t want to hear about his motion, truly, never did, and never do now. Want to hear about it. You were lost to me, that’s all I remember.”

“Do you think I’m back now?”

“I hope you are.”

“When I see you, will I touch you?”

“I hope you will.”

“I may. I don’t say that I won’t. You are the boy of my dreams, make no mistake.”

“I thought I could at least be that.”

“Remember my speech.”

“I do, I adore your speech, and I hope you adore mine, you are made of little speeches I have heard from the beginning. Ciao.”

“I remember you in the quiet. Quiet kid rolling marbles in my direction in French class, teaching me directions and attractions.”

“And you invited me to lunch.”

“It was the least I could do, to spare you from the general lunch tables of fourth period, if I could spare you that it’s wonderful.”

“You did.”

“And now I have broke up with Josh. Or he has broke up with me.”

“I say celebrate, but I am me. What was Josh? A token for you? With his civil war reenactments and such, with a sword? Did you like him for that?”

“Not exactly, but for knife-making, maybe.”

“You are a girl.”  
“I can’t help it! Do you want me to be something other than a girl?”  
“No, I like you that way.”  
“Better had.”  
“Did I answer correctly?”  
“Just.”  
“First you judge me for not being a man..”  
“Second I judge you for..”  
“For not liking you?”  
“Yes.”  
“Tuesday—”  
“Tuesday?!”  
“Tuesday, kill me for liking you. What is wrong with that?”  
“Nothing, boy.”  
“Nothing?”  
“Nothing that I can think of. Lest you invite calamity on me.”  
“I won’t invite calamity.”  
“I think you’re true.”  
“Why do you give me such a hard time?”  
“All part of your training.”  
“My training?”  
“Yes. Your boot camp. You don’t think I’ll love you for nothing?”  
“Why would you?”  
“Exactly. Your boot camp. This is where I know whether you’re right for me or not. Are you willing to do what’s necessary?”  
“Maybe I am.”  
“Maybe you’re not. This is how I’ll know. Your willingness, tested. Are you willing to jump through the same hoops as Josh? Was willing to.. That is your first test.”  
“Stop comparing me to Josh.”  
“If you could not be! But in all realism, you will be. Compared to Josh. Can you fill his shoes?”  
“Fuck Josh.”  
“And now that I am broken up with him, I might say, too: fuck Josh! Fuck Josh for forgetting me. Fuck Josh for tossing me to the side. Will you do different? And truthfully, Matthew, let me say: I am not interested in love in the way I was before. I am not looking for another suitor. Fuck people! I’m not looking for them! Who are you looking for me? Look at my bio. I’m not interested in meeting new people!!”  
“Tuesday, listen to me: I’m not a new or an old person. I’m me, Matthew, and I’m saying listen to me. I like you. I have since the first day. Listen to me like you listen to yourself.”

“I do. I do. I listen to you like I listen to myself. What do you have to say?”

-----

When it’s spring, Matt and Tuesday go back to the cemetery and sit on their usual cross, looking at the graves. They sit close but they don’t kiss. Tuesday doesn’t want to. Matt can feel this, and he doesn’t make the mistake of initiating.

“What do you want?”

“Nothing. What do you want?”

“I think I already have all I want right here.”

They’ve become de-sexualized, friend zoned, and they should have never let that happen. Now everything is post-Josh and Matt isn’t even sure he wants to be with Tuesday now that she’s been with Josh. Tuesday is exploring being on her own. She is surprisingly non-sexual, even masturbating less.

“Maybe you and I are just friends.”

“Maybe we are. I don’t know Tuesday, I never thought of us like that but maybe we are.”

“There’s nothing like a good friend.”

“But I hear there’s nothing like a good fuck.”

“That’s true. Don’t you want to find someone new to fuck, someone other than me, someone who’s never done it before?”

“I don’t know.”

“You always say you don’t know.”

“That’s because I don’t. Of all the things there are to know, I know very few of them.”

“But still you know very much.”

“It’s weird. You know what I think I want?”

“What?”

“To build something. Like. You know the grave that has the pool out front of it?”

“Yes,” Tuesday says. There is a grave with a very shallow (six inch) reflecting pool in front of it.

“Well I want to build something like that. But in the middle of the woods. I want it to have Doric columns. Did you study doric columns?”

“Yes, and Ionian, and Corinthian.”

