

Columbia

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**I**



The devil was restless. He was bored. He hadn't been let out in a while. He needed to play. His keeper had forgotten what happens when the devil gets out. His keeper had grown complacent.

Clarity seeks chaos and chaos seeks clarity. When things get calm, they need to get wilder. When things get wild, they need to get calm. The person I am now, who wants a future as someone else? When I become that someone else, I will miss who I am now. And there will be no going back. I will try, but it won't work. There's no way for me to know what I will want in the future. But the me of now will still conspire against that future me, trying to make that potential life everything I think I will want to be. And the me of this moment? I am the victim of a conspiracy being committed by all the me's of the past.

Of course they're conspiring for what they think I will want. They're trying to help. They're doing everything they can to ensure that their future ideas of me will be happy. They think they're conspiring for me. They think they're in a perfect position to know what I will want in the future. They think they're on my side. But they're not.

When the devil gets bored he gets playful. He gets creative. He's not good at being bored. He's not good at sitting still. He's like a little kid, in some ways. He's creative to a hilt. He's a maniac. He's a goblin. He's the devil, for Jack's sake. He doesn't give a fuck about you or me. Not anymore than the ocean takes notice of a wave, or a gull. You could say he's silly, but he's not. Not unless you think psychopathology is silly. Normal children do stupid things. They do things that make no sense to adults. But if they pull your hair, and you scream, they let go. If they reach for the stove, and you slap their hand and tell them no, they retrieve their hand. If you tell them not to play in the street, they start to internalize the values you're expressing. The street is dangerous. It hurts me when you play there. Because people get hurt when they get hit by cars. And cars are in the street. And I don't like it when you get hurt. It hurts me when

you hurt. I don't want you to get hurt. A normal child understands this. A normal child still disobeys you, but a normal child is listening. The devil isn't listening.

He's looking you in the face. He's making eye contact. He refrains from speech while you're talking to him. But he isn't listening to you.

He's not hearing a word you say.

He's waiting. He's planning. He's thinking. He's working out a puzzle. And he's very, very good at puzzles.

At puzzles, he's a grandmaster. At puzzles, he's chief. Like a profoundly gifted child. Those aren't eyes. Those are steep wells of craft. That isn't attentiveness. That's insanity. Pure, distilled, perfectly-woven thought. But not cogent thought. Not human thought. Anti-thought. Water that boils while its surface remains calm. Apparent placidity, quiet, order. But in the veins, fusion. Fusion unnatural and fusion vile. There is something among us. It looks like us. It mixes with us. It's in us, in every one of us. But it's not us. It's us at a right angle. Us, orthogonal. That's what makes it hard to recognize. And where it appears, it confuses. We think: that could not be evil there. But it is. You're looking at the face of your lover. You're looking at the face of your brother. You're looking at the face of your mother. You're watching the news. You're watching the president. You're watching the news. That's it. That's it. It's there. You're looking in the mirror. But it couldn't be there. It couldn't be there. It couldn't be me. But it is. It is. It's in me. It's right here. In my hands. In my mouth. In my uncut fingernails, curling over the fingerprints. Underneath them, it's growing. Too small to see. Hiding. Incubating. Taking form. Using my air. Feeding on my moisture. Gestating. Dividing. Trying new tactics. Learning by its mistakes. Studying. Getting smarter. Assembling fragments. Searching edges for a perfect fit. Matchmaking. Standing back. Seeing the picture come together. First a notion. Then a sketch. Then a schematic, fully laid, circuits, switches, parametrics, probabilities, appetites, ambitions, cravings, surgically architected behind blue wells. Not eyes. Wells of craft. Wells of plan, maybe. Wells of mind, maybe. But not of emotion. Emotion is the child who cries when he burns his hand on the stove; the child who, when his fireflies die after a night in the bug hotel, doesn't catch any more; the child who is scared of playing in the street. That's the normal child. That's not the child I'm talking about.

The child I'm talking about has seen someone get hit by a car and he is sitting in the street. He sees you come to the window. He sees you running out to get him. He understands the situation. He sees you rip your hose on the asphalt. He sees you scrape your shin as you scramble to pick him up.

He sees your mouth moving as you yell at him to try to impart the danger. He's happy about it. This is part of the game. He likes the sound of your screams.

When you try to help, he sucks you in. If you try to hurt him, he wins. There's nothing you can do with this child, except stay away from him. No amount of firepower can engulf him. No strategist can outflank him. No government, or agency, or family, or spirit can stop him. No purity can cleanse him, no ideology can convince him. Not even god. If you disagree then you should put this book down right now. Because I don't want to offend you, and I don't want to disappoint you. The child I'm talking about can't even be fixed by god. If your ideas of evil, and of goodness, are such that you can't imagine the most evil child in the world outwitting your god, then you don't know a thing about the power of goodness, or the power of evil, and I don't have time for you, I don't want your money, and in sincerely wishing you no ill I wouldn't want you to continue any further along the path this text follows. This is a long road. It's not censored for minors. It doesn't cater to the squeamish. It doesn't shy away from love. And let's be frank, it is this last quality that is the most disturbing. What would trouble you if I told a story in which love was always sweet and simple? What would trouble you if I told of people who were never hurt by love? What would be the problem if I told you of a land where mothers and their children were always perfect for each other? Would that ring true with your god? Would a land like that, sound like our land? Is the goodness you know, a limp goodness? A sickly-sweet goodness? A lie-to-your-face goodness? Is the land you know a land in peace? Is it a land of agreement? Is it a land of homogeneity? It may be. If it is, then you're not reading this from my land. My land is nothing like that. My land is not devoid of goodness. My land is not an evil land. And maybe there are lands that are unlike mine. Maybe someday I'll know those lands. Maybe someday I'll travel there. Maybe someday you can show me your land. Show me how you do it there. I will like that. Until it happens, I will imagine myself there. I will imagine other ways of living. I will know that the rules of my universe are not the rules of the universe. But that's all I can do. Imagine you. Wait for you to introduce yourself. Until then, this is the only land I know. This is the land I'm from. It is in my blood. I love it so much that I love it even when I hate it. I love it like blood; I love it like bile. I love it like flesh of my flesh and I will love it to the death. I love it like family. I love it enough to side with it even when it is wrong. That's how much I love this land. I would rather be in the wrong than to be on the other side. And in my land good is not simple, and neither is god. Neither is love, but that is true by definition.

My land is a land of complexities, and of ambiguities. It is a land of things you will hardly believe, but which are true nonetheless. It is a land of masks, and masquerades; it is a land of song, and singers of songs; it is a land of ambitions, and dreams, and losses; it is a land of forgetting, and being reminded; it is a land of spirits and horrors, of reaching, of falling, of stillness, of seeming doom; a land of children who haunt their parents and children who save them; of mothers who love their babies enough to kill for them, for that is the strongest and most vicious love there is, stiffer and more savage than any inhumanity of war. Mine is a land of Which Way is Up. Mine is a land where killer clowns are for kiddies. Mine is a land where babysitters have sex with the elfin human beings entrusted to their care, where it is only the pretenders who claim that politicians are ever straight, where we bury you in a hazmat barrel under fresh concrete, set out a folding chair, pop a beer, kick up our feet, and let the concrete dry while we watch a story on CNN about a black man who spent 25 years in prison for a rape he didn't commit. This is where I grew up, so what kind of story do you think I can tell? What kind of god do you think I have? One who wears lacy dresses to church and stays faithful to her husband and has perfect teeth and drives a motherfucking Lexus? I might be able to tell you a story with a Lexus in it, but if it's not the story of Lindsay Lohan driving backwards on the PCH then it's going to be a stolen Lexus. Or maybe a Lexus being blown up by Earth Firsters while it still has a family with three kids in it. They do that to make a point about carbon emissions. You get media coverage when you blow up a Lexus. But you get a lot of media coverage when you blow up a Lexus with a family in it.

That's where I live. That's what's in my DNA. My kids grew up waking up in the middle of the night because their parents were high on drugs, running around the house naked, a bunch of adults taking showers together because it felt good on ecstasy. We parody the news for fun. That's comedy to us. Fry your baby in the microwave? That might make the news in LA. To make the news here you have to kill a whole bunch of people at once. Institutional murder is more likely to make the news. That's only if we've decided to care. But single killings? Hardly. You have to park your car in front of a train and kill a hundred commuters to make the news here. Derail a train? That'll work. Blow up a building? That'll work. Broil the occupants of a subway car with sarin gas? That's more like it. Now I'm starting to hear the anthem. School shooting? Yeah, there's the chorus. Rape a 12-year old? I can't hear you! Rape a 12-year-old and keep her in a box under your bed for a decade? Throw your hands up! CIA false-flag operation that kills thousands of American citizens? That's the anthem!



The devil was bored. His keeper had grown complacent. After years of tranquility, after years and years of putting karma in the bank, the devil's keeper had forgotten what hell was like, and he needed to be reminded. As my daughter used to say, and I'll never forget this, she would sit her dolls in her lap and she'd say, "Now I'm going to tell you a sad story and a happy story. This is the sad story."

"Can you see?"

"No. Can you?"

"No."

"Stop it you guys, you're acting like you're drunk."

Crunch of leaves underfoot.

"Wait." Maggie's voice. "Are you?"

Tim. "How could we be drunk. Did you see us drink anything?"

"I don't know. It's dark."

"Did you see anyone take anything out of the car?"

"Well. It was dark in the car too."

"No one's drunk Maggie. We could get drunk if you want to. Do you want to?"

"Do a little sailing with the Captain."

"Who's the captain?"

"Captain Morgan. Spiced Rum."

"Oh."

More crunching.

"I can't see shit."

"Me either."

"Let's go back."

"Let's go to the pet cemetery."

"Ok. Want to?"

"Maggie, do you want to?"

"I wouldn't mind getting some Captain Morgan's."

"Tom. Hey. You there? What do you want to do?"

"Sure. Yeah. Cemetery is fine. Where is it?"

"It's up the road."

"Then can we get some Captain Morgan's?"

"How far is it?"

"We have to drive."

"I guess that means we have to find our way back to the car."

"Yeah."

"Can you see?"

"No."

"I can't see shit."

"I can't either."

"Let's hold hands."

Tim laughed.

"I figured you two were already doing that."

"That's not all we're doing."

"We were. Weren't you and Maggie?"

"Guys, when we get out of here can we please get some Captain Morgan's?"

"Two seconds ago you didn't know what it was."

"What if I don't want to hold Tim's hand."

"I'll hold it."

"No."

"No?"

"You won't. You'll hold mine."

"Yes ma'am."

"Did you two bring condoms?"

"Ewww! Why do you need a condom?"

"I don't know Maggie. Two of them. Two of us."

Maggie finds Tim in the dark and slaps his shoulder.

"Ow! I'm kidding. But really. Did you bring condoms?"

"What are you gonna do with a condom right now? Aside from fuck me, which you know is not going to happen."

"Thomas. Mileva. Stop tonguing and help out here. Tom!"

"Yeah. Here. I can't see shit. Are you guys holding hands?"

"I don't want to hold his hand while he's asking for a condom."

"Maggie. It's for safety. This is the kind of forest where kids get killed."

"Oh, thanks. That helps a lot."

"Our mission is to get to the car safely. We don't want this to be one of those stories where four teenagers go into the woods and never come out."

"Thanks. Could you please shut up?"

"Seriously. Hold my hand. Thank you. What if you trip?"

