

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Reminding

Book Two: Matt

by Matthew Temple

clownfysh.com

This is years later. Matt is walking around the Fairfield Commons mall outside Dayton. It's Christmas time. He's already looked at the Asian store where he used to buy swords. He's been by the Cinnabon shop where Marcus works. Said hi to Marcus. Now he's at the empty shell of a shop that sometimes is the Halloween store. In high school Christina used to work here. She and Matt have fucked in the stock room, and he's flooded with memories of the first time they fucked at his first apartment away from home, while Matt was still seeing Ashley. He gets out his phone.

"Hello?"

"Matt? What's up?"

"I want to see you. Can I pick you up?"

"Well..yeah. You can pick me up. I'm at home."

"I'll see you in..maybe..half an hour."

"Matt."

"Yeah?"

"You ok?"

"I'm dealing with it, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," she says. Her voice is hoarse and quiet.

Matt goes out of the mall through the Parisian. There are some coats he wants to look at. He flips through a rack of trenchcoats and doesn't pick one out. There's a salesman there, but he can tell it's not a good time to bother.

Matt finds his car in the rain, which turns to snow as he drives. He takes the highways to the Cherry Street exit—Christina's neighborhood. He drives the long way around since everything is one-way streets, and sits in front of Christina's house listening to Tom's Diner. The moodiness of it fits him right now. He thinks about calling Christina but decides to go to the door.

The Robertson's dog senses him. It's Winston, who recognizes Matt from way back.

"Hey buddy," Matt says, and he knocks on the door.

“Come in! Come in, my friend! It’s snowing?! Mom, it’s snowing!” Christina pulls Matt in the house and gives him a big hug. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

Matt nods.

“We will. We will as soon as we get out of here. I promise. Come say hi to my mom. Mom, you remember Matthew.”

“Oh yes, we remember Matthew. ‘Stina here thinks you can just leave the house without even packing a bag.”

“Mom!”

“What? You need some things for an overnight trip. She’d walk out the door naked if I’d let her!”

“I wouldn’t walk out the door naked. I’m wearing clothes!”

“But you’ll need some for tomorrow!”

Christina is taking her clothes out of the backpack her mother has. Once she empties it she throws it on the floor. “I’m not even taking this, mother. I’m taking my handbag. If you need to pack anything it has to fit in here. So! No! Clothes!” Christina slams down her purse on the kitchen island and stomps over to Matt. She touches the strings on his hoodie. “I’m almost ready to go. Mom. Can we please reach some sort of agreement on what I need to take with me so I can go?”

Christina’s mom bends down and picks up Christina’s panties, and she folds them and puts them inside the purse. “Stina. Here. Take your purse.”

Christina takes it. She pouts. “Are we done now?”

“Yeah, we’re done.”

She takes Matt’s hand and the two of them go to the door, with Christina’s clothes and backpack in a clump on the kitchen floor. There is music playing from upstairs, and Matt assumes Christina’s sister is home. They go out to the car.

When Matt starts it, Tom’s Diner comes on full blast. He quickly turns it down.

“I could hear that from inside my house when you drove up.”

“Sorry.”

“No. Matt. No. Don’t ever be sorry to me.” She grabs his face and makes him look at her.

Matt drives and they’re quiet until he gets on the highway.

He says, “How did you find out?”

“From Marcus. Then from Melissa. People are talking about you, you know.”

“Great.”

“They care, Matt. It’s kind of a big deal.”

“Yeah, it is a big deal.”

“Especially for her family. And you.”

“I called her family last night, I called her mother and I talked with everyone there.”

“That’s good. That’s good you did that. They probably needed to hear from you.”

“I know I needed to hear from them.”

“Matt. Don’t talk about it. Let’s talk about something else, or not talk. I applied for school today!”

“You did?”

“Yeah, medical technology major, nursing minor. I put that as my minor because I’ve always wanted to be a nurse since I was a little girl but medical technologist pays more.”

“It’s good, it’s good. I’m glad you applied.”

“Well, school’s in Cleveland so I’d have to move up there.”

“That’s cool.”

“You’re not interested in this, are you?”

“I’m interested.”

“It’s ok. If I were you I wouldn’t be able to think about anything else, either. I’ll be quiet until we get to your place.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Shhh. Be quiet with me.”

When they get to Matt’s place things are awkward. Matt sits on the floor by his futon. Christina sits on another side of the futon, fur blankets and plush pillows between them. Matt knows Christina has packed a fresh pair of underwear, so this is to be an overnight trip. But Christina makes no moves toward him. She maintains respect, because she knows what neither of them are talking about, that Matt’s girlfriend Nakia died recently, and died when she was with Matt—she died of an ecstasy overdose. So she doesn’t know if it’s ok to be flirty with Matt, and their friendship is the most important thing to her. To both of them.

And Matt doesn’t know what he wants. He is used to being flirty with Christina, but he still misses Nakia and doesn’t want to do anything to disrespect her. But sex right now would be so good.

Christina adjusts, dips a hand into her jeans pocket, and brings out a prescription medication bottle. She says, “Do you want to try some of my mom’s Zolofit with me?”

“Sure.”

Christina taps out two for him to take. They both go into the bathroom and drink out of the sink to take their medicine. They bump into each other because of the small space, and Matt grabs Christina by the butt pockets. He runs his hands down her butt, and puts one around

front and pulls her into him. She leans her head back, and her blond hair lays back on him. He has both his hands in front of her now and he undoes the top button on her jeans, then pulls the two sides of the fabric apart.

She turns around to him and rubs his dick through his pants.

There is no talking. Matt likes this.

They move into the bedroom and Matt lays Christina down on the bed. He gets on top of her and pulls a cover over them. Christina makes no movement. She just lies there. She's waiting for him to initiate, since she doesn't want to step on his toes with Nakia. He pulls off her pants and takes off her panties, then pushes down his own pants and spreads her legs. He does all the work. He licks her, he comes up to her, and only when he enters her does she respond, putting her arms around his neck and kissing him. He feels her hotness all around him, and he fucks her.

She stays on the bottom the whole time. They fuck for a long time, and Matt doesn't seem to be able to cum. Christina senses this, and she says, "It's because of the Zoloft. You won't be able to cum. I wanted to have you all night."

He pulls her so she's half way off the futon, her ass on the floor, and he fucks her like that, feeling it, feeling that he won't be able to cum, but feeling her vagina all around him, and loving that. It's the soap-suds fucking, where the friction between them is like soap suds. You can almost feel a squeak every time he thrusts into her, and they lock together in a perfect shape.

"Let's stop," she says.

"Ok."

"I kinda want to eat at the Diner." (The Diner on St. Claire, not far from Matt's apartment.)

"Ok. We'll go there."

So they get dressed, and as Matt is watching Christina shimmy her panties back on, he starts talking. "It's the most horrible thing that's ever happened in my life. And it happened to her. There's no mistake about that. She's the one who was most affected by this. She's not here. She's gone. And it affects her family who knew her better than I did, but mostly it affects her, you know? She's walking around full of potential and young and having sex and doing all the things she does and then she's not here. She got stopped. And it's partially because of me. We did that ecstasy together. If we hadn't, she wouldn't have died. That's always going to be on me. I was done with ecstasy! I had stopped doing it! But she comes along and I want to show her this cool thing I like to do, because I know she'll love it and she's naturally curious about it. She wanted to do it. I mean she would have found a way to do it without me but that's not what happened. We did it together. I bought it. I gave it to her. I literally put

it in her mouth.” Matt shakes his head. And he continues shaking it. “If her parents hadn’t been so nice they could have pressed charges. I could have been charged with involuntary manslaughter. I could be in jail. And there’s another life wasted. This is all I think about. This consumes my mind.”

And all Christina says is, “Don’t you think it’s funny how sex opens up a conversation?”

Skip ahead a little bit. Matt quits his job at LexisNexis because he’s having trouble dealing with Nakia’s death. He gives up his apartment and attempts a move to New York City. Aborts. Applies to school in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Is accepted. Goes to Yellow Springs. Can’t get the money together for school. Returns to Dayton. Lives in an artist warehouse he rents for four hundred dollars a month. Paints abstract expressionist paintings with his friends Zochae and Beth, who come over and chain smoke Kamel Reds with him. Occasionally Matt makes out with either Zochae or Beth, and Beth will later describe Matt as “not at all like I expected—he was forceful and aggressive.” But they make out in the studio and paint.

Eventually Matt moves back in with his mom. He stays in a room in the attic and pays no rent, and gets a job at Denny’s as a dishwasher. Dishwashing works for him, you don’t have to talk to anyone, you can just stand there and think. He works the Denny’s job for probably six days, then takes to doing henna tattoos at the Oregon Emporium coffeehouse for twenty dollars a pop.

One morning, after working a double shift the night before at Denny’s, he wakes up from a dream. It was New York: there was a fire downtown, and people were rushing in to help those trapped. He wakes up, clears his eyes, and goes downstairs. His mother is nowhere to be seen. The doors are open. Windows are open.

He walks outside. Still no Mom. He hears the sound of a TV coming from the neighbor’s house. They’re watching the news.

He goes up to the neighbor’s house, a house he’s never been in before, and opens the screen door. He walks in. His mother and the neighbor are sitting on the edge of the couch watching CNN. It’s coverage of 9/11.

“Hey mom.”

“Hey.”

“I had a dream New York was on fire, but I guess it was this.” Matt sits down with them and watches the news. It’s hours before any of them gets up.

Matt meets Tuesday at the coffeehouse. Tuesday has a daughter now, Clover—though she’s with her father. Tuesday is an hour late to the coffeehouse, and by the time she gets there Matt is doing a henna tattoo on a girl named Cat.

“How are you my friend?”

“I’m great, how are you?”

“I’m wonderful. I brought some maps for us to look at, in case you wanted to.”

“Great. I’m just going to finish up with Cat here and then we can look together?”

“Ok. Do you mind if I sit with you?”

“Please! Please! Sit with us!”

Actually Cat is lying on her stomach on a bench that’s next to the wall. Matt is on a chair that’s pulled up to the bench, so he can reach Cat’s back, where he is drawing on her with henna. And Tuesday sits at a chair at one of the tiny round tables that are in front of the bench.

When Matt puts the finishing touches on the tattoo he tells Cat to lie there for a while, while it dries.

“Do you want me to bring you coffee or anything?”

“Oh, I’m fine.”

“Ok, I’m going to talk with my friend. Let me know if you need anything.”

Tuesday looks over the henna drawing. She gives the thumbs up.

“So what did you bring?”

“Maps. Of California. Of the south. This is where I lived when we grew up. In the high deserts of California. I remember those times so fondly. In some ways I wish we had never moved to Ohio. But I was so young when we moved, I have only a few memories, really, of the high desert. But what I do remember I love. So. I was just thinking. That’s one place we could go.”

“I like.”

“And I brought a map of Texas.”

“Where did you get all these?”

“The library.”

“I didn’t know you could check out maps.”

“I never said I checked them out. Anywhere here’s where Julian is, Austin. You said that’s where he was the last time you talked to him, right?”

“Right. He works at a Denny’s.”

“You work at Denny’s.”

“I quit.”

“Oh?”

“I’m just doing henna tattoos now. I’ve raised over two-hundred dollars. I think I’ll have enough for gas money soon.”

“Your tattoo looks good.”

“Cat, how you holding up?”

“I’m fine. Am I dry yet?”

“Not yet. Give it a few more minutes. I don’t want to smudge you.”

Cat lays her head back down on the bench’s cushion.

“So where do you want to do first?”

“I don’t know but I want to make this an adventure, I don’t want us to be rushed or to be having some big agenda or needing to be at any certain place at a certain time. I want to, if we need to, get jobs in Austin and save enough money to get to California, you know?”

“Yeah! Yeah!”

“Ok, I’m glad we’re on the same page about that. I want it to be a journey. A true journey.”

“A Sidereal journey?”

“It doesn’t have to be a Sidereal journey. But a journey.”

“I think I want to go back to the high desert.”

“I think that sounds nice.”

“Where are you two going?” Cat asks.

“We’re going to get in the car and drive,” Matt says. “We’re not sure where we’re going.”

“We just need to get away from this place,” Tuesday says. “With everything that’s going on. Things are crazy right now.” She means 9/11.

“If there’s a time to pick up and move somewhere, I think it’s now,” Matt says. “I think you’re dry enough.”

“Can I sit up?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, my back.”

“Are you ok?”

“It’s just stiff from lying down.”

“Here.”

“Thank you. I’m going to go look at it in the bathroom!”

“Just don’t pick off any of the crusties. I want you to get as dark as possible. They’ll fall off naturally as you move.”

“How long will this last?”

“A week or two.”

“Oooh cool! I’mma go look at it!” Cat runs off.

“You’re quite the charmer.”

Matt shrugs.

“Are all the tattoos you’re doing, on pretty girls?”

“No, I had a guy the other day.”

“But mostly pretty girls.”

“It’s the demographic.”

“Which I’m sure you don’t mind.”

“No. I don’t mind at all.” He smiles.

“Look,” Tuesday says. “I know we were talking about leaving this Friday but I want to work a little more, at the costume shop, to make money before we leave. Do you mind terribly if we wait another week or two?”

“No, I’ll just hang out here and do more tattoos.”

“I like that bag,” Tuesday says. “Where did you get it?” Tuesday touches the bag.

“Down the street.”

“You got this on Fifth Avenue?”

“Yeah, you know that store like two stores down? They’ve got a bunch of them. You should get one.”

“I might. Do they have different colors?”

“Yep. So Tuesday, something I was thinking.”

“Yes?”

“When we drive to Austin—if we do go to Austin to rescue Julian—”

“It is a rescue, isn’t it.”

“He sounded awful when I talked to him. He seems like he’s dying down there. But anyway if we go to Austin, I want to do it without a map. Because..I know the basic geography of this country, and I just want to do it like every time there’s a highway that goes this way or goes that way, I want to make a decision about whether to go south or west based on just that basic knowledge of the country..and eventually we’ll get there.”

“That sounds..interesting. But I want to take these maps because I really like looking at maps.”

“Ok. And I have maps on my phone just in case,” Matt says.

“Did you hear those explosions yesterday?” Tuesday asks.

“I heard them. I think they were planes going into supersonic mode.”

“I heard some people saying they were bombs going off at Wright Patterson Air Force Base.”

“I don’t know what they were, but yeah, I heard them.”

Cat comes back from the bathroom. She hugs Matt and gives him a kiss on the cheek. “I love it. I love it! I truly motherfucking love it!”

“Good! Tell your friends. I’ll be here all week.”

“Ok, I will!”

“See ya Cat.”

“See ya!”

Cat has her purse and she goes out the front doors of the coffeehouse. She crosses the street to go to the record store, which is where her friends are waiting.

“Cool girl,” Tuesday says.

“Yeah, she was kind of cool,” Matt says.

“Do you think we’re going to have a war?”

“You mean because of New York?”

“And the Pentagon.”

“Maybe. Probably.”

Tuesday shakes her head. She breathes in. “It’s so crazy, I can’t believe the things that are happening in the world right now. You wake up one day and everything you think was solid..is..not solid!”

“It is crazy. That’s why I want to get out of here. It’s like..nothing matters. Like this is a reset point. Like it’s a good time to run away and start again, with all this going on.”

“Are we still gonna take your car?”

“Yeah! What else am I doing with it?”

“Are you sure we can fit all our stuff into it?”

“We can put what fits and leave the rest!”

“You wanna come over later?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m working until..I don’t know when they’re going to close the shop. But I’m making jewelry tonight until..whenever.”

“Call me when you’re done.”

“Do you think maybe you can give me a ride home?”

“Sure. Do you need a ride there?”

“No. Verona is taking me, but she has a date with Adolph so she’s leaving straight from the shop.”

“Just call me.”

“Thank you. Are we really doing this?”

“I think so.”

“I’ve always wanted to do a journey like this,” she says.

“Me too. It’s like it’s been coming for a long time.”

Then Tuesday hugs Matt and leaves the coffeehouse.

Matt sits there for a while, organizing his bag with the henna materials. He looks at the customers. None of them looks like they’d want a henna tattoo, so he drives to his mom’s house to watch the news.

It is from his mom’s house that Matt departs. He has his things packed, leaving enough room for Tuesday to put her stuff, and he hugs his mom

on the back porch and she wishes him well.

“You have everything you need?”

“I think so.”

“Well have fun. I know you like your adventures.”

“This is definitely going to be an adventure.”

“Well go do it, my boy. Do it to the best of your ability.”

“I will Mom. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Ok, see ya.”

“Bye my boy!” She stands on the back porch until he pulls the car out. She waves. He waves back, then he’s on the street and driving to Tuesday’s house.

Once they’re on the road, Matt indeed follows his no-map philosophy, taking whichever road seems to head in the south-westerly direction they need to be traveling.

They’re in Illinois by the time night falls, and since they’re low on funds they’re sleeping in the car. They lean the seats back as far as they’ll go, given that the back of the car is filled with their stuff. Matt leaves the car running, for heat, so they don’t need too many blankets.

“I’ve always wanted to do a journey with you.”

“Well, we did our shamanic journey.”

“That’s true. This is our second great journey!”

“Matt, I know you’re probably still missing Nakia, and I have no idea how you feel about that whole thing, and I’d like to hear about it if you’d like to talk about it..but I wanted to say if you’re interested, we could do some body work together, if you’re ok with it.”

“Ok, that would be good.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. Are you comfortable?”

“Um..kind of.”

“Yeah, it’s a little rough.”

“It’s ok I think I’ll put my feet up here if you don’t mind.”

“Please. And I do want to talk about Nakia. You would be a good person for me to talk about that with. Not tonight, but sometime, while we’re driving, we’ll do that.”

“Do you think we’re safe here?”

“Tonight? Yeah, I think as long as we leave the doors locked and the car on, we have pretty good chances. It’s mostly just truck drivers.”

“I saw another car up the way when I went to brush my teeth.”

“Yeah, I saw that too.”

“Let’s hope they’re not serial killers,” Tuesday says.
Matt laughs. “Yeah, let’s hope.”

It is a rough night’s sleep, with each of them waking multiple times to adjust their bodies in the bucket seats of Matt’s Honda. They roll down the windows a little bit to keep fresh air circulating, and to keep the car from fogging up.

Morning comes, the sun rising through their windshield, and they take turns brushing their teeth so someone is always with the car. Tuesday has brought spirulina and herbs for them to take with their water, and throughout the trip she orchestrates various drink mixtures for them to consume. They take the first of these on this first morning on the road.

“What’s in this?”

“A bunch of things. Spirulina. Cardamom. Tea tree oil. Cayenne. Coriander. Rose petals. A little weed. Not too much but just a little to keep us jovial.”

“What if weed doesn’t make me jovial?”

“Does it?”

“It makes me tell stories.”

“I like when you tell stories. Also it has valerian root, castor oil, grapeseed oil, acacia, china berry to give us good luck, and..juniper berries. And some other things. Try it and tell me if you think it’s terrible.”

Matt takes the water bottle. He braces himself. He drinks it.

Tuesday waits for his response.

He looks at her. There’s a question in her eyes.

“It’s fine, it’s good.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, it tastes kind of..earthy. But I like it. I could definitely get used to drinking this.”

“There are so many herbs I wanted to use. Each one is picked for a particular reason, to give us good luck and power on our journey.”

“I’m glad you made this.”

“I thought we could fast on our way, to cleanse, as a way to depart from the dear old land of Dayton and go to..wherever we end up. Do you want to fast with me?”

“I will unless it makes me lightheaded. I want to be safe while we drive.”

“Of course. I understand that.”

“But I’ll try for now, just the juice?”

“I also brought along some raisins, so we’ll be eating a little something.”

“Sounds good Tuesday. Thanks for looking after our spiritual well being.”

“And thank you for taking care of our material needs, this car, the money you made doing henna tattoos, and the other money you had from before. I really needed to get out of Dayton.”

“I did too.”

“So we’ll spring Julian and head west!”

“I know, I’m excited! I hope you don’t mind that we’re bringing Julian.”

“I don’t mind. He can get on my nerves when he starts talking about his end-of-the-world stuff. But I know he’s important to you, and I hate to think of him suffering in Austin. No, I think it’s good we’re getting him.”

“I think so too. Julian is a spark, he’s just fucked up right now. He says the same thing. We’ll get him out of Austin and he can sprout some new wings.”

“You want to drive now?”

“Yes, let’s go south today.”

“I trust your system.”

“Thanks for letting me do this, I just really get off on the idea of driving to Austin without a map. It’s sort of like a rite of passage for an American.”

“Whatever you want to do.”

“You want to listen to some music?”

“Yeah, I’ll see if I can find us something.”

“Thanks, Tuesday.” And Matt puts the car in reverse.

They drive south through Missouri, and somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, still fasting, Matt says, “I wanna talk about Nakia now.”

Tuesday closes the book she has been reading. “Ok.”

“There’s not a whole lot to say, except that the two of us were perfectly matched. Not like you and I, Tuesday. You and I were good because we were thrown together in an unfortunate situation: Colonel White High School. It was like we were in a war together. Julian too. We were forced together. Not to say we didn’t really like each other. I like you, Tuesday, and I always will. The only reason we didn’t have sex on our shamanic journey is that I had started to like Nakia. Or: that’s the only reason I didn’t go for it then. You and I seem to be star-crossed in that way.”

“Pshff.”

“You agree?”

Tuesday nods, looking straight ahead.

“Anyway Nakia and I were just cut from the same mold in a way I’ve never felt with another person.”

“I know. I saw you two together.”

“I know you did. Forgive me if I’m telling you things you already know.”

“No, it’s fine. You’re fine. Please continue.”

“So I was just..obsessed with her from the first day I saw her.

Which was years ago. Ashley and I were developing a play we were going to do at Wright State. Nakia auditioned for it, and even though Ash and I were together, I fell in love with Nakia when I first saw her in that audition. You could feel the energy of that girl. Even the way she was dressed. Like this sort of art-student mishmash. And her body. She was exactly the same height as me, which I think counts for something. And our first kiss—is this bothering you?”

“No, I want to hear.”

“I’m sorry if any part of it does bother you, but I don’t pretend that you’re still hanging on waiting for me, Tuesday. I mean what we had in high school was great, I’ll always remember us that way, and I still like you, I still want to fuck you, I just can’t right now. I’m still too hung up on Nakia. That’s if you’d even want to fuck me.”

“I would.”

“I thought so. I’m sorry, Tuesday, that I’m such a mess.”

“No, be your mess. Be your mess as long as you need to. Nakia dying was a horrible thing. I’ve wanted to be able to help you, but I don’t know how.”

“Just listen to me. That helps.”

“Ok.”

“I just don’t know if I’m ever going to meet someone like that again. Who energized me the way she did. Who likes me as much as she did. And I liked her, too, I mean I loved her, I really did. It was automatic. From the first day, I needed to be with her and I didn’t stop until I was. I almost think I forced her into being with me, by how much I liked her. But that’s not the truth. She wanted to be with me. I represented something to her that she couldn’t find anywhere else. She loved my writing, she saw characters she wanted to play, in my plays. So I don’t know what else I wanted to talk about, about her, except to say that I miss her and I think I always will, and I don’t want to dwell in the past but it’s not really in the past for me yet, it’s still present, that’s still what I’m going through. I’m consumed by it, in a way I don’t want to be. What else can I say? She was here, now she’s not. I don’t know if I’ll ever get over

that.”

That night they sleep in Arkansas, in another rest stop. Tuesday has them drink the next batch of her special drink.

“I put more acacia in it this time.”

“I’m amazed I made it this long without eating.”

“You fasted on our shamanic journey a lot longer than this.”

“But I wasn’t driving.”

“I can’t wait until we’re sleeping in real beds again. I was kind of stiff when I woke up this morning.”

“Me too.”

“When do you think we’ll get there?”

“Tomorrow, late tomorrow I think.”

“Do you have the address where Julian’s at?”

“I have the phone number for the Denny’s. That’s all.”

“Well maybe sometime while you’re driving I can use your phone and try to pinpoint the location of his Denny’s. You aren’t opposed to using a map for that?”

“No, once we get to Austin maps are fine.”

“Do you want a backrub before you go to sleep?”

“Tuesday, that’d be great.”

“Turn around.” She massages him. Gets his lower back especially. That was the part he always loved rubbed in high school.

“That feels great. You’re next.”

“Ok. I accept.”

So she finished his massage, and then he did her, and then they went to sleep.

“I want to work on my herbology,” Tuesday says.

They’re driving, through big Texas, and before this they have been quiet for a while.

“Yes?”

“Yes. I need more books. I’ve read the ones I have but I don’t know what to read next. I’ve followed web sites that talk about this stuff. I’ve got to guinea pig on you and Nik, but. I need a teacher, maybe we can find one along the way. Maybe out west, some wise woman who can teach me about herbs.”

“I bet you can find someone.”

“Thank you, I think I can. I know you weren’t around for it but

you know those shamans that came through town I think..was it..last year? They saw me and Verona and we did some quite scary rituals. It was very intense. They had us lying on our backs on the floor and they were breathing with us, through us, taking their hands and putting them on our chests and pushing the breath out of us..so deep. I thought I was going to die at a couple points. It was an energy cleaning exercise, starting over, and they were wearing these masks. Oh my god Matthew if you had seen these masks. They looked like fucking witch doctors! They were coating us with these powders and then blowing the powder out of our eyes. And they had sticks, we were practically eating the bark off of these sticks. They did strange, strange things to us. I sort of went between believing they were going to help us and thinking they were full of shit. Because we did pay them, for their gas money and everything. It wasn't a lot. But I couldn't tell if it was real or if they were just doing this for the money."

"I doubt they were just doing it for the money, even if they needed the money."

"I think you're right. They had the strangest names. And they gave me and Verona these unpronounceable names. I wrote mine down as best I could. But these are the names we're supposed to use from here on out, these are our spirit names. They claimed to have purified us from all impurity, and when they left, I did feel that I had been purified."

"What did Verona think?"

"She believed them. She made a pronounceable version of her unpronounceable name and she and I have been using that to call her."

"Just like our circle names!"

"Exactly! Why don't we use our circle names anymore?"

"I think we outgrew it. Or we just forgot."

"I think we have forgotten. We have forgotten some of the power we had years ago. Oh, I still want to call you by yours sometimes, do you mind if I do?"

"Not at all. Can I call you by yours?"

"I wish you would. I don't want everyone in my life to call me by it, but I do wish that you would call me Shringara more often."

"I will. And you call me Zha."

"Truly, truly. Zha, you are my spirit match. We have a spiritual connection that is like nothing I've experienced with anyone else. You can read my mind, it seems, almost. And when I say and do weird things it doesn't bother you."

"I like your wildness."

"I know! I know! I know you like my wildness, and I love you for that. Like that time on our shamanic journey when we were by the fire and..you remember what I told you I wanted to do, but it was too odd to

do?”

“I remember.”

“And you said you knew exactly what I was thinking even though I hadn’t said anything, and when I told you, you had! I don’t know how you knew what I was going to do, but you did, you did, we were in sync.”

“We’re always in sync. We always have been.”

“I know!”

“I know, Shringara. We are.”

“I know. Ooooh. I can feel it so clearly right now.”

“What do you feel?”

“I feel connected. I feel connected to you through the heart chakra like it’s open..”

“Wide.”

“..like a door. I feel like this door has been locked for so long and now it’s suddenly open. Do you feel that?”

“I do. I wish I wasn’t driving right now so I could give you a hug.”

Tuesday leans over and gives him a sideways hug, one arm around his back, one across his front.

“I love you, Shringara.”

“I love you too, Zha. Interesting how we say I love you using our spirit names.”

“I love our spirit names. I love what yours means. Love.”

“Love and laughter.”

“Laugh, Hasya!”

“You’re the only one who calls me Hasya!”

“Shringara Hasya.”

“Inhaesio Zha. The ancient child. You are the ancient child, you are, you are. I see this innocence in you, this ability to be like a child, and yet you do have the wisdom of an ancient. You are the father of time.”

“I never know why you call me that.”

“Because of your scientific side. Your projects. You stop time, you change time, you see how time works, I sense.”

“Well, Love and Laughter, you call me whatever you want.”

“You don’t mind?”

“I love it. I love how we use names powerfully, how we use them to remind ourselves that we see each other differently than how the rest of the world sees us. To remind ourselves of our power, to remind ourselves that we are primarily spiritual beings. I think of Jesus renaming Simon to Peter. What a transformative event in the life of a person to take on a second name, or more. I think we should call each other by our role, more often. Like calling Zochae ‘painter’ because he paints. That’s something I try to do with him. And calling you ‘shaman’ because you are on a shamanic path. I think that makes sense, calling teacher ‘teacher’ and

doctor ‘doctor.’”