“This is a place in my dreams,” he says. “In my dreams it’s called ‘Crescent Moon.’ But in real life I think I would call it the Sidereal Pool. It is in the middle of the woods. There are snakes. It’s much bigger than the pool by the grave. It’s two or three feet deep. It’s a rectangle of the golden proportion. There is no roof, but there’s an edge that goes around

the top, that the columns hold up. There are stairs on two sides, the short sides, leading up to the pool, from the outside, and there is a deck around the pool, made of stone, where you can sit if you don't want to get in the pool."

"You've thought a lot about this."

"I think about it all the time. I think it will be called the Sidereal Pool. And I want to have rituals there, to have communion, but not communion like in the Bible, but just community, of people I know. I want to live there."

"You will. I believe you will. I see you there. Do you mind if we're not together?"

"Is this not-together? Today? If it's like this Tuesday I don't mind anything."

They pull each other tighter.

"I don't think I could ever feel I'm just friends with you. Maybe I'm making up the other part in my mind. But you're so much to me, even if you are just a friend, you are such a part of my life. School would be unbearable without you, Tuesday. If I didn't have you I would go crazy in that place."

"So would I, without you. I think we were made for each other. There is something I want to become, too."

"Yes?"

"You know the way you want to build something? Well for me it's that I want to become something. Some kind of a magician. A sorceress. Somebody powerful. Who can do magic and heal people, who can see the future and advise kings. Do you see the type of person I am pointing to?"

"Yes, I do. I think you will become that."

"You really do?"

"Yes."

"You're not just saying it?"

"I already see signs of it in you, Tuesday. You already have some magic."

"Oh, thank you. I wanted it to be true but I didn't know if it was."

"It is."

She hugs him. "You don't know how badly I've wanted this. Since I was a little girl, I saw myself as a witch. When we read about the Salem Witch Trials in eighth grade, I knew that was me. That I would be persecuted like that."

"Maybe you won't be persecuted."

"But all who possess true power are persecuted. Don't you feel that with your smarts? Do you know how smart you are, Matthew? Don't you feel persecuted for that? When people don't understand you?"

"I never thought of it like that."

“Well do. Do. Because the people persecuting you see it that way, I guarantee it. They see you as a threat that must be taken out, just because you’re different. And they will take you out. They already do. How do you feel people react to your computer skills?”

“Most people just stop talking to me. They say nothing.”

“They stop talking to you. Because you’re a freak! None of them can imagine having those kinds of skills, and you actually do. You’re actually doing something with them, on your science fair project.”

“Well, me and Jesse.”

“You and Jesse, who, by the way, is a freak. That’s why you get along with him. That’s why you two are able to work together. People don’t like you because you do well. They shun you, they refuse to talk to you, they put you in a box and throw it away. That’s why we have our table. Everyone there has something that’s different about them. Nick wears suits to school and way past the socialization that happens here. He’s already an adult. Anna is a poetry freak. Julian nobody knows what to make of, with his music and his weirdness. You and me, we’re weird, too. I’m obsessed with sex, more than most of these idiots around here. And I can’t stand to see people persecuted. Like the way everyone makes fun of the special ed’ kids, I can’t stand that.”

“I can’t stand that either.”

“And there you’re a freak. Normal is not-caring about people who are too weak to defend themselves. Normal is wanting to blow up the school. Normal is making fun of people for their clothes. No one at our table does that, we respect each other’s choices. Do you realize how unusual that is?”

“Yes! I know! I totally get that! I know what we have is special. Even though sometimes we can’t stand each other, we do have this throughline of values which makes us one.”

“I mean half the time I can’t stand Julian.”

“I don’t think Nick likes me that much.”

“I don’t think Nick dislikes you, he just has a harsh way of stating things.”

“But I know what you mean. We’re not perfect but we do have a set of values that is the same, and that’s what makes us friends. We’re more of a small country, really.”

“We are. I’m so glad you turned out to be a freak. When I first met you I wasn’t sure. In French class? I was hoping you’d come to sit with us and not go with Sarah or one of the other band girls. You never know, when you meet someone. But you sat with us—thank you. And that was the end of it. All our stories were told before they even began. Maybe I’ll grow up to be a magician. A spiritual master. Maybe you’ll have your pool, and whatever else you want to have. There must be more.

I know you're going to create great things. You already do! I think part of the reason I wanted to be with you is that you're smart. That someone so smart could love me, I think that gets me off."

"You're smart too."

"But I'm not Matthew smart. You know what I mean?"

"I accept your compliment."