"Stop talking about condoms. You two can if you want. Uh, guys?"

"What?"

"I think I lost my glasses."

"Check on your head."

“They’re not there.”  
 “They’re probably in the car.”  
 “Seriously. I think I lost them.”  
 “Did you bring them with you?”  
 “I think so. We have to go back.”  
 “We’re not going back.”  
 “Seriously guys, we have to go back. I can’t see. Stop.”  
 “Maggie!”  
 “Sorry! Ahh!”  
 “You ok?”  
 “There’s a goddamn fucking root there. It wasn’t my fault.”  
 “Are you ok?”  
 “I’m fine!”  
 “We’ll come back tomorrow. If they’re not in the car. We’ll come back.”  
 “They’re probably in the car.”  
 “Why didn’t we bring a flashlight?”  
 “Good question.”  
 “That. Is a good question Maggie. Here. You ok?”  
 “Yeah.”  
 “You guys ok?”  
 “Yeah, it was a big root. I think I’m gonna be fine.”  
 “You remember what kind of story we don’t want this to turn into.”  
 “Mileva, you’re not helping.”

So they went. They went over root, over stone, over path. They stayed on the path by moonlight, and there wasn’t much of it. Clear June sky, lots of stars. And they were far enough out that the stars were bright. They weren’t bright enough to walk without tripping, but they were bright enough to keep on the path.

Maggie and Tim went first. Then Mileva and Tom. Mileva and Tom weren’t tonguing, as Tim had suggested, but they were doing their best to keep each other warm. And Mileva’s dress was unzipped.

All they had changed was their shoes. Tim was wearing a tuxedo. Tom was wearing the best suit he could scrape together from his dad’s closet. Mileva and Maggie were wearing their dresses. They had all gone to dinner earlier, at a mid-range Italian place, and so far that had been the best part of the evening for all of them.

For pure dancing, the other dances had been better. Homecoming was a disaster, but the Christmas dance had been ok, and turnabout was awesome. They had danced until the girls’ hair came undone, until they let

themselves get sweaty, until they forgot how to touch each other and how not to. Turnabout was good.

Tonight had been ok.

Tim was wishing he had a real date for tonight. Maggie was a friend. But if they could find a condom he would have sex with her. It was that kind of night. Walking around in the dark he could feel his dick sweeping against the silk of the tuxedo slacks. Need to get Tom aside, arrange a convenience store run, if you catch my drift.

Maggie was holding the plaits of her dress in her right hand. She was holding onto Tim with her right hand. She was doing this the best she could. Her left hand kept slipping from Tim's shoulder to his arm and he was alternately trying to lock fingers with her and squeezing her hand between his arm and his chest. Maggie was worried about her glasses. They were probably back in the woods. She was pretty sure she had brought them with her. Which meant they were going to have to come back out here tomorrow and walk all the way up here and find them. Because her mom would not buy her new ones. This was not the first pair she'd lost in the woods with Tim, Mileva, and Tom. And if she had to come back out here tomorrow, Mileva was coming with her.

Mileva knew this path the best of any of them. She was confident they would make it to the car. She wasn't sure it would happen before Maggie injured herself through some clumsy fall. Maggie had been in something like thirteen car accidents since she got her license. She had epilepsy. Mileva had been to the hospital with Maggie and Maggie's mom on multiple occasions. Mileva had been the one to drive Maggie from the school to the ER when Maggie had had a seizure during AP Bio. Maggie's mom, Aileen, had come later. She had been at work and Mileva had called her using Maggie's phone. This is the type of thing Mileva was always doing for Maggie. She cared about Maggie. And they would all get back to the car safely, they would. Mileva came hiking here all the time. The little village with HaHa Pizza, the little shops. Mileva came here all the time. Her mom managed properties here. Mileva knew they would make it back to the car. Although, this was the kind of place where sometimes teenagers went into the woods and never came out. That did happen. And Mileva couldn't help herself. She liked imagining that that might happen tonight. Of course it would be horrifying. And who knew exactly how things like that went down. It was probably awful when it actually happened. There was probably some guy who liked to rape people who were on dates, like Robert Garrow, and he was stalking around in the woods. This being June 13, mid-June, it was prom season. Someone like Robert Garrow would know that. He had probably followed

them into the woods from where they'd parked, and he was walking in silence behind them, having cut through the glen. He probably took the A. F. Th. van der Heijden Memorial Bridge. What was left of it. He probably knew that bridge. It wasn't even a bridge. It was a tensile steel wire that you held onto while balancing on a loose collection of deciduous stepping stones. This over a very shallow stream. But a stream that ran red due to the minerals in the glen. Ok, not red. But deep, deep orange. Not that they would be able to see that now. But if Garrow was here, he would be crossing that bridge now. This is what Mileva was thinking.

Tom was thinking about Mileva's dress. And Mileva's hair. And Mileva's neck. He was thinking about how Mileva gasped when he bit her ears. When he put his tongue inside them, and could taste the wax. Mileva wasn't the first person he had done that with, but she was his favorite person to do it with. When they made out, they made out for hours. Usually in Mileva's car, when Mileva drove him home from their dates. If you could call them dates. Usually they went to Mileva's house and made out. Then Mileva drove him home and they made out more, in the car, in front of Tom's house. Tom always forgot to think about the neighbors when they were making out in Mileva's car in front of his house. He would think about them for a while but then Mileva would bite his ear, or gasp, and then their mouths would be on each other and Tom would forget all about the neighbors. His hand held Mileva's now, and their fingers were warm. Mileva's fingers were small, and they could move very quickly. Mileva could work a Rubik's cube with her eyes closed, in about twenty seconds, after having studied it. Those were the fingers Tom liked. That was the mind Tom liked. He liked making out, too. No doubt. Tom was a big fan of making out. He had been doing it since the sixth grade, with misses Taliaferro, Robles, Lasley, Bogan; misses Holtz, Baxter, Anderson, and French; with misses Buehler, Lawrence, and Long. There were some misses whose last names he did not know. There had been a miss at Camp Minnewanica, and a couple of misses at camps Lebanon and Icthus. That had been a while ago. Most recently he had made out with miss Walker, and miss Rice, and miss Wood, and misses Mauser and Martinez, and miss Morrison, and miss Haines. And of course miss Mileva Maric, with whom all recent making out had occurred. This was before hooking up. Hooking up was one generation later. This is back when it was still making out. Tom was going to make out with Mileva tonight. He had been driving, in his dad's borrowed wagon, so they hadn't made out yet tonight. A couple lip kisses and some tight grabs during the dance. That's all. Tonight they were going to make out. Tom could feel it. Mileva's fingers were tight around his. She had left her dress unzipped when he'd unzipped

it. “It’s hot.” Every part of her. From the fact that she played rugby to that Rubik’s Cube thing. Tom liked smart girls. He liked smart girls from the very beginning. Skinny was good for Tom. Smart was better. Freaky was best of all. Mileva was flush with the first two and moderately imbued with the last. Misses Robles and Baxter had been skinny and freaky but not smart. One of the misses from Camp Lebanon, her name was Angela, had been freaky and smart. Very freaky and very smart. But not skinny. That was ok with Tom. Tom and Angela had had a lot of fun at Camp Lebanon. Mostly in the lake during swimming lessons. Mostly underwater. Angela had been very freaky indeed. They had had the advantage of most of their relationship taking place underwater. Making out underwater was even better than making out in the dark, if you asked Tom. As they walked through the glen, in the woods, in the middle of June 13 or somewhere close to June 14, Mileva was fantasizing about Robert Garrow crossing the van der Heijden bridge, on his way to kill their foursome. Tom was wondering if he would ever meet a woman who could hold her breath long enough to suck him off underwater.

“Guys, I can’t see. Guys.”

“Here.” Mileva let go of Tom’s hand. She pushed herself next to Maggie.

Tim fell back and the girls walked together and the guys walked together.

“Do you have any condoms?”

Mileva pretended not to hear this. When she and Tom talked about sex and sexual things it was never this explicit. Mileva was pretty sure Tim was a virgin but Tim had a way of talking about everything as though it was a business proposition. Whether he knew anything about a subject or not, he spoke confidently about it. Tom was still shy about such things.

“Let’s figure it out later.”

“If we go by Meijer we can get both. We can get beverages as well.”  
Tim laughed.

“Ok. Maybe.” But Tom had no intention of getting either item. They were going to Maggie’s mom’s house. He and Mileva were going to make out. They weren’t going to have sex. There was no need. And Tom didn’t want to get anyone pregnant. Tim and Maggie could do whatever they wanted, without a condom. Tim had no business screwing Maggie, if Maggie was even dumb enough to do it. If they did it, it would be an impulse thing. They would regret it not the next day, but five minutes after. Tom didn’t care. Maggie was dumb enough to fuck Tim. Tom had no doubt that might happen. Eager Tim and compliant Maggie. Tom didn’t care. They needed to get out of the glen before Mileva’s ghost story came true, though. Underwater dick-sucking was compelling to ponder, but not com-

elling enough to completely distract Tom from the real possibility that harm might come to them tonight. They should have at least brought a flashlight. You didn't need serial killers hiding in the woods to have a bad night. All you needed was a fall, or an animal encounter. Technically, this part of Ohio has poisonous snakes in it, but unless you were by the water it wasn't really an issue. There were wild pigs, and worse, wild turkeys. Wild turkeys, if you've never seen one, are as tall as a person. They could kill you by kicking you, or running into you. Mainly it was the sounds of the woods that got to Tom after a while. The clotted black enclosing the four of them. He felt the path's edges with his Converse. A few feet away, beyond roots, into swarming brush, bugs stopped creaking. He could hardly see Mileva and Maggie. Tim slapped Tom's back.

"Pretty successful evening, so far."

Tom didn't like the sound of that.

"Mileva. Where are we?"

"Don't worry, the bridge is right up here."

"Which one?"

"Van der Heijden."

"Ok. I don't know which one that is."

"The wire one."

"You're taking us that way?"

"It's the fastest way."

"How are we gonna see? Hold up. Hold up."

Then, to their left, there was a crashing in the woods.

"What was that?"

"Shhh! Shhh!"

"What was that?"

"Shut up? What was that?"

"I don't know."

"Stop fucking around, guys."

"No, shhh!"

"Stop shhh-ing so loud!"

"Hello? Hello? If you're out there say something."

"Stop kidding. Did you do that? What did you do, throw something?"

"Shhh!"

They all looked in the direction of the crash. Tom could almost see Mileva's blue eyes. Tim crouched. Maggie couldn't see anything. She couldn't even tell which was Tim and which was Tom. They didn't hear anything else. All the bugs were quiet.

Tim whispered. "A branch fell."

Mileva wasn't sure. Neither was Tom. It sounded like someone taking three distinct steps through the woods. It sounded like someone fell from a tree and then took three steps to catch its balance. Tom knew what Mileva was thinking. He was familiar with her serial killer fascination. Tom shook his head. Mileva nodded at him, smiling. Maybe the two of them were going to have sex tonight after all. It would be a good idea to have sex before they died.

"There's no one there."

"It was a branch."

Maggie spoke at regular volume. "We're freaking ourselves out."

"That's part of the fun. Who's up for the pet cemetery?"

"Uh uh. I'm not going to the pet cemetery. I'm going home."

Tim dug his fingertips into Maggie's shoulders.

"Stop!"

Mileva started walking first.