“Yes! You are glowing right now, Zha, you are shining with radiant energy. I see you in blue, and orange, and white. You know how Gandalf the Grey becomes Gandalf the White? I think you are in your white phase right now.”

“I like Gandalf the White. I always play white mages these days in role-playing games. I used to be more of a black mage kind of guy but now I like playing the white mage, the healer, with protective magic, regenerative magic, restorative magic.”

“I see that. You are a white mage and I am a high priestess. Have you noticed that I’ve changed my style of dress?”

“Of course.”

“I like it better this way, more flowy, I mean you can’t be goth all your life and I was never really goth but that’s the closest..it’s the closest you can get.”

“I love your hair.”

“It’s almost as long as I want it. And think, you knew me with a shaved head.”

“You’ve known me with a shaved head, too.”

“But now you have curls. Well not exactly curls but waves.”

“Do you like when I pull it back like this?”

“It looks excellent. Very feminine. It’s like your hair is a girl but your face is a boy.”

“I like that. My hair is a girl but I am a boy.”

“Guess what time it is?”

“What?”

“Time for our next drink. Are you holding up ok without any food?”

“I feel like I could go another week.”

“How long do you think it’s going to take to get to Julian?”

“I think we’ll get there late tonight, like around eleven.”

“Do you know if Julian is working?”

“I don’t know. I figure we’ll call him when we get there.”

“But let’s try to surprise him first.”

“Definitely. We’ll go to his Denny’s and see if he’s there.”

“Oooh. I hope, I hope we can surprise him.”

“Me too.”

“So our drink.”

“Yes?”

“I made it lighter than usual, because I’m running out of some of the oils I have been using, so you might find this a bit less syrupy.”

“I’m up for whatever.”

“Are you gonna eat tonight?”

“Yeah, if we find Julian at Denny’s I’ll probably eat there. Are you?”

“I might have something light. Do you think Julian has room, at his place, for us to stay?”

“We might have to sleep in the car. I think he has housemates.”

“What are we doing?”

“I don’t know!”

Tuesday tickles Matt’s sides. “Oooh!” she says. “I love that we can go on adventures together.”

“And we’re fearless,” Matt says.

“I think you might be a little more fearless than I am,” Tuesday says.

“No. I’ve seen you act. I’ve seen you dance. You’re every bit as fearless as me.”

Austin, Texas. Eleven eighteen p.m. The Denny’s on Colroy Avenue, by the highway. Tuesday and Matt get out of the car. They stretch their arms and legs. They walk into the restaurant.

“Is it going to be two of you tonight?”

“Actually, we’re here to see someone. Is Julian Findley here?”

“He’s working.”

Matt looks toward the kitchen. Just now Julian comes out carrying bus trays. He restocks the bus trays below one of the waitress stations, then stands up.

“Julian.”

Julian looks toward them, but there’s no recognition.

Tuesday and Matt go to him.

“Julian. How are you man?”

He starts to smile. “Who is that? Matt? Who’s with you?”

“It’s me, Julian,” Tuesday says.

“Tuesday?”

“Yes, Tuesday.”

“I’m sorry—my—I’m out of contacts. I can hardly see you.”

“We’re here to rescue you?”

“Aren’t you a little short for a stormtrooper?”

“No, I’m exactly the height of a stormtrooper—”

“It’s a Star Wars reference. It’s when Luke goes to rescue Princess Leia and she says—”

“I know the reference. Dude, it’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to—well—not see you. But it’s good to hear your voices. And that’s Tuesday?”

“Yes, Julian, it’s me. You’ve asked me like three times.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just—I can hardly see a thing.”

“How are you working like that?”

“I barely am. I work in sections.”

“When do you get off?”

“I get off at six a.m.”

“See if you can get the night off. Can you switch with someone?”

“I’ll see, but—”

“Julian, we drove two thousand miles to see you. We heard your life sucks and you can’t wait to get out of Austin. So we’re giving you what you want. We’re going to take you out of Austin.”

“That’s great, but. I’m working.”

“We can see that. Julian. We’re going to sit down. See if you can get a break at least to come over and talk to us.”

“Ok. Ok. I will.”

“Are you glad we’re here?”

“Yes. Very glad. You just caught me a little off guard.”

—————

“He seems disoriented.”

“When I talked to him, it was like ‘My life sucks in Austin, I’ve got to get out of here as soon as possible.’”

“He seems out of it.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean he seems totally out of it.”

“Well if he can’t see us, it’s like two strangers show up at his work asking to talk to him.”

“Why doesn’t he get new contacts?”

“He’s probably low on money.”

“Are you sure about this, Matt? Are you sure we should have come here?”

“No, I’m not sure. Let’s just give it a second and see what he has to say. You and I just got done with a very long car trip. Let’s eat, if you want to, and let ourselves adjust to being here, too.”

Tuesday puts her feet up on the bench between Matt’s legs.

He rubs her ankles.

“He’s your friend.”

“Let’s just eat, yeah? And we’ll figure out Julian later?”

—————

“Hey guys.”

“Julian, sit down.”

He sits next to Matt.

“Are you on break?”

“No, I just quit.”

Tuesday and Matt look at each other.

“I’m kidding. I’m kidding. I’m joking. I’m on fifteen minute break, so talk fast. I gotta get back there to mop.”

“If you’re having such a shit time in Austin, why don’t you quit? We have a car. We can clear out some of our things and take you with us.”

Julian smiles. “Where are we going?”

“West, generally.”

“We drove here without a map.”

“You drove here without a map?”

“Yeah, we just picked the right choice at each intersection of major highways, and we ended up here.”

“How long did it take you?”

“About two days.”

“How is Dayton?”

“Just like you left it.”

“I believe you.”

“Do you want to come with us?”

“Well..yeah..I just don’t know how long it’s going to take me to get my affairs in order.”

“What do you have to get in order?”

“To leave with you, right now, I’d have to..quit my job, sell off a few things, a computer, and I have to talk to some guys about a project we were starting. You would really like this, Matt, it’s a web programming venture that I’ve been putting together. XHI Designs. X-H-I for eXHibitionism. See that’s what web design is, it’s exhibitionism at its core.”

“So you got to talk to some guys and cancel out of your project.”

“Yeah, I guess I would have to. And we could pick up my computer and sell it. And I’m waiting on some checks for some web marketing work I did about a month ago, so I’d have to check my P.O. box, but I think in approximately..three business days I could be ready to go.”

“What day is it now?” Matt asks.

“Uh..this would be a Friday, on the cusp of Saturday. Let me go talk to my boss and see if he has someone to cover for me tonight.”

“And if not just quit your job.”

“Thank you, Tuesday, I just might.”

“See that you do.”

“Listen, miss—”

“Don’t fight, you two, please. It’s been a long day for everyone, I’m sure. Julian, make no mistake, we are asking you to come with us, to leave Austin, including all the little things that that would involve. But there is no pressure. You can come with us or not. So take what time you need to decide. We’re not in a hurry. We’re committed to take jobs in whatever cities we get stuck in, save money for gas, and move on as the journey takes us. We talked about this, and we want to do it right. This is a real journey. And the first stop had to be you.”

“I appreciate that. I am coming with you on this journey. Thanks for rescuing me. I’ve been done with Austin for..about four months now. You can feel the city and I are not in sync. Wasn’t that a name for a business idea you had?”

“Yes. Sync. Synchronicity. A transportation logistics system. I never finished that.”

“You will.”

“Maybe.”

Julian speaks quietly. “Austin has been caving in on me, my friends. Acquaintances not quite friends. Friends not quite lovers. I’ve been stabbed in the back so many times here. The guys I live with are scamming me, raising the rent every time I turn my back. Raising it so high I can’t pay. So now I owe them back rent for two months which if they don’t collect they say they’re going to kick me out. They didn’t like me from the beginning! I know that sounds strange but they rented this place to me, knowing they didn’t like me, and now they’re doing this rent thing. It’s killing me. My mother sent me money—money she didn’t have—just so I could stay afloat. So yeah, I’ll come with you.” Julian raises a water glass. “To greener pastures.”

Matt and Tuesday cheers him.

“To better times.”

“Better times.”

“So where can we stay tonight? Can we stay at your place?”

“My place? No, I don’t think that would work out.”

“You have your own room, don’t you?”

“Yes but it’s not exactly the thing they want to see, you know, me bringing a couple of vagabond friends home to sleep the night.”

“We’re vagabonds!” Tuesday says.

“Ok, we’ll find another place to sleep—”

“Hold on. Wait just a teenie-weenie little second here. I’ve got it. Courtney. Let me call Courtney. I think I can get you a place to stay. But it might not be till tomorrow night. But it would be for all of us. Do you want to meet back here once I’ve called Courtney?”

“Are you working the rest of your shift?”

“I don’t think so.”

“We could stay here all night at this table waiting up for you! Are you game?”

“I’m game.”

“I’m not sure if that’s going to be necessary. Let me think a little on where you can stay tonight.”

“We’ve been staying at rest stops but I don’t think it’s safe inside the city.”

“I can send you to a safe neighborhood. You can just park on the street and sleep in the car.”

“So we’d meet you in the morning?”

“Maybe I should work the rest of this shift, for the money. Sorry, guys, my planning engine is having trouble functioning amid the excitement of you two being here! Sorry I didn’t recognize you at first. It’s so great..so great..that you’re here. You don’t know how much I’ve needed a true friend. Or two true friends, even better.”

“Glad you’re receptive to our plan,” Tuesday says.

And Matt says, “Julian, friend, we’ve been apart too long.”

“Truly.”

They shake, each grabbing the other’s forearm, a legionnaire’s handshake.

“Would you mind getting our waitress?”

“Sure, Tuesday, you want..food?”

“I don’t mean to interrupt you guys’s secret handshake or whatever but I could really go for some coffee.”

Julian raises his hand. “Angela.”

In a second Angela comes over. “Yes?”

“Could you get us some coffee?”

“Keith says your break is over.”

“I’m catching up with some very old friends and will be back with Keith in just a moment, please, would you get us some coffee?”

“These are your friends from Dayton?”

“Yes, this is Matt Temple and this is Tuesday Fokker. Guys, this is Angela, who is just off to grab us some coffee, please, Angela, honey.”

“Ok, but Keith is pretty mad.”

“Thank you Angela.”

Angela leaves, and pretty soon Keith comes over to the table. He puts both hands on its edge and looks at Julian. “Julian. I’m only gonna tell you once. Get. Back. To work.” Keith un-leans himself from the table and leaves.

“Well,” Julian says, “that makes this easy.” He stands up and takes off his apron, sets it on the table. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to quit.”

Tuesday and Matt sleep in the car one more night. They find a neighborhood. They use the restroom at Denny's and brush their teeth and hope they can make it till morning. Julian rides the bus home.

Matt can barely see the houses in the neighborhood they pick, so they don't know whether it's a good neighborhood or a bad neighborhood, but they see where the nearest gas station is and hope it's open all night for emergency bathroom trips.

Matt parallel parks the car. No one is walking by. There are lights on in the house they're closest to.

"I guess this is it."

"I much prefer sleeping in the rest stops."

"As do I, as do I."

"I hope no one walks by."

"It's crazy, in the woods you're in danger because there's no one around to help. In the city you're in danger because of the people."

"I prefer the woods."

"I think I do too."

"Are you going to sleep now?"

"I think I'm going to stay up and read."

"What are you reading?"

"I'm re-reading *The Once and Future King*. It comforts me. It's the King Arthur story, I think the best telling of it."

"Read to me."

"Tuesday, I will always read to you."

So they settle down and Matt starts reading. He's in the first book, where Merlyn is teaching the young Arthur life lessons by turning him into all sorts of animals.

Tuesday closes her eyes. She listens to the story for a while, then imagines her and Matthew having sex. She appreciates that he's still getting over Nakia, but she thinks what he needs is a good strong fucking. She will have to see if she can make that happen.

And then, before long, used to the rhythm of sleeping in the car with Matt, she lays her head against the side window and falls asleep.

Tuesday wakes just before seven. She has to pee. The sun is up, and she sees that they are in fact in a nice neighborhood. There is a guy riding a bike, all dressed up in sponsored lycra gear.

She looks at Matt. He's still asleep, snoring lightly. She lays her

body on his arms, his chest. It takes a while for him to wake up.

“Hey.”

“Hey. You seem pretty relaxed.”

“I’ve gotten used to sleeping in here,” he says.

“You do realize that most people would never even consider sleeping in their cars.”

“If we had enough money to sleep in a hotel, I would sleep in a hotel.”

“But this doesn’t bother you at all, does it?”

“Not really,” he says. “Does it bother you?”

“A little more than it bothers you.”

“I’m sorry, I wish—”

“Don’t. Don’t be sorry. I’m fine with it. But it amazes me, you’re just like totally unphased by irritating things, like even Julian, sometimes I can’t stand him, but you’re totally calm, totally accepting of him.”

“He’s my friend.”

“I bet if you were being Chinese water tortured it wouldn’t matter to you at all. You’d probably enjoy it.”

“I probably would.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. You’re a rare quantity, Temple.”

“Thank you, Fokker.”

“You’re fucking welcome. Now if you don’t mind, I gotta piss like a motherfuck. Can we go somewhere to take care of that?”

—————

Matt drives them to the gas station. Tuesday is back at the car almost before she leaves.

“Can we find another place? There’s piss all over the seat.”

“Sure.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. Because I have standards. And they don’t involve placing my sweet ass on that fucking toilet seat.”

They come to a McDonald’s. They both go in this time.

“Was it clean?”

“Yes. Oh yes. I never thought I’d say this, but thank god for McDonald’s.”

“Wanna go?”

“Actually, Matt, if you don’t mind, let’s just eat here. I know it’s a terrible way to break our fast and we’ve put so much work into being healthy with the drinks I’ve been making but I feel like being a little bit bad. Do you feel like being a little bit bad with me?”

It's the end of breakfast by the time Julian calls.

Matt picks up his phone. "Yeah?"

"Hey, my friend, I want you to know that I'm feeling very clear on this decision to leave Austin. No more of the weaving, wobbling, worrisome Julian that you knew last night. No sir, I'm all topped-off, clipped up, razored, washed and ready to go!"

"Ok. Do you want to meet up today?"

"Yeppity yep yep yep. I want you to meet my friend Courtney who I met at a folk festival here last fall and her old teacher Ms. Kathryn I-don't-know-what-her-last-name-is. Come and meet us on Guadalupe Street in front of the Smoking Eye cafe, do you want the address?"

"No, I can map it."

"Mapping things now, are we?"

"Yes. Mapless fun is over."

"How soon do you think you can get here? It's not far from downtown."

"I think in about fifteen to twenty minutes."

"That's excellent news!"

"How much coffee have you had so far today?"

"About two pots."

"Ok! That's making sense now then. You sound manic."

"That, my friend, would be a state that is kindly reserved for you."

"Tuesday told you her theory?"

"It's half her theory and half mine, kemosabe. You are bipolar."

"We'll see you in a few minutes."

"Ke-kip-et-ey-kip-kip-kip-that's all folks!" Julian hangs up.

"I could hear him from over here," Tuesday says.

"He's had two pots of coffee."

"I heard that."

"He's crazy."

"I know."

"He wants us to meet him downtown with a couple of friends of his."

"Let's go."

By the time they find a place to park it's more like thirty minutes later that Tuesday and Matt arrive in the Smoking Eye via the back door (because that's the only place they could find to park).

Julian is standing out front, smoking, with three other people. The young woman in the off-white sleeveless dress is obviously Courtney. The older woman is Kathryn. The third wears all black and is adorned with crystals, and is a he.

“These are my friends,” Julian says. “Tuesday and Matt. This is Courtney.”

“Hi Courtney.”

“Hi.”

“This is Kathryn.”

“Hello.”

“And this is Crow.”

Matt shakes hands with the all-black character and is disappointed to find that Crow has a weak handshake.

Courtney says, “Kathryn was my eighth grade teacher. Crow and I met on Guadalupe, right down there. Julian and I met at a folk festival he was playing.”

“Nice,” Matt says. “Tuesday and Julian and I all went to high school together.”

“Tuesday and I have been in school together since the second grade. You showed up later, my very handsome friend.”

“Hey, hey!” Tuesday says. “Am I not handsome?”

“You are my perfectly sex-crazed friend.”

“What am I?” Courtney says.

“You are my musical friend. You should hear her sing, Matthew, you would love it. And you should hear him whistle. Matthew has one of the most highly-developed whistles this side of the Mississippi.”

“Do you even know which side of the Mississippi we’re on, Julian?”

“No idea. Well we were thinking—we were talking before you got here and Kathryn has decided to extend a welcome to us all to come out with her to her ranch in Llano, which is about forty-five minutes from here.”

“I would love if you would come,” she says.

“We’d be delighted,” Tuesday says. “Thank you for inviting us.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“We can go in two cars. Would y’all like to follow us?”

Matt and Tuesday pull around front, on Guadalupe, and they immediately spot Kathryn’s truck. They follow her onto the highway and soon they’re out of Austin, driving on a succession of smaller and smaller roads until they see signs for Llano.

“I wonder what her ranch is like.”

“I wonder, too.”

“I have to tell you something, Matt. I didn’t get a very good feeling about that kid Crow. I can feel his energy and it’s not good.”

“I had the same feeling. He has a weak handshake.”

“Oooh. There’s nothing creepier than a weak handshake!”

“I know! It’s awful. Well, let’s keep an eye on him, if he tries to do anything fucked up we can always leave.”

“I’m glad I’m here with you.”

“Tuesday, so am I.”

They’re going down a long stretch of dirt road with wooden fences on both sides. There are cattle roaming around, dust flying up from Kathryn’s pickup. They turn onto a smaller road, and then they’re driving up to a house. Kathryn pulls in and Matt parks next to her. It’s a house and two mobile homes. The next house in one direction is two football fields away. There is no next house in the other direction.

They get out, and Matt points over at a small pond. Tuesday looks, and see’s what he’s pointing at: a snake’s head pokes above water as he swims across the pond.

“Water moccasins,” Courtney says. “They’re all around here. So keep an eye out.” Courtney has a slightly-hoarse voice; Matt likes its timbre.

Crow is lifting the crystal from around his neck. He brings it up to his mouth and kisses it.

Kathryn comes over to Tuesday and Matt. “I figure you two can sleep in the Contessa.” She points to one of the trailers. I’ll get you fresh sheets and there’s a shower out there. I don’t have a lot of money for food right now but whatever I have you’re welcome to.”

“Thank you.”

“Kathryn, we’ll buy dinner for tonight. Is there a grocery store around here?”

“There’s a general store in town.”

“Is that ok? We could get some things and come back and cook you dinner.”

Kathryn says, “That would be wonderful.” And there’s a relief in her voice that makes them know they’re doing the right thing.

As they make dinner, Courtney sings, and Matthew whistles along with her. She sings low, soul-toned songs from her travels, which include a two-year stint in a commune in Australia. She tells stories of the commune, and of the aboriginal people, as she peels the potatoes.

Everyone helps make dinner except Crow, who sits in the living room meditating on his crystals.

“Work is hard,” Courtney says. “But it’s good for your soul. We did a lot of work on the commune. Farming, mostly. We worked the dirt. But the important thing about work is it makes you feel part of things..you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” Matthew says. “I know exactly what you mean. It’s like if you live in a house, and you don’t contribute to the bills, say, then you never feel like you’re a first-class member of the house. You have to participate to get that good feeling.”

“You have to participate to get that good feeling..I like that. I like that good feeling.”

Julian looks at Matt, and Matt looks at Courtney, now Julian is glaring at Matt for being the primary one in conversation with Courtney, who Matt is assuming Julian is exerting some idea of control over.

Matt looks at Julian like “What?”

Julian says, “Can I speak with you outside?”

“What, Julian?”

“I would just appreciate it if you didn’t try to overthrow what I’ve been building with Courtney over a matter of years now. It’s just that I’ve been working on her since we met at the folk festival and now you come along you two are singing together—”

“You sing too! Sing if you want to. No one’s stopping you from singing!”

“It’s just that it indicates a type of closeness which I—”

“I’m not taking over your girlfriend, Julian, I am simply having a conversation with her, singing, whistling, conversing. Is there something wrong with that?”

“No, there’s nothing wrong with that. Per se.”

“Are we done now? I want to get back to making dinner.”

“Don’t let me stop you.”

“What?”

“I said well don’t let me stop you.”

They eat dinner in Kathryn’s house, sitting around her kitchen island.

“So you were Courtney’s teacher.”

“Yes, it was my privilege to teach Courtney in the eighth grade.”

“Do you still teach?”

“Well, until recently, yes. I was fired two weeks ago.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Yes, it’s been quite the news. You do something for so long and then—. I don’t know what I’m going to do now.”

“So we’re all in a state of transition,” Matt says.

“I guess we are,” Tuesday says.

“Crow, how’s the food?”

He nods, barely. The look on his face is as if you offended him.

“I have an essay I want to show you, Kathryn. Some of the political stuff you were talking about earlier makes me think of it.”

“I’d enjoy that. You are a wonderful bunch of people who have descended on me. You can stay as long as you want. You let me know if you’re comfortable in the Contessa, Tuesday, ok?”

“Thank you. I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“I have some wine. Would you all like to share some wine with me?”

“That would be great, Kathryn.”

Kathryn gets up and Matt gets up to help her. Kathryn brings out two bottles of wine.

“You want me to open these for you?”

“Yes, the corkscrew is in one of those drawers.”

“Ok, I’ll get it.”

“And I’ll get the glasses.”

After the wine is poured, Tuesday, Matt, and Julian all raise their glasses. Kathryn, Courtney and crow follow suit.

“To being next to nature.”

“To being next to nature!”

They clink glasses.

“There really is nothing like being next to nature for one’s sanity.”

“You have to get away from the city.”

“The city is sick.”

“Some cities are better than others.”

“Yes, but, cities in general. You can’t just spend all your time in them. You have to at least get out for a walk.”

“Imagine people who have never seen nature. Like people born in New York who never get out. To have never seen a mountain..”

“Where were you born?”

“In El Paso.”

“I was born in the high desert in California. We’re thinking of ending up there on our journey.”

“Except we don’t know where we’re going.”

“Right. But we might end up there. Just saying we might!”

Tuesday smiles.

“I was born in Texas, too. In Dallas.”

“Really.”

“Yes. Except I was only there till the fourth grade. Then we moved to Philadelphia, then Ohio.”

“Which is where you all met?”

“Yes, I met these two in the tenth grade.”

“And you’ve been friends since then?”

“On and off.”

“We’ve been friends. We’ve been friends.”

“Crow, what sort of stuff are you into?”

“Crystals. I’ve been collecting crystals for ten years now. I like to meditate on crystals to make changes in the environment. Like if there’s a girl, and I don’t think she likes me, then I can meditate on it and make her like me.” He’s looking at Tuesday the whole time he says this. “There was this girl, who wouldn’t have me. I meditated on a crystal and it changed her mind. Or if my grades aren’t what they’re supposed to be, I meditate on them, with a crystal. Crystals are the only universal material guaranteed to make quantum changes during meditation. I don’t know if you knew that. But a crystal is like a portal for quantum changes. If you want to learn anything about quantum mechanics, I suggest you start with crystals. Read about them. Learn what they can do. Start collecting. One thing about crystals is they’re not very expensive, except if you mean a very large crystal, but I don’t think they have any advantages for meditation. If you want an example of something I can meditate on, I might take this crystal right here..”

—————

It’s just Matt, standing outside after dinner, sipping the rest of his wine. Tuesday comes up.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” She puts her arm around him.

He does the same.

“Did you see Crow looking at me when he was talking all that shit about crystals?”

“Yes, I saw it.”

“He needs to find himself something else to look at. Seriously. I don’t want some freak meditating on a crystal about me, while I’m here to be on a journey with you. This is our spiritual journey, one of them. And to have Crow around talking all this bullshit—”

“I’ll talk with him.”

“You will?”

“Yeah?”

“What are you going to say?”

“I don’t know, but I will have a word with him and we’ll see if that changes anything.”

“Cause if it doesn’t—”

“Let me just talk to him first.”

“Ok.”

“Other than Crow, are you glad we’re here?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what Kathryn was talking about when she said to stay as long as we want but I think she means we can stay a while.”

“Yeah, I think it really helped out that we had money for food.”

“Let’s do that for a while. We buy the groceries, she gives us a place to stay.”

“Yeah, awesome.”

“This is a spiritual place.”

“I can tell.”

“I think you and I should do some meditating here, tomorrow, just the two of us.”

“I agree.”

“I’m going to bed now.”

“I’ll see you there later.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to talk with Kathryn a while.”

“Ok. I love you. I’ll see you in bed.”

—————

Crow sits by himself in the kitchen. Julian and Courtney are behind the house, by a moveable fire pit. Kathryn is sitting in her living room just opening a book. Matt comes in.

“Sit down.”

“If you’re reading I can come back later.”

“No. I was just going to read if there was nothing else to do.”

“Thank you for welcoming us. We love your setup.”

“Wait till you see the river, tomorrow, we’ll go out on the rocks. It’s why I love living here.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Seventeen years.”

“Does it feel weird to be without a job?”

“Yeah, you know, you’re going along just fine and then suddenly you’re not. It changes everything. I’m not even sure I’m going to go back to teaching.”

“What would you do?”

“Well, like Courtney and Julian, I’m into music. So I might to that

more full time. Who knows? I don't."

"That's kind of how I felt after September 11th. I had quit my job already, and I worked at Denny's for a while, washing dishes. Before that I was doing computer programming. Now it's like..everything is uncertain, so Tuesday and I decided to take this trip. We don't even know where we'll end up. But we had to do something. I couldn't just stay around Dayton. It seemed like, if there was a time to move on, this was the time."

"And now you're picking up Julian and Courtney and who knows what'll happen."

"Are Courtney and Julian a thing?"

"I think so. You'll have to ask them."

"I think I'm going to go to bed. I want to be well rested for the river tomorrow."

"Goodnight Matthew."

"Goodnight."

Matt walks out the front door of Kathryn's house. Julian and Courtney are talking and laughing. Matt goes toward the Contessa, watching for snakes. He opens the door and goes up the stairs.

Tuesday is sleeping, but she's left a light on. Matt undresses, then slides into bed next to her. He lifts the sheet to see her body. On another day he might fuck her, he might insist on being with her. But he's too burned out from the Nakia experience and he cares too much about Tuesday to make this the moment they finally sleep together.

It's timing—the timing is all wrong.

When Matt wakes, Tuesday is sitting up in bed, in her underwear, eating peanut butter and celery. He sees her breasts, sees her legs. She has a box of raisins out, and is placing them one at a time onto her peanut butter sticks.

"How did you sleep, dear one?" she says.

"I slept great. How did you sleep?"

"I slept well." And Tuesday gives Matt a little hug, then offers him a peanut butter stick.

"Yes, please."

So she feeds it to him. This is the first time since high school they've been down to their underwear with each other. And though raucous, sneaky, incredible fucking is what should be going on, it isn't.

“Lie down,” she says. “On your stomach.”

He does.

She sits on top of him, and he can smell flowers in the air, coming through the screen window by the bed. He can see a swatch of sky, white clouds, blue background.

Tuesday settles on his butt. She leans down to rub him, rubbing deep past the skin to the muscles underneath.

Matt can smell her armpits, and tea tree oil, and just the smell of a body. He keeps his eyes open and takes in the sky.

Courtney is singing, that low voice switching to high.

“I feel like I woke up in a dream.”

“You are in a dream.”

“It’s like we just walked into this perfect situation.”

“When you put it out there, in the universe, the universe gives it back.”

“As well as anything you could have asked for.”

“Better than anything you could have asked for.”

“It is better, isn’t. I had the nicest little talk with Kathryn last night. I really like her. She’s like us, I think.”

“And she’s at a transition point.”

“Maybe she can come along with us, too.”

“If we got rid of all our stuff, maybe the two of them would fit.”

“Did you Courtney is thinking of coming along with us, too?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“Neither did I, but Kathryn said something about Julian and Courtney coming along.”

“With us?”

“Yeah.”

“Are they a thing, or does Julian just want them to be a thing?”

“I thought it was the latter, but I’m starting to think it’s the former.”

“Wait. Does Kathryn think we’re a thing?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think that’s why she put us in the Contessa.”

“She might have assumed.”

“Oh well, I don’t care, I like it out here.”

“It’s better than sleeping in the house with everyone else.”

“We have our own private little retreat. Are you going to the river today?”

“Of course.”

“I thought we might do a little meditation out there together.”

“Ok.”

“Without Julian.”

“I get it. We will. Without Julian.”

“You have to take care of the without-Julian part.”