"That's a good choice. See? You're smart enough to shut up and accept a compliment. Most people wouldn't do that. I need you to look over my French workbook, fix my tense. It's horrible, I've got imperatives where there should be future perfect, or the pluperfect, I think? It's all messed up. I desperately need your help. I never understood French, I think I would have taken Latin if they'd offered it. But you seem to get it perfectly, as you get all of your subjects. I heard Madame Duffy say that if all her students were like you that the world would be a better place. And it's true, it is. You're the ideal student. Maybe a little lackadaisical when it comes to sex, but who can complain?"

"I'm sorry if I wasn't forward enough with you."

"What does it matter? It's over. I wanted to have sex with someone so I did, with Josh."

"I know what it's like, to want to have sex with someone. I called Jessica earlier this year and tried to."

"Didn't she let you?"

"No, she didn't."

"Oh, I always thought of Jessica as sort of a street whore, I'm surprised to hear that."

"I was forceful with her. I initiated."

"I'm proud of you."

"But she sent me home."

"How rude!"

"Yeah! She totally sent me home!"

"You should try her again, maybe she's gotten horny since then."

"I don't want to try her again."

"Do you want to try with me?"

"I honestly don't know."

"I shouldn't tease you. I'm not sure if I want to, either."

Everything's gotten so cerebral since Josh and I broke up. I think about things too much. Tell me not to think about things."

"Don't think about things. Tuesday. You're thinking too much."

"Thanks. That helps. You shouldn't wait on me, Matthew. You should do whatever you want. Do you like that type of freedom?"

"I'm not sure I like it more than I would like being with you."

"Then I'm sorry for leading you on. Because as much as I'd like, I really can't see myself being in a relationship right now."



-----

Julian rents with the game masters. A group of Magic the Gathering playing motherfuckers who have a copy machine on top of the refrigerator and live in a house full of mess. Julian happens to have scored a bedroom on the top floor of the house.

“Welcome, my friends.”

It is Anna, Matthew, Tuesday, Nick, and of course Julian. They are all there like a champ.

“Why are we here?” Anna says.

“You’re here for good friendship, company,” says Nick.

Anna reaches for Matthew’s hand.

“Julian, you really scored one, didn’t you,” Tuesday says. “This is a nice place.”

“It’s nice except for the people I live with.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“They just don’t understand..the musician’s life. They expect rent to be paid like a motherfucking Nazi headmaster, I don’t have that cash right now. I’m waiting on payment from Plan B, from my show there. We said we’d split the tip jar.”

“Well good luck with that,” Anna says. “They’re going to split the tip jar with you?”

“They’re supposed to.”

“Julian, they’re not going to split the tip jar with you, wake up!”

“I’m counting on that for my rent.”

“Anna’s right,” Nick says, “they’re not good for that.”

“Julian, you owe rent on this room?” Tuesday says.

And Matt says, “J, you gotta pay up on this shit before they decide to execute.”

“I’m counting on people being good and honest,” Julian says. And he is.

“You can’t count on Plan B!”

“Well I expect to be able to count on Plan B!”

“You can’t, though!”

“Why can’t I? I can’t count on a reputable business..to pay my tips? Then who can I count on?”

“I wouldn’t consider Mark and Mickey to be a reputable business.”

“Then who can I count on?”

“No one?”

The argument is in stalemate.

“You guys wanna smoke some pot?” Nick says.

“Sure..fuck it,” Julian says.

Tuesday sidles up to the dealer.

Anna slides back, on Matt, who holds her.

Julian and Tuesday take hits off Nick's pipe, which Nick offers to Anna and Matt, but which is declined.

"Suit yourselves," Nick says.

Anna and Matt slink back to the closet, where Julian keeps his suits, and his shirts. Anna plays at Matt's zipper while Matt explores the closet. Matt opens it, and he and Anna slink inside, leaving behind the room of pot smokers.

Anna plays at Matt's crotch some more while Matt explores Anna's cleavage. They close the door.

Muffled voices continue from outside. They're smoking pot; that much is evident. Nick is offering Tuesday and Julian bowl after bowl of what he has on him, and the threesome is getting drunk.

Matt and Anna's twosome follows a different tack. Matt explores Anna's crotch and soon they have each other undone, Anna's mouth on Matt's cock as Matt's fingers explore Anna's crotch and they are together, each one on the other. Matt touching Anna's crotch and Anna's mouth on him, they strive toward orgasm, each playing with the other. They pull the closet door closed.

"This is excellent shit," Nick says, them all knowing that Anna and Matt have disappeared into the closet, making out with each other.

"Excellent," Julian says.

And Tuesday follows, "Good shit, Nick."

Nick takes a puff.

"And that's not all. I've got powder to boot," Nick says.