"Come on guys. I don't want this to turn into a stupid teenager story. Let's get to the bridge."

"What's a stupid teenager story?"

"Maggie, that's a story where four teenagers go into the woods and never come out. That's not the kind of story we want our parents to be telling tomorrow."

"Don't bug me about it. You guys wanted to come in here."

"I know. Maggie. Keep walking. Here."

They went on that way. They went too far, past a fork in the path where they should have gone right but went left instead. Mileva was leading, and the boys didn't say anything when she messed up the directions, but even though it was too dark to actually see each other's faces, they both rolled their eyes. They made it all the way to the pine forest before the smell of pine sap alerted them to where they were. The pine forest was almost at the edge of the glen, but not the edge where the car was.

"Don't say it."

"I'm not saying anything."

"Good. What? You lead, then."

"No, you lead. You know it better. You're fine. It happens. It's not a problem. Don't worry about it. It's a slight detour. Look. The moon is rising. It'll only take us ten minutes and we'll be back at the creek. It's ok, Mileva. Lead."

"I'm sorry guys."

Mileva sat on a rock.

"Don't sweat it. We're fine. What's the hurry?"



Then came the flashes. There were three of them, in succession. White like magnesium flares, if the entire stick burned instantly. They were far away, half a soccer field, but Tom saw them full-on. And for a second, through the duration of the flares, he saw what was holding them.

Tim saw the flashes, but that's it. Maggie saw Tim's face brighten, but the source was behind her. Mileva didn't see it.

Maggie tried to speak. "What the—"

But Tom stopped her. He cupped her head in his hands, sealing her mouth.

He spoke between the teeth, a darksome hiss. "Shut. Up."

And he had grabbed Mileva by her dress, Tim by his jacket, and had them all squatting center-path, and he was looking in the direction of the flashes.

"Did you see—"

Tom tightened his hold on the other boy. He was alive now, peaked.

Tim whispered low. "What the fuck was that?"

Tom shook his head. Held his hand over his own mouth.

Mileva. "What did you see?"

Tom didn't know. A creature. An animus. Flesh stretched tight around ribs? Hair. Wings. He didn't know.

Tim was breathing hard now. Something was out there. Maggie was too confused to be scared. She had seen the light on Tim's face, but was struggling to imagine what could have done that. Maybe a star. Mileva reached for Tom's hand. She found it and rolled the skin of his fingers in her own. A cold tear formed on Tom's eye.

"What did you see?"

"Light," he said.

And Tom was moving. Down the path, away from the pine forest. Back the way they had come. Mileva stood.

"What did you see?"

Tim ran after his friend.

"Stop. If something's out there—"

"It doesn't matter. It knows we're here anyway." Tom screamed, "Come on!"

Maggie and Mileva followed.

"What was that?"

"I don't know!"

"Be quiet!"

"It knows we're here!"

"What is it?"

"I have no idea!"

"Stop! Stop!"

"It doesn't matter. It knows we're here. Come on!!"

Tom grabbed Mileva's hand.

"Let's get to the car."

"What did you see?"

"I told you."

"Tim, what was it?"

"A flash of light."

"Was it a person?"

"I don't know."

"You saw a person?"

"Come on Maggie."

"Was it a person?"

"Was it?"

"If someone's there maybe they can help us get back, if they have a flashlight."

"It wasn't a flashlight. Let's go!!"

"Stop yelling."

"It knows we're here. It was looking at me! Hello! Hello!" The woods blotted out Tom's shouts. They were too far from the ravine for an echo. "Hello!"

"I don't think we should yell."

"It doesn't matter! Did you see that! Mileva, the van der bridge, right or left."

Mileva and Tim were scrambling over rocks, helping Maggie.

"Right or left?"

"Left."

"That's the way the thing was."

"The thing? What was it?"

"Left? Definitely left?"

"Left to the bridge."

"What's right?"

"Pig farm."

"I vote for right."

The four of them were huddled together now. They could see the path, barely. To the left was downhill toward the ravine, the wire bridge, and a steep climb to the car. To the right was uphill, even darker woods, and this supposed pig farm.

Tom whispered, "How far is the road from the pig farm?"

“Far.”

“Can we get over the fences? Is it barbed wire?”

“No, it’s three feet high. There’s no barbed wire on a pig farm.”

“I’m sorry, do I look like a pig farmer? Sorry. Sorry. You decide.”

“What did you see?”

“I don’t know. It could have been somebody with sparklers.”

“You definitely saw someone though?”

“Tim?”

“Someone’s over there with a flare.”

“I vote pig farm.”

“Tim?”

“Pig farm.”

“What do you think?”

“I say we go left.”

“You didn’t see what it was.”

“Neither did you. What was it?”

“Someone with lights.”

“We’re freaking ourselves out. This is how stupid teenager stories happen. You don’t even know what you saw. It could be another hiker with a flashlight. Maybe it’s fireworks, some kids.”

“You’re right, let’s go left. Let’s get back to the car. We’ll get some condoms, some Captain Morgan, go to Maggie’s house and have an orgy.”

“We can get condoms?”

“Sure.”

“Hey, why? I never said I was gonna do it with you.”

“We’ll blow ’em up and have a water balloon fight. You guys ok with left?”

“Sure. But stay close. I don’t want to die alone.”

Tim stood up, then Maggie, then Tom and Mileva. All four were holding hands at this point. Maggie stopped walking. This pulled Tim back, which pulled Mileva back, which pulled Tom back.

“What? What?”

“Nothing. Scratching.”

“Oooh. Sexy.”

“Bite me.”

Mileva came up behind Tom and wrapped her arms around his chest. She put her hot tongue in his ear. Tom put his hands behind him, on Mileva’s hips, and pulled her close.

Maggie said, “Are we really gonna get Captain Morgan’s?”

Tim said, “I think we are. Right lovebirds?”

Mileva said, "If we get it we're doing shots. Everyone here is doing shots."

Tom said, "I can't do shots."

Tim said, "Wimp."

Tom said, "I know."

Mileva said, "You're doing shots tonight."

Tom said, "If we get to the car, and we get to Maggie's house, I'll do a shot with you."

Mileva bit Tom's neck.

Maggie said, "What do you mean, if?"

Mileva figured it was someone with a flashlight, or possibly that the boys were making it up to encourage them all to make out in the woods. Why was it that seeing people die in a horror movie was accepted impetus for teenagers to make out? Mileva didn't know. Whether they had seen something or not, Mileva liked that this scenario fed into her thoughts of serial killers. Their hike was more exciting for her this way. They weren't going to get killed. She brought up stupid teenager stories to unnerve Maggie. Statistically speaking, the type of stupid teenager story most likely to happen to them was someone falling backwards as they climbed out of the ravine on the other side of the creek. Mileva knew that was a real possibility. She wanted Maggie to be scared, so she would be careful. Thirteen car accidents was not the ideal track record for someone wandering around the glen at night. If Maggie fell and broke something, even the three of them would have a hard time getting her out of here. Given that real tragedy was statistically unlikely, Mileva was happy for some ghost story action. She didn't rely on eye witness testimony to determine the nature of their circumstance. She relied on her estimation of the probability of various events. A serial killer lying in wait for them had a laughably low probability. Maggie falling backwards down the ravine when they tried to climb out had a moderate probability of occurring, Mileva thought around 0.2. Meaning that if they climbed out of the glen five times, Maggie would fall one of the times. Mileva hoped tonight wasn't that time. Runner up for probable stupid teenager outcomes was a car accident, but Tom was, in Mileva's mind, an overly cautious driver. She wasn't worried about a car accident. If anything, Tom could use to be a touch more reckless. Not in driving. But in other areas.

Maggie thought there probably was someone out there. Something had made the flash of light on Tim's face. They might be exaggerating. Tim might be. Tom she didn't think would go along with exaggerating whatever they had seen. He didn't lack imagination, but he was too serious to enjoy messing with them like that. He was probably doing calculus problems up

there with Mileva. Maggie's hand was cramped from holding her dress plaits off the ground. She wasn't going to be having sex with anyone tonight. If they didn't get Captain Morgan's they could drink her mom's gin. They had done that before, the five of them. Except Tom made grimacing faces every time he tasted it. He wasn't much for drinking. Even if Mileva and Tim didn't want to drink, Maggie was going to pour herself a cup of gin when they got home. She wanted to watch Discovery Channel. It was Shark Week. She wanted to put her feet on the coffee table. Maybe Tim would rub them if she suggested that might lead to something else. She would have her cup of gin and Mileva and Tom could make out while they watched Shark Week. If the others wanted to have gin they could do that. Or maybe they'd be drinking Captain Morgan's if everyone got their act together.

Tim was waiting for the attack. Maybe it was kids from another prom. But somebody was out there. Animals don't carry gas flares, or fireworks, or whatever he'd seen. They might be sneaking up behind them. Whoever it was was keeping hidden now. But they had wanted to be seen. There was no way they hadn't heard Tom's yelling. Tom was erratic but Tim had never seen him freak out like this. He had heard stories from Mileva. Tom had a big imagination. His mind would have naturally embellished on whatever he saw, even prior to the conscious level. Tom might have wilder ideas than Tim about what was out there. All Tim had seen was flashes of light, burning like flares. They might be in for a scare when some drunk prom kids jumped out at them, but that was about the worst that would happen. This wasn't Deliverance. If it was prom kids, they might have girls with them. Maybe there would be a mismatch, and he would get laid after all. Tim didn't want to have sex with Maggie. But he was leaning toward doing it anyway. Maggie was easy to convince. She would go along with it because acquiescence, even to sex, would be easier for her than maintaining an argument with Tim. Tim was sure of this. In the morning he would pretend it never happened. But the prospect of Tom and Mileva making out while he and Maggie sat stiffly next to each other in the car, or on the couch in Maggie's living room, especially if Tom didn't agree to stop and get something to drink, was enough to make Tim consider early suicide. You only get one prom, and this was his. It was pathetic. Maybe Maggie and Tom would pass out and he could finally get with Mileva. What was Mileva doing with Tom anyway? Tom was a little weird.

Tom thought about the path. This wasn't his park. He and Mileva had hiked here twice. They had kissed against a tree. Tom wished Maggie wasn't here. He didn't have Mileva's energy for putting up with Maggie. Tom wasn't going to spend time with Maggie in the hospital when Maggie's

mom should have been the one there with her. Tom wondered what it meant about Mileva that she was willing to hold Maggie's hand in life, to keep company this girl that was a wreck. Mileva was NHS, National Honor Society. Mileva had the second-highest SAT score in their class. She could work a Rubik's Cube with her eyes closed. Maggie was a disaster. She was bad luck. Everything she touched, broke. She was the opposite of Midas. Tom could pretend for a while, but deep down he thought Maggie was a waste of time. Mileva didn't see it that way. Tom thought he lacked compassion. Was that a learn-able trait?

Tom's Converse clipped the outskirts of a puddle. They were by the creek.

"Which way is it?"

"It's this way."

"Mileva. Don't take this the wrong way, but, are you sure? I mean, right now I wanna take the shortest way back."

"I'm tired."

"Why don't you tie that up instead of holding it?"

"Tie it?"

"Tie it. Like this."

"Thanks. Hey that works!"

"The bridge is right up here. Unless you guys want to explore back that way."

"Tom?"

"I'm good."

"Let's go."

"It's right up here."