“I will.” Matt turns around, so he’s facing Tuesday, her legs around him. He puts his hands on her abdomen, brushes her with his thumbs. “I love meditating with you. Who would have thought, when we met, that this is where we’d be now, in a Contessa, with Kathryn and friends. Our trip is turning out well so far, don’t you think?”

Tuesday nods. She sits down on him so her vulva is pressed against his penis. Matt can feel the hot between her legs. They look at each other, and a year passes by in their glance. Thoughts of when they were younger, making out in the hallways of Colonel White. Thoughts of this one time they were in one of the art studios and it almost happened. But now time has come between them, enough time without fucking that it makes it harder for it to happen. And Matt sits up and lies Tuesday down the other way on the bed, and has her turn over, and he gives her a back rub this time. When he’s done, he gets up and goes to the miniature bathroom to take a shower. When he comes out, Tuesday has already dressed and gone.

“So, y’all want to head down to the river?”

“I love how you say ‘y’all,’ Courtney.”

“I’m from Texas, I say ‘y’all.’”

“I’m from Texas, I don’t say y’all.”

“Are you ready for this? I said are you ready for this?” Courtney was jumping around next to the house while she talked.

“Yeah we’re ready.”

“So one word of warning. Snakes. There’s a lot of motherfuckin’ snakes around here and they’re just a rarin’ to take a bite out of you, so keep a look out and if you hear something rattling, go the other way.”

“Uh..one question about the snakes,” Tuesday says.

“Yeah?”

“When you say there’s a lot of them—”

“They don’t want to bite cha, Tuesd’y. But they will if you get in their way. Stay on the path while we’re gettin’ down there. Keep a look out on the rocks. Be sure you make plenty of noise so they can hear you comin’. That’s probably the most important thing. I like to clap while I’m walking. Or sing. That let’s ‘em know you’re on your way so they can find somewhere else to go.”

Julian puts his arm around Courtney. “You’re really letting your southern come out.”

“When I’m on the ranch, my southern comes out. This is true.”

Y'all ready to go?"

So then it's Courtney in the front, then Julian, then Kathryn, then Crow, then Tuesday, then Matt. Courtney wears sandals. Julian and Kathryn have sneakers on, with socks. Crow is wearing black boots. And Tuesday and Matt are in sandals as well.

"Should we be wearing shoes?" Tuesday shouts.

"Yeah, probably," Courtney says. "But I always wear sandals. It's just more comfortable."

They're all going through the path, which is about as wide as a single footprint, cutting through tall yellow grass. The wind whips the grass around, and they're stepping on the narrowest little trail of dirt.

It goes down, and down from the house level, and you can't see a river at all. They get to a low point where there's water on the trail and you have to either step in it or try to walk from rock to rock above it. Then the trail goes up again and Matt, in the back, can see Courtney spinning around in circles under that bright bright sky.

The Llano River, at this point in its procedure, is a stretch about half a mile wide that is equal parts water and large, flat rock. The water slides over the shallow parts of the rock, forming little streams and pools. Meanwhile the higher parts of the rock give people a place to stand, and, by carefully choosing your path, you can make it from one side of the Llano River to the other completely on dry rock.

They all come up on the rock. Courtney wanders on ahead, singing herself a comfort song from the aborigines. Kathryn and Crow sit cross-legged and seem to engage each other in conversation. Tuesday goes ahead where Courtney is and Julian finds Matt and asks, "Can we talk?"

The boys find a rock to sit on that is far away from where the others are. It is surrounded on two sides by tall grass, one side by water, and from the tall grass keep coming these bellowing sounds that they don't know if they're from a snake or from a frog.

"It's a beauty, eh?"

"Have you been here before?" Matt asks.

"No. I didn't know Kathryn had all this land."

"I can see why she loves to live here."

"I can see that too. Matt, the reason I wanted to talk to you, is I see you making certain—shall I say, quantum, or Sidereal—moves, with respect to Courtney. And I have to say I don't like it."

"I'm not making any moves toward Courtney. I'm conversing with her like a normal person would, given that she's in my sphere, but I am perfectly happy in my singleness and I'm very happy for whatever you and Courtney have. You have nothing to worry about."

"It's just that I see you making certain—"

“Don’t even tell me about moves I’m making. You’re wrong. You’ve misread the situation.”

“Well it’s just that you see, for instance, when you were whistling when Courtney was singing. I can’t whistle like you, so you’re engaging her on a platform on which I cannot engage her, and I thought that was an unfair move on your part.”

“I’m enjoying that she’s into music. I enjoy that you’re into music. Sometimes I whistle. You’re being jealous of something that isn’t there.”

“How can you be sure it isn’t there?”

“It’s not there for me, I know what is true for me.”

“What about for her? How can you be sure she isn’t developing a crush on you?”

“It’s none of my business who she has crushes on.”

“Even if it’s you?”

“Even if it’s me. Those are her feelings—if she even has them—and so it’s her business. Not mine. Not my problem. I really would like to have a nice day out here and that means not having this conversation with you all day.”

The bellowing sound comes again, and both boys look at the tall grass.

“Do you think maybe we should move?” Julian asks.

“Probably,” Matt says. “Look. I’m happy for you and Courtney. I’m not making moves on her. Even if she made moves on me, I wouldn’t be interested. And that isn’t to say anything bad about Courtney. It’s just me. I’ve got too much going on in my own head to worry about a relationship, Julian. I really can’t deal with that right now. Tuesday and I are not together. Courtney and I are not together. It’s just me. And I’d like to be able to deal with you like that, just you and me, no one triangulating in from the outside. I value my time with you, Julian. I want to be able to deal with you, just you, and me, just me. Do you think we can do that?”

—————

“In Australia,” Courtney begins, “in aboriginal culture, there are very different roles between men and women. Women do the cleaning and care of the home. Men do the hunting and protecting of the home. And contrary to our American way of seeing things, this is not an oppressive arrangement for either the men or the women. It’s just that in aboriginal culture things flow better when there’s men’s business and there’s women’s business. There are even certain conversations in aboriginal culture that would always only take place among a group of men, or a group of women. Those conversations are, respectively, men’s business

and women's business. I find it funny to observe..that in our culture, while the line between men's business and women's business is blurred, there still exist lines of delineation, such that we, too, have a distinct set of men's business and women's business. Conversations about tampons: women's business. Conversations about sports: still largely men's business. Certain conversations when it has to do with someone liking another person in the tribe, romantically..certain of those conversations happen among the men, and then at the same time, among the women: men's business and women's business. See, I don't like to think of the aboriginals as behind our time. I like to think of them as outside our times. And certain rules that they operate by, that have worked for thousands of years, are undisturbed in them by us. They have maintained a certain..je ne sais quoi..that works for them. And that's just one of many fascinating things I learned while I worked on that commune. It was a wonderful time, in many ways."

Kathryn asks, "Do you think they're better off than we are, with their men's business and women's business?"

"Not better off. Different. We each have something to learn from the other."

"I can see that, ways in which our culture has women's business," Tuesday says. "Relationship stuff. Definitely owned by the women."

"But there's always a relationship," Courtney says. "It may be women's business to spot the roach but it is men's business to squash it."

"I like your stories from the commune," Matt says. "What was it called again?"

"This particular commune is called Tree River Fish."

"How did you find out about it?"

"Internet. I was looking for something different to do."

"Thank you so much for sharing some of the wisdom you gained there," Matt says. "I know I've been benefitting."

"I can see that," Courtney says. "Now I'd like to have some time alone with just Tuesday, Matt, and Julian. Crow, do you think you can hang out with Kathryn for a while?"

"Why?" says Crow.

"Because I have some things I'd like to discuss in private." She offers no other explanation.

"Crow," Kathryn says, "why don't you and I walk on over to the other side." She points a stick towards the other side of the river.

Crow gives a biting look to Courtney. Matt sees it. Julian sees it. Something is definitely going on.

"We'll come back out in..about an hour or so."

"Let's go," Julian says.

"And then what do you think of eating outside tonight?" Courtney

asks.

Kathryn says, "I was going to suggest it."

"You think of jobs for everyone, and when we get back, give us all our jobs."

Kathryn nods, a big smile. She'll be able to handle Crow, no problem. He seems to be giving his looks to Tuesday and Courtney, exclusively.

"Bye y'all."

"See ya."

At the house, Courtney sits them all in the living room. She has out a newspaper (classified section) and a pen.

"You already know what I'm going to say, right?"

"No."

"Julian and I have been talking, and seeing as you would take on a third passenger, we were wondering if you might consider a fourth. Can I come with you to..wherever you're going? I just think it would be so cool: the two of you, the two of us. I feel it would be very balanced. We can stay here as long as we need to get ready for the trip, and then go."

"It sounds great," Tuesday says, "but where are we going to put our stuff? To clear out the back seat would mean we got rid of our clothes."

"Voila," Julian says.

And Courtney opens up the newspaper. She hands it to Tuesday and Matt. She's circled cars for sale. Vans, to be exact. There's an old VW, just under two grand.

"We can sell your car," Julian says. "And use the money from that to buy this van."

"I'm not sure we could get two grand for my car."

"I already looked it up in the blue book," Julian says. "It should sell for just over."

"For just over two grand."

"Yeah."

"What about instead we buy a small little trailer to go behind the car, and we put our stuff in there and ride in the car?"

"I just really think it would be so much cooler to go in this van."

"Well maybe I don't want to sell my car."

"We'd understand that," Courtney says. "It's just a thought."

"I mean, I'm willing to sell it, if we talk about it and it comes out that that's the best solution considered, but I don't want to just jump into buying and selling vehicles just so we can go on our trip."

"What's wrong with this idea?" Julian says.

“It’s not that there’s anything wrong with it, it’s just that..we have a car right now. We know it works. What if we buy this van and it has troubles? I know it’s cool because it’s a VW but it’s seriously old. What do you think?”

“Well,” Tuesday says, “it’s a big decision. I want you two to come along with us on this journey. I like the idea of a van. But it’s up to you, it’s your car.”

“Let me think about it. Let’s discuss this later..like..before dinner? I just need a minute to figure out what the hell I’m doing. Good idea. Just need to think it over a little.”

Matt is at the Contessa. Tuesday comes up.

“Are you mad?”

“I’m not mad, it’s just like..what are the two of them adding to this? We have our car, our little money that we saved. Julian just wants to buy this van because he’s got some aesthetic idea of driving west in a Volkswagen. I’m this close to doing, it, too, because I think it would be cool to go in that van, of course I do. We said we were going to roll with the punches on this trip. If changing the car for a van is the thing to do, then cool. I’m just a little on edge.”

“I can see that. You shouldn’t feel any pressure to do it.”

“I just wish one of them had a car. That would make this a lot easier.”

“I know. I’ve talked with Courtney and she suggested getting a mechanic to look at the van first, that way you know it’s going to get us to wherever we’re going.”

“Do you think this is a good idea?”

“I think it is a good idea. But it’s your car. Don’t feel pressured by me and certainly don’t feel pressured by Julian.”

“I do feel pressured by Julian. I feel like he’s done this since we started our magazine together. Spending the profits on cigarettes. Stuff never turning out the way he promised. I can’t count on that guy. I’m trying to remove him from the equation. What would I do then? I hope I’m not just a wet blanket on everyone else’s desire to go traipsing around the country in a Volkswagen!”

“No, you’re not.” Tuesday sits beside Matt. “Take your time. Do not be pressured into this by Julian.”

“I’ll figure it out by later this afternoon.”

“Take a day. Take two. It’s not like we’re in a hurry.”

“I feel like Julian’s making it seem like a hurry.”

“He is. I’ll have a talk with Courtney about that. That’s no good.”

“Thank you. You will? Thank you. I appreciate that. I need a little taking care of every once in a while, too.”

“I know. I know. Julian is being stupid and you have every right to take your time.”

“I think I want to do it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I think it’s a good idea. I’m excited about that van, and I’ve never even seen it. I want the four of us to go on this journey. Kathryn too, if she wants to come. Not Crow.”

“Oh, since you mention Crow, Crow is really starting to get on my nerves, like more than just an annoyance. I don’t want him meditating me on his crystals or just the way he looks at me. It’s icky.”

“Duly noted. I will take care of it.”

“You will?”

“Yes, I’ve been seeing some of what’s been going on and I’m sick of it. Thanks for telling me and please let me handle it from here.”

“No problem. Looks like your boy’s coming over to talk.” Tuesday gets up and greets Julian on her way out.

“Julian, what’s up?”

“What’s up?”

“I decided to buy the van.”

“You did? That’s great news.”

“And there’s something we need to take care of.”

“And what is that?”

“It’s Crow. He’s harassing Tuesday.”

“Courtney just talked to me about the same thing.”

“You know what I’m thinking?”

“What?”

“This is men’s business. The girls deciding he needs to go is women’s business. Us taking care of the problem is men’s business.”

“Right on.”

“So tomorrow I clean out the car, we take Crow back to Austin, sell the car, buy the van, and we’re back here by sundown.”

“Sounds great. Except I don’t know about being back by sundown.”

“No?”

“It sounds a little ambitious. Plus I’ve got to cancel out of my computer, pawn that and a few more things. But we’ll make it back in a day or two.”

“Sounds like an adventure,” Matt says.

Julian says, “I’m ready for an adventure.”

That afternoon, Matt and Tuesday, and Julian and Courtney go to the river in swimming clothes. Courtney leads, with Julian beside her. Matt and Tuesday follow.

“I think there’s a place up here where we can swim.”

They’re headed south, and they can see the neighbor’s house from here. Courtney takes them to a place where the water is deeper, the rocks less flat than by Kathryn’s house. She settles on a pool that is about twenty feet deep (you can see the bottom). You can also see snakes swimming in the pool.

“We’re gonna swim in that?” Tuesday says.

“Yep.” Courtney smiles.

Tuesday looks again. There’s a water moccasin. Swimming in the pool.

“I figure since no one is out here we can swim naked,” Courtney says. “If that’s ok with all of you.”

“I don’t mean to be a wet blanket, but there are snakes in there.”

“Yeah,” Courtney says. “Cottonmouth. They won’t hurt you unless they feel threatened.”

“Won’t they feel threatened if we swim in their pool?”

“I swim here all the time. Just don’t bat at them or kick them. They’ll stay away from you.”

Tuesday looks at Matt. Matt smiles, then starts laughing.

Courtney looks at him like: what?

“I can’t think of a better way to die,” he says, “than skinny dipping in snake-infested waters with my friends. Let’s do it!”

Julian says, “Woo hoo!”

Tuesday shakes her head.

Matt strips his shorts and steps out of them. “Can I dive in?”

“It might disturb the snakes.”

“I think I’m gonna dive in. I’ll make a small splash.”

“Just don’t go down too far. I saw a big one down there.”

“You’re really going to dive in?” Tuesday starts, but Matthew hardly lets her finish her sentence. He dives in.

The water is cool, and he opens his eyes once he’s in the pool. He doesn’t see any snakes, and he hopes none bites him on the way up. He changes directions and swims up, up, up, to the top of the pool.

When he gets to the top everyone’s pointing and jumping, screaming “Snake! Snake!” and he looks behind him. He doesn’t see anything but he swims backwards anyway. But what if there’s one behind him now? It’s harder to see under the water from this angle, as opposed to standing on the rocks above.

“There is right below you!”

Matt looks down.

“Stop kidding guys,” Courtney says. “There’s no snake. We just decided to scare you while you were down there.”

“Ha ha. But you know goddamn well there are snakes in here so get your asses in the pool!”

Everyone strips down to nothing. Courtney dives in as well, and Tuesday inches her way into the water, sliding down a steep rock.

“Are you coming in, Julian?”

“He’s afraid of water.”

Julian doesn’t deny it.

“Just come in, Julian.” That’s Courtney.

“Are you sure it’s safe.”

“It’s not, exactly,” Courtney admits. “But come in anyway. Just keep an eye out and try not to splash them.”

Julian doesn’t move.

“Just keep an eye out, it’s no problem. See!” Courtney waves her hands in the water.

“I can’t see without my contacts,” Julian says.

“Oh, I’m sorry baby. I’ll keep an eye out for you. Just stay close to me.”

“Are there really snakes in there?” Julian says.

“Yeah,” Courtney says, “there are.”

Julian creeps down the side of the rock, putting a toe in. Courtney swims toward him. She puts her hands on his legs and helps him come into the pool. It’s a steep climb, so he’s quickly all the way in. Julian makes a “woo” sound with his breath.

“It’s cold,” he says.

“This water is mineral rich,” Courtney says. “It sinks in through your skin. They say a ten-minute swim in this is like drinking a gallon of mineral water.”

“Is it safe to drink?” Tuesday asks.

“I would imagine,” Courtney says, “that this is some of the cleanest water you’ll ever find.”

Tuesday takes a little sip. She’s treading water next to Matt.

“I feel extra alive,” Matt says, “knowing there are snakes in here.” The snakes they saw on the surface have all disappeared, but he imagines they haven’t gone far. He looks down to where his feet are kicking. The movement of the water makes it a little bit of a blurry view. He can’t really see what’s down there. Thinking about it: at any moment, a snake could strike, and the four of them would begin a difficult journey to get one of them from this rural area to the nearest hospital, wherever that is. He kicks to keep himself afloat, and hopes none of the snakes find his kick threatening. He moves a little closer to the rock where Julian and

Tuesday slid in; that looks like the only way they're going to climb out.

Julian and Matt move together and Courtney and Tuesday move together. Matt can't hear what the girls are talking about.

"Are there really snakes in here?"

"Yes, Julian. There are!"

"Are you looking out for them?"

"As best I can. I'll let you know if I see any. I think we're safer in the shallow."

"I don't want a snake to bite Courtney."

"I don't either. We'll get out in a minute."

"Courtney, why don't you come into the shallow?"

"Why, are you afraid a snake will get me?" Courtney takes a deep breath and pushes herself underwater, going down as deep as she can. Everyone is imagining the big cottonmouth biting Courtney, but it doesn't happen. She swims to the top unharmed.

"Guys, let's get out of here, ok?"

"Julian, I swim here all the time!"

"It makes me nervous."

"You can get out. I'll be there in a minute."

Julian stays in. He's not getting out before his girlfriend.

Just then a dark figure appears at the top of the steep rock. It's Crow. He holds up his crystal and stares at the four of them through it. Tuesday sees him first. Then Courtney. The boys see him last.

"What are you doing, Crow?"

"Meditating on a crystal."

"Why don't you come in with us?"

"Would I have to get naked?"

"It's recommended, yes."

"Then I wouldn't want to."

"Then perhaps you could give us our privacy since this is a naked thing we're doing here."

Crow takes the crystal from in front of his face. He looks directly at the girls, taking them in.

"Crow!"

"Seriously, Crow; get lost!"

"Crow, take a hike. Get out of here, man."

Crow sits down on the rock. "This is my rock as much as it is any of yours."

"Then take your clothes off and get in here with us."

"No," he says, and he picks up his crystal. "There are snakes in there. Snakes who want to hurt you."

"Crow! What the fuck! Get the fuck out of here!"

"He's a total creeper!"

“We’ll meet you back at the house. Crow! We’ll meet you back at the house!”

Crow closes his eyes. His lips mumble something they can’t hear from where they are.

“Crow, do you want to get your ass kicked?”

Crow stops mumbling. “You’re threatening me?”

“Yes,” Julian says, in the loudest voice he has. “Yes Crow! You’re being threatened by a posse of four people who have way more meditate-on-a-crystal experience than you do. We will take that crystal.”

And Matt says, “We will take that crystal and crack it into a thousand pieces, Crow. While you’re sleeping, tonight. You know you won’t be able to stop us. We’ll watch you from now until you go to sleep so you won’t be able to hide it. Then we’ll take it from you and come out to this river and we’ll take a rock and smash that thing into a thousand pieces. Or we might just hold you down and stick it up your ass.”

Tuesday laughs. “Jesus.”

“You fuck with one of us you fuck with all of us,” Julian says. “And you have been fucking around with our women. Don’t think all your little creeper tactics go unseen. I wouldn’t feel safe sleeping tonight if I was you, Crow—”

“Ok, that’s enough. He’s leaving. You were just leaving, weren’t you, Crow.”

“If you take my crystal, I’ll tell Kathryn.”

“Kathryn doesn’t give a shit about you,” Courtney says. “She’s my friend. Get the fuck out of here!” she screams.

“Crow, if you don’t get the fuck out of here I’m gonna come up there and kill you with my bare hands!” Matt starts climbing the rock.

Crow turns and goes.

Matt eases off, slides back down into the water.

Then Crow comes back and silently points to each one of them, in turn, one, two, three, four. Then he makes a crushing motion with his fist.

“Crow,” Matt says in a regular voice. “Do you want to see how crazy I really am?” Matt starts climbing the rock again.

Crow goes.

Matt goes all the way to the top of the rock. “He’s gone. He’s going back.”

“What a psycho.”

“A regular true psychopath,” Julian says.

“Come on, let’s get out of this water before one of us gets bit.”

“Yeah guys,” Courtney says. “Party’s over.”

On the way to dinner that night, Julian walks with Matt. It is sundown. They have flashlights.

“Uh..Matt?”

“Yeah?”

“I think..in this little matter of telling Crow that his time in Llano has expired, that you would be the most neutral party for doing so. Crow and I have had some altercations, with him flirting with Courtney, and I’m not the best at confrontations. I know you’ll be able to do it peacefully.”

“Ok, I’ll do it.”

“Matt?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

Kathryn has built a fire on a high rock on the side of the river. She and the girls are there, plus Crow. Everyone was instructed to prepare a different ingredient, which went into the stew hours ago. Kathryn has been up here since mid-afternoon to get things ready.

“Smells beautiful, Kathryn.”

“Yeah, it smells wonderful.”

“Well, you’ll get a chance to taste. And there’s potatoes in the fire.” She had wrapped potatoes in foil and was cooking them in the ash part of the fire.

They all make a circle.

Matt looks at his surroundings. Fading light, pinks and orange and blue at the edges of the sky. Up here, on this rock, no house visible, not even Kathryn’s, certainly not the neighbors’. It’s getting cool. “I feel like we’re on the frontier, like no one else is out here. And this is how we eat, every night, on a fire. I feel like I could stay here forever.”

“I feel that way too sometimes. When I come up here.”

“You feel like we’re on the frontier?” Tuesday asks.

“Yeah, like it’s just us, just us and nature, and this is all the time we’ve ever known, eating outdoors like this, skinny dipping with the snakes, I just see this as such a powerful place.”

“I agree.”

“With me?”

“Of course.”

“Indeed.”

“Who wants some stew? You can pour it over your potato, or do ‘em separate.”

Crow raises his hand.

“Hold your bowl over here.”

He does, and Courtney pours some stew for him. “You want your potato?”

“Yes.”

She gives him one, using two sticks as tongs and placing it in front of him. “Be careful, now, it’s hot. I’d wait a while on that potato.”

Soon everyone is served. For a moment it’s quiet, people eating their food.

“Where I come from, that’s a sign of thanks to the cook,” Courtney says.

“What, the silence?” Tuesday asks.

“Yep.” Courtney nods.

Tuesday holds her bowl up to Kathryn as further thanks.

“Isn’t it going to be nice to be driving, all together, across the country?” Courtney asks, consciously excluding Kathryn and Crow.

Tuesday says, “You should come with us, Kathryn.”

“No, I’m staying right here. This is my home. If I have to work at that general store in town I think you’ll find me right on this spot.”

Crow is looking around helplessly at the other five.

“Crow,” Matthew says, “I’m going to tell you something about which there is going to be no discussion. It’s been pre-decided. So there’s no use complaining or arguing about it. Ok?”

“Ok.”

“Tomorrow Julian and I are going to take you back to Austin. We’re going to leave you on Guadalupe where we met you. Then we’re going to take care of some business and come back to Llano. Your time in Llano is done. Do you understand?”

There is the longest silence, in which Crow looks around to see if he’s going to get some support in the other direction, but finds none. Then he nods, and keeps his head low, and goes back to eating his stew.

There is a further silence, during which Courtney looks at Matt and Matt looks at Julian and Julian looks at Tuesday.

And then Courtney says, “I’m glad that’s decided. Thank you, Matt, for saying what needed to be said. Now let’s enjoy some more of this wonderful dinner!” She rubs Kathryn’s shoulder, and the teacher and the student share a glance.

Do you believe that the energy recovers? Crow sits silent for the rest of the meal. Everyone else talks about the trip plans! About how cool it will be for the four of them to continue their travels from here, about how much they’ll miss Kathryn and how beautiful it has been to stay outside of Llano for a while. At the end of the night, everyone helps carry the dishes and extra food back to the house. Then Julian and Courtney can be seen sneaking a sleeping bag back to the river, and Matt and Tuesday let themselves into the Contessa.

In the morning, Matt cleans out the Honda, moving every bit of his and Tuesday's stuff into the Contessa. He cleans out the glove compartment. He checks under the seats. The Contessa is crowded now with piles of clothes and bags and herbs and their water bottles and every bit of the stuff they took from Dayton.

Julian comes up.

"Is he ready to go?"

"Ready as he's gonna be."

"Well get him, let's go. You got the number for that van?"

"Got it right here." Julian pats his bag. "Did you pack some things?"

"I don't think I need much."

"Better pack a day's clothes. Pack your toothbrush."

"Ok ok I will. Get crow and I'll meet you here."

Julian gets crow and it's the five of them standing there, Julian and Matt, Courtney and Tuesday, and Crow.

Tuesday gives Matt a hug. "I'll see you back here. Come back soon."

"I will. See you soon."

Julian and Courtney hug similarly. Matt and Courtney wave.

"Bye you guys!"

"Bye Courtney!"

Then Julian holds the front seat forward to crow can get in the back. Then it's just the men, Matt driving, Julian in the front seat, and they're driving away from Kathryn's house back onto the roads that lead to Llano.

Almost nothing is said during the trip from Llano to Austin. The air is tense. Matt is reading Julian's mind and Julian is reading Matt's mind and both of them are reading Crow's mind and daring him, psychically, to say something. Say something. Go ahead. Say something. We'll leave you in the middle of this desert, motherfucker.

That's what Matt was thinking: if you say a fucking word I'm not even going to discuss it with you, I'm just going to pull over on the side of the road, get your ass out of my car, and keep on driving. You can walk to the nearest town, or try to find some car to take you before the snakes find you. That's what Matt was thinking.

Julian was thinking the same thing.

Who knows what Crow was thinking. But he must have understood the situation because he sat, quietly, until all three of them were back on Guadalupe Avenue in Austin, Texas.

Julian gets out. He holds the front seat forward to Crow can get out. And Crow takes his black bag with him and goes. Three words are said among them, and that is each of them saying, "Bye."

Matt and Julian park and find a coffeehouse. When they're settles with their drinks they make plans.

"I think we should call the guy about the van first."

"But we need to sell your car before we have the money."

"But how are we going to get to him without my car?"

"There's also the matter of me selling my computer. We definitely need the car for that."

"Ok, I agree—"

"With me?"

"Of course."

"Indeed."

"We need to take care of all your selling stuff first."

"But what if someone buys the van before us?"

"That's why I think we should call that guy first. But I agree we need to sell your stuff first."

"With me?"

"Of course."

"Indeed."

"So let's sell your stuff. Can we do that today? What exactly do we need to do?"

"We need to get my computer from where I used to live and pawn it. Then we need to go to my P.O. box and see if there are any checks from my last design jobs I did."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"I think we can do that today."

"Let's go then."

"I want to finish my coffee first."

"Me too. But I want to go ahead and get moving so we can get on the road as soon as possible."

"Ok, let's just finish our coffee, then we'll go."

"I was thinking..we could take our coffee with us?"

"What's the rush? We're gonna be here a few days anyway. Isn't that what you said?"

“Yes, I did say that, but it’s just..you haven’t been living here all this time. This town..gets to you after a while. I just want to be done with it.”

“I respect that you want to be done with it. We’re gonna be out of here soon enough. It’s not gonna make any difference, though, whether we drink our coffee here or take it to go, so let’s just enjoy our coffee in this luxuriously-appointed, hipster-esque, over-priced coffeehouse, shall we?”

They do enjoy their coffee in the coffeehouse. Then they go to Julian’s old place, where his housemates insist on smoking them both out, as a gesture of hospitality, so that by the time they go to the pawn shop they are both high on pot and neither of them can negotiate the best price for Julian’s computer. They check Julian’s P.O. box where there are no checks from past design jobs. Then it gets late so Julian guides them to a neighborhood he thinks is safe, and the two of them sleep in the car for their first night back in Austin.

In the morning, Matt wakes first. Julian is sleeping silently. Matt reads the bumper stickers on the car parked in front of them. “PHYSICS IS FUN” etc.

When Julian wakes, the boys go to a McDonald’s for breakfast. Matt pays. When they’re done eating Julian says, “What now?”