And Tuesday and Julian light up.

They do cocaine with Nick. He has them rolling on the spoils.

And all their conversation continues while Matt and Anna are in the closet.

"This is a nice surprise, Nick," Tuesday says.

"Yes, thank you," Julian says.

"You're welcome," Nick offers. "It's all on me."

"Nick, you wouldn't be serving them coke, would you?!" Anna says, from inside the closet.

"I would be!" Nick says.

"Nick!! You were supposed to wait for me to do hard drugs," Anna says, but she goes back to dealing with Matt. She has her mouth on him, and she's sucking his dick, hoping he will cum.

Matt's fingers are inside Anna, and he's rubbing her inside and out, hoping she will cum, but he's being rough and Anna doesn't know how much longer this will last.

She sucks his cock, hoping he will cum, but he won't so she has to

keep sucking him, rubbing her mouth back and forth on his cock.

Anna and Matt shift around in the darkness, letting her have better access to his cock and letting him have better access to her puss, rubbing each other as they are. She gets close to cumming but it doesn't happen. He gets close and he says, "Don't stop."

She keeps getting him with her mouth and he cums, cumming in her mouth and out the sides of her lips, cumming all over the place.

Anna holds his cum, then swallows, herself not completely done.

Matt withdraws his fingers from her, leaving her undone.

Anna says, "You want to go to the bathroom?"

And Matt says, "Yes."

So they get out of the closet and walk out of the room where Julian, Nick, and Tuesday are and they go downstairs, where Julian's housemates are sitting in the living room, playing some game in front of the TV, and they go into the downstairs bathroom, and Anna washes her hands and washes her mouth and looks up smiling at Matt, who she has just gotten off, and Matt looks at Anna, who has not gotten off, and he smiles as well, hoping to smooth over the moment. And Anna sits on the potty and goes to the bathroom exclaiming, "It hurts the first time you go after.." And Matt agrees and pees after her, and it does hurt for him, the beginning of his piss.

And they are together in their togetherness, having just gotten off or almost gotten off the other, and Anna and Matt make their way back up though the living room with the housemates playing some role-playing game and upstairs to Julian's room.

"So, did you two enjoy your time in the closet?" Nick says.

"Did you enjoy your time out here?" Anna says.

"Yes, we did." And they were all ready to follow each other on an adventure, through the dirt, through the snow, kissing each other on the cheek in a dream made of concrete and parking garages and kisses on the cheek. Nick imagined himself lying on the back of Anna in a desolated parking lot and kissing her cheek. Matt imagined himself on top of a fairytale Tuesday kissing the back of her neck, companion-style, with no love in it, but every bit of friendship. Julian was with them, playing a harp, and getting every note on tone. It was all told, in fairy tale, with the lovers on top and the loved on bottom and everything matching up inbetween.

But Nick laughs, and the five of them laugh, and suddenly everyone is interested in what Nick has, and he lays out the cocaine and they feed themselves upon it while Julian asks if everyone is partial to his neighbors.

"The game guys?"

"Yes, Timmy and Booch."

“They’re ok.”

“We saw them downstairs. Looks like they’re engaged in some kind of championship card game.”

“Magic the Gathering. They’re the national champs.”

“They are?”

“Yeah. Little ole Dayton. But the Magic the Gathering champions are from here. They sell decks in their store.”

“That store on Fifth Street?”

“That’s the one.”

“Cool, Julian. Cool housemates. When do they expect the rent?”

“Um the rent is due..this Thursday.”

“And will you have it?”

“Will I have it? Well that’s the small question of the Plan B proprietors being truthful to their word.”

“You think they’re going to pay you tips?”

“That was the arrangement.”

“Tips from their tip drawer?”

“From their jar, yes.”

“Julian, wake the fuck up.”

“Those tips are gone.”

“How else are you gonna pay for this place?”

“I need the tips from Plan B.”

“Julian, you’re—I’m sorry to say this, but—you’re fucked.”

“How am I fucked?”

“The Plan B guys?”

“There have to be at least three hundred dollars in tips in there.”

“How much is your rent?”

“Three-fifty.”

“So you’re fucked. I’m sorry, but you’re fucked, Julian.”

“Yes, thank you very much for ruining the suspense..I’m fucked.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. Matt, this is where you might help out—”

“What am I supposed to help with?”

“We said we were getting that place for Sidereal Studios. In the Oregon District. If we can move in there, then my rent problems will be solved..”

“I don’t know if I can, Julian—”

“You can, you just don’t want to—”

“To say goodbye from that sweet deal he has from his parents? Julian, you expect him to just leave home for you?”