Mileva led them. Tom let himself fall to the back of their line. Behind him was something, the thing he had seen. Someone was back there. Someone with flares, fireworks, something. Someone who had chosen to reveal itself to them, and then chosen to hide. It might be following them now. They might die here. Tom might be the first to die. It might reach out of the darkness and grab him. Put fingers around his throat. It might have claws, sweeping fingernails. Tom wished it wasn't here. He wanted to get to Maggie's house and touch Mileva's chest. He was going to feel her up tonight. If they got back ok. He might even take her bra off. Getting Captain Morgan was a good idea. Mileva and Maggie would both drink too much. Tim would have sex with Maggie and they would regret it in the morning. Mileva would get crazy. New Year's Eve she had stood on the railing of a parking garage five levels above the street. She was completely sober then. That had scared Tom to death. A kid in their school had killed

himself by jumping off a parking garage in the tenth grade. Tom imagined what it would be like to fall to his death. He imagined falling all the time. He would make his palms sweaty and his adrenaline rise by imagining himself falling, or imagining standing on the edge of something tall. In his dreams he would fall but never hit the ground, he would float but never fly. Maybe the thing behind them would leave them alone. Maybe it was scared, or maybe it liked to be alone. Maybe it didn't want to contact them.

"Are we close?"

"It's right up here."

"Is this definitely the way?"

"Yes. See? It's right there. See it?"

"No."

"Are you looking behind us?"

"Yes."

"You haven't seen anything?"

"No."

"Maggie, stay behind me."

"We're going across the rocks?"

"Take your shoes off."

"Why?"

"It'll be easier that way."

Mileva was sitting on a rock with her ankle in her hands. Tom saw her pry off a Med. Next to Mileva was a wooden marker labeling the crossing. Two posts, on either side of the creek, supported a steel wire. It was stretched tight between them. They could hardly see the water. It bubbled through rocks. They could hear it falling over a spillway, six feet down into pool rimmed with concrete. Maggie had never been to this part of the glen before.

"Are you sure we have to go this way?"

"Take your shoes off."

"Ok, but we're coming back tomorrow to get my glasses. You're coming with me. I don't care how hung over you are."

"I promise."

"I don't care what you two do, but you're coming with me."

"Keep your hands on the wire. Take your time."

Mileva was aware this was an inflection point for a possible stupid teenager story.

"I'm gonna go first. I'll be right here. Step on the rock."

"Are you sure this is stable? Whoah."

"I'm right behind you."

“Tim. You got her? Tim’s got you.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m right here Maggie. Take it slow. Put your foot on that rock.”

“I can’t see you. I’m sorry guys, I can’t see.”

“That’s ok. Maggie, listen, chill.”

“Is this dangerous?”

“Only if you consider the drop-off.”

“Tim! You’re fine, Maggie, it’s a foot deep. The worst thing that could happen to you is you get wet.”

“I’m already wet, my feet are. Ah!”

“I got you.”

“How far down is it?”

“Get onto this rock. Tim, help, please.”

“See that rock there?”

“No!”

“Put your foot on it.”

“Ok. Thanks guys.”

“It’s no problem. Tom, you back there?”

“Yeah.”

“You ok?”

“Yeah.”

“You see anything. Behind us?”

“Don’t see anything anymore.”

“Are you gonna do a shot with me when we get to Maggie’s house?”

“Yeah. Whoah!”

“What?”

“Oh fuck!”

“Got me?”

“Yeah!”

“Jesus fucking—”

“You guys ok?”

“Yeah. Fine, fine. Foot slipped. Thanks man.”

“Don’t sweat it.”

“Yeah, mad shots when we get to Maggie’s.”

And then it happened. Maggie was down. Tim heard a smack. It was flesh on rocks. Maggie had hit the stones. She didn’t fall over the spillway. She fell the other way. Her head went upstream and her feet were sticking out over the edge. Water was running all over her, she was instantly soaked. The water was cool. It would have been a nice temperature to wash your hands with, but it was flowing into her mouth, and into her nose, and



burning. Maggie breathed in through her mouth but it was only water. Tim reached in front of him and felt nothing.

“Maggie?”

Mileva was kneeling in the creek, water soaking the bottom half of her dress.

“Get her arm!”

Tim waved his arms, feeling wet stones and Maggie’s knee. Tom splashed through the current, strong trends pushing him into Tim. He got his hand on the back of Maggie’s neck. Mileva’s hand was there too. Tom was wet to the waist, water running up his side. Tim’s silk was limp, threads of algae swathing his legs. Mileva pulled up on Maggie’s neck, she tried to sit her up. But Maggie’s neck was stiff.

“Pull her up!”

“I can’t!”

Tim could feel it too. Maggie’s legs straight as poles. The three of them stood. Tom took one of Maggie’s arms and Mileva took the other. Tim propped Maggie’s hip under his knee and held her there. Her legs were still underwater, the muscles frozen. Her head was above water. All of her was soaked. She wasn’t speaking. Mileva ran her fingertips over Maggie’s face. Maggie’s eyelids were forced tight over her eyes.

“Did she hit her head?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Maggie? Is she breathing.”

Mileva pressed her fingers into Maggie’s cheeks. The jaw was clenched.

“She’s having a seizure.”

Light flashed on the water. It came from upstream. Someone was wading toward them. She was holding buckets of fire, little golden buckets with flames pouring out of them. These were balanced on her shoulders at the ends of a rod, golden buckets hanging down by lengths of chain, liquid fire pouring out of them. When the fire fell, it lingered on the surface of the creek. The fire itself was liquid. It didn’t go out when it flowed upon the water.

The woman was approaching. The children were not scared. She left trails of burning oil in the creek as she came. Flame trickled from her body and swam among them, burning white flowers, a circle.

She wore red robes, macrame. Her clothes draped from her, and as well were tied to her, one dress from her toes to the top of her head. Her hair, which was red as well, wove together with red strings, old, crusted, muddy strings, slow-dyed deep apricot by the minerals of the glen. A copper triangle hung from her neck. Did she live underwater? When you ran your hands

in the streams and mini-waterfalls of this area, you caught this same deep red. Her strings, her hair, they were the color of rocks you found in these streams, stained the color of flames after years of immersion. The only thing not orange about her was her skin, which was unrighteous pink. It would have been the skin of a pale white girl, except that nothing about her was pale. Her capillaries reddened the skin and everyone who saw her blushed. Tom blushed. Tim blushed. Mileva blushed. And they were half her age.

The woman knelt at Maggie's head. Her buckets of fire buoyed in the creek. Flames poured from them and landed on Tom. The sleeve of his father's suit ignited. It was a burning liquid, gas or oil or wax, and it soaked through the sleeve and foamed on Tom's forearm. He thrust it into the current, waving it around, but it burned still.

What Tom saw next he would never forget.

This woman kneeling over Maggie was not a phantom. She was not a dream. She wasn't a serial killer and she wasn't a ghost. Mileva and Tim were seeing this too. They hadn't been drinking, they were not insane, they were not collectively hallucinating, and this was not a god. This was not an angel. There was nothing supernatural about this. This was a human being, a woman kneeling with them in the creek. She was a hippie, or a freak, or a cave-dwelling homeless person. She was a fire-handler, a circus performer. She was into New Age religion or Wicca, but she was real.

She was kneeling over Maggie and she put her hands on Maggie's head. Then the woman opened her mouth and fire poured out. It poured from her lips, and it fell onto Maggie's forehead, and Maggie opened her eyes. Flames splashed from Maggie's eyes and fell into the water. Then the woman closed her mouth and it started to rain.

It rained in sheets. It rained in tides. Climbing the ravine, they slipped where mud was washing out, they scraped their wrists on sharpened ledges. They advanced. They slid back. They caught each other, and they slipped from each others' arms. By the time they reached the top all of them were bruised. Tim would not be able to return the silk tuxedo. Tom would throw his dad's suit in a neighbor's trashcan before Wednesday morning pickup. It would be easier to explain a missing suit than what had happened to this one. Mileva and Maggie's dresses, which had been yellow and blue, were now both brown. Everyone's clothes hung like they'd all climbed out of a swimming pool seconds before.

At the wagon, Tom stood by the driver's door, Mileva stood by the front passenger's door, and Tim and Maggie stood by the doors to the back seat. Tom used one hand to peel apart the opening to his hip pocket and he inserted the opposite hand between heavy layers of soggy fabric. He groped around.

"Tell me you have them."

"You locked it?"

"What, is someone going to steal your father's makeout mobile?"

"This is a piece of shit."

"Tell me you have the keys."

"One second."

"Thomas."

"One second."

"Thomas. Look at my eyes. Tell me you have they keys. Can you tell me that, right now? Listen to me. Do you have the keys? If you don't tell me you have those keys right now I'm breaking up with you. Do you hear what I'm telling you? Tell me you have the keys."

Tim folded his arms on the roof of the wagon and put his head down. Maggie looked like she would fall asleep standing up.

Tom had the keys in his hand. He wanted to see Mileva break up with him over losing a set of keys. But he took them out of his pocket, found the one with the bubbled, elliptical logo, and unlocked the car.

They didn't bother with seatbelts. Tom stared into the rear-view mirror, past Tim and Maggie, at the tree line.

Maggie said, "Oooh. I found them. They're right here. Sorry guys."

And she put on her glasses.

Tom put the car in reverse. Mileva flipped down the visor and looked at her reflection. She saw Maggie behind her, looking out the window, sleepy-eyed but oblivious. Did Maggie even know what had happened? Mileva wasn't even sure Maggie knew she'd had a seizure. She was acting like she'd fallen, soaked herself, and they'd pulled her out of the creek. Maggie wasn't the type to pretend. Mileva closed the visor. Hopefully Tom found wet rats attractive because that's what she was going to look like for the rest of the night.

When they got to Maggie's house the four of them camped at the dining room table. Maggie brought in her mom's gin from the kitchen. Tim kicked off his shoes. Mileva had shot glasses from a china cabinet and lined them up. She took the gin from Maggie and unscrewed the cap. It rolled around on the table and before it could come to a stop Tim flicked it with his middle finger and it sailed over the couch and hit the TV screen. Mileva poured

the shots. Some of it missed the thimbles and went onto the table. Maggie and Tom grabbed theirs right away.

Mileva said, "Wait."

She motioned to Tom.

"We're doing these together."

Tom scratched his face. The cheek was dry and stubble was already forming.

"Pick up your glass. You're doing this."

Tom wondered, would Mileva have broken up with him over a set of keys?

Mileva held out his glass for him. Tom took it.

Maggie said, "Let's go, I want to watch Discovery Channel."

Tim's eye twinkled.

"To the best prom ever. I never could have expected it. Next time let's go to the pet cemetery."

And he downed his shot.

Maggie slurped hers and choked a little. She took Tim's hand and led him to the couch, which Maggie plopped down on in her soaking dress. Tim remained standing.

"Do you have any towels?"

"Help yourself."

"Where are they?"

"In the bathroom?"

"Where is it?"

"Tim you know where the bathroom is! You want me to show you?"

"Do you have a t-shirt I could borrow?"

"Fuck me Tim, you're so high-maintenance. Yeah, come on."

Mileva was staring down her boyfriend.

"You gonna drink that?"

Tom was gritting his teeth.

"Drink up. What?"

Tom was glaring at Mileva.

Mileva said, "What's your problem?"

Maggie heard this.

"Relax guys. Mileva, go in my room and get you guys some dry clothes."

"Maggie, tell me you have condoms in this house."