Matt says, “I guess we call that guy about the van.” Matt tries the guy’s number, but there’s no answer and no voicemail.

“Well, we could sell your car.”

“How are we going to get around without it?”

“By bus. I can get us pretty much anywhere in the city by bus.”

“You can?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t know, Julian, I’d like to at least have talked to this guy before we assume we’re going to buy his van.”

Julian looks straight ahead. “Ok,” he says softly.

“What if we can’t buy his van? Then we’re stuck in Austin with no way to get back to Llano.”

“I’d prefer if we look at the positives.”

“Looking at the positives is one thing. I’m trying to make sure we don’t get stuck here.”

“We’re not going to get stuck here.”

“We’re not?”

“No.”

“How do you know that? I mean how do you really know? Let’s at least get the guy on the phone before we sell our one mode of transportation that we have between the four of us.”

“I think you’re overthinking this.”

“Am I?”

“Yes. It’s going to work out.”

“It might. I’m not saying it’s not going to work out. I’m just saying let’s be smart about what we do.”

“It sounds like you’ve made up your mind.”

“My mind isn’t made up! We’re talking. I’m just saying my part of the picture.”

“But you aren’t listening to mine.”

“I listened to yours. Yours has unanswered questions.”

“Yours has unanswered questions.”

“Like what?”

“Like when and if we ever leave Austin.”

“We’re gonna leave Austin, Julian.”

“But later rather than sooner.”

“If we can’t get this guy on the phone we can’t but the van, we can’t leave Austin anyway. Julian, let’s just be smart about when and how we buy and sell our cars, on very limited money. Otherwise we’re gonna get stuck at Kathryn’s in the middle of nowhere with no cars.”

“I think you’re choosing to focus on the negative.”

“How? How Julian?”

“Well, Matt, you’re assuming we’re not going to be able to buy this van when we haven’t even spoken to the guy. You’re assuming failure when you could be assuming success.”

“I’m not assuming failure, I’m not. I just think we should at least, like, confirm the price of the van with this guy before we sell our car.”

“Well then we’re in disagreement.”

“Yes we are.”

“I’m getting hungry again.”

“Let’s get something to eat.”

“Are you willing to pay for that?”

“Yes, Julian, I’m willing to pay for it. No problem.”

“I know this little place downtown. We could drive there and wait for it to open. No, even better, there’s a taco stand I love on Martin Luther King. Is that ok?”

They go to the taco stand on Martin Luther King and eat in silence. It's a cloudless day, and it's starting to get warm.

"I'm thinking on going to a little bookstore I know, down the street."

"Ok, fine, I think I'm going to go that coffeehouse we saw back there and look up other vehicles if they have a newspaper there."

"You're going to look up other vehicles?"

"Yes."

"What about the van?"

"The van is fine, except that we can't get in touch with the guy who's selling it. I'm just going to look at other options."

Julian looks the other direction. He looks back. "You just got to Austin," he says. "So you don't know what I'm talking about, but I've had enough of this place. I want to get out of here..now. Spiritually, psychically, I can't endure this place anymore. I'm asking you to understand that. Now can we do what is necessary to get going?"

"We are."

"We are?"

"Yeah. We are."

"But not selling your car."

"What difference does it make whether we sell the car today or tomorrow, if we don't have another car to drive, we'll be stuck in Austin anyway, not getting away from the spiritual vortex, not continuing on our journey, not spending time with Courtney and Tuesday. We have to actually buy another car before we'll be able to get out of Austin."

"I'm asking you to see that the other car will make itself available to us, as a matter of the bounty of the universe."

"And I'm asking you to see that the bounty of the universe requires making phone calls to people who are actually willing to sell their vehicles. Why don't you help me look in the newspaper to find something?"

"Because I can't deal with you right now, ok Matt? I need some time to myself and I'm going to take it in the bookstore."

"You can't deal with me right now?"

"That's right."

"What exactly is the problem?"

"You want to know what the problem is?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to tell you."

"Ok."

"I'm going to be honest."

"Please do."

"I see you," Julian says, "as an obstacle..that is standing in the way..of me getting out of Austin. You are standing in my way."

“I’m an obstacle?”

“Yes.”

“What about me being your friend?”

Julian stands. He throws away his taco refuse and gives Matt a little salute. Then he walks down Martin Luther King in the direction of the bookstore.

An hour later Matt has collected several newspapers and circled many vehicles for sale in their price range. He walks down Martin Luther King looking for Julian, who isn’t answering his cell phone.

He gets to the taco stand, figuring Julian might meet him back here. Waits. Adjusts his bag. Decides to go on looking for the bookstore.

Matt goes about five long blocks on MLK and doesn’t see a bookstore. It’s getting hot, and his back is sweating where his bag covers it. Where is Julian? Matt tries him on his cell phone again. No answer.

He considers leaving. If Julian can’t maintain a simple connectivity with the person he’s traveling with..but Matt’s not going to do that. He goes back to the coffeehouse and waits. There’s a computer you can use for money so he buys some time and checks his email. There’s a much-needed message from his dad asking for an address where he can send two checks for website work Matt did for his dad’s company. Together, it’s about two-thousand dollars, a sum that will make a big difference on this journey.

He reads email from friends who are back in Dayton, wishing Shringara and him a good journey. Some journey it’s shaping up to be.

Matt drinks several coffee drinks while he waits.

Eventually Julian shows up. He sloughs up the stairs and sets his bag down on the glass-topped table where the computer is.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

“I found some cars for us to look for.”

“You mean..cars?”

“Vans. One station wagon. We could make calls.”

Julian says nothing.

“Did you pick up any books?”

Julian shows Matt what he got. Some nineteen-fifties self-help books of the type that both Julian and Matt enjoyed reading in high school.

“Wanna make calls? Is your cell phone working?”

“It’s out of battery.”

“We can use my phone. Let’s make some calls and check out some

of these other cars.”

“What about the VW van?”

“We’ll call him, too. We can start with him. You wanna call? See if he picks up?”

Julian takes the cell phone from Matt’s hand. He grabs the scrap of newspaper they brought with them from Llano and dials the number.

“I really think we should go around and see how much we can get for your car, while we’re calling about these other cars.”

“Ok.”

“Ok?”

“Ok, sure.”

“What do you mean by ‘ok?’”

“I mean let’s go see what we can get.”

“You’re willing to do that?”

“Yes, Julian, I agree we need to do both. I just don’t want to end up in Austin without a car. As previously mentioned. Do you know where we’d find used car lots?”

“I can give you two-thousand.”

“I was really looking for something more like four.”

“No way. You’re not going to find anyone go that high. There’s a whole piece of your exhaust system that’s missing.”

“Yeah, I think we lost that a ways back. How about three thousand?”

“I can go twenty-two.”

“What about twenty-four.”

The guy rubs his chin. “Alright, I’ll give you twenty-four.”

So they sell the car, Matt offering a show of faith for his friend who has just told him he’s an obstacle in the way of Julian getting out of Austin.

They ride the bus back downtown, with an envelope with twenty-four hundred dollars in it, Matt holding it tightly in his hand inside his pocket.

Julian gets them to Guadalupe, and it’s getting dark.

“What do you want to do?” Julian says.

“I want to get something to eat.”

“Well I’m going to be down the way, in the mall. There’s a video game I want to play.”

“Ok. So I’ll meet you..somewhere.”

“Can I have some of the money?”

“Sure.” Matt takes out the envelope and gives Julian one-hundred dollars. “What video game is it?”

“It’s a vampire RPG.”

“Oooh,” Matt says, “an RPG in an arcade..that’s cool.”

But Julian doesn’t say anything, just does a little hop and turns around and walks down the street.

Matt goes into the nearest shop with a menu and orders a panini. He sees they have alcohol. He gets a margarita. He sits upstairs and after he’s done with his sandwich, gets out a journal to write in, and as he drinks he records the events of the day.

Matt drinks three margaritas and finished his writing before he gets up and decides to search for Julian. He heads for the mall, and pretty soon locates an arcade where Julian is dutifully playing his game, a multilevel vampire RPG.

Matt stands at the side of the machine and watches a while. Julian doesn’t offer a word.

“Hey Julian.”

Julian gives just the softest, “Yes?”

“Let’s get a hotel for tonight.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Let me finish this game.”

Matt gives Julian some space, entertaining himself with Indiana Jones pinball, and a few minutes later Julian comes over. The two of them walk towards the highway, where Julian says there’s a Days Inn. There’s hardly any conversation on the way there, just Julian saying, “This way,” or “That way” as they cross streets.

They get to the Days Inn and Matt pays for the room out of his stash. When they get inside there is talk of getting something to drink.

“Do you want to?”

“I just had three margaritas.”

“I’d like something.”

“You want to go out to drink?”

“I was thinking more like taking something back to the room.”

“Ok. You know what I’m thinking?”

“What?”

“I’m thinking of getting a prostitute.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m absolutely serious. I’ve never done that and I’d like to try it, to see what it’s like.”

“Tonight?”

Matt nods.

Julian laughs. “Go ahead, my friend. I’m going over to the gas station to get something to drink. Something for both of us?”

“Do you want me to get her to stay for both of us?”

“No. You go ahead.”

Matt gets out the phone book. “You have enough cash still?”

“Yeah. Don’t spend too much on that so that we can’t buy our van, ok?”

“I won’t. Two hundred tops. Then we still have just over a two grand for getting the van and other expenses and whatnot.”

“I’m trusting you,” Julian says.

“Ok. We have plenty of money left, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Are you going to get your drink?”

“I think I’ll wait till you call, then I can go when she gets here.”

“You wanna see if she’s hot, don’t you?”

Julian laughs. “Plus it’ll work well, if I’m gone while you two do your thing.”

“Have you ever fucked a prostitute?”

“No sir. Use a condom.”

“I will.”

“Do you have one?”

“No!”

“Neither do I? She’ll have one. Don’t be sticking your dick in no nasty ho.”

“I’ll ask for someone young.”

“Well go ahead and call!”

Matt looks in the phone book under “Escorts.” Selects a decent-looking ad. Calls the number.

“West Side Escorts.”

“Yeah, I’m looking for a girl.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the Days Inn on..”

“Tangerine,” Julian says.

“Tangerine.”

“Ok, forty-five minutes.”

“Wait. I want a young girl.”

“Ok, you got it. No problem. She’s young. Two-hundred dollars.”
The guy hangs up.

“Well?”

“Forty-five minutes.”

“They said they had a young girl?”

“They said they did. Don’t think less of me for doing this, I just want to see what it’s like..to fuck someone just for money.”

“I don’t think less of you. You deserve it, if anyone does.”

Matt never understands what Julian meant by that, you deserve it. Probably some pity reference to him and Nakia, like: you’ve been through enough heartbreak that you deserve any kind of fuck you can get. Something like that.

“I hope she’s young.”

“I hope she’s fine. Do you care what color she is?”

“No, I don’t care about that.”

“Probably white, though, in this area. Where did they say they were coming from?”

“West Side Escorts.”

“Probably white. So, any suggestions on what I should get us to drink?”

“I’m already tipsy, dude. Just get anything you want.”

“But you want to share?”

“Yeah, I’ll drink more. Just don’t get beer.”

They kill time until the prostitute knocks on their door. Julian grabs his bag and Matt goes to the door. “Hello.”

“You asked for a girl?”

Julian ducks out of the room. “Have fun, friend.”

“See you. Yeah, come in, come in.” Matt welcomes her into the room, closes and locks the door. She’s not young or pretty; she’s middle aged and busted looking. Matt is already committed, though.

“I’m Ashley.”

“I’m Matt.”

“Hi, Matt.”

“So it’s two-hundred dollars?”

“That’s the cost to the escort service. For me it’s three hundred.”

“So it’s three hundred?”

“No, it’s five. Three for me and two for the escort service.”

Matt counts out her bills from the envelope.

Ashley gets out the condoms and lets him select one. She unzips him and puts her hand on his cock. She uses her mouth, without the condom, to get him hard. Then she puts the condom on and lies down.

Matt gets on top of her and sticks it in. Fucking her is hideous. He is not attracted to her, not turned on by her, not into her in any way except that he’s having sex for money and he wants to come in this bitch.

They fuck a while and she says, “Are you close?”

“No.”

She turns over on her stomach, then gets on all fours. He gets back inside her and fucks her from behind. It’s mechanical, rote, and he’s

imagining that it's Christina instead of this forty-year-old busted-out-looking woman. He even dares for a second to imagine that this is Nakia, but Nakia is too sacred, too high on the pedestal, to become involved in something like this. In fact, if Nakia knew he was doing this, she would probably retroactively break up with him. Matt missed sex, though, and if it couldn't be sacred then it would come from someone like Ashley.

"Are you almost there?"

"No."

"Well I've got to go soon. My bodyguard is going to come up here." Ashley's phone rings.

"That's him. Just come quick, baby." She wants him to come, she wants him to get his five-hundred dollars worth, because he looks young, and he was sweet to her, he deserves at least that.

Matt does his best to imagine he's fucking someone else, and fucks her hard and fast, and can feel himself reach that point of no return, and he fucks just a little bit more, and he comes.

"You did it?"

"Yeah."

"Good, baby, now I gotta go."

Her phone rings again and she answers it.

"I'm fine. I'm coming now. No, don't come up here. I'm coming out the door right now. Ok, bye Matthew, this was nice, you're a sweet kid. And thank you. You're helping me pay my rent this month!"

"Bye Ashley."

Matt closes the door. And now he's left with just the meaninglessness of what he's just done and the fact that he's coming down off the margaritas with nothing else to drink.

"How was it, my friend? How was it?"

"It was fine. I came." Matt shrugs.

"Was she hot?"

"You saw that she wasn't hot."

"I can't see! I'm out of contacts. I did not know that."

"She wasn't hot."

"Was she young?"

"Nope. She was about forty years old. Busted. Ugly. But I fucked that woman from behind and I came."

"Good for you. You deserve it. You didn't spend all our car money, did you?"

"No, I had to spend a little more than I expected, but we're ok. I'm

getting some checks from my dad's work, I just have to cash them."

"You're getting them down here?"

"Yeah, he's supposed to mail them soon. I gave him Kathryn's address."

"And how much is that worth?"

"About two-thousand bucks."

"So we're fine! And Courtney has some money, too, actually. I've been holding out on telling you because I didn't want you to think we had too much money."

"How much does she have?"

"I don't know, exactly. But she says she has some."

"Well good."

"I know! This trip is as much as sealed!"

"What did you bring us to drink?"

"Well I know you said no beer, so I brought us this." He pulls out a fifth of gin and a quart of orange juice.

"How can you not see that Ashley is a butt-ugly dog but you can make it to the store and back with gin?"

"It's very difficult. I have to go on generalizations, rough forms. Sometimes all I can see is lights."

"Julian, we've got to get you some contacts."

"That would be nice. Maybe after we're settled down in California or wherever we end up, we can get some."

"Maybe we can get you some before then," Matt begins, but he's not even listening to what he himself is saying. He's talking, but he doesn't care about or believe in what he's saying. He's just saying it to be nice. To this friend who earlier in the day told him he was an obstacle, something Matthew will never forget. Matthew's friends will be like this, somewhat, throughout his life: not really friends.

And then Julian's talking and Matt isn't listening, just mixing gulp after gulp of gin and then orange juice, mixing it in his mouth because there are no cups.

The realization that you have to be drunk to fully enjoy the company of your friend.

The hurt of being told you're nothing but an obstacle, by someone who is supposed to be your best guy friend.

Obliviousness to Tuesday and Courtney, not taking them into account, but a plan forming, forming, to get rid of Julian from his life. And needing to make a cut, a decision, to never be treated like this again, to never be told you're an obstacle by someone you love. And to get away from love a little, not be so exposed to people like Julian, selfish, selfish, selfish to the core.

Matt wakes at 6:18am. The gin bottle is empty. He swishes some of the orange juice in his mouth in lieu of teeth brushing. Julian is asleep, lying on his front. Matt is careful not to wake him. Matt packs his backpack and takes three-hundred dollars out of the envelope and sets it beside Julian on the bed. He walks out the door of room 226 of the Days Inn on Tangerine Street and lets the door close. He goes to the front desk.

“Uh, I’m checking out. Room 226. Is there anything I need to do?”

“No, you paid last night, so.”

“My friend is still sleeping, so it’s not ready to be cleaned yet.”

“Ok.”

Matt walks back toward downtown. He walks across an empty lot. He gets back to where businesses and people are. Then he finds a pay phone and uses their phone book to call a cab.

While he’s waiting for the cab, he decides to call his mother. She picks up, even though it’s before seven a.m.

“Matthew?”

“I’m sorry if I woke you, but, but, I needed to talk.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m in Austin and, Julian’s treating me like an obstacle. He actually said that. You’re an obstacle. Tuesday and I came down here for a journey, you know, a spiritual journey, and then you’ve got people doing things like that. I can’t do it. I can’t take it when people are like this. I’m sensitive. Then you find out your friend doesn’t really care about you, he just looks at you as a way to get out of Austin ‘cause he’s messed things up for himself here. I just, can’t, take it.” Matt is crying now.

“Well, honey, I’m sorry that happened. I know how important your friendships are to you, and you’re right, you don’t need to be treated like that.” She exhales. “I’m glad you called.”

“Thanks, I’m glad I called too.”

“You can handle this, I know you can.”

“Yeah, I think I’ve got an idea about how I’m going to handle it.”

“Well good. Just take care of yourself and remember I love you.”

“Ok Mom.”

“I love you baby.”

“I love you too.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Then the cab comes. Matt gets in.

“Where to?”

“Greyhound station.”

Matt turns his back on the whole thing. It will be one of the decisions he regrets the most when the future comes. He'll wish he confronted Julian and went back to Llano to get Tuesday to somehow continue their journey.

But that's not what he does. He skips Austin, he skips Texas, he skips the whole plan altogether. First he rides the Greyhound from Austin to Houston, with no real plan. Once in Houston, he rides the bus to Galveston, a coastal town he had once driven through and liked. When he gets to Galveston, he's the only person left on the bus, and he gets off, looks around, then gets back on the bus and buys a ticket from the driver with cash, to go back to Galveston.

Not showering, eating only in the Greyhound terminal in Houston, he does this for several days, just rides from Houston to Galveston and back. He tries to figure out his shit. He's done with Julian, done with journeys across the country and he doesn't see how he can get to Tuesday now.

He makes a plan. His plan is to go to a city where nobody knows him, get a tiny apartment, and work on his projects: writing a book, and some ideas he has for making a new type of genetic algorithm. He wants his apartment to be filled with plants. He's always had this idea for a secret greenhouse to work on, that no one sees for a long time, until it's overgrown, packed with life, and then he'll only let a few special people in.

He has a notebook with him and so he writes on the Greyhound, writes about Julian's betrayal, writes about his own inability to keep friends, writes about the things he wants to make, writes about what his ideal future should look like.

He counts his money and puts together a budget. How much his apartment will cost, how much he can make working a minimum wage job. He assumes he will have to work a minimum wage job, as it's been a while since he did computer work and he doesn't think people will want to take him with gaps in his employment history. Gaps are pretty much a no no with Fortune 500 companies.

He passes the time talking with strangers, hearing people's stories, the story of a pastor who lost all his congregation but kept preaching anyway, week after week, to an empty church..until, finally, the church began to fill up again. He saw a woman and her three kids kicked off the bus in Arkansas, far from their destination, because the kids were making too much noise, according to the bus driver.

Eventually his Greyhound riding has a direction, a destination. That is the town he went to college in, Athens, Ohio. It's perfect. No one

there knows him, it has a street full of fast food restaurants and bars he can likely find a job at. They have an excellent library at the college, which he can use for free to do his horticultural and computer programming projects. And there are a number of small amenities, like inexpensive pool tables at the college, and hiking close by—you can just walk outside town and be in the woods.

He fantasizes about Athens, Ohio, the way it looks in the fall, the fact that there are a constant supply of young people there for friendship and dating, but most of all that no one knows him there. He can be alone, no one knowing what he's up to. He pledges to himself not to tell anyone in his family, or any of his friends, where he lives. This will be the age of transformation, he will emerge a new being, and this solitude will be part of it. He'll communicate only through email and cell phone, will turn off location tracking on tweets, and will never blog post or tweet anything that gives up his location. This place will be his, truly his, because no one else will know about it.

He takes the bus up through the southern states. The last stop before Athens is Columbus, where he meets an inmate being transferred from one prison to another, and the two of them walk around the downtown mall, taking as much time as they can without missing the bus, because the inmate wants as much free time as he can get before getting to his destination. The inmate soaks up the advertising, the pretty girls (mostly seen from the back) and the two of them part ways when they get back on the bus.

Then it's just one more stop to Athens, and Matt is consumed by his imagination of that place and of what his life will be like there. He knows, somewhere in him, that it will hurt his family and friends to be so secretive, but he feels so broken up in general, and broken up specifically about Nakia, that he feels he needs time to heal, and this is how he imagines it happening. He is closed off to all his people, not trusting them, or needing space from them, not wanting to be judged by them for anything he's done. Doing drugs with Nakia, killing her by handing her that little pill, fucking a prostitute, he needs to not be judged for any of it, so he can heal, so he can become himself. This is what he thinks.

He gets to Athens in the morning and has an apartment rented by the afternoon. He walks across campus to the coffeehouse, Perks, where he gets a spiced cider for old times' sake and picks up the local newspaper and goes straight for the classifieds. He circles numbers of apartments that are in his price range. Most of those are rooms in houses. He leaves messages at real estate offices that aren't picking up their phones. On the third call he gets a woman named Becky. She gives him the address and they agree to meet on the porch.

“Hello, are you Mr. Temple?”

“Yes, and you’re..”

“Just call me Becky.”

“Ok Becky.”

“Well, would you like to see the place?”

She shows him around. It’s a big house with a full kitchen and living room and dining room on the first floor. And upstairs are three bedrooms. She shows him the one that would be his.

It’s a fine room. Two windows and a closet—nothing else in it. The house is in good walking distance to High Street so Matt decides to rent the place.

“Now it’s month-to-month, so all I need is a first and last month’s rent. I don’t know where Keiland and T. are, but they’re very nice boys. I think you’ll get along fine. They play football at the college so I think they’re probably at practice now, but you just introduce yourself to them when you see them. I already left messages for them saying to expect you.”

Becky gives him the key and they sign a rental agreement on each other’s backs while sitting on the white porch. Becky gives Matt his copy and shakes his hand.

“Well, welcome!”

“Thank you!”

“Call if you need anything.”

“Ok, I will. Thanks again!”

“My pleasure.” And Becky walks off. She came here by foot, that’s a good sign.

Matt decides to take a walk, too. He leaves his backpack in the upstairs room and takes his key and his leftover money and walks into town, which is just about four blocks away. It’s that fall time he likes so much, and he walks a long way to enjoy it. He gets dinner at the gyro buggy, the same one that was here when he was in college. He gets his gyro with jalapenos, and eats it walking over the greens.

He has butterflies in his stomach, watching the trees change color and students go this way and that. He’ll have college bookstores to shop at!

Matt breathes in. He owns this moment completely, because no one knows he’s here.

The first days in Athens are nice. They are quiet, and lonely, but lonely is what Matt wants. He wanders the greens, goes back to the library, reminds himself of some of the favorite walks he used to take when he was in school here.

He walks through town re-familiarizing himself with the shops. He puts in an application at Taco Bell. He finds a thrift store he never knew existed, and buys a portable typewriter there. It's blue, with an integrated case, so you just remove the top and you're ready to type. It has a handle, and he carries it back to the apartment, buying one ream of typing paper at one of the stationery stores. He sets the typewriter in the middle of his floor, and begins writing a book. His housemates, Keiland and T., call him "The Writer." They smoke him out, so every day Keiland and T. and Matt are high on pot, playing football games on the Playstation. Matt sleeps on the floor, covered in his sweatshirt, and it gets cold at night. T. says he knows someone with a mattress they can bring over. Keiland and T. like to fuck white girls. It's like a project for them, how many cute little white girls they can get to come over and fuck.

Matt works on his book and waits for Taco Bell to call back. He's through with corporate life. It will never happen again. He's got to make it work with whatever talent he has. When he can, he'll buy a computer so he can resume his programming work, making the ultimate genetic algorithm. He wants to do great things, not just good things, great things.

He only has a few hundred dollars left, and he doesn't want to give his dad his address (since living in Athens is supposed to be a secret, after all), so he needs Taco Bell to call. And they do.

He goes down to interview with Beth, one of the managers there. At the end of the interview, she says she will hire him, and they set up an initial schedule. It's only four days a week, so it's not as much money as he'd hoped for, and the minimum wage in Ohio is terrible. But he takes the job, and is happy to have it. Mostly he sweeps the dining room and restocks cups and hot sauce and other supplies they need behind the counter. They'll train him to make food later. They'll train him on the register, later. For now just sweep and restock. He does it. The shifts go slowly, and the walk home gets increasingly cold. He needs to buy a jacket but doesn't have the cash. He walks in his sweatshirt, sleeps in his sweatshirt. Washes one pair of clothes at a time, and wears the other one.

When he sleeps, he learns that when sleeping on the floor, you need to put your body in certain positions so that you don't get sore. There are certain positions that put the hip flat to the floor, for example, instead of riding on the hip bone. Throughout the nights, he switches between these positions to keep himself comfortable. He tells Keiland and T. that he'll get furniture eventually, but he's starting to see there's no way he'll be able to do that with his Taco Bell pay.

He applies at Carl's Jr. He tells them the deal with Taco Bell hours and they understand. They'll give him full-time hours. But the Carl's Jr. is a hell of a walk from the apartment. Taco Bell is close.

He makes it through the shifts by thinking about what he wants to

do, what he wants to make. Imagining the empty room he stays in filled with plants on shelves, algae, little snails growing, air bubbles coming up through pipes in his aquariums. A lush environment, with computers and internet and shelves full of books. He thinks of his book, which is supposed to once and for all tell the story of the freaks, and hopes he can get it right. He writes chapters. The first one's ok. The rest are rushed, because he's young, and can't wait to get to the end of the book. Patience will come years later.

He emails Shringara, at a FedEx/Kinko's on High Street. He says he's sorry. He tells her what he's doing, disappearing for a while, and asks her to understand. He emails his family with the same information, that he will maintain contact through email and phone but that's it, for now, and then he's done with the FedEx computer and he walks out of the shop. He realizes, in these first few weeks, how much time he had previously spent communicating with family and friends. Now he feels it's sort of off limits: if he spends all his time communicating with people, then what's the point of going somewhere secret?

The nights get colder, and his walks home after his Taco Bell shifts become difficult because of the cold. He has to hold his hands inside his sweatshirt pockets, and sometimes he puts both his arms completely inside the sweatshirt, zipping the last part with his teeth. When he's walking, there is ice, and the occasional student walking to or from High Street back into the neighborhood. He tries to make the appropriate eye contact and greetings for this part of the world, which is not too much eye contact, but a "hi." He looks at rooftops, and thinks about lying atop them with a gun, aimed at lone walkers during the night. It would be the perfect place to kill someone. You'd have to have a rifle. But you could park your car, get on one of the warehouse rooftops, just wait for someone to walk by, and shoot them. Get in your car and leave. Matt thought about this a lot on his walks. At first it was a fear, the realization that he was vulnerable while walking home. But then it became more than that, it was the beginnings of a plan to kill someone. He knew he wasn't going to be able to survive alone long, once the killing plan began. He knew he needed his people. But his people betrayed him. At least one of them did. And that was his mistake, that he cut off Tuesday at the same time he cut off Julian. And he left all his belongings in Llano: laptop, DVDs, clothes. The journey he and Tuesday had started was a failure. He wonders where Tuesday is now.

When he gets home he writes, even long into the night. Keiland and T. don't seem to mind the clacking of his keyboard. But more and more he just has time on his hands, and not enough money, and he considers the Athens situation unworkable. Is there no way to survive in this country on a minimum wage income? Or do you have to play into the

system? He can't go back to LexisNexis. That had been a dead-end tunnel. Some corporate job where the only way to get ahead is to kiss your boss's ass, where everyone is stupider than you, and you work with the same technologies for years instead of learning about new technology when it comes out. To Matt, working there means hanging up your spurs, it means giving up on life, it means willingly suffocating yourself to death, over a long period of time. But they pay's great.

His walks home, his death walks, where he imagines getting shot by a sniper that would maybe relieve him of the cold walk, or, alternately, where he imagines shooting pretty girls in the head or asshole boys who would always look down on him for being different..those walks turned into Matt talking himself out of his Athens plan, deciding that it was all unrealistic to hide away from everyone unless you had money. If you had money it would be ok to disappear. But it sucks working at Taco Bell. It sucks being a way smart guy, who can do high end problem solving in corporate software environments, and your work is just sweeping the floor at Taco Bell, refilling the hot, mild, and fire sauce. He doesn't feel he's above it; he's just bored. The thing he enjoyed most about working at Taco Bell was the shift meal. He would always get a Steak Grilled Stuff Burrito, which, after working there for a month, seemed like the best bang for your buck on the Taco Bell menu.