“I don’t have the support of my parents I can’t be expected to think of all of you having the support of your parents—”

“But we do,” Nick says. He’s dealing drugs and even he has the

support of his parents. “Shit, my parents think I’m at an art show tonight. You know the Front Street warehouses? That show. Without my parents I’d be sunk.”

“Well good for you,” Julian says. “And when I say I don’t have the support of my mother maybe some of you can think about what that must really be like, sometime. For comparison.”

“You guys want any more of this? I’m putting it away.”

“Yeah, hold on,” Anna says.

And Matt is by her side.

Anna makes a line of the coke and takes Nick’s dollar bill to snort it.

Matt is by Anna’s side, but he hesitates. He takes the dollar bill but does nothing with it.

“Do you want me to make you a line?”

“No,” Matthew says. He puts the dollar bill down.

“Well, it really separates the boys from the men,” Nick says, cheering Anna. “You don’t want any?”

Matt shakes his head.

“That really shows you who’s who. Anna. Kudos. Julian. Tuesday. What have you. Only one person didn’t partake tonight.”

-----

Matt is at Jesse’s house. They have computer equipment spread out all over the dining room table, with Jesse’s mom’s permission. They’re working on their science fair project.

“Matt, I’ve got the latest version of that genetic unit checked in, you might want to do a refresh.”

“I will. Is that using the XOR crossover method?”

“Yeah. It’s a switch. It’s an option. I can take you through the new interface—”

“Let me get it loaded. Do you have any more root beer?”

“Root beer? I’ve got cases. There’s some in the fridge..bottom drawer.”

“Thanks.”

“Then Matt, we’ve got to talk.”

“About what?”

“About the project.”

“Lemme get this root beer and we can talk.”

“I want to go outside.”

“Ok. We’ll go outside.

Matt goes to the fridge and Jesse sits there, with his hands in his lap.

-----  
“So what do you want to talk about?”

“The project.”

“What about it?”

“About the way it’s not done.” Jesse stops walking.

“So?”

“So how are we going to present it?”

“We’ll just show what we have.”

“But. Some of the presentation materials. Indicate that we’re farther along than we are. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t that a problem? I mean aren’t we lying if we present it the way it is?”

“What’s not done?”

“Some of the chemical energy module.”

“We could finish that if we had more time.”

“But we don’t have more time. All the other kids had just as much time as we did, and if they didn’t finish something, they can’t present their project as though they did.”

“It’s so easy. The chemical energy module. Why did we wait so long on that?”

“Because it’s easy.”

“Yeah, it’s easy so neither of us wanted to do it. Can we do it real quick?”

“Before today? It’s 7:23 right now. We’ve got until noon before we have to be over there setting up our projects. I don’t think we have time to code it before then.”

“I think you’re right.”

“So what do we do?”

“I don’t know, Jesse, I’m sorry, I don’t know. I think we present the way we have it and finish the chemical energy module later.”

“Like in time for the state fair?..assuming we’re going to that.”

“Right.”

“Yeah, it’s just that..my problem is that the presentation kind of implies that we have the chemical energy module complete, because the display shows chemical energy graphs and packets moving around, the fake ones you put in. So if we present it the way we’re presenting it now, it’s a lie.”

“Crap. I mean you’re right. I can’t deny you’re right. But what else do we do? Without the chemical energy component, the project is kind of useless.”

“I’ll take full responsibility for this. I should have been working on that module sometime during the spring.”

“No, you can’t take responsibility for it, I should have been coding on that module, too. Fuck. Do you have any more root beer?”

“In the house.”

“Fuck fuck fuck. This really sucks, Jesse. I know it’s not completely honest but we have a good project, I think it deserves to be seen, I think we can show it today the way we have it and build the chemical energy module before regionals, or state, if we make it.”

“But if we make it to regionals or state with an incomplete project that we’re saying is complete, didn’t we cheat to get there?”

“I mean Jesse, you’re right. I can’t deny you’re right. I just worked so hard on this and you did too..I hate to see it fail.”

“I say we fudge a little bit and build it before regionals.”

“If there is a regionals.”

“Right.”

“I’m ok with that,” Jesse says.

“Are you?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok. I want another root beer. How about you?”

-----

“Hello.”

“Hello, I’m Matt Temple.”

“Jesse Anderson.”

“Good to meet you. You want to tell us a little about your project today?”