"Shut up Tim."

"You wanna join me in your bedroom? Where's your mom?"

"Take a cold shower. Is this shirt ok?"

"Only one problem. I'm gonna have to go without pants."

“I’ll get you something to wear. Tom, how’s that shot?”

“He wimped out.”

“Tom, did you wimp out?”

Tom spoke in a low voice to Mileva. “What if she had died out there?”

Mileva shrugged.

“Do you think she should be drinking?”

“She usually drinks more than this.”

“Maybe she shouldn’t have too much after that.”

“Ok, tell her not to.”

Tom bowed his head and shook it.

“Don’t worry. Look, take a sip. Come here. Sit with me.”

“We got bailed out.”

“Yeah, weird.”

“No, I mean we really got bailed out. By—.”

Tom shook his head again.

“If we had been alone—. How do you go to the hospital with her, how do you—sit with her when she’s like that?”

Mileva held the shot to Tom’s lips.

“What is a woman doing like that—what is that woman doing out there?”

Maggie sat down on the couch.

“Drink that shot yet?”

“We’re still negotiating.”

Tom whispered, “What is she—what did she do to her?”

“Shhh.”

“What are you guys whispering about in there? Making honeymoon plans?”

“He’s stalling.”

“You still haven’t drank that? Give it to me.”

“He’s gonna drink it.”

“I mean—” Tom stopped whispering. “Maggie. Is there something you need to do after—I mean do you have any medicine, or do you need to call your mom or a doctor—?”

“Oh, I’m really sorry about that.”

“I’m glad you’re ok.”

“Me? I’m totally fine. No, there’s nothing to do, it’s—unless I hit my head. Mileva, do I have a knot?”

“I already checked. You didn’t hit your head.”

“No, then, yeah, I’m fine. Come over here you guys, look, it’s Shark Week.”

“Are you gonna drink this?”

Tom took the shot glass from Mileva’s hand and set it on the dining room table.

“Come on in here, guys.”

“We’ll be there in a minute.”

Mileva’s dress was sticking to her. Tom put his hands on Mileva’s legs.

“When we go to college. Are we gonna break up before we go?”

“Well,” Mileva giggled, “college is one big fuckfest.”

Tim was back with a dry shirt. He had stripped down to his soaking boxers and was holding a pair of sweatpants.

“That’s what I’ve heard too.”

“Jesus Tim, put some pants on.”

“Mind if I change here?”

Tom and Mileva were looking in each other’s eyes.

Mileva said, “I think we should be realistic.”

Tom said, “I think so too.”

Mileva said, “You do?”

Tom said, “Unless. Well—yeah, I do.”

Tim leaned over them and grabbed the gin shot. He downed it and slapped the glass down on Maggie’s mom’s dining room table. He made a Tarzan sound and beat on his chest. Maggie leaned over the couch.

“Tim. Bring me the bottle.”

“Yes mistress.”

Maggie slumped down and went back to Shark Week.

Mileva placed her index finger on Tom’s top lip.

“Are you ok with that?”

Tom tried to count to ten before he answered. He made it to four.

Then he said, “Yeah, I’m fine with it.”

And he got up and walked out the door.

Maggie said, “Where’s he going?”

Tom was at the car. Mileva ran outside, barefoot, her dress clinging to her. She ran into the street, banging on the passenger side window. Tom put on his seatbelt and drove away, slowly at first to give Mileva a chance to step away from the vehicle. When she was no longer hitting the glass, he sped up. She was in the rear-view, in her soaked and muddy prom dress, no longer yellow, in the middle of the street in front of Maggie’s house. Maggie’s door was open and all the lights were on in the house. Tim came outside in a t-shirt and boxers, but that’s all Tom saw because right then he turned the corner.

He didn't go home. He got on the highway, telling himself he didn't know where he was going, telling himself he was driving aimlessly. It was like he had split personality. One of his personalities, the main one, believed that he was driving aimlessly. The other personality, who was hardly a personality at all, who was a tiny voice in the back of Tom's head, knew where he was going. That personality, that tiny voice, knew that he wasn't driving aimlessly. That tiny voice, one Tom didn't even know was there, didn't even recognize as a distinct and competing part of him, knew exactly where he was heading.

When he came to the exit for Yellow Springs, the car took it. It wasn't even him, it was actually the car and the tiny little voice, the new one, who conspired to pull the steering wheel to the right. And he, and the car, and the voice, barreled along a two-lane road at around 4 a.m. They were headed for the glen.

It was Monday and people were already drinking. Drinking usually started at noon on Wednesday. They studied Sunday evening through Wednesday morning. From Wednesday mid-day to Sunday afternoon they drank. If you had 8 a.m. classes on Thursday or Friday, too bad.

If you had Saturday morning classes, you needed to learn how to use the registration system. Abby had called the Dean of Studies one Sunday to express her frustration with the system's favoring of seniors' schedule fulfillment needs over her own. Abby was a freshman. The Dean of Studies wasn't snapping on Abby's request to take advanced classes her first year. He suggested she simply take Organizational Communication 315 when she was a junior, or maybe next year, when she was a sophomore, if there happened to be less demand. I believe Abby's exact words to the Dean of Studies, which she shouted into the phone, were, "You can suck my white ass."

Abby later transferred to Harvard Divinity School. Now she's a minister. She was drinking when she told the Dean of Studies to suck her white ass. Abby's roommate Katie was there when she said it. Abby slammed her phone against the window.

"Did you say that to who I think you said it to?"

Abby opened their door and stood in the hallway. She raised her arms over her head.

"You can SUCK MY WHITE ASS!"

Megan leaned out of her room. Abby pointed at her.

“That’s right. You and you and you. Everyone in this place can suck my motherfucking ass.”

Abby stepped back into her room.

“Are we going out tonight?”

Katie was on the top bunk. She took the towel off her head. It had ice in it.

“We are, aren’t we. We’re going out tonight.”

Abby swigged her beer.

Katie sat up and swung her feet off the edge of the top bunk.

“Did you get your class?”

“Yes I did, yes I did. Are we going out tonight? How’s your head?”

“Horrible.”

“Want some of this?”

“It’s four o’clock.”

“Guess what.”

Abby took another swig.

“And guess what else?”

Abby took another swig.

“And if you don’t like it.”

Abby took another swig.

“You can suck.”

Swig.

“My white.”

Swig.

“Ass.”

Katie lowered herself onto the floor. Abby felt Katie’s head.

“You feel fine.”

“I do?”

“Yeah. You feel well enough to go out.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Uh huh.”

Abby smiled.

“So where we going?”

Three floors down and one hallway over Big John and Nathan were watching Letterman re-runs on cable. Every time Letterman opened his mouth Big



John and Nathan tried to out-cackle each other. The game was who could laugh louder. The prize was some abstract territorial designation.

“Oh fuck, he’s so funny.”

“He’s ridiculous.”

“He’s better now than he’s ever been.”

“Have you seen the one where Madonna curses him out?”

“I’ve been watching Letterman for years.”

“So you saw that one?”

“I’ve been watching Letterman since I was like eight.”

Then Letterman made a joke. Big John and Nathan cracked themselves up, knee-slapping, guffawing, shoulder-punching, side-holding, chair-sliding, eye-squinting, cheek-cramping laughter.

“He’s great!”

“I know!”

“It’s funnier now that he’s older.”

“He’s insane.”

“Holy shit.”

“Holy motherfuck he’s a genius.”

“Holy shit motherfucking shit he’s a natural-born genius!”

“I know!”

“I know!”

“I know you know. That’s what I said.”

“I know motherfucker!”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey.”

“What.”

“Have you seen Mary and Jade?”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Ho!!!”

“Ho-oh!”

“What are you thinking?”

“Oh check this part out. This guy is a motherfucking genius.”

Insane laughter ensued. Big John punched Nathan in the chest. He got up. Nathan kept watching Letterman.

“Let’s go man.”

“Why. Where.”

“Let’s go get our dicks sucked.”

Nathan smiled and followed Big John out of their room.

Abby was in the hallway and had stolen Megan's guitar. She was nodding her hair pretending to be David Bowie. She was in sock feet. Katie and Megan, and Mandy and Donna were her audience. They weren't supposed to drink in this dorm so they left their beer in their rooms and kept their doors closed.

Big John and Nathan talked loudly as they came up the stairs, another territorial custom.

"This guy had like an inflatable sheep hanging from his ceiling."

"Really? I'm surprised it wasn't in bed with him."

"It was, it was!"

"He's inbred."

"Him and Eric are gay lovers. Hi ladies."

"They're fucking gay lovers."

"I know. And they fuck motherfucking sheep."

"I know. So who's coming out to the shit tonight?"

The shit was what they called The Paradise, the underage drinking bar. Abby stopped playing Bowie and spoke to Katie.

"Monday night."

Then Abby addressed Big John.

"What are you fags up to?"

"Going to the shit!"

"When are you going?"

"Later, later."

"You coming out?"

"Yeah, we'll walk with you. Who else is coming?"

"Guido. Rapper John. Maybe Blake."

"Yeah, we'll be down later."

"We were going to see what you're up to."

"You're looking at it."

"We're gonna hang and watch."

"We wanted some company."

"You're on the wrong fucking floor."

"Do you know that guy Erik brought an inflatable sheep?"

"I heard. Big news. Thanks for the update."

"So whatcha playing?"

"I'm playing ballads for fags, see if you've heard this one."

"I don't hear anything."

"Seriously, what do you want?"

“What’s wrong with your head?”

“Hangover. Don’t worry, she’ll be ready for good times later. Are you guys drinking now?”

“Beer.”

“Cool. We’ll meet you at like ten. Watch out for that sheep.”

“Are Mary and Jade around?”

“You want one floor up, ho central.”

“Are they up there?”

“I guess you’ll find out.”

“Come on, let’s check it out.”

“Little reconnaissance mission for you two.”

“What was that?”

“Good luck.”

“Luck with what?”

“Whatever.”

“So we’ll see you later.”

“Yep. Use a condom.”

“What?”

“Downstairs at ten, eleven. Wear a different shirt this time.”

“Bye ladies.”

“Yep. Don’t get AIDS.”

“Try to be on time this time.”

“Good one, yeah. Have fun. Watch for roaches.”

Big John and Nathan disappeared into the stairwell. Big John’s words echoed down to Abby.

“Next time it’s gonna be you.”

“I don’t think so. Hope you brought your fishing gear.”

“Tonight, Abby.”

“Yeah ok. Hope you like crabs. Good luck!”

“Grief.”

“They’re fucking man-hoes.”

“Did Mary and Jade fuck them?”

“I have no idea. Probably. Mary fucked twelve guys.”

“When?”

“That’s the total. That’s fall and winter quarters.”

“What’s up with her and Big John?”

“She sucks his sweaty balls. Check out this Bowie. This is him in Labyrinth. That hair makes me want to be a man. Did you ever used to masturbate when you watched Labyrinth as a kid? I did. That man is one of the sexiest men alive.”

“He’s bisexual.”

“He is?”

“You would only like a bisexual man.”

“Well, whatever. His hair makes me want to stitch my vagina open so he can take advantage of me. Do we have any ice cream?”

“Why?”

“No! I want some ice cream, what? Megan, you are a sick child. Sick. Are you coming to the shit?”

“I may not wake up in my own bed tomorrow. I can’t make any promises.”

“That’s my girl. Katie’s coming out.”

“Katie always comes out on Mondays.”