He wants to think it out better; he wants to think it through. But he can't work out his life here. It doesn't work. There are no jobs except at fast-food restaurants and bars, and he doesn't have a degree, so getting a university job is out. He doesn't see it. He doesn't see the way. Everything becomes "no"s. He's out of money, except his Taco Bell paycheck, and two of those checks is just barely enough to cover rent.

He splurges on the Chinese buffet one night, eats a mountain, enough to last for days. He never used to mind eating alone, when he worked at LexisNexis, because he was spending money and there was more where that came from, but this night, the pain of eating alone, feeling his chapped lips as he gets his mouth around a bite of sesame chicken..it stings. And everyone else is with people, groups of two and four. Living their prime life, parents paying for everything.

Matt finishes his meal, goes to the cashier, pays, and leaves, to begin the cold walk home again.

He begins planning how he will quit Taco Bell. He doesn't want to do it normally. Maybe it's because he's scared of confrontation. Maybe it's because he just doesn't want to have certain kinds of conversations right now. Quitting is one of those messy conversations. People want to know

why you're doing it and Matt doesn't feel like explaining himself. He's just gone.

So he plans it like a spy. He'll start his last shift on Friday, and then when he takes his mid-shift break, he'll take the side door into the alley, take off his Taco Bell shirt and throw it in the dumpster, and walk away. He'll go without his last check. He'll work the shifts between now and Friday, just because he has nothing better to do. Then he'll just walk out.

He checks the Greyhound schedule. There's a bus to Dayton at 8:18 a.m. on Saturday. He'll leave without telling his landlord or housemates. It's none of their business. He'll just walk out of the house with his backpack and typewriter, as if he is going somewhere to write, and never come back. Becky can keep her deposit and T. and Keiland can go back to not having a housemate. No messy goodbyes.

And all that is exactly what he does. He goes to his last shift, works the first half, then goes on break. He walks out the side door into the alley. No one is there. He takes off his Taco Bell shirt and has another shirt on underneath. He tosses the Taco Bell shirt in the dumpster, and he walks away. He just walks away from the whole thing. Because it doesn't fit. It makes no sense. Pretending to be Julian's friend never made any sense, and he stopped pretending. Working at Taco Bell, living in an empty room in a secret city, the same. He doesn't know what fits. But he's going home. To his mother. To the only semblance that he knows of anything of love.

The Greyhound ride back to Dayton is a kind of giving up. He has no idea what it's going to be like to be back at home, and this house is not one he's ever lived in..Mom moved to a new house after the divorce. He doesn't know what kind of job he'll get next. But at least he won't be cold. He'll be in a place where it's warm and he's loved by the person who loves him most in this world. And that has always been his mother.

When he gets off the Greyhound in Dayton it is at a gray and familiar corner: Fifth Street and St. Claire. These are his stomping grounds, as people say. This is a corner he's crossed many times. He used to live back in the Oregon District, over there. That was before he met Nakia and everything fell apart. To lose a lover, is a special kind of loss. Someone you were intimate with, now gone. It warps your world. But to be there when she died, when she took that pill and went into a coma, to ride in the ambulance with her to the last place she'd ever be, that was something else. Matt leaves behind the corner of Fifth and St. Claire, and walks through downtown to a certain bus stop. There, he boards the bus

that will take him up Salem Avenue, to his mother's new home.

When he gets there his mother is home. She lets him in. He sets his stuff down, and they hug.

"My boy."

"Hey, mom. I just couldn't do it anymore. I don't know what to do, but I couldn't stay secret anymore. I was working at Taco Bell and I didn't have money to buy a jacket and I was lonely. But that's the thing, even my old friends, I'm lonely around them. I'm disconnected from everything. I don't know what to do."

"Well, there, there. You don't have to know what to do, sometimes you just have to do it, and I think by coming here, you did."

"I think so too."

"Yeah."

"Can I just..spend some time here and figure it out?"

"Sure you can. I'm gonna have you stay in the attic, where Suzanne's room used to be. If Suzanne stays here, she'll stay in the computer room, on the second floor."

"Ok. Is Suzanne going to be here?"

"She should be coming back from New York in a couple of days, so you'll be here together, at the same time!"

"That'll be great! I miss Suzanne."

"She's always been special to you, I know."

"She has, it's true."

"Well listen, my boy, I've got to go into work for a little while, so I'm going to leave you here, but I wanted to be here when you got here."

"Thank you for that."

"Help yourself to whatever food you want to. Whatever's in the fridge. Ok?"

"Ok Mom."

"I'll see you later, baby."

"Alright. See you."

The first thing Matt does is go to the attic and sleep. He sleeps for a long, long time. And he keeps doing it for days. It is about six days before he is all slept up and used to being at the house. His mom buys him a coat so he can go places without being cold. She asks if he needs any money. He says he still has some left. And he begins the process of trying to get his dad to send the checks he's owed..to his mom's house. Dad replies

through email and says he'll send them. Matt watches a lot of TV, the news, and keeps writing. He sets the portable typewriter on the dining room table and works through the rest of his stack of paper. He writes epic poems, outlines for screenplays, little fiction pieces that don't go with anything. He gets together with his old friend Zochae. They smoke pot and do a painting project with a local artist who is buying up billboard space and putting non-commercial paintings on them. He does a photography project with Nik where they photograph four half-naked girls (Nik's ex-girlfriends) in all manner of positions and costumes. When Matt's mom sees Matt editing the photos on her computer, she calls the pornography. He edits them anyway. It's mid-December. He gets together with Christina; they hook up at her house. Christina has to drive him to and from his mom's house since he doesn't have a car. She doesn't mind. =) The two of them go on a date to see *The Shining* at the local art theatre but they leave early because they're making out too much. They decide they'd rather go home and fuck. And having Christina wrapped around him, during that time, is as close to feeling home as he's felt in a long time.

Suzanne comes home a few days before Christmas.

"Brother!"

"Sister!"

"How are you, my droogie?"

"I'm fine, how are you, my sistah?"

"I'm fine, fine. So you're staying here for a while?"

"Yeah, I'm done adventuring for now."

"I want to hear all about your trip!"

"I'll tell you all about it."

"If there's anything to tell."

"Oh there's stuff to tell, definitely."

"Good! Good! Well, you know what I want to do is..get some food."

"You wanna go out?"

"I was thinking more like..ramen."

"Ok, we have plenty here. Would you like to see the flavor selection?"

"Yes I would."

"Right this way then."

"Thank you, thank you. Oh, wow!"

"I told you we had flavor selections, for your perusal."

"And peruse I will."

“Suzanne, it’s really good to see you.”

“And you, my brother. I missed ya.”

“I missed you too. You’re the only person who makes any sense.”

“I feel the same way, my brotha. We have always had a..”

“Something.”

“Yes, a something.”

“Mom makes sense. She makes sense too.”

“Yes she does.”

“I always go to her when I need good advice..which is probably why I’m living here now.”

“Is Mom home, by the way?”

“She’s at work. But she wants us all to do something special when she gets home.”

“Aww, brother. I’ve been with crazy, crazy people in New York. It’s crazy I tell you!”

“No kidding? I’ve been with crazy people too.”

“On your travels?”

“Yes. What were your crazy people like?”

“Well, it’s like..you know when you’re going around..and you feel like you’re supposed to fit in to what everyone is doing..but you’re just out of step? It’s like I feel like everyone else is following a program that I haven’t been taught. And they’re perfectly comfortable with their routine. But it’s totally foreign to me!”

“Yes, yes, I get you!”

“You do? You do. You really do, brother, and that’s why I love you.” Suzanne turns maudlin and hugs her brother.

“Yeah, Suzanne, I’ve had some of the same. I found out with one friend..that we’re not friends at all! We’ve been pretending to be friends since the tenth grade and pretending to like each other and pretending to have rapport..but really he’s just using me for money, because I’m a way to get from point A to point B. You know? And he tells me this, to my face. You, Matthew, are an ‘obstacle’..obstacle is the word he used. You, Matthew, are an obstacle standing in the way of me leaving Austin. What the fuck? This is supposed to be someone I’ve been friends with for years.”

“Was that Julian?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok, I just flipped out a little. Or maybe I flipped out a lot. But I’m here now. I’ve been programming, and writing, doing good work. I have some scientific-type programming that I’d like to show you.”

“If you think I could understand..”

“Oh you can, don’t worry. It’s complex, but I do a very good job of

explaining it. And you're smart."

"Oh, my smart brother, I've missed you."

"I've missed you too, smart sister."

"So let me show you this thing I'm building."

"Ok. Is this your computer?"

"Yeah, I had this in the attic. Just put Linux on it."

"And you like Linux right?"

"I love it. It's the only way to develop software. There are more tools for software development made for Linux than any other operating system, and that's including commercial tools. Say I need a good memory checker—"

"What's that?"

"It's software that tells you if you have any memory leaks in your program. But anyway, you get the point. This thing I want to show you, is called Quantum Chaos, and it was initially developed by Julian and me, on paper, in high school. It's a way to calculate what changes are likely in a social situation once you take some action with respect to that system."

"Are you going to explain what that means?"

"Yes, of course. Let's say you have a social situation, like a group of friends. It's made up of various individual relationships. It's a chaotic situation, but you can quantify aspects of the situation, like types and magnitudes of various relationships."

"Types and magnitudes."

"A type might be like: this is a love-type relationship. A magnitude might explain whether it's like or love we're talking about here."

"I think I got it."

"So Quantum Chaos maps out a set of axes and triangles and higher-order polygons, and then shows you what happens to the system when one of the elements takes some kind of action. Like if the system consists of Julian, Matt, and Tuesday, and you have this sort of dysfunctional love triangle going on, Quantum Chaos can tell you what the system will look like after one of the elements—Julian, Matt, or Tuesday—takes some kind of relationship action. Like let's say Julian just goes for it and kisses Tuesday. That's some kind of action. Quantum Chaos, or I'll just call it QC from here on out, QC tells you what the relationships will be like after Julian takes that action. That's it!"

"Wait. You can do that with a computer?"

"Yes. And we've tested several hypergons. A hypergon in QC is some kind of higher-order polygon. The fundamental hypergon is the triangle. Another hypergon might have four elements, or four people,

contributing, and then you'd have a bunch of triangles in there, and a square."

"I don't believe you can make a program that does this. It doesn't seem..right."

"It's actually very easy. I envision using this in work teams in corporate environments, where you're trying to construct a team that works well together, you'd be able to test out different teams, theoretically, using QC, so you'd have some idea of what was likely to happen in real life if you assembled that team."

"This is amazing."

"Thank you. I've been working on it for a long time."

"And Julian helped with this?"

"With the initial idea. Once it started being programmed, it's been just me, since Julian can't program."

"Can you sell this?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I'm still working out some of the kinks of the modeling, and I made this kind of fortune-telling version that does the same thing but on a smaller scale..you don't need a computer and you can do a similar kind of problem solving."

"And it's called Quantum Chaos."

"Yes. What do you think?"

"I think..you're a genius."

"Well, thank you, I hope you're right. This is something I've been passionate about for a while. I just want to get it out so more people can use it."

"Maybe you need a business partner."

"I kind of had one with John Mitzka, this guy I used to work with at LexisNexis, but nothing ever came of our projects. I'm trying. I haven't given up. I'm still trying to make these things a reality. I don't know, Suzanne. I don't know how to make this work, all the way around, with customers and everything. I mostly like the programming part, the design part, the ideas, you know. In a way, if I'm the only user, ever, that's ok with me."

"Thanks for showing me, brother."

"Thanks for looking."

And somewhere in there Matt and his old friend Ashley and his sister Suzanne decide they will start a tradition (which would only last two years)..but a tradition of doing hallucinogenic mushrooms on New Year's Eve. On this and one other occasion, the three of them eat psilocybin and explore the insides of their mind with help from a naturally-occurring

drug, the magic mushroom.

Sharon, Matt and Suzanne's mom, is out of town for New Year's, on vacation with her friend. They have the house to themselves. Ashley brings the mushrooms. They start around 7pm, and it's already dark that time of year.

"Do they taste bad?" Suzanne asks.

"Not exactly bad. But they have a strong taste. You might want to have something to drink afterward."

Suzanne looks in a cabinet and brings out ruby red grapefruit juice.

"Perfect."

"Are we gonna do this?"

"It won't make me crazy."

"No, it'll just last for about six hours, then it'll go away."

Matt starts eating his. Ashley follows and Suzanne follows close behind.

They take the musty-tasting, dried mushroom stems, chew them, force themselves to swallow, and wash them down with their appointed drinks. Suzanne uses the ruby red grapefruit juice, as discussed. Ashley uses water. Matt uses rooibos tea, which he drinks throughout the evening.

Mushrooms are funny in that whatever you were thinking about throughout the day, before you take the mushrooms, becomes the thematic focus of your trip. You only want to take mushrooms if you're generally happy with your own mind, otherwise the results can be disastrous. For Ashley, she had been thinking about movies. Suzanne had been thinking about advertising, and all its illogicality. Matt had been editing most of New Year's Eve, so his trip became all about editing. He saw himself as editing together moments, fragments of experience which he wanted to massage into a unified whole.

"How many cups of tea have you had?"

"About ten. And I'm making them with the collection of teabags, so it's getting very strong by now."

"Do you realize how ridiculous it is that you've had ten cups of tea?"

They all laugh. Then they're working on an advertising spot called "Surprisingly Blue." Matt's not sure if that's the product name or the advertising slogan, all he knows is that Suzanne and Ashley have made a fort out of the bottom bunk bed in the computer room and are under there giggling.

Matt goes on his computer and opens the Post-it application. He drags the touchpad to make one tall, narrow note, in which he writes what will later become known as the Murder Muffyn Post-It, in that the word

“muffyn” is written like that with a “y,” and that the concept of murder appears repeatedly throughout the nonsensical note. Matt sees how hallucinogens can be dangerous; they place you in a different moral place, kind of beyond morality, and it’s understandable how sober society would consider that a danger.

They relocate themselves to various locations around the house. When you’re on mushrooms, little spaces can seem big and big spaces can seem little. It’s all very Alice-in-Wonderland.

Thanks to Matt’s and Ashley’s prior experience, they’ve dosed themselves expertly, taking neither too much nor too little of the blessed substance. They get the trip without having overly-paralyzing hallucinations. They make it downstairs for a game of chess. Matt takes black and Ashley takes white. They write down the moves in the game so they can replay it when sober to see if their high-on-mushroom selves were especially impaired when playing chess or if they happened to be especially creative. They’ve all done research on the neuro-cognitive effects of mushrooms and are aware that context pre-loading is enhanced on mushrooms. That’s the ability to think of related items, when prompted with a stimulus object. When they replay the game on New Year’s Day, they find absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. It’s as if they weren’t high at all. Matt has done similar experiments tape-recording himself talking while high on mushrooms. Same result as the chess game: you don’t sound any different than sober. The only noticeable difference is that a person on mushroom tends to occasionally refer to that fact while high, where a sober person of course does not.

They explore the wallpaper of the downstairs bathroom, all of them squeezing into the tiny space. The wallpaper is as never before. Previously-unknown logic to the floral pattern presents itself. The colors pop. They truly and unanimously, deeply, appreciate the wallpaper of the downstairs bathroom.

At some point Suzanne starts crying.

“Is it going to stop?”

“Yes, it’ll stop in a few hours.”

“You’re sure.”

“Yes, all will go back to normal. You’ll be exactly as you were before, things will look normal and everything.”

“It’s messing with my brain!”

“It certainly is! But don’t worry. The chemical that goes into your brain, from mushrooms, is a molecule that is one atom different that a chemical which is already present throughout your brain.”

“You’re not just making that up to make me feel better?”

“No, I’m not making it up! Although I would if that was what was required to make you feel better. But I’m not. Tell her, Ashley.”

“You’ll go back to normal. You’re fine. You’re safe. We’re safely locked inside this house. We’re not going outside where we could interact with dangerous situations like driving or walking around in public. The most dangerous thing going on here is your brother handling a hot teapot—”

“Which I’m being exceedingly conscious of and careful about—”

“But he’s fine. Maybe we should work on our advertising again!”

“Surprisingly Blue?”

“Surprisingly Blue!”

“Surprisingly Blue!” Matt says, and he lifts his tea mug.

They are all insane.

“I think this is what we should do,” Suzanne says.

She and Matt are having breakfast at a sandwich shop on Salem Avenue.

“I’m moving to Philadelphia,” she says. “I think you should move there, too.”

“Ok.”

“I’m going to work for Capital Access, as you know.” (Capital Access is their dad’s company. “I’m going to get a house in South Philly, near where Capital Access is.”

“Right.”

“So I’ll get a place with two bedrooms. We can live there together and you can write, or program, or look for a job. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds great! I miss Philly. I would love to live with you. I’m not doing anything else, so let’s do it!”

Matt continues to live with his mom while Suzanne goes ahead to Philadelphia. He finds a temporary job as a sexton in a nearby church. That means he answers the phone, makes the church bulletin, and closes up at the end of the day. It’s a good job for him because it’s mostly free time, during which he draws on a large pad of paper, making abstract pencil sketches.

Suzanne calls. She’s living with a friend of the family while she looks for places. She finds a house in Pennsport, South Philly, which is perfect. She rents it. She tells Matt to come out. He does. It’s a two-bedroom house with a kitchen and a living room, and next to it is a little open lot that has the beginnings of a garden in it. Suzanne takes the larger bedroom, with the understanding that in a year, they’ll switch

bedrooms.

It's good to be back in Philly. Their family lived there when they were all younger, and Matt and Suzanne are used to the subways, the libraries, the layout of the city. Matt picks up some work with Capital Access, editing documents they're putting together, manuals for home ownership. It's a two-block walk from where they live to their workplace, and it's good to see Dad every day.

Matt continues to look for other jobs. During the day, he drinks vodka and writes, the beginnings of a novel. In the evenings he goes to Capital Access and works, also using their internet to look for jobs. He applies to the nearby Burger King, twice, and never gets a call back. He finds a company online, the Susquehanna International Group, and applies. They're an options trading company, a hedge fund. That's a group that trades its own money in order to make more money. He applies.

He starts writing a play, called Carbon and Bullshit, to try to sum up how he feels about Nakia and the loss of her. He uses the portable typewriter he bought in Athens. He stops drinking, writes for three days straight, and finishes the play. He thinks it's his best work yet.

He and Suzanne discover Two Street Pizza, a walk-up restaurant that serves cheesesteaks. They go there often. They also make a habit of walking to the WaWa (a convenience store) and getting sugared-up cappuccinos.

Susquehanna calls back. They do a phone interview, then another phone interview, then decide to bring Matt in for a face to face. He goes in in the best clothes he has, which is less than a suit, just a pair of pants and a striped button-up shirt. It's a full day of interviews. He meets people he might work with, their bosses, their bosses, their bosses..all the way up to the CIO. They ask him about all kinds of programming matter. They ask him to take a written test. He does. They come back saying he only got one question wrong. It's one of the highest scores they've seen. They tell him they'll call him if they have anything. He goes home and drinks.

Two days later they call. They make him an offer. It's for less than he made at LexisNexis but it's still good middle-class money. He accepts the offer.

Suzanne takes him to Foreman Mills to buy clothes. He buys some better shirts, some new pants.

He works the job.

It gives him money, which he uses to go to restaurants and eat and drink better and better stuff. He buys Chinese for him and his sister almost every night.

The job is ok. It's supposed to be the best job in the world,

according to his employer. It does have good health insurance. Supposedly these are the best people he'll ever find to work with, anywhere. Their hiring process is so steep, that they can just trust their employees to make decisions for themselves, instead of needing to ask upper management about little decisions. They cater breakfast and lunch every day.

They hired Matt to do configuration management, which is a part of software development. It doesn't matter exactly what it entails, just understand that it is not the most interesting part of software development. The agreement is he will do this for a while, then get switched to something else.

He does his job well. He does everything they ask him to do, and more. And he learns fast. But something is missing. He came to this company with trading strategies (he has big ideas). They're giving him the smallest possible piece of work, and he's bored. The great company isn't so great after all. The perfect job..isn't.

He begins to get email from Tuesday. She's in Tucson, Arizona. Julian and Courtney are in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Tuesday loves Tucson. She refers to herself as a "sun child." She's working in a coffeehouse..well, kind of a vegetarian restaurant called the Casbah Tea House. She's made a friend who she thinks Matt will like. The friend's name is Rishi. Would Matt like to come out for a visit?

Matt takes vacation time. It's the next winter after Matt's cold Athens winter. He takes a week off in November.

He's never been to Tucson before, but he falls in love the moment he leaves the airport. Big mountains to the north, tall blue sky, and sand and cacti everywhere. The air is dry and easy to breathe. He asks the cab driver to take him to the Casbah Tea House.

"The what?"

"The Casbah Tea House? It's on Fourth Avenue."

"I take you to Fourth Avenue."

"Excellent."

He gets out of the cab with his duffel bag. The building is yellow. It has many swirls painted across its front. He opens the door.

Instantly, Tuesday is there, beaming at him across the counter. She truly is Shringara Hasya now, Love and Laughter. She comes around the side and gives him a hug.

"Tuesday!"

"Matthew!"

"It's so good to see you!"

“It’s..amazing to see you, my friend. Did you just get here?”

“Just came from the airport.”

“Well I have to work, but I’m going to set you up in the back, where you can write. Come with me.”

She leads him behind the counter, through the kitchen, through the dishwashing station, and into a whole back part of the restaurant he hadn’t known was there. It’s partially covered with huge blankets. It’s tents, like for a small circus or a nomad. She takes him to the very back, which is uncovered, but with low couches and tables set all around.

“Guess it doesn’t rain here very much.”

“Not ever! Well it does rain during monsoon, but that’s over now. You can sit here. And I’ll take your order, when you’re ready. I wish I could talk more but I really have to get back, but this way I’ll see you a little, and when I’m off we can sip tea and catch up! I’ll be right back.” She bends and gives Matt another hug.

He watches her go, back to the kitchen, a long dress flowing behind her. Matt looks through the menu. They have sandwiches and many kinds of tea. He looks up at the sky. It’s 100% blue, still, giant. He appreciates being able to eat outside. He does get out a notebook, but by the time he does, Tuesday is back.

“And have you decided on something to drink?”

“I don’t know. Can you help me decide?”

“The chai is excellent. It’s the best in the city!”

“Ok I’ll have the chai.”

“I’ll get you a pot.”

“Is it a big pot?”

“No, it’s a small pot. And would you like anything to eat?”

“I like you waiting on me.” Matt smiles.

“It is a special privilege, I have, to wait on you, my dear friend.”

“Oh it’s so good to see you.”

“Good to see you too. Oh I can’t wait I can’t wait to talk with you! I’ll be off at six o’clock, we can regale each other with tales from our respective journeys.”

“That will be wonderful, Tuesday. Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me.”

“It is my pleasure. Now I must insist that you pick a dish, so that I may return to my other duties.” She says it like Mary Poppins.

“What’s the Brazilian Black Beans?”

“That is one of our most popular dishes, it has many things in it. And while that is good, for you I’d recommend the seitan cheesesteak, Mr. Philadelphia.”

“What is seitan?”

“It’s made of gluten, it’s very delicious. You won’t be able to tell

it's not meat!"

"Ok, Crazy One, I'll have that."

"Do you think I am crazy?"

"A touch."

"I must insist," she says, "that it is you who is the crazy one." Big smiles. Then a chuckle. "I'll be back with your chai."

"Thank you darling."

The minute Tuesday is gone, another girl appears, this one shorter and darker skinned. She comes through the maze of empty tables and stops directly in front of Matthew's table.

Matthew looks up at her.

She bends at the waist and waves at him. She smiles and says, "I'm Rishi."

"So, is that the hunter-gatherer community?"

"No, that's my theatre troupe."

"What are they called again?"

"The Starlight Sunshine Infinity Players. We're putting on a show in January, you should come watch."

"Well I might have to be back at work by then but thank you for the invitation!"

"Take the time off work. You took this week off."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Don't let them tell you what to do. You tell them."

"That's good advice, Rishi."

"You don't think my idea for a hunter-gatherer community is weird?"

"No. Not weird. I think it sounds great."

"I'll have to show you my tent."

"You have a tent?"

"That's where I live, in the backyard of the house where Tuesday lives. I have a shrine and everything."

"I'd love to see your tent."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

They give each other sexual looks. Rishi is very forward sexually. They are going to fuck.

"Yeah. Tell me about your interests."

"I like to write. I used to paint. I program..things..on computers. I'm trying to make a program that completely rewrites itself. And I've been reading this book on cellular automata..do you know what that is?"

She shakes her head.

“It’s like these little systems, it’s a row of cells, and each cell follows a rule. Then, overall system behavior emerges, and it’s often surprising how complex the overall behavior is, given the simplicity of the cell rules. So I’ve been reading this book, and I want to understand it through and through. I think I can contribute to the field.”

“So you’re a mathematician.”

“Not exactly. But I like computer science.”

“I have someone I want you to meet. His name’s Tyler. He’s an inventor, he makes bicycle machines, like a machine to cool your house made only out of bicycle parts. I think you two should talk.”

“Neat!”

“You would want to meet him?”

“Yes, of course I would. He sounds fascinating.”

“He is. We used to be together a couple years ago. We’re just friends now. He had a huge dick. It was too big for me. But now we just talk about bicycles and he helped me get my current bike, which I like to call a fast bike. I had a really fast bike in D.C. when I lived there. Then me and Paul went on a road trip, and I ended up here. I really wanted to go to Los Angeles but Paul stopped the car in Tucson, and I’ve been here ever since!”

“So when Tuesday gets off we’ll go back to the house?”

“Yes, are you tired? Did you have a long day traveling?”

“I’m not tired, I just wondered.”

“Or..I could take you back to the house first, and Tuesday could come when she gets off. That’s probably a better idea.”

“Ok, whatever works.”

“Are you scared of me?”

“No.”

“Cause some guys are afraid of me. They think I’m too forward, but I’m not being forward I just figure there’s only so much time in the universe so you might as well skip the smalltalk.”

“I hate smalltalk.”

“Me too.”

“Let’s agree never to speak smalltalk again.”

“Between us? Or with everyone?”

“With everyone? Swear.”

“I will do my best.”

“No, swear it. From here on out, no smalltalk.”

“Ok, I swear.”

“I’m holding you to that.”

“Ok. You know..”

“What?”

“You have a look about you. Julian would call you a spark.”

“I met Julian. When Tuesday and him came through with Courtney.”

“Where is he now?”

“Santa Fe. He and Courtney moved over there. Funny how you left that journey but ended up here anyway. You should move here.”

“I might.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I really like it. The fact that you can eat outside because it’s always sunny.”

“You could find computer work out here.”

“Maybe. I could find something.”

“So you’re moving here?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I should probably take you home and Tuesday can meet up with us later.”

“You probably should?”

“Come on, get your stuff.”

“Watch out for the devil heads!”

“What are devil heads?”

“This plant you just went by? It has these stickers that come out and stick to you and they look like devil heads. They’re really hard to get out. I don’t think you got any, but remember what that plant looks like and stay away from it.”

They walk under a bright moon. Matt schluffs a duffel bag. Rishi talks to him about all the personal landmarks along the way. There’s a dumpster where she used to dumpster dive fresh produce for her Food Not Bombs conventions in the park. That spot right there..that’s where the van was parked when Julian impregnated Courtney.

Matt thinks about Rishi, and how Tuesday said they would like each other. It’s kind of an arranged marriage, Tuesday having talked up each one to the other, describing their spiritual qualities, telling each one the other was smart, that this was one of her best friends.

They get to the house. It has two bedrooms. Matt places his stuff in the living room.

“This is my spirit room,” Rishi says, walking toward what would normally have been the dining room. It has a doorway leading to the kitchen, and a doorway leading to the living room, each without a door, but covered instead with purple fabric. There is absolutely nothing in the room. “Do you have a sleeping bag?”

“Yes.”

“Get that out. We’ll sit on it.”

So they lay the sleeping bag long ways across the room and each sit on one end of it.

“Now let’s meditate.”

They slide in closer to each other. Rishi grabs Matt’s hands. She starts singing “om” and Matt joins in, the varying registers of their voices filling the room and resonating with it.

“Have you meditated before?”

“Yes, I meditate.”

“How do you do it?”

“I usually do breath-centered meditation or sometimes I pay attention to my heartbeat.”