“Yes. What we have here is a simulated ecosystem. It incorporates a level of producers, consumers, and decomposers. The program is written in C and has this visual display that you see right here. Our creatures undergo genetic mutation and reproduction by XOR-based crossover, a type of crossover we have researched and found works better than regular straight-copy crossover. These graphs show chemical energy levels for various components of the system. For instance, this graph shows the levels of oxygen as oxygen passes through the organism life cycle in our little ocean here. That’s a basic overview but now what we’d like to do is take you through our project through the lens of the scientific method, starting with our question: “Can a simple C program simulate chemical energy exchange in a biological environment?”

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“That went pretty well.”

“Yeah, I was a little nervous when they went for the code binder.”

“Yeah!”

“But of course they’re not going to notice there’s no chemical energy module, I mean they have fifteen minutes max to spend with us, they’re not going to read every line of code! How do you feel about it?”

“I think you’re right. We had a lot we could present that doesn’t have anything to do with the chemical energy module, and if they don’t ask..”

“Yeah, if they don’t ask. We didn’t actually lie.”

“We implied, though.”

“We implied.”

Matt sits on the display table. Jesse sits on the cooler they have set in front of the display. The kid next to them is presenting her project; they listen in for a second. Then comes Tuesday walking up the aisle.

“Hello boys.”

“Hey!”

“Hey Tuesday, want a root beer?” Jesse stands up and opens the cooler. He offers Tuesday a root beer.

“Um..thanks. Is that like part of your project, or..?”

“It’s our mascot.”

“I see. Well your mascot is delicious.”

“Can I have one of those?”

“Sure.” Jesse gets a couple more out of the cooler.

“We offered these to the judges,” Matt says, almost cracking up.

“Bribery. Yeah. I taught you well.”

“It wasn’t as a bribe.”

“Do you think they took it that way?”

Matt shrugs.

“So are you done?”

“Just waiting for the awards ceremony.”

“Is that today?”

“It’s in the auditorium. Three o’clock. Thanks for showing up by the way.”

“Don’t count on me following you two to state.”

“If we even make it that far.”

“You’ll make it, Jesse. Have trust in my boy here. You’ll be at state.”

“Yeah,” Jesse says, “I’m not sure what he’s dragged me into. Right Matt?”

Matt clears his throat. “Uh..right Jesse. We’ll get it worked out before the next round.”

“Are you two still working on this thing? Aren’t you supposed to



be done by now?"

"We're putting..ah..few finishing touches on it."

"Overachievers." Tuesday kicks the leg of the table with her combat boot. "Come on, let's go to the auditorium."

"Ok, let's go," Matt says.

"I..think I'm gonna stay here," Jesse says, pulling the cooler up to their table. "I'm gonna work on some stuff." His hands are on the keys of Matt's desktop computer, which he brought from home for this presentation.

"You gonna work on what's missing?" Matt asks.

"Yep."

"Ok, I'll help later today, ok. See you Jesse."

"See you."

Matt and Tuesday hold hands on their way out of the gym, but it's not exactly a boyfriend-and-girlfriend holding hands. It's that they have so much affection for each other that they can't not hold hands, you know what I mean?

"Should I let you go? Do you need to go help Jesse with what's missing?"

"No. I'll help him later. He knows what needs to be done."

They walk through this long tunnel hallway that goes all the way from one end of the school to the other.

"Tuesday, let me ask you something. Do you think it's cheating if we didn't quite finish our project?"

Tuesday looks at Matt.

"Like if the coding isn't quite complete. So it's there, it works, but this one component that's supposed be be working isn't really there."

"Did you say it was there when you did your presentation?"

"No. But it would be implied."

"Implied?"

"Yes, given our presentation, you would assume that component was there."

"But it isn't."

"Right."

"Then that's lying. Oh, gosh, it's hard, because you say you didn't actually tell them that it was there. But they would assume it. Based on your presentation. What was so hard about this component that you and Jesse couldn't make it?"

"Nothing! That's the thing. It's doable by either me or Jesse, we just never did it."

"I don't know. Why are you asking me?"

"Because I feel bad. I feel guilty."

"Then you're probably doing something wrong."

“I figure we can fix it before regionals, if we get to regionals.”

“But if you get to regionals and some other kid doesn’t, and it’s partially because you lied, then should you really have gotten to regionals?”

“Fuck. This is ruining this whole thing for me.”

“Don’t let it. Let’s go to the prop room and I’ll give you a blowjob.”

“Really?”

Tuesday nods.

“But I thought we were just friends.”

“Are you going to try to talk me out of giving you a blowjob, or are you going to try to talk me in to giving you a blowjob?”

“Let’s go to the prop room.”