“Katie always comes out every night. How’s your head?”

“Sucks.”

“No, Monday.”

“Monday?”

“Monday. It’s quarter draught night.”

“Oh fuck. It’s on.”

“I know it’s on.”

“Are we gonna dress nice or ho?”

“Ho.”

“Ho!”

“I’m gonna wear my checkered dress.”

“You are not.”

“I am, bitch. What are you wearing?”

“Brown leather. You’re gonna wear the checkered one?”

“Two words for you. This is what we are tonight. Ho. And ho.”

“I told you I can’t promise I’ll wake up in my own bed.”

“I’ll tell you right now you’re not waking up in your own bed.”

“I’m not waking up in yours.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Katie, keep your roomie away from me. I think she has bad intentions. I don’t do hoes with bad intentions.”

“Ho’s night out!”

“Do you guys have beer?”

“Yeah, come in here.”

“Ok. If I’m not back in two minutes come get me. You’re really gonna wear that checkered dress?”

“Fuck yeah ho, now get in here and drink your beer.”

Big John and Nathan were back downstairs. Mary and Jade weren't home. Big John and Nathan were back to Letterman. Their strenuous trip up and down the stairs, on top of the beer, was slowing them down.

"I need to get laid bro."

"Yeah you do."

"I'm not kidding. I think Mary's avoiding me."

"No, no."

"I'm serious. Did you have a girlfriend where you came from?"

"In tenth grade. Then I went through kind of a dry spell."

"My whole life has been a dry spell."

"She's at class or something, you'll see her."

"I'm not talking about tonight. She won't even talk to me."

"She did for a while."

"She won't anymore. Since break. She's moved on."

"I don't think she's with anyone."

"She's moved on to being by herself. Do you know what she said to me? She said she needs some alone time. Or no. She said she needs to learn to be by herself. What is that? You haven't seen her with anyone?"

"I haven't."

"What about Rapper John?"

"He's with everybody."

"But is he with her?"

"No, he's up there rapping sometimes."

"Does she like him?"

"I don't think so."

"I need to learn to rap. Learn some skill. Something interesting. Something that's a draw. You've got to have a gimmick. Rapper John has that. He's Rapper John. Even Guido. He's Dork Guido. Dressing up like a knight and carrying around a fake sword. That's a gimmick. That's what I need. What should my gimmick be?"

"I don't have a gimmick."

"No you don't. And you're not getting any. Am I right?"

"Guido's not getting any. Unless there's someone I don't know about."

"No, he's not getting any. Fuck. Did you go to your prom?"

"Yeah."

"Who'd you go with?"

"This girl Kelly."

"See, I didn't have a date."

“Did you go anyway?”

“No, I stayed home. I watched Letterman.”

“Kelly wasn’t a date. No one else asked her so I did.”

“But at least you went! Did you kiss her?”

“Yeah, well, not really. I kissed her on the cheek.”

“At least that’s something. I stayed home and watched fucking Letterman.”

“Well, we’re going out tonight.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Turn it up.”

“Here you deaf motherfucker, adjust away. If you get laid tonight make sure you let me meet her roommate. Oh shit, yeah, turn it up, this part’s hilarious.”

The girls were explosive. It was Abby and Katie, Megan, Nadia, Mandy, and Donna. They had gone ho-style. Abby had worn the checkered dress true to her promise. Mandy’s skirt was so short there was no possible way she could sit down. The six of them were a mural of heels and lipstick and hair.

Abby pushed open Big John and Nathan’s door. They were passed out, a Chia Pet commercial on the TV. Big John still had a beer in his hand. Abby took that. She poked Big John’s shoulder. There was no movement. Nathan was lying back on the bed and Big John’s head was on Nathan’s shoulder.

Abby switched off the overhead light and closed the door. She had Big John’s beer in her hand.

“What’s up?”

“They’re passed out.”

“Awww, how cute.”

“Guido. Get your ass in gear. Guido? Fuck it, let’s go.”

It was freezing outside. It was January 12. None of them were wearing coats. This is one of the hazards of living in Ohio. Halloween is stiff-nipple season and everyone gets frostbite. The twin goals of sexiness and safety disagreed in this case. Girls with the dohpest costumes got frostbite, but they got the attention they desired. Going dancing in the winter was the same. Ohio girls are strong, though. They don’t get frostbite until at least ten degrees below what frostbites most people.

Mandy lit a cig. Donna bummed one. Abby thought about it, but no. She was already buzzed, and Abby always smoked when she drank, but she didn't want to smoke before they went up Jeff hill. This was the steepest hill you can find outside of San Francisco. It's so steep, they have it heated from underneath the surface of the street so that it never ices. If a car was on this hill and there was ice, the brakes would have no effect. Walking up Jeff hill while smoking was not something Abby wanted to do. She liked to find someplace to stand while she smoked.

There were tons of people out. When they got to Court Street the burrito buggy was in full effect. Thirty people in line. Later there would be more. Katie stood in line for the ATM. Abby stood by her roomie and tried not to shiver. She didn't want to get started. Get to the shit and they would have shots of 151, then she wouldn't be cold. Abby looked over the other girls. She had to watch out for Megan. She wished Nadia would help out sometimes. Nadia was Megan's roommate. Megan required full-time babysitting. Yes, Megan would wake up tomorrow in someone's bed other than her own. Yes, Megan would probably physically survive. But you never knew. Fall quarter a girl had been raped behind their hall. The guys from downstairs found the guy who did it and beat him almost to death. The girl left school and never came back. They kicked out the rapist and one of the guys who beat him up. Fortunately for Megan she would not remember tonight's proceedings after a certain point. That mitigated the trauma of things somewhat. But for Abby there was a fine line between funny and scary. College boys seemed to like to walk that line. What was that line from Woody Allen? If it bends, it's funny, if it breaks it's not funny. Abby wanted bending, rather than breaking, to characterize this particular evening. Megan wasn't likely to help that to be so.

"Nadia. You gonna keep an eye on your roomie tonight?"

"She'll never leave my sight."

"Make sure she gets home."

"Hey, what do I need watching for?"

"Because you're a psychopath, you're chemically imbalanced, and you need the Lord in your life."

"I don't think we're going to find him tonight."

"But you'll try."

Katie was done at the ATM. Crowds were gathering. This was their first weekend back. The student bodies had gotten horny over break. Mandy chain-smoked her third cigarette.

"Can I bum another one of those?"

Abby couldn't take it.

“Fuck. Gimme one of those. Fuck you guys. You’re gonna get me light-headed.”

They headed toward the shit. Formally called The Paradise, the shit was Athens’ underage drinking bar. One night a week an undercover cop went and played pool all night. The rest of the week the shit didn’t card anyone. Everyone knew who the cop was. His name was Jimmy. His cap said Jim Beam on it. He got free drinks the one night he came in. The only thing was you never knew which night it was going to be. You had to go there and find out. If they weren’t serving, you walked home freezing your fucking ass off, and you had to listen to Abby preach about how fucked up this country’s juridico-legal system was.

“Gonna find me some Jesus tonight. Fuck me. I love menthols.”

They passed a group of guys. None of them hid the fact they were looking at the girls. Megan stared back a little too long at one of them. Abby was snapping in Megan’s face.

“Let’s go sparky. She hasn’t had her shots. Where did you say you were going to wake up tomorrow?”

Megan answered cheerfully, “I don’t know.”

“At least you’re honest. Get some Jesus into you.”

Katie’s head still hurt. She and Abby had done some Sunday night drinking she was still recovering from. They were starting again. Katie would drink tonight. She would be hungover tomorrow. She was hungover now. Without 48 hours to get a full recovery, she would be stuck in this cycle. In a few minutes Katie would be drinking again. That would fix her hangover. But she’d be back in the same place tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day. This was a bad time of the week to be drinking. It was their first week back, though. They had to.

The shit was packed. Packs of boys in white baseball caps. Packs of girls in black dresses. They must be serving.

“How you doing? How you ladies? What’s up? Quarter draught night. Quarter draughts. Hey. Get away from the door. What the hell, man. Stand back. Are you going in? Why’d you wanna stand around in the cold. Show’s better inside man.”

Abby put her face in Megan’s.

“Find me before you leave. Find me.”

And Abby turned and brushed past two fat bouncers. She would mother but she wouldn’t mother that much.

Katie said, “Let’s get a table.”

They were walking into the shit.

Abby shouted, “Find one, I’ll meet you.”



And they went in, Abby, then Katie, then Megan, then Nadia, then Mandy, then Donna. Flashing lights, disco balls. There were three floors of this. You entered on the middle floor. Upstairs it was bars and dancing. Downstairs it was only bars. The middle floor had bars and dancing. Upstairs and downstairs had separate DJs. The place was packed. Immediately the heat was on them. Eyes, eyes, eyes, and random, random, random moving bodies. Eddies and streams approaching and then retreating from the bars. Guys edging in at the service areas of the bars. "You can't stand there." But where else were they going to stand? Once a guy found a good spot at the bar he wouldn't shift a half an inch to let even someone else's arm approach. He would stand there with his back to you. If you moved to be in his periphery, he would swivel to keep you invisible. Wherever you went, you always faced his back at a right angle. That was if you were a guy, of course. If you were a girl things worked a bit differently. The price you paid for relative bar access was a guaranteed "accidental" body brush, usually against sub-prime anatomy, but not always. Abby was at the bar.

"Four draughts."

A crew-cut guy was bartender. Abby handed him one dollar, a bill. Quarter draughts, that's a plastic cup with a draught beer for one quarter. If you've only ever lived in Los Angeles or New York you've never heard of anything like this before. In middle America this sort of thing is common. The prices have gone up since then, of course. By now it's probably "dollar draught" nights, but at the time of this story it was a quarter. Abby looked at the bartender's biceps, his thick neck. She'd take him over anyone in a white baseball cap but she was going to have to go to a bigger city to find a husband. She was thinking Boston or D.C. She'd be able to find someone in one of those places who followed politics. Someone who read central American poets. The guy handed Abby four beers. She pinched the tops of the cups in her fingers.

Katie was hovering over a table with four guys at it. She leaned in and showed them her double-Ds. Katie smiled. She had perfect teeth. One of the guys got up and stood next to her. Katie sat down. She motioned to Abby, coming through the crowd. The guy opposite Katie stood up. Now two of the four guys were standing. Abby sat down. Donna was ordering a shot. They would own this place in a minute. By the time Donna came over with her shot they would have the rest of the booth cleared, on the currency of some beyond-vague suggestions of interest from the girls. A beyond-vague suggestion from a female college freshman had prolific coin in this place. A beyond-vague suggestion, here, was worth, in common currency, about fifty dollars. The use of this booth was worth about fifty dollars. If

a guy had insulted another guy by paying him to give up the booth he was already sitting in, fifty dollars payment was about the point at which the payee would stop caring that he was being insulted, take the fifty bucks, and happily give up the booth. Fifty bucks was about the point at which a hard-up girl would offer to suck a guy's dick for cash. Fifty bucks was about how much a guy had to spend on a date before the girl felt obligated to give him something in return. Not necessarily sex, but at the end of a fifty-dollar date the guy was getting something. Fifty bucks was what, here, a suggestion was worth. An abstract bargaining was in effect here: the girls had bartered the suggestion of future interaction for seats in a booth. The trade occurring here was a no-brainer. It was considered rational for both sides. The cost, to each party, was less than the expected potential gain. For the boys, the cost was having to stand instead of sit; the benefit was a fractional probability of getting laid. For the girls the benefit was having a place to sit while they drank shitty beer; the cost was some degree of harassment throughout the evening, worsening as the night went on, as the boys got drunker and their feelings of entitlement grew. If they ended up on each other's couches, of course, the game had changed, the previous cost/benefit calculations went out the window, and a new set of exchanges superseded any considerations having to do with who was sitting at the booth. Abby would have to remember, tomorrow, that whatever happened, tonight had not been a waste. She might even venture to answer a question or two in her 8 a.m. class. That was microeconomics with Harold Winter. He was always talking about cost-benefit analysis and price-discriminating monopolists. Abby wondered if Harold Winter ever came to the shit. Better yet, maybe he would agree to hold class here some Monday night. Abby was pretty sure she could explain how quarter draught night made sense in terms of the price elasticity of demand, but she wasn't sure she got why it made sense for the shit to serve underage patrons six nights a week and allow Jimmy to screw things up one night a week. Abby didn't get that exactly. She needed someone with some game theory to help her with that one.