“So silent.”

“Yes, I do silent meditation. I used to do singing meditation with a friend named Nakia.”

“Was she a girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Do you still like her?”

“She’s dead.”

“Oh. That’s terrible, Matthew, how did that happen?”

“We took ecstasy together.”

“She died and you didn’t. Do you have survivor’s guilt?”

“Some.”

“Let’s go again. This time I’ll sing a phrase and you repeat it.”

But they don’t make it very far into that before Rishi kisses Matt, just moves in and does it. Then they’re making out on the sleeping bag and Rishi is in Matt’s lap by the time Tuesday comes home. Tuesday opens the sheet covering the spirit room.

“Well, hello, my two friends. I see you’re enjoying each other’s company.”

“Hello Tuesday.”

“Hi Tuesday,” Rishi says, with a hint of exasperation.

“I’ll leave you to it.”

“Actually,” Rishi says, “I have some things to do, can you two hang out and I’ll meet you back here later?”

“Of course,” Tuesday says.

Rishi goes.

Tuesday shows Matt her room. It is filled with musical instruments, books, plants, celestial posters, and has a thin futon in the far corner from the door.

“So this is where you’ve been living?”

“We just moved in here a month ago. Before this we were staying

at this other place, it was kind of crazy. Kind of a big flop house with hippies and chickens and a kitchen with a stove that didn't work. So I'm very glad to be in this place now, to have our own kitchen, and it's quiet. They don't have the heat turned on yet so it's a little cold at night, but I can make due for a few days. Are you cold?"

"A little."

"Come lie with me in my bed."

They get in Tuesday's bed, under the covers, and hold their faces to each other, talking like little kids in a blanket fort.

"Do you like Rishi?"

"Yes."

"I thought you would. I've been so dying for you two to meet each other."

"She's very interesting."

"And beautiful, too."

"She is."

"Rishi's been living in the woods north of here, near Flagstaff. She told me she got tired of people and she just left Tucson, she's been living for months off five dollars a day, then she came back down here and I met her through the Teahouse."

"Who else lives here?"

"My friend Andie is moving out. She stays in the next bedroom but she's not here right now. So..if you move here, you could stay in that bedroom."

"Did you and Rishi talk about me moving here?"

"I just figure..I don't know what your life is like now, in Philadelphia, but we thought it might be good for you to get out of the city, come somewhere where there are like-minded people. I see you becoming the most wonderful sunchild. Like me. Can you see the difference in my hair?"

"Yes, it's lighter."

"I can feel it in my skin, I can feel it in my bones. I feel you belong here, with me and Rishi. I think you would like to be closer to a friend."

When she talks, it is easy for Matt to imagine himself coming here. Leaving everything behind in Philly, being close to Tuesday and maybe having a relationship with Rishi.

"Is Rishi with anyone?"

"Not that I know of."

"Do you think she likes me?"

"She looked like she was liking you in the spirit room."

"Right."

"You really like her, don't you?"

"I do like her. But I like you, too. You know that, don't you?"

“Yes.”

“I’m thinking of just going into her tent and being there when she gets back. Do you think that would freak her out?”

“I think..probably not. Probably a good idea. I’d say, eighty-twenty.”

“Eighty-twenty? I’m going. Do you mind that terribly, if I go and sleep with her in her tent tonight?”

Darkness. The tent zipper opens. Rishi comes in. She immediately feels that there is someone else in here. She puts her hands out, kneeling over the body in her bed. They kiss, and it is pulling their clothes off, feeling each other’s bodies, grasping, groping, getting to it as quickly as possible, him sticking his dick in her pussy and the two of them fucking like dogs, doing everything they can to each other, until they lie still, her on top of him, her just holding his dick inside her, holding it in that one position, and they stay like that for a long time.

They wake throughout the night to fuck. The chemistry is immediate. It is intense, holding each other’s throats and hair while they fuck, two bodies who have taken control over from their owners, and are doing what bodies do. They are animal.

In the morning, Rishi has to leave very early. She tells Matt he can stay in her tent as long as he wants. When the sun comes up, he can see the altar, to some saint whose name he can never remember, stacked on top of books on meditation and spirituality.

He lets himself out of the tent and goes inside the house. Tuesday’s door is still closed. Matt goes to sit in the kitchen, and makes a pot of coffee.

Soon Tuesday comes out. “I smelled the coffee.” She smiles, and the two of them hug.

“How was your night last night?” Tuesday asks.

Matt smiles. “It was good,” he says.

“Did you like Rishi’s tent?”

“Yes, I like it very much. Were you warm enough?”

“I did the best I could with my covers. It will be good when they get the heat on. Funny how in such a warm place it’s cold for part of every day.”

“Yeah, I think I like that. Feeling all that change throughout the day.”

“I was thinking that on Wednesday we could all go to get Indian food. Rishi can come if you want her to. There’s a place we can walk to from here.”

“Sounds great.”

“Is there anything else you want to do while you’re here?”

“Just hang out with you.”

“I do have to work, but you’re always welcome to come sit at the Casbah and we can talk periodically.”

“Ok. I think later in the week I’m going to want to do some camping myself, just one night, but up in the mountains.”

“You want to hike into these mountains?”

“Yes.”

“Just be careful. There are many animals here that would wish to hurt you. I want my Matthew to be around for a long time. Especially be careful of snakes. There are several varieties of rattlesnake that live around here, and one bite could kill you.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“I hope so. Especially if you’re up there alone. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’ll be very careful. I’ll just go for one night. I’ll keep an eye out for snakes. But I need some alone time, you know. I need a mini shamanic journey, so I can think about my life and what I’m doing.”

“I respect that. And I know you can take care of yourself. I just..very much love you and it’s so good so see you. I’m so glad you took the week off and came here.”

This goes on for several days. At night, Matt sleeps with Rishi. During the day, he goes to the Casbah Teahouse and sits in the back, where Rishi and Tuesday both come see him when they have break time, or to bring him something special they’re experimenting with in the kitchen.

Tuesday doesn’t display any jealousy. Matt is aware that he could have slept with Tuesday the first night he was here, and that would have vastly changed the course of the week. He felt compelled toward Rishi, though, and partially by Tuesday, in the arranged-marriage aspect. Tuesday was pushing Matt and Rishi together.

They go get Indian food on Wednesday, and when they’re done, Matt prepares himself to go up into the mountains. He has a backpack inside his duffel bag, and he uses it to carry a sleeping bag and four canteens of water. He walks north from Tuesday and Rishi’s house, buys a footlong sub at Subway, eats half of it, saves half for dinner, keeps walking. It takes him several hours to walk to the edge of the city. The big

streets turn to small ones, the houses go from normal to expensive, and he starts going uphill. He stops at a nice restaurant and asks for some water. Instead of tap water they give him an expensive bottles water, which he drinks there. Then he's hiking through the foothills, coming to the last houses separating him from the mountain. He walks through someone's yard, a hot expanse of sand, and through a gap in a fence and then he's beyond private property, on the bare mountain.

He goes up the mountain. He looks for snakes, but doesn't see any the whole time he's up there. He sees saguaro cacti, many types of small trees and flowers. He sees a white rabbit, and he knows that they are prey for large rattlesnakes. He climbs to the first rocky peak, above where you see snake holes, and stands facing the city. A fighter jet flies below. He looks over the back side of the mountains. There are more mountains there, gorgeous planks of rock taking the sun's fading light.

He finds a tree at the top of the peak. There's a jar underneath, and in it is a notebook. He opens the jar and takes it out. It's a register of those who have climbed the mountain. There's a pencil. He doesn't put his name in.

He eats the other half of his Subway sandwich. He looks at Tucson. You can see the whole city from here. He feels peace for having climbed the mountain. He is a long way from the east coast, a long way from Philadelphia. He wants to live like this, to climb mountains and be standing at their tops. He can't do this in Philadelphia. He suddenly thinks that people who work in offices are suckers: they are missing out on all this beautiful natural wildness and instead staring at painted walls a few feet in front of their faces. He drinks some of his water.

By the time the sun goes down, he's gotten his fill of looking at Tucson, gotten his sleeping bag out, placed it on rock, and gotten inside. He closes the zipper all the way up to his head. He doesn't think snakes come up this high, but he doesn't want some snake to crawl into his sleeping bag while he's sleeping to get warm. The rock isn't exactly comfortable, but it's more comfortable than the floor he had in his Athens apartment. This rock has little cradles and curves Matt nestles against.

He doesn't sleep much, but he gets some rest. He thinks about the idea of moving here. It would be crazy to leave the company he works for; if he does, he won't find a job like that again. But then again, what is that job really offering him? He's doing the shit work of the company while others get to have all the fun. He's underutilized. He doesn't fit with corporate culture. He's always felt like a stranger in the companies he's worked for, never felt he fit. So then, what? Take his money out of the stock market and use it to live? He thinks he can make it a year without working. Come here, set up a tent in the girls' backyard, cut out rent as an expense, and work on his programs. It's an interesting proposition. He'd

have to leave Suzanne in Philadelphia, but he could do that. The house is small, city life too difficult. He would have to live without cheesesteaks.

Sometime in the night he finally falls asleep. Nothing bad happens..no snakes crawl into his sleeping bag and he doesn't roll or slide down the slope of rock he's sleeping on. He wakes before sunrise, very carefully gets out of the sleeping bag in case any snakes are nearby, puts on his boots.

Walking down the mountain is more difficult. It's harder to see where you're going, when stepping down off a rock ledge..there could be a snake underneath it, waiting. He's out of water, and the sun is getting hotter. He slowly makes his way, clapping and singing and tapping his walking stick to alert snakes to his presence, so they can move on before he gets to them.

When he gets back into the city, the idea of walking all that way is unbearable. He finds a bus and hopes it goes toward the center of the city where Tuesday and Rishi live. It does. He has just enough cash on him to pay the fare.

His feet hurt. He's sunburned. He needs to take a bath, and then a shower, and get a change of clothes. Before he goes to the girls' house, though, he goes to a University of Arizona bar and sits down.

"You look like you've been on a hike."

"Yes I have."

"Whatcha having?"

"Can I see a menu? I'm thinking about getting some food, but I also want a..gin and tonic, tall. Thanks."

He sips his drink. He orders another one, and another one. He eats some kind of open-faced burger and starts to feel better. He orders just one more drink and by the time he leaves he's numb and happy, walking back to the house.

He takes a bath and a shower, changes clothes, and walks to the Casbah, where he spends the rest of the evening being exquisitely taken care of by Tuesday and Rishi. And he writes in his notebook. And he takes in the sky and the stars. And for a moment, he feels supremely, supremely home.

The last night Matt sleeps in the spirit room, wanting to give Rishi some space if she wants it. Rishi comes in at the crack of dawn.

"Hey, baby."

"Hey."

"Can I get in here with you?"

"Yeah."

Rishi gets in the sleeping bag with Matt. It's the kind that's shaped like a mummy, so it's a tight fit.

"Is everything alright? Why didn't you come to my tent last night?"

"I wanted to give you some space."

"It's just as well. I started my woman-time yesterday. But. I still want to have sex with you. Is that ok?"

"If we have sex?"

"Yeah."

"Sure. It's fine with me."

So she pushes off her underwear and slips herself around him. They hold each other tightly and fuck.

Tuesday pulls back the curtain to the spirit room. "Good morning lovers!"

"Good morning!"

"I was wondering if you two wanted to get breakfast or coffee at Sabine's. Since Matthew is leaving, I wanted to have some time with him."

"Maybe we can talk about this in just a minute?" Rishi says.

"I wasn't sure what time Matthew was leaving. What time do you need to be at the airport?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"So you'll want to take a cab around nine-thirty or ten. Does coffee sound like something you'd be interested in?"

Rishi says, "Tuesday, can you give us a minute?"

"Yes, I'm sorry I've caught you in the ritual, but I want to make sure everyone gets to spend time with Matthew before he leaves."

"We will," Matt says. "Let's do coffee. Maybe we can leave in..thirty minutes?"

"Sounds wonderful," Tuesday says, and she leaves them.

"Why do you think she comes in here when she can hear that we're in here?" Rishi says.

"I don't know. I think the week didn't go exactly as she'd planned, with you and I spending so much time together—"

"Because she wanted to fuck you."

"Maybe she did. It's ok. Are you interested in coffee?"

"Tuesday has some very backhanded tactics, I don't know if you know this. But if you've lived with her..you start to see some passive-aggressive tendencies that I would think she would have worked out by this time in her life."

"I don't know about all that. Can we just make love and then get coffee? I'll say goodbye and then that'll be that."

"Are you ever coming back?"

“I don’t know, Rishi. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You can’t just come into my life like this and leave, you know.”

“This has been a great week. I’m so glad I got to meet you. I’m giving thought to moving here, but I need some more time to think about it.”

“When you get back to Philadelphia you’ll forget about us.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it.”

“Tuesday had been planning out this trip for weeks. She wanted to sleep with you, I know. Then we threw a wrench in her plans.”

“I don’t know about that, Rishi. She’s been talking to me about you for weeks, trying to hook us up.”

“But she secretly wants to be with you.”

“I’ve known Tuesday a long time. If we were gonna sleep together, we would have done it by now.”

“Her coming in here was on purpose. She just wanted to interrupt us.”

“Well she didn’t interrupt us.”

“No, she didn’t,” Rishi says, and she rubs herself against him.

“So let her think what she’s going to think, or want what she wants. What happened is what happened. I wanted to sleep with you, and we have, and it’s wonderful.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, I love being with you. I wish I didn’t have to go back to Philadelphia at all. I could just stay here in your tent and make love to you and hang out with both of you and tell my stupid job goodbye.”

“You should go back. Take your time to think. I know you like that job.”

“I like it ok.”

“Do I feel extra slippery to you?”

“Yes you do!”

“You’re sure you don’t mind?”

“I don’t mind at all.”

Coffee is a disaster. Tuesday and Rishi fight subtly over control of Matt’s attention. Matt knows it, and he doesn’t enjoy it. Maybe going back to Philadelphia is a good idea.

They meet at Sabine’s Cafe Passé, which has outdoor seating. When it’s time, Matthew calls a cab and they sit in front of the cafe. They hug and kiss goodbye and Matt waves at them through the window of the cab as it pulls away.

On Monday, Susquehanna International Group doesn’t have the

draw for him that it used to. Knowing that he could be in sunny Tucson instead of snowy Philadelphia, knowing that there he would have the love of Rishi and the love of a friend in Tuesday. The job is a farce to him. The things he's asked to do are too easy; he's not growing and learning in the position. He decides to say goodbye to the Susquehanna International Group. He fires up a word processor and writes his boss a letter of resignation. He places it under his boss's door at the end of the day. He doesn't feel like telling them that he's leaving them to go be a sand bum in Tucson, so he makes up a reason for quitting that will end all discussions: that he's sold a screenplay and is going to write another.

It runs in the family, a cautiousness and almost a disrespect or maybe more accurately a disregard for work and employers. Matt and his sisters do hard work, but their idyllic upbringing makes them not accept disrespect and general bullshit from employers. They have a sense that life is worth more than a nine-to-five, that there has to be a spiritual component to work, and to life, and that life without that component isn't life at all. There is a certain level of abuse that most people accept from their employers. Matt and his sisters don't accept that abuse; they view it as intolerable, and they view themselves as not subject to it. To get them to work for you, you have to be very respectful.

So he gives his two weeks notice, uses some of his saved money to buy a truck. It's a Mitsubishi Mighty Max, which he buys from his cousin in New Jersey. He tells Suzanne he is moving and he says she will be sad to see him go but she is happy for his future, and they say their goodbyes. He coordinates with Tuesday, who is traveling back to Ohio to pick up her daughter. They will meet in Dayton and drive together in Matt's truck back to Tucson. Matt's two weeks pass, and one day he finds himself leaving Susquehanna for the last time. It feels good. He wishes them no ill. It just isn't a good fit. Matt is too much of an adventurer to marry into a career at so young an age.

One morning he leaves early, driving out of Philadelphia before seven, having given his sister one last goodbye hug and determined to go forward with his plan. He's in Dayton by that night, and hooks up with Shringara and Clover. They all sleep at Martha and Zochae's house, and M+Z make them good food and comfort them and Zochae helps Matt re-pack the truck now that he has Tuesday's stuff to bring as well.

And Tuesday and Clover and Matthew embark on another great roadtrip. As with Tuesday and Matt's prior road trip, they don't spend their money on hotels but rather sleep in the truck in awkward positions. They use a map this time. They don't want to spend any extra days on the road, traveling with a child. Clover is excellent, patient and calm and understanding that this will be a long journey.

The truck has no CD player, no iPod inputs, so they sing to

themselves for their music and sometimes do chants from Tuesday and Matthew's childhood.

As soon as they can, they drive south rather than west, so that the nights will be as warm as possible. The first couple of nights are trying. But then they get to Texas, and New Mexico, and they know they're getting close. Clover has never been to Tucson, so Tuesday tells her about it, about the plants and the creatures that live there. She describes the house, talks about how we walk from the house to the Casbah Teahouse when mommy needs to go to work. Tuesday tells Clover that she'll be hanging out at the Teahouse during the days, possibly with Matt if he decides to hang out there too.

They get to Arizona, and drive through Flagstaff, and Sedona. After Sedona the land goes way way down, through canyons into wide open desert. Then you get to Phoenix, and the next city after that is Tucson. When they stop for gas outside Sedona, they have a sense of excitement. This is the last tank of gas they'll have to buy to get to Tucson! They're getting there today! No more sleeping in the truck!

Matt has transferred his stock market money into a checking account. He sold his stocks. He's locked in to a certain amount of money he has to live on. He's going to make it as long as he can on that money. After that, he's not sure what he'll do. He'll figure it out later, but hopefully he won't have to return to work.

When they get off the highway, Tuesday navigates to the house. They park in the driveway around the side. Rishi isn't home. They stretch their arms and legs and before they bring anything in, Tuesday gives Clover a tour, and they all make tea in a French press.

The first thing Matt does is set up a tent in the backyard. Rishi goes with him to the camping store to pick one out. The one they pick is a two-person tent, much like Rishi's. Matt sets it up his second day in Tucson.

"That looks good."

"Thank you."

"Are you gonna set up some of your paintings inside the house?"

"I don't know, I hadn't thought about it."

"Why don't you? You can use the walls in the living room."

"Could I? I could hang up a few."

"Why not, it'll give the house some of your flavor."

"Ok, Rishi, I will. Thank you."

"No problem."

"Hey Rishi."

“What’s up?”

“Want to come visit me in my tent?”

“Oh, in your tent now. We have two places to fuck.”

Matt runs an electrical cord from the house to his tent so he can have computers up and running, for various purposes. He has two machines running in there, one for surfing the internet and one for programming. He sets up wireless internet for the house. It feels more like home now, checking email from the tent, being able to run his simulations.

He buys a case of wine from a store within walking distance, puts that in his tent. He relaxes. Drinks wine, enjoys the days. He writes in the morning, entertaining Clover while Tuesday sleeps, and in the afternoons he drinks or walks around Tucson or (mostly) goes to the Casbah and sits at a table in the back until it’s dark. He has a laptop with him, so sitting at the Casbah he can program as well as work in his notebooks.

In his notebooks, in his notebooks, is a menagerie of logics and politics and ideas for plays. Written down sayings. He and Tuesday have an idea for a new kind of voting system. Matt wants to start a tea company, and make bagged tea for restaurants in the area. He thinks about cellular automata, a science he is reading about in a book called A New Kind of Science, a big fat book which he carries with him everywhere, that the people at Susquehanna thought was hackish but which Matthew thinks is brilliant. He reads it. He studies. He tries to understand the parts with physics, which he hasn’t studied beyond the high school level. He writes down ideas for things he wants to do, sitting at the Teahouse imagining his life. Re-imagining it, from the ground up. You’ve taken away the job, you’ve moved to a new location. Now: what is left? Who is he really? Who might he become? How can he do what he loves among others? His ideas center on making some sort of business, or product, or service..maybe a computer game, so that he can make money without going back to work, as work hasn’t suited him up to now. He has ideas for new economies, which he sketches in the books, new ways to think about the exchange of money and labor, new ways to diagram. When people look at the books, they think he’s crazy. Constance, one of his new friends, says it’s the “logical version of zen.”

Rishi and Matt find new places to fuck, besides each of their new tents, they fuck in the bathroom. Lying in the tub or with Rishi bent over the sink. They fuck in the chair that sits on the back porch, when Rishi comes home from work. Matt will be sitting in the chair. Rishi will come home. She’s wearing a dress..with no underwear, as Matt will soon discover, as Rishi straddles him and they fuck in the warm sunshine. With the danger that Tuesday or Clover could come out of the house at

any time and they would be caught.

They have a ritual of fucking. In the afternoons the chair or bathroom or Rishi's tent. In the evenings Rishi's tent. And in the morning's Matthew's tent, when Rishi comes in and wakes Matt up with his dick in her mouth. Then she crawls in his sleeping bag with him and they fuck, and Matthew learns that Rishi is a squirter, when you put her on top and let her do her thing. After she squirts, after he cums, she licks it off his abdomen.

The early days are simple. The house gets along well. Clover is taken care of by Matt or Rishi when Tuesday has to work, usually as simply as having Clover sit with Matthew in the back of the Teahouse. The girls do their work at the restaurant, Matt does his programming, and Clover sings the most wonderful songs. She and Matthew make up a song about the book Matt carries with him all the time. One cold night, while Matt is walking home, he starts singing to himself about the heavy book, calling it "the booky book." Clover picks up on this and an entire universe of language is born. They no longer go to and from the house, they go to and from "the housey house." A fork is no longer simply a fork, it's a "forky fork." The whole house starts speaking like this, taking "trippy trips" to the library, eating "lunchy lunch." Instead of his spirit name, Zha, Clover calls Matthew "Zhazey Zha." He calls her "Clovey Clove."

Then one day, Julian and Courtney show up in a station wagon. Things have gone bad for them in Santa Fe and they are looking for a place to stay. They come to the housey house. Tuesday says yes, they can stay in the other bedroom. Their station wagon, parked out front, is loaded to the gills with stuff. And it's not just Courtney and Julian. It's the two of them plus their baby, Acacia.

One night, Rishi breaks up with Matt.

"I'm just not used to being around someone who uses computers," she says. "I'm thinking about hunter-gatherer communities and you're off programming computers to do who knows what all. I just don't think it could work between us."

"Ok, well I guess it's over."

"But I love you, I feel such a deep attraction to you, it's like our bodies are screaming to be together. I want to fuck you and fuck you and fuck you five times a day."

"I know. I love our love."

"But you don't understand. I was living in the woods before I met you. I was that fed up with people that I left everything. I had my little home area with rock-lined paths that I made out of stones from the forest, and I was just meditating, and meditating, and meditating! Some days I thought I would disappear if I meditated anymore. Like I would just evaporate from the Earth if I meditated one more minute! I felt like I was

going away, Zha. Like nothing could hold me down. It's just that that's the kind of life I'm used to. Even being in the city, living in a tent, is a little too city for me. There's black helicopters that fly around. I swear to you, one of them had its light directly on my tent one night. Like they were looking for me or marking me for deletion or something. You may not believe in black helicopters but I know they're real. And I worry about some of that stuff you're programming sometimes. Are you trying to create a superhuman race or something? What exactly are you simulating? Because I think sometimes the simulation becomes not a simulation, and then what are you left with? I'm just not used to dating someone who's on the computer all the time. See?"

"I hear what you're saying but I don't see any reason why any of these things have to be a problem, for us. I believe in black helicopters. I'm not doing anything sinister on the computer—"

"Well maybe it would help if you explain, to me, sometime, exactly what you're doing. Because when I look at those screens, you have to admit, some of it looks kind of scary."

"It doesn't have to be scary. All I'm doing is thinking about simple systems that produce complex behavior. They're not superhuman systems. They don't think, they're not designed to take over the world. They're simple little play systems to explore a certain type of behavior."

"But, Matthew, you never know when a simple little play system is going to become more than a simple little play system, you follow me?"

"That is true, Rishi. That is true."

"Well."

"I get all of this, but what I don't get is why this means we have to break up. We love each other. What more is there? You don't have to look at or think about my computer stuff if you don't want to."

"It's in your tent. When I come in in the mornings it's there."

"I can cover it up if you want."

"I'll know it's there."

"Maybe I can get a separate tent, for computer stuff—"

"Don't do that."

"I would do it if it would fix things between us. I love you, Rishi. I love your spirit. I love that you meditate. I love that you went to live in the woods. I can't tell you how attractive that is to me, that you have the sturdiness, that you have the backbone and the defiance to do that, amazes me. I wish I was more like you in that way! I am a little but not to the degree you are. I think you're beautiful. Even if you could never see me, I'd follow you around in spirit just to watch you because you're that beautiful to me. I'm not trying to scare you or exploit you. Nothing I'm doing on the computer is harming anyone. I'm not with the black helicopters. You know?"

Without Rishi coming to visit every morning and with the awkwardness of living in the backyard with her while they're hardly speaking, Matt decides to move. It goes against his original plan, which is to save on rent money by living in his friend's backyard, but he rents an apartment. It's in the same general neighborhood as the housey house but a few blocks closer into town.

Rishi decides to move too, so after Matt's done moving his things to his new place, he moves Rishi in the truck to a hotel she'll be staying in. She asks if she can borrow some money. He gives her five hundred dollars.

Since he's spending money, he decides he wants to replay some old video games, so he buys a fifty-four inch TV. He also goes into town and orders a custom futon, California king sized, the biggest, plushest bed you can get.

Rishi's aversion to Matt's programming only entrenches him further into it. It's as if she broke up with the programming, not him, and now the programming had more of its free time to spend with Matt. He buys a whiteboard, six feet wide by four feet tall, which he sets against the wall in the bedroom of his apartment. He uses the bedroom for work and sleeps in his sleeping bag in the living room. Every morning, he erases that whiteboard of the previous day's work, and every afternoon, he fills it with scribbles about cellular automata, simulation ideas, programs that write programs, and little blocks that represent the connective nature of the universe. He gives himself seriously to his work, even though he's not coming up with anything concrete, result wise. He works anyway, trying incrementally to increase his understanding of how things work. He toys with ideas that have to do with importing human consciousness into a computer, or exporting it from a computer into a human. He thinks about medical simulations, that would learn to fix problems within the body. And always, always, somewhere on the horizon, is this fixation with eternal life. What can be done to remove death from the equation..it would be the ultimate way to get rid of suffering in the world.

Julian gets a job at the Casbah Teahouse, as their dishwasher. This means, as Matt and Clover lounge in the evening in the back of the Casbah, that not only Tuesday and Rishi come through to visit them every once in a while, but Julian, too, when he takes broken down boxes out back to the dumpster. Courtney and Acacia get into the habit of hanging

out in the back of the Casbah, too, so it's a full-family affair. Matt and Courtney talk, over things musical, things spiritual, and Matt gets to hear more of Courtney's stories from the Tree River Fish commune in Australia. It isn't long before Julian gets jealous of this situation.

"Julian has forbid me from hanging out with you," Courtney says, one day, as Matt and Courtney walk, and Courtney pushes Acacia in the stroller.

"What?"

"He is worried that you and I will get too familiar. And that we may do things..which men and women do..which would go against our marriage."

"But Courtney, I would never do that, even if—and I'm not saying you would, but even if—you would."

"I know."

"You're my hang-out buddy!"

"I know."

"I mean it kind of works out well, don't you think, because we're both not working, I mean it's just convenient to hang out at the Casbah. What does he think we're going to do, have an affair at the restaurant? It's not like I'm coming over to your house while it's just you and me there or anything."

"I know, but Julian is a jealous person. And in this case, I respect his husbandly jealousy enough to go along with him."

"Well I'm not going to stop hanging out at the Casbah."

"I guess we'll just have to sit at different tables!"

"Do you realize how silly that is? I feel like we're all part of one big family and that doesn't mean that everyone has to sleep with everyone, but—"

"That's what he's worried about."

"That's just Julian's mind. I've known Julian since the tenth grade and he's always been jealous. Even when there's no reason to be. It ruins friendships."

"Maybe I could have a talk with him."

"This just seems too severe, Courtney. We even talked about this—"

"I know."

(The two of them have already discussed the likelihood of them sleeping together if they hang out all the time and made a distinct pact not to let that happen, for everyone's sake.)

"I mean we talked about this exact thing."

"I know. And I told Julian about our pact and it's not enough for him."

"Well, I respect whatever you and Julian decide about your

relationship.”

“Thank you.”

“But I disagree that this is necessary, and I think it takes away some valuable friend/family time like me getting to play with Acacia and you and I getting to talk, frankly, I think is a good thing. You’re good company for me.”

“Thank you for respecting our decision.”

“I do. See you, I guess.”