-----

Jesse and Matt’s project wins first place that day. And when they go to regionals, they win first place plus summer internships at Wright Patterson Air Force Base. When they go to state, they have a perfect score and win so many special awards that by the end of the ceremony they move their seats to the front of the auditorium so it will be less distance to the podium. They never finish the chemical energy module.

-----

The crazy picnic is Matt’s idea. Well, his and Tuesday’s. The idea is that each of them bring something to share, and that everyone would have plenty to eat, and that this would be the crazy picnic of the freaks of Colonel White High School for the Creative and Performing Arts.

Tuesday shows up first. She is first to get to her locker and into the lunchroom while the period starts. She has a container of mashed potatoes before her..her offering to the crazy picnic. And if they love her, so be it. And if they hate her..

Matt is the second to arrive. He has a container of monkey bread, which is a sticky cinnamon bread that you eat with your fingers. He thinks this will be suitable for a crazy picnic because of the eat-with-your-fingers aspect.

“So. That’s what you’ve got.”

“I remember your famous mashed potatoes.”

“I stirred these with my feet, don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t. What is that, some sort of sticky bread?”

“It’s monkey bread.”

“Is it made with real monkeys?”

“Yes. Yes it is. Made with real monkeys in every bite. You should

have some.”

“I will. You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“How could I be mad at you?”

“That whole thing with Josh?”

“If you’re saying you want to get back together with me right now then I accept your apology.”

“And if I’m not?”

“I accept your apology. I don’t care about Josh. I don’t care about you and me. I just want you to be around. Forget you and me. Ok? Forget it. Imagine you and me was a sunk ship. Just hang around with us, that’s all I care about Tuesday.”

“You’re a true motherfucker,” she says.

“Thank you.”

“You’re a true blue friend.”

“Thank you. I accept. Now be a true blue friend and hand me some of those mashed potatoes.”

Just then Nick shows up. He is wearing a cape and vampire fangs.

“What did you bring?”

“I brought deviled eggs,” he says, flourishing the fangs.

“Excellent. This is monkey bread. This is mashed potatoes. Help yourselves.”

“This is a fine picnic if I’ve ever seen.”

“In all your vampire years?”

“In all my vampire years. Have some deviled eggs.”

“Ok, ok, I got you.”

“Bite my neck,” Tuesday says.

And Nick bites her neck, with his plastic fangs, and she likes it.

Nick sits down. He’s beside Matthew, and the two of them trade food.

“What is this party,” Nick says, standing up, “without a vampire?” He shows his self off to the nearby lunch tables. They are impressed.

Tuesday stands up in her seat. Her shorts show her legs through tights. Every table around her is impressed. She sits down.

“Now do you think we can eat in front of these motherfuckers?”

“I don’t know.”

“I say can we eat in front of these motherfuckers?”

“I don’t know, Tuesday.”

“But our party is in full style. With mashed potatoes, monkey bread, and deviled eggs, how can you say it’s not?”

“You can’t!”

“I heard you broke up with Josh.”

“Heh. It’s more like he broke up with me.”

“Is that so? I heard it the other way around.”

“No, he broke up with me, you can be sure.”

“And why would he have done that, I wonder.”

“Your guess is as good as mine, I don’t know,” Tuesday says.

“But you’re broken up?” Nick asks.

“Nick, if you’re planning on sending me pics of your ass, don’t try it,” Tuesday says.

“I was thinking of sending you dick pics,” he says.

“Don’t bother either, I’m all closed up to dick pics.”

“Thwarted!” Nick screams.

Matt calms himself knowing that Tuesday at least has some knowledge of his dick, that he doesn’t have to defend himself thus.

“And don’t you send me any either,” Tuesday says to Matt.

“Dick picks? I wasn’t going to. I promise.”

“I believe you. Nick, on the other hand..”

“I only send dick pics when requested, ma’am.”

“Good for you. I know you have ‘em. Don’t be posting ‘em to my ass, hear?”

“I hear,” Nick says, and Matt is relieved, because he doesn’t want to think about Nick’s dick anymore.

Julian comes screaming into the lunch situation, acting like his lunch tray is a plane and nnnnnneeeerrring the plane into its landing at the freak table.

“And how are you?”

“And how are you?”

“What did you bring, Julian?”

“Well, I was late to my apartments to grab a usual celebratory dish but I managed to bring this..pork sides and tater tots, and mashed potatoes—”

“We already have mashed potatoes!”

“So you do!”

“We already have mash!”

“Jules, your mash is duplicate!”