Fifty cents later the shit swam for Abby. She knew you weren't supposed to drink beer before liquor, never sicker, but rather liquor before beer, never fear, but despite this advice Abby was back at the bar. She had left the girls at the booth they had commandeered and ventured through the increasingly dense crowd, pushing through people dancing and thinking of the Coors

commercial where the girl is at the party and all the colors in the room are green, and yellow, and blue. Everything in that commercial moves kind of slowly, and that's how the shit moved for Abby now.

The white-capped bartender was leaning over the bar trying to hear what some guy was ordering. The guy who was ordering had this girl in tow, little mouse, brown ponytail. She was wearing a checkered blouse that had been recently ironed; she looked to Abby like she was dressed for Sunday school. The guy she was with, who was yelling his drink order, had on a hooded sweatshirt and Airwalks. There's no way these two were a couple, but they seemed to be drinking together. Abby edged her way in beside the guy.

"What kind of shots do you want?"

"I don't know!"

The bartender went to Abby.

"What can I get you?"

"Aren't they first?"

"What do you want?"

"A shot of 151. And a Coors Silver Bullet."

"Ok. What do you guys want?"

"We don't know." This was the guy in the hooded sweatshirt speaking. His girl came up between him and Abby.

"What should we get?"

"You want shots?"

"Yeah."

"What do you usually drink?"

"We don't."

The bartender shook his head.

"Well, pick something."

"Can you pick for us?"

"You want a beer?"

"We want to get drunk."

"Well, I can't order for you."

The guy in the hooded sweatshirt addressed Abby.

"What are you getting?"

"Coors and 151."

"What's 151?"

"Bacardi 151? It's—uh—"

The Sunday school girl said, "Should we get that?"

Abby didn't think either of them seemed shy or standoffish. Most people Abby had observed in the shit were one or the other. They were both looking

at her open-faced, seeming perfectly comfortable in their skin. Abby leaned her head close to theirs.

“What have you been drinking so far?”

“We haven’t.”

“We never drink.”

“Why don’t you start with a beer?”

“Should we?”

“I don’t know. Sure. But I want a shot too.”

“Ok.”

The guy in the hooded sweatshirt said to the bartender, “We want two beers and we want a couple of shots.”

“What kind of shot?”

“I don’t know the names. How about the one she’s having?”

“Two Coors and two 151s.”

“Sure.”

“No, no,” Abby said, “You can’t drink 151 if it’s your first time. Get them two Coors and—drink—try a lemon drop or something.”

The Sunday school girl seemed anxious about this “lemon drop” concept.

“Will that get us drunk?”

“We want to get drunk. It’s time.”

“Yep, it’s time.”

Abby shook her head. “Get ’em two shots of Firewater!”

“Firewater?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s Firewater?”

“It’s a shot.”

“Will it get us drunk?”

“Maybe. So wait. You never drink?”

“Tonight we’re changing that.”

“Yes, tonight’s the night.”

“What makes tonight the night?”

The guy in the hooded sweatshirt pointed to the dancefloor.

“You see that girl there?”

Abby couldn’t help but smile.

“Which one?”

“You see that whole pack of girls? See that one right there? Blond hair, high boots.”

Abby was still looking.

“The one who looks like she’s about to pass out. The one with her boobs hanging out, black shirt. The one spilling beer all over the place?”

“Oh, yeah. I see her.”

“That’s my girlfriend. All those people live in her quad, they’re her neighbors. This is Amy.”

“I’m his girlfriend’s roommate.”

“Yeah, they live together. Anyway we come here every week and we walk their asses home. I have to walk my girlfriend home to make sure she gets back to the right building. And also because at the end of the night she can’t walk.”

“She needs help.”

“She needs help. She needs help walking. It’s this little game we play. We all come out dancing and Amy and I are the designated walkers, because—”

“They need help walking.”

“Exactly. That’s exactly right.”

The bartender placed six drinks on the bar.

“Twelve-fifty. For yours. And—gimme seven.”

They had good shot glasses here. The real kind, the one-and-a-half ounce kind, thick glass bottoms, not like the ones you get as souvenirs. Tiny glasses, two with cough-syrup red Firewater and one with piss-yellow Bacardi 151. Three Silver Bullets, extra-long, extra-tall cans.

They all loaded up double-fisted and stepped away from the bar. It was too crowded in here, and the shit isn’t the kind of place where you drink at the bar. Abby threw back her 151 and then threw back a mouthful of her Silver Bullet, sealing her mouth around the can to prevent sloshing.

The other two were still standing there staring at their shots.

“You don’t ever drink?”

“Not exactly.”

“Who’s gonna walk you home if you do?”

The guy in the hooded sweatshirt, and his Sunday school girl, Amy, looked at each other. Abby got the whole backstory in a glance. They didn’t have to say a word. The blond girl on the dancefloor whose boobs were hanging out was chugging her beer while she danced. The guy in the hooded sweatshirt put his shot to his lips and tipped it up. He swallowed it. His face looked like he had eaten a lemon and raw garlic blended with snails and wasabi. Amy wasn’t quite there yet. She sipped her Coors and held the shot away from her body.

“You guys should probably go easy on the beer.”

“What?”

“Beer before liquor, never sicker.”

“How was it?”

“It was ok.”

“Liquor before beer, never fear.”

Amy downed her shot. There was no post-wasabi, post-squid look on her face.

“Want another one?”

The guy in the hooded sweatshirt nodded.

“Yeah, let’s.”

It was three shots later, on their fourth shot, when Abby learned the name of the guy in the hooded sweatshirt. Abby had switched to Firewater and they had all set their Silver Bullet’s aside. Abby had recommended this for everyone’s safety, but Amy and the guy kept taking occasional sips of theirs.

They had a campground of cash and beer cans and recently-emptied shot glasses on a corner of the bar. All three of them had this latest shot in their hand.

“To the designated walkers.”

“To getting fucked up.”

“Wait, wait, hold on, I don’t even know your name.”

“My name? Who I am is not important. Who you are is not important.

What is important is that the three of us get fucked up.”

“I’m gonna get plastered.”

“We’re gonna get hammered.”

“I’m gonna be so trashed.”

“We’re gonna get wasted.”

“I’m gonna be shit-faced.”

“No, schlitzed.”

“What do they say in England—?”

“You’re already schlitzed.”

“Not compared to how schlitzed I’m going to be.”

“I’m gonna get butt-wasted.”

“Ok but, before—hold on, hold on. I know you’re Amy. And you know I’m Abby. But who are you?”

“Who I am is not important. Let’s drink?”

“Hold up. But if it was important.”

“It’s not.”

“But if it was. Then who would you be?”

“Then I would be Tom.”

“Tom.”

“Thomas, actually. Can we drink now?”

“Yeah but are you keeping track? How many is this?”

“This is four. See. I’m perfectly sober.”

“But not for long.”

“Not for long.”

“To getting butt-wasted.”

“To getting schlitzed. That’s my favorite.”

“My favorite is butt-wasted.”

“I know.”

“So you two don’t like each other? Like, like each other?”

Amy and Tom looked at each other. Tom put his arm around Amy. He smiled. Then he put his arm around Abby.

“I like you both.”

Tom drank his shot, made the squid face again, and set his shot glass on their corner of the bar. Abby drank hers. Amy drank hers. Their white-capped bartender was taking some delight in the novelty of these novice drinkers doing shot after shot of Firewater. Tom got the bartender’s attention.

“One more.”

“For all of you?”

“Yesss. So. Abby. Why don’t you tell us something about you. Do you have a boyfriend, what do you study, are you here by choice or are you under duress, are you being followed, who did you come here with, what’s your middle name, what’s your major, did I say that one already? Give us, you know, the basics.”

“Is your girlfriend going to have a problem with this?”

“Who, her?”

Tom put his arms around Abby and Amy again.

“She doesn’t know a sailboat from a salamander. Salamander. Salamander. I like that word. It’s underused.”

“How are you? How do you feel?” Abby asked Amy this.

“I’m fine.” She sighed and bit her bottom lip.

“So she’s not gonna be mad?”

“About what? She doesn’t even know we’re over here. She doesn’t even know where she is.”

“When you take her home, she’s not gonna be mad you’re—schlitzed?”

“Who, her? She loves being schlitzed.”

“Is she gonna be mad that you are though?”

"I doubt it. She won't even remember. We do this every week, don't worry. Let's do another one. Amy, you in? Abby?"

"Yeah."

Abby shook her head, but in a way that meant yes.

"To number four."

"To passing out happily."

"To the Coors commercial," Abby said. She was aware of the oddity of saying this, given that these two probably had no idea what she was talking about.

They all drank, placed their glasses on the corner of the bar.

"What's the Coors commercial?"

"It's this commercial where the dancing girl's all green and yellow and blue. There's some red in there."

"Sounds nice."

"Yeah, it's like this."

Abby waved her arm in a circle, indicating their present scene.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's in slow-motion. Did you say 'to number four'?"

"Don't quote me on that."

"Shut up!"

"I mean, who's asking?"

"I am."

"In what capacity?"

"As a random girl you're drinking with!"

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"In that case I think we should take this conversation off the record."

"Is that ok with you?"

"Sure, I suppose. Where's my beer?"

"Don't drink anymore beer!"

"Why not?"

"Liquor before beer, never—I mean beer before liquor never sicker."

"This is after liquor."

"That's what I said. Never sicker."

"No. But it was beer before that, so it's beer, then liquor—"

"Stop! You're gonna throw up if you drink that."

"Are we still off the record?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because I think I'm in like with both of you. I think I want to take both of you home to my room with me. Is that ok?"



“That’s definitely gonna have to be off the record with Bindy.”

“Who’s Bindy?”

“Bindy. Slosly girl.”

“Your girlfriend’s name is Bindy!?”

“She’s not my girlfriend. Are we still off the record?”

“Yes.”

“Also it’s Belinda.”

“Fuck me. Do you remember my name?”

“Your name is Abby.”

“What’s her name?”

“That’s Amy! That’s my drinking buddy. New drinking buddy. She used to be my designated walking buddy but we decided to do things a little differently tonight didn’t we? Is Bindy looking over here?”

“She’s coming over.”

“It’s definitely slow-motion.”

“See!?”

“I’ll keep an eye out for that commercial.”

“She looks mad.”

“Should I go?”

“Are you kidding? She’s out there dancing with who knows who.”