“I’m sure I’ll see you around, Matt.”

—————

Matt and Julian talk.

“So how much money did you make in Philly?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well. You’re not working. How much did you make?”

“I made enough to live very simply for a moderate while.”

“But like how much?”

“It doesn’t matter!”

“Don’t be coy with me, I’m your old friend, remember?”

“I don’t want to discuss it, Julian. You’re prying. I’m still mad at you, for being such a dick to me in Austin. You really let me down.”

“Well you let me down by vanishing like David effing Blaine. What was that?”

“I was just sick of everything.”

“Sick of me?”

“Yeah, for a while. You were treating me like a non-human entity, Julian. There’s only so much of that you can take from somebody who’s supposed to be your best friend.”

“And that justifies leaving us all in the lurch because your whim just decided you were going to move to Athens?”

“I was hurt, Julian. You hurt my feelings! Do you get that? There was no friendship after what you said to me in Austin. Am I going to pretend to go on some kind of journey when my best friend is treating me like shit? There is no journey then!”

“Well you could have gone about it better,” he says, almost in a whisper.

—————

One day Matt and Julian are walking down Fourth Ave. A homeless-looking guy comes up to them.

“Can you spare a dollar?”

“Sorry, I can’t,” Matt says.

Julian doesn’t say anything for a while.

The homeless-looking guy walks on ahead of them on the sidewalk.

“Why didn’t you give him a dollar?” Julian says.

“I don’t have one available.”

“You don’t even know why you didn’t give him one.”

“Why didn’t I.”

“Because he’s black.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“Perfectly.”

“Do you really think that?”

“Yes.”

“Are you saying I’m racist?”

“Yes.”

“Julian, I don’t know what to say. I’m not racist.”

“Well I think you are.”

“You just decided that I’m racist?”

“You obviously have the money to give to the man, and you don’t give it to him. What else am I to assume?”

“That I don’t have any money with me? Julian, I made a little bit of money in Philadelphia. I’m spending it, on the whole, very very slowly. I don’t have a dollar on me, I buy things with my debit card, and you saying I’m racist is ridiculous. Look at who I’m walking with. I’ve been your friend since high school? Do you think I was pretending to like you this whole time but really secretly hating you because you’re black?!”

“Yes, I think something very much like that.”

“I can’t talk with you anymore.”

Matt crosses the street. He goes on up to the Casbah to get some space.

Probably because he’s lonely, he calls his sister.

“Hey, brother!”

“Hey, sister.”

“Is everything alright?”

“I’m just pissed at people, that’s all. People treat you badly sometimes, you know.”

“I know. I know about that very thing.”

“So what’s going on with you?”

“I quit my job.”

“You did?”

“Yep, couldn’t take any more of Jeremy’s bullshit.” (Jeremy is a guy who works at Dad’s company.)

“Well good for you. What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea! I was thinking of applying at this arcade, you know, over where the movie theaters are?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen that arcade. Never been in.”

“I really have no idea what I’m going to do, brother.”

“Why don’t you move to Tucson?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, you can stay with me. It’s a magical place. Sun all the time. Great mountains. I’m not living in a tent anymore, I gave that up. I have a one-bedroom apartment but it’s big. Why don’t you come down here and kick back a little, give yourself a rest. My apartment has a pool!”

“That sounds nice, but I don’t know if I could really do it.”

“Why not? Just get your stuff down to what you can carry, and get on a bus! Or a plane.”

“You know what,” Suzanne says, beginning to sob. “That sounds great and I think I’m going to do it.”

“You should!”

“I think I am. From what you describe it sounds so nice down there, I think I would really like it.”

“I know you would. It’s a perfect little town. And you and me can hang out. Work on our comic book! We could brainstorm movie ideas and have our great conversations like we always have!”

“We do have great conversations.”

“Heck yeah we do. Oh, Suzanne, it would be great to have you down here. My friend situation is kinda falling apart.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, it’s betrayals and back stabbing, it’s a regular soap opera in my social circle right now.”

“I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

“I’ll tell you when you get here.”

“I think I’m going to cry now.”

“Ok.”

“Like I think I’m getting off the phone to go cry.”

“Ok! Well talk to you soon.”

“Ok, brother, thank you.”

“Suzanne, I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Which brings us to Jade.

Jade is a nineteen year old woman who came to Tucson to work for a punk-environmental magazine run out of a house near Fourth Ave.

Matt first meets Jade when he's walking down Fourth Ave. He goes by Sabine's Cafe Pasé and looks in the window. There's a woman holding a baby. He double takes on the woman she's so pretty. Then he recognizes the baby she's holding is Julian and Courtney's; it's Acacia.

Matt goes inside the cafe. "I know that baby."

"Huh?"

"That baby you're holding, is Acacia, my friends' baby. Isn't it?"

"Yes, this is Acacia."

"Where are Julian and Courtney?"

"Down the street making a delivery." (Courtney is working for Sabine now, making deliveries up and down Fourth Ave.)

"What's your name?" Matt holds out his hand to shake.

"Jade, what's yours?"

"Matt. Are you babysitting?"

"No, they just gave me their baby and told me to hold her. I actually need to be going, but I'm stuck here watching her. Maybe you could take over?"

"I don't think Julian would be very happy to come back and find me holding his kid."

"I thought you said they were your friends."

"They are, but we're in a tiff right now. I'll sit and wait with you though. You want a coffee or anything?"

"Have one."

"I'll be right back." Matt leaves her to get a juice. "So what do you do, Jade?"

"I work at a magazine?" She shrugs as she says it, as though she really isn't sure. Jade is making eye contact, smiling.

Matt sits across from her.

She puts her leg up on the bench where he's sitting.

"So what do you do?"

"I'm not working right now. I'm working on some writing projects? Programming and stuff."

"Computer programming?"

"Yeah."

"My sister does that."

"Your sister does computer programming? You must have a cool family."

"I do. We're being investigated by the FBI."

"What for?"

"For consorting with Earth First activists."

"What's Earth First?"

“You don’t know what Earth First is?” Jade moves over to the bench where Matt is sitting, sits right next to him, their legs touching. She tells him all about Earth First, how it got started and how it doesn’t have members and isn’t a real organization, it’s just a tag you put on serious environmental activism, like the kind where they blow up SUVs (and stuff). As she talks she looks right in Matthew’s eyes, inviting him to smile with her, inviting him into her sunny little world of federal-law-breaking environmental activists and foggy levels of connection between her family and said activists. It’s not clear, after listening to Jade, if she knew about certain Earth First demolitions before they happened or not. She’s never quite certain whether they housed a known fugitive or not. And it’s all in the name of environmentalism, of course, so Matthew is supposed to accept that Jade and her family are in the right on every matter. She’s explaining how to safely set an SUV on fire when Julian and Courtney return.

“Here, I’ll take her,” Courtney says. “I see you two have met.”

“Yeah, we were just talking about—”

“Peaceful activism tactics,” Jade says.

“Oh,” Courtney says, rocking Acacia, “there’s a lot to talk about there.”

Julian is just standing there looking like a vamp, trying to get Matt to look at him. When Matt finally does, Julian cuts a quick eye to Jade.

“Can I see you outside, Matt?”

“No. I’m talking.”

“I was just leaving,” Jade says.

“Well where are you going?” Matt says. “I’ll walk you.”

Julian fumes.

“Just going downtown.”

“I’ll walk with you,” Julian says.

So the three of them leave. Outside, before she gets her bike, Jade stands very close to Matthew, looking up at him, smiling and talking. Julian stands a few feet away. Then she gets her bike and the three of them head downtown. Jade walks beside her bicycle.

Julian tries to dominate the conversation. Jade and Matt mostly ignore him, talking with each other about Jade’s magazine and a house drama situation which Jade was partially responsible for, that had to do with someone (guess who) fucking someone she wasn’t supposed to be fucking. Jade flaunts her sexuality, proud of the story. Matt flirts back with her, matching her suggestive smiles, talking openly with her, walking close to her. When they get downtown Jade says bye and rides off on her bike. Matt and Julian both watch her go.

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“What do you think you’re doing with her?”

“Just talking!”

Julian rolls his eyes.

“What? I met a nice person and I’m talking to her. What?”

“Courtney and I are already making moves on Jade.”

“Well you better check your moves because it doesn’t look like they’re working.”

“We’ve been talking to her for a week.”

“Julian, I can’t help if she likes me.”

“You can help liking her back.”

“Fuck that! I like her, she likes me, what’s your problem?”

“I think you know.”

“She doesn’t like you, Julian. Get over it! You’re gonna force yourself on a girl that doesn’t like you?”

“What makes you think she doesn’t like me?”

“Body language! I’m going now.”

“Where to?”

“I have no idea. Away from you.”

“I thought I might sit down and play piano for a little while.”

They’re in front of the Chicago Store, a music store which has a piano set up out front.

“Go ahead.”

“You’re not going to stay and listen?”

“No,” Matt says, and he heads off in the direction Jade went, just to piss Julian off.

The next thing that happens is Matt and Jade decide to have a movie night. They see each other again at Sabine’s and exchange numbers. It’s a short conversation. They share their love for Fight Club.

So Matt invites a few people over. He invites Courtney and Julian, even though it’s against the rules. He invites Rishi, even though he’s sure Rishi hates him right now. He invites this kid Kevin he met downtown. And of course Jade is invited.

The only person who shows up is Jade. She rides her bike over to Matt’s apartment, parks it out front, comes inside.

“Where is everyone?”

“Still waiting?”

“I woulda thought they woulda been here by now,” she says, out of breath.

“Let’s wait a little longer and then we’ll start. You want anything to drink?” Matt makes Jade a vodka cranberry.

No one shows up. They decide to start the movie anyway. Anyone who comes late can join them in the middle of the movie. So they watch it. And they totally cuddle while they do. It's on Matt's new fifty-four inch TV, and it looks beautiful. Neither of them has ever seen fight club like this. They don't kiss, they don't feel each other up, they just cuddle. Matt puts his arm around Jade. At the end of the movie Jade wants a cigarette.

They go out front to the swimming pool and sit by its side. Their sandals are inside the apartment so they just put their feet right in.

"Have you thought any more about that situation I told you about?" Jade asks.

"The situation where you fucked your housemate?"

"Hey! I never said it was me!"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

"I guess." Jade drags off her American Spirit. After a long time she says, "I kind of have a problem with that. I mean this isn't the first time this has happened. Not even at this house. But before, on this project I worked on in Portland, I had the same thing happened and it caused trouble on the staff. That's what happened here. They're going to have a meeting to decide whether or not I can stay in the house. Because I messed things up so bad. I want to work on that magazine. That's my whole reason for coming to Tucson. And without that grant, I can't afford to stay here—I'd have to go back to Portland right away. I don't know what it is, but in matters of sex I'm just..out of control. It always causes problems for me. Like this one time.." Jade continues to tell Matt about her problematic sexual encounters.

Matt looks at the pool, at the light shining on it. He bums an American Spirit. He thinks about his friends, and his friend problems. He's too forgiving. He's too needy for friendships that he does the same thing Jade does, in a way: stay involved with someone just for the company, when, really, it's causing a problem in your whole life. Jade wants primarily sexual company. Matt wants primarily intellectual company. To get it, both of them are doing things that are hurting them and being in relationships with people who hurt them. Jade tells him all about it, right down to the first time she had sex, and before. Matt smokes another cigarette. He thinks about how hot Jade is, and how unfortunate that is going to be since, after all these stories Jade is telling him, there's no way he will ever fuck her. He would never take part in the very thing that a person is telling him is the major problem in their life. Jade is enough younger that he sees himself as outside of her struggles, rather than a part of them. Let her fuck some other nineteen year old and it be problematic. He's not going to get involved with her that way. So even though his dick disagrees, Matt walks Jade back inside to get her sandals and he says goodnight to her with a hug, and Jade gets on her bike to ride

back over to the house.

In a few days Suzanne comes, she arrives on the Greyhound. She has just one backpack and one suitcase full of stuff. Matt brings her home from the station.

She gets the back room (the bedroom). Matt still has his sleeping bag in the front room.

She unpacks. She settles in the room. She familiarizes herself with the pool area, buys some sandals, a hat. Matt calls her Hannibal Lecter because the hat Suzanne wears looks like Hannibal Lecter's hat from the end of *The Silence of the Lambs*. Suzanne adjusts to Tucson. She and Matt cook dinner together sometimes. She has gotten out of Philadelphia and Matt has gotten his company back. The good conversations resume.

One day, the bed arrives, the futon that Matt ordered downtown. It is huge; it takes two or three people to carry it, and even then it's a struggle. Two delivery guys and Matt manage to get it off the truck and into the living room. Matt can barely make adjustments to its position, it's so huge, but he gets it to where he wants it.

Rishi comes over. Both Matt and Suzanne are in the house, Suzanne in her back room, Matt in the front. He is surprised to see her at his place. She comes in.

"So what's up?"

"Nothing much, Rishi. What's up with you?"

They stand uncomfortably.

"I just wanted to come by and see if you were mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you."

"That's a really big bed," Rishi says, and in the next breath they're undressing each other. Matt knows Suzanne is here but he doesn't care, he needs to have Rishi, needs to be inside her, all over her, everywhere about her. Suzanne closes the door to the bedroom. Rishi and Matt fuck, fuck like they've missed each other, which they have. They change positions to utilize the bed. Rishi takes Matt's belt—which is leather—and slaps his penis with it. He sticks it inside her. They're holding each other's faces, fucking. They come at the same time; they have it down to a science from before.

When they're done, they lie silent for a while.

Then Rishi speaks. "Still, I think we made the right decision to break up. I mean look at that TV. I just didn't grow up watching TV."

"Neither did I, Rishi, and I'm not watching TV on it now. I don't have cable. I haven't watched a single TV show on that TV. Mostly I

watch movies or play games.”

“And video games. I just don’t see myself going out with a person who likes video games.”

“Well, you’re not.”

“I know. I know. If you’re going to be a smartass about it..”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be a smartass.”

“I mean I live in a tent,” she says.

“I know! I love your tent. It’s one of my favorite places in the whole world! Why can’t you live in your tent, and I’ll live in my apartment, and we can get together in either one, and we can talk, and fuck, and eat together. That’s all I want, Rishi. I don’t see why me living in an apartment is a thing.”

“When I met you,” she says, “I was starting a hunter-gatherer community. You don’t think you living in an apartment is a problem?”

“No, I don’t. If you living in a tent isn’t a problem then why is me living in an apartment a problem.”

“Because you’re used to all this, big TV, huge bed—which I like by the way—running water. And I live in a tent—”

“I know you do. It’s good. It’s great. Your tent is perfect.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes!”

“Well maybe it could work. We each keep our own place and we can visit each other anytime. I wouldn’t want you playing video games while I was over, most video games are so violent—”

“Rishi. I think you and I can find better things with our time than to play video games. Do you really see me sitting off in a corner ignoring you while you’re over?”

“I guess it could world. I mean. Let’s try it, yeah. If you would want to try that with me.”

“I would.”

“You would?”

“Yes.”

“After all that we’ve been through, with me breaking up with you and everything?”

“Yes, I want to be with you. I’m glad you came over and I’m glad we’re getting back together.”

There are perfect days, doing science in the morning on the huge whiteboard, eating dinner at the Casbah, and sleeping with Rishi. Usually at Matt’s apartment, sometimes in the tent, they make love again and again and again, perfecting it. At two a.m. they go out in Matt’s truck to

get Jack in the Box, or drive through taco places to get his and her's matching burritos. Rishi sits next to him without her seatbelt, in an off-white dress stained with cum.

"I'm your whore," she says. "You pick me up and you put me in your truck and you drive me places. I go wherever you want me to go. You fuck me. I wonder what that guy [the Jack in the Box window operator] thinks when he looks in here. Does he think: that's a guy, and that's his whore that he brought out in his truck. I'm your whore."

When they get home they fuck again, then eat their food. Rishi is a vegetarian, but she doesn't give Matt a hard time about eating meat. She appreciates that he needs to.

For a while it's wonderful. Matt starts working on a computer game, that he's building, and Rishi helps out with the character classes. Rishi brings him lunch when she's working and they eat outside by the pool. Matt takes pictures of everything. Rishi insists that he not take pictures of her. He doesn't. He gets away with taking a picture of her shadow. It's one of the best periods that Matt and Rishi have together, ever.

Then one night Matt is sleeping in Rishi's tent, waiting for her to get home, and he wakes with Rishi kneeling above him. She has lit candles, and he sees her face. It is a mix of sadness and horror. Matt sits up.

"Rishi. What happened?"

She doesn't talk for a long time. She looks directly at him, and her face transmogrifies through various states of pain, terror, who knows what. Matt is extremely worried about what is going on with her. He has never seen her like this before.

Eventually, she can talk. She tells him that Julian told her about Jade, and how Matt fucked her, and how he was laughing about Rishi when he did it.

"That didn't happen, Rishi."

"Julian said."

"I don't know what Julian's doing, talking to you late doing dishwashing, but he's trying to manipulate you to get at me, probably. I never slept with Jade. The only time I was ever with Jade we watched a movie, and that was when you and I were broken up. We never kissed, we never held hands. And I never fucked her. That is straight from Julian's imagination."

"But he said."

"Rishi, I didn't sleep with Jade. It didn't happen. Julian is making shit up, and when I see him again I'm going to talk with him about what

the fuck he's doing lying to you like that. Part of the reason I didn't sleep with Jade is because I thought you and I might get back together. I was waiting for you!"

"But you did go out with her."

"She came over to watch a movie."

"And it was just the two of you."

"Yes, but I invited other people. I invited you, remember? If you or Julian or Tuesday had shown up, it wouldn't have been just me and Jade. It wasn't meant to be just me and Jade. You were invited!"

"Julian said you smiled when you said it and were bragging about how you fucked her and laughing about me finding out about it."

"Julian is a fucking liar."

"You didn't tell him that you slept with Jade?"

"No. Because I didn't sleep with her."

"Well why would Julian say that?"

"Because he's mad at me? Because he's jealous of me? I don't know why he said what he said but it's not true. Not true, Rishi. If I slept with Jade I would be honest with you and tell you."

"So you never had sex with Jade."

"Right. Never did anything with Jade but watch a movie."

"What movie?"

"Fight Club? Don't you remember I invited you? Do you remember that I invited you?"

"Yes."

"So it wasn't a date. It was supposed to be you, me, Julian, Tuesday, whatever. Watching a movie. Nobody else showed up so I was stuck with Jade! Why don't you talk to Julian and tell him to tell you the truth this time."

"I just don't see why he would lie about that."

"Well he did. I'm not going to speculate on why he did, but he did. Fuck him. He's just trying to fuck with our relationship since it's going well! He's a manipulative fuck! I fucking hate him for doing this to you. To us."

"You're sure you didn't fuck Jade?"

"Rishi, I can't say it any other way. Nothing happened between me and Jade. Julian is fucking with you, straight up. Why don't you go to him, tomorrow, and see if he can tell you the same story with a straight face. He might assume that just because Jade came over to my house and we were there alone that something must have happened, but that's not how I operate."

Rishi stops kneeling above Matt. She lies down beside him and cries.

“Yes. Julian told Rishi that I fucked Jade.”

“And you didn’t.”

“No. Absolutely not. I wanted to. I probably should have, given the big deal that’s come of it. I didn’t fuck her partially because I thought Rishi and I might get back together.”

“Are you together now?”

“We were. I don’t know what the fuck we are now. Julian just straight up lied to her! And she believed it! It’s caused this huge problem between me and Rishi.”

“Well don’t worry,” Tuesday says. “She’ll see the truth in her own time. And Julian..phew!..I don’t know what kind of power trip he is on right now but he and Courtney have been doing some very strange things around the house. Well, I guess they’re not strange if you’re into that sort of thing, and it isn’t awful, but they’ve started inviting all these very young women—like Jade—over to the house, I think with the intention of sleeping with them.”

“And how is that going?”

Tuesday laughs. “It’s not going very well, I think. One of them left very early from what looked like a dinner party. I think they popped the question on her.”

“The: would-you-like-to-sleep-with-me-and-my-wife question?”

“That one, yes.” Tuesday places her hands on Matt’s. “Listen, you’ve got a lot going on with this whole Rishi-and-Julian thing, but I hope you can remember there are people who love you. I’m one of them, and, you deserve peace in your life without Julian saying those things or without Rishi believing it and causing you chaos that way. Why don’t you take this afternoon and do something for yourself, whether it be reading one of your favorite books or just taking a nap by yourself, without Rishi or Julian around.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

“Then you can get centered in yourself regardless of what’s going on outside you. I know you like to hike. Why don’t you consider a trip up the mountain?”

“Ok, I might. Thank you. I’ll find something. Thanks for your help. You’re a very calming, healing presence.”

“Well I try!” Tuesday smiles.

“I’ll see you later.”

Sometimes they have drum circles, and sometimes people come through

from out of town and need a place to stay. Tuesday lets them stay at her house, old friends, friends of friends, new friends.

On this particular occasion Keith and his wife Apple have come through, with their three children. A bit of a drum circle forms one night after a communal dinner. Rishi is nowhere to be seen. Julian and Courtney and Acacia are there, and of course Tuesday and Clover. Matt shows up, steers clear of Julian, and brings his own drum.

They're all sitting in the spirit room of the housey house beating on drums. Sometimes Tuesday and Apple sing. Sometimes the drumming is almost nonexistent, just fingertips on the drum heads.

"I have a vision," Matt says, "of a drum circle that starts and never stops. The drummers decide they will sit and drum forever. Others find out about it, because they're passing by, they hear it, or hear of it, and they come to sit, too, to sit and sing. When a drummer gets tired, he or she gives up their instrument to someone else, and in this way the circle can go on forever, with enough people. I don't know exactly, but I think some sort of political action could be associated with such a congregation. It would be like a cross between a church and a sit in. It would grow, and grow, and grow, and become as wide as a city. It would become a city, with people bringing food and people sleeping in place inside the circle. This is what I see. And I'm not saying this drum circle is that drum circle, but I am saying that I think all that is needed to create this kind of circle is for the participants to decide to never stop playing." Matt is quiet.

Tuesday nods; she likes this idea. Courtney nods. Julian has his eyes close, drumming. Keith and Apple are drumming, Keith looking away, Apple looking at Matt. Clover comes over and places a flower wreath over Matt's head. It fits him like a crown.

"But," Keith says, "what would happen when people had to go to the bathroom?"

Matt looks at him blankly.

Tuesday says, "They would probably just go to the bathroom."

"On the floor?"

"No, we have bathrooms in houses here. I expect they would use one of those."

Keith is looking at Matt but Matt refuses to make eye contact with him. Keith observes Matt's drumming. "Try not to make it on the beat," he says.

"What?" Matt asks.

"You're hitting on the beat. Try hitting it off-beat, like this."

Matt glares at Keith. Keith looks satisfied.

Matt gets up and leaves the room, taking his drum with him. He goes through the kitchen, grabbing a knife on his way out the back door.

Outside, the night is cool. Matt takes a deep breath, looks up at

the stars, and then starts ripping the shit out of his drum head.

Tuesday comes out. "What are you doing?" She puts her hand on Matt's hand, and he stops cutting.

He goes back inside the house and stands in front of Keith. He hands Keith the mutilated drum. Everyone in the room is like: what's happening? Matt goes back outside. He is fuming, shaking mad.

Tuesday puts her hand on Matt's shoulder. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I wanted to show him that I'll do exactly what the fuck I want to do with my drum, and he has nothing to say about it. Fucking asshole."

Tuesday starts to defend Keith but Matt's not listening.

"Goodnight, Tuesday. I'm going home."

"Ok, take care. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, definitely." He gives her a hug and a forehead kiss, then they let each other go and Matt begins the walk back to his apartment.

Rishi comes over to Matt's apartment one night. Matt doesn't know if they're together or broken up, if Rishi's talked with Julian and straightened things out, or what.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Is it ok that I'm here?"

"Yes, Rishi, you're always welcome here."

"Ok, good, I wanted to see you."

"Come here." Matt holds her tightly, his arms around her shoulders and head.

"I brought some groceries," Rishi says. "They're outside."

"Let's get them."

"I got some ginger and this cantaloupe. You like mellon, don't you? I got some corn, I'm not sure what we'll use that in but it looked so good. I also got some ice cream, I know that's kind of random but..ooh, we should probably get this into the freezer."

"Thanks for bringing all this stuff. Do you want to cook together? We could make dinner?"

"That's kind of what I was thinking when I got this stuff."

"Yeah, let's combine ingredients and make something."

"Ok. Baby, I'm sorry I believed Julian."

"Don't worry about it! It's ok! How would you know?"

"He just sounded so certain."

"Yeah, I don't know what he's thinking. Really I don't."

“Maybe Julian is getting more crazy in his old age.”

“Maybe he is.”

So Matt is taking things out of Rishi’s two grocery bags and putting them on the counter. Rishi helps.

“I had a nice trip to the grocery store,” she says.

“Oh, good.”

“I met this guy there. He was no one I knew. I was sort of standing in the produce section and he came up to talk to me. I think he was flirting with me. He stood really close and he kept saying these really flirtatious things.”

“Did you like it?”

“No, it made me feel very uncomfortable. I wished you were there to stop him.”

“Sorry I wasn’t.”

“He made me very uncomfortable. He asked about you.”

“He asked about me?”

“He asked if I had a boyfriend.”

“What did you say?”

“I said yes. Then you know what he said?”

“What?”

“He said he would make a better boyfriend than you. Can you believe it? This is a complete stranger. He doesn’t know you, or me, or anything about us. And he’s standing there trying to get inbetween you and me by saying you’re a bad boyfriend to me.”

“Rishi, why are you telling me this story?”

“I thought you would want to know.”

“Well, I mean sometimes girls flirt with me in the grocery store, but I don’t necessarily tell you about it.”

“Why don’t you? Are you trying to keep it a secret?”

“No, it’s just that by the time I’ve gotten home I’ve forgotten about it. It’s not that important to me.”

“Well this is important to me.”

“Why is it, though? Did you like the guy?”

“No!”

“Then why are you telling me about it?”

“Because I think something should be done to stop people from doing what he did. You can’t just go up to people and do that!”

“Do you want me to go find the guy and beat him up?”

“No!”

“Am I supposed to go with you to the grocery store every time? So no one flirts with you?”

“I think that might be a good idea.”

“You can’t just handle it if a guy flirts with you? If you don’t like

him can't you just tell him to go away?"

"Guys don't listen! They're aggressive!"

"So are some women but you don't hear me telling you about every time some girl flirts with me in the grocery store. Because, to me, it's not that significant of an event because I'm not about to start a relationship with them. Even if I'm attracted to them, it's not that big an issue, because I'm with you, Rishi, so I'm not paying attention when people flirt with me!"

"Are you blaming me for this guy hitting on me?"

"No, I'm just saying why are you still thinking about it by the time you leave the grocery store? What was so memorable about that occasion of meeting that guy that you feel compelled to tell me about it?"

There are many breakups between Matt and Rishi. They run hot and cold. Or rather, hot and really hot, when they're hot headed and break up with each other over the fact that one plays video games or that the other wakes him up screaming in the middle of the night.

Matt comes to the end of his money. He doesn't want to work, so he plans to move back to Ohio, where he can stay in a tent in Martha and Zochae's back yard. He wants to do some science with an old science buddy from back in the day, Al. Al is like sixty years old and he and Matt have worked on learning systems together..software systems that learn from their observations of the world around them. Matt thinks if he and Al work together that they could make some breakthroughs.

So he starts to pack his things. He doesn't know what to do about Rishi. He wants to break up with her and go alone. In fact he does break up with her, telling her his plans.

"I'm going to Ohio."

"Don't leave me here!"

"I'm done being here. I'm done with us. We tried, Rishi. If it was gonna work out between us it would have worked by now. We're too volatile. If I'm not breaking up with you, you're breaking up with me. We have good sex but that's not enough. We don't fit. Like you said, you're off on your hunter-gatherer thing and I'm doing computer science. It's no good."

"Please don't leave me."

"I am. I did. I just did, Rishi."

"I want to go with you."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"I still want to go."

"I just broke up with you."

“Take me with you, please, I want to be with you.”

“We’re not together anymore. It’s over.”

“Please take me with you.”

“I just broke up with you and you still want to go with me to Ohio?”

Rishi sobs, “Yes.”

And something clicks in Matt’s head. “You still want to go, even though we’re broken up, you still want to go to Ohio?”

Rishi nods.

“Ok. Pack your things.”

And that’s how it happens. It doesn’t make any sense, but Matt and Rishi are determined to go to Ohio together, even though they’re broken up, even though they can’t get anything to work between them.