“So it is! I am errant knave! I offer pork sides and tater tots, for your viewing pleasure, miss!”

“We already have mashed potatoes, Julian!”

“I agree!”

He tries to enlist Matt in the macro but it is lost in the conversation.

“Offering a portly pig and fully fried potato segments, I do!”

“Sit down!”

“I am sitting, ma’am.”

“And you have to offer portly pig and fully fried potato segments?”

“That is correct.”

“Then welcome to this, the first annual freaks’ picnic on this first of May, year of our lord, in the Colonel White lunchroom. Full welcome to your portly pig and shaved potato fragments. All blossom in his light.”

“Anna, you’re just in time. We were just welcoming the portly pig fragments of one Julian Ender, honorable, presiding, over tater tots and more, and what have you brought?”

“Uh..tofu tacos?” Anna says.

“That is excellent. That completes the offering so completely,” Nick says.

“Tofu tacos,” Matt says. “I remember having those at your house.”

“Tofu tacos,” Anna says. That’s what she has to offer.

“Well have some of this monkey bread.”

“And have some deviled eggs!”

“And mashed potatoes! Darling. You haven’t eaten till you’ve eaten these mashed potatoes.”

“This is a full picnic,” Anna says. “I couldn’t have imagined more.”

“We each had to bring our own,” Matt says.

“Give me a tofu taco,” Tuesday says.

“Excellent,” Nick says. “Every person doing their part.”

“And you didn’t even have to bring the drugs,” Anna says.

“Well I could have,” Nick says.

“This is us above a line,” Tuesday says.

“Yes!”

“I agree.”

“With me?”

“Of course!”

“Indeed.”

“You two are sick.”

“Only as sick as Sidereal Studios.”

“Like I said, you’re sick.”

“No, Tuesday,” Nick says, “I have to say. You’re better without Josh.”

“Oh you think so?” she says.

“Yes, we like you better, on the whole, with Matt here or on your own. That’s the truth, if you’ll believe it.”

“If I’ll believe it.”

“Oh Jesus Nick, bring out the cocaine.”

“I don’t have any on me! I’m a free man!”

“This is how the freaks died, in their very own picnic they killed themselves by association, killed themselves by knowing one another.”

“Wait, you mean me? Because I usually have drugs on me?”

“You mean me, since I’m the most cynical of the group?”

“No, he doesn’t mean anyone, he just means we might die by

association, when it comes down to it?”

“By association to me? I can’t imagine that.”

“By association to me? How would they find us?”

“By association to all of us. We would die because we knew each other. That is all. It’s not saying you or you or any one of us. Just that we might die by association, which we might, if you think about it.”

“It’s possible.”

“With you or Tuesday it’s possible. You know the most people.”

“So what? That doesn’t mean I’m giving any of you away!”

“It doesn’t mean anything! I’m not selling anyone out!”

“You might not be today! But when it becomes profitable for you!”

“Who cares about our little group?”

“We are the countercultural, we are of great interest to our governments, oh yes, they’d pay to have us on a wire.”

“You think the CIA cares about the freaks of Colonel White?”

“Of course they do. They care about anyone who’s going against the norm. If you don’t think the CIA is interested in us then you are mistaken.”

“The CIA? Really? I thought they were into terrorists, that sort of thing.”

“You don’t think we’re much different than a terrorist cell? We are! We’re like terrorists in waiting.”

“We’re not terrorists! I don’t want to hear anything more about it. We’re kids, misguided perhaps, but we’re just kids. If the CIA takes interest in us there’s something majorly wrong with the US government.”

“So we’re kids, yes, but we’re freaks. The more so couldn’t be told by our government. We are freaks of the first order. We have a science fair motherfucker who is bound to win the ranks of science fairs everywhere. We have a socialite motherfucker who is bound to ring the black ties off of black ties everywhere. We have a musician..two musicians, one of the formal scores, Anna, and one of original tunes, Julian. We have a painter, Anna. We have a sexualite, Tuesday, of sexualite terms on sexualite registers.”

“We have one of every type, yes, we have a complete arcana.”

“We have one of every soldier, one of every specialization.”

“This is the freak picnic, and there shall only be one.”

“This is the freak picnic, there is only one.”

“This is the freak picnic, one is one!”

“This is the freak picnic, and we have every one to every one,” Julian says, and they all grab hands, and stand up, and they are in the middle of a seance in the lunchroom.

This is the last time they’ll all be together for more than a decade, and some of them sense it, and they hold hands tight for that moment but

also for all the moments to come, which will be experienced each to their own.