Amy said, “Let’s get another shot.”

Abby said, “You two are gonna die.”

Amy said, “How many is this?”

Tom said, “This is four.”

Even though Tom’s girlfriend was right there, even though she was right on top of them, Abby put her hand on Tom’s hand.

Abby said, “No, that was five.”

Abby and Bindy were staring at each other. Tom put his hand on the front of Bindy’s body, below her chest, and it was sweaty.

“That was five, really?”

“What are you doing, honey?”

“Drinking.”

“Who’s gonna walk me home?”

“You are. This is Abby. You guys want to do a shot together.”

Abby said, “I’ll get us another one. You want one?”

Bindy said, “Sure.”

Abby went to the bar.

Amy said, “We decided to drink.”

Abby said, “How many have you had?”

Tom said, “She was drinking with me and Amy, it’s nothing.”

Amy said, “You can do whatever you want. So what are you guys drinking?”

“Firewater.”

“Firewater!?”

“Yeah, is she getting one for Bindy?”

“I think so.”

“Do you want one?”

“Sure. How drunk are you?”

“Pretty drunk. What was the word we were using to describe it?”

“Butt-wasted.”

“I prefer schlitzed but yeah we’re basically—drunk.”

“I wanna go after this.”

“Ok, we’ll go after this.”

“Seriously, you don’t look like you can stand.”

“Are you gonna walk us home tonight?”

“I guess I’ll have to.”

“Are you drunk?”

“Not nearly enough. How you doing Amy?”

“Fine. I don’t want to go home though. You guys go and I’ll meet you.”

“How many shots have you two had?”

“Maybe—four?”

“Five. We’ve had five.”

“How can you still count?”

“Oh my god.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Who is this girl?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who is she?”

“We met her while you were dancing.”

Bindy put her arms around Tom.

“Are you coming home with me tonight?”

Tom looked at the bar.

“I think so. Why.”

“Cause I wanna give you your birthday present.”

“What is it? Can I open it here?”

“Come dance with me.”

Bindy was sweaty, still holding her beer. Tom remembered their first meeting. He was standing outside Biddle, his dorm, and Bindy had come up to him and run her fingers through his hair. They had a cigarette together, and their hands were on each other’s waists and bellies from the start. Amy

danced like this every time they came out, danced until she was sweaty and danced with her beer in her hand. Tom put his hands in Bindy's hair now, ran his fingers down the back of her sweaty neck. Later on, if he wanted, he could lick that sweat and bite it, put his hands anywhere he wanted on and in her body. Bindy's quadmates wouldn't care. This was tradition. If they minded, they could go sleep in the other room. Amy figured this was where this night was headed. Bindy would drag one of the desk trashcans in from the study area. She would probably grab the wrong one, and she would be puking over top of Amy's discarded political theory papers. Then Bindy would stop puking, get back into bed with Tom, and they would continue making out. At least tonight Amy had the lense of five shots of Firewater between her and whatever was coming.

"Here you go, here you go."

Abby was back with four shots.

"How much were these?"

"Like fifteen bucks. I think he gave us a discount."

"Here, go in my pocket, there's a—mmm—yeah—there's a ten in there."

"Thanks baby."

"No problem."

"Ok, take this off me."

"How many have they had?"

"This is six."

"You're stopping after this."

"This isn't six. This is five."

"I think you lost count two shots ago."

"I don't believe you got these two to drink."

"She didn't."

"They were drinking when I came over. Or trying to."

"Abby helped us."

"She did."

"She helped us with the drink selection process."

"I helped with the drinking process too!"

"I'll thank you when I'm scraping them up off the floor later."

Everyone drank. Well, almost everyone. Bindy and Abby downed their shots. Tom sipped the first couple sips, then drank about half of his shot, then looked around to see what progress everyone else was making. Then he drank the rest of his shot, but barely. It gave him shivers. He tried to set the glass down, but there was no place to put it. Bindy took it.

Amy got half of her sixth shot into her mouth and dropped her glass on the floor of the shit. Then she spewed the liquid she had gotten into her

mouth all over Abby, Bindy, and Tom. Amy kneeled on the floor.  
She said, "I think I'm done."

Outside, Tom, Abby, Bindy, Amy, and Abby and Bindy's various roommates stood in a loose group. Donna had gone off somewhere. No one was really sure. They could see the condensation with every breath.

Tom was hot and had decided to take his shirt off. Bindy was trying to stop him.

"Baby, no. There are cops here. We have to wait 'till we get home to take our clothes off. Baby, do you hear me?"

"I hear you but it's extremely hot out here. We should have come on a different day."

"Baby, you see those cops?"

Tom saw some people but there weren't any cops anywhere.

"They're going to arrest us if we don't put your shirt back on. Where's your hoodie? Weren't you wearing your hoodie?"

"I left it inside."

"Where'd you take it off?"

"Don't worry, I don't need it anymore. I'll get a new one."

Mandy was not amused.

"Can we go now? I'm freezing my ass off."

"Thank you!"

"Are you bringing your drinking buddy with you?"

"Where are you guys?"

"We're in Crawford, where are you?"

"In Biddle. We'll walk you."

So they all walked together.

Mandy smoked. She shook with every breath, a combination of the cold and the drinking, and it was so cold her fingertips felt like they had been recently smashed with a hammer, one of those small ones you used for tacks.

Tom and Bindy walked together, their hands tucked into each other's clothing and around each other's bodies. Tom had his shirt back on. The sweat on the back of Bindy's neck froze. They couldn't wait to get into bed.

Amy was glad she had drunk tonight. It was the first time she had ever been really drunk. She had had sips before, but that was it. She felt wild, but she didn't want to throw up. She took each step carefully.

Abby was mad. None of this solved the fact that she hadn't been able to register for Organizational Communication 315 because the stupid registration system didn't like her. Someone was going to have to suck her white ass, but she wasn't sure who. The Dean of Studies wasn't going to. Maybe his secretary. Abby was watching Tom and Bindy put their hands all over each other. Bindy didn't seem his type. She seemed a little dumb. Not actual dumb, but acted dumb. To Abby, that was actually worse. But Abby was drunk, maybe Bindy wasn't dumb. Abby thought Tom and Amy would have made a better pair. The fact that they were drinking together tonight for the first time, the fact that the two of them had been, until tonight, the designated walkers. Abby thought Amy was cuter than Bindy, even though Amy was wearing that ridiculously-ironed Sunday school blouse. Amy was cuter, but Bindy had a better body. Abby had a thing for girls. She had a thing for boys too. But she knew this, and she was ok with it. Abby thought bisexuality was the sexuality that made the most sense. Not that your sexuality had to make sense, but if she had to pick the one that made the most sense, it would be that one. Sure, procreation seemed to require one of each kind, but from the perspective of sensual enjoyment, how could anything more restricted than bisexuality be the optimal choice? Abby's microeconomics professor, Harold Winter, might have an opinion on that. Abby was pretty sure Harold Winter was gay. He was also paranioid. Abby had already started to notice some trends in the behavioral dynamics of college professors. She would have additional opportunity to observe these dynamics a few years later, at Harvard. When Harold Winter explained certain economic theories, he would literally check the classroom door to make sure no other professors were listening. Certain books, when mentioned, were mentioned only in private, in closed-door professor-student meetings. Read this book, but don't tell anyone I recommended it. Check out Derrida, but don't speak his name in public, don't mention that I like him. Abby's professors acted like spies.

Tom wanted to go home with Abby. He knew what would happen if he went home with Bindy, he didn't know what would happen if he went home with Abby. He didn't even want to fuck her, not primarily. He did want to fuck her, but first he wanted to talk to her. But you couldn't do that, you couldn't go out with one girl and go home with one you met on the way. He had to walk Bindy home, at least, and that meant staying over. He couldn't get to the door of Bindy's quad, kiss her goodnight, and leave. That was not how it worked. That wasn't how it had ever worked. Even if he kissed her outside the building, Bindy would say, "Coming up?" Then they would go through some moderate cloak-and-dagger gyrations, going up different

stairwells and such, since Crawford was a girls-only dorm, even though it didn't matter 'cause no one was ever there to check. But if some other girls saw you and wanted to make an issue of it, they could, so Bindy and Amy would go in the front door and Tom would hold it open with his foot. Then about thirty seconds later Tom would go in the front door of Crawford and up a side staircase. Then he and Bindy and Amy would go into the quad and if the other girls were still out he and Bindy would get into Amy's bed and if the other girls were home he and Bindy would stay in the study room and use the flip 'n' fuck. Tom didn't want to use the flip 'n' fuck tonight. He wanted to see if Abby had a flip 'n' fuck.

At the bottom of Jeff hill it was time to go their separate ways. Abby and her crew were going one way. Tom and Bindy and Amy and them were going another way. Abby didn't care what Bindy thought; she went up to Tom and Bindy and put a hand on each of their shoulders.

"Be careful walking."

"Yes, well—"

"Do you guys usually go out on Monday night?"

"Look, if the shit is serving, we'll be there."

"Ok. Be safe. Remember, tomato juice and ginseng."

"We use chocolate milk and Schweppes."

"No, I always eat a banana and I'm fine."

"It's not the banana that does it. You're sucking on PBR for breakfast. That's how this one cures a hangover."

"So."

"Guys, I'm freezing. Can we please go?"

Abby stepped back into her crew. Tom and Bindy, their hands still all over each other, went toward Crawford. Abby and her friends started toward Biddle. And then, Tom shouted out to Abby.

He said, "Stop by sometime. I'm in Sargent, 105."

Everyone in Abby's crowd laughed. Bindy's face burned, but she kept walking with him. Tom wasn't going to get laid that night. Bindy was going to make sure of that. There would be no cuddling. There would be no making out. In fact, there would be no flip 'n' fuck, except maybe a flip 'n' fuck with Tom on it by himself.

But that's not what happened. What happened is that Abby and her crowd went off to Biddle and checked in on Big John and Nathan, whose door was tellingly locked even though Abby knew they were both inside. Then Abby and Katie left their other hallmates in their various rooms, and Katie fell asleep while Abby sat at her desk looking at Harvard's website on her computer. When they got to Crawford, Tom kissed Bindy and Bindy

said, "Coming up?" Then Tom held the door open with his foot and waited about thirty seconds, then he took his foot out of the door and walked by himself through the freezing cold to Sargent hall, where a girl named Sarah and a tattooed guy named Jake, who was Student Senate President, held the door open and Thomas barely made it to the bathroom, where he stood vomiting in a shower.

fz

tom in school, wearing glasses in class, tickling classmates, oral sex party, pool and poetry, swiss cheese in calculus, people stealing money from the coke machine, flunking out of classes, but enjoying time with abby

abby and tom endeavor to throw the wildest parties in the history of the fourth planet from the sun, abby and tom break up, tom gets with someone who comes to one of their parties, he feels bad for abby who quit school to be with him, he just says "sorry" :: abby gets in a car to go to harvard





# Part I



“You’re totally insane.”

“No. It’s worse than that. I’m totally sane.”



## Part II



In the next part of our story we return to Ohio. If you really want to understand this country, it's Ohio you need to understand. Secondly it's Los Angeles and New York, Chicago and the like. Lastly, the deep south; it's not really important that you understand the deep south. If you really want to understand this country it's Ohio you need to look at, primarily. That's not to say the rest of the country isn't important. But if you want to take the quickest route to understanding America, start with Ohio.