Matt gets rid of the stuff he collected while in Tucson. They get it down so both of their stuff fits in the truck with room to spare. They throw away books, art, dishes, old clothes, one of their tents. Rishi decides she doesn’t want to say goodbye to anyone, she just wants to leave. Matt says bye to Tuesday and Clover, sees his sister into a new apartment, and then, one morning, with the TV given away to a neighbor and the futon left by a dumpster, Matt and Rishi start driving north.

They see the grand canyon. Matt cries at the sight of it. The two of them fuck beside it, in the brush, and it is one of their best fucks so far. They make up in the car, as they head up into Colorado. They see themselves as together again, as a couple moving across the country. Rishi is interested to see where Matt grew up, there have been so many stories of Dayton. Matt is glad to have Rishi’s company, sexual and otherwise. She’s good to talk to, smart, and they have extended conversations about herbology and the tarot as they drive. When they get to a sticking point in the talk, they avert their attention, finding a new direction. It is important that they don’t have a fight on this trip.

While they’re still in Arizona, Rishi navigates them through a reservation, and they sleep in the back of the truck, having driven some way away from the road, into rough land. The whole night, no one drives by on the road. In the morning, the stars disappearing, they make love in the back of Matt’s truck and it is one of the most perfect moments Matt has ever experienced. Being there, with this woman he loves, in the middle of this sacred land..it is heaven. The two of them wish they could set up camp here and stay forever. But they journey on.

Driving across Kansas, they talk about spirit names and Rishi gets comfortable calling Matt, Zha. Rishi says if she had a spirit name it would be Triangle Love Dirt Universe. Matt likes that.

When they get to Ohio, they’re fighting again. They have lunch in a Don Pablo’s and Rishi sees all the Ohio girls, with their cute white faces,

eating with their parents.

“It looks like some of these girls need to get fucked,” Rishi says.

Matt laughs. “I agree. I was noticing that, too.”

“They’re looking at you.”

“They’re not looking at me all that much.”

“Yes they are. It’s like they want to be with a white boy like you and they want you to just take them out back and fuck them.”

“They’re not that horny looking.”

“Yes they are. I don’t like the way they’re looking at you and I don’t like the way you’re looking at them.”

“I’m not really looking at them.”

“Yes you are, I can see you. You want to fuck them, don’t you?”

“No, Rishi, I do not want to fuck them. I’m just noticing them, same as you are.”

Etc. By the time they get to Dayton they’re essentially broken up again.

Coming from Arizona, Dayton in the summer seems impossibly green.

Rishi comments on the lushness of the trees there. It really does look like a paradise.

The two of them drive to Martha and Zochae’s house. They visit. They feel each other out. Zochae is cool with having a tent in the back yard but they can tell Martha’s not. Rishi and Matt go out to talk in the truck.

They decide to go camping in John Bryan State Park. For a few days at least, to consider other options. It’s a park Matt has hiked extensively as a kid. They drive there.

They set up camp, using Matt’s tent, which they kept because it was newer. They have gone into the nearest town of Yellow Springs and bought food and also picked up the local papers so they can look for apartments.

“Here’s one. Look at the price! And wood floors, it’s the second floor of a house. I like this one, Zha. What do you think?”

“I think we should call about it, see if we can see it.”

“I’m excited,” Rishi says. “Do you feel that?”

“I feel it.” But he’s starting to see that, with Rishi, every period of peace is going to be followed by a period of war, that the two of them are never going to be happily in love, that there’s always going to be some guy flirting with Rishi at the grocery store or some horny white girl sitting next to their table at Don Pablo’s. Rishi is going to put words in his mouth and feelings in his heart, and he’s going to get blamed for the fact

that some other girl looked at him. In Flagstaff, they had hooked up with Jesse, Matt's old friend, and afterwards all Rishi could say was how much she had felt Jesse wanted to fuck her. He was looking at her with this hunger, she was saying, inviting sex. And Rishi blamed this on Matt; Jesse was his friend who was making her feel uncomfortable. But only because Rishi was (in Matt's mind) overinterpreting signals from Jesse. And what if Jesse did want to fuck Rishi? What difference does it make as long as Rishi doesn't want to fuck him? No one is raping anybody here. It's all just in Rishi's mind, and directed by Rishi. She gets to decide what Jesse is thinking. She gets to decide what Matt's intentions are. In an argument, she makes up what Matt's supposed perspective is and claims that that is true, even when (to Matt) it's not. It's as if he's not even present in the relationship. Rishi just makes up whatever she wants (or maybe fears) her partner's intentions, their thoughts, to be, and argues against that. It's maddening.

Matt thinks about this while they're looking through apartment listings. They were arguing earlier today; they'll be arguing later tonight. They can't go to the grocery store without arguing. They can just barely manage to fuck without arguing.

"Rishi."

"What."

"I can't live here with you."

"What? No no no. Don't do this to me again!"

"It's not going to work out. We're coming from two too different places."

"You can't break up with me here. In fucking Ohio."

"I'll give you money for a plane ticket back to Tucson, if you want that."

"I hate planes!"

"I'll buy you a bus ticket."

"I can't ride the bus. Do you know how long it would take to ride the bus from here to Tucson? I can't be cooped up with all those people."

"I'm telling you what I can do. I can't be with you anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't. I can't, Rishi. This isn't going well for me."

"What about me?"

"I'm trying to take care of you in the best way I can."

"By dumping me in fucking Ohio, where I don't know anyone?"

"I'm offering to pay for you to go back to Tucson."

"I can't go back to Tucson. I left without saying goodbye to anyone! I just left the Casbah!"

"They'll love to have you back, Rishi, they will. Just go back to Tucson, please."

She crosses her arms. “No.”
“Well you can’t stay with me anymore. I need peace.”
“I’m not going anywhere.”
“You have to. Let me fly you to Tucson.”
“No,” she says. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Rishi, you have to listen to me.”

“No.” She’s like a little child.

“Let me fly you to Tucson.”

“No.” She crosses her arms. She goes into the tent.

Matt goes to the truck and sits in it. He thinks. He doesn’t know what to do! He can’t deal with her anymore, he just can’t. He never should have let her come on this trip, it was a stupid idea, just a whim, since she wouldn’t listen to him then, either. Now he’s stuck with this girl who hates him, who really doesn’t like his company, but is just putting up with him as some semblance of a boyfriend.

He starts the truck.

Rishi comes out of the tent. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes, I’m leaving. I’m sorry Rishi but you give me no choice. I can’t stay here with you hating me and yelling at me. When I look in your eyes it looks like you want to hit me.”

“I do want to hit you.”

“I can’t deal with that. That’s..outside of the realm of what I can deal with.” He takes out his wallet. He peels off five hundred dollars and reaches out his hand.

“What is that?”

“That’s cash. Take it. Buy a plane ticket back to Tucson. Or ride a bus if you hate planes. Or hitchhike if you can’t stand the bus. Take it, Rishi.”

She won’t take it. She comes close to the truck and tries to hug Matt through the window but he’s already putting it in reverse.

“Would you please take this money?”

“No!!” She tries to reach through the window of the truck but Matt backs up.

“Would you back away, please, so I don’t run over your feet?”

“No!”

Matt drops the cash in the dirt and backs out all the way.

Rishi walks with the truck and touches its hood. She starts to cry.

“I’m sorry, Rishi, but since you won’t talk about options with me, this is how it has to be.” And he pulls out of the camping spot, and out of the camping area, and he leaves her in the fucking woods in the middle of

John Bryan State Park.

He doesn't look back. He forgets about her. He goes to Martha and Zochae's house, and he lives there, in their spare bedroom. They ask what happened to Rishi and he tells them. He offered to buy her a plane ticket. She wouldn't take it. He couldn't deal with her anymore so he left. He left her in the woods. Martha and Zochae understand. They welcome Matt back into their circle. They have a son, Simon, and Simon loves to play with Matthew. Matthew makes silly faces and bounces balls off his head, and Simon laughs.

Matt is so angry at Rishi that he is able to let her go. She's been such a tormentor of his that he doesn't feel the need to take care of her anymore, by worrying what happened to her. If she was smart, she flew back to Tucson where she had a life. But whatever it is, it's her problem. He's had enough of Sharishi Kobayashi.

Matt finds work. He goes back with a company he worked for before, straight out of college. They do computer programming, transportation logistics. It doesn't pay well and it's not challenging, but it's a job.

He and Martha and Zochae, and Verona, do things every weekend. They go listen to concerts. They go to botanical gardens. They go to art museums in Dayton and Cincinnati. It's a nice little foursome.

Months pass. Matt doesn't worry about finding his own apartment. He likes living with Martha and Zochae and they like having him. He pays for meals and pays a little rent. Matt and Zochae convert the garage into an art studio, to make up for the warehouse spaces they used to have. They smoke pot and paint, and it's great. Martha doesn't mind the pot as long as they keep it in the garage. The boys walk to a nearby gas station to buy Zima and Mike's Hard Lemonade.

Matt helps Zochae put together a web site, to sell his paintings. They do gardening projects together. They watch movies at night. Martha makes dinner most of the time and Matt washes dishes most of the time. It's a happy family. They put up a hammock in the back yard.

Matt is starting to save some money. Get reconnected with some old friends. He hangs out with Nik. They go down to Cincinnati to hear a ska band play. Nik sells Matt some mushrooms, which Matt and Zochae eat while painting. They never tell Martha about this, because Martha thinks Zochae doesn't do drugs anymore (besides pot). But he does.

It's a good period for Matt. He doesn't date anyone, he focuses on his work and having fun with his friends. He feels like he's part of something, with Martha and Zochae and Simon. He doesn't feel alone. And he doesn't have the chaos of an on-and-off girlfriend who it seems

has a serious dislike for him, or maybe for men in general.

Then one day Martha, Zochae, Verona, and Matt decide to go to Yellow Springs. Matt doesn't think anything of this. He doesn't think: this is near John Bryan State Park and maybe Rishi is still around, actually living here. And they're walking down High Street and Matt looks in the window of a coffeehouse, and there is Rishi, sitting on a stool at the window ledge.

They look at each other, and some sort of magic takes over. They primarily want to fuck each other, right there. All their arguments and shared hatred pass away. It is like they forgive each other for everything that happened in the past, and they just met anew, and fell in love again. That's how it is between Matt and Rishi. They can't live in the same place, because when they see each other, everything gets reset and they forget all the reasons they broke up and they get back together.

Matt stands there on the sidewalk. Rishi comes out to him.

"How have you been?"

"I missed you."

"I've missed you, too."

And Martha and Zochae see this happening, and they don't know how to stop it. Verona sees Rishi for the first time, and all she can see is that they love each other.

"Do you two..need some time alone?"

"I'll meet you at the wine shop. Or, no: Verona, I'll just call you, ok?"

"Ok. Have fun you two!"

And they do. Martha and Zochae and Verona go on down the street and Rishi gets her back from inside the coffee shop and the two of them walk right out of town. It's like they're being guided by a third party. They walk into "the glen" (Glen Helen park). They go over a dam. They walk through a clearing. They go to a big tree with branches that hang all the way down to the ground, and they sneak inside there where no one could see them if they walked by.

They fuck.

They get as undressed as they need to be and Rishi lies down on a branch and Matt straddles it behind her and they fuck. Cum is dripping out of her and off of him onto the tree branch. They are both satisfied.

And then they hold each other for a long time, without saying anything. Because they have hurt each other, and this is making up for it.

"So where were you?"

"Making love with Rishi in the woods."

“I don’t think he’s kidding.”

“What have you guys been up to?”

“Are you sure that’s the best idea?” Martha says. “I mean, you broke up with her for a reason. What’s really changed?”

“I can’t explain it,” Matt says, “but I love her. When we saw each other just now it was like something else took over our bodies.”

“I mean, that sounds very romantic,” Martha says. “I just wonder if it’s the best idea.”

“It’s probably not. But I can’t help it. I love her. We’ve been through some rough times and sometimes she drives me crazy, but I love her.”

“She should move in with us,” Zochae says. “If you want.”

“Zochae!”

“What?”

“I would think you would talk about something like this with your wife before just deciding to do it.”

“We’re talking about it now. I think, if he wants her to, that we could fix up the basement with a bedroom-type area.”

“Could we?”

“Why not? Your family is our family.”

“Thank you Zochae. I appreciate that. I don’t know. Let’s think about it a little more, let me and Rishi talk, and then maybe..”

“Good, so what do you want for lunch?”

“Wine?”

Everyone laughs. They’re sitting outside at a picnic table, on this restaurant’s patio.

“So where is she now?”

“She had some things to do.”

“How has she been living here this whole time?”

“I don’t know. She’s resourceful.”

“I’ll say.”

“She lived alone in the woods by herself for a few months,” Matt says.

“Wow. That sounds scary.”

“She’s kind of amazing.”

“Well I’m glad you two are back together. If you’re happy, we’re happy.”

“Thank you. I think it’s going to be good this time. I can’t see it getting any worse than it has been!”

“Relationships are tricky like that. I remember I had this one boyfriend, before I met Zochae. We were engaged to be married, actually. We fought and fought and fought, like cats and dogs. But he was so sweet to me at the same time. I thought I’d never figure it out. And I did,

eventually—I broke up with him and have never seen him since. But it was tough. I mean you don't want to get rid of a good boyfriend if you don't have to!"

"I think," Verona says, "we should all start with wine."

Everyone looks at her.

"I think that's a great idea," says Martha.

"What about you boys?"

Zochae and Matt look at each other. They smile.

"Pick one out," Matt says. "It's your idea. Pick one out."

So Rishi and Matt move into Martha and Zochae's basement. Zochae and Matt fix it up, it's real nice. How long do you think this lasts? Matt gets a call at work one day.

"Hey, it's Zochae."

"Hey man."

"There's a problem."

"What?"

"Rishi wrote Martha a letter."

"She did what?"

"She wrote Martha an eleven page letter telling her all the things she's doing wrong as a mom, as a wife. Martha's really offended."

"Is this problem fixable?"

"I don't think so."

"Are the two of them together at the house?"

"That's what it seemed like when I talked to Martha."

"Jesus, Zochae, I'm sorry she did that."

"I know it's not you who did it. But."

"I'll have Rishi and I out of there ASAP."

"You're not breaking up with her?"

"Why would I break up with her?"

"Because she did this to my wife."

"Zochae, I'm not going to break up with her just because she insulted your wife. No offense, but I'm going to remove her, and me, from the situation, and see if things cool down. I didn't write the letter!"

"Well Martha is considering that you did, since you're her boyfriend."

"Can we talk about this later? I'll make sure Rishi and I are out of there by tonight, ok? That's the best I can do for you. Zochae?"

"Matthew."

"Are you mad at me?"

"I'm not happy."

“You thought I was going to break up with Rishi just because she wrote that letter?”

“I have to go.”

“Ok, bye.”

Zochae ends the call.

Matt and Rishi move that night into a temporary motel—kind of a crack motel—one of the places Rishi stayed while she was on her own. It’s one room, with bathrooms down the hall. They eat dry food and drink water out of jugs. They stay there for about a week until they find a new apartment.

Matt pays the deposit and first month’s rent on a beautiful apartment on the tenth floor of a building overlooking Dayton. It’s quite possibly the best apartment in the city. They move their few things in, and are relieved to have their own place again.

Matt only has one more conversation with Zochae, wherein Zochae insists that Matt break up with Rishi to make things right with Martha, over Rishi’s letter. Matt tells Zochae he isn’t breaking up with Rishi over the letter. Then Matt and Zochae decide not to be friends. They end it quietly, and never speak again. Zochae dies a few years later of cancer. Matt is not at the funeral.

Verona and Matt talk during this time in which Matt and Zochae first break up. Verona agrees with Matt that Martha and Zochae have become un-hang-out-with-able, they’re too crazy, they try to control everyone they’re friends with, and they have this habit of asking people to live with them, and then totally becoming Nazi about the person’s life. The same thing happened to Verona when she stayed with them a while.

Rishi and Matt resume their normal rocky relations. Rishi spends Matt’s money on furniture and kitchenwares. She cooks him breakfast and packs a lunch for him every work day. They make love and fight. Rishi breaks down and sucks Matt’s dick for him while he’s playing video games, counter to her earlier stance on games. Matt goes over to Nik’s house and buys vicodin, which Matt keeps in a prescription medicine bottle in the bathroom cabinet, and takes, one per evening, to deal with Rishi’s presence. Rishi never knows about the vicodin, but Matt on vicodin and Rishi get along quite well, with none of the usual fighting, because Matt on vicodin can’t be drawn into fights..he’s just to chill.

One night Matt stays out until dawn, only coming home to change for work. But Rishi is awake when he gets home.

“Where were you?”

“I was out.”

“Where were you out?”

“I was out with friends.”

“Who?”

“Verona, if you must know.”

“You were out with Verona?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you stay?”

“With Verona.”

“Did you fuck her?”

Matt says nothing. He didn't fuck Verona, they just slept in the same bed, but he wants Rishi to think he did, because he's sick of Rishi's bullshit and wants her to leave.

“Did you?”

Matt says nothing.

“You won't even have sex with me and then you go off and fuck that girl?”

“I have sex with you.”

“But you never give head!”

“I give head!”

“Do you enjoy doing it, though?”

“I enjoy doing it. I would enjoy it more if you would shave or at least trim your hair. I don't like to have hair in my mouth.”

“You and your panty girls!”

“What??”

“Your panty girls. That's what you really want. Girls who wear panties, girls who shave! I catch you looking in the windows of those porn shops downtown every time we walk there!”

“I'm not looking in the windows of porn shops!”

“Yes you are! I see you. All those girls are just like Jade. Little, petite girls who wear panties and have their twats shaved. Is that the type of girl you want?”

“Rishi, you are petite!”

“But I don't shave.”

“I'm just saying it would make it easier for me to access you if you shaved! Why not make it as easy as possible for me to give you head?”

“And you won't like me unless I'm like them.”

“Rishi—”

“You won't! Admit it! You wanted Jade. You wanted to fuck her even if you didn't.”

“So what if I wanted to fuck her! I didn't! That's all that matters!”

“It's not all that matters! Are you telling me you wanted to fuck her?”

“So what? You can't get a massage without coming home and

telling me how hot the guy was. You can't buy groceries without coming home and telling me about the guys who flirted with you!"

"I don't want to fuck them!"

"Then why are you telling me how hot they were! Going to get a massage should be a nonsexual thing. For you it isn't! For you it's about how hot the guy is and how quickly you can get home to tell me about it. It's like you're trying to make me jealous."

"I think you should be jealous. Of other guys who flirt with me."

"If you didn't flirt back it wouldn't be an issue!"

"I don't flirt back!"

"Yes you do, Rishi, you're always willing to offer a comforting arm to some down-on-his-luck guy who happens to see you."

"I comfort people! That's not flirting!"

"It is if the guy interprets it that way and you know the guy is interpreting it that way."

"So I can't comfort people now? That's part of what I do as a human!"

"Not if you know the guy thinks it's flirting."

"Every guy is going to think it's flirting."

"Then you can't do it. You can't do it and be fair to them. You can't do it and be fair to me."

"You got me off the subject."

"What is the subject?"

"How you don't like me because I'm not the type of girl you're into."

"That's just not true, Rishi."

"Then why are you staring at panty girls in the windows of porno shops?"

"Because they're dramatic! Those windows are designed to make you look. I'm not looking at them thinking, 'I wish Rishi would be more like that.'" I'm just looking at them because they're there, and they're flashy. It has nothing to do with us."

The two of them are quiet for a moment.

Then Rishi says, "I want to move out."

"Ok."

"I want to move into a temporary apartment, then get my own place after a while."

"Ok."

"I need help paying for it. For the temporary place. I found a place. It's not that much. I mean, it's less than we pay here. I would get a job and pay you back. That way we wouldn't be fighting and maybe we could even come see each other once in a while. I think that would be better than me staying here while I look for a job. I can't focus when we're

fighting. It really disturbs my energy.”

“It disturbs mine too. I don’t know if I can afford to buy you a separate apartment while you look for a job.”

“You can afford it.”

“Well, I don’t know..”

“This is great. When it comes to you, you get everything you want. When it comes to me, it’s we’ll see.”

“It’s a lot of money to rent two apartments. I don’t know if I can really do that.”

“Paul would never do this to me.”

“What?”

“Skimp.”

“Didn’t you say Paul used to beat you?”

Rishi is silent.

“I mean, didn’t you say he would hit you in the face?”

“He did hit me but he would never treat me with the disrespect you treat me with.”

“I love how you compare me to Paul—a guy who used to beat you—when I would never do that—as if he and I are somehow on the same footing.”

“Paul loves me.”

“Loves?”

“I called him the other day.”

“Why don’t you go stay with him?”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking.”

“If you want to go stay with Paul, I’ll help you get there.”

“You will?”

“Yeah, you can have the truck. I’ll buy a new car.”

“You would give me the truck?”

“Yes, Rishi, I want you to be happy. If you want to go to Paul, go to Paul.”

Rishi rushes over and hugs Matt. “I think that would be best,” she says. “Can I have some cash, too?”

Of course he gives her cash. He gives her two-hundred dollars and hopes he never sees her again. Two-hundred bucks should get her to D.C., where Paul is, and after that she can mooch off him in exchange for sex. He thinks he’s truly done this time.

He adjusts to the quiet. He adjusts to not having sex. After three weeks or so, he doesn’t miss it. He thinks of calling Christina. He doesn’t. He gets into a routine with work, he starts playing Final Fantasy Online.

Every day consists of three parts: work, Final Fantasy, and the time spent driving between the two. He gets carry out every day from Uno's, his favorite, rattlesnake pasta, and grabs a bottle of wine from this little store downtown where Nik works. He drinks and plays Final Fantasy. That is his evenings. In the day, he works, the simple tasks they give him, and he even gets used to eating lunch with the guys in the office..even though they constantly make ignorant and sexist comments. He deals with it.

Then Rishi calls. She crashed the truck and it's still on Matt's insurance. He says it's ok and lets her go.

She calls again. This time, he's downtown, eating a hot dog by the river, watching kids play in a fountain. They talk. He feels that longing again. It's that love that erases everything that's gone before, all the problems, all the situations, whether he was angry or she was angry it all goes away, and he finds himself driving to D.C. to rescue Rishi from her life.

She has a job, she has a place to live, but she can't stand her pseudo-political housemates and their idiotic surface talk about political issues. Matt can relate. Rishi and Paul were together for a while but they've split. Rishi calls Matt because he's a sure thing. The life they were living in Dayton is better to her than the life she's living now, even with the occasional argument. She misses the financial stability of Matt's job. She misses having sex with him. She misses their talks. Even though he's infuriating at times, talking with him is better than talking with most people. He's as smart as she is, maybe smarter, and that's hard to find.

The drive from D.C. to Dayton is happy. They both believe that it's going to work out this time. Matt tries to drive all the way through but he gets tired. They stop at a hotel. Rishi sucks his dick and gives him the longest-lasting orgasm of his life. He immediately falls asleep.

And in Dayton things go as usual. They end up not being able to stand each other and they break up again. Matt looks for jobs in other cities. He finds one in LA. They check to see if Rishi can keep the apartment, but the management company won't rent it to Rishi alone. Matt doesn't wait. He goes to LA alone, leaving Rishi in Dayton, Ohio, a city she hates and a job she hates even more—making coffee and pastries at a Starbucks inside a Barnes & Noble.

On the drive to LA he dries out like an alcoholic off drink. He is never going back to Dayton. He will never see Rishi again. This is it, the final time—and this time it really is. He deletes her number, changes his. Makes a pact with himself never to email her, never to look her up on Facebook. He feels a lightness, and emptiness too. He will miss her; she is one of the major relationships of his life. As much as a mess as it was, he will always love her, will always wish the best for her life.

In LA, he works. He works for about two years. The company is the same, a loose band of idiots working together to earn a penny. After two years he asks if he can work remotely, from another city. The boss says yes.

He moves back to Tucson, this time with a job that pays reasonably well and the ability to work from home. He rents a sweet apartment downtown, a studio on the fifth floor with a wall of windows facing the north mountains. He watches storms from that balcony, incredible sand storms that whip up in hours and make it impossible to drive. But they look great from that balcony.

He wishes Tuesday was still here. But she's moved on to New Orleans. She lives there with her new husband and new children.

Matthew drinks. He drinks at home. He drinks at bars. He meets people, women, girls. Then one day he's getting a haircut and the woman who's cutting his hair keeps bragging about how it's her three month anniversary of sobriety off liquor. Her AA keytag is taped to the mirror. So he decides to go to an AA meeting.

It sticks. He stops drinking. He meets a lot of new people through AA, a real community. It helps that he works from home because he can go to many meetings a week. Things are starting to look up.

Then they start to look up even more, when an old friend comes to town. Leslie, and old Dayton friend, moves to Tucson. They hang out and talk one afternoon. It turns into a long talk, with lots of smiling and laughing. Later that night, they're fucking in an RV parked in front of Leslie's house while Leslie's son sleeps inside.

And yet another friend comes to town. Beth, another old Dayton friend (the one who described making out with Matt as "not at all like I expected—he was forceful and aggressive")..she comes to town. Beth and Matt don't make out anymore, but they go to movies and go hiking in mountain spots around the city. With Beth and Leslie and his AA friends, he's starting to have regular social contact, and it feels good.

With the sun, and the mountains, and his friends, and the ability to work at home, he has fallen upon, and helped design, an almost perfect life. He works on his laptop at coffeehouses during the day. He sees Leslie occasionally. He goes to AA meetings and works through their steps for healing your life. Every time a storm comes, and he's watching it from his balcony, he says a little prayer to Tucson, that he may always stay in her.

Then everything falls apart. The company he works for loses its major government contracts, and has to lay off half its people. Matt is one of the people laid off. His AI technology is no longer needed. He looks for

other jobs in Tucson and can't find anything for a programmer. The only jobs he sees are restaurant jobs, and he can't pay the rent on his studio with only one of those.

So he moves home. He gives up. Living with Leslie isn't an option because she moves down south to Bisbee, Arizona, and there's no way he can find a job there. So he calls his mom. He tells her his situation. He explains that he can't find a programming job in Tucson and he doesn't want to work two server jobs just to make rent. She is sympathetic, she offers that he come stay with her. He takes her up on it, sells all his stuff, and begins driving east across the country again. He hates to give up on Tucson but he doesn't see a way around it. The possibilities are dim. It's not the world of his early twenties, where companies were bending over backwards to hire him. The world seems bleak.

Verona hears of this and comes to visit him for a day. But not even she can cheer him up enough to continue in Tucson.

He sells everything but his old thirty-five millimeter photographs, his laptop, and some clothes. He has to scan those photos someday. He eats peanuts and one fast food meal a day, during his drive, to save money. Usually it's breakfast. He sleeps in his car, and he gets used to sleeping in his car. It doesn't even feel unusual to not shower. He brushes his teeth in rest stop bathrooms, no more than once a day. In Cleveland, his car is jerking to the left while he's driving it, and it almost jerks into the next lane while a car is there. He stops driving.

It's the struts, or the axles, or something. He doesn't have money to fix it. He's only a few hundred miles from where his mom lives now, Le Raysville, Pennsylvania, population 318.

He calls his sister in New York. Suzanne wires him the three-hundred bucks that it'll take to fix the car. He thanks her. He is humbled.

With the car fixed, he makes it to his mom's house. She meets him there.

"How's it going, my firstborn?"

"I'm having a bit of a rough time at the moment."

"I hear that. We'll see if we can't get you fixed up."

His mother hugs him, and he weakly hugs back. He's broken down, not much hope. The only thing he has going for him is six months of sobriety.

He stays with his mother a long time. He's stuck there, basically. Not enough money to get a job—he's too broke to travel. He watches TV, sleeps late, cooks dinner for his mom. They go to the grocery store together. He wears his pajamas. He's so disappointed in his last job, for not managing themselves well enough financially that they didn't have to lay off half their employees. He's mad at his boss for not cleaning up

more of the bullshit that took place around the office, people jerking off, wasting time, incompetent people in key positions.

Eventually he gets over his anger. He starts running, every day, for half an hour. He loses weight. He ups his run to an hour a day. He goes walking in the woods nearby, walking along this beautiful stream. He thinks of Nakia. He misses her still, but it's been enough years that he thinks he can let go of her. He has an old hat of hers that he's carried around all this time. He throws that in an icy river as a way to say goodbye.

For a time, he gives up projects. He stops writing. He stops programming. He gives up on making things. His computer sits in a box at the foot of his bed.

Christina calls him one day and he can't even listen to her. It's the same old bullshit, same old story, only now she has kids. The fact that Christina is a great lay is worth nothing to him now. He listens for a while. He finally says, "I can't talk to you anymore Christina. Bye." Then he hangs up.

And that's the last any of the old friends hear from Matt for a long time.